

Hofstadter's thomas jefferson: a visionary of questionable merit



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In the book *The American Political Tradition*, by Hofstadter, Jefferson, in the opinion of the author, is an extremely complex man. Jefferson is usually thought to be an incredibly important and well respected figure in American history, but in the way that Hofstadter explains it, over time Jefferson has been highly overdramatized and is much less the person that he is commonly said to be. Hofstadter claims that Jefferson was a massive hypocrite, as his ideals are completely contradictory to his actions a large amount of the times. To put Hofstadter's opinions of Jefferson together; Jefferson is not the man he is ordinarily portrayed as, but rather a hypocrite who's place in American history has been existentially exaggerated.

Hofstadter in his book claims that Jefferson was quite the hypocrite, as his ideals were largely contradictory to how he actually lived his life. Jefferson wanted the United States to be a Meritocracy, a place in which the skilled workman were the top class. As Jefferson wanted a Meritocracy, Jefferson still was in full support of the people of whom he surrounded himself with, the wealthy, upper-class politicians of the United States. According to Hofstadter, " Under his leadership the Virginia reformers abolished primogeniture and entail... " (27). This helps to show how Jefferson's ideals largely contradict how he is as a person. Jefferson was in full, a massive recipient of primogeniture when his father died. Due to the primogeniture laws, Jefferson was given " 2, 700 acres and a large number of bondsman" (26). Jefferson abolished primogeniture later in his life, yet never had to really work for anything as immediate wealth was bestowed upon him. As well as the abolishment of primogeniture, for a long time, Jefferson worked on a draft on the emancipation of slaves and abolishing slavery in total. Yet

again, another contradictory action, as Jefferson was a benevolent slave owner who owned upwards of 600 slaves, and even though he tried to free slaves, he never freed the ones he owned. One of the reasons he never went through with his draft for slavery was as stated by Jefferson in Hofstadter, "that the public mind would not bear the proposition... Yet the day is not distant when it must bear and adopt it, or worse will follow" (29). Jefferson was too afraid to go against the public opinion regardless of him being claimed as a "revolutionary", as he never in his lifetime would ever go against the public opinion. "... after he wrote the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom he avoided expressing his more unacceptable ideas in public" (33). Jefferson's choice to never go against the majority opinion is one of many reasons that Hofstadter argues that Jefferson is really not a true "revolutionary" and that Jefferson's hypocrisy is a main proponent in the exaggeration of his place in history.

Jefferson is claimed by Hofstadter to be a very complex man, this partially pertaining to his thoughts as they relate to his voiced opinions. Jefferson always sided with the masses on every major issue, yet in reality, the way he really felt about something differed from his vocalized opinion. For example Hofstadter uses a quote from Charles M. Wiltse, "He remains aloof from the masses, and if he claims equality for all men, it is not because he feels all men are equal, but because he reasons they must be so" (26). Hofstadter uses this quote to help show that Jefferson, a man who truly believes that he is better than the common folk, sides with the common folk on the issue that all men are equal. Once again, his ideas contradicting his actions. Another stance that Jefferson takes is that he was in total belief that an agrarian

United States was the way it should be, and that these “Jeffersonians” (people who followed the agrarian ideals of Jefferson) would be the face of the nation. As Hofstadter claims, “... but when he entered the White House it was after satisfying the Federalists that he and they had come to some kind of understanding” (44). Jefferson fully believing in a “Jeffersonian Democracy”, still in large amount supported the people whom he surrounded himself with, Federalists, who believed in Federalism, a concept far from a Jeffersonian Democracy. Jefferson as explained in the quote believed in something far from Federalism but obviously his “strong” set of beliefs were broken as he appeased to the important Federalists of the nation. Jefferson appealing to the Federalists comes as a sign of weakness in his thoughts, as he remodeled his original thoughts to ones that were influenced by the Federalists. He did appease to them to win their vote, but during his Presidency, he stayed true to his word on the agreed intentions. Jefferson's true thoughts in most cases were never reflected in the statements he made to the public, and this highlights the fact that people really couldn't trust in things he would say, there was usually an underlying opinion of which he wouldn't reveal.

In American history, Thomas Jefferson is commonly known and praised for his achievements and how he helped shape America, but Hofstadter elucidates that Jefferson has some large failures that are never really spoken about. American history surrounding Jefferson is always known to be only positive, and you would never know that he has had some massive failures in his past, as his “overdramatized” achievements drown out his failures. One of these failures was the Embargo Act of 1807. The Embargo Act aimed to

get Britain and France to end the maritime seizures and give the United States the power they deserve by basically restricting American exports to Britain and France. As Hofstadter explains, "The Embargo not only failed to force Britain and France to respect American rights on the high seas, but also brought economic paralysis to the trading cities of the Northeast and the farms and plantations of the West and South. Jefferson finally admitted that the fifteen months of its operation cost more than a war" (51). Hofstadter uses this example because it shows that this was an incredibly large failure on Jefferson's part that came at an expense equating to more than the cost of a war. Not only was Jefferson unsuccessful in the creation of the Embargo Act, but even after, he continued to ban trade, creating the Nonintercourse Act, which only opened trade up to a limited section of Europe. The Nonintercourse act in the eyes of Americans was a horrible decision, as by Jefferson appeasing to Britain and France, he was showing and psychologically stating that America was weaker than Britain and France by continuing to allow the maritime seizures. Another failure of Jefferson that the Embargo Act was Jefferson's view of an "Agrarian America". This was a large failure because as exclaimed by Hofstadter, "... it was expansionism - what John Randolph called "agrarian cupidity"- rather than free trade that in the end brought the War of 1812" (52). Jefferson's ideals for the United States ended up causing a war between the Northern and Southern United States, as the North wanted Canada and the South wanted Florida. Jefferson's vision was for America to be made up of self sufficient yeoman farmers, ones that did not have the large scale business aspirations, but rather ones that did well enough to get by on their own, decreasing the dependency on each other. But this vision came to a screeching halt when <https://assignbuster.com/hofstadters-thomas-jefferson-a-visionary-of-questionable-merit/>

the farmers became greedy, as their "cupidity", their greed/desire for wealth caused the War of 1812. Many historians paint the picture that Jefferson was a man who influenced American history in only positive ways, yet they seem to leave out the fact that Jefferson was far from perfect, and he had many costly failures that Hofstadter eloquently points out.

Jefferson is always made out to be one of the most positively influential men in American history, but Hofstadter shows that Jefferson is entirely different from what is commonly relayed about him. Jefferson is not the man he is so frequently explained to be, but rather a complex mess of a man whose accomplishments in the eyes of many historians seem to make his failures insignificant, when in reality his failures were brutal, and cost America largely. Jefferson was not as stunning as he is always explained as, but is a hypocrite and a overdramatized man whose place in American history is not as righteous as commonly believed. In many ways has Jefferson gone wrong in American history, but Hofstadter takes too much of a cynical approach to Jefferson, really highlighting failures and moral complexities that seem to really turn one of the great men in American history into someone that doesn't deserve any credit.

Regardless of Jefferson's mistakes, large or small, he still has made such profound changes in American history that he deserves some massive credit to his name. Hofstadter attempts to turn people against Jefferson, briefly noting his successes, but dwelling on his mistakes and inconsistencies.

Although some mistakes cost a lot, Jefferson's successes and mistakes really do even out, with his mistakes seeming to make up less profound history than his accomplishments. Jefferson deserves his spot in American history
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despite his mistakes, as every person in history has made a mistake, and Jefferson's triumphs truly do account and leave a fervent impressment in American history.