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Thomas Jefferson speaks to our generation, 1943.

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THOMAS JEFFERSON SPEAKS TO OUR GENERATION

In tribute to the author of the Declaration of Independence,
on the occasion of the Two-Hundredth Anniversary of his birth.

By
Dr. Abba Hillel Silver

At
The Temple

On
Sunday morning, April 11, 1943

To understand the present, you must know the past. To plan for the future one must draw upon the experience of the past. Without a true knowledge of history, a nation is without compass. "History teaches everything, even the future."

Recently the American people were greatly disturbed over the revelation of the lamentable ignorance on the part of students in our colleges and universities of the elementary facts in American history. The New York Times carried a report on the examination of 7000 students in 36 colleges and universities in all sections of the country on the subject of American history. The lack of knowledge on the part of most of these students of the most elementary facts, and the amount of misinformation which they possessed was pretty shocking. Many of these students could not identify such names as Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson and Theodore Roosevelt, because they didn't know who they were - not to speak of significant trends landmarks or movements or parties in American history. 30% of these students did not know who was President of the United States during the World War. 20% did not know that Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States during the Civil War. Some of them said "Abraham Lincoln emaciated the slaves", that he was the first President of the United States. Some said that Thomas Jefferson founded the salvation army. Andrew Jackson was a hero in the Spanish-American War of 1898. Theodore Roosevelt founded the WPA, and that he "walked on a by stick with a soft voice." Less than half the 7000 students could name the specific freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights. Some of them thought that among the freedoms guaranteed in the Bill of Rights was freedom to overthrow the government and freedom of the white people of the South to lynch negroes. Only six percent of these students could name the original thirteen colonies. Equally faulty was their geography. History is inextricably tied up with geography. Some placed the Mississippi River on the Pacific Ocean. 250 thought that Portland Oregon was on the Atlantic Coast, also Texas and Nebraska. Charles Elliot

they thought was head of the Boy Scouts, that Carl Schurz was a Nazi, that Walt Whitman was a famous cartoonist and that Roger Williams was a movie star.

Such was the hazy and sloppy ideas of many of the students, graduates of our high schools on our foundations, our sources, our basic laws, outstanding personalities which are all so vital to a real grasp of what we call the American Way of Life.

I thought that this appalling ignorance of history was restricted only to Jewish students on Jewish history. It is amazing to find out how little the average student knows about Jewish history - how difficult it is for him to name the Patriarchs, to state when the Temple was destroyed, when the prophets lived, who was Judah Halevi. Go home and try to answer these questions yourselves! But I found that it isn't at all restricted to our religious schools. It is true also of our secular schools. Our students have a hodge-podge of knowledge. The remedy of course is to learn history differently and to teach it differently. Not only history for that matter, but all other subjects more systematically, more thoroughly and more scientifically. What is indicated is that we have had too much of fringes, peripheries in education and not enough of groundwork and fundamentals - basic facts. It should be illumined by direct pedagogic inspiration and imagination. We haven't done enough of what our Bible said we ought to do; study of the Torah - "Teach them diligently unto thy children." Speak of them when thou walkest, sittest down, when thou liest down, riseth up, etc. Thou shalt write them upon the doorposts of thy house, and there they shall remain." That is education. We were forced to seize every historic opportunity and recount the story of it over and over again, to refresh, to recall and to correlate our history. In the story of Passover it is said that the one who does more and more of it -- the more is he to be blessed -- in order that certain vital facts of the life of the people, the experience of the people, the education and ethics of the people become deeply engraved on the minds and heart of the people.

We should do that with American history, because American history is not an inspiration only to the American people but to the whole world. We ought to seize every opportunity, every historic opportunity to refresh our knowledge of history and to correlate it, with what is going on today.

That is why it is gratifying this week to celebrate the bi-centennial of Thomas Jefferson, one of the Founding Fathers of our country, and a great spokesman of American Democracy. Thomas Jefferson's words and acts may serve as a helpful guide to us in these times which are not very different from his own times. There is much in his words and acts and manner of life that can speak to us, be of help to us today.

The life of Thomas Jefferson was cast in one of the most fateful epochs in the history of the Western World. He lived through two great revolutions of modern time -- the American Revolution and the French Revolution, one of which he helped to make. He saw the end of Feudalism in the Old World and the emergency of a new system of society based not upon hierarchy but equality of all men before the Law. He himself was a dynamic factor in the creation of this new system of society. He was able to watch at close range the career of a would-be-world conqueror of his day - Napoloen - as we are able to watch in this day the career of another would-be-world-conqueror - Hitler, from his rise to his fall. He saw the whole of Europe practically conquered. Then he saw the rise of Nationalism among the peoples and states of Europe and the over-throw of the would-be-conqueror.

He saw his own country newly independent struggling successively between intervention in the Old World and isolation from it - our problem of today. The new United States of America was caught in the toils of French and British imperial rivalries. The new Republic was struggling hard to disentangle itself from the Old World with only partial success.

Thomas Jefferson was a leading figure, the leading figure, in the struggle which in a real sense as continued to this day. He was on one side of the

opposition in this struggle which was represented by another great American, Alexander Hamilton, a Federalist, -- the struggle between the common man and those who possessed privileges and money, between real democracy which believes in the individual and trusts the majority, which dares to experiment, which favors maximum freedoms and the various oligarchic conceptions of governments which fear and mistrust the common man, which believe that safety and stability of country lie only with the propertied classes, who would like to restrict the rights and liberties of men and sharply circumscribe their power. That struggle began at the very dawn of American national life and has continued uninterruptedly in one form or another to this day. In this struggle Thomas Jefferson was on the side of the common man.

In that turbulent revolutionary world, a century and a half ago, Jefferson held true, steadfastly through fifty years of public life, to an heroic faith in the common man though he, himself was a man of means and of an aristocratic lineage. By so doing he molded for all future time what we call classic American Democracy.

He insisted that America was different and should be different. It was not part of the Old World in a new continent. It was a new world in every sense of the word. It had seceded from the Old World not only in a political sense, but in every sense. The new world must not be patterned after the Old World, but the new must remain new, distinctive, unique. It had a pattern all of its own. Here in the new world men were to enjoy what the Old World had denied them and perhaps must deny them.

Here in this new world what counts, what was of prime importance was not class, station or rank or privilege, or state or nation. Those weren't primary things. What was of primary importance was man, the individual, the citizen. The state was made up of men, individuals, and existed to serve these individuals reality, no authority, no function apart from individual

men and women and children which the state was supposed to serve. Fascist conception of State was already defined in the Old World by certain Teutonic philosophers - Fichte and others -- in the days of Thomas Jefferson and they were completely ~~i~~ unintelligible and repugnant to him -- the ~~state~~ was created to serve the state and not vice versa. Jefferson's idea was that the state was created for the people -- "We the people". The wise citizen will of course faithfully serve the state, the government which faithfully looks after his interests. When the state ceases to look after the interests of the people and becomes autocratic, exploiting, a stumbling block in the way of the individual man and women, why the state should be changed and ultimately destroyed, preferably by peaceable methods and by revolution if necessary. Thomas Jefferson advocated the keeping alive among the people the free spirit of resistance, the spirit of resistance to government. "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it always to be kept alive...I like a little rebellion now and then...It is like a storm in the atmosphere."

He was told about the excesses which were committed by the revolutionists during the French Revolution. He wrote: "The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest, and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should ^{have} failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated; were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is." So great was his love of freedom.

In
Thomas Jefferson wanted minimum government. /His first inaugural address which was one of immortal documents of America, he pleads for "a wise and frugal government which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall ~~leave~~ leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvements." The totalitarian state would have been to Thomas Jefferson a

nightmare. He insisted, for example, on state rights. He didn't want the government ^{to} become too powerful. He insisted on State Rights not to protect slavery "as the surest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies." He wanted decentralization, a decentralized government in order to keep the states free and the people free. There were many people in his day who wanted strong, centralized government. Thomas Jefferson was afraid of constitutional government with too much power. He knew the tendency of democracies to become more voracious and more autocratic. He wasn't even sure that a constitutional government was sufficient protection for the individuals. So he was not satisfied with the Constitution of the United States, and he insisted that in order to safeguard the rights of the individual certain amendments must be written into the Constitution of the United States which would guarantee the citizens against infringements by government in certain domains of their lives which would sharply circumscribe his rights. Those ten amendments were written into it and came to be known as the Bill of Rights, one of the most important safeguards given to the individual -- safeguarding Freedom of Religion, Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Press, Freedom of Assembly, Freedom of Petition. These rights were given to them by God and not by government. No wonder he was called a dangerous and radical man. Today they are dedicating a huge monument in Washington to him. In his day he was thought of as a radical. He was a radical. Thomas Jefferson wrote this faith of his in man, in all men, and in man's inviolate rights which transcend the rights of governments and states into the Declaration of Independence. "Behold these truths to be self-evident -- that all men are created free and equal and endowed with certain unalienable rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. This Declaration of Independence carved a new highway for man!x Hitler can't subscribe to the Declaration of Independence. Franco can't subscribe to it. Stalin can't subscribe to it. But mankind today is reasserting that doctrine. When men talk today of the Four Freedoms, of the comm on man,

they are talking the language of Thomas Jefferson, re-echoing his very words.

Thomas Jefferson ~~■~~ was an individualist. He once was asked to declare himself as to what party he belonged. Thomas Jefferson was not a party man or a class man. He was a man. " I am not a federalist, because I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction, is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all. Therefore, I am not of the party of federalists. But I am much farther from that of the antifederalists...."

Thomas Jefferson believed in the common man. He believed in education. He realized that no man was perfect. He wasn't naive. But he believed that the average man had the stuff in him. Jefferson himself was a bright and educated man. He knew Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian. He was a thorough student of the natural sciences known in his day, and mathematics. He was a student all his life, a seeker after knowledge. He was amazingly versatile, with a wide range of interests. He was not only a lawyer, but an architect and a musician -- an expert violinist. His mind was eager and alert. He believed in mind. He believed in men's minds...He championed education for all men. He wanted schools, more schools, public libraries for everyone. He hoped, to "safeguard our liberties through the education of the common man." Elsewhere he wrote: "Educate the whole mass of the people. They are the only sure realization for sure preservation of our race."

The later part of his life he devoted to the establishment of the University of Virginia. He planned not only its curriculum, but also he planned the ~~art~~ architecture of the buildings, and supervised the construction of them. He introduced into the curriculum of this University the study of "Political Science". He abolished all religious texts and all religious practices ~~by~~ and

put all the students on an honor system. He was an idealist, but also a realist and a practical man.

He believed in America. And America in those days was a struggling young republic, showing the ravages of eight years of revolutionary strife. The government in a real sense was still untried, in the early stages of experiment. In his same inaugural address he said: "I believe this the strongest government on earth." He saw America advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eyes." He saw America advancing. He helped America advance in a material sense, in a territorial sense and in a spiritual sense. It was he who who achieved the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 which added a million square miles, and doubled the territory of America, so that America spread from the Eastern bank of the Mississippi to the Rocky Mountains from Northern Texas to Canada.

So America advanced, and spiritually, also. The quality of the new life in the new republic advanced spiritually. A quality of new citizenship was developed.

Thomas Jefferson wrote his own epitaph -- a very wise thing for a man to do. Every man should write his own epitaph. One shouldn't trust one's neighbor to do it. In a sense he didn't have to do it, for his career was already written in history. But this is what he wrote on his own tombstone: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father of the University of Virginia." That is all. That is the summary of his life - republicanism and democracy, religious liberty and tolerance and education and ~~enlight~~ enlightenment as represented by the founding of a University. This was Thomas Jefferson's dream of America. If this dream is still ours one hundred fifty years later, then we may accomplish, we shall be ~~xx~~ advancing rapidly to destiny and.....

DECALOGUE OF CANONS FOR OBSERVATION IN PRACTICAL LIFE
Thomas Jefferson

1. Never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.
2. Never trouble another for what you can do yourself.
3. Never spend your money before you have it.
4. Never buy what you do not want because it is cheap;
it will be dear to you.
5. Pride costs us more than hunger, thirst, or cold.
6. We never repent of having eaten too little.
7. Nothing is troublesome that we do willingly.
8. How much pain have cost us the things which have
never happened!
9. Take things always by their smooth handle.
10. When angry, count ten before you speak; if very
angry, a hundred.

1) To understand Present - you must know Past - To plan for Future^①
wise, you must draw upon experiences, the Past.
without a Knowledge of History - a nation is without Compass
"History teaches every thing, even the future"

(a) Recently Am. people disturbed - & rightly - over a revelation
of the lamentable ignorance of Am. hist. on part of College Freshmen.
N.Y. Times - Examined 2000 students - 36 colleges & Universities
in all sections of country. Lack of knowledge of most
elementary facts - & amazing amount of misinformation.
Many could not identify such names as Abraham Lincoln,
Thomas Jefferson, Andrew Jackson, & Theodore Roosevelt - not to
speak of significant ^{landmarks} movements or figures in
Am. history: 30% did not know who was Pres. of U.S. during
last world war, 20% - that also. H. was Pres. - and only
only 16% knew what contribution Thomas Jefferson made
to America.

Lincoln had "emancipated" the slaves - was first
Pres. of U.S. - Thomas Jefferson had founded the Seaboard Army
Andrew Jackson was a hero in the Spanish-American War of 1898
Theodore Roosevelt founded the W.P.A. - and that he "walked
on a log stick with a soft voice." ~~or~~ Less than 1/2
could name four specific freedoms guaranteed in the Bill
of Rights. Freedom to overthrow government - "white people
in the South the right to lynch Negroes" - only 6%
could name the 13 original colonies. Equally faulty was
their geography. Some placed the Mississippi R. on the
Pacific Ocean. 250 that that Portland, Oregon was on the

Atlantic coast, also Texas and Nebraska.

Charles W. Chesnut = head, the Boy Scouts

Carl Schurz - a Nazi
Walt Whitman - famous cartoonist

Roger Williams - a movie star

Hazy, sloppy ideas - our foundations, our sources, our
basic laws, all vital to a real

* War, what we call the American way & life

(b) I had found that to be true of Jewish history among Jews
a bridge bridge - some, then presume to be leaders -
and to participate about what is or is not Judaism
and the J. people!

(c) Kennedy - To learn & to teach! - more systematically
& systematically - less of the fringes, flowers and perbelms
Education - more of the solid fundamentals - the basic
facts, illuminated & made vital by ~~primary interpretation~~ ^{primary interpretation}

Seize every historic opportunity - to refresh, to recall
to correlate - → 20th LI - - 20th LI -

2/ It is patriotism - Am. people celebration bi-annual
of F. J. - on the Founding Fathers - the greatest spokesman
of Am. Democ. since Am. became a nation - whose
words & facts every serve as helpful guide & inspiration
to us - in these times - not very diff from his times.
We can learn much - Can speak to all generations

⑤

World
- + helped to
Ann. P.H.

(5) He watched the career of a world-famous Carpenter - Napoleon - from his rise to his fall. Saw Europe engaged in a rise of nationalist spirit which overthrew N.

② ~~was~~ saw the end of Feudalism in Old world + the emergence of a new system of society based not upon hierarchy but of equality before the law — and was himself a dynamic force in this emergence.

(a) Saw his country - newly independent - struggle necessarily
between intervention in old world & i. s. Nation from it -
- caught in the trials of French & British imperial motives
& seeking to disentangle itself - with only partial success.

(2) He was a leader - the leading figure in that struggle - which in a real sense, has never ceased to this day - the opposition to him being represented by the Federalists and Alexander Hamilton ^{the rich} - but the common man and ^{these} poor and the working classes - but real democracy that which believes in the individual - trust the majority - down to experiment - gains maximum freedom - & the various oligarchic conceptions of justice - which fear and mis-trust the common man - believe that only stability & order lie only with the privileged classes - never without the rights & liberties of men - & sharply circumscribe the powers of representative gov.

4/ In that turbulent, revolutionary world - he held
true, steadfastly thru 50 yrs of public life, to an heroic
faith in the common man - tho he himself was a man

means of an aristocratic society - and by so doing
marked for all future time the classic Amer. character.

① America was different! It was not part, the old
world in a new garment! It was a new world! It had
seeded ^{in ways that political sense} from the old world. It might even remake the old
world. ^(Hampden - Bunker) It had a pattern all its own! Here men were
to enjoy what the old world had denied them -

② Here - what counts - what is of prime consideration -
is not class, station, inherited rank & privilege, or state or nation,
but man - The ^{state} ~~nation~~ was made up of indiv. citizens - has
no reality, no authority, no function - apart from them.
Fastest conception of state - already defunct in the old
world by certain Tentative phils. in days of T. J. - were
completely unworkable & ^{state created by people in the past} ~~unworkable~~ ^{to him} State
exists to serve the citizen - not vice versa - The
wise citizen will faithfully serve the state which ^{faithfully}
looks after his interests. Other wise he will & should
destroy it by ^{republican} ~~revolution~~ ^{if necessary} ~~if necessary~~ ^{for}
~~the people~~ ^{the people} ~~to make~~ ^{the people} ~~changing to meet their changing needs~~

~~③ The modern concept of a limited government is a cheap
old influence dog. It is a cheap dog. It is a cheap dog. It is a cheap dog.
and it is a cheap dog. It is a cheap dog. It is a cheap dog. It is a cheap dog.
The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it always
to be kept alive. It is a little rebellion now & then... It is like giving in the atmosphere (p. 107)~~
④ He wanted a minimum of govt - In his First Inaugural
he pleaded for "a wise and frugal govt, which shall restrain men
from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free
to regulate their own pursuits of industry & improvement.
The Totalitarian State was a nightmare to him."

He insisted on State Rights (not to protect slavery) "as the
surest bulwarks against anti-republican tendencies"

~~Decried~~ ^{They were many men in his day who demanded a strong,}
^{centralized} ~~part~~ ^{with} ~~unlimited~~ ^{power} ~~for~~ ^{It was afraid of it.}
- of a centralized govt with too much power. Would encroach upon
rights of Individual. Not satisfied with Constitution - Championed
Bill of Rights - maintainance, Ind. rights - 10 Amendments
guaranteeing citizens against interference by the govt. in
some very important domains, these are - Freedom ^{Religion}

Speeches, Press, Assembly, Petitions. "A wild and dangerous
the opinions given on the subject of Civil Govt" (Bill for Abol. Slavery) Radical

(4) He wrote his faith in the man - in the equality of all
men - and in the man's inviolable right ^{which he grasped} where thousands the
rights of poor states - in the Deal - Independence "his hope"

- Carved a ^{his} highway for Man -
no Hitler - can subscribe to it. But marked
her - and is reasserting it with its blood to day.

When men belong to-day the of freedom -
the coming century the common man - they
echo T. J. (4th Strong Individualist (77))

(5) Believed in Education - Known a highly educated
man - Latin, Greek, French, Spanish, Italian - Natural sciences
and mathematics - a student all his life - An amazingly

versatile man - expert without scientist - lawyer,
free schools at a time - sharply retracted - public
libraries

Championed education for all - superior of an illiterate
Gov. of Pa. member of Congress Mount to France Says of State under Washington

"About all things I hope the education, the common people will be attended to; convinced that on their good sense we may rely with the most security for the preservation of a due degree of liberty" he wrote to Madison. Elsewhere he stated: "Educate and inform the white mass, the people. They are the only sure reliance for the preservation of our liberty."

His private library - nucleus of impressional library and his last years devoted to establishment of U. of Virginia - ^{the most liberal writt. library in the world in its day} when he planned not only curriculum but also architecture and construction → made pol. sc. an important subject study - abolished all rel. tests & practices - put all students under the honors system.

Idealist + Realist - (Jest)

⑥ Believed in America: "I believe this the strongest govt. on earth". "Fischer - Deas." "Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the govt of himself. Can he then be trusted with the govt of others? Or, have we found angels in the forms of Kings, to govern him? Let history answer this question." (193)
He saw America "advancing rapidly to destinies beyond the reach of mortal eye". - ~~Still must be our vision~~

⑦ Louisiana Purchase - 1803 - 15M. - a million sq. miles - doubled size of America - E. bank, Miss. to Rocky Mts. from Northern Texas to Canadian Border. But also spiritually - in quality of its life - to parts of people - Still must be our vision!

5) ^{For} his Tomb - ~~He~~ he chose the epitaph: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author, the Declaration, American Independence (25), the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and father, the

University of Virginia" Now it is - the true summary of his life

① Republicanism + Democracy ② Religious Liberty + Tolerance

③ Education + Enlightenment. Isn't this the Am. Dream?



2 "I am not a federalist, because I never submitted the whole system of my opinions to the creed of any party of men whatever, in religion, in philosophy, in politics, or in anything else, where I was capable of thinking for myself. Such an addiction, is the last degradation of a free and moral agent. If I could not go to heaven but with a party, I would not go there at all. Therefore, I am not of the party of federalists. But I am much farther from that of the antifederalists . . . "

1 "The liberty of the whole earth was depending on the issue of the contest (the French Revolution), and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some of the martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed I would have seen half the earth desolated; were there but an Adam and an Eve left in every country, and left free, it would be better than as it now is."

3 "While in Europe, I often amused myself with contemplating the characters of the then reigning sovereigns of Europe. Louis the XVI. was a fool, of my own knowledge, and in despite of the answers made for him at his trial. The King of Spain was a fool, and of Naples the same. They passed their lives in hunting, and despatched two couriers a week, one thousand miles, to let each other know what game they had killed the preceding days. The King of Sardinia was a fool. All these were Bourbons. The Queen of Portugal, a Braganza, was an idiot by nature. And so was the King of Denmark. Their sons, as regents, exercised the powers of government. The King of Prussia, successor to the great Frederick, was a mere hog in body as well as in mind. Gustavus of Sweden, and Joseph of Austria, were really crazy, and George of England, you know, was in a strait-waistcoat. ~~There remained, then, none but old Catharine, who had been too lately picked up to have lost her common sense.~~ In this state Bonaparte found Europe; and it was this state of its rulers which lost it with scarce a struggle. These animals had become without mind and powerless; and so will every hereditary monarch be after a few generations. . . "