

A Slave to His Time and Place

In protecting slavery, Jefferson shielded a system that nurtured him economically and politically



By GARRY WILLS

Americans are blessed, but ambiguously blessed, by the extraordinary generation of men (yes, *all* men) who shaped our republic in the 18th century. They formed such a brilliant galaxy of talents that they hover far above us. At times, it seems that the only way to remedy their Olympic remove is by rocket assault, which brings them crashing down to Earth. Usually the fuel is humanizing (but trivializing) scandal, which leads to an overemphasis on such matters as Thomas Jefferson's sexual liaison with Sally Hemings.

In this famous tale, too much has been made of sex and too little of slavery. The real point of the story is that Hemings was available to Jefferson because he owned her — he never had to acknowledge her, educate her, bring her within the circle of his family or free her. The issue is not his sexual continence but the fact that he used his property at his will.

And that raises the larger question — not what he did for or to her or her family, but what he did about the institution of slavery.

The answer is simple: He did everything he could to protect and extend the slave system.

This was not because he approved of slavery, or would have defended it in principle — as did John Calhoun of South Carolina in the Senate and John Taylor of Caroline County, Va., in his writings. Jefferson defended slavery because it was inextricable from the economy that sustained him and the politics that supported him. Publicly questioning slavery would have been fatal to a man with political ambitions in the South. He actively worked to keep his own personal condemnations of slavery away from the voters. So did his great compeers, George Washington, James Madison and James Monroe.

The importance of slavery to Jefferson's political career can be summed up in one astonishing and often overlooked fact. But for slavery, he would have lost the 1800 presidential race. He received fewer votes than his adversary, John Adams. What put him in office was a bonus of 12 votes in the Electoral College that came from counting the slave population at three-fifths of its number. As his Federalist opponents put it, he "rode into the temple of liberty on the shoulders of his slaves." As he added new plantation territory to the nation through the Louisiana Purchase and efforts to acquire the Floridas, Federalists protested at the number of slaves who would be added to the Southern vote count.

We often forget the rationale for the three-fifths clause in the Constitution, which affected the balance of power between North and South, slave and free, in all congressional votes, as well as those in the Electoral College.

The South had feared that it would be

underrepresented in the first Congress because there were fewer whites in the South than in the North. To even things out, it demanded that blacks be counted in the representable population.

Northerners said this would be non-representation, given that blacks were disenfranchised and would have no say in how "their" representatives voted.

The Deep South said it would not ratify the Constitution unless slaves were counted. The North tried to whittle the representation down, offering to count a black as one-half a person. The South responded with a bid for three-quarters. Three-fifths was the resulting compromise.

But slaveholders continued to feel politically vulnerable because of their treatment of human beings as property. Jefferson defended the "agrarian virtue" of the plantation system, vilifying Northern banks and commerce and cities, in part as a means to excuse slavery, the literal backbone of the Southern economy. When states were opening up in the West — Missouri, Kentucky, Kansas — Jefferson argued that they should be slave states in order to maintain that "agrarian virtue."

The protection of the slave system made Jefferson's scheme with George Washington to make sure the permanent national capital would be in slave territory, because their slaves had been hard to

hold on to when they took them to the seat of government in Philadelphia. The proof of the Virginians' intent is that Washington carried the survey for the District of Columbia lower than Congress had authorized, to include the slave city of Alexandria (which was not deeded back to Virginia until 1846).

Such facts cannot be ignored or glossed over. The protection of slavery by even our noblest founders left a horrendous legacy, one only partially cleansed by a horrendous war. Deep patterns of bias may be defended by the use of Jefferson's example. Uprooting ancient attitudes is hard enough without the availability of great names to dignify our prejudice.

Still, those truths should not make us blind to the other bequests of Jefferson. He is our greatest champion of religious freedom, of freedom of the mind, of a national vision. Lincoln's greatest weapon against slavery was supplied him by the ideals expressed in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson knew what his real achievements were — the three listed on his tombstone: author of the Declaration of Independence, of the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, and father of the University of Virginia. Those works will stand as long as our country stands.

He is still a founder to be revered.

Garry Wills' latest book, "Negro President: Thomas Jefferson and Slave Power" will be published this month by Houghton Mifflin.

Had it not been for a rule regarding the subjugated population, the Virginian might never have been president.

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