

TO AMERICA

*Stephen E. Ambrose*

*Personal  
Reflections  
of an Historian*

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*For Paul Schwarzenberger, M.D.,*

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*Alicia R. Millet, R.N.,*

*Suzanne Murray, R.N.,*

*And the Stanley S. Scott Cancer Center, L.S.U. Health Sciences Center*



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# TO AMERICA

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# Preface

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## Storytelling

In 1953, when I was an eighteen-year-old sophomore at the University of Wisconsin, I took a course in American history entitled “Representative Americans.” Professor William B. Hesseltine taught it. From his first lecture, I was enthralled. He spoke about presidents, generals, senators, novelists, businessmen. Who they were, what they did, what effect it had.

It was storytelling at its best, about real people whose actions had a direct impact on my life, even if they had lived a century or more ago. Some made mistakes. Some were geniuses. Some were kind, others cruel. They were far more interesting than any character in a novel or actor in a movie.

At the end of his first lecture, on George Washington, I approached the professor—short, bald, pudgy, with a big curved pipe—and told him, as he lit up, that I wanted to do what he did for a living. “How do I do that?” He laughed, then said, stick around and I will show you. That afternoon I went to the registrar’s office and switched my major from premed to history.

A half-century later, I’ve never wavered. History is everything that has ever happened. No one can ever master everything, but your interest will never flag. When I first began teaching American history, my students would come to me before the first day of class and say, “Doc, I hate history. I’m only here because it is required.”

My reply was, “You don’t mean that. You don’t hate history, you hate the way it was taught to you in high school. But history is about people, and there is nothing more fascinating to people than other people, living in a different time, in different circumstances.”

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, our students know that they live in the richest and freest nation that ever was and they want to know how that happened. They realize that God did not decide to make the United States so supremely special. They want to know who those people were who made it so, what they did, with what consequences. One week in early 2002, I noted that four of the top six books on the *New York Times Book Review* nonfiction best-seller list were about American history.

I was taught by professors who had done their schooling in the 1930s. Most of them, like many intellectuals of their time, were scornful of, even hated, big business. They presented Andrew



Carnegie, John D. Rockefeller, J. P. Morgan, and other fabulously successful businessmen and investors as devoid of any social consciousness, men whose goal was to plunder; they brought on the Great Depression.

My professors had praise for the anti-Federalists of the Revolutionary era, for Jacksonian Democrats later on. Of course they were four-square for Lincoln in the Civil War, but not for his Republican Party, especially under Ulysses Grant. In the period from the end of Reconstruction down to the 1930s, the only parties they praised were the Populists, the Progressives, and Woodrow Wilson's Democrats. After 1932, it was Franklin Roosevelt and the New Deal Democrats, although many of the professors were Socialists who preferred Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas to Wilson and Roosevelt.

These professors were not left-wing zealots, but they couldn't see much good in the Republican Party. Still, they adhered to the first rule for historians—always stick to the truth. Tell or write only what you can prove. This they did. I was an undergraduate less than a decade after World War II. These men of the Second World War were patriotic, many of them veterans, who wished that the United States had done this or that differently, but who loved their country nevertheless.

At twenty-four with a Ph. D. in hand, I became a teacher of history. My subject was the Civil War. I was a military historian, studying and writing about the generals. Then in 1964, I went to work on Dwight Eisenhower's biography. For the next decade I was writing about him. That was my scholarly life. My country was at war in Vietnam, which I thought a dreadful mistake. I was a dove, not very active in the antiwar movement but very much an outspoken critic.

I spent about half of my time with World War II veterans and historians, who were mainly hawks, and the other half with students, who were doves. The first group was generally positive about the whole of American history, the second group critical. I agreed with the first on some matters, with the second on others.

In this short volume, I tell stories about Americans from the past, what they did, how they did it with what results. I am a storyteller by training and inclination. I tell war stories, political stories, academic stories, business stories. I tell stories about some of my admired Americans—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Lewis and Clark, Andrew Jackson, Ulysses Grant, Crazy Horse, Custer, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, Jackie Robinson, Betty Friedan. And some stories about Americans who are far from being my favorites—Andrew Johnson, Lyndon Johnson, Richard Nixon.

Whether I'm writing a story, or telling it to family or friends gathered around a campfire, or giving a lecture to students, I hope that my listener is concentrating on what is happening and wants to know how it turns out.

One of the wonderful things about a story is that it can be anything—heroic, sad, funny, triumphant, tragic, good, evil. To tell a story well, you need to help the listener identify with the main character, whether he is struggling in a small boat against a rampaging sea, or risking his or her life to secure civil rights, promoting the status of women. What happened? Who made it happen? What are the results today? Where do we need to go? It is through history that we learn who we are and how w

got that way, why and how we changed, why the good sometimes prevailed and sometimes did not.

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# Chapter One

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## The Founding Fathers

Americans in great numbers are rediscovering their Founding Fathers in such best-selling books as Joseph Ellis's *Founding Brothers*, David McCullough's *John Adams*, and my own *Undaunted Courage*, about Lewis and Clark. There are others who believe that some of these men are unworthy of our attention because they owned slaves—Washington, Jefferson, Clark among them, but not Adams. They failed to rise above their time and place, though Washington, but not Jefferson, freed his slaves upon his death. But history abounds with ironies. These men, the Founding Fathers and Brothers, established a system of government that, after much struggle, and the terrible violence of the Civil War, and the civil rights movement led by black Americans, did lead to legal freedom for all Americans and movement toward equality.

Let's begin with Thomas Jefferson, because it is he who wrote the words that inspired subsequent generations to make the heroic sacrifices that transformed the words "All men are created equal" into reality.

In the fall of 1996 I was a visiting professor at the University of Wisconsin. The History Club there asked me to participate in a panel discussion called "Political Correctness and the University." The professor seated next to me taught American political thought in the Political Science Department. I remarked to her that when I began teaching I had required students to read five or six books each semester, but I had cut that back to three or four or else the students would drop my course. She said she had the same problem. She had dropped Thomas Jefferson's writings from the required reading list. She did, she said, have Vine Deloria's *God Is Red* on it. She said she wanted her students to get the Native American point of view.

"You are in Madison, being paid by the citizens of Wisconsin to teach their children American political thought, and you leave out Tom Jefferson?"

"Yes," she replied. "He was a slaveholder." More than half the large audience applauded.

Jefferson owned slaves. He did not believe that all were created equal. He was a racist, incapable of rising above the thought of his time and place, and willing to profit from slave labor.

Few of us entirely escape our times and places. Thomas Jefferson did not achieve greatness in his personal life. ~~He had a slave as mistress. He lied about it. He once tried to bribe a hostile reporter. His war record was not good.~~ He spent much of his life in intellectual pursuits in which he excelled, and not enough in leading his fellow Americans toward great goals by example. Theodore Roosevelt called him our worst President. Jefferson surely knew slavery was wrong, but he didn't have the courage to lead the way to emancipation. If you hate slavery and the terrible things it did to human beings, it is difficult to regard Jefferson as a great man, or a good man. He was a spendthrift, always deeply in debt. He never freed his slaves. Thus the sting in Dr. Samuel Johnson's mortifying question, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?"

In his only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson's chapter on slavery includes this passage: "The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it. If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his children are present. But generally it is not sufficient. The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances."

He knew slavery was wrong and that he was wrong in profiting from the institution, but apparently could see no way to relinquish it in his lifetime. He thought abolition of slavery might be accomplished by the young men of the next generation. They were qualified to bring the American Revolution to its idealistic conclusion because, he said, these young Virginians had "sucked in the principles of liberty as if it were their mother's milk." This despite what he had written about the effect of slavery on the slave owner's children.

Of all the contradictions in Jefferson's contradictory life, none is greater. Of all the contradictions in America's history, none surpasses its toleration first of slavery and then of segregation. Jefferson hoped and expected that Virginians of Meriwether Lewis's and William Clark's generation would abolish slavery, yet he said not a word to them about his dream. His writing showed that he had a great mind and a limited character.

William Clark owned a slave called York. They were the same age. York went with him on the Great Expedition, which crossed the hitherto unexplored continent. He paddled, pushed, hauled, made and broke camp, hunted, stood ready to fight Indians, went hungry and was often exhausted, carried his rifle, and was prepared to protect Captain Clark's life at the risk of his own. When the Corps of Discovery got back to St. Louis, and every man who had gone on the expedition got double pay and a land grant, York received nothing.

York asked Clark, How about my freedom? His owner said that that was out of the question. He asked Clark to sell him to an owner in Louisville so he could live with his wife and family. Not possible, Clark replied, and he complained, "York is but of very little Service to me, insolent and Sulky. I gave him a Severe trouncing the other Day and he has much mended Sence." In 1816, more than a decade after the expedition, Clark finally freed York, and gave him a wagon and a mule so he could move goods between Nashville and Louisville and make a living. Clark, like Jefferson, like all

slaveholders and many other white members of American society, regarded Negroes as inferior, childlike, untrustworthy—and of course as property. Clark and his fellows got such ideas not from observation, not from York's actions—or the actions of many, probably most, slaves—but from a prejudice so deeply rooted that nothing, it seemed, could pull that plant from the ground.

Jefferson, the genius of politics, could see no way for African Americans to live in society as free people. He embraced the worst forms of racism to justify slavery, to himself and those he instructed. The limitations he displayed in refusing both to acknowledge the truth of his own observations on the institution, and his unwillingness to do something, anything, to weaken and finally destroy it, brand him as an intellectual coward.

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson describes the institution of slavery as forcing tyranny and depravity on master and slave alike. He also wrote about the character and morals of blacks in words that drip with the most vulgar assertions: Negroes have produced no scholars or poets (without mentioning that it was illegal in the South to teach a slave how to read or write); they smell different and bad; they engage in sex constantly but always without love. He said things about these fellow human beings that would make members of a nineteenth- or twentieth-century lynch mob feel comfortable. He knew—how could a man with his agile mind not know—that these were all lies. He left America's first and greatest moral problem to his successors. He could not rise above convenience. To be a slaveholder meant one had to regard the African American as inferior in every way. One had to believe that the worst white man was better than the best black man. If you did not believe these things you could not justify yourself to yourself. So Jefferson could condemn slavery in words, but not in deeds.

Jefferson had slaves at his magnificent estate, Monticello, who were superb artisans, shoemakers, masons, carpenters, cooks. But like every bigot, he never said, after seeing a skilled African craftsman at work or enjoying the fruits of his labor, "Maybe I'm wrong." He already knew that. He ignored the words of his fellow revolutionary John Adams, who said that the Revolution would never be complete until the slaves were free.

Jefferson left another racial and moral problem for his successors, the treatment of the Native Americans. He had no positive idea of what to do with or about the Indians. He handed that problem over to his grandchildren, and theirs.

The author of the Declaration of Independence threw up his hands at the questions of women's rights. It is not as if the subject of votes for women and other rights never came up. Abigail Adams, at one time a close friend of Jefferson, raised it. But Jefferson's attitude toward women was at one with that of the white men of his age. He wrote about almost everything, but almost never about women, not his wife or his mother and certainly not Sally Hemmings. He contrasted American and Parisian women he observed when he was ambassador to France. In America, Jefferson noted with approval, women knew their place, which was in the home and, more specifically, in the nursery. Instead of gadding frivolously about town as Frenchwomen did, chasing fashion or meddling in politics, American women were content with "the tender and tranquil amusement of domestic life" and never troubled their pretty heads about politics.

...

So it is of particular irony to admit that Jefferson was as remarkable a man as America has

produced. “Spent the evening with Mr. Jefferson,” John Quincy Adams wrote in his diary in 1785, “whom I love to be with.... You can never be an hour in the man’s company without something of the marvelous.” And even Abigail Adams wrote of him, “He is one of the choice ones of the earth.”

Jefferson was born rich and became well educated. He was a man of principle (except with regard to slaves, Indians, and women). His civic duty was paramount to him. He read, deeply and widely—more than any other President of the United States except, possibly, Theodore Roosevelt. He wrote well and with more productivity and skill than any other President, except, perhaps, Theodore Roosevelt. He was not a great public speaker, but in small groups he shone. Wherever Jefferson sat was the head of the table. Those few who got to dine with him around a small table always recalled his charm, wit, insights, queries, explanations, gossip, curiosity, and above all else his laughter.

Jefferson’s range of knowledge was astonishing. Science in general. Flora and fauna specifically. Geography. Fossils. The classics and modern literature. Languages. Politicians of all types. Politics, state by state, county by county. International affairs. He was an intense partisan. He loved music and playing the violin. He wrote countless letters about his philosophy, observations of people and places. He composed powerful essays, not always about politics—his head and heart essay is perhaps the best known. In his official correspondence, Jefferson maintained a level of eloquence not since equaled. I’ve spent much of my professional life studying Presidents and generals, reading their letters, examining their orders to their subordinates, making an attempt to judge them. None match Jefferson.

In spite of these rare abilities, Jefferson was not a hero. His great achievements were words. Except for the Louisiana Purchase, his actions as President fall short. But those words! He was the author of the Declaration of Independence. The second paragraph begins with a perfect sentence —“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal” (an affirmation he did not live out). Eventually, with Lincoln, who articulated these truths and lived them, and slowly afterward the idea made its progress.

Abraham Lincoln, who grew up in a free state, struggled for more than a half-century with his own feelings about slavery. At one point he wanted to ship all slaves back to Africa. But in 1865, in his Second Inaugural, shortly before his death, he clarified his conclusion unequivocally. He said the whole country was guilty of the fact of slavery, not just the South. All of us.

Jefferson’s declaration that all men are created equal is quoted all over the world. Everyone, everywhere, knows these words. Those words, as the great historian Samuel Eliot Morison has said, “are more revolutionary than anything written by Robespierre, Marx, or Lenin, a continual challenge to ourselves, as well as an inspiration to the oppressed of all the world.”

Jefferson was the author of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, a doctrine that spread throughout the United States. He is the father of our religious freedom. It is, next to the words of our independence, his greatest gift, save only perhaps our commitment to universal education, which also comes to us via Jefferson.

In 1779, when Jefferson introduced “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” in the Virginia legislature, he wrote: “no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship... whatsoever...nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion....” In *Notes on the State of Virginia* he wrote, “The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts

only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” In his most famous utterance on religion, Jefferson said, “I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

A pity that he did not introduce “A Bill for Emancipation” in the Virginia legislature and swear “eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind and work of man, including slaves.”

Religious liberty did not happen throughout the United States all at once, of course, but as Jefferson’s great biographer Dumas Malone wrote: “Jefferson’s vision extended farther and comprehended more than that of anybody else in public life, and, thinking of himself as working for posterity, he was more concerned that things should be well started than that they be quickly finished.”

More than anyone else, even Benjamin Franklin, it is Jefferson who implanted in the United States the notion that everyone is entitled to universal education. He put no limit on the amount of time or money he would invest in education. When he was eighty years old he made the architectural plans for the University of Virginia—what he liked to call his “academical village.” (In 1976 the American Institute of Architects voted his design “the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years.”) When the school opened, March 7, 1825, it had five faculty members and four students. Jefferson was startled to learn that most of the students were found by the faculty to be “wretchedly prepared.” He immediately began to work on improving the elementary and secondary education in Virginia.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was based on Jefferson’s “Report of a Plan of Government for the Western Territory” written three years earlier. In it, he made certain that when the populations of Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Michigan were large enough, these and other territories would come into the Union as fully equal states. They would have the same number of senators and representatives as the original thirteen. They would elect their own governors, and so on. He was the first who had the thought that colonies should be equal to the thirteen original members of the Union. No one before him had proposed such a thing. Empires were run by the “mother country,” with the king appointing the governors. It was Jefferson who decided that we wouldn’t do it that way in the United States. The territories shall be states. He applied the principles of the Northwest Ordinance to the Louisiana Purchase territories, and by later extension to the West Coast. It was Jefferson who envisioned an empire of liberty that stretched from sea to shining sea.

For Jefferson, the matters he was eager to address, the ones he seized on most, start with the assertion of American independence, exclude the grip of established religion on the minds of men, and provide education for the citizens. These are the accomplishments he chose to put on his tombstone, the ones by which “I wish most to be remembered.”

HERE WAS BURIED

THOMAS JEFFERSON

AUTHOR OF THE



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