

Teaching American History Online Seminar

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## Jefferson: The Atheist?

**November 8, 2025**

**Panelists:** Christine McDonald, Eric Sands and Jason Stevens

### Reading List

- Notes on the State of Virginia: Query 18
- First Inaugural Address
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes
- Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Roger Chew Weightman

**Link to Event:** <https://crowdcast.io/c/xr7a4mgkwffo>



READING 1: *Notes on the State of Virginia*: Query 18, Thomas Jefferson | 1784SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/notes-on-the-state-of-virginia-4/>

Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) was the primary author of the [Declaration of Independence](#) and the [Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom](#), secretary of state during the presidency of George Washington, and the third president of the United States. Jefferson also served as governor of Virginia during the Revolutionary War.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, published between the conclusion of the war and the creation of the Constitution, Jefferson discussed a wide range of issues related to the state's history, geography, and constitution. In this selection from that book, Jefferson discussed the defects of the original Virginia constitution, which was established hurriedly in 1776. Jefferson, like many others, including [James Madison](#), feared the overbearing legislatures that typically dominated state executives during the 1780s.

—J. David Alvis and Joseph Postell

### The Constitution of the State and Its Several Charters

. . . This constitution was formed when we were new and unexperienced in the science of government. It was the first too which was formed in the whole United States. No wonder then that time and trial have discovered very capital defects in it. . . .

All the powers of government, legislative, executive, and judiciary, result to the legislative body. The concentrating these in the same hands is precisely the definition of despotic government. It will be no alleviation that these powers will be exercised by a plurality of hands, and not by a single one; 173 despots would surely be as oppressive as one. Let those who doubt it turn their eyes on the republic of Venice. As little will it avail us that they are chosen by ourselves. An *elective despotism* was not the government we fought for; but one which should not only be founded on free principles, but in which the powers of government should be so divided and balanced among several bodies of magistracy, as that no one could transcend their legal limits without being effectually checked and restrained by the others. For this reason that convention which passed the ordinance of government, laid its foundation on this basis, that the legislative, executive, and judiciary departments should be separate and distinct, so that no person should exercise the powers of more than one of them at the same time. But no barrier was provided between these several powers. The judiciary and executive members were left dependent on the legislative, for their subsistence in office, and some of them for their continuance in it. If therefore the legislature assumes executive and judiciary powers, no opposition is likely to be made; nor, if made, can it be effectual; because in that case they may put their proceedings into the form of an act of assembly, which will render them obligatory on the other branches. They have accordingly, in many instances, decided rights which should have been left to judiciary controversy; and the direction of the executive, during the whole time of their session, is becoming habitual and familiar. And this is done with no ill intention. The views of the present members are perfectly upright. . . . Nor should our assembly be deluded by the integrity of their own purposes, and conclude that these unlimited powers will never be abused because themselves are not disposed to abuse them. They should look forward to a time, and that not a distant one, when corruption in this, as in the country from which we derive our origin, will have seized the heads of government, and be spread by them through the body of the people; when they will purchase the voices of the people, and make them pay the price. Human nature is the same on every side of the Atlantic, and will be alike influenced by the same causes. The time to guard against corruption and tyranny is before they shall have gotten hold on us. It is better to keep the wolf out of the fold, than to trust to drawing his teeth and talons after he shall have entered. . . .

. . .In December 1776, our circumstances being much distressed, it was proposed in the house of delegates to create a *dictator*, invested with every power legislative, executive, and judiciary, civil and military, of life and of death, over our persons and over our properties; and in June 1781, again under calamity, the same proposition was repeated, and wanted a few votes only of being passed. . . .In God's name, from whence have they derived this power? Is it from our ancient laws? None such can be produced. Is it from any principle in our new constitution, expressed or implied? Every lineament of that expressed or implied, is in full opposition to it. Its fundamental principle is that the state shall be governed as a commonwealth. It provides a republican organization, proscribes under the name of *prerogative* the exercise of all powers undefined by the laws; places on this basis the whole system of our laws; and, by consolidating them together, chooses that they shall be left to stand or fall together, never providing for any circumstances, nor admitting that such could arise, wherein either should be suspended, no, not for a moment. Our ancient laws expressly declare that those who are but delegates themselves shall not delegate to others powers which require judgment and integrity in their exercise. Or was this proposition moved on a supposed right in the movers of abandoning their posts in a moment of distress? The same laws forbid the abandonment of that post, even on ordinary occasions; and much more a transfer of their powers into other hands and other forms, without consulting the people. They never admit the idea that these, like sheep or cattle, may be given from hand to hand without an appeal to their own will. . . .Those who meant well, of the advocates for this measure (and most of them meant well, for I know them personally, had been their fellow laborers in the common cause, and had often proved the purity of their principles), had been seduced in their judgment by the example of an ancient republic, whose constitution and circumstances were fundamentally different. They had sought this precedent in the history of Rome, where alone it was to be found, and where at length too it had proved fatal. They had taken it from a republic, rent by the most bitter factions and tumults, where the government was of a heavy-handed unfeeling aristocracy, over a people ferocious and rendered desperate by poverty and wretchedness; tumults which could not be allayed under the most trying circumstances, but by the omnipotent hand of a single despot. Their constitution therefore allowed a temporary tyrant to be erected, under the name of a dictator; and that temporary tyrant, after a few examples, became perpetual. They misapplied this precedent to a people mild in their dispositions, patient under their trial, united for the public liberty, and affectionate to their leaders. . . . Our situation is indeed perilous, and I hope my countrymen will be sensible of it, and will apply, at a proper season, the proper remedy; which is a convention to fix the constitution, to amend its defects, to bind up the several branches of government by certain laws, which when they transgress their acts shall become nullities; to render unnecessary an appeal to the people, or in other words a rebellion, on every infraction of their rights, on the peril that their acquiescence shall be construed into an intention to surrender those rights.

## READING 2: First Inaugural Address | 1801

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/first-inaugural-address-2/>

The election of 1800 was highly contentious, pitting Democratic-Republicans supporting Thomas Jefferson against Federalists supporting the reelection of John Adams (see [Letter to Thomas Jefferson](#)). When the electoral votes were counted, Jefferson and Aaron Burr, his presidential running mate, received the same number of votes. (When the Electoral College was created, no one had anticipated that political parties would exist to nominate candidates for both offices, so such an eventuality had not been foreseen.) Following the protocol laid out in the Constitution, the election was sent to the House of Representatives where votes were taken by state with each state getting one vote. Unfortunately for Jefferson, the Federalists still controlled the House and many initially cast their votes in favor of Burr in an attempt to deny Jefferson the presidency. In the end, however, enough Federalists supported Jefferson for him to be elected president.

Despite the contentious nature of the election, the events did not produce violence among the electorate and the election set a precedent for the peaceful transfer of power from one political party to another. Jefferson's followers also passed the Twelfth Amendment requiring separate electoral votes for president and vice president to ensure the events of 1800 would not be repeated.

—Eric C. Sands

Called upon to undertake the duties of the first executive office of our country, I avail myself of the presence of that portion of my fellow-citizens which is here assembled, to express my grateful thanks for the favor with which they have been pleased to look toward me, to declare a sincere consciousness, that the task is above my talents, and that I approach it with those anxious and awful presentiments which the greatness of the charge and the weakness of my powers so justly inspire. A rising nation, spread over a wide and fruitful land, traversing all the seas with the rich productions of their industry, engaged in commerce with nations who feel power and forget right, advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye—when I contemplate these transcendent objects, and see the honor, the happiness, and the hopes of this beloved country, committed to the issue and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation, and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking. Utterly, indeed, should I despair, did not the presence of many whom I here see remind me, that, in the other high authorities, provided by our Constitution I shall find resources of wisdom, of virtue, and of zeal, on which to rely under all difficulties. To you, then, gentlemen, who are charged with the sovereign functions of legislation, and to those associated with you, I look with encouragement for that guidance and support which may enable us to steer with safety the vessel in which we are all embarked amidst the conflicting elements of a troubled world.

During the contest of opinion through which we have passed the animation of discussions and of exertions has sometimes worn an aspect which might impose on strangers unused to think freely, and to write what they think; but this being now decided by the voice of the nation, announced according to the rules of the Constitution, all will, of course, arrange themselves under the will of the law, and unite in common efforts for the common good. All, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal laws must protect, and to violate would be oppression. Let us, then, fellow-citizens, unite with one heart and one mind. Let us restore to social intercourse that harmony and affection without which liberty and even life itself are but dreary things. And let us reflect that, having banished from our land that religious intolerance, under which mankind so long bled and suffered, we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions. During the throes and convulsions of the ancient world, during the agonizing spasms of infuriated man, seeking through blood and slaughter his long-lost liberty, it was not wonderful

that the agitation of the billows should reach even this distant and peaceful shore; that this should be more felt and feared by some and less by others, and should divide opinions as to measures of safety. But every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans,<sup>[1]</sup> we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it. I know, indeed, that some honest men fear a republican government cannot be strong, that this Government is not strong enough; but would the honest patriot, in the full tide of successful experiment, abandon a government which has so far kept us free and firm on the theoretic and visionary fear that this Government, the world's best hope, may by possibility want energy to preserve itself? I trust not. I believe this, on the contrary, the strongest Government on earth. I believe it the only one where every man, at the call of the law, would fly to the standard of the law, and would meet invasions of the public order as his own personal concern. Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others? Or have we found angels in the form of kings to govern him? Let history answer this question.

Let us, then, with courage and confidence, pursue our own Federal and Republican principles, our attachment to union and representative government. Kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe; too high-minded to endure the degradations of the others; possessing a chosen country, with room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation; entertaining a due sense of our equal right to the use of our own faculties, to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from our fellow-citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them; enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man; acknowledging and adoring an overruling Providence, which by all its dispensations proves that it delights in the happiness of man here and his greater happiness hereafter<sup>[2]</sup>—with all these blessings, what more is necessary to make us a happy and a prosperous people? Still one thing more, fellow-citizens—a wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned. This is the sum of good government, and this is necessary to close the circle of our felicities.

About to enter, fellow-citizens, on the exercise of duties which comprehend everything dear and valuable to you, it is proper you should understand what I deem the essential principles of our Government, and consequently those which ought to shape its Administration. I will compress them within the narrowest compass they will bear, stating the general principle, but not all its limitations. Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none; the support of the State governments in all their rights, as the most competent administrations for our domestic concerns and the surest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies; the preservation of the General Government in its whole constitutional vigor, as the sheet anchor of our peace at home, and safety abroad; a zealous care of the right of election by the people—a mild and safe corrective of abuses which are lopped by the sword of revolution where peaceable remedies are unprovided; absolute acquiescence in the decisions of the majority, the vital principle of republics, from which there is no appeal but to force, the vital principle and immediate parent of despotism; a well-disciplined militia, our best reliance in peace and for the first moments of war, till regulars may relieve them; the supremacy of the civil over the military authority; economy in the public

expense, that labor may be lightly burdened; the honest payment of our debts and sacred preservation of public faith; encouragement of agriculture, and of commerce as its handmaid; the diffusion of information and arraignment of all abuses at the bar of the public reason; freedom of religion; freedom of the press, and freedom of person, under the protection of the habeas corpus, and trial by juries impartially selected. These principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us, and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which to try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or of alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.

I repair, then, fellow citizens, to the post you have assigned me. With experience enough in subordinate offices to have seen the difficulties of this the greatest of all, I have learned to expect that it will rarely fall to the lot of imperfect man to retire from this station with the reputation and the favor which bring him into it. Without pretensions to that high confidence you reposed in our first and greatest revolutionary character, whose preeminent services had entitled him to the first place in his country's love and destined for him the fairest page in the volume of faithful history, I ask so much confidence only as may give firmness and effect to the legal administration of your affairs. I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment. When right, I shall often be thought wrong by those whose positions will not command a view of the whole ground. I ask you indulgence for my own errors, which will never be intentional, and your support against the error of others, who may condemn what they would not if seen in all its parts. The approbation implied by your suffrage is a great consolation to me for the past, and my future solicitude will be to retain the good opinion of those who have bestowed it in advance, to conciliate that of others by doing them all the good in my power, and to be instrumental to the happiness and freedom of all.

Relying, then, on the patronage of your good will, I advance with obedience to the work, ready to retire from it whenever you become sensible how much better choice it is in your power to make. And may that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe lead our councils to what is best, and give them a favorable issue for your peace and prosperity.

THOMAS JEFFERSON.

## READING 3: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes | 1820

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/letter-to-john-holmes-2/>

John Holmes was a U.S. Representative from Massachusetts and one of the earliest supporters of the Missouri Compromise in Congress. Before moving to the U.S. Senate as one of the first two senators from the newly formed state of Maine, he mailed a letter to Thomas Jefferson with a copy of a pamphlet he had published to the citizens of Maine on the Missouri question. Jefferson, in retirement at Monticello, responded to Holmes's inquiry shortly after the passage of the Missouri Compromise. In his response, Jefferson congratulated Holmes on his defense of the measure, but worried about the effects of drawing a literal line of separation across the nation in regard to a moral and political principle. Jefferson, himself a slave-owner, makes clear in the rest of the letter not only his hatred of slavery, but his personal desire to see all men everywhere free.

The letter also notes in passing that expatriation of the slaves—removing them from the United States—should accompany their emancipation. This was a standard view in the period leading to the Civil War. Whites felt that the history of antagonism between whites and blacks would make it impossible for them to be fellow-citizens. Blacks who could express a view ("[What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?](#)" (1852)) recognized the problem of embittered racial relations, but most often took the view that the United States was as much their country as it was the white man's. The letter also contains a brief statement of the so-called diffusion theory for ending slavery. This theory held that slavery was more likely to end if it was spread over the United States. As improbable as this may sound to us today, to some in the nineteenth century it seemed true because, as Jefferson explained, it would mean that the cost of emancipation and expatriation would not fall only on the Southern states. Jefferson's view of the limited power of the Federal government, as he made clear in this letter, persuaded him that it should not be the agent for emancipation and expatriation. Abraham Lincoln later argued that the federal government should play this role, supporting states in their efforts to emancipate and relocate slaves, although acknowledging that the U.S. Constitution gave the states the primary responsibility for dealing with slavery within their borders ([Reply to the Dred Scott Decision](#)(1857); [First Inaugural Address](#) (1861)).

—Jason W. Stevens

I thank you, dear sir, for the copy you have been so kind as to send me of the letter to your constituents on the Missouri question. It is a perfect justification to them. I had for a long time ceased to read newspapers, or pay any attention to public affairs, confident they were in good hands, and content to be a passenger in our bark to the shore from which I am not distant. But this momentous question, like a fire bell in the night, awakened and filled me with terror. I considered it at once as the knell of the Union. It is hushed, indeed, for the moment. But this is a reprieve only, not a final sentence. A geographical line, coinciding with a marked principle, moral and political, once conceived and held up to the angry passions of men, will never be obliterated; and every new irritation will mark it deeper and deeper. I can say, with conscious truth, that there is not a man on earth who would sacrifice more than I would to relieve us from this heavy reproach, in any practicable way. The cession of that kind of property, for so it is misnamed, is a bagatelle<sup>[1]</sup> which would not cost me a second thought, if, in that way, a general emancipation and expatriation could be effected; and, gradually, and with due sacrifices, I think it might be. But as it is, we have the wolf by the ears, and we can neither hold him, nor safely let him go. Justice is in one scale, and self-preservation in the other. Of one thing I am certain, that as the passage of slaves from one state to another, would not make a slave of a single human being who would not be so without it, so their diffusion over a greater surface would make them individually happier, and proportionally facilitate the accomplishment of their emancipation, by dividing the burthen on a greater number of coadjutors.<sup>[2]</sup> An abstinence too, from this act of power, would remove the jealousy excited by the undertaking of Congress to regulate the condition of the

different descriptions of men composing a state. This certainly is the exclusive right of every state, which nothing in the Constitution has taken from them and given to the general government. Could Congress, for example, say, that the non-freemen of Connecticut shall be freemen, or that they shall not emigrate into any other state?

I regret that I am now to die in the belief, that the useless sacrifice of themselves by the generation of 1776, to acquire self-government and happiness to their country, is to be thrown away by the unwise and unworthy passions of their sons, and that my only consolation is to be, that I live not to weep over it. If they would but dispassionately weigh the blessings they will throw away, against an abstract principle more likely to be effected by union than by scission, they would pause before they would perpetrate this act of suicide on themselves, and of treason against the hopes of the world. To yourself, as the faithful advocate of the Union, I tender the offering of my high esteem and respect.



## READING 4: Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Roger Chew Weightman | 1826

SOURCE: <https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/thomas-jefferson-to-roger-chew-weightman/>

The influence of the [Declaration of Independence](#) lasted well beyond 1776, and its principles continue to resonate around the globe. The Marquis de Lafayette (1757–1834) and the Comte de Mirabeau (1749–1791) incorporated the Declaration’s sentiments in the “Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen,” one of the key documents of the French Revolution. Hungarian nationalist Lajos Kossuth (1802–1894), considered the father of Hungarian democracy and that nation’s president in the mid-nineteenth century, argued that the Declaration was “the noblest, happiest page in mankind’s history.” Francisco de Miranda (1750–1816) was inspired by America’s example to attempt to overthrow the Spanish empire in South America, and the former American slaves who settled in Liberia noted in their founding document that “all men, [enjoy] certain natural and inalienable rights: among these are life, liberty, and the right to acquire, possess, and enjoy property.” In the twentieth century, the United Nations incorporated Jefferson’s sentiments in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), and various anticolonial movements adopted elements of the Declaration’s language in their independence efforts. Vaclav Havel (1936–2011), the driving force behind the Velvet Revolution in 1989 that led to the collapse of Soviet rule in the former Czechoslovakia, frequently mentioned the Declaration as one of the seminal statements animating the perpetual human quest for self-government.

In this letter to Roger Weightman (1787–1876), who at the time was mayor of Washington, DC, Jefferson apologized for being unable to attend celebrations there marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration but noted that he took comfort in the fact that the Declaration’s principles were beginning to take root and would eventually triumph around the globe.

—Stephen F. Knott

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The kind invitation I receive from you, on the part of the citizens of the city of Washington, to be present with them at their celebration of the 50th anniversary of American independence; as one of the surviving signers of an instrument pregnant with our own, and the fate of the world is most flattering to myself. . . . May it be to the world, what I believe it will be (to some parts sooner, to others later, but finally to all), the signal of arousing men to burst the chains, under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves, and to assume the blessings & security of self-government. That form which we have substituted, restores the free right to the unbounded exercise of reason and freedom of opinion. All eyes are opened, or opening, to the rights of man. The general spread of the light of science has already laid open to every view the palpable truth that the mass of mankind has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God. These are grounds of hope for others. For ourselves, let the annual return of this day forever refresh our recollections of these rights, and an undiminished devotion to them. . .