

Thomas Jefferson – American Muse

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I. Introduction

In 1962, President Kennedy assembled the Nobel laureates from the Western Hemisphere in the White House dining room. To this illustrious group he said: “I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.”

In modern Washington we identify people by their most celebrated occupation. Jefferson, then, would be called a statesman. But as Kennedy suggested, he was highly accomplished in an astonishing number of vocations and avocations. Jefferson was also a poet, philosopher, architect, naturalist, inventor, correspondent, musician, farmer, educator, bibliophile ... The list is seemingly endless because his energy, curiosity and discipline were truly extraordinary.

In recent decades, Jefferson's name has increasingly been linked with yet another label – hypocrite. There's more than a little truth to that critique. For bad as well as for good, Jefferson exemplified this nation's spirit through his words and conduct. In some respects, he soared like an eagle. In others, he refused to practice what he preached. Then again, so does America. For all who wish to understand this country, for all who thirst to take advantage of the rights and opportunities she affords, for all who are willing to grapple with her failings and comprehend how she may rise to even greater heights, there is no better place to start than with Jefferson.

Perhaps that's why my favorite moniker for him is *muse*. When I've tried to understand what it means to honor this country in all the right ways, no historical figure has influenced me like Jefferson. When I've considered which American landmark can consistently excite my American pride, I've found nothing that equals Monticello. Maybe I'm in denial – unwilling to delve deeply into Jefferson's limitations. But I'm not alone in loving this man. Despite recent findings about his sexual relationship with a slave, people still love him because we appreciate what he has taught us about our country and our own potential as individuals.

As a religious figure, he falls short. As a man, he will always stand tall.

II. Jefferson and His Paradoxes

Jefferson is full of paradoxes. His powers as a muse are available only to those who are willing to recognize and accept his glaring inconsistencies and his willingness to evolve.

A. Whig and Tory

According to the myth, Jefferson is the quintessential Whig. A progressive who stands for modernity, liberty, democracy and enlightenment, Jefferson is celebrated as a man of the people, by the people and for the people. He surely would have endorsed that description. Intellectually, he believed in the Whig ideal.

Dispositionally, however, Jefferson was very much a Tory. He hated conflict. He even had a distaste for debate. He instead sought the same serenity for his mind that he found in the countryside at dawn. And who could blame him for his sensibilities? While the salt of the earth he rhapsodized employed their children in the fields, young Thomas was learning Plutarch and drinking in the virtues of Greece and Rome. His heroes were aristocrats, and their traits were suitable for their noble stations. Honorable. Disciplined. Cultivated. These were the kinds of characteristics to which Jefferson aspired.

In the 18th century, Tories weren't merely throwbacks to ancient pagans. They were also pious – as steeped in Sinai as in Athens. Jefferson's piety was central to his character. For him, though, religion wasn't transmitted at church. It was experienced by soaking in the peaks of the Blue Ridge or the shores of the upper Potomac. Like the most orthodox churchman, Jefferson believed in a providential, omnibenevolent creator. But Jefferson's creator wasn't known through Biblical miracles but rather through the beauty and laws of nature. Anything that Jefferson could connect to nature in its pristine form he absolutely adored.

Admittedly, human beings are often viewed in contrast to nature. Jefferson, however, linked the two by seeing both as the products of a divine source. Just as he appreciated the Godlike hand behind fauna and flora, he found grandeur in humankind generally and particularly in those people who remained close to the soil. What choice did he have? The Tory in him demanded piety, and his chosen form of piety required faith in humankind, the crown jewel of God's earthly creation.

This is how the teenage Jefferson came to be a progressive despite his wealth and his schooling at the feet of a conservative teacher. Jefferson also came to be a patriot, and his form of patriotism flowed from his manner of piety. In America -- unspoiled, limitless and far from the decadent cities of Europe -- Jefferson's beloved nature was at her most glorious. There would be plenty of land for the common men to divide up amongst themselves without having to be dependent on a small group of tyrants who controlled their thoughts as well as their assets. America, then, would have a glorious future, and the agents of that future would be the wise, independent-minded yeoman farmers who nurtured its holy resources. That was the optimistic vision of Jefferson the Tory *and* Jefferson the Whig.

Armed with this vision, Jefferson wrote the words heard 'round the world. I won't repeat them. We all know what they were: nothing less than the organizing principles of the United States of America captured in poetry.

It's ironic that the first concept Jefferson invoked was equality because that is the last thing in which a Tory believes. Tories stand for hierarchy – a natural order in which the few rule over the many – but Jefferson was tired of the old hierarchy, and that's what made him a

revolutionary. At least for members of his own race and gender, he dreamt of a form of equality. Jefferson imagined an America where children of the poor as well as the affluent have a legitimate opportunity to cultivate their own God-given talents to the full. To Jefferson, this cultivation, this nourishment of the glorious spirit that resides within every one of us, should be the central focus of human existence.

Jefferson the Whig assumed that in the poorest villages and the most decrepid urban neighborhoods, exceptionally talented and virtuous children can be found. Jefferson the Tory viewed these diamonds in the rough as aristocrats, “natural aristocrats, and assigned to them, together with the more able members of the moneyed class, the rights of leadership over the American society. Jefferson the Whig assumed that the rank and file of white men, the ones without exceptional gifts, are nevertheless wise and intelligent enough to be educable about matters of politics. Jefferson the Tory assigned to these men the honorable, yet subordinate role of identifying and electing the natural aristocrats. Like their more talented compatriots, the salt of the earth in a Jeffersonian republic wouldn't simply be serving their society but would also be realizing their own potential as individuals. That's what Jefferson meant by being free. It's a positive conception of liberty – the freedom *to* be your best, not merely the freedom *from* inappropriate restraints.

Freedom was the concept that truly obsessed Jefferson back in the 1770s. His version of equality, his equality of *opportunity*, was all tied up with freeing the minds and unleashing the talents of the people. But for all he thought about the beauty of freedom, I get the impression he thought at least as much about the ugliness of tyranny. You can sense his indignation from the Declaration itself. The Moses who crafted it had less of an idea of the Promised Land than of the Pharaoh in the way. A rallying cry was implicit in the document: “Be gone, English monarchy, and take your trappings with you! Big centralized bureaucracies, standing armies, financial speculators, plutocrats, all of it. It's not welcome on these shores. Here we breathe God's air and we distribute power as liberally as God Himself distributes trees and grass.”

These emotions, these thoughts, these dreams have captivated Whigs ever since. But they represent only part of the truth, don't they? The new Republic wasn't a land of opportunity for *all*, and Jefferson the Tory didn't truly believe it should be. To women, he offered lives of domesticity, not leadership. To African-Americans, he offered even less. Were they really human beings, he wondered? Or were they a different, inferior species, the product of a separate divine creation? Jefferson's mind remained open on the issue, though he opined that blacks lacked the reasoning capacity, poetry skills and imagination of whites. More importantly, the grandiose words in his Declaration of Independence didn't stop him and other white people from denying African-Americans their liberty and their right to pursue happiness with dignity.

So Jefferson wrote words that he didn't fully believe. But the words had such power that they transcended the limited 18th century mind of their author. Today, they represent a rallying cry for Americans of every color who believe that freedom and justice should be universal. When Barak Obama, America's fastest rising political star today and the son of a black African, needed to introduce himself to the American public, he turned to the words that Jefferson penned in 1776. He had to. Those are the words that ground the American consciousness. As Rabbi

Hillel would say, all the rest is commentary.

B. Idealist and Pragmatist

What is the best way to unleash the talents and virtues of at least the white people in the new Republic? This was the predicament Jefferson faced during the years after he declared independence on the Republic's behalf.

His solution starts with the common man – or should I say, the common farmer. As conceived by Jefferson, the farmer is independent (beholden to no one), literary (as familiar with Plato as with agriculture) and equipped with the fruits of science. Jefferson was no Luddite. He believed that once tyrannical institutions were removed, the power of science would be unleashed and labor-saving technology would be employed throughout the land. This would free up the time for the farmers and others who work with their hands to enrich their lives through higher, contemplative pursuits.

To retain their independence, these men of the soil craved property. Jefferson knew that. Still, he viewed private property not as an end in itself but only as a means. He wrote in 1785, “I am conscious that an equal division of property is impracticable. But the consequences of this enormous inequality producing so much misery to the bulk of mankind, legislators cannot invent too many devices for subdividing property.” He called for progressive taxation and for the alteration of property laws at least once every 19 years to ensure that property inequalities are not maintained. “The earth,” he famously claimed, “belongs in usufruct to the living” – not to the indolent descendants of the wealthy.

Jefferson qua egalitarian didn't merely philosophize. He made concrete proposals to ensure the disbursement of political and economic power. In 1778, he drafted a bill for the More General Diffusion of Knowledge that would take tax dollars and use them to educate every poor white child in the state of Virginia. With the help of progressive taxation, the natural aristocrats – boys only, of course -- would get a free pass to his alma mater, the College of William and Mary. Other bright students would get many years of schooling, but would have to leave before matriculating in college, or even in secondary school. But *every* white child would get three years of schooling. That, Jefferson assumed, would be enough to make them literate. Then, armed with their God-given curiosity, they could reasonably be expected to become lifelong lovers of knowledge, readers of newspapers, and voters who possess the wisdom to entrust our nation's leadership to the proper hands. In other words, a little bit of education for children and a ready supply of information for adults is all we need. In the spirit of these beliefs, the young Jefferson wrote that “If I had to choose between government without newspapers and newspapers without government, I wouldn't hesitate to choose the latter.”

As it turned out, Jefferson's educational proposal was too idealistic for the Commonwealth of Virginia. The barons of the Commonwealth were unwilling to raise the tax dollars needed to implement the proposal during Jefferson's lifetime. Consequently, the masses of children remained barely literate, if that. In his later years, Jefferson was able to see to the creation of the University of Virginia, but the immediate beneficiaries were aristocrats of the old-

fashioned kind – the kind that are nurtured by leisure as much as by talent.

And what of the electorate? The newspaper-reading yeoman farmers whom the young Jefferson trusted with the fate of democracy? Jefferson never abandoned the belief that these people were endowed by their creator with a strong “moral sense.” Social in orientation, essentially altruistic, empathetic and loving, this sixth sense, he claimed, is present in all people who have not been thoroughly corrupted by societal decadence. It impels us to perform our duties to others. But don't these yeomans need information to understand how best to discharge their duties? Newspapers perhaps? The older Jefferson wasn't quite so optimistic about what they would read if, in fact, they sought to inform themselves about the world of politics. Jefferson's romance with newspapers went out with the scandal mongering of his middle-age years – some of which he himself fomented. At an advanced age, the sage of Monticello said that “the man who never looks into a newspaper is better than he who reads; inasmuch as he who knows nothing is nearer to truth than he whose mind is filled with falsehood and errors.”

Let's face it. The young author of the Declaration was a visionary. The older Jefferson, a battle-worn pragmatist. The former decried the prospect of political parties. The latter recalls how candidate Jefferson played hardball partisan politics – supposedly to save America from the threat of the “monarchists” in power. The young Jefferson wrote polemics against slavery and proposed bills to limit its expansion. The mature Jefferson toasted the value of slavery's untrammelled diffusion, even yearning for a time when small farmers had a slave or two of their own. The young Jefferson criticized centralized institutions like the Bank of the United States or the U.S. Navy. The older Jefferson, having been elected President, recognized the need to maintain them both. The young Jefferson spoke of the value of limited government. President Jefferson, however, couldn't resist the opportunity to purchase the Louisiana Territory though the Constitution didn't explicitly authorize him to do so. The young Jefferson saw America as a haven for farmers and rural craftsmen. The mature Jefferson spoke of the need for balance between farming and commerce – in short, for an economy that reflected Hamiltonian federalism as much as the agrarian vision of Jefferson's early days.

What happened? You might say Jefferson grew up with his country. His pragmatism reflected his nation's mentality: ideals are fine, but not if they get in the way of results, and particularly our prosperity. Jefferson took pride in the fact that he wasn't one to tilt at windmills.

C. Freedom Fighter, Freedom Neglector

There was one area in which Jefferson's teachings were remarkably consistent – his commitment to religious freedom. As a fighter for that type of liberty, Jefferson was tireless. He drafted his bill to protect religious freedom in the state of Virginia as early as 1777. As President, he coined the concept of a “wall between church and state.” And throughout his adult life, he demanded that his government extend rights to all dissenters, not merely to unorthodox Christians, as was suggested by certain other prominent enlightenment philosophers.

Thanks in large part to Jefferson, freedom of religion is as American as apple pie. Along with it comes greater respect for other compatible liberties – freedom of conscience, expression,

speech, assembly, the press. These freedoms harken back to the message of the Declaration of Independence without directly threatening the interests of property. Freedom to be educated would have no doubt met with similar encouragement – until someone showed up with the bill.

Jefferson's work to protect freedom of religion and conscience was incredibly successful. It's no wonder that if you look at his tombstone, you will find inscribed as one of the three accomplishments in which he felt the most pride the drafting of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom. It's right up there with penning the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia, his life's final project.

If preserving religious liberty was an area in which Jefferson's life was a great success, his lack of success in many other domains was striking. Slavery provides the obvious example. Jefferson must have understood the absurdity of declaring the United States to be the land of the free while at the same time enslaving a large segment of its population. His professed desire to ship the slaves back to Africa was impracticable. Wouldn't he have known that? He sometimes expressed that to resolve the slavery problem, only divine providence could save America from a bloodshed of Biblical proportions. Strangely enough, Ft. Sumter beat God to the punch.

As much as Jefferson wished to rationalize slavery by questioning the very humanity of the black race, he couldn't possibly have been comfortable with these rationalizations. For decades after his wife's untimely death, Jefferson maintained an affair with a mulatto, an affair that resulted in numerous children. Would a man as cultivated as Jefferson have shared a bed year after year with the same woman if he were convinced that some of her ancestors weren't truly human? I find that difficult to imagine.

Why then did Jefferson tolerate slavery as a young man and support its diffusion in his later years? Presumably, he merely fell prey to the very American desire to protect his own economic self interest. He needed slaves to maintain his lifestyle, and he must have rationalized that whatever was good for “Thomas Jefferson, Natural Aristocrat” was good for America.

As Jefferson the Intellectual grew older and watched the revolutionary generation turn into the Hamiltonian generation, he bemoaned the fact that Americans are marked more by their *acquisitiveness* than their *inquisitiveness*. This reaction only stands to reason. This Renaissance Man possessed aesthetic as well as intellectual sensibilities that were far and away more advanced than those of his contemporaries. And yet, when it came down to his luxurious lifestyle and the slaves who made that possible, Jefferson was as American as Ado Annie. He just couldn't say “no.”

Thoreau once wrote of the American farmer that He “would carry his God to market if he could get anything for Him.” And so Jefferson's slaves were sold on the block after his death because of the debt that resulted from his insatiable desire for luxuries. Ironically, many of these luxuries were books touting the realm of the spirit above that of mammon.

De Tocqueville pointed out the problem quite well: 19th century Americans had both egalitarian ideals and an enormous potential to generate wealth. How did the nation harmonize

these attributes? By seizing on the principle of equal opportunity above all else, and freely encouraging *everyone* to acquire as much as his or her ingenuity can muster. “The first of all distinctions in America is money,” de Tocqueville wrote. Jefferson would have shuddered at the thought. But this prophet had to know that he lacked standing to respond with a jeremiad.

III. Jefferson The Muse

With that as prologue, let's take a critical look at Jefferson's ability to inspire.

A. Letting a Hypocrite into Your Heart

It's always easy to criticize. It's *particularly* easy to criticize Jefferson. Jefferson the Hypocrite spoke of liberty but kept legions of people in bondage. Jefferson the Hypocrite spoke of the need to exercise discipline and to live within our means but damned if he didn't saddle his family and slaves with enormous debt. Jefferson the Hypocrite spoke of opening political discourse to the “doors of truth, and to fortify the habit of testing everything by reason,” but that didn't stop him from surreptitiously supporting a journalist who peddled hyperbolic and sometimes fallacious trash about Jefferson's political opponents.

Webster once said of Dartmouth that it is “but a small college. And yet there are those who love it.” Jefferson is but a very *human* being, and yet there are those of us who love him, too. We recognize that his hypocrisies are not nearly as profound as his gifts – both his gifts from nature and his gifts to us as Americans. Besides, after Gutenberg, isn't it true that to be a public figure who dares to philosophize about great ideas is to condemn oneself to the ranks of hypocrites? Is it really better to avoid those ranks -- by saying little and accomplishing less?

As was mentioned before, Jefferson had an incredibly wide range of interests. Yet he was no dilettante. He threw his soul into all his activities and *mastered* craft after craft. Living as we do in a society where television is king, Jefferson's example demonstrates how much potential each of us possesses when we live actively and autonomously.

For myself, Jefferson looms largest when he's viewed as an aristocrat – that's right, a Tory. He never got fat and happy. He always enjoyed the search for beauty and truth more than their possession. Jefferson the Whig would have hated to be called American royalty, but for those of us who are starved for home grown greatness, that's precisely what he was.

Most Americans aren't open to royalty. We disdain its excesses and selfishness. And we constantly note that those who bask in the privileges of royalty seldom seem justified in doing so. But Jefferson was different. Not only did he work from dawn until dusk to develop his talents, but above all else, he developed a vision. And this vision, paradoxically, was that those who disdained royalty were right all along.

What's endearing about Thomas Jefferson is that even though he was arguably the quintessential aristocrat because of how he took advantage of the privileges that life had given him, his crowning act was to take aristocracy to the guillotine and chop off its head in a decisive

stroke. He didn't condemn it out of hatred for aristocrats, but rather out of respect for we the people, we the commoners. He respected our moral fiber. Our common sense. Our educability. Our dignity. And he fought aristocracy out of respect for our creator, who endowed each of us with unique talents just waiting to be developed, if only we could live in the right social climate.

The truth is that there is a particular group of talents that Jefferson wanted to develop above all – the talents of the intellect. He was an unusual American aristocrat in that not only was he tireless in his activity, but most of his activity was cerebral. He considered contemplation to be the highest form of human conduct, yet he didn't simply seek to understand the world but also to revolutionize it. All his life, he worked in one manner or another as a public servant. For him, public service wasn't simply a choice; it was an act of duty.

Those various qualities make Jefferson a special figure in American history. I personally find them inspiring. But his ability to move us extends even further. It extends to his piety. We spoke before about that word. Meant in a theological sense, a pious person could be viewed as someone who doesn't take life for granted and feels thankful for its source. Speaking in a political sense, perhaps a pious American is one who doesn't take *republicanism* for granted and feels thankful for the band of brothers and sisters in the 18th century who devoted themselves to the great republican experiment. When you enter the mind of Jefferson, you're reminded of how exciting this experiment was to him. He knew about democratic city-states. He knew how much they've enriched us intellectually and artistically. What he didn't know is whether the idea of a republic, a place where supreme power rests with the commoners, could take root over a large, populated land mass.

Now, we live in a country with literally millions of square miles and hundreds of millions of people that has enjoyed republican rule for well over two centuries. Are we to take that for granted?

To go to church or synagogue is to experience a spate of opportunities to thank God for water, food or light. To go to Valley Forge or the Old North Church is to be given the honor of thanking a generation for the gift of republicanism. But none of the founding fathers explained this gift as eloquently as Jefferson. None captured the excitement in a way that moved both the heart and the mind. None, perhaps, understood better what was at stake when we said to George III that where there is no autonomy there is no dignity, and all the security and wealth in the world would mean nothing.

B. Lessons for the Modern American Society

So far, I've been talking about Jefferson as an individual who for all his faults can aptly be termed a role model worthy of our admiration and appreciation. I'd like to address now just a few of the many lessons from his legacy that can be applied to 21st century America.

First, the story of Thomas Jefferson teaches Americans to recognize and confront our characteristic vice: greed. His generation of plantation owners wouldn't sacrifice their "property." Nor did he. As a result, many of their descendents paid the ultimate price.

Today, we cheer the fact that the descendents of the slaves are free. Yet they commonly live in the grips of poverty, and they're not alone – millions of other Americans are similarly impoverished. Jefferson himself spoke of the consequences of the “enormous inequalities” of wealth. In 1785, he wrote that whenever a country has

uncultivated lands and unemployed poor, it is clear that the laws of property have been so far extended as to violate natural right. The earth is given as a common stock for man to labour and live on. If, for the encouragement of industry we allow it to be appropriated, we must take care that other employment be furnished to those excluded from the appropriation. If we do not the fundamental right to labour the earth returns to the unemployed.

Following in Jefferson's footsteps, I would ask whether our affluent society is sacrificing as much as necessary to combat the scourge of poverty? Just as the Virginians of his day refused to support the taxes needed to provide for universal public education, even for just three years, Americans today are unwilling to support the taxes needed to wage a war on want. Perhaps a modern-day Jefferson would be skeptical as well if a demagogue suggested to him that the poverty problem could be effectively fought through taxes and bureaucracies alone. Lord knows that a man who valued independence as much as he did would take a dim view of a welfare program that focused primarily on handouts. Yet I don't doubt that today's Jefferson would recognize the need for expensive public initiatives – such as in education and job training. And more to the point, I don't doubt that today's Jefferson would seek to mobilize the nation's forces against poverty with every bit the energy that his generation mobilized to fight George III. If we've learned any lesson from the Civil War, that should be the one. Our national chain is only as strong as our weakest links.

The second lesson I'd like to discuss is related to the first, and it involves the need for societal unity. Let's say a number of Americans wanted to undertake an initiative to wage total war against the scourge of poverty. Alternatively, we could pick another holy, Jeffersonian pursuit – like cleaning up the environment. (Remember, this is the man who believed that one generation cannot bind future generations to their detriment. Yet we today threaten to do just that, such as by changing the climates across the globe or destroying the ozone layer in the sky.)

Pick whatever grandiose goal you'd like – whatever revolutionary, dramatic mission would be worthy of the pen of a modern poet-statesman with Jeffersonian talents. How could we achieve this goal as a society if we are as divided as we are today? How, for example, could modern progressives hope to help the South Bronx without the full support of the business community, most of which has found a secure home within the GOP? Is there anything more vital to accomplishing great social goals in a democracy than the elimination of sharp divisions among the body politic?

Jefferson knew full well the blight of social and political divisions. He helped foment them and was rewarded with the White House. But I get the impression that if he had a chance to live over again, he would have behaved more civilly to the Hamiltons's and the Adams's when

they were in power in the late 1790s. The evidence I'd submit for my assertion is one of the most beautiful testaments to unity in our nation's history – the Jefferson-Adams correspondence that began on New Year's Day in 1812 and continued throughout the remainder of their lives. In all, these former combatants wrote 158 letters to each other, expressing their competing visions but also their commonalities, with even an apology or two thrown in for good measure. Could you imagine Bush and Kerry writing deep, loving, and sometimes apologetic letters to each other throughout their golden years? Not likely.

If the leaders of the Democrats and Republicans are to someday bury the hatchet and take on a common enterprise, they should look no further for role models than the Sage of Monticello and his elderly friend from Boston. Read the correspondence, appreciate what it means to be magnanimous, and remember that statesmanship is supposed to harmonize more with the ideals of religion than with the joys of a boxing match.

Speaking of religion, it is from that domain that I would like to offer a third and final lesson from Jefferson's legacy. Like many, if not most, free-thinking intellectuals, Jefferson was commonly termed an atheist in his day. And the truth is that he wasn't exactly fundamentalist in his beliefs. He refused to accept the the divinity of Jesus, the virgin birth or the facticity of other Biblical events that violated the laws of nature. As a Presidential candidate, he was attacked as a “French infidel” who failed to keep the Sabbath.

How did Jefferson respond to these critiques? By writing an analysis of the New Testament while in the White House. “Jefferson's Bible,” as it has come to be known, focused on Jesus as moral teacher and social reformer. What's most interesting for our purposes is that Jefferson never allowed his Bible to be published – except anonymously. He gave it as a gift to his cabinet and a few trusted loved ones, but otherwise kept it to himself.

What was he thinking? Didn't he know that there was political capital to be made in becoming part statesman, part theologian? Probably so. But Jefferson was appealing to a higher principle, one that he held throughout his life. To Jefferson, in order for religion to be a holy matter, it must be a private one. It must be cultivated in a peaceful, contemplative garden. As we all know, Jefferson wasn't above invoking the name of God if needed to make a political point. But he never appropriated God for himself or his fellow deists. He never attempted to divide a body politic on the basis of their religious beliefs. He never attempted to say that public policy should reflect particular interpretations of a divine injunction. When he spoke of God, it was to empower people, not to deprive them of their liberties.

It's sad that we as a society still haven't learned that his way was the enlightened way. It's sad that we haven't recognized the enormous power of religion to unify, which is potentially every bit as great as its power to divide. Which of these two powers becomes dominant may determine our society's fate as we move further into this new millenium.

IV. Conclusion

It has been said about Jefferson that whichever side of the political fence you find

yourselves, you can legitimately claim Jefferson as one of your own. I would go even further and say that ideologically, he was the father of both the American left and the American right.

Liberals are able to take from Jefferson his call to disbursing political and economic power, and his willingness to allow the government to tamper with the laws of property, if necessary to equalize wealth. As a liberal, I've drawn quite a lot from that aspect of his philosophy in framing this lecture. But conservatives won't find themselves left out at Monticello. Not hardly. Few statesmen have warned more than Jefferson about the dangers of big government generally and a big *federal* government in particular. During the early years of this Republic, who argued more vociferously for states rights than the sage of Monticello?

Truly, when you're looking for an eloquent statement of a philosophy, whether you're dealing with the domain of politics or otherwise, you're advised to look no further than Jefferson. Whatever ore you're mining, he's probably mined it too, only deeper. Even here at the Washington Spinoza Society, we can reflect on the kindred musings of Jefferson. "My business," wrote an older Jefferson, "is to beguile the wearisomeness of declining life, as I endeavor to do, by the delights of classical reading, and of mathematical truths, and by the consolidations of a sound philosophy, equally indifferent to hope and fear." Spinoza never lived past 44. But if he had, he might have said those words himself.

The Spinozist in me precludes attributing to divine intervention the fact that Adams and Jefferson died 50 years to the day after the signing of the Declaration. It's just a coincidence, I keep telling myself, skeptically. Jefferson had been invited to spend that day in our fair city and partake in an anniversary celebration of his beloved nation. That he couldn't attend is obviously understandable. But he did offer words of encouragement. And I'd like to read some of them.

May [the celebration] ... be to the world, what I believe it will be, (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all,) the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings and security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are the grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them...

Ultimately, that's what his legacy is all about – preserving the rights of human beings. The right to be alive, to be free and to at least begin to realize our potential as individuals. For those who think the job's finished, that the war for autonomy is over and we won, I say you've missed his point. Jefferson never rested in his fight to protect human rights and opportunities. We mustn't either.