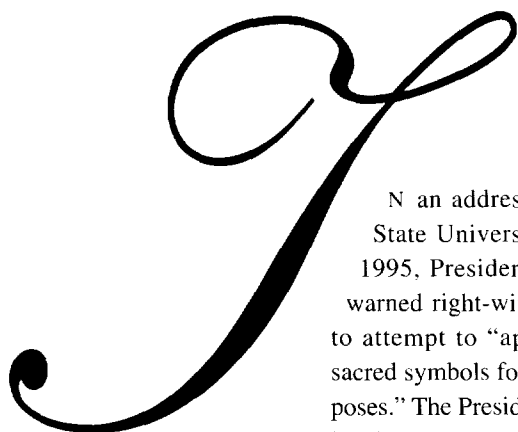


THOMAS JEFFERSON: Radical and Racist

by CONOR CRUISE O'BRIEN

In the multiracial American future Jefferson will not be thought of as the Sage of Monticello. His flaws are beyond redemption. The sound you hear is the crashing of a reputation



IN an address at Michigan State University on May 5, 1995, President Bill Clinton warned right-wing militias not to attempt to “appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes.” The President was speaking in the aftermath of the destruction, apparently by American right-wing fanatics, of the federal building in Oklahoma City and its occupants on April 19. The aftermath of that ghastly act had brought media reports of widespread paramilitary conspiracies in several states—notably the militias in Michigan—for the organization of armed resistance to the federal government. The President was seeking to exclude such conspirators from what is called the American civil religion.

There is quite a copious literature about the American civ-

il religion, and although there are differences over the exact nature of this powerful but nebulous concept, there is also a broad consensus about its general nature.

The term “civil religion” was first used by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and refers to “the religious dimension of the polity.” *American* civil religion has been summed up by one scholar as “an institutionalized collection of sacred American beliefs providing sources of cohesion and prophetic guidance through times of national crises.” Among those sacred beliefs, a cult of liberty has been important from very early on. The sociologist Robert N. Bellah quotes a 1770 observer’s opinion that “the minds of the people are wrought up into as high a degree of Enthusiasm by the word liberty, as could have been expected had Religion been the cause.”

Liberty, nationalism, and faith are fused in the American civil religion. As Norman Mailer once put it, “In America,

the country was the religion. And all the religions of the land were fed from that first religion. . . .”

Central to the American civil religion are two eighteenth-century documents: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Around these documents, and linked with them in the religion, are a limited number of historical figures—for all Americans, the Founding Fathers; for most Americans, also Abraham Lincoln. In the pantheon of the American civil religion, however, two holy personages stand out with unusually large halos. As Richard Pierard and Robert Linder, the authors of *Civil Religion & the Presidency* (1988), write,

The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and later, Lincoln's Gettysburg Address became the sacred scriptures of the new public faith. Just as the colonists saw their own church covenants as vehicles of God's participation in history, so these public documents became the covenants which bound the people of the nation together in a political and religious union. . . . A leadership imagery developed that paralleled the biblical account of Israel and led to the Founding Fathers mythology. . . . Before long Washington had become the Moses-liberator figure, Jefferson the prophet.

THE POPE OF LIBERTY

THERE is no difficulty in seeing Jefferson as the prophet of the American civil religion if one thinks of him as the author of its most sacred document, the Declaration of Independence, and leaves it at that. But there is great difficulty in fitting the historical Jefferson, with all we know of him, into the civil religion of modern America (as it is generally and semi-officially expounded) at all, let alone in seeing him as its prophet.

Thomas Jefferson was in his day a prophet of American civil religion. Indeed, if his original draft of the Declaration of Independence had been accepted, the Declaration would have been more explicitly linked to the American civil religion than it is in its present form. Whereas the second paragraph of the Declaration opens with the words “We hold these truths to be self-evident . . .,” Jefferson's original draft had “We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable . . .” The drafting of the Declaration had been entrusted by the Second Continental Congress to a committee of five, of which the leading members were Jefferson, John Adams, and Benjamin Franklin. Although Rousseau's phrase “civil religion” does not seem to have been in circulation in America at this time (when it would have been suspect in the eyes of churchmen), Jefferson—whether through Rousseau or not—was a “civil religion” person in his habitual use of language. Adams objected strongly to the mixing of politics and religion. Franklin was more consistently secular than Jefferson in his style. The historian Carl Lotus Becker writes, on the change in the manuscript to “self-evident,” “It is not clear that this change was made by Jeffer-

son. The hand-writing of ‘self-evident’ resembles Franklin's.” The change was an improvement, functionally speaking, for a revolutionary manifesto. Anyone who rejects a “self-evident truth” must be either a fool or a knave. And that is precisely what the Founders wanted to say about anyone who opposed the Declaration. Jefferson himself appreciated the polemical force of this word, and often used it later.

Thomas Jefferson served as the American Minister to France from 1785 to late in 1789, and thus witnessed the last crisis of the ancien régime. He was in Paris for the opening of the Estates General (May 5, 1789) and for the fall of the Bastille (July 14). In letters to divers correspondents he evinced growing and confident enthusiasm for the burgeoning revolution. To James Madison: “The revolution of France has gone on with the most unexampled success hitherto. . . .” To Thomas Paine: “The National Assembly [showed] a coolness, wisdom, and resolution to set fire the four corners of the kingdom and to perish with it themselves rather than to relinquish an iota from their plan of total change. . . .” To Paine again: “The king, queen and national assembly are removed to Paris. The mobs and murders under which [the revolutionaries] dress this fact are like the rags in which religion robes the true god.” No mere observer of the revolution, Jefferson is believed to have played a part in formulating the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, adopted by the National Assembly, the revolutionary heir to the Estates General, on August 26, 1789.

He thus became the symbol of a proposition of which he came to be a fervent apologist: that the French Revolution was the continuation and fulfillment of the American one, both being manifestations of one and the same spirit of liberty. Within a few years that proposition was to become bitterly divisive, both among the American people and among the Founding Fathers themselves. The question of policy toward France was to range Jefferson and Madison, supported by James Monroe, against Hamilton and Adams. Washington first tried to hold the balance but ultimately threw his tremendous weight decisively against the Jeffersonian theory of the continuity and kinship of the two revolutions.

The Jefferson of the early 1790s, the champion of the French Revolution, was an ardent believer in, and prophet of, civil religion in the sense adumbrated by Rousseau. That is, he sought to animate an apparently secular and political idea—that of liberty, “the true god”—by breathing into it the kinds of emotions and dispositions with which religion had been invested in the Age of Faith. Of this religion Thomas Jefferson was more than a prophet—he was a pope. As the author of the Declaration of Independence, he possessed the magisterium of liberty. He could define heresy and excommunicate heretics. To fail to acknowledge, for example, that the French Revolution was an integral part of the holy cause of liberty, along with the American Revolution, was heresy, and the heretic had to be driven from public life.

Thomas Jefferson ardently preached and energetically practiced his own version of civil religion. But is that civil religion compatible with the *American* civil religion as we know it today? In investigating that question we have to begin by asking another question: What kind of American was Thomas Jefferson?

He was a good American in the general sense; he held America and Americans to be vastly superior to Europe and Europeans, morally and socially speaking. But he was not an American nationalist, politically speaking. He was not an “America firster.” He was a “Virginia firster.” He continued to speak of Virginia as “my country” even when he was representing the United States abroad. Nor was this an isolated trick of speech. The United States was not an object that engaged his emotions; Virginia was. The Declaration of Independence was for him a sacred document, part of the civil religion of liberty. The Constitution of the United States was not; it was a political document, just about acceptable, and no more, for pragmatic reasons, and remaining acceptable only as long as the federal government respected what Virginians regarded as the limits of its authority. Federal institutions, including the presidency, were workaday things, not invested with the spiritual aura of the civil religion. Virginia remained the holy land of liberty.

In his epitaph Jefferson did not mention the fact that he had twice been President of the United States as among the significant events of his career. He did mention—along with his authorship of the Declaration of Independence—his foundation of the University of Virginia. In terms of that old dialogue between head and heart, the heart was always with Virginia, and only the head with the United States.

In political life, as in his personal emotional life, Jefferson’s head usually prevailed over his heart. But this was not always the case. When, in 1798, under President John Adams, Virginia appeared to be threatened by an excess of federal government, Jefferson encouraged Virginians to resist. Virginians and other southerners of later generations, in challenging what they perceived as the excessive claims of the federal government, were to that extent in the Jefferson tradition.

In the 1830s John C. Calhoun, the great propagator of states’-rights ideology in the antebellum South, claimed Jefferson’s authority for his “Nullification” doctrine: that states

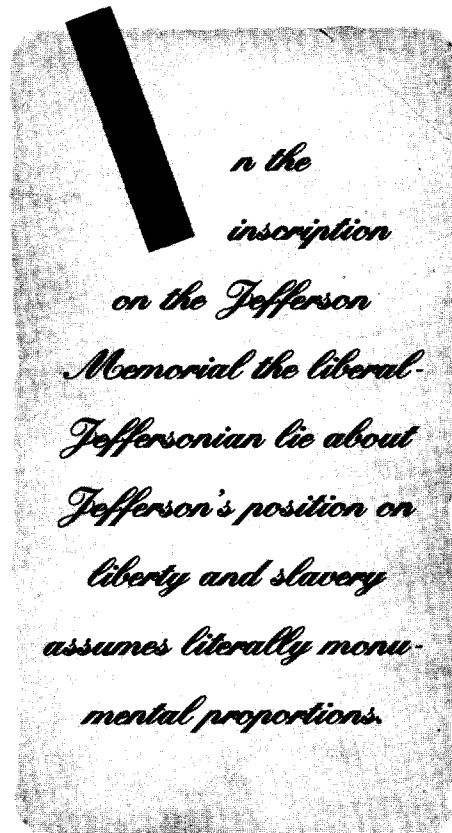
could treat as null and void federal laws they regarded as intruding on the proper sphere of the states. Calhoun invoked as precedents the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions rejecting the Alien and Sedition Laws passed by Congress in 1798. Calhoun observed that the Kentucky resolutions were “now known to have emanated from the pen of Mr. Jefferson.”

Jefferson’s authority was important to the leaders of the South in the 1830s as validating the philosophy of Nullification: a philosophy that had within it the germ of the eventual secession. But by the 1840s Nullification had come to be regarded by southerners as axiomatic (“self-evident” truths, indeed), so Jefferson’s validation was now surplus to requirements. And Jefferson was by this time becoming deeply unpopular with the more ardent defenders of southern institutions. The reason was that from the 1830s on, the hated abolitionist press had been making copious use of Jefferson’s “antislavery” writings, mainly from *Notes on the State of Virginia*. For example,

There must doubtless be an unhappy influence on the manners of our people produced by the existence of slavery among us. The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. Our children see this, and learn to imitate it; for man is an imitative animal. . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves, gives a loose to his worst of passions, and thus nursed, educated, and daily exercised in tyranny, cannot but be stamped by it with odious peculiarities. The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.

Back in the late eighteenth century the Virginia slaveowners who were Jefferson’s contemporaries hadn’t taken this Jeffersonian antislavery seriously. They knew Jefferson personally, and knew he meant no harm. And many of them were in the habit of saying the same sorts of things themselves, in appropriate company.

By the mid nineteenth century, however, southerners had to take Jefferson’s antislavery writings seriously, because *northerners* were taking them seriously, and using them against the South. Taking the Declaration of Independence in conjunction with Jefferson’s antislavery utterances (well publicized



in the North for more than two decades), northerners were able on the eve of the Civil War to read antislavery intentions into the Declaration of Independence itself, and thus to enlist both the Declaration and its author on their side in the coming war. In a letter of April, 1859, Lincoln wrote,

All honor to Jefferson—to the man who, in the concrete pressure of a struggle for national independence by a single people, had the coolness, forecast, and capacity to introduce into a merely revolutionary document, an abstract truth, and so to embalm it there, that today, and in all coming days, it shall be a rebuke and a stumbling block to the very harbingers of re-appearing tyranny and oppression.

This letter was really a campaign manifesto, the Jefferson scholar Merrill D. Peterson writes.

Lincoln's letter circulated freely during the presidential campaign of 1860. It was a masterpiece, the *Cincinnati Daily Gazette* declared, "the most pointed and most forcible political letter ever written . . . a platform in itself."

After the Civil War that accolade from the martyred President secured a continuing place for Jefferson in the pantheon of the American civil religion. The Jeffersonian vessel had survived the rapids of the Civil War and remained holy in the eyes of large numbers of Americans, among both the victors and the vanquished. In his posthumous reputation, as in his political career, luck was on Jefferson's side.

Still, there were always some begrudgers, and there were many more in the North than in the South. In the North after the Civil War, Hamilton, not Jefferson, was at the center of the civil religion. In the South it was Jefferson—more firmly than before the Civil War—who was at the center. That is to say, sectional and regional alignments were again for a time essentially what they had been in the late eighteenth century.

In the first half of the twentieth century the most important occurrence affecting the posthumous reputation and civil-religion status of Thomas Jefferson was the New Deal. Peterson depicts the Roosevelt Administration as building a great national temple to Jefferson's memory. The temple is the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, dedicated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the two hundredth anniversary of Jefferson's birth, April 13, 1943. According to an official brochure, "Inscriptions at the memorial were selected by the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Commission and were taken from a wide variety of his writings on freedom, slavery, education and government." The section of the inscriptions that deals with freedom and slavery runs as follows:

God who gave us life gave us liberty. Can the liberties of a nation be secure when we have removed a conviction

that these liberties are the gift of God? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever. Commerce between master and slave is despotism. Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free.

All of this passage except for the last sentence is taken from *Notes on the State of Virginia*. The last sentence is taken from Jefferson's *Autobiography*. That sentence, as isolated in the memorial inscription, deceives the public as to Jefferson's meaning. For the original passage in the *Autobiography* continues, "Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government. Nature, habit, opinion has drawn indelible lines of distinction between them." (Emphasis added.)

In short, these people are to be free, and then deported. Jefferson's teaching on that matter is quite clear and often repeated.

Those who edited that inscription on behalf of the memorial commission must have known what they were doing when they wrenched that resounding sentence from the *Autobiography* out of the context that so drastically qualifies its meaning. The distortion by suppression has to be deliberate.

In that inscription on the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., the liberal-Jeffersonian lie about Jefferson's position on liberty and slavery assumes literally monumental proportions.

The quarter century following the dedication of the memorial saw Jefferson's reputation, especially as a liberal, at its height. John F. Kennedy and his liberal-intellectual entourage strongly contributed to the general and almost universal acceptance of the Jefferson Memorial. By the mid-1960s Jefferson's towering position within the American civil religion appeared assured for all time.

Peterson's invaluable work *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* was published in 1960. By now a successor volume, covering the last decades of the twentieth century, is badly needed. In particular, a detailed study needs to be made of the impact on Jefferson's image of the civil-rights movement and ensuing changes. In default of such source material I propose to "cut to the chase," as the filmmakers say, and consider factors affecting the place of Thomas Jefferson in the American civil religion as these appear to me today. The two major factors, in my opinion, are challenges to the authority of the federal government and the race issue. These factors have been linked in earlier momentous phases of American history: in 1798, when Virginia and Kentucky were threatening revolt against federal authority; in the periods before and after the Civil War; and in the civil-rights crisis of the 1960s. They are still linked today, and they raise serious questions about the place of Thomas Jefferson in the civil religion of modern America. Let me begin with the challenge to the authority of the federal government.

THE President's full name—William Jefferson Clinton—attests to his family's allegiance to a Jeffersonian tradition, probably through Franklin D. Roosevelt. As President-elect, Clinton affirmed his personal commitment to that tradition by a symbolic gesture: in the week of his inauguration he retraced the trip that Jefferson made as President-elect from Monticello to Washington. And Clinton's staff underlined the significance of this gesture by noting that the President-elect at this solemn moment in his life was reading a new biography of Thomas Jefferson.

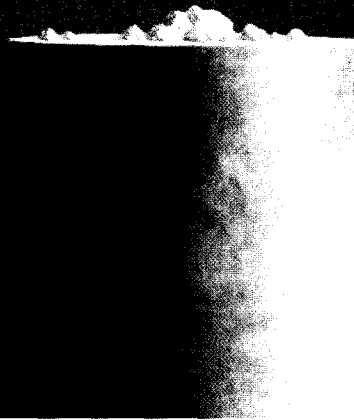
We may assume, therefore, that when Clinton warned the right-wing militias not to attempt to "appropriate our sacred symbols for paranoid purposes," the heritage of Thomas Jefferson was associated in his mind with the defense of the sacred symbols. But Jefferson is an unreliable ally in this matter. In his middle years—and even before the French Revolution—Jefferson was in the grip of a fanatical cult of liberty, which was seen as an absolute to which it would be blasphemous to assign limits. In this period—roughly 1787 to 1793—Jefferson was intoxicated with what Edmund Burke called "the wild gas" of liberty. That phrase occurs in Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, with the confutation of which Jefferson, as Secretary of State, managed to associate himself publicly in April of 1791, greatly to his own political advantage. The passage from which the phrase comes is worth quoting here.

When I see the spirit of liberty in action, I see a strong principle at work; and this, for a while, is all I can possibly know of it. The wild gas, the fixed air is plainly broke loose: but we ought to suspend our judgement until the first effervescence is a little subsided, till the liquor is cleared, and until we see something deeper than the agitation of a troubled and frothy surface. I must be tolerably sure, before I venture publicly to congratulate men upon a blessing, that they have really received one. Flattery corrupts both the receiver and the giver; and adulation is not of more service to the people than to kings. I should therefore suspend my congratulations on the new liberty of France, until I was informed how it had been combined with government; with public force; with the discipline and obedience of armies; with the collection of an effective and well-distributed revenue; with morality and religion; with the solidity of property; with peace and order; with civil and social manners. All these (in their way) are good things too; and, without them, liberty is not a benefit whilst it lasts, and is not likely to continue long. The effect of liberty to individuals is, that they may do what they please: We ought to see what it will please them to do, before we risque congratulations, which may be soon turned into complaints.

In America the holy cause of liberty became "combined with government" through the enactment and acceptance of the Constitution. Washington, Adams, and Hamilton were

all spiritually Burkeans; so was Madison, while he worked with Hamilton on the *Federalist* papers and before he fell under the Jeffersonian spell, from 1790 on. These Founders were Burkeans not in that they got their ideas from Burke but in that the principles on which they worked were identical with those enunciated by Burke in the passage above.

In resisting the enterprise of the right-wing militias, who are also libertarian extremists, President Clinton has most of the Founders, and the Constitution itself, on his side. But Jefferson is different. The liberty that Jefferson adored is not a liberty "combined" with all those tedious Burkean things, as in the Constitution, but a wild liberty, absolute, untrammelled, universal, the liberty of a great revolutionary manifesto: the Declaration of Independence. The other Founders saw the Declaration as embodying generalities that would at a later stage need to be combined with and confined by practical considerations. But Jefferson saw the principles of the Declaration as



transcendent truths of which he himself, as author of the Declaration, was also the destined and authoritative interpreter.

Even before the French Revolution—and even before the American Constitution—Jefferson had approved keeping the spirit of armed rebellion alive in America and elsewhere. In the context of Shays's Rebellion in Massachusetts, in 1787, Jefferson wrote, "God forbid we should ever be 20 years without such a rebellion. . . . The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure."

That is something very like a Jeffersonian charter for the most militant segment of the modern American militias, is it not? If President Clinton is relying on the authority of Thomas Jefferson to keep those sacred symbols out of the clutches of paranoid militias, the President can be refuted out of the mouth of the very authority he invokes.

Jefferson's enthusiasm for what later came to be called

permanent revolution antedates the French Revolution. But the advent of the French Revolution fortified and exalted that enthusiasm. In propagating the cause of the French Revolution in America, and incorporating it with the American Revolution into a single holy cause of freedom, one of the things Jefferson was doing was emancipating the cause of freedom from the limits set on it in America by the Constitution. The holy cause was now universal, and transcended the limits of any merely local legislation. The French Revolution couldn't be told that it was in breach of the American Constitution, so the cult of the French Revolution clipped the Constitution's wings. There were indeed *no* limits that could be assigned to the holy cause of freedom—neither geographic boundaries nor conventional ideas of morality and compassion.

In his well-known "Adam and Eve" letter to William Short, the American chargé d'affaires in Paris, the Secretary of State instructed that squeamish diplomatist (and defector from the

ideals of his patron Jefferson) to stop complaining about French revolutionary atrocities: "My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs of this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam and Eve, left in every country, and left free, it would be better than it now is." Short should accept that there was no limit (except the sparing of two persons per nation) to the slaughter that might legitimately be perpetrated in the holy cause of freedom. And the letter to Short is not—as Jefferson apologists like to imply—an isolated flash of hyperbole. It is a follow-up to *Notes of a Conversation With George Washington on French Affairs*, in which Jefferson recorded that faith in the French Revolution was his "polar star," and that he believed Washington to be a belated convert to that faith. Jefferson set out in his letter to Short the merciless and almost limitless exigencies of polar faith.

Those in the culture of the modern American militias who see themselves as at war, or on the verge of war, with the federal government are fanatical believers in liberty, as Jefferson was. Jefferson condoned French revolutionary atrocities on a far greater scale, numerically, than the 1995 massacre in Oklahoma City. The Adam and Eve letter was written after the news had reached America of the murder of more than a thousand helpless people by the Paris mobs in the September massacres of 1792. After September, as before, the French Revolution remained Jefferson's polar star. Philip Freneau, Jefferson's protégé, an employee at the Department of State, explicitly defended the execution of Louis XVI in the *National Gazette*—at that date the principal organ of Jefferson's Republican Party, and under Jefferson's direct and active patronage in Philadelphia.

It is true that Jefferson later condemned "the atrocities of Robespierre." But that was in 1795, and Robespierre (who did not order the September massacres) was not only dead but anathema to the new masters of the French Revolution. While Robespierre was alive and the Terror was actually raging, Jefferson had no comment to offer on French revolutionary atrocities. When Madison informed Jefferson, in a letter, of the massacre of the Brissotins (Girondins) in October of 1793, Jefferson, in a longish reply, made no reference to that transaction. Presumably all such matters were still covered by the Adam and Eve doctrine of six months earlier.

THE LESSON OF SAINT-DOMINIGUE

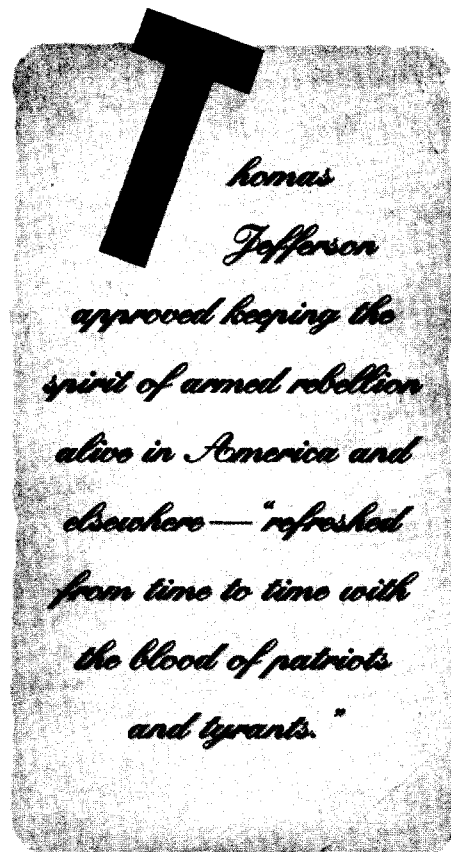
TRUE, there was a pragmatist in Jefferson as well as a visionary fanatic, and the pragmatist acquired the upper hand over the visionary in the late 1790s. Of this phenomenon Robert Bellah, the leading authority on the American civil religion, writes, somewhat misleadingly,

Early in the history of the new nation there had been a deep revulsion against the excesses of the French Revolution and a tendency to contrast it with the moderate and humane character of the American Revolution. Such a contrast was stated most vigorously by the early Federalists but was in some form or other accepted by Jeffersonian Democrats as well.

In reality the deep revulsion against the excesses of the French Revolution (while they were happening) was exclusively a Federalist affair. The Republicans, headed by Jefferson himself, stoutly defended the French Revolution throughout the period when reports of the excesses were reaching America. If possible, anything horrible in the reports from Paris was ascribed by Republicans to the manipulation of the news by the British. In private the esoteric doctrine of the Republican leaders—as revealed by Jefferson to William Short—was that what the Federalists called excesses were really taking place but were entirely justifiable, however drastic, because they were undertaken in the cause of liberty.

The Republicans began to detach themselves from the cause of the French Revolution after 1793, and especially from 1795 on. But this was not because Jefferson and the rest of them were belatedly experiencing some form of revulsion against excesses that they had systematically condoned (often by denying their existence) at the time of their perpetration. The detachment was, rather, the result of a growing perception in 1794–1795 that enthusiasm among the American people for the French Revolution was cooling—not only because of those excesses, which were at their worst during the period when Americans other than Federalists were most enthusiastic about the French Revolution, but also because of developments in the United States itself and in a neighboring territory, Saint-Domingue, or Haiti, and because of Washington's influence.

Those developments included the victory of the black



slaves in Haiti and the ensuing carnage and dispersion of the whites. The exact nature of the connection between the black insurrection and the French Revolution remains open to argument. But it would have been hard for slaveowners to remain enthusiastic about the French Revolution after February of 1794, when the French National Convention, then dominated by Robespierre, decreed the emancipation of all slaves in the dominions of the French Republic.

The emancipating act was probably not the least of "the atrocities of Robespierre" in the eyes of Virginia slaveowners, including Thomas Jefferson.

After these events Jefferson and his colleagues realized that the cause of the French Revolution, formerly a major political asset to them in the United States, had become a liability. So they cut their losses. They never repudiated the French Revolution, still cherished by many of their rank and file, but it was as if this part of their political stock in trade had been removed from the front window.

By the time Jefferson became President, the pragmatist had prevailed over the visionary, head over heart, in this matter. Yet when we are talking about the American civil religion and its sacred symbols, the visionary in Jefferson, the champion of the French Revolution, remains disturbingly—and subversively—alive and relevant. Jefferson does not fit into the modern American civil religion as *officially and semi-officially expounded*. The official version involves, as James Smylie has put it, "divine sanction in the use of power and in the support of civil authority." That is not what the *Jeffersonian* civil religion is about. But other versions of the civil religion are extant in modern America—even if official America, and the textbooks written for it, take no cognizance of their existence.

Some people seem to feel that since the militia rebels are right-wing, they cannot be Jeffersonians. But the tree of liberty is a mystical, abstract, absolute entity knowing nothing of mundane political distinctions. It accepts its natural manure, the blood of patriots and tyrants. Which are the patriots and which the tyrants makes no difference to the quality of the manure or the health of the bloodthirsty organism that feeds on it.

It is now known that three of the initial suspects in the Oklahoma City bombing claim Jeffersonian inspiration. In an article about the second man charged with the bombing, Terry Lynn Nichols, Serge F. Kovaleski wrote in *The Washington Post* last year, "[Nichols] read the works of Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine and was particularly inspired by Jefferson's maxim 'The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants.'"

CNN, on January 31 of this year, broadcast a news item about Timothy McVeigh that was accompanied by the teaser "McVeigh's Shirt Expected to Be Key Evidence." In the course of a discussion of the shirt, the following remarks were made:

Susan Candiotti (CNN correspondent): "Sources tell CNN when Tim McVeigh was arrested driving away from

Oklahoma City on the day of the bombing, he was wearing a T-shirt emblazoned with words of rebellion and bloodshed. McVeigh's shirt bore this quotation—"The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants." The words were written by Thomas Jefferson shortly after the American Revolution, when some people felt threatened by their new federal government." (The words were actually written in November of 1787, before the federal government came into existence, and they were about a rebellion against the State of Massachusetts.)

Dr. Steven Hochman (identified as a Jefferson scholar): "What Jefferson is saying is that it is a fact that in order to preserve freedom, you're going to have a situation where there is violence—as a wake-up call, you might say, to the leaders."

Susan Candiotti: "At the jail in Perry, Oklahoma, where McVeigh was first taken, the FBI asked for the clothing he was wearing but described the T-shirt in a way that kept the wording secret until now. CNN has been told the words are visible in McVeigh's mug shot taken at the jail. The FBI seized the only copy of that photo and will not release it. McVeigh's lawyer brushed aside any concern over the T-shirt slogan when we asked him, How incriminating is this?"

Stephen Jones (McVeigh's lawyer): "Well, if Thomas Jefferson said it, I shouldn't think it would be incriminating at all."

SLAVERY

AMONG revisionist scholarly threats to Jefferson's place in the American pantheon is the work of William Cohen. His 1969 article "Thomas Jefferson and the Problem of Slavery" is valuable principally for its analysis of Jefferson's position on free Negroes and escaped slaves and of the solution Jefferson proposed—"colonization"—but especially for Cohen's final summation of the contradictions in Jefferson's position on race and slavery.

Cohen considers some 1776 legislative proposals of Jefferson's, of which the most significant were those that introduced new restrictions and penalties applying to free Negroes and to "miscegenation" involving white women. He writes,

In November 1776, Jefferson was chosen as a member of a committee whose task was to revise, modernize, and codify the statutes of Virginia. Among his assignments was the job of drawing up the legislation dealing with slaves. He later described this bill, which he completed in 1778, as a "mere digest" of the existing legislation on the subject, and to a certain extent this was true. . . .

Nevertheless, the bill was more than a digest of earlier codes and it contained some significant additions which were designed to prevent the increase of the state's free Negro population. It was to be illegal for free Negroes to come into Virginia of their own accord or to remain there for more than one year after they were emancipated. A

white woman having a child by a Negro would be required to leave the state within a year. The individual who violated these regulations would be placed "out of the protection of the laws." This would have left them subject to re-enslavement or even to murder at the whim of their neighbors and was, therefore, a most severe punishment.

As eventually passed by the Virginia legislature, in 1785, the revising act did not contain Jefferson's "significant additions." It would seem that Jefferson's abhorrence of the presence of free Negroes, and of white women who gave birth to children of mixed race, was stronger than was normal among contemporaries of his own class. Jefferson probably treated his slaves somewhat better than other slaveowners did, but he seems to have been at least as harsh as other landowners in his treatment of slaves who escaped and were recaptured. Cohen writes,

When he dealt with runaways, sales of slaves, breeding, flogging, and manumissions, his behavior did not differ appreciably from that of other enlightened slaveholders who deplored needless cruelty, but would use whatever means they felt necessary to protect their peculiar form of property.

During Jefferson's adult lifetime, more than forty of his Negroes attempted to escape. . . .

In early September 1805, Jame Hubbard, a stout Negro who worked in the plantation nail factory, ran away, but was soon apprehended and returned. About five years later he escaped again. A year passed before Jefferson learned that Hubbard was living in the area of Lexington and dispatched Isham Chisolm to retrieve the bondsman. It was too late, however; Hubbard had departed only a few days earlier for parts unknown. When Chisolm returned empty-handed, Jefferson offered him a bonus of twenty-five dollars to go after the man a second time. This time Hubbard was caught and brought back in irons, and Jefferson reported: "I had him severely flogged in the presence of his old companions. . . ." He then added that he was convinced that Hubbard "will never again serve any man as a slave, the moment he is out of jail and his irons off he will be off himself." Before Jefferson could implement plans to have him sold out of the state, Hubbard disappeared again.

In theory Jefferson's "solution" to slavery consisted in "colonization": the deportation of all the freed blacks from the United States, preferably back to Africa. Cohen:

The entire body of Jefferson's writings shows that he never seriously considered the possibility of any form of racial coexistence on the basis of equality and that, from at least 1778 until his death, he saw colonization as the only alternative to slavery.

Late in his life, however, Jefferson began to admit the impracticability of this solution, at least in its widest sense, while reiterating his faith in an attenuated form of it. Cohen writes,

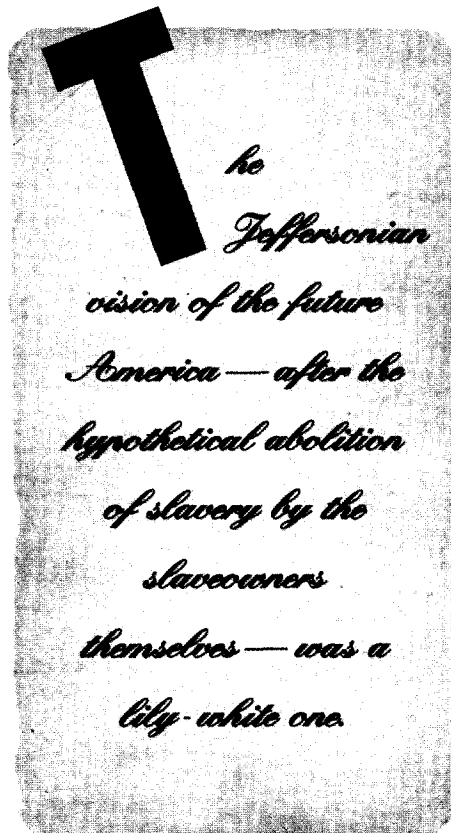
In 1824 Jefferson argued that there were a million and a half slaves in the nation and that no one conceived it to be "practicable for us, or expedient for them" to send all the blacks away at once. He then went on to calculate:

Their estimated value as property, in the first place, (for actual property has been lawfully vested in that form, and who can lawfully take it from the possessors?) at an average of two hundred dollars each . . . would amount to six hundred millions of dollars which must be paid or lost by somebody. To this add the cost of their transportation by land and sea to Mesurado [the west coast of Liberia], a year's provision of food and clothes, implements of husbandry and of their trades, which will amount to three hundred millions more . . . and it is impossible to look at the question a second time.

Since African colonization seemed an impossibility, Jefferson suggested a plan which entailed "emancipating the afterborn, leaving them, on due compensation,

with their mothers, until their services are worth their maintenance, and putting them to industrious occupations until a proper age for deportation." The individuals who would be "freed" immediately after their birth would eventually be sent to Santo Domingo which, according to the newspapers, had recently offered to open its doors to such persons. In effect, Jefferson was proposing that the federal government buy all newborn slaves from their owners (at twelve dollars and fifty cents each) and that it pay for their "nurture with the mother [for] a few years." Beyond this, the plan would not cost the government anything, for the young blacks would then work for their maintenance until deported. Santo Domingo had offered to bear the cost of passage.

Jefferson noted that a majority of Americans then living would live to see the black population reach six million



and warned that "a million and a half are within their control; but six millions, . . . and one million of these fighting men, will say, 'we will not go.'" The Virginia statesman concluded his proposal by urging that neither constitutional problems nor human sentiment ought to be allowed to stand in its way:

I am aware that this subject involves some constitutional scruples. But a liberal construction, justified by the object, may go far, and an amendment of the constitution, the whole length necessary. The separation of infants from their mothers, too, would produce some scruples of humanity. But this would be straining at a gnat, and swallowing a camel.

Thus, only two and a half years before his death, Jefferson reiterated his long held belief that emancipation was imperative for the sake of the nation, but that it must be accompanied by colonization. Even here, however, his theory differed from his practice; and in this case his inconsistency would follow him beyond the grave for he did not offer to free his slaves on the condition that they leave the country. On the contrary, in his will he requested the Virginia legislature to grant special permission to the five slaves he manumitted to continue to live in the state.

In his conclusion Cohen provides a succinct summation of the contradictions in Jefferson's position with regard to slavery and free Negroes. He writes,

Jefferson was a man of many dimensions, and any explanation of his behavior must contain a myriad of seeming contradictions. He was a sincere and dedicated foe of the slave trade who bought and sold men whenever he found it personally necessary. He believed that all men were entitled to life and liberty regardless of their abilities, yet he tracked down those slaves who had the courage to take their rights by running away. He believed that slavery was morally and politically wrong, but still he wrote a slave code for his state and opposed a national attempt in 1819 to limit the further expansion of the institution. He believed that one hour of slavery was worse than ages of British oppression, yet he was able to discuss the matter of slave breeding in much the same terms that one would use when speaking of the propagation of dogs and horses.

THE EVIDENCE ON RACE

MODERN America is, and has been for more than a quarter of a century, a postracist society, juridically and institutionally and in the ethos of all its establishments: political, social, financial, academic, scientific, and—not least significant—athletic. The American civil religion, if it is to be a bonding force through the coming century, must be unequivocally multiracial. I am not sure that it is yet. The civil religion has been implicitly or ex-

PLICITLY a religion of white people for most of its history. I am not sure whether it has by now lived down that past. But obviously it must do so in the coming century if it is to remain a civil religion for the American people as a whole. There are—as in other Western countries—powerful racist undercurrents still around. But for both reasons, because this is officially a postracist society *and* because the racist undercurrents are still there, Thomas Jefferson is becoming a most unsuitable and embarrassing figure in the pantheon of the modern American civil religion. For Thomas Jefferson was demonstrably a racist, and a particularly aggressive and vindictive one at that.

I don't mean that Jefferson was a racist because he owned slaves. A person might own slaves in the conditions of the eighteenth century without being a racist. The person might simply have inherited slaves, and not quite know what to do about it. I believe that Washington, who manumitted all his slaves by his will, was in that category. (Jefferson manumitted only the five young Hemingses, who were probably his own children, and two others.) I am not aware of any utterances of Washington's that could reasonably be classed as racist. Washington did not, as Jefferson did (in Query XIV of *Notes on the State of Virginia*), go on about such topics as the supposed preference of black males for white women, as compared with the supposed preference of orangutans for black women. Nor did Washington display, as Jefferson did (most obsessively in Query XIV), the classic racist itch to identify black characteristics that might be interpreted as indicative of genetic inferiority.

It is precisely Jefferson's status as the oracle of liberty within the American civil religion that is becoming unsustainable in a postracist America. Consider the implications of the story of Jame Hubbard. Hubbard's sole offense was to claim liberty for himself and try to win it. For that offense Jefferson had him "severely flogged in the presence of his old companions." For many Americans today (I would hope for most Americans, and most other people), the hero of liberty in that story is not the famous Thomas Jefferson but the otherwise unknown Jame Hubbard. And that perception has ominous implications for the future status of Thomas Jefferson in the civil religion of a postracist and increasingly multiracial America.

The factor, however, that is bound eventually to eliminate a personal cult of Thomas Jefferson from America's civil religion is not his record in relation to slaves and slavery but the policy laid down by him in relation to "free Negroes." Jefferson's vision of the future America—after the hypothetical abolition of slavery by the slaveowners themselves—was a lily-white one. All the ex-slaves were to be deported to Africa. In the meantime, free blacks had to be eliminated from Virginia. Jefferson's proposals for their elimination were too draconian to be stomached even by his fellow slaveowners. His proposed (and rejected) amendments to the Virginia legal code included

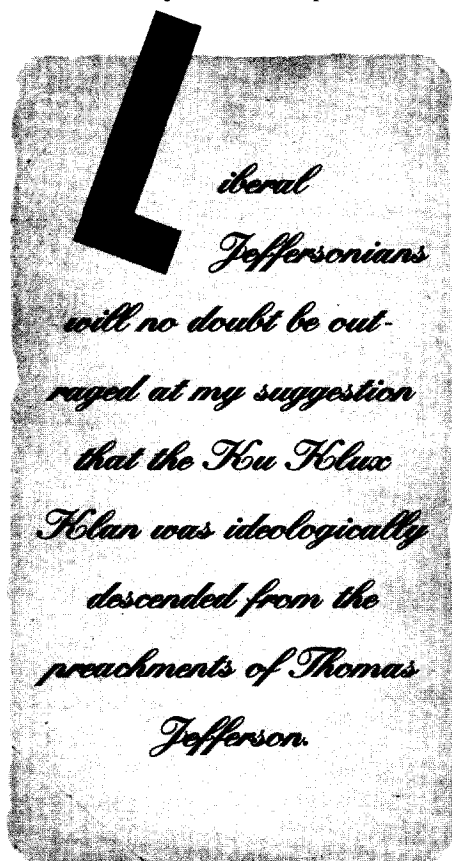
a recommendation for penalizing what Virginia slaveowners called miscegenation, by which they always meant sexual intercourse between black men and white women, never between white men and black women—an event of frequent but unmentionable occurrence. Jefferson made provision for the case of a white woman who might bear a mulatto child. Both the mother and her child were to leave Virginia within a year of the birth. In the event of their failure to do so, mother and child were declared to be “out of the protection of the laws.” In the circumstances that proposition was a license for lynching—for the physical destruction of mother and child by any Virginian who might care to do the job. Volunteers would not be lacking.

Jefferson’s white contemporaries refused to accept that sinister recommendation. But later generations of southerners were to act in its spirit. It is no coincidence that Jefferson was much more popular in the South after the Civil War than he had been before. Before the war the issue had been slavery, and Jefferson was a bit unsound on that by the standards prevailing in the South in the immediate antebellum period. After the war, however, the question of the hour for white southerners was the status of free blacks. And on *that* Thomas Jefferson was absolutely sound.

It is true that after the war white southerners were in no position to achieve Jefferson’s ideal solution: the deportation of all emancipated blacks. But they could and did act in the spirit of Jefferson’s major premise in this matter: they could ensure that there would be no *free* blacks in the southern states. Any black who attempted to achieve real freedom was at best treated as Jefferson had treated Jame Hubbard. Penalties more drastic than flogging, however, were available against persons perceived as guilty of serious racial misconduct. Such people were “out of the protection of the laws.” That is, they could be lynched with perfect impunity. And they were, regularly and in large numbers, after the end of Reconstruction and through the first two decades of the twentieth century.

For all this the enforcers of white supremacy claimed, and with justice, a mandate in Thomas Jefferson’s well-known doctrine that there was no place for free blacks in American society. If blacks were emancipated and yet remained in America and in the South, then they had to be brought under restraint.

Perhaps the most vocal of the southern white supremacists in the late nineteenth century was the Populist leader Tom Watson, of Georgia. Watson’s magazine *The Jeffersonian* propagated, according to Merrill Peterson, “sectional and racial hatred of the most vicious sort.” The relation of *The Jeffersonian* to Jefferson’s thought was similar to the relation of the Republican press in Jefferson’s own time to Jefferson’s thought. *The Jeffersonian*, like the Republican press, propagated in crude emotive forms ideas to which the master had given discreet and overtly unemotional expression. And in the southern states in the years after the Civil War the whites who most practiced what *The Jeffersonian* was preaching were members of the Ku Klux Klan.



LIBERAL JEFFERSONIANS

LIBERAL Jeffersonians will no doubt be outraged at my suggestion that the Ku Klux Klan was ideologically descended from Thomas Jefferson. I hope liberal Jeffersonians *are* outraged, and I propose to go on outraging them. I intend, if possible, to outrage them out of existence: not out of physical existence, of course, but out of existence as the confused and confusing school of thought they actually constitute. For “liberal Jeffersonian” is a contradiction in terms—at least it is if you think that “liberal racist” is a contradiction in terms. And modern American liberals can hardly contest that last point.

In the 1970s and 1980s American liberals were greatly exercised about apartheid in South Africa, and were

busy tracking down any person who might conceivably have given any kind of aid or comfort to that iniquitous system. In that connection, how about Thomas Jefferson? The Jeffersonian doctrine of no free blacks in America was a doctrine of apartheid for America.

Someone should write a thesis on “The Influence of Thomas Jefferson on Hendrik Verwoerd.”

What is surprising about Jeffersonian liberalism is that it has managed (so far) to survive both the comprehensive discrediting of racism among the educated and in official America in the second half of the twentieth century *and* the scholarly work that demonstrates that Jefferson was a racist. Thus as late as 1984 we find Richard Matthews writing in *The Radical Politics of Thomas Jefferson: A Revisionist View*, “Jefferson . . . not only presents a radical critique of

American market society but also provides an image for—not a road-map to—a consciously made, legitimately democratic American future.” A legitimately democratic American future without any blacks in it.

I believe that in the next century, as blacks and Hispanics and Asians acquire increasing influence in American society, the Jeffersonian liberal tradition, which is already intellectually untenable, will become socially and politically untenable as well. I also believe that the American civil religion, official version—let me call it ACROV—will have to be reformed in a manner that will downgrade and eventually exclude Thomas Jefferson. Finally, I believe that Jefferson will nonetheless continue to be a power in America in the area where the mystical side of Jefferson really belongs: among the radical, violent, anti-federal libertarian fanatics—the very same paranoid conspirators against whose grasp President Clinton is rightly resolved to defend our sacred symbols.

THE IMPENDING SCHISM

AS the twenty-first century advances, there will be changes within the American civil religion to correspond to great changes in the society itself. The multiracial character of the society will be increasingly realized, as significant numbers of blacks, Hispanics, and Asians move up the economic ladder. Women of all races will also be moving up, in many cases even faster and higher than the general rate of ascent of nonwhite people.

In these circumstances ACROV will be needed more than ever, as a bonding force for a more and more visibly diverse society and polity. But within ACROV the cult of the Founding Fathers will be affected. The present campus assaults on the authority, in every field, of “dead white males” are often absurd, but they have their implications for the future, and in particular for the cult of the Founding Fathers.

In the new circumstances the emphasis is likely to be increasingly on documents, rather than personalities, as the core of ACROV. Of the two main documents, the Constitution presents no problems for the new societal coalition, in which women and nonwhite people exercise increasing authority. The Constitution as it now stands is the work not just of Founding Fathers but of many kinds of people, over many generations. Both abolitionists and feminists—overlapping categories in the nineteenth century—played their part in bringing the Constitution into the shape in which we have it today. The Constitution will be amended—an Equal Rights Amendment would appear to be inevitable, if present trends continue—during the first half of the coming century. The Constitution—amended and amendable—will be at the center of ACROV.

The Declaration of Independence is another matter. ACROV without the Declaration is unthinkable. The Declaration is the primary assertion of American nationalism, and

the primary function of the American civil religion is to invest American nationalism with the aura of the sacred. Without the Declaration, then, there is no American civil religion.

Yet there are problems about the Declaration, in its relation to a society no longer exclusively dominated by whites. There are problems about the wording, and problems about the authorship. It is accepted that the words “all men are created equal” do not in their literal meaning apply to women, and were not intended by the Founding Fathers (collectively) to apply to slaves. Yet it is also accepted that the expectations aroused by this formula have been a force that eventually changed the meaning of the formula to include women and people of all races.

The wording in itself offers no basic difficulty. The trouble is in the relation of the wording to the perceived authorship. In ACROV as we know it in the twentieth century, Jefferson has sacred status as the author of the most sacred document: the Declaration of Independence. And nothing is more certain than that Thomas Jefferson did not intend that black people should be free in America. Freedom and blackness were incompatible in America: free blacks were to be banished.

For many years Jefferson’s real views concerning the future of blacks in America were hidden by soothing obfuscation best exemplified by the relevant inscription in the Jefferson Memorial. People were told that Thomas Jefferson was against slavery, and his words to that effect were quoted frequently. But people were *not* told that for Jefferson, black people had no future in America at all *except as slaves*. Once they ceased to be slaves, they were to be sent packing. Nor would other nonwhites be welcome (the American Indian excepted, whom Jefferson was at pains to “whiten”). Jefferson’s bright vision of the future of America was a monoracial one: whites only.

It follows that there can be no room for a cult of Thomas Jefferson in the civil religion of an effectively multiracial America—that is, an America in which nonwhite Americans have a significant and increasing say. Once the facts are known, Jefferson is of necessity abhorrent to people who would not be in America at all if he could have had his way.

Those people don’t need Jefferson. But they do need the Declaration. The words “all men are created equal” are an important part of their American title deeds. Racists hold that blacks are genetically inferior—that is, that they were *not* created equal. Against that doctrine it is important to be able to invoke the most sacred of American documents.

In these circumstances, in which the Declaration is needed and Jefferson is not, I would expect to see a change in the perceived relation between Jefferson and the Declaration. There is an element of exaggeration in the present official perception of that relation, and that exaggeration will come under attack in the increasingly multiracial climate of the coming century.

The crucial question is, Was Thomas Jefferson the author of the Declaration of Independence?

Many Americans will answer that question with an indignant "Of course he was!" Yet there is really no "of course" about it. The Declaration was certainly not the unaided work of Thomas Jefferson. The document did not spring fully formed from his head, like Athena from the forehead of Zeus. The work of preparing the Declaration—to justify the independence that the Second Continental Congress had actually proclaimed two days before—was entrusted by Congress not to Jefferson alone but to a committee that included John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, figures of no less status in the America of 1776. Adams and Franklin would probably have had considerable input into discussions preceding the actual drafting of the document. Jefferson's draft was reviewed and corrected by the committee prior to being laid before the Congress, whose consensus it was designed to reflect. And the Congress made further changes in the draft. Carl Lotus Becker writes in *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas*,

Congress discussed his draft for three successive days. What uncomplimentary remarks the members may have made is not known; but it is known that in the end certain paragraphs were greatly changed and others omitted altogether. These "depredateions"—so he speaks of them—Jefferson did not enjoy; but we may easily console ourselves for his discomfiture since it moved the humane Franklin to tell him a story. Writing in 1818, Jefferson says: "I was sitting by Dr. Franklin, who perceived that I was not insensible to these mutilations. I have made it a rule, said he, whenever in my power, to avoid becoming the draughtsman of papers to be reviewed by a public body."

Franklin's story follows, and though it is amusing, it is not relevant here. What is relevant is the word "draughtsman," and it is evident that it was in that role, and not the more exalted role of "author," that Jefferson's colleagues envisaged him, in relation to the collective elaboration of the Declaration of Independence.

In ACROV as it evolves under the conditions of the coming century, the Declaration will increasingly be seen as a collective document. The Founding Fathers will have declined in importance in comparison with the sacred documents, but their *collective* authority will still be found to be vastly more acceptable than the idea of the personal authorship of Thomas Jefferson.

With the Declaration increasingly perceived as a collective document, Jefferson may increasingly be cast in the prosaic and subordinate role of draftsman. Jefferson's demotion from the sacred status of author of the Declaration of Independence would effectively put an end to the official cult of Jefferson within the American civil religion. Jefferson should be out of ACROV, I would guess, before the middle of the coming century.

Jefferson should be out of ACROV. But he is likely to be at the center of an alternative, and powerful, version of American civil religion.

It is safe to predict that the liberal-Jeffersonian tradition will become extinct fairly early in the coming century. The huge contradiction within that tradition with regard to race renders it unfit to survive in a multiracial society. But the inevitable rejection of Jefferson by liberals in a multiracial America will draw increasingly favorable attention to Jefferson on the far right. The very reasons for which liberals will have to reject him will compel the far right to adopt him. Or rather *re-adopt* him, for he was a hero to southern white supremacists.

Doctrinally, Jefferson is a patron saint far more suitable to white supremacists than to modern American liberals. The themes of states' rights and no free blacks in America fit the positions of the far-right militia movement like a glove. Tom Watson's old title *The Jeffersonian* could well be revived in the next century, and with the same racist content.

Rhetorically and emotionally also, the mystical Jefferson—the Jefferson of the tree of liberty and of the French Revolution—meets the needs of the modern far right. Jefferson's liberty, a powerfully emotive concept, unanalyzed and without intellectual content, is the kind of liberty the militias love: Burke's "wild gas" of liberty.

The Jefferson who admired Shays's rebels and hoped they would find imitators in later generations, and who inspired the Virginia and Kentucky resolutions of 1798, is providing those who now resist the federal government with clear warrant for their cause, and for the use of armed force should the incursions of the federal government make that necessary.

Finally, the Jefferson who made a cult of the French Revolution provides aid and comfort not just to the far right in government but to the most ferocious militant extremists. In the paroxysms of his enthusiasm for the French Revolution, in January of 1793, Jefferson laid down the principle that there are (virtually) no limits to the slaughter that may legitimately be perpetrated in the name of liberty—so that anyone in modern America who is planning any act of mass destruction may invoke the sanction of "the author of the Declaration of Independence," provided only that the act is deemed to be perpetrated in the holy cause of liberty.

For these and other reasons I believe that at some time in the coming century the cult of Jefferson may, as it were, split off from its present home in ACROV and find a new home on the wilder shores of American freedom.

I believe that the orthodox multiracial version of the American civil religion must eventually prevail—at whatever cost—against the neo-Jeffersonian racist schism. That the orthodox version should prevail is vital not only for America but also for the future of nonracial democracy, and of Enlightenment values generally, in those parts of the world where these are now dominant or where people are struggling to bring them into effective being. ☞