

Celebrated and Condemned: Thomas Jefferson

9

Main Goals

Students can analyze historical situations in which dramatically nonconforming thought meets up with strongly held societal norms.

They understand the importance of our country’s constitutional protections for religious liberty to its free and independent thinkers.

Affective: Cultivate in students a sense that those who think “too differently” may be vulnerable and in need of legal protection.

Subgoal

To have students investigate how ideas and actions are viewed through evolving societal lenses, leading to reinterpretation of a leader’s actions and refashioning his or her image over time.

Lesson Context

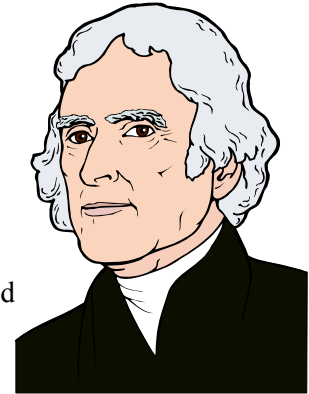
Knowledge and Cultural Understanding		Skills Attainment and Social Participation	
X	<i>Historical Literacy</i>		<i>Basic Study Skills</i>
X	<i>Ethical Literacy</i>	X	<i>Critical Thinking Skills</i>
X	<i>Cultural Literacy</i>	X	<i>Participation Skills</i>
	<i>Geographic Literacy</i>	Democratic Understanding and Civic Values	
	<i>Economic Literacy</i>		<i>National Identity</i>
	<i>Sociopolitical Literacy</i>		<i>Constitutional Heritage</i>
Check the Table on page 4. Make sure your students have the concepts in Rows 1 and 2.		X	<i>Civic Values, Rights, and Responsibilities</i>

Lesson 9

Celebrated and Condemned

Concept Building Objective

Given information on an icon of American history, the student will demonstrate understanding that a *society's judgment* of a person's ideas and actions *is subject to revision as the society changes*. The history of a person may be reevaluated from time to time. The individual's reputation may rise and fall according to the aggregated values of those who are doing the examining.



Contextual Introduction

Of late, Thomas Jefferson's life and reputation have been at the core of many new books, movies, essays, and discussions. Jefferson, a powerful thinker and doer, was judged by his contemporaries and has, from his presidency onward, been continually revisited and his reputation revised. The ideas with which we associate Jefferson are powerful ones.

There are several areas of current controversy concerning this man. One is the contrast between Jefferson's thinking as expressed in his writings and how his life conformed to his times. For example, although Jefferson often wrote and spoke on the evils of slavery (thoughts), he continued to hold slaves throughout his entire life (actions). Another controversy surrounds his relationship with a slave, Sally Hemmings. In researching Jefferson, some authors had claimed he had children by Ms. Hemmings whereas others had posited no such relationship. (Recent biological evidence with respect to at least one offspring appears to lend support to the former group.) A third center of controversy is Jefferson's actions during the formation of our constitution, when he laid down the ground rules regarding the separation of church and state. Although Jefferson's firmly established "wall of separation" continues to exist, it currently is under attack by those who seek to meld governance and religious dogma.

Jefferson was a deist, as were many other notables of the period leading up to and including the founding of our nation (e.g., Paine, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Benjamin Franklin). [Certain elements of George Washington's conduct indicate he had deistic inclination.] Deists believe that God does not take part in the daily transactions of humankind. Although Jefferson's words and writings were accomplished mainly in the late 1700s and early 1800s, his writings continue to help us to preserve a nation in which the nonconforming thinkers in the citizenry are at liberty to let their thoughts flow freely without direct societal repression.

Materials

1. Original quotations from the writings of Thomas Jefferson.

Although Jefferson is featured, it would be appropriate to provide students with similar selected source material on other figures whose reputations have changed considerably as their lives have been reinterpreted across time.

2. (Optional; to be supplied by teacher) Reference material, such as encyclopedia entry, on the life of Jefferson, and any additional information deemed useful to enhance the goals and specific instructional objective.

There is an overabundance of information on Thomas Jefferson. So, as a general rule, you will want to limit whatever you provide to students beyond what is included in this lesson. Use the instructional objectives as your primary guide to selecting and presenting any added information.

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Strategies

Preparation: Beforehand, read over the basic elements of the “Contextual Introduction” above. Plan for any additional ideas or resources you will want to use.

1. If your class is not already studying Jefferson, then in your own fashion acquaint them with him and provide a few tidbits to entice their interest in studying him further.

(It will be helpful if your students are acquainted with Jefferson’s *time frame* and *society* so they can compare it with their own society as they interpret what he has said.)
2. Group students so you will have several categories of “special interests” from Jefferson’s day represented by teams. You will perhaps want to have some merchants (businesspeople), employed laborers, slaves, politicians, religious devotees, career military, teachers and/or librarians. Engage students in an activity that permits them to compare sayings of Jefferson from at least two different time frames: *Jefferson’s day*, and *today*. (*Note:* If students have been studying intervening times, such as the Civil War, an additional timeframe reference could be utilized.) If you have no preferred method of your own to use, you may follow this procedure.
 - (a) Remind students they are living in **Jefferson’s day**, and you are seeking a “group reaction” to some things he has said. Ask that beforehand they spend five minutes or so “getting into their roles” and discussing what their situation as Jefferson’s contemporaries is like (e.g., *How is farm labor conducted? What do merchants sell? Where are the politicians?*).
 - (b) Point out the quotations listing and assign each “special interest” team this task:
 - Examine and interpret the meaning of the available quotations, and then locate the three sayings they feel *most relevant* to their special interests (e.g., as merchants).
 - As they discuss and interpret what they think Jefferson’s is saying, they are to decide how their interest group is likely to react to his positions (and to him).
 - Write a “What We Think of Mr. Jefferson” paragraph to *present and explain* to the class the group’s reaction to Mr. Jefferson’s views on the topics that concern them most.
 - (c) Conduct a class sharing session in which teams report their reactions.
 - (d) Now cast the situation into **modern times** in which an important speaker, “T J” is coming to town to give a talk that will be televised and carried on radio. Mr. J’s pronouncements are expected to generate controversy. (Some townspeople are expected to carry signs and demonstrate. Some plan to phone in questions and arguments or write letters to the editor. Others will be sponsoring a reception beforehand where Mr. J can be greeted. Others will be invited to the dinner-dance after the speech.) Conduct a discussion with the class at large comparing how Mr. J is likely to be received by *their* group if his views mirror Jefferson’s exactly. For example, *do students suspect farm laborers nowadays would picket or cheer him? Will military leaders attend the dinner dance? Will the most prominent businessperson in town be likely to host him overnight? Who will plan a reception for him? Who will write letters to the editor?*

Appraisal of Understanding

1. Evidence. Each team has completed an analysis and produced written reaction.

2. Assessment. Ask students to write an open response to the following:

“How is it possible for Jefferson to create different forms of controversy today than he did in his own times?”
3. Transfer: You could identify other figures from American history whose reputations have risen or fallen across time and that fit your interest and curriculum. There needs to be sufficiency of resources to permit your pursuing similar analyses and accomplishing the same instructional objective.

Background for Teachers

RECOMMENDED READINGS

There has been a spate of books written this decade on Thomas Jefferson. Several deal with the issues outlined in the contextual overview for this lesson. One good way to obtain a quick overview of these books' content (and especially their positions on the controversies surrounding Jefferson) is to refer to critical reviews near the time of publication. Listed below is a sampling of such reviews, all to be found in the **New York Review of Books**.

“Liberty’s Wild Man,” by Gordon S. Wood (*NYRB*, February 20, 1997), reviewing *The Long Affair: Thomas Jefferson and the French Revolution, 1785-1800*, by Conor Cruise O’Brien, published by University of Chicago Press.

“Portrait of an Enigma” by Eric L. McKittrick (*NYRB*, April 24, 1997), reviewing *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, by Joseph J. Ellis, published by Knopf.

“Dusting Off the Declaration,” by Gordon S. Wood (*NYRB*, August 14, 1997), reviewing *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence*, by Pauline Maier, published by Knopf.

In closing his review of the O’Brien book, Gordon Wood writes as follows:

Against these sorts of angry assaults, what is the poor historian to say? Pathetic as it may seem to present-minded people, he must suggest that Jefferson was a man of the eighteenth century and not our age, that he was not the best of his time perhaps but he was better than most, that on most matters he did not and could not share our ideas, that in fact he could not even imagine our world at all.

Jefferson belongs in the eighteenth century, but he did make many ringing statements in celebration of liberty and equality that have resounded throughout our culture, indeed the world’s culture, for the past two hundred years. It is these transcendent statements that we need to honor, not the eighteenth-century slaveholder who remains inextricably enmeshed in a lost and distant past.

Additional References

Internet Links

- The Presidents: Thomas Jefferson, Third President 1801-1809 — <http://www.whitehouse.gov/WH/glimpse/presidents/html/tj3.html>
- The American Presidency — <http://www.grolier.com/presidents/preshome.html>
- Monticello, Home of Thomas Jefferson — <http://www.monticello.org/>

Books

- *Thomas Jefferson* by Kathie Smith; Messner, 1989 (Jefferson's life from childhood to adulthood).
- *Thomas Jefferson: The Revolutionary Aristocrat*, by Milton Meltzer; Watts, 1991.
- *Thomas Jefferson: Man on a Mountain*, by Natalie Bober, Athenium, 1988.

SOURCE MATERIALS FOR THOMAS JEFFERSON

(A)

In the fevered state of our country, no good can ever result from any attempt to set one of these fiery zealots to rights, either in fact or principle. They are determined as to the facts they will believe, and the opinions on which they will act. Get by them, therefore, as you would by an angry bull; it is not for a man of sense to dispute the road with such an animal.

Letter, 24 Nov. 1808, to his grandson, Thomas Jefferson Randolph.

(B)

What signify a few lives lost in a century or two? The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure.

Letter, 13 Nov. 1787, referring to Daniel Shay's rebellion of poor farmers in Massachusetts. Jefferson, writing from Paris, was the only one of the American leaders not alarmed by news of the revolt.

(C)

The boisterous sea of liberty is never without a wave.

Letter, 20 Oct. 1820.

(D)

The republican is the only form of government which is not eternally at open or secret war with the rights of mankind.

Letter, 11 March 1790.

(E)

No government ought to be without censors; and where the press is free no one ever will.

Letter, 9 Sept. 1792, to George Washington.

(F)

There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents.

Letter, 28 Oct. 1813, to former president John Adams.

(G)

If there be one principle more deeply rooted than any other in the mind of every American, it is that we should have nothing to do with conquest.

Letter, 28 July 1791.

(H)

Merchants have no country. The mere spot they stand on does not constitute so strong an attachment as that from which they draw their gains.

Letter, 17 March 1814.

(I)

The selfish spirit of commerce, which knows no country, and feels no passion or principle but that of gain.

Letter, 15 April 1809.

Lesson 9

(J)

A passion for politics stems usually from an insatiable need, either for power, or for friendship and adulation, or a combination of both.

Fawn M. Brodie (1915–81), U.S. biographer.
Thomas Jefferson, ch. 1 (1974).

(K)

I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.

Letter, 23 Sept. 1800.

(L)

I hope our wisdom will grow with our power, and teach us, that the less we use our power the greater it will be.

Letter, 12 June 1815.

(M)

Mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed.

The Declaration of Independence, 4 July 1776.

(N)

Books constitute capital. A library book lasts as long as a house, for hundreds of years. It is not, then, an article of mere consumption but fairly of capital, and often in the case of professional men, setting out in life, it is their only capital.

Letter, Sept. 1821, to former President James Madison.

(O)

Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blind-folded fear.

Letter, 10 Aug. 1787.

(P)

We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Original draft of the Declaration of Independence (1776), later amended.

(Q)

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. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it.

Notes on the State of Virginia, Query 18 (1784; written 1781).
