

**HERO WORSHIP AND THE SAINTLY STATUS
OF THOMAS JEFFERSON**

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Final Project: A More Perfect Union

American Sphinx would be a telling title for a biography which attempts to deconstruct the myth and controversy still surrounding Thomas Jefferson. Yet, Joseph Ellis accurately informs the reader in his subtitle that his work will focus on the “Character of Thomas Jefferson”. This helps to temper what lies ahead. Early on in his award winning book Ellis mentions that Jefferson’s “capacity to play hide and seek with himself, was a protective device he developed to prevent his truly radical and highly romantic personal vision from colliding with reality” (Preface, xxvii). Ellis is often highly critical of Jefferson but never fails to portray this troubled figure’s heroic devotion to his revolutionary idealism. The portrait provided by Ellis was supposed to be for the general reader, yet his complex and balanced account was scholarly and shows little bias. Five titled chapters focus on: Philadelphia 1775, his years in France, his attempt to retire and work on his mountain top retreat, his Presidency, and last but not least his final years at Monticello 1816-1826. The idea that the general public would welcome this account of Jefferson led me to believe that Jefferson’s character would be dragged through the mud. In my analyze Ellis is able to justify why Jefferson does what he does whether it is positive or negative. He looks to historian Gordon Wood when discussing the hero worship of Jefferson that is found in the general public at present. Wood points out that “no real life historical figure could ever prove a satisfactory hero because his human weaknesses would always undercut his saintly status.”(Ellis pg. 22).

Preparing to write a book review concerning the aforementioned work of Joseph Ellis coincided with my preparation for my Advanced Placement Class on American History. The 2009 Document Based Question was the first assignment I had prepared for my current students. The essay question concerns the analysis of free and enslaved African Americans from 1775 to 1830. I was pleasantly surprised to realize that my classroom preparation directly related to

several topics discussed by Ellis. The slavery issue is obvious. However my bias towards Jefferson focused on a majority of negative points and dismissed Jefferson's conscience effort to support a nation based on legislative republicanism and equality. Jefferson's broad impact allowed me to look at several controversial topics from the Ellis book with my advanced class in mind. The idealism behind the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, the North-West Ordinance, and the Missouri Question all were useful when discussing African American status from 1775 to 1830. This content further relates back to the question of hero worship and how quick we condemn Thomas Jefferson for his "human weaknesses".

Looking at biographical content like the work of Joseph Ellis provides a jumping off point for creating a curriculum which can apply several primary sources authored by Thomas Jefferson. When we analyze Jefferson's idealistic morals and character and apply his written works they expose students to Jefferson's accomplished works beyond the Declaration of Independence. Teachers can use this pedagogical approach to easily discuss how Jefferson's hero worship can have an impact on history which is included in our textbooks. The work of Joseph Ellis, Gordon Wood and even Peter Gibbon are all helpful at presenting students with perspectives on hero worship while broadening our content knowledge. Using the following concepts will help categorize the summation which follows. Students would be asked to define the following concepts and show how they relate to Jefferson throughout his life. **Pragmatist / Visionary / Precedence / Idealism**

Jefferson's role in the Second Continental Congress and the impact of the Declaration of Independence takes most of the focus from Chapter One. Jefferson's writing authenticity is called into question when discussing the Declaration of Independence. Ellis however is praiseworthy of Jefferson and clearly explains how the romantic Whig history of England and

their representative principles impact Jefferson from an early age and was drawn on by Jefferson when writing his idealistic prose. This idealized Whig connection to England's feudal past would be used by Jefferson in his opposition to rule under George III when defining the colonist's perspective. Ellis includes the interesting fact that John Adams would give Jefferson the important role of writing his declaration, knowing that Jefferson was too shy to ever speak at the Philadelphia Convention. Also note worthy was the belief that Jefferson was trying to compete with the oratory genius of his fellow Virginia delegate, Patrick Henry.

Two traumatic events impact Jefferson before he leaves for Paris in 1784. The death of his wife Martha and the capture of Richmond by Benedict Arnold would be devastating to Jefferson while governing Virginia. Ellis quickly balances these set-backs in chapter two when mentioning his role in establishing precedence and reforms for the Virginia law codes, the abolition of primogeniture and entail, public education, and the separation of Anglican Church and the State of Virginia. An unexpected diplomatic role was given to Jefferson upon his arrival in France. Jefferson would have to deal with the quarrelsome relationship between Benjamin Franklin and John Adams. Little support would come from the major European monarchs for the American Cause at this time. While in Paris Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* would be published and clearly show opposition to slavery and his fears that a racial war would take place in America. Ellis points to this controversial work as his last attempt to take the role of "Crusading advocate" against slavery. Perhaps Jefferson was showing he could be pragmatic when he knew how Virginians would react to his true feelings. Does this make him a hero?

Correspondence between James Madison and Jefferson would drastically reveal the differing philosophical beliefs between Madison and his mentor during the formation and framing of the United States Constitution. An effort would be made by Madison to explain the

wide-ranging issues facing the framers of the Constitution, but Jefferson was at a disadvantage in France. Interestingly, Jefferson is again supported by Ellis for his “utopian vision of the liberated individual resisting all external coercion and regarding all forms of explicit government power as a necessary evil” (Ellis pg 120). Jefferson was especially outspoken with his opposition toward the executive branches unlimited term policy. His stance concerning the Constitution was clearly impacted by his immediacy and connection with the French Revolution. It should be obvious that Jefferson would make strong correlations between the American and French Revolution. Ellis also points out that Jefferson was at a disadvantage concerning our Constitutional framework while he was so far away in Europe. Ellis states that Jefferson’s “revolutionary values” had not changed and they would not allow him to support a strong executive at the national level.

The first attempt by Jefferson to retreat to Monticello is short lived. The 1790’s for Jefferson and his opposition politics could be considered a low point when discussing his character. Washington’s Secretary of State would face less foreign concerns than domestic concerns during his four year term, especially the drama surrounding Jefferson and his nemesis Alexander Hamilton. While both men try to respectfully serve in the Washington Cabinet. Jefferson’s hatred for Hamilton leads to the formation of an opposition political party. Ellis is at his most critical when discussing Jefferson’s political “infighting” and the scathing newspaper attacks from both political camps. Jefferson is unable to stay away from the political controversies when he steps down after Washington’s first term. His retirement quickly ends with his outrage over Jay’s Treaty. Ellis focuses on the impact the Heming's family would have on Jefferson and also how his view of slavery over time becomes less idealistic and more paternalistic while he is living at Monticello. Correspondence with Madison draws Jefferson

back into politics and leads to his pursuit of the presidency. Content details on Jay's Treaty are extremely helpful in showing Jefferson as an Anglophobe and the ironic twist which helps him become president. Jefferson's thoughts concerning John Marshall, the "Evil Wizard" and Aaron Burr the "American Napoleon" are also insightful during the Adams presidency.

The content covered by Ellis concerning Jefferson's two terms as president are especially prolific and could easily be the focus of his entire character study. Jefferson's first inaugural address was especially uplifting and the author was able to explain how the voluntary populous, according to the President, would make our government strong and that his critics were wrong to accuse him of trying to dismantle the Constitutional frameworks in place. The focused attack on the national debt becomes an obsession with our third president. Also interesting was his lack of public appearances and speeches. Content and analyses by Ellis on the first inaugural address could easily be incorporated with the source to discuss the "Revolutionary" impact of the Election of 1800. War with Tripoli, the Louisiana Purchase and battles with Chief Justice Marshall show the struggles that Jefferson faced. The impact of the Embargo Act clearly shows Jefferson's second presidential term as a much more painful experience to live through than his first term.

Ellis describes in his last chapter the "posturing for history" between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams. The author also describes Jefferson's struggles with states rights in the south and the Missouri Question concerning the spread of slavery. Madison is credited with saving his lifelong colleague when Jefferson supports the idea of "diffusing" slavery into western territories where the peculiar institution will come to a gradual end. The correspondence between Adams and Jefferson eventually comes back around to the importance of Declaration of Independence,

Agrarian idealism, and of course slavery. Both statesmen fittingly go to the grave with their friendship intact.

Several questions concerning hero worship can obviously be applied to the character of Thomas Jefferson. Two questions posed by Peter Gibbon in his article entitled *Making the Case for Heroes* can also be useful. Do we need to know the whole truth about heroes? How can anyone from the past serve as a model? Content concerning several conflicts faced by Jefferson will help to answer these open-ended questions and make the primary source content relevant. Students and teachers alike may have to tear down the popular and myth like image of Jefferson to make him into a realistic and historically accurate hero. The growth process involved will hopefully make Thomas Jefferson into an acceptable hero for many generations to come.

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