

HPFY3009: Discuss the most important reasons for Jefferson favouring Democracy over Republicanism

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This essay will discuss the causality of Thomas Jefferson's advocacy of a confederacy of independent democratic states and resistance to the formation of a federal republic, in which fundamental national decisions would be centralised on behalf of the constituent states by the administration. To understand his motivations, the terminology will need to be defined with reference to the contemporary situation and examined against his philosophy and political legacy. It will be demonstrated that his resistance to federal control, despite acknowledging the necessity of union, was the result of an individualist agrarian idealism and Virginian patriotism.

During the revolutionary war, there was a unity of purpose between the thirteen colonies rejecting British sovereignty, and a need for concerted approaches to both the war and domestic administration. State representatives re-convened the Continental Congress to negotiate terms of the union and unanimously sought democratic self-governance.¹ Their experience of colonialism limited support for a hereditary leadership, and the disparity of their culture and circumstances mandated individual representation. However, this apparently homogenous approach was misleading and plagued with ideological differences and ambitions from the outset.

There was agreement that peace and co-operation between the colonies was achievable only by democratic representation, but whether this was best served by a confederacy of democratic states, mutually supporting their

¹ The First Continental Congress had been convened in 1774 to co-ordinate peaceful boycotts in response to punitive British laws and to draft a petition of protest to King George III.

neighbours, or by a central authority representing the needs of its constituent territories as a federal republic, was to become a point of contention.

For the purposes of this discussion 'Republican' will be defined as advocacy of the latter and will be contrasted with a 'Democratic' approach requiring self-governance of each state by its own people, within the framework of a mutually co-operative union. To understand Jefferson's position in this debate, it is necessary to examine his background and philosophy, and consider his ideology alongside hypocrisies that plague his legacy.

Born the son of a wealthy plantation owner in 1743, Jefferson's father valued education and he was tutored from an early age. His father died when Jefferson was 14, bequeathing him 5000 acres in trust until age 21. From sixteen he read metaphysics, philosophy, and mathematics at college, encountering the work of British Empiricists, before going on to read law under George Wythe, a notable abolitionist judge. Jefferson passed the bar in 1767 and was elected to the House of Burgesses in 1769.²

The influence of Wythe and his Empiricist education are evidenced by his first political act; drafting a bill of procedural emancipation reforms, which was summarily rejected, with the sponsor '...denounced as an enemy of his country...'.³ As a lawyer he defended seven slave bids for freedom, unsuccessfully arguing that personal liberty at birth was Natural Law.⁴ This principle informed his entire political life and is explicit in the Declaration of Independence.

He owned over 600 slaves throughout his life, including two of his own half siblings and six of his own children. He freed only six, of which five were his relations.⁵ Although an abolitionist, he pursued a cautious approach, aiming to dismantle the institution incrementally, with colonial repatriation and segregation of races, conceding privately by 1805 that he did not expect full

² Elected representative lower house of the Virginia General Assembly.

³ Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson To Edward Coles*, 25 August 1814. The Thomas Jefferson Papers at The Library Of Congress: Series 1: General Correspondence. 1651 to 1827 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib021817> [accessed 13 March 2021].

⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Reports Of Cases Determined In The General Court Of Virginia: From 1730, To 1740; And From 1768, To 1772*, (Charlottesville: F. Carr, and Co., 1829), p. 92.

⁵ William Cohen, 'Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery', *Journal of American History*, 56.3 (1969), 503–526 (p. 519-520) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1904203>.

abolition to be safely possible within his lifetime.⁶ While he believed that all men deserved liberty, he felt that free racial integration would result in a race war and was unwilling to compromise his own safety or lifestyle to further that cause. In 1785 he wrote:

...ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained ... will divide us into parties and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race.⁷

In pursuit of this universal liberty, he tabled the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, proclaiming separation of Church and State, for inclusion in the new Virginian constitution of 1779.⁸ Seeing the Church as an authority beyond the democratic control of the Virginian people he wrote in 1814 that 'In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty.'⁹ He listed the Bill as one of only three accomplishments to be included on his tombstone epitaph. In contrast he omitted mention of his Presidency or any federal positions, demonstrative of similar misgivings regarding central governance.

He considered manufacturing and growth of cities to be precursors of oppression, and was wary of commerce, believing that liberty could be maintained only by men working their own land.¹⁰ He was committed to an agrarian future for the States and opposed bills aimed at industrial stimulation, arguing that manufacturing should be left to Europe, and traded for the produce of the Union.

He saw education as a prerequisite for democracy, since only educated men could reliably govern themselves and hold their administration to account. Accordingly, he supported education of the black population only as part of a program of manumission and deportation. His establishment of the University

⁶ Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson to William A. Burwell*, 28 January 1805. The Thomas Jefferson Papers at The Library Of Congress: Series 1: General Correspondence. 1651 to 1827 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib014284> [accessed 13 March 2021]; Cohen, 'Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery', p. 510.

⁷ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes On The State Of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1785), p. 147.

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, 'A Bill For Establishing Religious Freedom', in *The Works Of Thomas Jefferson Volume II*, ed. by Paul Leicester Ford (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), pp. 438-441.

⁹ Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson to Horatio G. Spafford*, 17 March 1814. The Thomas Jefferson Papers at The Library Of Congress: Series 1: General Correspondence. 1651 to 1827 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib021671> [accessed 14 March 2021].

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, 'Jefferson on Farming: letter to John Jay' (1785) in *HPFY3009 US History Primary Sourcebook* <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=337019> [accessed 10 March 2021], p.41.

of Virginia, with a manifesto to be independent of the Church and free to all (white) men, was one of the three achievements memorialised in his epitaph.¹¹

Jefferson saw himself as a farmer and academic. His involvement in the Revolution and the confederation was ideologically motivated, by his passion to see Virginia thrive as a white agrarian self-governing republic, surrounded by States with similar ideals. While he recognised the importance of the Union, his work in federal government was driven by a determination to intervene to prevent overreach. He considered federal interference in the affairs of States to be little better than foreign rule, and a precursor of a return to a subjugation of the people.

When the second Continental Congress required a Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was not their first choice, but John Adams delegated to him, recognising a better writer.¹² Jefferson stamped his personal philosophy on the foundation of the new republics, listing this as the first achievement in his epitaph.

The Declaration opens with an assertion of ‘self-evident truths’ of Natural Law and governmental Social Contract. Paraphrasing Locke, the declaration states ‘...all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’, and concludes with a clear demand for individual State governance:

...as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do.¹³

When this document was editorialised and ratified by the colonies, Jefferson as a representative for Virginia, expected the continental congress to act as a convention of the union, rather than an out of State authority.

¹¹ Jefferson would not live to see his dream of free education for all (white men) realised, but tuition was finally funded for all (white male) Virginians in 1875.

¹² Ken Burns, *Thomas Jefferson* [video]. 1997 <https://vimeo.com/138444487> [accessed 8 March 2021]

¹³ US Declaration of Independence in *HPFY3009 US History Primary Sourcebook* <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=337019> [accessed 14 March 2021] pp. 20-23.

The claim that all men are equal may have been hollow rhetoric, designed to inspire the State administrations. Jefferson did not believe it, writing in 1785 that 'the blacks ... are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind'.¹⁴ Indeed, as an explanation of his abolitionist views, he wrote '...Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others.'¹⁵

The sovereignty of States was controversial from the start, and Jefferson's representation of Virginia on the drafting committee for the Articles of Confederation was instrumental in the adoption of Article II: 'Each State retains its Sovereignty, freedom and independence, and every Power, Jurisdiction and right, which is not by this confederation expressly delegated to the United States in Congress assembled.'¹⁶ This elucidates Jefferson's goal for the Union, allowing direct democracy to guard against Federal interference.

After the war, Jefferson saw a US Republic as a threat to Virginian democracy. Much of his participation in government from this point was intended to foil the ambitions of Republicans.

He opposed Federal taxation and the establishment of a central Bank, argued for State militias over a standing army and opposed Federal assumption of State debts, feeling that international debt should be their only remit.

He supported automatic citizenship for white immigrants to Virginia and opposed any joint border control. So deep was his faith in the democracy of educated white men, that he supported rebellion on principle, even where he opposed the cause. Concerning Shays' Rebellion in Massachusetts he wrote:

¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes On The State Of Virginia* (Philadelphia: Prichard and Hall, 1785), p. 239.

¹⁵ Library of Congress, Thomas Jefferson, *Thomas Jefferson to Henri Gregoire*, 25 February 1809. The Thomas Jefferson Papers at The Library Of Congress: Series 1: General Correspondence. 1651 to 1827 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.mss/mtj.mtjbib019810> [accessed 14 March 2021].

¹⁶ US Continental Congress, *Articles of Confederation, article II* (Exeter, New-Hampshire: Zechariah Fowle, 1777) <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/SMAN-107/pdf/SMAN-107-pg935.pdf> [accessed 14 March 2021] (p.937).

...what country can preserve its liberties if their rulers are not warned from time to time that their people preserve the spirit of resistance? Let them take arms. The remedy is to set them right as to facts, pardon and pacify them.¹⁷

He was the ambassador to France in the prelude to the French Revolution and supported the French Republic against Britain in the Napoleonic Wars, in opposition to the official Union stance.

Even as Vice President to his former ally John Adams, Jefferson secretly drafted the 1799 Kentucky Resolution, declaring the Alien and Sedition Acts unconstitutional and stating:

That the several states who formed that instrument, being sovereign and independent, have the unquestionable right to judge of its infraction; and that a nullification, by those sovereignties, of all unauthorized acts done under colour of that instrument, is the rightful remedy.¹⁸

The unanimous State rejection of this and the accompanying Virginia Resolution of James Madison, in favour of the authority of the Federal Courts was a declaration of Victory of Federal Republicanism over State Democracy, a trend which even the two subsequent terms of Jefferson's Presidency could not reverse, and which would spark the divisions that precipitated Civil War.

As demonstrated, Jefferson's adherence to State Democracy was central to his revolutionary thinking. Even while working within government, he saw the Union as a potential threat to the hard-fought self-governance of Virginia, and as the Federal administration sought greater centralised power, focussing on development of commerce and industry, he became increasingly convinced that their views were incompatible with the rural Southern States.

¹⁷ Thomas Jefferson, 'Jefferson on Revolution: letter to Willian Stephens Smith' (1787) in *HPFY3009 US History Primary Sourcebook* <https://moodle.uwtsd.ac.uk/mod/resource/view.php?id=337019> [accessed 14 March 2021], p.39.

¹⁸ Bill of Rights Institute, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, *Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions* (1798). Primary Sources <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/primary-sources/virginia-and-kentucky-resolutions> [accessed 14 March 2021].

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