

THOMAS JEFFERSON DESERVES A HOLIDAY!

The task of preparing a twenty-minute sermon on Thomas Jefferson is daunting. When I was a youngster, I was so captivated by the life of Jefferson that I told my parents I wanted to change my name to Thomas Jefferson Towle. I never made the switch, but I've certainly devoured my share of Jefferson biographies, and I know firsthand that the task of preaching on Jefferson remains an awesome, if not, arrogant, endeavor.

One historian said that Jefferson records were like a labyrinth and that anyone who chose to write about Jefferson would enter the labyrinth and never emerge. Oh well, I'll give it my best shot today, because it's precisely Jefferson's 265th birthday!

Furthermore, working on Jefferson is always a favor to oneself, for as Dumas Malone writes:

The thing about Jefferson that gives you the greatest lift is his belief in the human mind and his belief in human beings. You always have the feeling of springtime with Jefferson's mind—a new era, getting rid of superstition and prejudice and tyranny, with the human race launched on an endless conquest of freedom and knowledge.

Our country could sure use more of Jefferson's spirit and mindset as we approach a most critical presidential election this fall. In truth, we could use another Thomas Jefferson. He surely deserves a holiday in his honor, if for no other reason than by studying Jefferson, we'd benefit enormously both as citizens and as a country.

For starters it's hard to imagine American history without the public writings of Thomas Jefferson: the Declaration of Independence; the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty; as well as the First Inaugural Address. Jefferson's arguments and presence also contributed to our Bill of Rights. He was a scientist, an inventor, and, by the way, an

architect. Jefferson was a farmer who experimented with crops and livestock.

Furthermore, he was a student of the classics and of the Bible.

Jefferson was an author whose genius lay in his ability to take deep and complicated concepts of history, law, and philosophy and clothe them in a graceful, direct language, what John Adams admired as a “peculiar felicity of expression.” But I’m not through. Jefferson was an accomplished violinist, who also practiced law, performed a chemical experiment, and, oh yea, administered a country. “What was he not?” asks Unitarian historian, Henry Steele Commager.

Well, for one thing, Jefferson wasn’t a traditional Christian. And because he wasn’t, and because he held some negative opinions about Christian clergy, he was angrily denounced, in his time, as the anti-Christ, and branded as an atheist, which he wasn’t. But more about his religious views later on.

The facts of Jefferson’s long and amazingly productive life are relatively simple. He was born on April 13, 1743 at Shadwell, his father’s small farm home among the rolling foothills of the Shenandoah mountains, which was then the westward edge of western civilization. Jefferson was a distinct blend of his mother’s distinguished family of aristocracy who ruled large plantations along the coast and his father’s heritage of plain, earth-based people.

Jefferson attended William and Mary College, and was admitted to the bar in 1767 at the age of 24. On New Year’s Day, 1772, he married a young widow, Martha Wayles Skelton, and carried her through the winter snows to the one room brick cottage at Monticello that was the earliest section of the grand mansion he later designed and built on a hill near his father’s home at Shadwell.

They had one son and five daughters, only two of whom survived. And Martha died, after only ten years of marriage. Jefferson reared his two daughters and never remarried. In 1779, he was elected governor of Virginia; in 1785 he was appointed minister to France; in 1789 he became Secretary of State; in 1796 he was elected Vice President; and in 1800 he became our third President.

It was typical Thomas Jefferson that when he was inaugurated as President, he refused to use the state coach with six horses and outriders as both Washington and Adams had done in imitation of European royalty. Instead, Jefferson deliberately walked on his own two feet from his boarding house to the yet unfinished capitol for the ceremony. The first, last, and only President in our history to do so.

In the Presidency, Jefferson continued to refuse to observe the European rules of protocol that he despised as being inconsistent with American ideals of equality. And to the great confusion and wrath of foreign diplomats, Jefferson always seated the guests randomly at the White House, regardless of prominence and position, and insisted on shaking hands with each and every guest, rather than bowing from the waist.

After two terms in office and having more than doubled the size of the country with the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson retired from the Presidency in 1809. He felt free at last, he said, to cultivate those “tranquil pursuits of science for which nature had intended him.”

So, Jefferson’s later years were devoted almost entirely to education. He projected his character and talents in founding a university that, he said, would be based on “the illimitable freedom of the human mind to explore and to expose every subject susceptible of its contemplation.” Jefferson organized the curriculum, hired the faculty, even selected

the library books. He then drew up plans for the buildings and supervised their construction. What a renaissance man, what a renaissance accomplishment! In 1825 Jefferson had the unspeakable privilege of seeing his pride and joy, the University of Virginia, open with 40 students.

On July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years after the adoption of the Declaration of Independence that he'd written, Jefferson died and was buried at Monticello. Ironically, his fellow Unitarian, non-conformist friend, and erstwhile political opponent, John Adams, was dying that very day in Quincy, Massachusetts.

Some of the last words that Adams spoke were these: "Thomas Jefferson still survives." In other words, a *founder* still lives. Not long before, Adams had written to Jefferson that only a few of the signers of the great Declaration were alive and that Jefferson, being the youngest, might outlive all the rest. "Thomas Jefferson still survives..." Adams mumbled and lapsed into unconsciousness, then died.

John Adams didn't know that his friend, Thomas Jefferson, with whom fifty years before he had pledged his life, his fortune, and his sacred honor, then grown estranged followed by reconciliation...that this special friend had actually preceded him in death by a few hours. "Thomas Jefferson still survives..." Well, indeed he does!

The epitaph on Jefferson's tombstone was written by himself and contains a simple statement of the life accomplishments of which he was most proud: "Here lies Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and of the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty." Note that Jefferson didn't think it important enough to mention that he'd been twice elected and served as the President of our United States.

Jefferson and other radical reformers of his era were true children of the Enlightenment, regarding themselves to be creating a new country on a new continent, a whole new way of being, free from as Jefferson put it, “the ancient errors and antagonisms of the old world.”

Thus, to every task that came before him, Jefferson tried to apply a fresh slant. Given the task of farming, he designed a more efficient kind of plow. Faced with even so basic a need as that of sitting down, Jefferson designed an entirely new kind of chair. That same originality that he applied to the physical world, Jefferson also applied to the political and religious worlds. He wrote into law wholly new and infinitely fairer arrangements by which Americans might live together.

Don’t forget that the age into which Jefferson was born was profoundly narrow. It was governed by the conviction that the basic conditions of life had been handed down once and for all, by special decree from a Christian God, and that the unchanging and the unchangeable world was to be forever after held in the hands of a few churchmen and nobles, who, with the help of tradition, would decide what truth was.

Now, against this static, oppressive worldview, Jefferson, promoted a political and religious philosophy where each person should pursue truths for themselves. Neither custom nor precedent, neither scripture nor institutions but *reason* was our god-given faculty to be used and applied to every aspect of life.

Therefore, when pursuing the study of religion, Jefferson even wrote his own version of the New Testament and the life of Jesus from the evidence available, focusing upon the moral wisdom of the Nazarene, omitting all of the miracles. It’s known today as the Jefferson Bible.

In fact, Jefferson held certain portions of the Bible in high regard, so when his daughter lay dying in 1802, he was found reading the Bible under the trees at Monticello; and, in his own last illness, Jefferson read it, as he did the Greek tragedians. Lamentably, the Jefferson Bible was not published until after his death. I ask you: who in this age, much less in that Bible-thumping time, would be so bold as to tamper with “Holy Writ” as Jefferson did?

Yet, to Jefferson and his innovative ilk, nothing was set for all time. There was nothing that couldn't be improved upon, or for which a better way might not be found. This adventurous Jeffersonian spirit is considered the cornerstone of our American character today. Given time, opportunity, and resources we Americans still firmly believe, at our best, that we might create a new heaven and a new earth.

As a radical believer in democracy, Jefferson advocated a powerful series of reforms in various areas. Upon becoming Governor of Virginia his first acts of reform were to abolish and destroy the great landed estates controlled by a few. He also promoted and passed a law providing that immigrants could become naturalized after living in Virginia for two years. While he was serving in the Virginia House of Burgess, at his very first session in 1769, he attempted unsuccessfully to sponsor a bill that provided for the emancipation of slaves, and during his first term as President, he sponsored a law that was to make slavery illegal after the year 1808, throughout the United States.

Jefferson was certainly flawed, because he himself kept slaves and probably had a black mistress. Yes, Jefferson was a living contradiction, because he both abominated

slavery yet continued to live with and off it. He settled for being a humane slave-owner who abhorred the more violent aspects of the practice.

As his own epitaph shows, the work of which Jefferson was most proud was his effort on behalf of religious liberty. And Virginia, thanks to Jefferson, became the first state in the history of the world to proclaim the separation between church and state that led directly to the “no establishment of religion” clause in the first amendment.

For these reformist religious views, Jefferson was condemned severely by mainline Americans, yet he steadfastly refused to reply to attacks on his beliefs holding that “we’re accountable to God alone for our religious views.”

As early as 1799, at the pressing request of Universalist Benjamin Rush, Jefferson finally prepared a syllabus of his religious opinions to convince folks that the slanders about him were untrue, but he sent it to only six trusted friends. The clergy of his age continued to hound him about his morals and religion. “But, he wrote, “I am not afraid of the priests. All their pious whining, hypocritical canting, lying and slandering haven’t given me one moment of pain...for I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the human mind.”

Toward the end of his life, Jefferson, always an avid reader, wrote to fellow Unitarian John Adams, “I have read Joseph Priestley’s books over and over again, and I rest on them as the basis of my own faith.” Priestley, of course, was not only the great chemist of his age who discovered oxygen, but also a Unitarian minister.

Unitarianism was the only faith wide enough to accommodate Jefferson’s broad and unscriptural concept of God. So in 1822, he wrote the Rev. Thomas Whittemore, a Universalist minister, as follows:

Had the doctrines of Jesus been preached always as pure as they came from his own lips, then the whole civilized world would now have been Christian. I rejoice that in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its conscience to neither kings, nor priests, the genuine doctrine of only one God is reviving, and I trust that there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.

And on January 8, 1925, Jefferson wrote again:

The population of my neighborhood is too slender and is too much divided into sects to maintain any one preacher well. I must therefore be content to be a Unitarian by myself, although I know there are many around me who would become so if once they heard the questions fairly stated.

Whether or not Jefferson was a Unitarian is actually immaterial. The New England Unitarians of his time wouldn't have claimed him nor would have the Virginian Anglicans, though they all claim him now. Jefferson was what he was, an original, prophetic, revolutionary person, who was a grand exponent of religious freedom and non-conformity.

The claim that we ought to have a holiday honoring Jefferson as well as Washington, Lincoln and King isn't original with me, but after my brief review of his life and message this morning, I hope you'll concur with my position that America could use a holiday in his memory. As Bruce Rhodewalt comments:

Sure, Jefferson got picked for Mt. Rushmore, but it seems like a backhanded compliment being stuck through eternity staring over the shoulder of George Washington while Teddy Roosevelt nudges you from behind... Besides the fact that his birthday, April 13th, falls neatly between President's Day and Memorial Day, it would be an excellent opportunity to bring a complex, flawed yet reachable hero into our midst, an occasion to honor lifelong education and a great opportunity to remind all Americans and teach our children that our government is fully ours.

Yes, my friends, “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all 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.”

Now, I don’t know about you, but I wouldn’t mind hearing that pledge recited and discussed occasionally in our schools as well as committed to regular practice by those elected to run our country.

Yes, if you ask me, Thomas Jefferson deserves a holiday!

April 13, 2008
Tom Owen-Towle