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Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery

WILLIAM COHEN

It seems paradoxical that Thomas Jefferson, one of the enduring heroes of American democracy, should have been the owner of more than 180 slaves at the very time when he was proclaiming that all men were created equal and that they were "endowed by their Creator" with the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Moreover, throughout his life he continued to hold that slavery was unjust and immoral. In 1785 he had used the phrase "avarice and oppression" to characterize the slaveholding interest, and he contrasted this with the "sacred side" of emancipation. A year later, he marveled at the fact that American patriots who had endured beatings, starvation, and imprisonment at the hands of their British oppressors could inflict "on their fellow men a bondage one hour of which is fraught with more misery than ages of that which he rose in rebellion to oppose." In the final year of his life, he reiterated his belief that it was unlawful for "one man to appropriate to himself the faculties of another without his consent."¹

Most Jefferson scholars have dealt with this contradiction by ignoring it, or by citing his views on abolition and holding that his role as an owner of men was entailed upon him. Born into a slave system, they argue, he could not in good conscience abandon his black charges; he made the best of a bad situation by behaving as a benevolent and indulgent master. Indeed, the most competent and scholarly biographer of Jefferson contends that "if the master himself erred [in handling his slaves] he did so on the side of leniency."²

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¹Thomas Jefferson to Edward Everett, April 8, 1826, Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (12 vols., New York, 1904-1905), XII, 469. T. Jefferson to Richard Price, Aug. 7, 1785; T. Jefferson to Jean Nicolas Demeunier [June 26, 1786], Julian P. Boyd, ed., and Lyman H. Butterfield and Mina R. Bryan, associate eds., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (17 vols., Princeton, 1950-1965), VIII, 357, X, 63.

²Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time* (3 vols., Boston, 1948-1962), III, 212. Dumas Malone is the most prominent advocate of the view which holds that, although T. Jefferson disliked his role as an owner of men, it was entailed upon him. Henry S. Ran-

This argument is supported by Jefferson's own remarks. The most famous of these comments is his reply to a letter from Edward Coles, a Virginia slaveholder, who, in 1814, urged him to take the leadership of the abolition cause and described his own plan to move to a free state. Jefferson answered by agreeing with Coles' sentiments and saying:

The love of justice and the love of country plead equally the cause of the people [slaves], 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.³

Jefferson then described his own idea of a practical plan for abolition, but, taking note of the fact that he was now an old man, he left the antislavery enterprise to the young "who can follow it up." He urged Coles not to shirk his responsibility to his slaves by leaving Virginia and added:

until more can be done for them, we should endeavor with those whom fortune has thrown on our hands, to feed and clothe them well, protect them from all ill usage, require such reasonable labor only as is performed voluntarily by freemen, and be led by no repugnancies to abdicate them, and our duties to them.⁴

dall took a similar view. A New Yorker, writing with family authorization, Randall handled the slavery issue gingerly; and the picture of plantation life which emerges is idyllic in the extreme. Henry S. Randall, *The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (3 vols., New York, 1858), I, 552-53, III, 667-69.

Marie Kimball, *Jefferson: The Road to Glory, 1743-1776* (New York, 1943), and Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: The Apostle of Americanism* (2nd ed. rev.; Ann Arbor, 1957), both describe his antislavery opinions in glowing terms, but fail to come to grips with the contradiction between these ideas and his role as a plantation owner. The same holds true for Adrienne Koch, *Jefferson and Madison: The Great Collaboration* (New York, 1950). After describing Jefferson's emancipation plan of 1778, she dismisses the inconsistency in his position: "one can speculate on the consequences to American History had the enlightened legislation of the liberal Jefferson been adopted, but such speculation is resisted here on the condition that Jefferson's intention be noted by all who remember him as a 'slaveholding Virginia planter.'" Koch, *Jefferson and Madison*, 13.

Nathan Schachner, *Thomas Jefferson: A Biography* (New York, 1951), gives little space to the problem of Jefferson and slavery. When he does deal with it, he is either neutral or somewhat critical. In treating Jefferson's plan to colonize free Negroes and slave criminals he notes that the plantation owner "saw nothing wrong with this sudden wrenching from their homes of free Negroes." Schachner, *Thomas Jefferson*, 704.

Albert Jay Nock, *Jefferson* (Washington, D.C., 1926), is in many respects a sensitive and perceptive portrayal of the Virginian, but it accepts without question Jefferson's role as a slaveholder. Taking note of the wastefulness of the Negro children who toiled in Jefferson's nail factory, Nock wrote: "but what better could be done with these boys It was to no purpose to educate them beyond their slave status; and even if one killed them off, their place would be taken almost immediately by others precisely like them." Nock, *Jefferson*, 68.

³T. Jefferson to Edward Coles, Aug. 25, 1814, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XI, 416.

⁴*Ibid.*, 419.

This view of Jefferson as a proto-abolitionist master came under attack in 1961. Robert McColley's *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* depicted the author of the Declaration of Independence as a man who believed in Negro inferiority and whose public actions frequently favored the slave system. Devoted to showing that the institution of slavery actually gained strength during the post-Revolutionary era, this work often used Jefferson as an example of the planter class and argued that political expediency and racist ideology prevented him from working effectively against the system.⁵

More recently, Winthrop Jordan devoted a chapter of his study to an analysis of the contradiction within Jefferson's thought on the subject of black servitude. Accepting the traditional formulation that the Virginian was trapped by a system he abhorred, Jordan defined Jefferson's central dilemma as being that he "hated slavery but thought Negroes inferior to white men." Taking note of Jefferson's daily personal involvement with the slave system, Jordan concluded that "his heartfelt hatred of slavery did not derive so much from this harassing personal entanglement in the practicalities of slavery as from the system of politics in which he was enmeshed mentally."⁶

Jordan treated the problem almost exclusively in terms of Jefferson's ideas and emotions, and his perceptive account described the confusion which emerged from the clash of the contradictory tendencies within the Virginian's thought. First, his belief in a single creation and in a universe governed by natural law led him inexorably toward the view that the concept of natural rights applied to Negroes by virtue of the fact that they were human beings too. Second, Jefferson also held an intuitive belief in the inferiority of the blacks, which he tried to cover up with an appeal to science, but which actually stemmed from the interaction between his own psychological makeup and the mores of the society which surrounded him. Jefferson's refusal to accept an environmentalist explanation for the apparent inferiority of the blacks led to a confusion which Jordan termed "monumental." For if the Negroes were innately inferior, then Jefferson must have "suspected that the Creator might have in fact created men unequal; and he could not say this without giving his assertion exactly the same logical force as his famous statement to the contrary."⁷

Jordan's work is valuable for its analysis of Jefferson's intellectual entanglement with slavery, but it does not delve into Jefferson's day to day rela-

⁵ Robert McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia* (Urbana, 1964), 124.

⁶ Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill, 1968), 429, 431.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 453.

tionship with slavery. This is important because Jefferson's practical involvement with the system of black bondage indicates that, while his racist beliefs were generally congruent with his actions, his libertarian views about slavery tended to be mere intellectual abstractions. This is particularly true for the years after 1785; and to a somewhat lesser degree, it holds true for the earlier period as well.

Upon the death of his father in 1757, Jefferson inherited more than 5,000 acres of land and twenty slaves. By 1774, natural increase, purchases, and the deed of all Negroes owned by his mother brought this number to forty-two. At this time he acquired (on his wife's behalf), 11,000 more acres and 135 slaves as his share of the estate of his father-in-law, John Wayles. Debts on this property caused the sale of about half the new land, but even so, he was left with more than 5,000 acres which, when added to his own land, gave him an estate of more than 10,000 acres; and it remained at about this size until his death.⁸

As a result of the inheritance, Jefferson owned 187 men, women, and children, but the figure changed from year to year with births, deaths, purchases, and sales. In 1783, despite the loss of thirty slaves to the British, it rose to 204. By 1798, he owned only 147 Negroes because he had sold over fifty bondsmen to pay off his debts. The number increased to 197 in 1810; and, by 1822, it reached 267. After 1774, Jefferson's holdings in land and Negroes made him the second wealthiest man in Albemarle County and one of the richest men in Virginia.⁹

This new status did not prevent him from advocating the abolition of the slave trade and even of slavery itself during the years 1774-1784, but the extent of this activity should not be exaggerated. In 1774, as opposition to Britain increased, Jefferson indicted the British monarch for the disallowance of Virginia laws which would have ended the African slave trade in the colony. Putting the blame on the British government without condemning those who currently perpetuated the system, he wrote:

For the most trifling reasons, . . . his majesty has rejected laws of the most salutary tendency. The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire

⁸ Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, I, 439-44.

⁹ For an assessment of T. Jefferson's comparative wealth in Albemarle County, see *ibid.*, 441. The data on slaves is from T. Jefferson's "Farm Book," 5-9, 24, 57, 128-31. A facsimile reproduction of the "Farm Book" is printed in Edwin Morris Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's Farm Book: With Relevant Commentary and Extracts From Other Writings* (Princeton, 1953). Since the "Extracts" and the "Farm Book" are numbered separately and each begins with 1, references to the facsimile will be cited as T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," and references to "Extracts" will be cited as Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*.

in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state. But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa. Yet our repeated attempts to effect this . . . have been hitherto defeated by his majesty's negative.¹⁰

As the crisis with England deepened, Jefferson became more positive in his opposition to the slave trade. The draft he wrote in 1776 of a constitution for Virginia contained a provision that "No person hereafter coming into this country [Virginia] shall be held in slavery under any pretext whatever."¹¹ The document was not adopted, but Jefferson continued to attack the slave trade; and in his draft of the Declaration of Independence he included a paragraph reminiscent of the remarks he had made in 1774. George III, he charged:

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. . . . This piratical warfare, the opprobrium of *infidel* powers, is the warfare of the *Christian* king of Great Britain. 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. . . .¹²

Jefferson made this onslaught despite the fact that his fortune was founded partly upon profits derived from the slave trade. His father-in-law had engaged in this commerce, and several of the bondsmen inherited by Jefferson bore African names. Moreover, the locations of the Negro quarters were indicated in his "Farm Book" by such appellations as Angola and Guinea.¹³

Of far greater significance, however, was Jefferson's charge that the slave trade violated the "most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people." These words show clearly that, when he spoke of man's "unalienable Rights," he meant black men too. This is not to imply that he believed the races to be equal in endowment. In 1784, Jefferson expressed the "suspicion" that Negroes were inherently inferior to whites; and he seems to have retained this view throughout his life. The apparent contradiction between his belief in equal rights and his position that Negroes were not on a par with whites is partly explained by remarks he made in 1809 when he argued that "whatever be their degree of talent it is no measure of their rights. Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in un-

¹⁰ Thomas Jefferson, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America," Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 129-130.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 353. This document was written before June 13, 1776.

¹² Carl L. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1942), 212.

¹³ T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," 7-9; Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 96n.

understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others."¹⁴

In 1778, Virginia outlawed the slave trade. There is no evidence that Jefferson participated directly in securing the passage of the law, but there can be little doubt that, at the very least, he helped to create the climate for it.¹⁵ Nevertheless, the bill did not lead to the emancipations that Jefferson had indicated would follow in the wake of such an action. Indeed, there was no necessary connection between opposition to the trade and support of slavery itself. In the case of Jefferson, it is quite likely that there was a link between his opposition to this commerce and his distaste for slavery, but other masters might oppose it for a wide variety of other reasons including a realization of the fact that the price of slaves would rise if the trade were cut off.

Jefferson was more circumspect in dealing directly with the question of abolition. In 1769, during his first term in the House of Burgesses, he seconded a motion for the adoption of a law which would permit masters to manumit their slaves, but it did not pass. When such a law was adopted in 1782, Jefferson failed to free his own bondsmen.¹⁶ In three other instances Jefferson proposed specific plans which called for emancipation, but he was less than vigorous in pressing for their adoption and only the Ordinance of 1784 was actually brought before a public body for consideration.¹⁷

In November 1776, Jefferson was chosen as a member of a committee whose task was to revise, modernize, and codify the statutes of Virginia. Among his assignments was the job of drawing up the legislation dealing

¹⁴ T. Jefferson to Henri Gregoire, Feb. 25, 1809, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XI, 100. See also Jordan, *White Over Black*, 429-81; McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 124-32.

¹⁵ In his autobiography, T. Jefferson asserted that in 1778 he brought in a bill to prevent the further importation of slaves into Virginia. Paul L. Ford disputes this claim and notes that Jefferson was not in the legislature when the bill was debated and adopted. Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 60, 60n-61n. The editors of the Jefferson papers believe that he was probably responsible for the bill, and they point out that his absence does not necessarily prove that the bill was not the product of his labors. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 23n.

¹⁶ Randall, *Thomas Jefferson*, I, 58; Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 7. In a footnote Ford indicates that a diligent search of the *Journal of the House of Burgesses* failed to reveal any trace of this effort. The editors of the Jefferson papers refer to this motion as "an extension of the protection of certain laws to Negroes," and they point out that the motion may have been made "in the committee of the whole or in some other manner not requiring a record." Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 23n.

¹⁷ These attempts were an amendment in the Virginia legislature, 1778 to the bill pertaining to slaves; the Ordinance of 1784; and T. Jefferson's 1784 draft of a revised constitution for Virginia. This last document provided that all slaves in the state would be free after December 31, 1800. Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VI, 298.

with slaves. He later described this bill, which he completed in 1778, as a "mere digest" of the existing legislation on the subject, and to a certain extent this was true. The bill did contain a strengthened version of a law which prohibited the slave trade, and Jefferson was merely codifying previous laws when he included provisions barring Negroes from testifying against whites and forbidding slaves to possess arms or to leave the property of their masters without a pass. Jefferson's measure also included the usual penalty of whipping for such slave offenses as rioting, presenting seditious speeches, and running away, but here, too, he was copying earlier legislation.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the bill was more than a digest of earlier codes and it contained some significant additions which were designed to prevent the increase of the state's free Negro population. It was to be illegal for free Negroes to come into Virginia of their own accord or to remain there for more than one year after they were emancipated. A white woman having a child by a Negro would be required to leave the state within a year. The individual who violated these regulations would be placed "out of the protection of the laws."¹⁹ This would have left them subject to re-enslavement or even to murder at the whim of their neighbors and was, therefore, a most severe punishment.

It has been argued that Jefferson may have included these provisions in the belief that slavery would gradually die out because of an absence of new recruits to replenish the stock. This may have been his reason, but it seems unlikely in view of his own personal knowledge of the ratio of births to deaths on his plantation. During the years 1774-1778 there were at least twenty-two births and twelve deaths among his Negroes.²⁰ It must have been obvious to him that preventing further importations and limiting the growth of the free-Negro population would not stop the increase of the slave population due to natural causes. Another, and more reasonable, explanation is that Jefferson feared that a sizeable population of free Negroes would be an incitement to unrest among the slaves.

In 1784, Jefferson described his amendment to the Bill Pertaining to

¹⁸ This was Bill No. 51 of those prepared by the Committee of Revisors. *Ibid.*, II, 470-72. Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 77.

¹⁹ Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 471-72, 473n. As finally passed by the legislature in 1785 the bill omitted these provisions.

²⁰ T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," 21-22, 28. The figures for 1776 do not appear in the "Farm Book" and are unknown. T. Jefferson said that it was a known fact that slaves multiply as rapidly as free inhabitants. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York, 1964), 136. The argument that T. Jefferson believed slavery would gradually die out if the free Negro population were reduced is advanced in Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 473n.

Slaves. It would have freed all bondsmen born after the passage of the act. Significantly, the amendment also provided that after a suitable period of education these blacks "should be colonized to such place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper," for he could not envision the two races living together peacefully on a plane of equality. When the bill was sent to the legislature for final action in 1785, the amendment did not accompany it because Jefferson "found that the public mind would not yet bear the proposition." He must have had grave doubts all along about its acceptability; there is no independent evidence (outside of Jefferson's own statement) of its existence, and he did nothing to help create a favorable reception for his proposed revision.²¹ Moreover, his use of the words "such place as the circumstances of the time should render most proper" seems to suggest that he did not really believe his suggestion would be adopted in the immediate future.

The single most important antislavery act in Jefferson's career was writing a clause for the Ordinance of 1784 which would have barred slavery from the western territory (North and South) after 1800.²² In this proposal is the germ of the free-soil doctrine of the nineteenth century, which accepted the existence of slavery where it had already taken root and attempted to stop its extension to new areas. Like many of his free-soil successors, Jefferson was seeking to protect whites from the baneful effects of slavery; and he certainly did not believe that the blacks could, or should, become equal partners in the building of these new western communities. The entire body of Jefferson's writings shows that he never seriously considered the possibility of any form of racial coexistence on the basis of equality and that, from at least 1778 until his death, he saw colonization as the only alternative to slavery.²³

²¹ Jefferson, *Notes on . . . Virginia*, 132-33; Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, II, 472n.

²² Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VI, 604.

²³ T. Jefferson's immediate motive for incorporating the exclusionary clause in the Ordinance is unclear, but he may have written it more for the purpose of halting the slave trade than of weakening the institution of bondage itself. Writing in 1819, James Madison claimed that the prohibition of slavery which appeared in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 had been adopted as a means of restraining the trade by narrowing the potential market for bondsmen. He doubted that such a provision would have even been proposed if the power to abolish the trade already had been vested in Congress. While Madison's remarks were clearly directed to the Ordinance of 1787, it seems likely that they applied to the earlier version as well. With Spanish slave traders infesting the lower Mississippi area, the threat from this quarter certainly required attention. Madison to Robert Walsh, Nov. 27, 1819, Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison: Comprising His Public Papers and His Private Correspondence, Including Numerous Letters and Documents Now for the First Time Printed* (9 vols., New York, 1900-1910), IX, 9-10. See also McColey, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 171.

Jefferson's proposal certainly foreshadowed these aspects of the free-soil doctrine, but he can scarcely be credited with originating the portion of the doctrine which held that, if slavery were prevented from further expansion, it would die a natural death. If such thoughts were in his mind in 1784, he certainly had repudiated them by 1820; and, when the Missouri question was dividing the nation, he wrote:

Of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one State to another would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burden on a greater number of coadjutors.²⁴

The Ordinance of 1784 failed of adoption by one vote, but even if it had become law, bondage would have been legal in the area for sixteen years; and it seems likely that, if the institution of slavery had been allowed to get a foothold in the territory, the prohibition would have been repealed. Even after the Ordinance of 1787 banned slavery from the Northwest Territory, there was widespread sentiment in favor of rescinding the exclusion clause; and in 1802 a convention was held in Indiana under the auspices of Governor William Henry Harrison to petition Congress for its revocation. The request was denied, but, if slavery had been given a sixteen-year grace period in the entire western territory, Congress probably would have been forced to yield.²⁵ Thus, the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was significantly different from Jefferson's proposal because, by providing for immediate freedom in the area, it rendered the possibility of a later repeal less likely. The Ordinance of 1784 marked Jefferson's last public attempt to limit or end slavery. Thereafter, he restricted his opposition to private letters directed to men whose views appeared to be in substantial agreement with his own. In these communications he deplored slavery and advocated expatriation as the only solution to this difficult problem.²⁶

One theme that emerges with great clarity from an evaluation of Jefferson's antislavery career is his steadfast opposition to the slave trade. On this issue public opinion was with him, and he did not temporize or take a moderate stand.

²⁴ T. Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XII, 159; Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VI, 604.

²⁵ McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 125, 178-80; T. Jefferson to Madison, April 25, 1784, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VII, 118-19.

²⁶ On T. Jefferson's reluctance to speak out publicly about slavery, see T. Jefferson to [General] Chastellux, June 7, 1785, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VIII, 184; and T. Jefferson to George Logan, May 11, 1805, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, X, 141-42. For his advocacy of expatriation, see T. Jefferson to Jared Sparks, Feb. 4, 1824, *ibid.*, XII, 334-39.

On the whole, however, there was a significant gap between his thought and action with regard to the abolition question. He fully believed that it was morally and politically evil to hold another man in slavery, but he continued to do so. Believing that bondage should be abolished, he wrote an amendment which would have accomplished this gradually. But he kept it a secret for fear the public was not ready. Meanwhile, he codified Virginia's slave law and added to it harsh provisions aimed against free Negroes. He agreed to the desirability of keeping slavery out of the western territory, but his proposal would have allowed the disease a sixteen-year incubation period.

The contradiction in Jefferson's intellectual position stemmed in large part from his equivocal stance on the question of racial equality.²⁷ Jefferson's only systematic account of his views on race is to be found in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Even here, the ambiguity of his position is pointed up by his attempts to prevent the work from being made public because he feared that the terms in which he spoke of slavery and the constitution of Virginia might "produce an irritation which will revolt the minds of our countrymen against reformation in these two articles and thus do more harm than good."²⁸ Moreover, Jefferson must have been aware that such statements might harm his political career by provoking the ire of his fellow southerners.

Despite his attempt to prevent the publication of the book, Jefferson's remarks were generally moderate. In discussing the "revisal" of Virginia's laws, he described his proposed amendment to "emancipate all slaves born after the passing [of] the act" and then explained why wholesale manumissions would have to be accompanied by the expatriation of the freed Negroes. It would be impossible "to retain and incorporate the blacks into the State," he argued, because white prejudice and black memories of past wrongs would lead to disorders.²⁹ Jefferson also discussed the physical and moral barriers which he believed would prevent the two races from living together harmoniously in a condition of freedom.

He made a series of observations about the physical and behavioral differences between the races which suggested that Negroes were cruder and more animalistic than whites. He found greater beauty in the flowing hair and variable coloration of the Caucasians than in the "immovable veil

²⁷ This analysis of T. Jefferson's thought on the race question was written before the publication of *White Over Black*. It has subsequently undergone extensive revision, and this newer version reflects many insights gained from Jordan's important work.

²⁸ T. Jefferson to James Monroe, June 17, 1785, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VIII, 229.

²⁹ Jefferson, *Notes on . . . Virginia*, 132-33.

of black” which covered the emotions of the Negroes, and noted that they themselves seemed to prefer the whites. Since the factor of superior beauty was considered to be worthy of attention in the propagation of domestic animals, he asked, “why not in that of man.” He observed that Negroes sweat more and urinate less than whites, which results in their having a “strong and disagreeable odor.” They seemed to need less sleep and to have griefs that were “merely transient.” Furthermore, they were “more ardent after their female; but love seems with them to be more an eager desire, than a tender delicate mixture of sentiment and sensation.”³⁰

Jefferson found that the blacks were equal in memory to the whites, but far inferior in their ability to reason. In imagination they were “dull, tasteless and anomalous.” He saw little to praise by objective standards in the works of the Negro writers which had come to his attention. Referring to the Negro poetess, Phillis Wheatley, he lauded the effect of religion upon her sentiments, but held that her compositions were “beneath the dignity of criticism.”³¹ In 1791, Jefferson expressed high regard for the elegant geometrical solutions of Benjamin Banneker, a free Negro mathematician. In 1809, however, he voiced the suspicion that Banneker’s attainments had been made with white assistance. He went on to add that a letter from the mathematician showed him to have “a mind of very common stature indeed.”³²

In *Notes on the State of Virginia*, and elsewhere as well, Jefferson’s remarks were usually conveyed in the dispassionate tones of the scientific investigator. Clearly aware of the environmentalist argument, he earnestly expressed the wish that future evidence might prove that the Negroes’ inferiority was the result of their condition rather than their nature.³³ Nevertheless, he did not seem to have much hope that this would be the case; and his appeal to science may, as Jordan points out, have been a veneer which covered the already formed conclusion that “it is not their condition then, but nature which has produced the distinction” between the intellectual attainments of blacks and whites.³⁴ But he finally contented himself with a more

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 133-34.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 134-35.

³² T. Jefferson to Joel Barlow, Oct. 8, 1809, T. Jefferson to the Marquis de Condorcet, Aug. 30, 1791, T. Jefferson to Benjamin Banneker, Aug. 30, 1791, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XI, 121, VI, 311, 309-10.

³³ Although environmentalism has only come into its own in recent years, there were many, even in Jefferson’s time, who subscribed to this position; and he was keenly aware of their views. T. Jefferson, *Notes on . . . Virginia*, 134-38. Abbe Raynal, Adam Smith, and Alexander Hamilton were among those who believed that the degraded condition of the blacks was due exclusively to the effects of their situation. John C. Miller, *Alexander Hamilton: Portrait in Paradox* (New York, 1959), 41-42; David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (Ithaca, 1966), 420-21, 456.

³⁴ Jefferson, *Notes on . . . Virginia*, 137.

tentative statement: "I advance it, therefore, as a suspicion only that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind."³⁵

There was, however, one highly significant area in which Jefferson held that Negroes were every bit the equal of the whites: they possessed a "moral sense." As Jordan points out, for Jefferson to deny this would have been tantamount to excluding Negroes from membership in the human species; it was this faculty which, the Virginian believed, separated man from the animals. Although Jefferson may have doubted that all men were created equal, he did not deny that the blacks were men.³⁶ Curiously, Jefferson, who was unable to view environment as responsible for the differences he observed between the intellectual abilities of the races, turned to this interpretation to explain the Negroes' lapses from white standards of morality. He defended the blacks against the charge that they were congenitally thievish and ascribed this trait to their situation rather than to "any depravity of the moral sense"; and he went on to remark:

the man in whose favor no laws of property exist, probably feels himself less bound to respect those made in favor of others. When arguing for ourselves, we lay it down as a fundamental, that laws, to be just, must give a reciprocation of right; that, without this, they are mere arbitrary rules of conduct, founded in force, and not in conscience; and it is a problem which I give to the master to solve, whether the religious precepts against the violation of property were not framed for him as well as his slave?³⁷

Jefferson then pointed out that he had found numerous instances of rigid integrity among the Negroes and that benevolence, gratitude, and fidelity were seen as often in slaves as in masters.³⁸

Jefferson's views on slavery and race suggest that his libertarian sentiments were more than counterbalanced by his conviction that Negroes were members of a race so alien and inferior that there was no hope that whites and blacks could coexist side by side on terms of equality. Jefferson's libertarian views, however, had virtually no impact upon his actions after 1784, and his belief in the inferiority of the slaves was completely congruent with his behavior as both a planter and a politician.

In his daily life there were few differences between Jefferson's behavior as an owner of men and that of Virginia plantation masters who opposed his antislavery speculations. His bondsmen were well fed and clothed, and

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 138; Jordan, *White Over Black*, 438-39.

³⁶ Jordan, *White Over Black*, 431-32, 439-40.

³⁷ Jefferson, *Notes on . . . Virginia*, 137.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

their work load was comparable to that of white freemen.³⁹ In this regard their lot may have been easier than that of many other slaves in the state. Nevertheless, when he dealt with runaways, sales of slaves, breeding, flogging, and manumissions, his behavior did not differ appreciably from that of other enlightened slaveholders who deplored needless cruelty, but would use whatever means they felt necessary to protect their peculiar form of property.

During Jefferson's adult lifetime, more than forty of his Negroes attempted to escape.⁴⁰ Thirty of these were mentioned by him in a letter to an Englishman, Dr. William Gordon, who had fought on the American side in the Revolution and returned to Great Britain in 1786. Jefferson described the depredations of Lord Cornwallis and his troops when they overran his estate in 1781 and added: "he carried off also about thirty slaves; had this been to give them their freedom, he would have done right, but it was to consign them to inevitable death from the smallpox and putrid fever then raging in his camp."⁴¹

This account differs markedly from the cold facts recorded in his "Farm Book" when these events took place. In that document, which was not intended for the public eye, he listed the names of the slaves that he had lost and described what had befallen them. Next to eight entries in a group he wrote: "fled to the enemy and died." Another two slaves were said to have "joined the enemy and died"; while four more, "joined the enemy, returned and died." Beside three names he wrote laconically: "joined enemy"; and it is presumed that they managed to survive the war. One slave, Barnaby, was described as having "run away, returned and died." Four slaves were said to have "joined the enemy, but came back again and lived."⁴² Nowhere in this account is the term "carried off" seen, and Jefferson's later use of the phrase glosses over the fact that more than one seventh of his blacks chose to desert him.

³⁹ Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 5-7.

⁴⁰ This includes thirty slaves who went over to the British in 1781 and cases involving one or more runaways mentioned in the following sources: advertisement for a runaway named Sandy in the *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 7, 14, 1769, George Wythe to T. Jefferson, Dec. 31, 1781, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, VI, 144; Daniel Bradley to T. Jefferson, Oct. 6, 1805, T. Jefferson to Joseph Daugherty, July 31, 1806, T. Jefferson to Mary Dangerfield, July 31, 1808, T. Jefferson to Jeremiah Goodman, July 26, 1813, Joel Yancey to T. Jefferson, May 22, 1821, Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 21, 22, 27, 36, 46. Two other runaways, Beverly and Harriet [Hemings] are listed in Jefferson, "Farm Book," 130. The figure of forty is probably conservative as it is based solely on a study of readily available sources.

⁴¹ T. Jefferson to William Gordon, July 16, 1788, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, XIII, 363-64.

⁴² T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," 29. Albert J. Nock quotes both the Gordon letter and the "Farm Book" entry, but he does not explore the contradiction between them. Nock, *Jefferson*, 63-64.

Jefferson's statement that Cornwallis would have done right if he had taken the Negroes to free them is at variance with the Virginian's behavior both before and after 1781. In 1769 he placed an advertisement in the *Virginia Gazette* asking for the return of a runaway slave named Sandy.⁴³ Throughout his life Jefferson hired slave catchers and asked his friends to keep an eye peeled for his thralls when they struck out for freedom. In early September 1805, Jame Hubbard, a stout Negro who worked in the plantation nail factory, ran away, but was soon apprehended and returned. About five years later, he escaped again. A year passed before Jefferson learned that Hubbard was living in the area of Lexington and dispatched Isham Chisolm to retrieve the bondsman. It was too late, however; Hubbard had departed only a few days earlier for parts unknown. When Chisolm returned empty-handed, Jefferson offered him a bonus of twenty-five dollars to go after the man a second time. This time Hubbard was caught and brought back in irons, and Jefferson reported: "I had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions. . . ." He then added that he was convinced that Hubbard "will never again serve any man as a slave. the [sic] moment he is out of jail and his irons off he will be off himself." Before Jefferson could implement plans to have him sold out of the state, Hubbard disappeared again.⁴⁴

In the abstract Jefferson did not believe one man had a right to own another, and, hence, no man had a right to sell another. He repeatedly expressed his dislike for this commerce, and he tried to avoid selling his human property except for misbehavior or at their own request.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, slaves were sold when he was pressed for cash, regardless of their wishes in the matter. In 1787, deeply in debt as the result of obligations which he had inherited from his father-in-law, Jefferson wrote to his plantation manager:

The torment of mind I endure till the moment shall arrive when I shall not owe a shilling on earth is such really as to render life of little value. I cannot decide to sell my lands. I have sold too much of them already, and they are the only sure provision for my children, nor would I willingly sell the slaves as long as there remains any prospect of paying my debts with their labor. In this I am governed solely by views to their happiness which will render it worth their while to use extraordinary exertions for some time to enable me to put them ultimately on an easier footing, which I will do the moment they have paid the debts due from the estate, two thirds of which have been contracted by purchasing them.⁴⁶

⁴³ *Virginia Gazette*, Sept. 7, 14, 1769, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, I, 33.

⁴⁴ T. Jefferson to Bradley, Oct. 6, 1805, T. Jefferson to Reuben Perry, April 16, 1812, Sept. 3, 1812, Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 21, 34-36.

⁴⁵ T. Jefferson to John W. Eppes, June 30, 1820, T. Jefferson to Craven Peyton, Nov. 27, 1815, T. Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph, June 8, 1803, *ibid.*, 45, 40, 19.

⁴⁶ T. Jefferson to Nicholas Lewis, July 29, 1787, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*

These remarks may appear to confirm the view that Jefferson's primary concern was the welfare of his bondsmen, but just the opposite is true. The underlying assumption in this letter is that the slaves owe him a living and that, if they do not provide it, they will be the ones to suffer. A second implication is that he has the right to dispose of them as he thinks best. Acting upon this view in the years 1783-1794, he reluctantly sold about fifty slaves.⁴⁷

When selling slaves, Jefferson did his best to keep families together if it did not entail a financial hardship for him. In 1792, he sold two males named York and Jame and offered to throw their superannuated parents, Judy and Will, into the bargain if they wished to go along with their sons. His gesture might have saved him money by taking from his shoulders the burden of caring for the old couple who were no longer good for much work. That Jefferson did not let scruples about breaking up families interfere with his business is shown by the fact that in the same lot of slaves with Jame and York was Dilcey, a twenty-three-year-old woman, whose valuable parents remained his property.⁴⁸

The eleven males to be sold in this lot were insufficient in number to make a sale by themselves, and Jefferson instructed his agents to carry them "to some other sale in that part of the country to be sold." Jefferson had yet another reason for selling them elsewhere: "I do not (while in public life) like to have my name annexed in the public papers to the sale of property."⁴⁹ Whether he was referring specifically to slave property or to property in general is not clear.

Whenever it could be done without seriously inconveniencing himself, Jefferson tried to unite husbands and wives; and he would buy or sell one partner of a marriage to enable the two of them to live together. He expressed himself as "always willing to indulge connections seriously formed by those people, where it can be done reasonably."⁵⁰ In 1792, when he needed to sell a few more slaves to pay his debts, Jefferson offered to sell a slave and her children to his brother who owned her husband. The bonds-

son, V, 311. This letter is also given in Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, XI, 640, but in place of the word "exertions," Boyd substitutes the word "cautions."

⁴⁷ Malone, *Jefferson and His Time*, III, 207, I, 443-44. References to sales of slaves appear in T. Jefferson to Alexander McCaul, Jan. 4, 1787, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, XI, 10; and T. Jefferson to James Lyle, April 25, 1793, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, VII, 278.

⁴⁸ T. Jefferson to Bowling Clarke, Sept. 21, 1792; Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 13; T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," 9, 24, 30. Bess was known as Betty in 1774. In 1795 T. Jefferson wrote the word "old" beside the names of Judy and Will indicating that they were not useful for labor anymore.

⁴⁹ T. Jefferson to Clarke, Sept. 21, 1792, Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 13.

⁵⁰ T. Jefferson to John Jordan, Dec. 21, 1805, *ibid.*, 21.

woman had been asking to be united with her husband for some time, but her wishes in the matter had had to await Jefferson's convenience.⁵¹

In November 1806, Jefferson noted that he had always intended to buy the wife of his slave, Moses, when he could "spare the money," but he could not do so at that time. He said he was willing to hire her, but feared that she had not been brought up to field labor. However, he told his manager that it would be permissible to employ her if she could earn her keep. She was not hired, and Moses and his wife remained apart for the next six months. At the end of that time, however, Jefferson did purchase the woman and her children.⁵²

It may be argued that, although Jefferson deplored the institution of slavery and particularly the buying and selling of men, the purchases and sales he made were impossible to avoid, since they were for the purpose of paying off debts or uniting families. But in 1805, he said that he was "endeavoring to purchase young and able negro men" for his plantation.⁵³ Clearly then, he was not merely engaged in a holding operation designed to protect his slaves from a cruel and inhospitable world.

Like any other entrepreneur, Jefferson was concerned with the problem of increasing his capital assets—land and Negroes. Because he was always short of cash, it was difficult for him to increase his land holdings; and he never did. Slaves, however, increased of their own accord, and Jefferson took pains to make sure that this source of profit was not lost through shortsightedness. In 1819 he instructed his manager:

I have had no reason to believe that any overseer, since Griffin's time has over worked them. accordingly, the deaths among the grown ones seems ascribable to natural causes, but the loss of 5. little ones in 4 years induces me to fear that the overseers do not permit the women to devote as much time as is necessary to the care of their children: that they view their labor as the 1st object and the raising their child but as secondary. I consider the labor of a breeding woman as no object, and that a child raised every 2. years is of more profit than the crop of the best laboring man. in this, as in all other cases, providence has made our interests and our duties coincide perfectly. . . . I must pray you to inculcate upon the overseers that it is not their labor, but their increase which is the first consideration with us.⁵⁴

⁵¹ T. Jefferson to Randolph Jefferson, Sept. 25, 1792, *ibid.*, 14.

⁵² T. Jefferson to Edmund Bacon, Nov. 21, 1806, T. Jefferson to Randolph Lewis, April 23, 1807; Account Book for 1807, *ibid.*, 24-27.

⁵³ T. Jefferson to Jordan, Dec. 21, 1805, Betts, *ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁴ T. Jefferson to Yancey, Jan. 17, 1819, *ibid.*, 43. Writing to Eppes on June 30, 1820, T. Jefferson said: "I know no error more consuming to an estate than that of stocking farms with men almost exclusively. I consider a woman who brings a child every two years as more profitable than the best man of the farm. What she produces is an addition to capital, while his labors disappear in mere consumption." *Ibid.*, 45-46. T. Jefferson's keen

Between 1810 and 1822, about 100 slaves were born to Jefferson's "breeding women"; while only a total of thirty Negroes died, were sold, or ran away.⁵⁵

Throughout his life, Jefferson appears to have emancipated only two slaves; and one of them bought his freedom in 1792 at the price of £60. Upon his death in 1826, Jefferson manumitted five more Negroes and willed over 260 bondsmen to his heirs. Of the total of seven slaves that he freed, at least five were members of a mulatto family named Hemings; and it seems well established that these favored individuals were directly descended from Jefferson's father-in-law. Nevertheless, several of them remained in servitude after Jefferson died. In 1822, two Hemings girls, tired of waiting for their freedom, ran away to Washington.⁵⁶

Apparently, Jefferson's unwillingness to manumit his bondsmen arose, at least in part, from his reluctance to alter his standard of living and to bring his practices into line with his principles. He took much pride in the fine wines, good books, and generous hospitality to be found at Monticello; and he went to great lengths to preserve intact this inheritance for his posterity.⁵⁷ It may be argued that Jefferson did not believe in emancipation unless it was accompanied by colonization, and this is true enough. But if this had been the only obstacle to the emancipation of his slaves, he could have made arrangements for the expatriation of those who might choose freedom.

Although manumissions were infrequent in Virginia at this time, they were by no means unknown. When George Washington died in 1799, he gave his slaves their freedom, and so did Jefferson's mentor, George Wythe, who passed away in 1806. Coles, a young planter who had served as private secretary to President James Madison, went still further and in 1819 migrated to Illinois with his slaves and gave 160 acres of land to each family along with its freedom. When the eccentric John Randolph of Roa-

awareness of the profit to be derived from the natural increase of his slaves is also shown in his observation that "our families of negroes double in 25 years which is an increase of the capital invested in them, 4. per cent over and above keeping up the original number." See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 430.

⁵⁵ These figures are based on T. Jefferson, "Farm Book," 130-31.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 130. For the freedom papers of Robert and James Hemings (dated Dec. 12, 1794 and Feb. 5, 1796 respectively), see Betts, ed., *Thomas Jefferson's . . . Writings*, 15. For T. Jefferson's will, dated March 1826, see Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XII, 482. The relationship of the Hemings family to Jefferson and his relatives is discussed in Merrill D. Peterson, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (New York, 1960), 185-86. See also Jordan, *White Over Black*, 464-68.

⁵⁷ In his will the Virginian went to elaborate lengths to see that his estate went to his daughter Martha and not to the creditors of her husband. Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, XII, 479; McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 23; Randall, *Thomas Jefferson*, III, 332-33; Nock, *Jefferson*, 59.

noke died in 1833 (seven years after Jefferson), his will contained a provision for the emancipation of his 400 bondsmen.⁵⁸

If self-interest played a major role in determining Jefferson's behavior as a plantation owner, it was equally important in shaping his stance as a national leader on questions involving slavery. After 1784, he refrained from discussing the issue publicly for political reasons, but the matter came up occasionally in the course of his official duties. As ambassador to France, he zealously sought to justify the American claim to compensation for slaves taken by the British in 1783; and he continued to press for satisfaction on this issue when he served as secretary of state. He then pressured the Spanish government into denying sanctuary in Florida to fugitive slaves from Georgia.⁵⁹

Although Jefferson embraced the French Revolution, he shuddered with fear in August 1791 when slaves on the island of Santo Domingo revolted for their liberty, and he approved a grant of arms and ammunition to their embattled Gallic masters. The situation grew more complicated when it became apparent that a second and larger grant might provoke the resentment of the French mother country; and Jefferson insisted that future applications for aid be routed through Paris. Nevertheless, he continued to sympathize with the island aristocracy; and, when in 1793 many of them fled to the United States, he argued that they be generously aided. True to his states' rights convictions, he denied the power of the federal government to apply money to such a purpose, but he denied it "with a bleeding heart." He implored James Monroe to urge the government of Virginia to make a large donation to the refugees and said: "never was so deep a tragedy presented to the feelings of men."⁶⁰

The upheaval in Santo Domingo struck a responsive chord in Jefferson, for he feared that Virginia would eventually see the same kind of murderous violence. He warned Monroe that "it is high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves . . . [will] have to wade through, and try to avert them." Four years afterward, in

⁵⁸ John Alexander Carroll and Mary Wells Ashworth, *George Washington: First in Peace* (New York, 1957), 585. "George Wythe," *Dictionary of American Biography* (11 vols., New York, 1957), XI, 588; "John Randolph," *ibid.*, VIII, 366.

⁵⁹ Amplification of Subjects Discussed with Vergennes [ca. Dec. 20, 1785], Jefferson to John Jay, April 23, 1786, Boyd, ed., *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, IX, 111, 403-04; T. Jefferson to British Minister, May 29, 1792, Dec. 15, 1793, T. Jefferson to Governor of Florida, March 10, 1791, T. Jefferson to Governor of Georgia, March 26, 1791, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, VII, 41-46, VIII, 95-97, VI, 212, 226-27.

⁶⁰ T. Jefferson to Monroe, July 14, 1793, T. Jefferson to the Chargé d'Affaires in France [William Short], Nov. 24, 1791, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, VII, 449-50, VI, 331-32.

1797, he again urged that "if something is not done and soon done we shall be the murderers of our own children."⁶¹

Three years later, his worst fears seemed about to be realized when a Virginia slave revolt, which may have involved as many as 1,000 Negroes, was aborted. Monroe informed Jefferson that ten of the rebels had already been hanged and wondered what to do about the remaining conspirators. Jefferson, advising against any further executions, cautioned that "the other states and the world at large will forever condemn us if we indulge a principle of revenge, or go one step beyond absolute necessity. They cannot lose sight of the rights of the two parties, and the object of the unsuccessful one." This was good advice, but it did not prevent the execution of about twenty-five more Negroes involved in the plot.⁶²

Within a few months Jefferson became President, and he failed to use his office to avert the bloody scenes which he had predicted. Deeply worried by the slave revolt of 1800, the Virginia legislature requested Governor Monroe to consult with the President about means of deporting Negroes involved in future outbreaks. Jefferson, a longtime colonizationist, then asked the American minister to England to negotiate with the Sierra Leone Company for the "reception of such of these people as might be colonized thither." After learning that the Company was unwilling to consider the proposal, the President abandoned his colonization efforts for the duration of his term.⁶³

Jefferson's proslavery actions were particularly evident in the area of foreign policy, and the treaty which granted the Louisiana Territory to the United States contained a provision protecting the right of the Spanish and French inhabitants in the area to keep their slaves. The French insistence upon such a condition was understandable, and so was its acceptance by the

⁶¹ T. Jefferson to St. George Tucker, Aug. 28, 1797, T. Jefferson to Monroe, July 14, 1793, *ibid.*, VIII, 334-36, VII, 449-50.

⁶² T. Jefferson to Monroe, Sept. 20, 1800, *ibid.*, IX, 146. Herbert Aptheker, *American Negro Slave Revolts* (New York, 1943), 219-27. T. Jefferson's desire to avoid further executions appears to have stemmed in part from a genuine respect for the rebels. While investigating the possibility that such Negroes might be banished to Africa and colonized there, he observed that "they are not felons or common malefactors, but persons guilty of what the safety of society, under actual circumstances, obliges us to treat as a crime, but which their feelings may represent in a far different shape. They are such as will be a valuable acquisition to the settlement already existing [in Africa] . . . and well calculated to cooperate in the plan of civilization." T. Jefferson to Rufus King, July 13, 1802, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, IX, 385.

⁶³ Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, IX, 383-86. The quotation is to be found in T. Jefferson to John Lynch, Jan. 21, 1811, *ibid.*, XI, 179. The request of the Virginia legislature also asked that the matter of finding a place to which free Negroes could be sent should also be investigated.

United States, but the author of the Ordinance of 1784 made no move to limit the further introduction of bondage into the area.⁶⁴

Napoleon had given up Louisiana largely because of his inability to crush the rebel forces on Santo Domingo. By 1806, he again entertained the hope of reconquering the island, and he asked the American government to cooperate by cutting off all trade with the black nation. Jefferson complied with this request and commended the measure to Congress, where it passed in the House by a vote of 93-26. The President supported France in this venture because he hoped that Napoleon would reciprocate by aiding the United States to acquire Florida, but Jefferson was surely aware of the fact that if the plan succeeded it would destroy the island's Negro regime, which stood as a beacon of hope to American slaves.⁶⁵

Despite these actions, the dominant theme of Jefferson's administration on the subject of slavery was discreet silence. When citizens in the Indiana Territory were demanding that slavery be permitted throughout the Northwest Territory, the President made no comment.⁶⁶ Although Jefferson privately continued to represent himself as a foe of human bondage and on rare occasions during his presidency voiced such sentiments in letters to men who shared his views, he was exceedingly careful to keep these thoughts from reaching the public. When he received an emancipation tract from Thomas Brannagan, a slave trader-turned-abolitionist, Jefferson did not directly reply to the author's request for an endorsement. Instead, he wrote to Dr. George Logan:

The cause in which he embarks is so holy, the sentiments he expresses in his letter so friendly that it is highly painful to me to hesitate on a compliance which appears so small. But that is not its true character, and it would be injurious even to his views, for me to commit myself on paper by answering his letter. I have most carefully avoided every public act or manifestation on that subject. Should an occasion occur in which I can interpose with decisive effect, I shall certainly know and do my duty with promptitude and zeal.⁶⁷

In fact, by the time he wrote these words, Jefferson had already given up "the expectation of any early provision for the extinguishment of slavery among us," and his actions appear to have been designed more to mute the issue than to resolve it.⁶⁸

Ten years after he left office, as the Missouri issue was dividing the nation, Jefferson again demonstrated his ability to mix vague abolition senti-

⁶⁴ McColley, *Slavery and Jeffersonian Virginia*, 125.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 178-80.

⁶⁷ T. Jefferson to Logan, May 11, 1805, Ford, ed., *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, X, 141.

⁶⁸ T. Jefferson to William A. Burwell, Jan. 28, 1805, *ibid.*, X, 126.

ments with a position that worked to the advantage of the slave states. Recognizing that the dispute over the admission of Missouri heralded an era of increasing national division over the slavery issue, he likened the controversy to a "fire bell in the night" and warned of impending disaster for the Union. Speaking of slavery, he implicitly endorsed the moral position of the North when he described the dilemma of the South: "We have the wolf by the ears and can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in the one scale, and self-preservation in the other." He indicated his willingness to give up his bondsmen if any "*practicable*" way of achieving their "emancipation and *expatriation*" could be found.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, he endorsed the southern position and charged the Federalists with creating a geographical division based on an ostensibly moral question as a means of regaining their influence. He then denied that morality was involved because the limitation of the area of bondage would free no one. He also denied that the federal government could regulate the "condition of different descriptions of men composing a State," and he ruled out the only practical means by which emancipation might eventually have been brought about.⁷⁰

It may be argued that Jefferson's position on the Missouri issue and also his inactivity as President may have been dictated by his strict construction of the Constitution. When the object was large enough, however, Jefferson could be quite flexible; and he did not allow such scruples to prevent the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. Moreover, he believed that the expatriation of America's blacks was a subject which merited a similar elasticity.

Despite his support for the southern position on the issue of Missouri, in 1821 Jefferson could still write: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free, Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government."⁷¹ Thus, in the last years of his life he continued to insist that emancipation must be accompanied by expatriation. Nevertheless, he lacked enthusiasm about the plan to resettle the Negroes in Africa and believed that the distance of that continent would make it impossible for such an operation to succeed.⁷²

In 1824 Jefferson argued that there were a million and a half slaves in the nation and that no one conceived it to be "practicable for us, or expedient for them" to send all the blacks away at once. He then went on to calculate:

⁶⁹ T. Jefferson to John Holmes, April 22, 1820, *ibid.*, XII, 159.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*; T. Jefferson to Albert Gallatin, Dec. 26, 1820, *ibid.*, XII, 187-89.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, I, 77.

⁷² T. Jefferson to Jared Sparks, Feb. 4, 1824, *ibid.*, XII, 334-35.

Their estimated value as property, in the first place, (for actual property has been lawfully vested in that form, and who can lawfully take it from the possessors?) at an average of two hundred dollars each . . . would amount to six hundred millions of dollars which must be paid or lost by somebody. To this add the cost of their transportation by land and sea to Mesurado, a year's provision of food and clothes, implements of husbandry and of their trades, which will amount to three hundred millions more . . . and it is impossible to look at the question a second time.⁷³

Since African colonization seemed an impossibility, Jefferson suggested a plan which entailed "emancipating the afterborn, leaving them, on due compensation, with their mothers, until their services are worth their maintenance, and putting them to industrious occupations until a proper age for deportation."⁷⁴ The individuals who would be "freed" immediately after their birth would eventually be sent to Santo Domingo which, according to the newspapers, had recently offered to open its doors to such persons. In effect, Jefferson was proposing that the federal government buy all newborn slaves from their owners (at twelve dollars and fifty cents each) and that it pay for their "nurture with the mother [for] a few years." Beyond this, the plan would not cost the government anything, for the young blacks would then work for their maintenance until deported. Santo Domingo had offered to bear the cost of passage.

Jefferson noted that a majority of Americans then living would live to see the black population reach six million and warned that "a million and a half are within their control; but six millions, . . . and one million of these fighting men, will say, 'we will not go.'" The Virginia statesman concluded his proposal by urging that neither constitutional problems nor human sentiment ought to be allowed to stand in its way:

I am aware that this subject involves some constitutional scruples. But a liberal construction, justified by the object, may go far, and an amendment of the constitution, the whole length necessary. The separation of infants from their mothers, too, would produce some scruples of humanity. But this would be straining at a gnat, and swallowing a camel.⁷⁵

Thus, only two and a half years before his death, Jefferson reiterated his long held belief that emancipation was imperative for the sake of the nation, but that it must be accompanied by colonization. Even here, however, his theory differed from his practice; and in this case his inconsistency would follow him beyond the grave for he did not offer to free his slaves on the condition that they leave the country. On the contrary, in his will he

⁷³ *Ibid.*, XII, 335-36.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, XII, 336.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, XII, 339.

requested the Virginia legislature to grant special permission to the five slaves he manumitted to continue to live in the state.⁷⁶

Jefferson was a man of many dimensions, and any explanation of his behavior must contain a myriad of seeming contradictions. He was a sincere and dedicated foe of the slave trade who bought and sold men whenever he found it personally necessary. He believed that all men were entitled to life and liberty regardless of their abilities, yet he tracked down those slaves who had the courage to take their rights by running away. He believed that slavery was morally and politically wrong, but still he wrote a slave code for his state and opposed a national attempt in 1819 to limit the further expansion of the institution. He believed that one hour of slavery was worse than ages of British oppression, yet he was able to discuss the matter of slave breeding in much the same terms that one would use when speaking of the propagation of dogs and horses.

From an intellectual point of view, his strong "suspicion" that the Negroes were innately inferior is probably of great significance in explaining his ability to ignore his own strictures about their rights. Thinking of them as lesser men, he was able to convince himself that his behavior toward them was benevolent and humane; and indeed it was, when judged by the traditional assumptions of the slaveholders. It is a mistake, however, to treat Jefferson's relationship to slavery in intellectual or psychological terms alone, for the institution shaped the warp and woof of life at Monticello and his abstract speculations about human freedom carried little weight when balanced against the whole pattern of his existence there.

Interacting with one another as both cause and effect to produce Jefferson's proslavery behavior was a complex set of factors which included his belief in Negro inferiority, a societal environment which took for granted the enslavement of one race by another, and the fact that he owned 10,000 acres of land and over 200 slaves.⁷⁷ His wealth, his status, and his political position were tied to the system of slavery, and never once did he *actively* propose a plan that would have jeopardized all this. More often than not, the actions he took with regard to slavery actually strengthened the institution. This can be seen in his authorship in 1778 of Virginia's slave code, in his support of the plantation owners of Santo Domingo, and in his position on the Missouri question.

Monticello was the workshop of the maker of the "agrarian dream." It

⁷⁶ T. Jefferson's will, March 1826, *ibid.*, XII, 483.

⁷⁷ This listing is not meant to exclude the effect of T. Jefferson's psychological make-up as a factor which influenced his behavior with regard to slavery. Jordan convincingly suggests that the Virginian's belief in Negro inferiority was partially rooted in his inner mind. See Jordan, *White Over Black*, 457-81.

was here that Jefferson conducted his agricultural and scientific experiments and offered a generous hospitality to visitors. It was here that he lived a bustling, but gracious life far from the money changers in the cities of the North. This was the life that he sought to preserve against the incursions of the forces of commerce and industry. But it should not be forgotten that Jefferson's world depended upon forced labor for its very existence.