

The more human, realistic Jefferson

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In 1803, citizens of Boston wrote a letter to President Thomas Jefferson asking permission to make April 13, his birthday, a holiday. Jefferson courteously turned them down, saying he disapproved of "transferring the honors and veneration for the great birthday of our Republic to any individual." For the rest of his life, he refused to reveal to the public the day he was born.

Last summer, as director of a National Endowment for the Humanities institute, I spent four weeks with 30 teachers discussing Jefferson, a man of paradoxes: one who craved friendship yet was intensely private; an aristocrat who detested privilege; an urban intellectual who feared cities; a slaveholder who preached equality; a peaceful man who sanctioned violent rebellion; a dreamer and philosopher and a cunning diplomat.

Scorning politics, he spent much of his life in office. Comfortable on his plantation, he remained ignorant of banks and money, unaware of a commercial manufacturing revolution that would reshape his agrarian utopia. Generous but extravagant, he increased the debt he inherited as a young man, and died in fear of poverty and disgrace.

Today, Jefferson has become one of the most controversial figures in American history. He had doubts about the proposed Constitution, believing it conferred too much presidential power and too little protection of citizens' rights. He glorified the French Revolution. Excessively

idealistic, he believed the states could be held together by shared interests, and feared a strong central government — except when *he* became president. Most notably, he hated slavery and early in his life drew up plans to eliminate it, yet he freed only five of his 200 slaves, acquiescing to an iniquitous institution. Today, Jefferson seems passive, his comments on "Negroes" in *Notes on the State of Virginia* racist, and his relationship with Sally Hemings hypocritical.

During the last 40 years, our view of America's past has become more honest and realistic, reflecting a society of full disclosure, impatient with myths. We see our founding fathers as human. This more realistic view, many historians argue, offers approachable rather than exemplary lives. But the downside is the dark side, leaving little allowance for the idealism that drove Jefferson's ideology.

Jefferson was more than an eloquent espouser of democratic ideology, more than a patient and realistic secretary of state, and more than a president who doubled the size of America with the Louisiana Purchase. He was a scientist who analyzed climate change, studied mastodon bones, and championed small-pox inoculation; a farmer who invented a moldboard plough and brought fruit trees and upland rice to America; a lawyer who helped make Virginia laws more humane; and an architect who designed Monticello and the University of Virginia.

Only education, Jefferson believed, could end tyranny and preserve democratic

values. Thus, he advocated universal primary education, colleges open to merit, and curriculum separate from theology. His thousands of books eventually became the beginning of the Library of Congress. Devoted to reason, he loved beauty, playing his violin, and marveling at the flowers and fruits of the Virginia countryside. In love with knowledge, he placed a higher priority on virtue.

Jefferson cultivated friends, treasured his wife (who died after only 10 years of marriage), and watched after his children. In 1804, Maria, his 26-year-old daughter, died. Against a background of war, political combat, and personal suffering, Jefferson struggled to retain his optimism.

Our celebration of Jefferson's birthday today is more complicated than the adoration of Boston citizens in 1803. Now, we acknowledge a guilty, conflicted slaveholder who did not transcend his time, a tough politician who orchestrated attacks on his opponents and carefully shaped his reputation for posterity. We see a second presidential term marred by a misconceived embargo that backfired and caused an economic crisis. Still, we might also see a sweet-tempered, affectionate human being — a diplomat, architect, and idealist who believed in religious tolerance, rebuked tyrants, promoted civil rights, and wrote the words that justify the creation of America.

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