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THOMAS JEFFERSON AND SLAVERY

An Analysis of His Racist Thinking as Revealed by His Writings and Political Behavior

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Thomas Jefferson's most enduring legacy is the American Creed, the belief expressed in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence that declares "all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." These sentiments have been the vision in the struggle to create an egalitarian, multiracial society in the United States. However, the author of this passage believed fervently that all persons of African descent should not be permitted to reside in the new republic unless they were enslaved. Throughout his life, Jefferson maintained that if freed, the former slaves must be colonized outside of North America to Africa or the Caribbean Islands. He based this imperative on his belief that the Blacks "are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (Jefferson, 1787/1954, p. 143).¹ I will develop my analysis of Jefferson's racist thinking based primarily on his writings, and substantiate it with a summary of his political behavior with respect to slavery and freed slaves.

"Nature intended me for the tranquil pursuits of science by rendering them my supreme delight," he wrote in 1809 (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XII, pp. 258-260),² but a review of Jefferson's major published work, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954), indicates that Jefferson was not rational and scientific when he

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wrote of the African-descended slaves in Virginia. His conclusion, developed in his book, that the slaves were inferior in body and mind resulted from thinking that was extremely emotional and illogical. His bias is especially obvious when compared to his own standards expressed in this same work. Jefferson, who considered himself among the enlightened persons of his time, broke with the prevailing Enlightenment thought when he speculated on the causes for what he believed was the innate inferiority of the Black race. In addition, soon after writing the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson participated in political activity that clearly indicated his unwavering belief that Blacks, if emancipated, must not live as freemen in Virginia. Lastly, a consummate political strategist, Jefferson did almost nothing to advance abolition during his 40 years in the turbulent political arena of Virginia and the new republic. The singular positive measure that he advocated in 1784 to prevent slavery from flourishing in the new states of the north-west territory he diametrically opposed in 1820, when his desire to prevent the dissolution of the Union over the issue of the spread of slavery became more important for him than the curtailment of slavery.

Jefferson wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954) in response to a set of queries sent in late 1780 to influential members of the Continental Congress by the French legation at Philadelphia. The purpose of the queries was to inform French officials about the states in the new republic in North America. A copy was transmitted to Jefferson, then Governor of Virginia, who undertook the response for his state. A private printing of 200 copies was completed in France in 1785, and a public printing was made in 1787 (pp. xii, xvii, xix).

The scope of the book is remarkable in its breadth. William Peden, in his introduction to the 1954 edition, states:

Here are to be found his [Jefferson's] ideas concerning religious freedom or the separation of church and state, his analysis of the ideals of representative government versus dictatorship, his theories of art and education, his attitude concerning slavery and the Negro, his interest in science. (p. xi)

The focus of this article will be on his attitude concerning slavery and Blacks. Jefferson's main discussion of race and slavery occurs in Query XIV on "Laws." He starts by describing a bill written by the Virginia Committee of Revisors, of which he was a member, to emancipate all slaves in Virginia (Jefferson, 1787/1954, pp. 137-138).

The bill proposed a gradual plan of emancipation providing that all children of slaves born after the passage of the act would be emancipated in their infancy. These infants would be separated from their parents, and raised and educated at public expense until the females were 18 and the males were 21 years of age. At that time, they would be colonized at public expense to some place outside of the United States, where they would be deemed a free and independent people. This bill was never submitted to the assembly because, as Jefferson later reported in his *Autobiography* (1829/1959), "the public mind would not yet bear this proposition, nor will it bear it even at this day [1821]" (p. 62). After describing the provisions of his emancipation plan, Jefferson followed with a rhetorical question: "Why not retain and incorporate the blacks into the state, and thus save the expense of supplying, by importation of white settlers, the vacancies they will leave?" His response was unequivocal; the freed slaves had to be removed from the country because of "deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; the real distinctions which nature has made; and many other circumstances which will divide us into two parties" (Jefferson, 1787/1954, pp. 137-138).

In this response, Jefferson ascribed to both the Whites and Blacks living in Virginia feelings that he believed would prevent them from living peacefully together in freedom; but, more importantly, he added his belief of "the real distinctions which nature has made." As an enlightened person, Jefferson needed to view the differences between Whites and Blacks in a rational manner to uncover the real distinctions that he referred to, which he proceeded to do in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954). I will compare the illogical arguments used by Jefferson in his remarks about

Blacks in *Notes on the State of Virginia* with his rational thinking in similar situations not involving Blacks, which he included in this same book.

Jefferson opened his comparison by commenting on the beauty of Whites and Blacks, and disparaging the latter because of the “immovable veil of black” and lack of flowing hair. He then stated that Black men favor White women over women of their own species as “uniformly as is the preference of Oran-ootans for the black women over those of their own species” (Jefferson, 1787/1954, p. 138). This fiction must be measured against another statement Jefferson made in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, when he was discussing the Indians in the New World: “Of the Indian of South America, I know nothing; for I would not honor with the appellation of knowledge, what I derive from the fables published of them. These I believe to be just as true as the fables of Aesop” (p. 59). Jefferson had never visited Africa either, but he stated, without qualification, the fiction that sexually linked Black women in Africa to the jungle primates there. When later in *Notes on the State of Virginia* he speculated on the reasons for the innate inferiority of Blacks, he would again allude to this fable.

Jefferson continued his comparison of the two races by citing a long list of physical and emotional differences between Blacks and Whites. His presentation was made in the style of reporting on scientific observations. These comparisons include the following: “They [blacks] secrete more by the glands of the skin and less by the kidneys which gives them a strong and disagreeable odor”; “They are more tolerant of heat and less of cold”; “They are at least as brave . . . but this may perhaps proceed from a want of forethought”; “Their griefs are transient”; and “Their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection” (1787/1954, p. 139). His conclusion was also couched in scientific terms:

Comparing them by their faculties of memory, reason and imagination, it appears to me, that in memory they are equal to the whites; in reason much inferior, as I think one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid; and that in imagination, they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous. (1787/1954, p. 139)

Merrill Peterson, a well-regarded biographer of Thomas Jefferson, characterized these remarks as “thinly disguised folk beliefs about Negroes” (1970, p. 262). We shall learn below that Jefferson later admitted in his book that he had no empirical basis for these comparisons; they were his subjective observations.

Jefferson was, however, capable of objective analyses on other subjects. Under the Query on “Productions Mineral, Vegetable and Animal,” Jefferson undertook a spirited defense against a charge made by the most renowned naturalist of his era, the Frenchman Count Buffon. Buffon (1807-1812) stated that animal and vegetable life in the New World, including the aboriginal people, was degenerate compared to Europe’s because the prevailing weather in North America was cooler and more moist. Jefferson’s lengthy response to Buffon was extremely rational, the work of a logical mind (1787/1954, pp. 47-58).³ In his defense of the Indians of the New World who Buffon included in his charge of degeneracy, Jefferson vigorously asserted that all differences between the North American Indians and the Europeans were a consequence of their situation; that is, the differences in their culture and environment. In this defense, he displayed great sensitivity to a people he had described in the Declaration of Independence as “the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.”

Toward the conclusion of his defense of the Indians, Jefferson wrote that “Before we condemn the Indians of this continent as wanting genius, we must consider that letters have not yet been introduced among them.” He then asked a rhetorical question concerning the accomplishments of Northern Europeans when the Roman armies first crossed over the Alps: “How many good poets, how many able mathematicians, how many great inventors in arts and sciences, had Europe North of the Alps then produced? And it was sixteen centuries after this before a Newton could be formed” (1787/1954, p. 63). For the Indians, he believed it would be illogical to decry their lack of genius until they had sufficient time to develop a written language and to develop their intellects, perhaps 16 centuries. From among the enslaved Blacks in Virginia, he was

pointedly critical that “one could scarcely be found capable of tracing and comprehending the investigations of Euclid.”

Continuing with his comparison of Whites and Blacks, Jefferson asserted that “We will consider them here, on the same stage with whites, and where the facts are not apocryphal on which a judgment is to be formed” (1787/1954, p. 139). Jefferson knew that Blacks and Whites were not on “the same stage” in Virginia. Almost all Blacks in Virginia were condemned to hereditary slavery, whereas the Whites were free men except for the indentured servants who labored under a fixed term of servitude. In his comparison of Whites and Blacks, Jefferson refused to consider the situation of the Blacks as he did with the Indians.

I stated that Jefferson knew that Blacks and Whites were not on “the same stage” in Virginia because later in his book, while responding to the Query on “Manners,” Jefferson revealed that he was aware of the effects of slavery on the enslaved. He wrote that “The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other.” Jefferson continued by writing that if a slave had a preference for a country in this world, it must be any other than that in which he is born to live and labor for another, “in which he must *lock up* the faculties of his nature” (1787/1954, pp. 162-163, emphasis added). He completely compartmentalized these sensitive observations from his comparison of the two groups described 20 pages earlier.

Jefferson did make one exception to the condition of the slaves—he sought to explain the cause of their “disposition to theft” on their enslavement. His inspiration for this was the poet Homer, who wrote the following verse that Jefferson quoted in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954):

Jove fix'd it certain, that whatever day
Makes man a slave, takes half his worth away. (p. 142)

Jefferson did not seem to comprehend in this passage that Homer’s notion of worth was much broader than to drive an enslaved person

to petty theft; rather, Homer intended it to describe the totality of an enslaved person's self-image and, consequently, his behavior.

To complete his comparison of Whites with Blacks, Jefferson delved into ancient history. He compared New World slavery with Roman slavery, concluding that Roman slaves were treated more harshly. Despite their harsh condition, he observed that the Roman slaves were often the rarest of artists, the most learned of scientists, and the trusted tutors to their masters' children. Blacks, he believed, could not achieve such accomplishments. The superiority of Roman slaves over Black slaves was explainable, Jefferson concluded, because the Roman slaves were White, proving that race, not condition, made the difference (1787/1954, p. 142). He made no attempt to determine whether the Roman slaves who were artists, scientists, and tutors had been educated before their enslavement or were afforded an education while enslaved. Nor did he point out, as the historian Edward Gibbon (1776/1994) did, that although Roman slaves were the most abject part of that society, hope of emancipation was always present—and that when freed, the Roman slave could enter into society on a near-equal status with his former master (p. 68). This account was contained in Gibbon's first volume of *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* that was published in 1776, and which Jefferson, a voracious reader, very likely had read by the time he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia*.

Jefferson also wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954) that "The improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites, has been *observed by everyone*, and proves that their inferiority is not the effect merely of their condition of life" (p. 141, emphasis added). In this book, he also summarily dismissed the accomplishments of two contemporary Black writers, Phyllis Wheatley and Ignatius Sancho. Of Wheatley, the African-born, American poet, Jefferson stated that "Religion indeed has produced a Phyllis Wheatley; but it could not produce a poet" (pp. 140, 288, fn. 11). As for Sancho, born on a slave ship and author of *Letters*, Jefferson stated that when compared with White writers, "we are compelled to enroll him at the bottom of the column" (pp. 140-141, 288, fn. 12).

Nearing the end of his comparison of Whites and Blacks, Jefferson stated, "The opinion, that they [Blacks] are inferior in the faculties of reason and imagination, must be hazarded with great diffidence" (1787/1954, p. 143). He added that to justify a general conclusion requires many observations of a scientific nature that had not been undertaken in this study. He also confessed that "To our reproach it must be said that though for a century and a half we have had under our eyes the races of black and red men, they have never been viewed by us as subjects of natural history" (p. 143). One might expect that based on these admissions, Jefferson would forego a conclusion in his comparison of the races. This was not the case. Jefferson's conclusion on the race issue was tentative but chilling: "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstance, are inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (1787/1954, p. 143).

This is in striking contrast to his conclusion stated in the Query entitled "Productions Mineral, Vegetable and Animal." In his response to this Query, Jefferson was delving into three hypotheses that had been postulated to explain how seashells had been deposited in the Andes Mountains 15,000 feet above the sea. He analyzed each of these hypotheses and found all were unsatisfactory to explain the phenomenon, concluding that "Ignorance is preferable to error; and he is less remote from the truth who believes nothing, than he who believes what is wrong" (1787/1954, p. 33). Jefferson postulated and published a hypothesis of the innate inferiority of Blacks compared to Whites that, by his own rational standards, the choice of silence would have been preferable. This is the essence of racial bias.

Finally, Jefferson divulged in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954) his political conclusions that emerged from his racial comparison. "This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people." Secondly, he made these comments: "Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave, when made free, might mix, without staining the blood of his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed

beyond the reach of mixture" (p. 143). These drastic consequences, especially the imperative for removal elsewhere, are based on what Jefferson termed "a suspicion only"; it is obvious that Jefferson entertained no doubts in his belief of Black inferiority.

The removal of the emancipated Blacks from the United States was an imperative that Jefferson held for the remainder of his life. He expressed this imperative consistently over the intervening years. In 1821, 5 years before his death, Jefferson wrote in his *Autobiography* (1829/1959) that "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate that these people [the slaves] are to be free, nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, can not live in the same government" (p. 62). (The first phrase of this sentence is inscribed out of context on the rotunda of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, DC.)

Contrast his imperative for deportation of freed Blacks with his sentiments regarding the Indians. Jefferson wrote, "In truth, the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them [the Indians] is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix and become one people" (Ford, 1904-1905, Vol. IX, p. 445).⁴ In an address to some Indians while he was president of the United States, he proclaimed, "You will mix with us by marriage, your blood will run in our veins, and will spread with us over this great island" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XVI, p. 452).⁵ He invited intermixture of Whites with Indians; intermixture of Whites with Blacks was Jefferson's great phobia.

Jefferson based his suspicion of Black inferiority on one of two possibilities: Either Blacks were originally created a distinct species, or were made distinct by time and circumstance. In the former, Jefferson was in disagreement with the prevailing Enlightenment thought that was exemplified by the French naturalist, Count Buffon, with whose work he was very familiar (Jefferson, 1787/1954, p. 64).⁶ Jefferson was alluding to the Great Chain of Being that had become widely popularized when he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Jordan, 1968, p. 483). It was believed that all the species of animal life could be represented from the simplest to the most complex in a single hierarchy termed the Great Chain of Being, and that all of the races of humankind were of a single species located at

the eminence of this chain. Jefferson offered the possibility that Blacks on this chain were a separate species located beneath humans but above orang-ootans. Jefferson intimated this possibility when he reported on the fiction of this animal's mating with Black women, as interbreeding was regarded possible only within a species. That Blacks were below humans on the Great Chain of Being was a belief that Buffon fully discredited in his *Natural History* (1807-1812). Buffon wrote:

From every circumstance may we obtain a proof, that mankind are not composed of species essentially different from each other; that, on the contrary, there was originally but one species, which, after being multiplied and diffused itself over the whole surface of the earth, underwent diverse changes from the influence of the climate, food, mode of living, epidemical disasters, and the intermixture of individuals more or less resembling each other. (Vol. IV, p. 351)

Buffon also recorded in his work the accounts of a few travelers who had reported their observations of "Orang-outans" (Buffon's spelling) in their various natural habitats. Several of these travelers reported that these animals carried young girls of about 8 or 10 years old to the tops of high trees. Another traveler reported that these animals attempt to surprise the Negresses whom they retain for "enjoying," and another reported that these animals are passionately fond of women. Buffon presented these reports in his monumental work but did not comment on them. Later in this work, he reported on the anatomical differences between Orang-outans and humans that had been determined by dissection. He stated that the laboratory studies of this animal "neither bring it nearer the nature of man nor raise it above that of the brute." He concluded that this animal approaches nearer to man than other creatures but the interval of difference is not trifling (Vol. IX, pp. 149-177). Buffon approached this issue by stating the results of scientific observation and avoiding any conclusion on the issue of interspecies sexuality. His was the essence of enlightened thought; Jefferson's was not.

Like most of the French intellectuals of his time, Buffon condemned slavery. Alluding to claims that Negroes could remain hardy with much less food and sleep than Europeans, thereby

justifying their enslavement, he wrote, "How can men in whom the smallest sentiment of humanity remains, adopt such maxims, and on such shallow foundations attempt to justify excesses to which nothing could have given birth but the most sordid avarice?" (1807-1812, Vol. IV, p. 293).

Within months after the Declaration of Independence was proclaimed, Jefferson left Philadelphia to join the Committee of Revisors in the Virginia assembly. This committee was undertaking a general review of the laws of their newly independent state. Bill number 51, dealing with slavery, has been determined to have been drawn by Jefferson (Boyd, 1950-1995, Vol. 2, pp. 320, 472). Its first provision stated that henceforth no persons were to be held as slaves in the Commonwealth, except those presently enslaved and their descendants. It continued that Negroes and mulattos brought into Virginia as slaves and held for 1 year shall be free. The next provision seemed to be crucial in Jefferson's thinking: Any person so freed, as well as any slaves emancipated in the future, must leave the state within 1 year's time or they shall "be out of protection of the laws." Any Negroes and mulattos coming into Virginia as free-men shall immediately "be out of protection of the laws." Any White woman bearing a child by a Negro or mulatto shall depart the Commonwealth within 1 year or "be out of protection of the laws." It appears conclusive that Jefferson wanted a Commonwealth where Blacks would either continue to remain enslaved or, if freed, would be forced to leave the state, and White women consorting with Black men were to be treated as social outcasts. Jefferson's sentiments as expressed in this bill were more excessive than the majority of Virginia's legislators at this time; when the bill was introduced to the assembly almost 10 years after Jefferson had drafted it, the three "out of protection of the laws" clauses were eliminated before its final passage (Boyd, 1950-1995, Vol. 2, p. 472).

Four years later, as governor of Virginia, Jefferson signed a bill to reward Virginia's soldiers who enlisted for the duration of the War for Independence with "300 acres of land plus a healthy sound Negro between 20 and 30 years of age or 60 pounds in gold or silver" (Miller, 1977, p. 20).⁷ Jefferson's behavior as lawmaker and

governor indicate, literally, his understanding of what the American revolution was all about despite his rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence. His behavior in these political acts indicated that, in his mind, "all men" did not include Black men.

Late in his life, Jefferson revealed the rationale for the gradual emancipation plan he described in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954). In 1824, Jefferson wrote to Jared Sparks, a prominent American historian, editor, and minister, responding to a proposal to colonize American Negroes to Sierra Leone (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XVI, pp. 8-14).⁸ He stated that the proposal had two advantages: it would bring the blessings of civilization and science to Sierra Leone and provide an asylum where "we can, by degrees, send the *whole* of that population [Blacks] from among us" (emphasis added). Such an enterprise, Jefferson concluded, would contribute "to our happiness and safety." Past 80 years of age when he wrote this letter to Sparks, Jefferson continued to equate forced deportation of all of Blacks with "our happiness and safety."

Jefferson proceeded to illustrate for Sparks the calculus of his gradual emancipation plan. He stated that his plan would be phased over 25 years, during which time the current slave population in the United States (1.5 million) would have doubled. Therefore, 3 million slaves would have to be deported. If only mature slaves were freed and deported, the cost to purchase these slaves at an average of \$200 per adult slave would total \$600 million, which must be paid to compensate the slave owners. To this must be added the cost of transportation to Africa, farm implements, and a year's provisions, or a total of \$300 million additional. Total costs, therefore, would be \$900 million, or \$36 million each year for the 25 years it would require for the plan of gradual emancipation. He concluded by stating,

I am aware that at the end of sixteen years, a gradual detracton of this sum will commence from the gradual diminution of breeders and go on during the remaining nine years. Calculate this deduction and it is still impossible to look at this enterprise a second time. (Lipscomb & Bergh, Vol. XVI, p. 10)

Jefferson then described the basis for an affordable emancipation plan. He would only emancipate infants because they would be much cheaper to purchase, \$12.50 each, or a total of \$37.5 million. Some of the infants, he added, might even be gotten free. This would leave only the expenses of nourishment while the infants were with their mothers and the expenses for their eventual transportation to Africa. They would stay with their mothers, he continued, until their services were worth their maintenance, and then they would be put to industrious occupations until the proper age for deportation. He continued that this was the result of his reflections on the subject 45 years ago, and was the economic basis of the emancipation plan that he described in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954). In the interim, he stated, he had not conceived any other practicable plan in which “no violation of property rights is proposed.” He concluded, “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” (Lipscomb & Bergh, Vol. XVI, p. 13).

This letter makes very clear that Jefferson’s gradual emancipation plan of acquiring infants for eventual deportation was, essentially, a sordid, mercenary means to remove all Blacks from America. Jefferson’s rhetoric in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954) that the infants would be brought up and educated at public expense was belied by his revelation in the letter to Sparks that the economics of his plan required that the emancipated infants work in bondage until their colonization to earn their subsistence; their training to become a free people, a sham. And as for the mothers, their sorrow would be minuscule compared to the benefit of deporting all Blacks.

Jefferson also revealed in his correspondence that he could be less than forthright in his responses on the subject of Black competency. In 1809, Jefferson received a book entitled *The Literature of Negroes* from a French bishop, Henri Gregoire. He responded to the Bishop with this statement:

Be assured that no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts I have myself entertained

and expressed on the grade of understanding allotted to them [Blacks] by nature, and to find that in this respect they are on a par with ourselves. (Ford, 1904-1905, Vol. XI, p. 99)⁹

Jefferson continued in his response with an amazing refutation of the position he took in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954), where he maintained that he must compare the competency of enslaved Blacks in Virginia with the Whites there because “the facts are not apocryphal.” He wrote in his response to Gregoire: “My doubts [on the competency of Blacks] were the result of personal observation on the limited sphere of my own state where the opportunities for the development of their genius were not favorable, and those of exercising it less so” (see Note 9). The full meaning of Homer’s quotation seemed now to dawn on him. If he truly believed that his analysis of Black competency was in error, he never publicly corrected it or altered his view that, when freed, Blacks must be removed beyond the reach of intermixture.

The response to Gregoire also contained another sentiment that has been widely quoted in Jefferson’s defense against racism. He wrote that the rights of slaves are not dependent on their degree of talent but are equivalent to those of all men, even the most talented—for example, a Sir Isaac Newton. But he omitted any mention of the position he continued to advocate, forced deportation after emancipation. Therefore, the freed slaves would not have the right to live in the land of their birth; their rights would be inferior to the rights of all White Americans at that time.

Later in 1809, Jefferson wrote to a friend describing his correspondence with the French bishop earlier in the year, stating that he gave Gregoire a “very soft answer”; that is, he expressed to Gregoire the sentiments that he believed this humane-minded person wanted to hear (Ellis, 1997, p. 89).¹⁰ We are therefore unable to sort out any of the sentiments he expressed to Gregoire with what he sincerely believed. However, the balance of the letter to his friend indicates that he had not modified his beliefs on the innate incompetence of Blacks. Jefferson complained that Bishop Gregoire had gathered every story that he could find by “men of color (without

distinguishing whether black or of what degree of mixture) however slight the mention or light the authority on which they are based" (Ford, 1904-1905, Vol. XI, p. 120).¹¹ More than 20 years after he wrote *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787/1954), Jefferson still clung to his belief expressed in this book that there is a noticeable "improvement of the blacks in body and mind, in the first instance of their mixture with the whites" (1787/1954, p. 141). He was therefore critical of Gregoire for not having reported the degree of intermixture of the authors included in his anthology.

In this same letter, Jefferson disparaged Benjamin Banneker, an African American who had developed an almanac that he had sent to Jefferson. Jefferson responded to Banneker when he received the almanac with the same sentiment he wrote to Gregoire; that is, "no person living wishes more sincerely than I do, to see a complete refutation of the doubts . . . on the grade of understanding allotted to them by nature" (see Note 9). This surely must have been a "very soft answer" (see Note 11) in light of what he now wrote about Banneker to his correspondent:

We know that he had spherical trigonometry enough to make almanacs but not without the suspicion of aid from Ellicott [a White Quaker], who was his neighbor and friend, and never missed an opportunity of puffing him. I have a long letter from Banneker which shows him to have a mind of very common stature indeed. (Ford, 1904-05, Vol. XI, p.120)

Jefferson continued in this letter with the following sentence:

It was impossible for doubt to have been more tenderly or hesitatingly expressed than that was in *Notes on Virginia*, and nothing was or is farther from my intentions, than to enlist myself as the champion of a fixed opinion, where I have only expressed a doubt. (see Note 11)

Within the context of a letter in which Jefferson disparaged Banneker and complained that Gregoire had not disclosed the degree of interracial mixture of the authors included in his anthology (after

sending both of them very soft answers), it is reasonable to assume that this sentence was another "very soft answer" directed to the critics of his racial views.

As might be expected from a person with his racial beliefs, Jefferson was almost totally passive in attempting to abolish slavery (Ellis, 1997, p. 147).¹² Jefferson seconded a bill presented to the Virginia legislature in 1769 to ease private manumission by slave owners. It was resoundingly defeated and he never again introduced or endorsed legislation to abolish slavery in the southern states. His emancipation and deportation plan for Virginia (described in *Notes on the State of Virginia* [1787/1954]) was never submitted to the legislature because he believed that the public sentiment did not favor it. In 1784, he proposed that the American Confederation enact a law that would require the constitutions of the new states formed out of Virginia's western territory to include five articles, one of which would prohibit slavery after 1800. The slavery article lost by one vote, with only one southerner supporting him (Peterson, 1970, p. 283). (Jefferson was in France when the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was approved, which banned slavery after 1800 in that part of the western territory north of the Ohio River.) It was during his presidency that all transportation of slaves into the United States was prohibited. Jefferson recommended that Congress enact this ban at the earliest date permitted by the Constitution, January 1, 1808, and the bill was passed. By 1807, all states except South Carolina had banned the importation of slaves from outside the United States, so there was little opposition to the federal ban (Miller, 1977, p. 145). From a politician who fought hard to establish a republican government in the new republic, his political efforts to end slavery were insignificant by comparison.

In 1820, the status of slavery in the states west of the Mississippi River seeking admission to the Union created much contention in Congress, and Jefferson reversed his position advocated 36 years earlier for the Northwest Territory. He argued that slavery could not be denied by the federal government in any state being created out of the Louisiana Purchase, because only a state has the right to regulate the different descriptions of the persons comprising it.

Additionally, he wrote that the resulting spread of slavery would benefit the slaves: "Their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionately facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation by dividing the burden on a greater number of coadjutors" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XV, p. 248).¹³ What burden? He was most certainly referring to the burden of deportation. He never departed from that imperative.

If not emancipation, what were his political priorities? His overriding concern seemed to be for the republic that he helped to establish, for it to thrive and to provide liberty and happiness for its White citizens. In 1820, he described the American Republic as "the experiment which was to decide ultimately whether man is capable of self-government" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XV, p. 243).¹⁴ When he wrote that letter he was in despair that the political contention over the admission of Missouri as a state would result in disunion and the loss of his generation's effort to establish the new republic. Shortly afterwards, he wrote of the sacrifice of his generation to acquire self-government and happiness for their country, now threatened by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons. He added that "If they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they will throw away, against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission" (Lipscomb & Bergh, 1905, Vol. XV, pp. 248-250).¹⁵ The blessings he referred to were the liberties that the republic afforded to White men; the abstract principle was whether the federal government could ban slavery in the newly admitted states. In a letter to John Adams, he discussed the distinction of the American republic, and made this statement: "A constitution has been acquired, which, though neither of us thinks perfect, yet both consider as competent to render our fellow citizens the happiest and the securest on whom the sun has ever shone" (Ford, 1904-1905, Vol. XI, p. 341).¹⁶ In Jefferson's horizon, the happiest and securest citizens were White; the Black slaves would remain chattel property until freed, and then they would be removed beyond the "reach of mixture."

It is abundantly clear that Jefferson intended the United States to be a society of free White men because of his overwhelming

prejudice toward Blacks, who he regarded as inferior in body and mind. It is a supreme irony that his inspirational words in the Declaration of Independence were transformed to their literal interpretation by later Americans and they have served the nation as the vision for the struggle to attain an egalitarian multiracial society. If Jefferson's thinking had prevailed, the country would not have taken the first step toward this vision.

NOTES

1. Jefferson stated that he advanced this conclusion to his comparison of Blacks and Whites "as a suspicion only," but I maintain that for Jefferson this was his lifelong belief. It is the theme of this article to establish this position.

2. Jefferson's letter to Pierre Samuel DuPont, March 2, 1809.

3. Jefferson starts by indicating that he could not challenge the comparison of the weather because of a lack of sufficient observations. He then challenges Buffon's contention that more moisture inhibits growth of animals by citing observations that belie this contention. Lastly, he makes direct comparisons of the sizes of similar quadrupeds that inhabit Europe and North America to challenge Buffon's contention that vegetable and animal life is smaller in North America.

4. Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Hawkins, February 18, 1803.

5. Jefferson's Address to Captain Hendrick, the Delawares Mohicans and Munries, December 21, 1808.

6. Jefferson called Buffon "the celebrated Zoologist who has added, and is adding, so many precious things to the treasures of science," p. 64.

7. Morgan (1975, p. 385) also reported this event.

8. Jefferson's letter to Jared Sparks, February 4, 1824.

9. Jefferson's letter to Henri Gregoire, February 25, 1809.

10. Ellis (1997) states that "Jefferson always regarded candor and courtesy as incompatible, and when forced to choose, he invariably chose courtesy thereby avoiding unpleasant confrontations," p. 89.

11. Jefferson's letter to Joel Barlow, October 8, 1809.

12. Ellis (1997) states that Jefferson's belief "was that slavery was morally wrong but racial segregation was morally right. And until a practical solution to the problem of what to do with the freed slaves could be found, it made no sense to press for emancipation," p. 147.

13. Jefferson's letter to John Holmes, April 22, 1820.

14. Jefferson's letter to William Short, April 13, 1820.

15. Jefferson's letter to John Holmes, April 22, 1820.

16. Jefferson's letter to John Adams, October 28, 1813.

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