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A More Perfect Union

The Wolf By the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery by John Chester Miller

One of the more challenging aspects of teaching United States history to high school students is to be able to persuade students to see historical events and people through contemporary eyes. The idea that the English colonies and the early states were culturally different from ours and that the people had a very different world view is a difficult concept for many. Compounding this difficulty is being able to understand that a person, particularly a historically significant one, is not either good or bad. For example, many students will hold onto the idea that if the institute of slavery was bad then slave holders were bad people. To help students understand that historical figures were real and complex people with strengths and weaknesses, good points and bad points, and not just the villains and heroes of the history texts, I needed to become more knowledgeable myself. To this end, I have read John Chester Miller's book The Wolf by the Ears: Thomas Jefferson and Slavery, published in 1977.

Jefferson is one of the key people in the founding of this nation: the primary writer of the Declaration of Independence and served as governor of the Commonwealth of Virginia, foreign minister to France, Secretary of State and President. Jefferson was a man born to Virginian gentry who received a classical education. During his education he was exposed to, and embraced the teachings of the Enlightenment philosophers: John Locke, Francis Bacon and

Isaac Newton. When he wrote “...all men are created equal...” there is no doubt that he fervently believed these words. And this raises the dichotomy that was Thomas Jefferson: how does a man who believes that ‘all men are created equal’ and who is an advocate of abolition, own other people? This is the conundrum that faces students and is the main topic of Miller’s book and the answer is complex and difficult for students to grasp.

Jefferson was born in a society that was largely based upon the economic and social system of slavery. According to Miller, Jefferson’s first memory was being carried on a pillow by a slave (Miller, page 1). Throughout his life, his ability to accomplish the things that he did relied on the slave labor on his plantation. Slavery was an integral thread in the fabric of the society in which he was born and lived. Yet Miller states that Jefferson abhorred this system. Complicating the issue further was Jefferson commitment to the ideals of an agrarian society. His vision of America was one of self-sufficient farmers, each providing for his needs through his own labor on his own farm. His view of city life was one of corruption, greed and poverty. Yet Jefferson was a gentleman farmer, whose plantations were managed by overseers and whose labor was provided by slaves. That Jefferson was against the institution of slavery is not in question. “The ownership of human beings, he declared, fostered only cruelty, false pride, tyranny, and mindless brutality – the most uncivilized behavior of which man was capable except in time of war... ‘The whole commerce between master and slave, ‘he said, ‘is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part and degrading submission on the other.’” (Miller, p 41)

Miller proposed several explanations for Jefferson's apparent hypocrisy. The first explanation was Jefferson's understanding that his success both professionally and socially would not withstand the onslaught of criticism and rejection had he taken a strong stance on abolition. More importantly, Jefferson believed that slavery would soon be eliminated on its own accord. "Jefferson not only assumed that slavery had been placed in the course of ultimate extinguishment: he often spoke as though the event had already occurred, as if the United States had freed slaves, removed them to another land, and made its peace with the author of nature. His proclivity for living in the future, reveling in the felicities that awaited mankind, sometimes obscured present realities for Jefferson." (Miller, p. 97) When this did not happen Jefferson condemned the next generation for not having taken a more active role in the elimination of slavery. "In 1814 he confessed for the first time that he was disappointed by their performance as the agents of an 'overruling Providence' entrusted with the solemn duty of cleansing the land of slavery. Instead, he lamented, the postrevolutionary generation seemed less moral and less idealistic than the generation which had fought the revolution." (Miller p.205)

Perhaps the biggest justification for Jefferson's lack of action was his fear of what would happen if slavery were eliminated without a plan for the freed slaves. Jefferson envisioned race riots with the freed slaves rising against their masters for retribution. There was good reason for this fear. The slave revolt in Saint-Domingue had resulted in the slaughter of several thousand slave owners. Jefferson believed (as did most Virginians) that slaves were of "a race the most detestable and vile that ever the earth had produced." (Miller, p.62) and could not foresee blacks ever becoming equal citizens. "He believed that centuries of slavery had

created so much hatred and resentment on the part of blacks toward whites that it would never cease to effect racial relations as long as the blacks remained in the United States.” (Miller, p 62). (Of note, Jefferson did not feel this way about Native Americans. He believed that they would become incorporated into society and would reach equal status.) Jefferson’s fear of race riots and fear of miscegenation prompted Jefferson to support the idea of expatriation of freed slaves. He believed that there was no place for freed slaves in the United States and supported the idea of sending them to Africa. “Basically, Jefferson feared blacks. He had grown up on a Virginian plantation surrounded by black slaves, and as a mature man he lived at Monticello where blacks far outnumbered whites. The sheer force of numbers, coupled with the fact that they were held forcibly in servitude, was calculated to produce fear.”(Miller, p. 64)

Miller’s book covers far more than simply his views on the problems of slavery and his wrestling with the conflicts of abolition and slavery. Miller covers his relationships with several women, including Sally Hemings (Miller seems convinced that this relationship did not occur and presents a variety of solid evidence, so much so that one is almost relieved to know that the DNA evidence, while not 100% conclusive, was completed after Miller’s death). At times Miller seems almost an apologist for Jefferson, at other times he seems almost to be trying to justify Jefferson’s views. Overall, however, I left this book with a satisfaction of having a far greater understanding of the man.

The purpose of reading this book was not simply to gain a better understanding of Jefferson but to have a tool to allow students to understand that no man is all good or all evil

or, if you'll pardon the pun, that its not either black or white. To present this in class I would divide my class into two groups. One group would be provided with Miller's descriptions of the positive attributes of Jefferson: his feelings about abolition, his efforts to establish religious freedom in Virginia and his commitment to establishing a solid republic in the new United States. I would include in these readings the preamble to the Declaration of Independence. The other half of the class would be provided with the darker side of Jefferson: his fear of a slavery uprising, his blatant racism, his fear of miscegenation and his idea of expatriation of freed slaves. I would not tell either group who they were reading about. After the students have completed these readings each group would discuss the qualities of the man they had just read about. I would then bring the class back together and have each group present a five minute discussion on the man they had read about. Following this discussion, I would tell them that these writings were both about Thomas Jefferson and ask them to discuss how a person could have such conflicting ideas. The discussion would be guided away from simple answers and would lead them to discuss the complexity of Thomas Jefferson the human rather than a villain or a hero.

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