

Interview: Joseph Ellis

How central was slavery in Jefferson's life?

His whole life was lived in the midst of slaves over the course of his lifetime. He owned approximately 600 slave persons. At any one time, he owned about 200. And his lifestyle, his standard of living itself at Monticello, were all dependent upon the institution of slavery.

He was born as a member of the Virginia planter class, into an institution that was rooted in his world and his country--he called Virginia his country. And he grew up with that as a kind of fait accompli.

How thorough was this dependence? Did Jefferson have other means of income besides slavery?

In an economic sense, he was almost completely dependent on the institution of slavery. The bulk of his life was spent in public service and as a white planter in Monticello, growing tobacco. It was an ironic form of dependence, because he went bankrupt, as did a significant percentage of the planter class in Virginia, in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Slavery in Virginia was not working as an economic institution.

So he was economically dependent on slavery. Monticello was built on slaves. Tobacco was raised and harvested by slaves. The wheat was, too. Jefferson has these great hymns to the American farmer--the pastoral ideal--but he didn't get out in the fields and farm. He very seldom went to the fields. He went there occasionally during harvests. And he didn't really see the slave population very often that was out there living beyond the house of Monticello.

But in response to your initial question, in some sense slavery is what sustained his life. On the other hand, slavery was also the institution that made it certain that he would die bankrupt, because it was not economically viable.

You talk in the book about Jefferson's concept of family--that it seemed to be larger than just his immediate family, and, in some cases, it seemed to include slaves.

I think that's tricky. In verbal terms, he does refer to his family on occasion as the entire residence of people in Monticello, which includes the African-American population. He talked about "my



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slave family." There was a very paternalistic attitude that he had towards them, which was familial.

On the other hand, I think that Jefferson regarded as his core family, the white descendants--his two daughters and their children--the real core of the family in Monticello. And the more you look at the African-American population at Monticello, the more you realize that there were real racial divisions within the slave population.

Jefferson thought of most of members of the Hemings family, and a few other household slaves, as longstanding members of his larger family--as people who were part of his household--and, in some sense of the term, part of his family. I think the other slaves, who tended to be darker slaves, fieldhands, were regarded as beyond the pale. They were in a somewhat different position.

So it's not simple. The best way to think about it is read "Absalom, Absalom." It's a complicated context in which the whites and blacks are bound together. But the black slaves, especially in the field, are not treated as anything other than slaves.

Can you talk about the special relations that he had with the Hemings family? How did they come to be a part of his life?

The Hemings family becomes a large portion of Jefferson's slave population. It's a family that is related to him through his father-in-law. Jefferson's father-in-law fathered several of the Hemings children--John Wales, by Betty Hemings. The Hemings family and a few other of the most trusted slaves in Monticello are inherited by Jefferson when he marries Martha Skelton Jefferson. Those become the core of the household slaves, and then they themselves have children. Sally Hemings is one of such children. They become the slaves that are the front and center slaves at

Monticello. If you come to Monticello to visit Jefferson, those will tend to be the slaves you see. They're the ones tending to the household and they're the ones around the house. They are the more light-skinned slaves.

Sally herself is three-quarters white. All of her children would be seven-eighths white. So there's a kind of racial layering at Monticello. And Sally Hemings, or the Hemings family, is present for a lot of the important moments in Jefferson's life, for example, when his wife dies. So they've built up a residue of genuine emotional affinity.

You mention also that there was a self-conscious attempt on Jefferson's part to buffer himself from the harsher realities of field slavery. Did he self-consciously create a sort of radius around himself?

I don't know how self-conscious it was. This is my interpretation of Jefferson after spending five or six years trying to understand the fellow--that Jefferson, at some level, is very uncomfortable with slavery. He is on record as believing that it's a fundamental moral travesty, and that the institution of slavery violates the core principles of the American Revolution--that it, in fact, violates the words that he himself wrote in the Declaration of Independence. He says this over and over again. He's therefore on record as believing that this is, if not a sin, at least a moral wrong, and that it needs to end. Yet he's living right in the middle of it.

So my own interpretation of Jefferson is that he constructs a way



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to shield himself from some of the most unattractive facets of slavery. His identity is that of a man who's leading a family. He's a planter with a paternalistic identity and thinks of these black slaves as his children. That's one such way, and a great many other planters in Virginia and North Carolina did the same thing.

In addition to that, visually construct Monticello. The slaves that live around Monticello are thought to be the light-skinned slaves. He doesn't see much of the slaves who are in the fields. And there's his other major plantation in Bedford, about 90 miles away--he doesn't see much of them at all. This is a psychological way to create some distance, and to show himself only the most attractive side of slavery, if in fact it can have an attractive side.

And the ones in his immediate world, the Hemingses, were more privileged?

The Hemings family tended to have more privileges. They were given a good deal more freedom. All descendants of the Hemings family were among the slaves that Jefferson eventually freed or allowed to run away without pursuing them.

What were some of Jefferson's earlier views about race when he was still a young man, and up to the time that he arrived in Paris?

During Jefferson's early years, prior to the time that he becomes a major public figure, he tends to be one of the more progressive members of the Virginia planter elite. He tends to take positions that are, in modern terms, to the left and more liberal within that context. He tends to favor the end of the slave trade, though a great many planters come around to that position. He tends to talk about the right to free slaves in the colony of Virginia; and also to see to it that, if accused of crimes, they would receive the same kind of justice as whites.

However, in Virginia in the 1760s, he witnesses that some of his colleagues who take similar positions are very severely punished and ostracized. And he recognizes that any kind of proto-emancipation position, anything that looks like it's leading to that, is out of bounds. . . and politically suicidal.

When he comes to Philadelphia in 1775 at the Continental Congress, he's one of the lesser members of the Virginia delegation. He's not yet a major figure. But in the draft of the Declaration that he writes, he inserts a paragraph essentially calling for the end of the slave trade. He blames the slave trade and, in some sense, slavery itself, on George III. It's a rather preposterous propagandistic position. But one can imagine that maybe he's trying to say, "This is the opportunity to end slavery, and we can, in this great revolutionary transformational moment, end it all."

It's more likely that he was only calling for the end of the slave trade. Within Virginia, ending the slave trade was a popular position. They already had enough slaves, and it was actually in their economic advantage to end the slave trade. Nevertheless, that section was deleted by the Continental Congress, and he always called attention to that. He said that this was one of his earliest efforts to try to make a statement against slavery at the

In the wake of the DNA revelations, an already-clear pattern of denial in Jefferson's life is deepened and darkened.

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earnest efforts to try to make a statement against slavery at the birth of the Republic.

In the Continental Congress before he goes to Paris, he proposed legislation that would call for the abolition of any extension of

slavery into any of the territories--not just the northwest territories--but to any of the western territories. It failed to pass by one vote. That was perhaps the most significant thing he tried, and failed, to do.

If that had passed, the entire history of the United States would have been quite different. That's the high-water mark of his progressive position on slavery. After that time, you begin to see a gradual decline into a position that becomes more paralyzed.

Did he advertise himself as being progressive on slavery? Was it a part of his identity, a quality that made him special in the eyes of others?

He was selective in that regard. He didn't do that in Virginia. In Virginia, he did not feature that side of his own identity or his own political perspective. However, in Philadelphia, he did feature it, in a Quaker city hostile to slavery. By the time he goes to Paris, he features it in a quite pronounced way. He celebrates the imminent end of slavery in Paris to Frenchmen.

Jefferson begins to develop the capacity to be all things to all people in his own lifetime, by projecting in his letters and in his comments different facets of his own personality and his own political perspective.

Does this suggest that, even in this earlier, more progressive period, he was not entirely heartfelt--that it was not sincere?

No, Jefferson is almost always sincere, even when he contradicts himself.

You and other historians have cited the Paris years as being some of Jefferson's happiest and most fulfilling. Regarding his aesthetic, cultural side, what did Paris mean to Jefferson?

That side of him was vitalized and immersed in the luxuries and the sort of ravishing and rhapsodic beauties of late eighteenth-century Paris, which was perhaps the most beautiful city in the world at that time. His five years there were culturally, in terms of the architecture, the wine, the salon set, and the sheer density of social life, a great, great experience for him. He was the American minister to Paris, and therefore part of the court. That's a real side of Jefferson, an important side. It's an odd set of loves and emotional affinities, because at another level, he is saying that what Paris represents, what urban life represents, what this kind of consolidation of social, political, economic power represents, is everything that he is opposed to politically.

How so?

This is a monarchical society, an aristocratic society. This is a society that closes off access to power for the vast majority of the people. The society lives by inherited wealth, and presumes a level of class distinction that he proclaims to oppose. This is a European urban society, the epitome of Europe, with all of its traps and snares and deprivations. In some sense, this is what Jefferson calls "the dead hand of the past." This is feudalism. This is the medieval world that the United States is being

founded to speak against.

And yet he found himself.

And yet he loves it, he loves it. On the one hand he genuinely loves it, and talks in ravishing terms about the architecture. He takes trips down to southern France, and crosses over somewhat illegally into northern Italy, to see the sights and the ruins there. But when writing to young men who ask for his advice, he says, "Don't come," or "Be very careful. Your life will be caught up in sinfulness." So what's good for him is sometimes not something he would recommend to others.

In Paris at this time, the intellectual climate offered ideas of democracy and political liberation. These ideas were beginning to be entertained in a serious way. What role did he play in that?

The French Revolution is beginning to become a possibility during Jefferson's time there, especially during the last two to three years of his time there. He is in conversation with some of the major figures who will become figures in the French Revolution, such as Condurset, and Lafayette especially. There are, in fact, meetings among people who are involved in reforming the French monarchy, and they hope to create a constitutional monarchy in a peaceful way. . . .

Some of the very documents from the early days of the French Revolution are drafted with Jefferson--he didn't write them--but they're drafted with Jefferson's contribution.

He has what turns out to be a somewhat innocent and naïve notion as to how the French Revolution will proceed. In fact, most of the people who become his friends and associates are themselves eventually guillotined in the French Revolution. He thinks it will be a bloodless affair.

But the French Revolution, for Jefferson, represents "The Spirit of '76," the American Revolution in the European context. He sees the French Revolution as a projection of the very

revolutionary energies that he had helped launch in the United States in the previous decade. Other Americans, John Adams and many others, think that's a somewhat loony idea, and that the French Revolution and the American Revolution have almost nothing in common. But Jefferson's core conviction is that this is the same movement that we're all part of.

If that is so, Jefferson almost seems to have been in advance of his new French friends with regard to some of these ideas. But there's also the fact of slavery lurking in the background. And in many ways, the French seemed to have been more progressive than he is. . . .

That's one of the reasons why, when Jefferson talks about slavery in France, he talks about it as an anachronism that's soon to die. If any of his Virginia friends saw what he was saying to his French friends, they would be aghast. Of course, slavery was not on the road to extinction in Virginia--nowhere near it.

And French society is a place where, for example, if you brought a slave with you into France, upon arriving in France, that person--man or woman--was free. Jefferson was asked by some of his Virginia and South Carolina friends who were bringing slaves with them over to France, "What do you do about it?" And Jefferson said, "Well, you just don't tell them about it."

So even as he was projecting himself as the libertarian and the democrat, he was in a sense facilitating slavery among his American friends.

He was saying that "It's possible for you to come and over here, bring your slaves and you won't lose them, because they won't find out about it if you don't tell them." I don't know whether you want to call it hypocrisy, or a kind of psychological agility, but Jefferson is comfortable as the American in Paris in the 1780s, the successor to Franklin, and as the emblem of the American Revolution, which in French terms, also means an end to slavery.

The French thought that the American Revolution of course, must lead to the end of slavery. That's what the republican principles allegedly lead to. And Jefferson went along with that.

Jefferson hated controversy. Jefferson heard harmonies inside himself. And whenever there was dissonance outside, that must be wrong. There's something wrong. We have to get back to the harmonies. And so he didn't like to argue. He liked to tell people what they wanted to hear. The French wanted to hear that slavery was ending. The Virginians, if they had heard that, would have gone bonkers.

While Jefferson was in Paris, his Notes on Virginia was published back home in America. . . .

It was originally published in England in translation. . . . It was published first in England and France and then it was sent back to the United States in translated form. He didn't want it to be published.

Why not?

Jefferson didn't like to project out into the world a single expression of his opinions. He liked to tailor his views to different constituencies. It's one of the reasons it's the only book he ever published in his whole life.

So it imposed accountability.

That's right. And it did have some things to say in it about slavery that he knew would upset certain people back in the United States. Therefore, he was not himself involved in the move to publish it. Once it was published, he then said, "Okay, now it's out there, and I want to make sure it's a good English translation," and was involved in that.

In the arena of race, it seems to be a somewhat divided book. There are certain passages that are explicitly racist. And there are other passages that we would think of as very progressive with regards to slavery.

Yes. On the one hand, in Notes on Virginia, he seems to be taking the position that slavery itself is an immoral institution, that we need to establish some sort of gradual emancipation plan to put it on the road to extinction. And he suggests a plan.

On the other hand, he also has some of the most racist remarks imaginable in the book. He suggests that blacks are biologically inferior. . . . that the racial differences between blacks and whites are not a function of nurture, but nature, and that blacks and whites can never hope to live together in the same society in any harmony.

harmony.

In fact, those are his honest convictions, and ones that he pretty much holds to for the remainder of his life--that slavery should end, but the blacks and whites cannot live together in this society.

Does he suggest, though, in Notes on Virginia . . . that even though blacks are by his likes inferior, that this inferiority should not preclude, or does not necessarily preclude their right to freedom.

That's right. The fact that blacks are inferior human beings, in Jefferson's view, doesn't mean that it's right to enslave them. They are human, and in Jeffersonian terms, they possess within them a core of humanity in a moral sense, which is violated when they are enslaved. Therefore, slavery by any measure is a moral wrong and a statement against mankind. So blacks, even though inferior, should not be enslaved.

Is it fair to interpret that as a very radical definition of freedom--that even a human inferiority should not preclude one's political freedom?

I wouldn't call it a radical position. It's more of a liberal position. Within the context of the late eighteenth century, it's a core humanistic idea. It comes out of the Renaissance and out of the humanistic tradition.

Jefferson gets some of his philosophical foundation for this out of the Scotch common sense philosophy, and what's called the moral sense--that every human being has a conscience--can tell right from wrong--and that's the distinguishing feature of our humanness, or our humanity. Blacks and Indians have that, too. For that reason, to restrain them in an institution of slavery is to prevent them from being human. That said, the biological differences between the races will lead to warfare and bloodshed, and weeping and gnashing of teeth, and the best thing that one can do, if one wishes to end slavery, is to find a way to send the freed African-Americans out of the country.

What are his views on racial mixing--mixing of the bloods?

All bad, according to his written work, and that it represents a contamination of both races. But most especially, white Anglo-Saxon Americans take a fatal blow to the purity of the Anglo-Saxon race, which is destined to sweep across the North American continent.

Jefferson is a thinking man's racist, but he's a racist. He has a letter in the early nineteenth century, in which he talks in very specific terms about the ratio of black and white blood inside different people. He's talking about them as if they were animals that you're breeding, like Merino sheep. . . .

On the one hand, his Notes on Virginia has many sections that are racist, that clearly argue against the mixing of the bloods, and so forth. And even as that book is becoming known to the world, he seems to be embarking on a relationship involving precisely that.

Right, right. We don't know for sure when Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings started. The DNA testing that has been done was done on the Eston Hemings line. Eston was born in 1805. It does seem that Jefferson had a long-term relationship with Sally Hemings. It's impossible for us to know

with precision when it began. The DNA testing done on the one progeny that would have come out of the Paris years was a non-match. That's the Woodson line.

Sally Hemings's son Madison Hemings said that that's when the relationship started--when his mother Sally and Jefferson were together in Paris and that, in fact, she wanted to stay in Paris, and that Jefferson persuaded her to come back, promising that he would eventually free all of her children.

That's according to Madison Hemings in a testimony in 1873. My own personal opinion is that the Paris years is the time that a sexual relationship with Sally Hemings began. She was young, about 14 or 15 years old at that time. We know very little about her, and what we do know comes from testimony of other slaves, who described her as "mighty 'nar white." She was three-fourths white. She had straight black hair, and was very attractive.

You can certainly say that, by initiating a relationship with Sally Hemings in the late 1780s in Paris--if that, in fact, occurred, and I think it probably did--he is acting in a way that's at odds with his own statements about biological inferiority. You can explain that by suggesting this as just another one of the Jeffersonian contradictions.

It's one of the pieces of evidence that led folks astray for many years, because it wasn't that Jefferson was such a gallant wonderful fellow that caused many people to doubt that he had a relationship with Sally Hemings. It was that he really was a racist. The other way to potentially explain it is to say that he didn't think of Sally as black. Sally Hemings was seven-eighths white, and by his own definition, seven-eighths white is white. So the children he would have had by Sally Hemings were themselves no longer black, in Jefferson's own highly mathematical definition of what the fundamental difference between black and white is.

I want to come back to precisely that point a little later. Is it fair to say that, at this point--either in Paris, or at some point not too far after his Paris years--Jefferson began to live a double life? That he began to live a life with Sally that, from then on, really was at odds, not only with his racist views, but also with his democratic views--his views as the father of democracy?

Well, yes. I wouldn't quite put it that way myself. But I wouldn't shout down that way of describing it. Once the relationship with Sally Hemings begins, he is living a lie. And because he's a public figure and has aspirations to become a major figure in American history, he needs to conceal this. He needs to keep this a secret.

It's also rather interesting that it is at this same moment that the relationship with Sally begins, he begins to back away from a leadership position on the slavery issue. It's at this time that Jefferson begins to talk about slavery as something that he cannot do anything about, and that needs to be postponed for the next generation.

So are you saying then that it is very likely that his entering into a relationship with Sally transformed the nature of Jefferson's leadership as an American political figure? Because certainly one of the things that has been interesting about Jefferson up to this point is that there seemed to have been a certain moral courage--a moral daring to come

forward, and say that all men are created equal, as he did.

Jefferson doesn't lose the moral tone. No, Jefferson becomes the most out-front, strident leader opposing the Federalist Party in the 1790s, seen as a hostile takeover of the American Revolution . . . within the United States. And is the most shrill and outspoken believer in those same revolutionary principles.

So I don't think that the relationship with Sally Hemings can be called something that transforms him and fundamentally changes his own political character.

Except in the area of slavery?

Except in the area of slavery, which is a big area, to be sure. It draws upon skills and abilities that he has already developed--abilities to speak in different ways to different constituencies--to be agile inside himself. He's a person who can project fundamentally different impressions and images to different groups.

He already possessed that. But he's going to need to have that in order to sustain this relationship with Sally Hemings. We really can't know, or don't know, what the character of that relationship is--whether it was a love relationship--although we can be sure that people will be telling us what it was.

I do think it had an effect on Jefferson's life, most especially in the way in which he backs off a position of leadership on the slavery issue. And that's fascinating.

From our own perspective, and through what you call "presentism," Jefferson clearly seems to be living an outrageous double life. But were there customs in play in his time that made this not quite so outrageous, that made it, maybe even in many ways, normal?

Yes. Within the white planter class of the Chesapeake region--Virginia, Maryland and maybe North Carolina --the existence of interracial sex within the plantation between master and slave was not uncommon. I choose those words with some care. We don't know how frequent it was --whether it was the exception or the rule.

John Adams first heard the story of Sally Hemings when it was first published in 1802 by Calender, the notorious libeler of Jefferson, and of Adams too. Adams didn't really believe it, saying that he knows what kind of guy this Calender is. On the other hand, Jefferson is eminently vulnerable to the charge, because every planter in the South is involved in some way sexually with his black charges.

Now, every planter in the South was not involved. But a lot was going on, and a lot was being done in this way, where everybody knew it, but no one could or would talk about it. . . .

So what was Jefferson was doing was hardly unprecedented. What made it more dangerous was that he was a major public figure. Therefore, the possibility of this affecting his own public career was much more of a real threat.

So had he not been a public figure . . .

Then it would have been okay. People would have talked, and people would have known about it. I find most interesting . . . in

reading her correspondence . . . that Jefferson's eldest daughter, Martha who lived with him for most of his adult life and who had 12 children at Monticello, is convinced there's no relationship. She's not covering up for her father.

Try to explain that to me. Is there any indication that anyone in his family or in his white circle are aware of . . . It's difficult to believe that they didn't . . .

This is the problem. Here is a person living in a plantation mansion, but one in which people are seeing each other in a face-to-face basis and moving around. It's impossible to imagine that the relationship between Jefferson and Sally Hemings was unknown to members of the family, or was unknown to other

members of the slave community--the extended family, if you will--especially within the inner circle of the Hemingses.

But the written record that remains suggests that they all denied that it was true, that they didn't talk about it until it was made public in the Calender accusations of 1802. Once it's made public, they devote a great deal of time saying that it's obviously not true, that that's not the Mr. Jefferson that they know, etc.

There were rumors within the slave community at Monticello, and within the world of Charlottesville around it, that something like this was going on, and that's what Calender heard. Calender was thrown in jail, imprisoned in the Sedition Act, and he hears these rumors while he's in jail in Richmond.

So that there is an oral tradition that this is happening. But it leaves no footsteps in the written record.

That's very interesting, because certainly, there clearly were situations where the two sets of children would have spoken to each other, or had dealings of some kind or another. . . .

The only thing we know is in the testimony of Madison Hemings in 1873, and Madison Hemings says that "Mr. Jefferson took my mother as his concubine," that he treated all of his slaves well but that he did not treat him, Madison Hemings or his other children by Sally Hemings, as his children, and that he, Madison Hemings, was resentful about that.

One of the old archetypal images of Jefferson would be him crafting the magic words in American history with his quill pen in Philadelphia in 1776. In the wake of the DNA revelations, we need to think of Jefferson also sitting at dinner surrounded by his white family--his daughter and her children, and maybe a few guests--being served by a mulatto slave, a house servant, named Madison Hemings, who is mostly a carpenter but periodically helped out in the household. There is this blurry sense that Madison Hemings is related to Jefferson, but there's no acknowledgement of it. In Jefferson's own mind . . . he cannot acknowledge that Madison Hemings is his own son.

The skills of a novelist are almost necessary to get at the psychological layers that are operating there. We need to start reading--we need Faulkner and Tennessee Williams--and stop all the sentimental stuff about the interiors of Monticello.

You write very interestingly about his capacity for what modern psychological language would call denial. In order to achieve the denial, one has to repress many of one's own natural feelings and impulses . . . such as a repression of

fatherly affection or of paternal love. Does anything indicate particularly that, as Jefferson ages, he's increasingly in this double life, increasingly cutting him off from himself, and alienating him from his own?

What you're saying about denial is true. In the wake of the DNA revelations, an already-clear pattern of denial in Jefferson's life is deepened and darkened. In my own book about Jefferson, I really stayed away from using the word hypocrite or hypocrisy. I talked about him as a man who is self-deceived, and whose denial mechanisms worked in such a way that he could sincerely say somewhat different things to different groups.

I'm not sure it's possible to sustain that anymore in the wake of the revelations on Sally Hemings. Jefferson was always capable, in effect, of lying, and then passing a lie detector test about what he had just said. He hires Calender to libel John Adams in the election of 1800. And Abigail and John Adams ask him if he did it and he says, "No, I didn't do it."

He does the same thing against George Washington in an earlier moment in politics in 1796, and then denies to Washington that he did it. And he seems to believe himself as he says these things.

As he gets older, what happens politically is that he clings even more tenaciously to his original principles, and those original principles really are principles that he believes are at risk of being overwhelmed by the future.

He sees the Missouri crisis as a potential threat to the Union. But most important, he sees any degree of federal power as a threat to what he calls consolidation. As he gets older, he becomes increasingly isolated, and will deny evidence that doesn't fit his particular view of the world and of what he wants America to become.

Life for Jefferson is always black and white. And in some sense, the most interesting thing about the whole Hemings family and Sally is that they don't fit. They're not either black or white. But Jefferson sees the world in terms of the forces of darkness and the forces of light, and he's on the side of the forces of light.

He wants everything to fit into that paradigm, and when it doesn't, he forces it in, then denies whatever doesn't fit.

This is clearly speculative. But does he pay a price for this denial in terms of his character, and in terms of the nature of his leadership? As he talks about slavery in his later years, he almost tries to work it out in very mathematical terms, and discusses how many years it would take to get blacks back to Africa. But the problem is that then they continue to reproduce, and he's dealing now with race and with slavery on this very abstract and very removed--almost absurd--level.

As he ages, he's constantly pressured by the more progressive elements in Southern society, especially Virginia society, to assume leadership. So he's always under pressure and he's got nothing to lose now. He's no longer in public office. This can be a real testimony to his contribution to American history.

And he resists it. He keeps going back and developing theoretical plans that would allow for emancipation, and then demonstrating that they are either economically or racially impossible. Once it's mathematically demonstrated that it's impossible, then it's not our problem anymore, it's not my problem anymore.

problem anymore--it's not my problem any more.

He does a kind of Pontius Pilate and says, "It's obviously something that has got to be taken care of in the future, and I worry that it will only occur violently." His latter-day discussions of this are almost always in response to somebody's questioning of him. And they almost always conclude that, while theoretically he's in favor of emancipation, realistically it's economically and racially impossible.

It makes me think that this somehow is central maybe to the character of the South, that there's something deeply southern in this. In that sense, is Jefferson maybe typical . . .

Jefferson is not typical, though. Many, many people in the South are much more willing to discuss slavery as an institution that they're not going to condemn, that is an integral part of their lives, and eventually they're going to describe it not just as a necessary evil, but as a positive good.

People taking the same racist values that Jefferson does within, say, ten or 20 years, are going to make the case that slavery's the best thing that could possibly have happened to the African-American population. William Fitzhugh and John C. Calhoun both make that case. That grows right out of Jefferson's racism. Jefferson doesn't do that. Jefferson acknowledges the humanity of the African-Americans and the wrongness of slavery. I don't think he's that typical.

He's more typical of the Virginia planter elite in its most patriarchal and paternalistic mode.

Are you saying that, in the South, there never was that sort of affection for the principles of democracy or the passion for them in the same way that Jefferson . . .

The form of slavery that exists in Virginia in the late eighteenth century is not what develops in South Carolina and in the deep South in the antebellum period. It's less of a highly organized, almost-factory system as it develops in the later period. And there are more small farms and more interactions with slaves in the late eighteenth century.

As I said earlier, Jefferson didn't go out in the fields and be with his slaves. But he's got a book. He knows them in a personal way. At least he knows enough to record their births and their children. The form of slavery that develops in the nineteenth century is pretty different.

Is it fair to say . . . that there was prescience in him? That he foresaw, for example, the deepening conflict between the North and the South that ultimately . . .

He does. John Adams and he correspond about this, and both of them are worried about the future. Again, though, Jefferson's position in the Missouri crisis is to call for the expansion of slavery. Jefferson's position leads directly to the position of the Confederacy in 1860. Adams's position leads directly to the position of Lincoln in 1860. Adams says that slavery is a moral wrong, that "We hoped that it would die a natural death. We had looked to Virginia to assume leadership to put it on the road to extinction. That hasn't happened, and we have to take decisive action."

Jefferson doesn't agree with that. Jefferson says that any federal government empowered to end slavery is a violation of the

principles of the American Revolution. He's unwilling to see federal power used in that way.

The other thing that you must understand about him is that, towards the end, everything needs to be seen through the prism of debt. He is in debt. He is the modern equivalent of several million, maybe \$10 million in debt. One of the reasons that he can't free his slaves is that he doesn't really own them anymore. His creditors own them. In effect, he has made a promise to them that he cannot keep--that he will take care of them. When he dies, Monticello is going to be sold and they're going to be sold, the vast majority of them. Most of them remain in Virginia, but some of them are sold down the river.

In that sense, the debt issue and his inability to control his own economic situation and his fate, is a great, great tragedy. We think of Jefferson in such positive ways, in such affirmative ways. But the end of his life is tragic in the extreme.

So the debt simply ties him to slavery in an inextricable way.

There's no way of saying for sure that he would have freed them anyway. In fact, by his own words, he would not have freed them . . . he would not have been able to allow them to live in Virginia. By law, they couldn't stay in Virginia after freedom. Virginia passed a law that precluded freeing slaves and then allowing them to remain inside the Commonwealth. So I don't think he would have freed them anyway. He didn't even have the luxury of considering it. He was economically not in control of them anymore.

So here's a man who is economically tied inextricably to slavery and who, on a man-to-woman level, is also bound up in this institution. He's obviously a man who is very compromised.

If the Madison Hemings recollections are correct, Jefferson keeps his promise to Sally Hemings. He does free her children. And the last two are freed after he dies and by his will, though he never frees Sally herself.

Is there speculation as to why he does not free her himself?

It's all speculation. . . . One obvious reason is that, if she's free, he can't control her, and she might effectively speak out and expose their relationship. Another is they have a relationship. He wants her close to him. I'd expect to see conversations and debates, both at the popular level and at the scholarly level about this, ranging from a discussion of their relationship as a kind of love relationship to a discussion of their relationship as essentially prolonged rape.

It could go either way at this point?

I don't think it's possible to ignore the fact that this woman is a slave. He has total power over her. To talk about this as a love relationship in the most glowing terms is wrong, because it ignores that control.

On the other hand, because it was so prolonged, I don't think it's possible to imagine it as rape in any meaningful or traditional sense of that term. I think it was a mutual understanding in which both sides got something. She got privileges and the freedom of her children. He got physical satisfaction. And whether there was

her children. He got physical satisfaction. And whether there was any emotional content to it beyond that, there are some things you can never know. . . .

Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, makes this really incomparable articulation of democratic promise. . . .

The word that he would use is republican. In the eighteenth century, if you said someone was a democrat, that was a bad thing. The federalists accused Jefferson of being a democrat or a democratic person. A democratic person is a person who panders to popular opinion. So what you're talking about is, he would say "republican."

In contemporary terms, his term of "republican" would come out as "American democracy?"

Democracy comes to mean certain things in the nineteenth century in Jacksonian and Tocquevillian America that Jefferson didn't like. Jefferson never believed that ordinary people should hold public office at the national level. Until very late in his day, Jefferson didn't believe that you should vote if you didn't have property or educational qualifications.

He didn't make that distinction by class, necessarily?

No, but what I'm saying is that the term democracy has come to have a gestalt of meanings, and then we breathe those meanings back on Jefferson, and many of them don't work for him. Jefferson didn't conceive of himself as founding a democracy--in part, because a democracy carries with it a sense of a commitment to a materialistic culture, to a full-blooded capitalistic system in which people's own worth was mostly identified with what they owned. And Jefferson didn't like that. He thought that was a contamination. When Andrew Jackson was elected president of the United States, he thought it was the end of the American Revolution as he knew it. It was a repudiation of what he believed in.

So, for Jefferson, the core spirit of 1776 is a liberation movement in which we destroy and blow to smithereens the last vestiges of the Old World, the ancien regime, feudalism, medieval ways.

And once that's blown away, the individual energies of ordinary Americans can express themselves in full form and pursue their happiness. It's that liberationist philosophy--in contemporary terms, it's pretty close to a liberationist political position. That's really at the center of what Jefferson thought America is about.

He did make this articulation of a liberationist sort of idea about the individual as the seat of rights and opportunities.

Jefferson is truly distinctive within the revolutionary generation. There, most everybody else talks about the collective. Jefferson

doesn't talk much about the collective. Everybody else talks about the public. Jefferson will talk about the people. And Jefferson does have, in the end, an individualistic ethos, a real belief that the individual is the sovereign unit in society. And that's right.

The individual as the sovereign unit. Civil rights leaders in the 1960s, most notably Dr. King, used precisely that notion--the individual as a sovereign unit in a democracy--to gain the civil rights victories of the 1960s, such as the 1964 Civil

civil rights victories of the 1960s, such as the 1964 Civil Rights Bill. Is there any indication anywhere that Jefferson applied these ideas to the problem of race? Did he ever see the set of ideas as having any relevance at all?

. . . Jefferson is the most eloquent lyrical spokesperson for the most inspiring values that will lead to both the emancipation of women and the emancipation of slaves, and then to the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, in the "I Have a Dream" speech, talks about the promissory note that Jefferson issued in 1776.

But there's a reason that Martin Luther King gave the "I Have a Dream" speech on the Lincoln memorial steps, rather than the Jefferson memorial steps. It is Lincoln's interpretation of Jefferson's language that is appropriate for an expansion to civil rights.

Jefferson himself never made that expansion. In fact, he set up a wall between the liberal and liberationist values that he was so articulate about, and any presumption that they could be shared with African-Americans. He felt that they were another people, and they needed to go and have their own place. In some sense, Jefferson wouldn't have been able to participate in Martin Luther King's march, but maybe he could in the Million Man march.

Is it fair to say that Jefferson felt that his brand of individualistic, liberationist branch of republicanism or democratic thought was not strong enough to breach this problem of racial difference?

It's an interesting point. There was never a moment when he didn't say that what he most believed in wasn't strong and powerful. It was so strong that it was going to blow away the European monarchies of the nineteenth century, and it did. It was so strong that it was going to blow away any challenges in the twentieth century in the form of Nazism and fascism and totalitarianism. And it did.

So the notion that it wasn't strong, no. It's that he couldn't think of black people as people in the same sense as white people.

Does that fact in itself suggest that there is something too idealistic about democracy--that Jefferson's own failings in this regard suggest that democracy is too idealistic? Is it not really possible in its fullest sense?

There are many, many things central to the democratic tradition that you and I now believe in, which nobody in the late eighteenth century would have been able to comprehend--in gender equity, racial equality, the multicultural agenda, and diversity.

Nobody, including Jefferson, would have understood that. Jefferson's the most articulate spokesman for the core of values that grow in meaning to cover those groups and to have those modern, contemporary, inspirational meanings. But he himself, is back there in the eighteenth century, and there's a chasm between him and us. I don't think that means that he's a hypocrite. It means that we can't expect him to think and behave along late twentieth-century lines.

Can we say that Jefferson was flawed, in that, even though he could envision this individualistic ideal, he was unable to see its relevance to race? We now know what we know about Thomas Jefferson and the DNA and this sort of thing. Is this

Thomas Jefferson and the DNA and this sort of thing. Is this reason to believe that this flaw of Jefferson's remains a threat to democracy? Is it really something that may still threaten to undermine this great individualistic, liberationist vision?

No. I don't think so. We have evolved as a society to a level of commitment, especially in terms of racial justice, that will never surrender. It's one of the reasons that we're fighting in Kosovo. We're fighting against the kind of society that separates people on the basis of race and ethnicity and ethnically cleanses or kills them. And we're never going back.

You can go back to Jefferson and discover in him the inspirational values that allowed us to reach this moment, and you'd be right. But you can also go back and see that he himself remains embedded in the late eighteenth century as a man who cannot fathom the relationship between the races being equal and harmonious.

In some sense, it's a real sign of how far we've come, and how truly revolutionary the principle of a racially integrated society is. And we shouldn't take that for granted. It's an unusual achievement, and the rest of the world is still trying to catch up.

Especially in the context of Jefferson's autobiography, how much was Jefferson's intimacy with slaves a part of his life? What was recorded?

When he was about two years old and carried as a child from Tuckahoe, the original place of his birth right near Monticello, he remembers being carried on a pillow. He was told he was carried on a pillow by a slave.

His last conscious thought, or semi-conscious thought, occurs on the evening of July 3, 1826. As he's dying, he's making noises and they don't know what it is. He's talking about being back in the Revolution, and then he makes a gurgling sound, and he's trying to say something, he wants something. The only person in the room who understands what he's asking for is his trusted slave Burwell, and Burwell steps forward and adjusts the pillows. That's the last sound Jefferson makes.

So both his first conscious thought and his last sound, at least, are directly related to a slave.

Who's in the room with him at his deathbed?

When he is dying, there's a fairly sizeable gathering of people and physicians as well. But Burwell is his trusted manservant who accompanies him everywhere, and who fans him, keeps the flies off of him--it's very hot. Burwell is there throughout the vigil at the bedside, and responds to Jefferson's request to adjust the pillows.

What family is Burwell a part of?

Burwell is part of the extended Hemings family and is one of the slaves freed in Jefferson's will.

That's a pretty vivid image. In the traditional sense of the word "family," that is, his immediate white family, how important is family to Jefferson?

Jefferson talks about family in the most glowing terms. Jefferson describes family as the single most meaningful unit in his life

describes family as the single most meaningful unit in his life. This is the place where real happiness happens. Public life is a place where trials and tribulations and horrors happen and people behave badly, and you retreat back to your family as this preserve. It's a sort of tabernacular place, where you can be who you really are, and can interact in ways that are emotional and intimate and affectionate and towards other people.

For Jefferson, that is the real place where, if you're going to pursue happiness, you're going to find it.

That's not just idle rhetoric. There are elements of rhetoric, which you pointed out. . . . Talk a little bit about how the importance of family, as he actually acts on it.

Jefferson wants to gather together as many of his immediate family and friends as close to him as possible. He puts enormous pressure on his eldest daughter Martha to live with him and to raise her children at Monticello.

She does that, and in some sense, her own husband, Jefferson's son-in-law, essentially is odd man out. His daughter's main relationship is with her father rather than with her husband, in many respects.

He wants his younger daughter, Maria, to do the same thing. She resists, because she knows if she comes under the spell of Jefferson, she will not have the kind of autonomous life she wants to have. Jefferson also writes to many of his friends, like Monroe and Madison and William Short, his personal secretary, and talks them into buying up land right around here and all living together in a kind of family unit. In fact, Monroe's place is not far away, and Madison's is not that far away either.

I want to bring you back to the scene that you evoked very powerfully, of the sitting around the table. His daughter is there, his grandchildren are there. As informed speculation, what do you imagine is the dynamic around that table, first of all, among the white people? How does it feel to be the daughter or the grandchildren in what would have been almost a daily event?

Picture Jefferson sitting at a table with his children and grandchildren and a few guests. They're being served by say Madison Hemings, who is a young mulatto slave (though most of the time Madison Hemings would have been working outside as a carpenter). The feelings in the room are extraordinarily complicated and difficult for us to fathom.

At some level, because they see Madison Hemings a lot on a day-by-day basis, there's nothing that novel about the situation. They have learned, in effect, how to see him and not see him at the same time. They have learned how to talk to him and about him in ways that are familiar, but don't expose his real familiarity.

Jefferson himself, inside his own mind, is capable of setting these borders, essentially playing hide-and-seek within himself. He imposes that same kind of order on his family at Monticello, and they're all extraordinarily deft at it.

But you can talk to members of southern white families in the South now, they say, "Oh, we always knew about so-and-so," and so on. It's just that there are certain things that you don't talk about.

In the Jefferson sense, those things that you don't talk about are really solemn things that you don't talk about. You don't talk about the fact that your relative is an alcoholic. That wouldn't be polite. You don't talk about the fact that some of your children probably murdered somebody down in Kentucky. That would disturb the atmospherics that are essential for the kind of family unit that Jefferson wants to survive. But the psychological agility required to enforce that is extraordinary.

For Jefferson, was race a double issue, in a sense? On one level, when he wanted to enjoy or be with Sally as a woman, he could see her as white, and fully human. But when he wanted to deny her human entitlements, he could see her as black. Was there a double convenience involved there?

Yes, Jefferson's racial views do give him an ability to have his cake and eat it, too. On the one hand, he can control Sally Hemings, and doesn't have to worry about a relationship that's a truly equitable relationship, back and forth. And yet he can get his physical gratification and satisfactions at the same time.

Jefferson is excellent at "having your cake and eating it, too." And he's excellent at then denying inside himself what he's doing. What's impossible to know is what Sally thinks and feels on her side of this relationship at this time.

Madison does give some indication . . . about his experience serving in the house. . . .

Madison Hemings said that he felt that he was treated as one of the Hemings slaves, and that they were treated in more privileged ways than the other slaves. But he was treated as a slave. He was not treated as a member of Jefferson's family, or in the same way that Jefferson's own grandchildren were treated. And he resented that. He was the age of Jefferson's grandchildren. He's implicitly suggesting that, within the family, Jefferson never acknowledged his paternity.

Monticello was important to Jefferson, more than just a place to lay your head. You talked about the architecture and the place of Monticello in his mind. Give us the sense of that importance.

Jefferson began to build Monticello in the early 1770s, and it was

a lifelong project. It's constantly being built and rebuilt, although in some sense, it never looks the way it looks now, when tourists come to visit. It is what Jefferson wanted it to look like. It was always a kind of construction site throughout most of his years. It's on top of a mountain. By the way, that's one of the reasons that he's not a very good farmer, because the soil on mountains is not very good, and it has lots of inconveniences. But it gives him an incredible panoramic view of the region, and it puts him in a place where he feels separated from other people--where he's got a kind of fortress.

So it's both a haven and a fortress--a haven in a heartless world, if you will. But it's also a place where he's safe, and where he can gather around him the affectionate folk that will allow the kind of idyllic world that Jefferson believes in, that can exist without human interference.

Monticello is that for him. The other reality is that it only works both as a plantation and as a mansion because African-Americans built the mansion and African-Americans are out there running the plantation.

there, running the plantation.

Talk about this constant construction, and the environment that Jefferson sees himself building. What about Jefferson, the designer?

Jefferson liked to design whatever environment he lived in, even when he moved into temporary quarters in Paris or in Philadelphia. He would have the owner give him permission to redesign it, to tear things down and construct it. He was really obsessed with living in spaces that he himself controlled and designed.

Monticello is the ultimate Jeffersonian space. He designs in the 1770s and then redesigns in the 1780s and 1790s, and is in the process of constructing it according to his larger scheme. The larger scheme was necessary in order to contain the larger family that he had produced, and that he wanted to have live there.

At any one time, it required 100 or 200 workmen to construct that--some of them Irish workmen, but others mostly African-American slaves.

Did he also design the racial environment--the layers of unpleasantness and where they were relegated?

Just as Jefferson designed the physical thing called Monticello, the mansion, it seems to me that he also was extraordinarily committed to designing the social and racial arrangements at Monticello.

The fieldhands, who tended to be the darker African-Americans, were far away and were out of view. They were seldom seen even by Jefferson, and certainly not by visitors. The . . . slaves that were seen when visitors came and were in interactions with the Jefferson family on a day-by-day basis were almost all Hemingses. They were all light-skinned slaves. They didn't look like full-blooded Africans because, in some sense, they weren't.

Jefferson liked that kind of arrangement because it muted and ameliorated his understanding of what slavery really was. These weren't really slaves. These were people who were here living with his family. These people really weren't black. These were people who were sort of white.

I think that that's what he himself designed, and several visitors to Monticello commented on the light-skinned character of the slaves that they saw at Monticello.

Of course, slavery can't function without unpleasantness. So when there is unpleasantness, whether it's whippings or the sales or the auctions, how is that absorbed in the environment?

Jefferson himself never whipped any slave that we know of. He did, on occasion, allow a whipping to occur, not in his presence, by an overseer. And when he was going to sell slaves, he would see to it that they would be sold down to other plantations far away. In fact, he said, "I do not like to see my name in the newspapers associated with these transactions." So he wanted to divorce himself, disassociate himself, from the most unattractive dimensions of slavery whenever possible.

Can you talk about his gloom in 1820? There's a real sense of despair, which is part political and part personal.

despair, which is part political and part personal.

In 1820, at the public and political level, Jefferson believes that the world that he wanted America to become is on the verge of destruction. The federal government is assuming or claiming the power to control slavery. And slavery itself as an institution is threatening the Union in ways that he thinks is going to possibly lead to civil war.

Jefferson's answer to that is to allow slavery to expand into the West, not to try to stop it. But he sees this as a contagion, and he sees that the sectional argument beginning there is very, very divisive. He talks in apocalyptic terms about what the future of the United States is, and that he does not wish to live it.

At the personal level, he's in debt, and becoming even more in debt. The opportunity to envision his family and Monticello ever getting out from underneath that debt is closing--the opportunity no longer exists. Here's a man who says that every generation should be sovereign--and he's going to bequeath to his heirs a huge debt. He's not going to be able to keep the promise that he's made to his slaves, to take care of them. They're going to be sold down the river or sold anyway. His surviving daughter, Martha, actually becomes a ward of the state.

You had talked about his bold position on slavery in 1784. Contrast that position with his position as an older man.

Jefferson's position in 1819-1822 on the Missouri Compromise is that the federal government does not have the power to regulate slavery in the western territories--that the people in the territories have a right to do what they want to do. It becomes the position of Stephen Douglass in the 1850s--popular sovereignty. But Jefferson then says that the diffusion of slavery into the West will ameliorate slaves' conditions. John Adams says, "How can a cancer, when it spreads, make things better? This is a cancer."

The thing that's really discouraging is that Jefferson's position at that point is a direct contradiction of the more liberal and progressive position he had taken as a young man. In 1784, he had effectively said that there should be no slavery allowed to expand into the West at all. And that particular motion failed by only one vote in the Confederation Congress in 1784.

So the young man is taking a much more liberal position, a much more abolitionist position, than the elderly man. It's not a modest modification of views.

This is not a modest modification--this is a 180-degree switch.

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