

Jefferson *speaks*

Among the founders of the United States of America, none has bequeathed us more than Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). As author of the Declaration of Independence, Minister to France, Secretary of State, Vice-President, and President, he profoundly influenced the future of this Republic, leaving upon it the imprint of his deep faith in the common man and in freedom in its finest sense.

Born in Virginia, he was reared in an aristocratic family living on the frontier. Trained in the law, he soon turned to politics, becoming an influential member of the House of Burgesses and later Governor. Due to his efforts the rights of entail and primogeniture were abolished and religious freedom granted to Virginians.

An early advocate of freedom, he drafted the Resolutions of 1774 attacking Britain, took an active part in the Committees of Correspondence, and wrote the Declaration of Independence. After the formation of the Republic, he occupied several major posts, including two terms as President.

After his retirement from public life, he founded the University of Virginia as an expression of his belief in the necessity of education in a democracy. He was interested, too, in scientific farming, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, languages, architecture, music, and other fields of human endeavor.

A brilliant philosophical author, he nevertheless curtailed his public writings; most of his thinking comes to us through his voluminous correspondence which opens up vistas into the mind of "America's first great democrat."

ON RELIGION . . .

"I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrine, in preference to all others."

"Had the doctrines of Jesus been preached always as pure as they came from his lips, the whole civilized world would now have been Christian."

"I have ever judged of the religion of others by their lives. . . . For it is in our lives, and not from our words that our religion must be read."

ON MORALITY . . .

"I sincerely, then, believe . . . in the general existence of a moral instinct. I think it is the brightest gem with which the human character is studded, and the want of it as more degrading than the most hideous of bodily deformities."

"Give up money, give up fame, give up science, give up the earth itself and all it contains, rather than do an immoral act. And never suppose, that in any possible situation, or under any circumstances, it is best for you to do a dishonorable thing, however slightly so it may appear to you. Whenever you are to do a thing, though it can never be known but to yourself, ask yourself how you would act were all the world looking at you, and act accordingly."

"Encourage all your virtuous dispositions, and exercise them whenever opportunity arises; being assured that they will gain strength by exercise, . . . and that exercise will make them habitual. From the practice of the purest virtue you may be assured you will derive the most sublime comforts in every moment of life, and in the moment of death."

ON FREEDOM OF CONSCIENCE . . .

"It behooves every man who values liberty of conscience for himself, to resist invasions of it in the case of others."

"I never will, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance, or admit a right of inquiry into the religious opinions of others. On the contrary, we are bound, you and I, and every one, to make common cause, even with error itself, to maintain the common right of freedom of conscience."

ON FREEDOM OF SPEECH . . .

"In every country where man is free to think and to speak, differences of opinion will arise from differences of perception, and the imperfections of reason; but these differences when permitted . . . to purify themselves by free discussion, are but as passing clouds overspreading our land transiently, and leaving the horizon more bright and serene."

ON FREEDOM FOR MINORITIES . . .

"All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will, to be rightful, must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate which would be oppression."

ON FREEDOM TO VOTE . . .

"My opinion has always been in favor of a general suffrage. Still I find very honest men who, thinking the possession of some property necessary to give due independence of mind, are for restraining the elective franchise to property. I believe we lessen the danger of buying and selling votes by making the number of voters too great for any means of purchase. I may further say that I have not observed men's honesty to increase with their riches."

ON FREEDOM OF THE PRESS . . .

"Our liberty depends on the freedom of the press, and that cannot be limited without being lost."

"To the press alone, checkered as it is with abuses, the world is indebted for all the triumphs which have been gained by reason and humanity over error and oppression . . . ; to the same benefit source, the United States owe much of the lights which conducted them to the rank of a free and independent nation."

"No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found is the freedom of the press. It is therefore, the first shut up by those who fear the investigation of their actions."

ON LIBERTY . . .

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

"The ground of liberty is to be gained by inches, we must be contented to secure what we can get, from time to time, and eternally press forward for what is yet to get."

"Timid men . . . prefer the calm of despotism to the boisterous sea of liberty."

"I shall not die without a hope that light and liberty are on steady advance."

"I tolerate with the utmost latitude the right of others to differ from me in opinion without imputing to them criminality. I know too well the weakness and uncertainty of human reason to wonder at its different results."

ON THE AIM OF GOVERNMENT . . .

"The . . . object of the institution of government is to secure the greatest degree of happiness possible to the general mass of those associated under it."

ON THE CONSTITUTION . . .

"The Constitution of the United States (is) the result of the collected wisdom of our country."

"No society can make a perpetual constitution, or even a perpetual law."

"Some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched. They ascribe to the men of the preceding age a wisdom more than human, and suppose what they did to be beyond amendment. . . . I am certainly not an advocate for frequent and untried changes in laws and constitutions. I think moderate imperfections had better be borne with. . . . But I know also that laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. . . . As new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times."

"The execution of the laws is more important than the making of them."

ON THE UNITED STATES AS A SANCTUARY OF LIBERTY . . .

"Let us consecrate a sanctuary for those whom the misrule of Europe may compel to seek happiness in other climes."

ON HIS BELIEF IN PEOPLE . . .

"I am not among those who fear the people. They, and not the rich, are our dependence for continued freedom."

"Whenever the people are well-informed, they can be trusted with their own government; whenever things get so far wrong as to attract their notice, they may be relied on to set them to rights."

"Every government degenerates when trusted to the rulers . . . alone. The people themselves are its only safe depositories."

"Educate and inform the whole mass of the people. Enable them to see that it is their interest to preserve peace and order, and they will preserve them. And it requires no very high degree of education to convince them of this. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

ON FARMERS . . .

"Those who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever He had a chosen people, whose breasts He has made His peculiar deposit for substantial and genuine virtue."

ON A NATURAL ARISTOCRACY . . .

"There is a natural aristocracy among men. The grounds of this are virtue and talents. . . . The natural aristocracy I consider as the most precious gift of nature, for the instruction, the trusts, and the government of society."

ON EDUCATION . . .

"No one more sincerely wishes the spread of information among mankind than I do, and none greater confidence in its effect towards supporting free and good government."

"If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be."

"In the present spirit of extending to the great mass of mankind the blessings of instruction, I see a prospect of great advancement in the happiness of the human race."

"I look to the diffusion of light and education as the resource most to be relied on for ameliorating the condition, promoting the virtue, and advancing the happiness of man."

"The object (of education) is to bring into action that mass of talents which lies buried in poverty in every country for want of the means of development, and thus give activity to a mass of mind, which, in proportion to our population, shall be the double or treble of what it is in most countries."

ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS . . .

"Peace and friendship with all mankind is our wisest policy."

"We certainly cannot deny to other nations that principle whereon our government is founded, that every nation has a right to govern itself internally under what forms it pleases, and to change these forms at its own will; and externally to transact business with other nations through whatever organ it chooses. . . . The only thing essential is the will of the nation."

"I hope . . . (for) a cordial fraternization among all the American nations, and . . . for their coalescing in an American system of policy. . . ."

ON THE RIGHTS OF MAN . . .

"We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and reorganizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."

ON RIGHTS FOR ALL MANKIND . . .

"All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth, that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others."

ON PROGRESS . . .

"There is a snail-paced gait for the advance of new ideas on the general mind, under which we must acquiesce!"

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