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Jeffersonian America

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On the cover of the book is a photograph of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC, taken by Robert Y. Kaufman. Here, Thomas Jefferson stands silent and stoic, silhouetted against an orange fading sky, and flanked, perhaps even incarcerated, by the appropriately neo-classical columns of the Memorial. It is a graceful cover, and one that helps draw the reader immediately to the importance of the subject, and the domination of Jefferson over that subject matter. In a period not lacking in heroes and great figures, Thomas Jefferson sits astride the fifty years beginning with the outbreak of the American War for Independence like no other of his contemporaries. Author of the Declaration of Independence, Third President of the United States, and prolific correspondent, Jefferson asserted an awesome political presence and left an unmatched legacy of political wisdom and reflection on the emerging republicanism of the newly united States. Indeed, Jefferson, unlike any other President, imparted his own name to the era following the American Revolution. The 'Age of Jefferson' or 'Jeffersonian America' has no parallels. Not even Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt or Kennedy have quite dominated their eras in the same way that Jefferson has come to be associated with the period spanning the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries – the crucial years of the early Republic.

It is perhaps fitting, then, that *Jeffersonian America* has found a place in Blackwell's 'Problems in American History' series, fortuitously edited by one of the pre-eminent scholars of early American history, Jack P. Greene. Each volume in the series is supposed to focus on a central theme in American history and provide greater analytical depth and historiographic coverage than standard textbook discussions. The series editor, Jack P. Greene, wants to provide 'in highly interpretive texts the unresolved questions of American history that are central to current debates and concerns': in short, brief syntheses of large subjects. The texts are supposed to be concise enough to be supplemented either with primary readings or core textbooks. Other texts in the series so far include Ronald Edsforth's *The New Deal* (2000), Jacqueline Jones' *A Social History of the Laboring Classes* (1999), and Donna R. Gabbacia's *Immigration and American Diversity* (2002), among others.

Jefferson and Jefferson's America is an appropriate yet particularly taxing subject for such a treatment. Appropriate because historians have created a powerful but often overwhelming industry surrounding Jefferson, his life, politics, philosophy, morality, and legacy. Taxing because part of the reason so much has been written about Jefferson is not just because of his influential role in the

early Republic, but also because of the sheer scale, complexity, and ambiguity of his literary and political legacy. In the flood of literature – much of it particularly polemical – Jefferson himself sometimes gets drowned. Different schools of interpretation use Jefferson for all kinds of different arguments. Nor does Jefferson help himself; in a political career spanning over fifty years, Jefferson's public pronouncements are often elusive, opaque and/or contradictory.

Authors Peter Onuf and Leonard Sadosky want to rescue Jefferson from this rising tide of confusing interpretive currents. They are well qualified for the job. Leonard Sadosky is a PhD student with Peter Onuf, who in turn is the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation Professor at the University of Virginia. Sadosky brings to the book the fresh perspective and enthusiasm of a postgraduate student, while Onuf is well known and respected for his work – often collaborative – on Jefferson and his era. The main message of this book, Onuf and Sadosky argue, is that Jefferson had a fairly clear goal. He endeavoured to create a perfect republic: 'a community whose politics, economy, and social life were governed, within and without, solely by republican principles'.(p. 1) His struggle to do so, they assert, illuminates the history of the first fifty years of the United States. Thus 'America' in this period can be seen 'in some meaningful sense' definitively to be 'Jeffersonian'.(p. 1)

With this ambitious goal in mind, then, the authors break the book down into four chapters that really amount to rich but separate and discrete interpretive essays. After an introduction that provides an all too brief overview of political events leading up to Jefferson's election as President – the 'Revolution of 1800' – and beyond, the first chapter looks in detail at the 'Republican Revolution'. Here, the authors document the spread and depth of support for Jefferson and the emerging Republican party over the years leading up to the election of 1800. Jefferson's own base of support in Virginia – principally independent white yeoman farmers – not only helped solidify support throughout the southern states, but also contributed heavily to the formation of Jefferson's political philosophy. Following a line laid down long ago by Edmund S. Morgan in *American Slavery, American Freedom* (Norton; New York, 1975), the authors argue that slavery and the absence of any serious divisions among whites in Virginia allowed Jefferson to think more expansively about the possibilities of reforming society on strict republican principles. For Jefferson, the principal challenges to doing so came from above and below. Jefferson believed that ordinary property-holding whites had to be awakened to their duty as active citizens in their own republic. On the other hand, he believed that the greatest threat to a republic was the power of an 'aristocracy' – variously defined by Jefferson and his followers throughout the period to include any potentially dangerous concentrations of wealth and influence, including an enlarged Federal government.

The juxtaposition of the 'vicious few' and the 'virtuous many' became a key tool in the Jeffersonian box of political rhetoric in the acrimonious years following the ratification of the Constitution. At the same time, the protean nature of such terms enabled Republican support to spread beyond the borders of Virginia. Indeed, the authors show that the genius of Republicanism lay in the fact that it could be so many different things to so many different people. In the northern states, especially, political leaders adapted opposition thought to local circumstances and employed Republican rhetoric in partisan competitions that already had a long lineage. At the same time, though, the simplicity of the Republican message meant that most could believe that they shared common principles. In an important sense in this pre-party age, Republicans everywhere could believe that they truly represented the 'people' and were not a national party at all. The Federalists were instead pictured as enemies of the people – counter-revolutionary enemies. Thus, the real triumph of 1800, for Jefferson, was that the people themselves had once again saved the republic by reaffirming the principles of the Revolution.

Chapter Two, 'Little Republics', explores the far-reaching nature of Jefferson's republicanism. For Jefferson, a virtuous and active citizenry was vital to the health of a republican nation. Jefferson's ideal citizen was the independent yeoman farmer, capable of providing for his own family and

ensuring his sons' independence at maturity. The family was central in Jefferson's vision and was a little republic in its own right, created by a free act of consent between sovereign and equal individuals. Though in practice women had few rights, especially once married, the republican husband had a duty to respect and honour his wife. In turn, though women could not participate fully in civic life, they also had a duty as equal citizens in the new republic to domesticate and moralize the 'boisterous passions' of their republican husbands. Wives thus played an important role in creating and helping to re-create republican domesticity – the defining characteristic of which was the reproduction of the autonomous (and self-sufficient) household form. Republican households, however, were in turn also connected to others through a vast and growing array of (usually fraternal) 'associations' designed to redevelop and redefine new republican social and cultural values. Thus with the family as the basic building block, the nation was 'linked in an ascending series of 'republics', each 'sovereign' in its own sphere'.(p. 82) The genius of Republican culture, the authors assert, was to create a new American nationalism based on the connections between these different republican identities: between families, local communities, and the many groups the 'good American' could join (churches, fraternal associations, and even business enterprises) while they pursued their happiness.

Chapter Three explores the simple but pervasive premise underlying Jefferson's conception of the importance of the 'pursuit of happiness' – particularly in the realm of the political economy of the early Republic. Freed from the restrictions of a hierarchical social order that supposedly denied the humanity and natural rights of the vast majority of its subjects, American citizens could freely pursue happiness in their own ways. Happiness lay in the enjoyment of the personal autonomy and independence which allowed that free pursuit, but success was of course also measured by the accumulation of property and the formation of families. The independent yeoman farmer was again at the heart of this vision, and for Jefferson, the republican state existed only to create opportunities for free men to improve themselves. Paradoxically, however, this meant that government might act in ways that seemed to enlarge its powers way beyond what even Federalists in opposition thought were healthy. Republicans called on the state to encourage foreign and domestic trade, in improving transportation facilities, and in promoting economic development in general. Yet a republican government created by and for independent property-holding citizens could also steal Native American land through state-sponsored war and diplomacy. Moreover, the retention and expansion of slavery was also in large measure dependent on state support and the coercive power of government. Onuf and Sadosky enjoy exploring the apparent paradoxes between Jeffersonian ideals of independence and self-sufficiency, and the almost routine use of government to facilitate the pursuit of happiness. Indeed, they claim that the genius of Republicanism lay in its apparent ability to 'reconcile the dialectic between liberty and power that defined the political world of the founding generation'.(pp. 7-8)

The final chapter looks outwards, to the new nation's relations with other states. Tracing the issues and problems confronting the new union of republics from the Revolution to the early nineteenth century, the authors here explore the ways in which Americans defined their sovereignty and their sovereign nation status, and grappled with its attendant dilemmas. Indeed, in struggling for self-preservation within a factious 'Atlantic States System', Republicans and Federalists alike were forced to confront the limits of their own extended republic. As the federal government assumed greater sovereignty over foreign diplomacy, both states and individuals worried that such concentrations of power would undermine cherished republican principles and destroy the union. The ultimate irony lay in the fact that Jefferson's model world order of peaceful republican states was constantly threatened by almost continuous foreign conflict and war and internal dissension. Moreover, it was the Republicans – Jefferson's heirs – not the Federalists, who brought America into a second European war in which they did not hesitate to use the full extent of state power to preserve the union, even at the expense of constitutional principles. In the end, Jefferson himself

remained ambiguous, even pessimistic about the future of the federal republic and extended union. He was right to have doubts: the tensions engendered by a republic of republics – each supposedly capable of defining and pursuing their common interests – would only be resolved by a war between the States that started a mere 34 years after Jefferson died.

These brief summaries cannot do justice to the range of arguments, nuanced interpretations, and extensive historiographic asides that the authors employ in this text. It is a rich book that moves well beyond summarising principal lines of Jeffersonian scholarship and provides much food for thought for those who might tackle Jefferson yet. But for these same reasons, it is difficult to see how this book can and will be used in the classroom. The series goal is to provide concise books that can supplement a textbook, or perhaps for the advanced student, a text itself that could be supplemented with other readings, including primary sources. Though challenging and provocative at times, few undergraduates, even advanced students, will persevere through the sometimes dense interpretive text, especially if they have just waded through a textbook. The book might yet be used as a core text in an advanced undergraduate class. However, few markers help the slower readers along, and the uninterrupted pages of text will make even the hardiest student blanch. Nor will they be helped by the organization of the book. The interpretive essays make for wide-ranging arguments, but the reader is often left floundering in a sea of detail and diverse arguments that do not make for a straightforward read.

More likely, postgraduate students and academics will enjoy this book most, and they will welcome the high level of abstraction, debate, and discussion of the most important issues of the period. Moreover, a detailed, up-to-date bibliography is an invaluable asset for any further research by students and scholars alike. The annotated bibliography runs to almost forty pages, and covers influential monographs and journal articles on virtually every issue covered in the book. Thus the book is, in short, a treasure trove for scholars of Jefferson and his age, whether they are beginning new research or wanting to reengage or catch-up with the sometimes overwhelming volume of work on ‘Jeffersonian America’.

One final caveat, however. In an important sense, this book is far more about Jefferson, or Jefferson’s view of America, than it is about Jeffersonian America. It is not that Onuf and Sadosky are oblivious to the presence of those amongst whom Jefferson lived, who toiled for Jefferson, or simply disagreed with Jefferson. Both scholars are aware of those ‘below’ Jefferson and at times draw from recent, rich and engaging literature that does full justice to the many people who lived during the era. Rather, in dissecting and analysing Jefferson’s carefully-crafted vision for the republic, the authors give the impression that there are few who counted in Jefferson’s world apart from himself, an idealised citizenry, and fellow Republican and Federalist elites. Few other people make an appearance in the book. Though the authors pay lip service to the historical presence and agency of other people, the book never really moves beyond Jefferson’s own world. Onuf and Sadosky do at times stop and separate out Jefferson’s idealised view from the messy reality, but the language employed implies too often that they are one and the same. Though the authors are at pains to emphasise the contingency of the period, the readers are never given a sense of the sometimes painful challenges, interactions, and conflicts that created the world in which Jefferson lived, and thought.

Returning to the cover photograph, closer inspection brings to consciousness the presence of a tiny figure at the foot of the statue of Jefferson – a figure that is at first unnoticed. Perhaps intentionally, the photographer has given Jefferson a cellmate within the columns of the Memorial. Not an admiring tourist, nor even a contemplative bureaucrat or politician come to draw inspiration from the man, myth, or memorial. Rather, the tiny figure dwarfed by the statute is a cleaner, labouring away with mop or brush, sweeping the day’s dirt and debris from Jefferson’s view, helping to ensure that the Jefferson Memorial continues to stand as an appropriately pristine monument to the man

and the period. Jefferson gazes ahead, eyes directed forward far above the cleaner, oblivious to the presence below him. In a book dedicated to understanding the complex thought of such a monumental presence on the landscape, Onuf and Sadosky should be congratulated on the richness and timeliness of their interpretation. This is certainly a convincing book about Jefferson's America. Yet because we never see the view from the cleaner's floor, the authors do not quite succeed in convincing this reader that all America during this period was definitively Jeffersonian.

The authors are pleased to accept this review and do not wish to comment further

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