

The Ideas of Thomas Jefferson

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Objectives

- Identify Jefferson's thoughts on the Republic
 - Self-Government as 'Natural Right'
 - The First Principle of Republicanism
 - States' Rights and Law Making
 - General Male Suffrage
- Discuss how Locke's political philosophy influenced Jefferson's views
- Identify Jefferson ideas about Education
 - 1778 Educational Reforms in Virginia
 - Public Education/Schools
 - Secularization of Education

Thomas Jefferson

- Principle author of the United States Declaration of Independence
- Third President of the United States (1801-1809)
- Founder of the University of Virginia
- Influential “Founding Father” and an exponent of Jeffersonian democracy
- Spoke five languages
- Interested in science and political philosophy
- Influenced by of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and John Locke

Declaration of Independence

- American Revolutionaries were not opposing any specific form of government
- To secure their “Life, Liberty and pursuit of Happiness” - entitled to abolish the corrupt British Government
- Condition set for all such governments - “The consent of the governed”



JEFFERSON'S THOUGHTS ON THE REPUBLIC

Republican Government

“A pure republic” comprised “a state of society in which every member of mature and sound mind has an equal right of participation, personally, in the direction of the affairs of the society”

Self-Government – Natural right of Man

- Naturalistic rather than moral, derived from historically valid experience and political practice
- Based on Locke's theory - Government was an instrument for the people to peacefully exercise the law of nature and nations within the framework of the universal standard of equal rights
- Extending responsibility for governmental action to each and every free man was a natural goal for Jeffersonian republicanism

Skepticism About Political Constitutions

- Natural right to self-government was independent of any precise governmental form
- Each generation has the right to choose for itself the form of government it believes most promoting its 'happiness'
- This should be done every nineteen or twenty years

The First Principle of Republicanism

- An almost unconditional surrender to the temporally variable will of the people
- The will of the majority being not only “*the Natural law of every society,*” but also “*the only sure guardian of the rights of man*”
- Genuine republicanism is not found in constitutions - “*but merely in the spirit of our people*”

Teutonic Origins of American Freedom

- Anglo-Americans’ “Saxon ancestor” had once moved to Britain – by the same law or right of all men to depart from the country in which chance had put them
- British colonists had, in turn, gone to America and established new societies, under such laws and regulations as to them had seemed most likely to promote their ‘happiness’

States' Rights

- Considered each state a separate nation
- The states formed the Union for the management of the relations with each other and with foreign nations
- The legal Origins of the Union rested on the will of its members
 - States had the right to judge the constitutionality of laws (except those specifically delegated to Congress by the constitution)
 - Federal government was that of international law

Just Governmental Powers

- Justified violence remained something to which only nations could resort
- Never imagined that republican government could permanently comply with any other citizen activity than constant, “peaceful deliberation”
- All questions of justice and equality were to be “fairly, fully and peaceably expressed, discussed, and decided by the common reason of the society”
- Could wage war in the name of “national morality”

Enforcement of the Law of Nature and Nations

- Government monopoly as long as the consent of the governed prevailed
- States – sole executive power of the civil law (except for the few cases listed in the Constitution)
- Federal government concerned with international law

General Male Suffrage

- Draft constitution of Virginia spring 1776 – Jefferson suggested
 - the appropriation of fifty acres of land to every free person of full age
 - The law of religious freedom
 - Adoption of general male suffrage (rights of citizenship)
- Jefferson had aimed at extending the right of suffrage to all who had a permanent interest of living in the country



JEFFERSON'S THOUGHTS ON EDUCATION

1778 Educational Reforms in Virginia

- First bill - mandated a system of public elementary and grammar schools throughout the state
 - Three years of schooling in basic literacy and mathematics for all free children
 - Reading lessons drawn from classical and Anglo-American history rather than scripture
- Second bill – reconstituted the College of William and Mary as purely secular institution of higher learning
 - Mandated a system of scholarships to both the grammar schools and the university for boys of “the best and most promising genius”
- Third bill - called for the establishment of a research library in Richmond

Public Education and a National University

- Urged Congress to fund public education and a national university
 - Elementary education ensured the enlightenment of the people at large and thus made them the safe guardians of their own liberty
 - Instruction in history qualified people to judge the actions of their representatives
 - Primary reading in history would prevent the rise of “tyranny”
 - Did not argue that it would enable them to fully assume the reins of government and make informed decisions regarding substantive policy

Separation of Church and Education

- Superstition dangerous because it could blind the minds of the people
 - Virginia educational scheme removed scripture as a source of primary instruction
 - Eliminating clerics as potential purveyors of primary education
 - Envisioned that the “best geniuses” supported through scholarships that were dismissed after one or two years of college preparation would go on to be masters of the public schools

Secularizing Virginia's University

- More vital for it was in the universities that the future statesmen would be trained
 - Called for severing all links between William and Mary and the “English Church”
 - Proposed a fully secular curriculum in the modern arts and sciences
 - Oversight would be placed in the hands of the political authorities

Summary

- General
- Thoughts on the Republic
 - Self-Government as ‘Natural Right’
 - The First Principle of Republicanism
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 - General Male Suffrage
- Thoughts on Education
 - 1778 Educational Reforms in Virginia
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