

FIRST
PLACE

Joe
Mattern

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Individual Liberty as a Fulfillment of Jefferson's Vision For America

Thomas Jefferson embodied certain ideals and principles which have embedded themselves deeply into the consciousness of American society and whose effects can still be felt today. Jefferson is an enigmatic figure in American history, and upon review of his life and career, the complexities inherent in his nature become quite distinctive. Indeed, Jefferson was a complex individual who held views considered by many to be contradictory. There is no question that Jefferson showed ambivalent tendencies toward a variety of issues. What is clear, however, is that this Virginia-born, wealthy aristocrat who penned the Declaration of Independence and who served two terms as President of the United States, had a definite vision for the infant republic. The crux of Jefferson's vision for America rests on the idea of individual liberty. For Jefferson, this view manifested itself primarily in three ways: the concept of the pursuit of happiness, his ideal of an agrarian democracy based on the functions of the yeoman farmer, and his idea of limiting the power of the government. These three concepts represented for Jefferson the means by which to attain the ultimate end of individual liberty. In deciding whether or not Jefferson's vision has been fulfilled in contemporary American society, it is important to see how the means have been fulfilled, but it is much more important to determine if the end has been achieved. Having said that, I think that Jefferson's essential vision for America has been fulfilled in contemporary society because his idea of individual liberty has endured and flourished.

An important element in Jefferson's vision for America is the idea of the pursuit of happiness, which according to Jefferson, was a natural right shared by all men. Charles M. Wiltse says of Jefferson's vision, "so man is pictured as a gregarious animal, endowed by nature with a moral sense which enables him to distinguish right from wrong" (Wiltse 69). Wiltse goes on to say that "his ethical end is happiness, which can be achieved only in society; and the end of society itself is to promote the individual happiness of its members" (Wiltse 69). This idea of individual happiness within the larger society is at the center of Jefferson's vision, and lends itself particularly well to the idea of the American dream.

The concept of the individual in America having the opportunity to pursue his own happiness (so long as this pursuit does not interfere with or encroach upon the rights of others) is as central to modern American thought as it was to Jefferson. Charles M. Wiltse says, "the happiness principle is undoubtedly the most significant feature of Jefferson's theory of rights, for it raises government above the mere function of securing the individual against the encroachment of others. By recognizing a right to the pursuit of happiness, the state is committed to aid its citizens in the constructive task of obtaining their desires, whatever they may be" (Wiltse 70). This interpretation of the function of the state is interesting because it sets forth a precedent in which the individual happiness of a citizen is equal to, and inclusive of, those other two natural rights, life and liberty. The pursuit of happiness, what

Robert Darnton calls "the rhetorical climax to Thomas Jefferson's enunciation of natural rights and revolutionary theory" (Darnton 46), also seems to be a kind of testament to Jefferson's optimism. Jefferson was not confrontational in a direct sense, and as Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick state, "because of his essential optimism Jefferson seldom felt it necessary to break lances. He believed, and often in effect said, that all would come right with time" (Elkins and McKittrick 205). This optimistic outlook is consistent with the general Enlightenment views of the time, and it lets the student of Jefferson in on another level of Jeffersonian thought; that for Jefferson, defeats, political or otherwise, were only temporary interruptions on the path toward the eventual goal.

In modern America, the idea of the pursuit of happiness is ever-present in the sense that happiness is a goal toward which most Americans strive, often exerting considerable effort in the process. Happiness, though, is a relative term and can perhaps be best described in a general way. For most Americans, the "dream" can be summed up in one word: opportunity. There are no guarantees for happiness and, in any event, such an abstract notion could not be realistically guaranteed. But as long as the opportunity exists for an average citizen to achieve his own version of happiness, then the dream is alive and individual liberty is exemplified. Jefferson would probably agree that the opportunity exists now more than ever to pursue your dreams in America, inasmuch as it is possible to objectify happiness.

A second ingredient in Jefferson's vision for America is the idea of an agrarian democracy based on the functions of the yeoman farmer. In this sense, Jefferson placed a higher social value upon the virtuous nature inherent in a rural society. In reference to Jefferson's Notes on the State of Virginia, Elkins and McKittrick state that "Jefferson's conviction that whatever his countrymen might do, and whatever concessions he himself might have to make, the United States ought to remain a rural society" (Elkins and McKittrick 199). Elkins and McKittrick go on to say of Jefferson's vision, that "whatever economic expediency might seem to dictate either way, a society of yeoman farmers was inherently more stable, more virtuous, and more republican than any other" (Elkins and McKittrick 199). This is significant because it illuminates Jefferson's ideological and economic viewpoints.

Jefferson's problems with industry stemmed from its diametrical opposition to his ideal of a yeoman republic. Industry and commerce represented evil in the sense that they contributed to the forces of corruption which were on the verge of running rampant throughout the modern world. Jefferson saw what was happening in England, and its effect upon America, and he didn't like it. Elkins and McKittrick say of his agrarian world view: "It applies not least to his feelings about England, where commerce was being used as an instrument to corrupt America, and against whose commerce America ought to strike to cleanse herself of those corruptions" (Elkins and McKittrick 199).

Another major aspect of Jefferson's displeasure with the rise of industry has to do with the challenge that it presented to his idea of autonomy. For Jefferson, the yeoman farmer was the epitome of an autonomous American and, until the advent of the secret ballot, the only American who would vote his mind, irrespective of outside forces. With an increase in mechanization, Jefferson feared, the individual would be lost in the shuffle, as it were, and effectively become part of a collective, the likes of which would not resemble individualism in any respect. The question of whether or not the rise of technology (i.e., computers, automation, cloning, etc.) threatens the individual liberty of American citizens is a question that is as hotly contested today as it was in Jefferson's time.

Ironically, Jefferson himself may have actually given rise to the American industrialism which he so despised, in order that he might enable the United States to become economically self-sufficient and independent of European trade. In reference to this, Richard Hofstadter states: "Jefferson, of course, realized the immediate implications of his desire to pursue an independent economic course and as early as 1805 became a convert to the development of manufactures" (Hofstadter 40). This shows the ability of Jefferson to adapt his views and actions to ever-changing circumstances. In this respect, Jefferson was able to change his means in order to achieve the same end, namely the betterment of American society.

In contemporary America, the idea of an agrarian democracy is long gone. Obviously, America is a leading agricultural producer in the global marketplace, but not in the way that Jefferson originally envisioned. With large corporations taking over the majority of the farming functions in the country, the modern day "yeoman farmer" doesn't exist. Additionally, the emergence of big cities and the numbers of people flocking to those cities is indicative of a movement away from a rural society and towards a more urban, or at least suburban one. The reason for this is one of practicality; in a free-market economy like that of the United States, the cities are where the jobs are. People don't grow their own food; they go to the supermarket. But Thomas Jefferson was nothing if not pragmatic, and his greater vision was one of individual liberty. So the better question might be not whether America achieved the goal of agrarianism, but rather whether or not the current system affords the average American citizen a greater or lesser degree of individual liberty than that which was enjoyed by his predecessor in the 18th century. I think Jefferson would agree that the modern American enjoys at least an equal amount of liberty, even though the external circumstances in America have changed so much. A good example of this fact is the increased amount of leisure time, created in large part by technological advances, which afford the citizens the freedom to do what they choose. This is a testament to the enduring quality of Jefferson's mind.

Completing the triumvirate of Jefferson's vision of the infant republic is his ideal of limited government. Jefferson distrusted centralized government, and was of the opinion that individual liberty could flourish only in an environment where the power of the government was limited. Jefferson alludes to this in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* when he states: "In December 1776, our circumstances being much distressed, it was proposed in the house of delegates to create a dictator, invested with every power legislative, executive, and judiciary, civil and military, of life and death, over our persons and over our properties. One who entered into this contest from a pure love of liberty... must stand confounded and dismayed when he is told that a considerable portion of that plurality had meditated the surrender of them (rights) into a single hand" (Jefferson 126). This distrust stemmed from his dealings with monarchical governments and his knowledge of dictatorial regimes. Jefferson was intrigued with Native American systems of no real government, but thought it impractical for large populations. Jefferson's vision for government, then, was pragmatic in that he saw government as an instrument designed to serve the masses and to help the people achieve happiness through liberty. Usually this meant that government should not interfere with things too much, excepting those times when it could effect the increased liberty and protection of rights of citizens. Federal government should be relatively weak, with considerable power going to state and local governments.

Jefferson's involvement in the Louisiana purchase provided a test to his theory of limited government. Nowhere in the constitution does it state that the federal government has the power to expand by purchasing land. In this way, Jefferson effectively increased the power of the federal government.

Edward Channing says of this: "It was not the expenditure of the money which troubled him, it was not the acquisition of an empire which disturbed his mind, it was the constitutional aspect which annoyed him" (Channing 73). Claude Bowers offers this clarification: "To him the constitution was not a fetish to be worshipped and made sacrosanct against change, but an instrument for the service of the nation, to be changed when changed conditions demanded change in the interest of progress" (Bowers 349).

In modern America, we still try to guard against "big government", but where the federal government has exercised power (civil rights, for instance), it has done so in order to protect individual rights. In this way, Jefferson's vision for limited government has been fulfilled.

Although Jefferson's minor goals did not always work out (agrarian democracy), his major and more essential goal of individual liberty has been fulfilled. To sum up, Jefferson's vision of an agrarian democracy was not fulfilled, but his ideas of the pursuit of happiness and limited government were. Two out of three isn't bad, especially when individual liberty prevails.

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