

In Defense of Thomas Jefferson

Alexander Hamilton is very much in vogue these days. A musical in his name is all the rage on Broadway. He is seen as a nation-building hero, a man who, by force of ambition, talent, and hard work, helped create a country: *our* country. Hamilton's Caribbean roots are celebrated, as is the fact that he was raised by a single mother. His ability and gumption appear to align him more closely to the currents of our time than the universalizing and rationalistic Thomas Jefferson.

The rise of Alexander Hamilton in the public estimation has been accompanied by an increasing disregard for Thomas Jefferson. Americans remember Jefferson and are grateful for his contribution to the Founding, but he has come to be seen as a something of a daffodil, brimming with privilege and high-minded platitudes. Hamilton richly deserves our collective regard, but we Americans are poorly served if it comes from the hide of Thomas Jefferson.

In particular, Jefferson's slaveholding seems to eclipse the light generated by his career. It is important that we think about this matter with sufficient humility and respect. Slavery is the original sin of our country, the hypocrisy upon which our liberty was based, but just as it is false to extol one generation over another, there is no value in wagging a moralistic finger at previous generations. One of history's conundrums is that, even as our nature holds constant, men are largely products of their times. Slavery made Jefferson's career possible. Many people were victimized, directly and indirectly, by Jefferson's slaveholding. The career of Thomas Jefferson's was to the benefit of all mankind. It should not be impossible to hold these thoughts together.

There is a story about Alexander Hamilton visiting Jefferson in the early 1790s, when both men were cabinet secretaries in the Washington administration. Hamilton noticed three portraits in the sitting room and asked Thomas Jefferson who they were. "Those are the three greatest men the world has ever produced," Jefferson replied, "Bacon, Newton, and Locke." Hamilton paused and said: "the greatest man who ever lived was Julius Caesar."

This exchange does much to illuminate two sides of the American character. There is the liberal arts side and the straight power-concept side, a side preoccupied with universal truth and a side preoccupied by what works. The American type includes the values-based reasoning of the classics and the reductionist thinking of the moderns, principle and pragmatism, rolled into one. It is synergy that can lead to greatness.

Many Americans see the partisan divide over the course of our long history as extending from the early split between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson, but it is more apt to see them as different sides of the same form. Jefferson and Hamilton are not incompatible. They were not then and they are not now. Properly viewed, Jefferson and Hamilton are in harmony, not conflict (and one cannot say *that* about our two political parties).

Our country was founded upon natural reason, that is to say, upon universal principles knowable to human rationality. We may have been Christian colonies, but it took the Enlightenment to make us a republic. To the Founders, God Himself could not contravene the laws of nature.

Although those laws do not change, our rational understanding of them *does*. The natural law of the Founders is different than the natural law of today, no less than the natural law of Locke was different than the natural law of Cicero. Just as Copernicus, Newton, and the nascent discipline of economics changed the naturalistic framework of the 17th and 18th centuries, *our* naturalistic framework has been forged by subsequent developments in knowledge, including Darwin's theory of evolution, Einstein's theory of relativity, and Keynesian macroeconomics. And if the God the Creator cannot keep up with these developments, then that would place the onus on Him—or at least upon those who claim to give Him voice.

By the lights of the progression in science and naturalistic reasoning since the late 18th century, it appears that Hamilton got it mostly right and Jefferson got it mostly wrong. Hamilton's vision of an urban republic with strong central government proved far more prescient than Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic populated by farmer-citizens. Evolutionary theory in particular confirmed Hamilton's clear-eyed strategic thinking, as opposed to the moral rationality of Jefferson.

But what Jefferson *did* bring to the table was the idea a country inspired by the liberal arts of science and math, governed by reason, and characterized by a broad dispersion of education and prosperity. Hamilton admirers cannot say the same. The Jeffersonian republic is, first and foremost, a *middle-class* republic. Although Jefferson's naïveté about the proper interplay between government and the economy does not hold up, he was reflecting the state of economic knowledge of his time. We can rightly expect that Jefferson *himself*, were he to live in our era, would have calibrated his reasoning to the *current* state of macroeconomic knowledge. Thomas Jefferson would not have disrespected the hard-earned scientific achievements of the ensuing generations.

It is not shrill to argue that our Jeffersonian republic is at risk. The economic reality is that a robust and prosperous middle-class requires government reinforcement and support, but today's conventional wisdom is that government stands in the way of such prosperity as can be found here on earth. Hamilton's views on the role of government were much more in line with what we now know to be the economic truth of the matter, but our body politic continues to be plagued with anti-government rhetoric. It is as though there were no difference between our own republican form of government and the medieval tyranny which caused the Founding Whigs to shudder. Americans should be offended by such stupid arrogance.

Jefferson and Hamilton are different sides of the same naturalistic heritage. It is a heritage of which we Americans can be proud. If there is to be a productive and peaceable world, it will be built along American lines, as our country is not built from conventional building blocks like religion, culture and language. Nor is our heritage a set

of moral injunctions: we are a nation conceived in science—in particular, economic science—and *not* the barbaric relic of morality. *This* is what Jefferson was getting at. It took more time to get there, but it was his beautiful gift to us and our beautiful gift to the rest of the world.

And if we have fallen short of the Jeffersonian republic, our middle-class ideals, it is not because Jefferson was a hypocrite or that his vision was faulty. Rather, it is because we chose to create civic myths around the products on his vision rather than venerating the *methodology* from which those products were drawn. Jefferson understood the transitory and imperfect nature of knowledge. He understood that the one thing which unites all people is that we do not know anything for sure. This is the litmus test for civilized men: however passionate our convictions, we must fess up to the reality that we may be wrong. Our beliefs, no matter how deeply-held, prove nothing; only science and quantitative reasoning bear proof.

We 21st century Americans need to rethink our perspective on Thomas Jefferson. His sins are our sins, but his strengths are our strengths. Unlike Hamilton, Jefferson was willing to conceal his ambitions, and there is fundamental decency to that. Unlike Hamilton, Jefferson was committed to civilian governance. And unlike Hamilton, Jefferson stood up for ordinary Americans. His universal truths are not *our* universal truths, but that is because scientific knowledge has evolved from his era to ours. We who carry his liberalism, his flawed but fundamentally rational humanity, might recommit to his Whiggish way of looking at things. Our republic—our world itself—hangs in the balance.

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