

*In April of 1962, President John F. Kennedy was entertaining the Nobel Laureates at the White House with a dinner in their honor. In a genial moment he turned to the impressive assemblage of men and women—America's prize-winning scientists, writers, artists—and said with a grin that he saw before him "probably the greatest concentration of talent and genius in this house except for perhaps those times when Thomas Jefferson ate alone."*

*Few men have been foolish enough to deny in their hearts what they may have denied with their lips: that Jefferson, in the brilliant reach of his mind and the limitless play of his interests, was one of the most gifted men ever to assume the tasks of democratic statesmanship. The historian, Henry Steele Commager, attempting to assess Jefferson's mighty influence over his countrymen, from the opening act of Independence to our present point in history, wrote: "Jefferson is the central figure in American history and—if freedom and democracy survive in our generation—he may yet prove to be the central figure of modern history." The philosopher, John Dewey, hailed Jefferson as "the first modern to state in human terms the principles of democracy." The great French sociologist, Alexis de Tocqueville, in his classic work, Democracy in America, stated without qualification: "I consider him the most powerful advocate democracy has ever had."*

*The young Virginian who became the symbol of America's most compelling ideals—so conclusively that both sides in every heated substantive policy from Jefferson's days to ours have claimed the sanction of his principles—was himself of the belief that politics per se was an inferior form of human life. His democratic faith, so properly coupled with the ideals he wrote into the Declaration of Independence, the human rights of equality, of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, was the faith of a humanist who had put himself to school in the method of the experimental sciences. Thus his comprehensive program was to establish a new social-political experiment, a democratic modern republic. Its base would be free men using their intelligence and information to play a responsible part, directly or indirectly, in the significant decisions of government. But the fruits and results of a democratic republic were*

*what he valued, not political power or political form in themselves. The chance to learn, to engage in enlightened discourse and debate, to work with some pride in a suitable task, to cultivate friendships, and enter the many-mansioned realm of art and culture as more than passive recipients, to quest endlessly, creatively, for the meanings of life, to win ever more of the inexhaustible truth—these were the moral goods for which free men would gratefully endure the burdens of self-government. So often is Jefferson cited as an "apostle of liberty"—as though liberty could be spoken for without questions for how, by what means, at what cost, and through what work, courage and sacrifice—that it is essential to remember that he had no illusions that liberty was absolute and undivided! Not a cheap and easy liberty to which men are "transported in a featherbed," but the liberty which is the obverse side of responsibility, of intelligent concern and planning, and which at best ascends to a general rule, never to a universal dogma.*

*Since Jefferson was the child of the European Enlightenment and in himself the superb fulfillment of the American Enlightenment, one must consider the underlying assumptions of his liberal social views. Long before Marx formulated the slogan that the role of philosophers was not merely to understand the world but to change it, Jefferson had come, through his own process of growth and through the selective affiliation with philosophers he would regard as his ideals, to link theory and action, ideals and reality, principles and practice. As a youth in Western Virginia, he was under the tutelage of his father, Peter Jefferson, a self-made man, a surveyor, cartographer, and skilled craftsman who had himself built the house at Shadwell on the farm where Jefferson was born. Jefferson's memories of his boyhood included less about his mother who came of good aristocratic Randolph stock, than of his father who taught him how to ride, manage a canoe, do carpentry and building, manage a farm, shoot, plant, judge livestock. His father died when Jefferson was fourteen years old, leaving a legacy of some 1400 acres to his son; and yet the fact that his father had arranged that the boy be given a complete training in the classics was mentioned in Jefferson's Autobiography in this way: "I thank on my knees him who directed my early education, for having put into my possession this rich source of delight; and I would not exchange it for anything which I could then have acquired."*

*To this classical training, he soon added intensive exploration of the new world of natural science and mathematics, under the instruction of Dr. William Small at William and Mary College. Praised by Jefferson as "the most excellent Small," revered ever after as his beloved teacher, this professor of moral philosophy had been responsible for purchasing scientific apparatus for the college which has been described as "at least comparable to what Harvard then possessed." He also built up a library on scientific experiments and inventions for the college. Before this enlightened Scotsman returned to England, he had made a daily companion*

of young Jefferson, and was responsible for introducing him to George Wythe, with whom Jefferson studied law for five years after college. Small and Wythe were also the men who conducted Jefferson into the intimate circle of friends who visited with Governor Fauquier at the Palace in Williamsburg. To their common interest in the advance of science, and the principles of law and government, these men joined the amateur's passion for *impromptu musicales*. Jefferson, who is said to have practiced three hours daily on the cello in these student days, was assigned performing parts.

Thus early the seamless web of knowledge, the Baconian challenge to take all knowledge for his empire became Jefferson's delight. He himself reflected in later years that he had been "a hard student" and his orderly, analytical notes on Montesquieu, Shaftesbury, Locke among others—as well as his careful annotation of the history of law and his more personal selections and comments in his literary commonplace book—bear him out. But important too were the occasions for good conversation, with affable and courteous manners, and the city pleasures of theatre-going, attendance at concerts, games and convivial meetings at the Williamsburg cafe. When Jefferson came to the ultimate test of defining his basic moral values, the use of the phrase "the pursuit of happiness" encompassed all these substantial, intellectual, artistic, and friendly human associations.

Tall, red-haired, soft-spoken and without a trace of arrogance, Jefferson travelled the path from law to public life that was even more compelling in Virginia than in Massachusetts. Henry Adams in characteristic exaggeration once propounded that "Law and politics were the only objects of Virginian thought; but within these bounds the Virginians achieved triumphs." Wythe, Jefferson, Madison, Marshall—these four alone, and at close distance dozens of others—attest to what is correct in the Adams judgment. By the time Jefferson appeared in Philadelphia, aged thirty-three, to represent Virginia at the second Continental Congress, he had practised law, served as a member of the House of Burgesses for Albemarle County from 1769 on, and had appeared in print as the author of a distinguished essay on the oppressive course of British rule in America, and the rationale of American rights, *A Summary View of the Rights of British America*, which had placed him in the vanguard of the revolutionary leadership in his state. In the spring of 1776, when he was assigned to write the Declaration of Independence for Congress, he stepped across the threshold of "The Old Dominion" to enter the world stage as an American founder. We have John Adams' testimony that he, like the other members of the Committee on the Declaration, deferred to the younger man for this coveted role because Jefferson possessed the reputation of having written a most handsome public paper ("*A Summary View*") and was known to the delegates for the felicity of his pen.

Wasting no time to preen his feathers, Jefferson wrote urgently to political associates in Virginia asking to be recalled so that he might

help to draft a new state constitution. Like John Adams, he sensed that Americans, who had solicited the attention of a candid world in their quest for freedom and self-government, had best create the framework of orderly republican institutions. "It is the whole object of the present controversy," he affirmed; "for should a bad government be instituted for us in future, it had been as well to have accepted at first the bad one offered to us from beyond the water without the risk of expense of contest." Through a series of accidental circumstances, Jefferson's draft of a constitution for Virginia arrived late in the proceedings of the Virginia Convention but nonetheless his preamble and several other features were incorporated into the Virginia constitution of 1776. Very shortly after, Jefferson was pressed into one of the most demanding assignments that could be dealt to a legal reformer. He was put on a committee charged with the revision of Virginia's laws, and since he was Jefferson, he alone drafted 126 bills before this Herculean task was over. His aim was to bring the laws of Virginia into conformity with republican principles, creating a system which he described in his *Autobiography* "by which every fibre would be eradicated of ancient or future aristocracy; and a foundation laid for a government truly republican." Justly famous among these important bills in the revisal of 1770 was the Bill for establishing religious freedom, a bill called by Julian Boyd "Jefferson's declaration of intellectual and spiritual independence." Unlike some of his other great bills, this one was at long last enacted into law in 1786, the first piece of legislation ever to provide expressly for full religious freedom. In this contribution alone, Jefferson advanced far beyond his revered John Locke whose philosophy of toleration "stopped short," as Jefferson said, of the full freedom required by the independent intelligence and conscience of man.

Other significant bills which contributed to the fame of "the philosophical legislation of Virginia" in France and throughout Europe in the decade of the 1780's were "A Bill on the more General Diffusion of Knowledge" and the bills abolishing primogeniture and entail. The object of the diffusion of knowledge bill was to "qualify citizens to understand their rights, to maintain them, and to exercise with intelligence their parts in self-government." As means to this end, Jefferson proposed a comprehensive new plan of education for the commonwealth of Virginia, providing for free elementary schools for all future citizens, and various higher levels of free education for students of proven ability or talent. This bill must be viewed as part of the revolutionary transformation of society that Jefferson considered to be the practical outcome of the ideals professed in the Declaration. It suffered the fate shared by many later wise educational proposals in America; it could not pass the legislature on grounds of "too much expence."

It is worth notice that Jefferson was also consciously trying to effect reform in the language of the law, as well as in its content. Eager to open

*the laws to the hard-headed intelligence of citizens who might nevertheless be perfectly innocent of legal scholarship, he tried to get rid of the barbarisms of legal jargon, ornate, indirect and repetitive phrasing beneath which the logic of the law was often buried. Beyond any man of his time, Jefferson had grasped the central principles that a free society flourished with the freely flowing intelligence of its citizens; and that communication, on the most extensive basis possible, was indispensable to governments based upon the consent of the people. Both as means and as ends, the morality of intelligence would conduct men to freedom and renew their faith.*

*He was in no sense a provincial Virginia planter, consequently, when he embarked for Europe in 1784 on a mission to join John Adams and Benjamin Franklin in negotiating treaties of commerce for the needy new United States. His success in Paris was second only to Franklin's, whose affectionate introduction of Jefferson to his European network of friends smoothed his path. Never did an American enter upon "the vaunted scene of Europe" with more ardor and more determination to study the best of European society, art, architecture, technology, invention, agriculture—even cuisine, in order to raise the level of life and culture at home. Thus, observant travel notes were the product of one phase of Jefferson's personal conquest of the old world. But his official duties were pressing and important, especially after Franklin's return to America when Jefferson was appointed American Minister in France. Moreover, as a good friend of Lafayette and his circle, Jefferson was consulted unofficially for political advice by this group who were the leaders of the liberal "Patriot Party" in the early days of the French Revolution. In sum, the crowded years of 1784-1789 challenged Jefferson to compare his values and philosophy, his own country's qualities and aspirations with those of France and indeed Europe as a civilization. On the whole, they confirmed his earlier beliefs about free, republican government. With all the animated discussions he partook of in the most brilliant salons, and the profuse opportunities he seized for opera and theatre, he gained cosmopolitan sophistication—but nothing profoundly new in the way of ideas. Matters of emphasis changed, of course. He rethought his position on natural rights, and henceforth stressed, as he had not before, the fundamental importance of economic rights. In connection with his powerful phrase, "the earth belongs to the living," he developed his ideas of the primary claims men had upon society for the opportunity to work and find satisfaction for their economic needs. He was sensitive to human suffering and could not be indifferent to the crushing poverty of the masses of men in the cities and the peasantry in the countryside. These miseries, this inhuman indigence and accompanying ignorance he attributed to the "oppression" of stupid or self-indulgent government policy. Monarchy, which he had always condemned on grounds of self-respect and freedom of action, he now de-*

tested as a visible system of evil that ground the faces of the poor. A new depth of moral passion awoke in him in Europe. This fact goes a long way in explaining the character of his feelings about the French Revolution. The opening events of this fateful upheaval he hailed as "the first chapter of the history of European liberty."

Even these few remarks about Jefferson in Paris would be inexcusable without at least a gesture towards the more personal side of his life there. He managed to surround himself with his adored and adoring daughters, Martha and Maria; and having placed them in a fine convent school, directed their studies and reading, even the details of their dress on important occasions, in a manner sufficiently attentive to violate the canons of so-called "permissiveness" which modern society has come to tolerate. He became an intimate friend of John Adams in these years and of his splendid lady and her young ones. Across the water, Madison was Jefferson's most valued correspondent, informing him of the course and climate of political changes at home; but across the Channel, when Adams became the American Ambassador at the Court of St. James's, Jefferson had an acute countryman nearby with whom he could review problems and share information and impressions. For example, as each of these diplomats received news of the new Federal Constitution, they exchanged appraising criticisms. Most affecting of all the events of these years, however, was the attractive middle-aged widower's infatuation with the ravishingly beautiful Mrs. Maria Cosway, portrait painter, musician, childlike lady of fashion—an exquisitely flirtatious creature of sensibility, gayety and melancholy. Jefferson's interest in Maria kept within bounds, as the elaborate love letter, the "Dialog between my Head and my Heart" unmistakably shows. But she remained a bright and glowing image in his emotional life while he lived. Their correspondence, once he had resumed his high but sober tasks in the United States, dwindled through the years; yet Jefferson's last letter to her from Monticello was dated 1822, when, as he described himself to her, he had become "octogenary."

In 1789 Jefferson returned to the United States for a "visit," to find himself under pressure as soon as he put his foot on American soil to remain at home and accept the post of Secretary of State in the new government under the Constitution. After strong misgivings and considerable delay, Jefferson joined the small Cabinet family of President Washington and soon found himself at close range with Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury. The classic enmity between these two brilliant men began very early: in 1790, it is already apparent in the clashing opinions sent to Washington on the question of arrearages in soldiers' pay in Virginia. As the enmity developed, and led to Jefferson's resignation as Secretary of State in December of 1793 (he expressed relief at quitting "the hated occupation of politics") the dynamics of a cleavage into two major parties had been set in motion. Jefferson and Madison, as joint leaders of the opposition party, soon captured for themselves the

appealing name of "Republicans"—an appeal far more extensive throughout the country than that of "Federalists." The entire decade of the 1790's, whether Jefferson was in retirement in Virginia, or at the capitol in Philadelphia, was intensely political for him in the hated sense. Fighting was rough on both sides, partly because big issues were at stake concerning the survival of democratic principles and institutions, and partly because of the dangerous inroads on the independence and growth of the infant United States by both England and France. To Jefferson and Madison as leaders of the emerging Republican Party must go the credit for creating and preserving a two-party system as a viable instrument of real political choice, and thus the sine qua non of free government.

In the plainer terms of political success and failure, Jefferson's Presidency commands attention. The results of a poll of the opinions of professional historians made by Arthur M. Schlesinger places Jefferson as one of the six "great" Presidents, the "Olympians" among all American statesmen. The grounds for this estimate of Jefferson were various: his successful negotiation of a turning point in the nation's history, by extending the national boundaries from the Mississippi to the Rockies; he "advanced the cause of human rights through precept and example"; he strengthened the powers of the Presidency, by his adroit management of the Congress and other means. Franklin Delano Roosevelt, himself a "great," suggested an entirely different basis for evaluating Jefferson's worth as President. He valued Jefferson as the deepest student of the cross-currents of our folk life, the hopes and fears of the common people. He praised Jefferson's "consecration" to social justice and to the freedom of the human mind. Interestingly enough, another "great," Woodrow Wilson, shifted the focus to a broader horizon still when he said "The immortality of Thomas Jefferson does not lie in any one of his achievements, but in his attitude toward mankind."

Thus, when the battles over the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions, the constitutionality of the Bank of the United States, the Embargo policy, even Jefferson's "Agrarianism" or balanced budget fiscal policy are over, the campaign to deepen and extend Jefferson's "attitude toward mankind" is still being waged. The curious fact is that Jefferson's philosophy of human nature, and his profound understanding of the process of significant social order and social reform, made him insist that he had realized something substantial of the high ideals of "76" and yet know that he had clearly failed to realize all he would have desired; and that successive generations of Americans would find themselves struggling with the agonizing ambiguities and tragic limitations similar to those for which he had expended a nonetheless fulfilling life! As he spoke across the barriers of time and space to men who would be born after he had died, he prepared instructions to his daughter that he wished only these three things inscribed on his tombstone—"because by these, as testimonials that I have lived, I wish most to be remembered:

*Author of the Declaration of Independence;  
of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom  
and Father of the University of Virginia."*

*The galaxy of his nation's highest office which he had held he passed over silently to choose the meaning of his life—his deepest and most abiding values. These were: political freedom, so that man may live with the dignity of a human person; equality, so that moral concern for every man, woman and child may strengthen his chance to live a fulfilling life and lessen his chance of being distorted into a creature of irrational violence and hatred; religious freedom, so that man's ultimate reading of his being and of nature may be free of coercive or persuasive intrusion by the state or organized pressure groups of his fellows; and intellectual freedom or freedom of the mind, the underlying pervasive value entering into the creation and safeguarding of the other freedoms. For this "freedom of the mind" education must be available, ideally from the cradle to the grave, for all.*

*The University of Virginia, the "darling" project of Jefferson's old age at Monticello after his retirement from politics, represented to him the culmination of his early love of the classics, his later induction into the enlightened and liberating sciences that could be put to use to improve the human estate, his long pilgrimage of test and trial in the hard decisions and bitter conflicts of creating and serving a powerful government based on faith in the people and functioning by the mandate of their consent. The University was more than that—it was a final embodiment of his distinctive ideal of "the pursuit of happiness." What greater happiness was there than learning, the love of books, of writing, of ideas, of learning, teaching, communicating? His last years were spent fussing over library catalogs for the University, planning the curriculum, the administration. Even the buildings were grouped as an "academical village" graced with serpentine walls and well-proportioned buildings—that art might enhance the students' lives.*

*On July 4, 1826, fifty years to the day since his Declaration of Independence had gone forth on its immortal journey, Jefferson died. He died a poor man, in debt, his extensive land holdings reduced in value through impersonal factors beyond his control, his capital savings nonexistent because of his long absences from Monticello for the three decades of active public service. The irony of this "planter aristocrat," who freed some of his slaves in his last will but could not afford to free them all, was that he poured his soul into the vision of human rights that he bequeathed to all his countrymen.*

*Lest this image be tarnished today, it is important to recall, if only briefly, Jefferson's efforts toward the abolition of slavery. Despite the fact that he was a man of his time and culture, from his first entry into politics in 1769 he made an effort in the Virginia legislature "for permission of the emancipation of the slaves, which was rejected." Again, in his draft of the Declaration of Independence, he declared that the*



King "waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere. . . . Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce." This clause was stricken out on the floor of Congress. Even more important was Jefferson's proposal in 1784, in his "Report of Government for the Western Territories," "that after the year 1800 of the Christian era, there should be no slavery nor involuntary servitude in any of the said states." Richard Morris, the historian, recently stated that had Congress adopted Jefferson's proposal, "slavery would have been forbidden in all the Western territory after 1800, not only in the Northwest as it was by the Ordinance of 1787, and the grounds for the Civil War could have been removed." Finally, Jefferson's sentiments for equality reappear in 1814 in his letter to Edward Coles, President Madison's private secretary, who later removed with his freed slaves to Illinois, and became Governor of that state, a man heroically committed to the cause of abolition. Jefferson wrote, "The love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of this people and it is a moral reproach to us that they should have pleaded it so long in vain, and should have produced not a single effort, nay, I fear not much serious willingness to relieve them and ourselves from our present condition of moral and political reprobation. . . . Yet the hour of emancipation is advancing, in the march of time."

It is against this setting of the American Experiment as a continuing revolution that we may view Jefferson's last extant letter, written less than two weeks before his death, regretfully declining the invitation to be present in Washington at the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of American Independence. "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 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."

Perhaps the last word should be the poet's—Robert Frost musing on "the pursuit of happiness":

*That's a hard mystery of Jefferson's.  
What did he mean? Of course the easy way  
Is to decide it simply isn't true.  
It may not be. I heard a fellow say so.  
But never mind, the Welshman got it planted  
Where it will trouble us a thousand years.  
Each age will have to reconsider it.*