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A recent article in these pages argued that Thomas Jefferson was so deeply racist that he should be expelled from the American pantheon. But examining the problems this ambiguous figure poses for Americans reveals how the American principles of democracy and equality were entwined with the country's practice of slavery and racism, and helps to explain why America has had such difficulty creating an interracial society

by Benjamin Schwarz

DMIRERS of Thomas Jefferson have long quoted his statement about black men and women that is inscribed on the Jefferson Memorial: "Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free." But they and the inscription, as Conor Cruise O'Brien pointed out in *Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist* (October, 1996, Atlantic), omit Jefferson's subsequent clause: "Nor is it less certain that the two races, equally free, cannot live in the same government." Those who write about the troubling aspects of the Jeffersonian heritage are often criticized as naively applying today's standards to the past. But critics of O'Brien's assessment of Jefferson should remember the deceptive inscription on the memorial. O'Brien is to a large extent reacting to a history of distortion by Jefferson hagiographers who have created a Jefferson to suit their purposes, applying their own contemporary standards while picking and choosing among Jefferson's words. Still, it is important to ask why the hagiographers have tried at best to excuse or at worst to sanitize Jefferson. The answer, of course, is that he is too valuable to lose. They want to enlist the man who wrote the Declaration of Independence on the side of racial tolerance -- a value that, we believe, springs from the Declaration itself. What would it mean for America if its very inventor stood for the things that O'Brien reports?

From the archives

"Thomas Jefferson: Radical and Racist," by Conor Cruise O'Brien (1996). O'Brien contended that Jefferson's flaws are beyond redemption.

Web-only Sidebar: "Counterpoints" (1996). Jefferson scholar Douglas L. Wilson responded to Conor Cruise O'Brien's argument.

"Thomas Jefferson and the Character Issue," by Douglas L. Wilson (1992). A Jefferson scholar reflected on Jefferson's life -- and the difficulties that may impede the historical assessment of motive and character.

"Jefferson and Slavery," by A. D. White (1862). "Let us, by the simplest and fairest process possible, try to come at his real opinions on Slavery, -- just as they grew when he did so much to found the Republic."

"The Art of Being President, Gathered From the Experience of Thomas Jefferson," by James Parton (1873). James Parton examines "the leading traits of Mr. Jefferson's administration, with a view to getting light upon the question, whether he satisfied the people of his time by doing right, or by

adroitly pretending to do right."

"The Presidential Election of 1800," by James Parton (1873). An account of Jefferson's campaign and election.

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As the controversy surrounding Jefferson shows, the most admirable and the most repulsive tendencies in our country are often rooted in the same soil. But the study of America's past shuns ambiguity. Most of those who write about American history can be divided into two camps. Those who follow the orthodox line tend toward the panegyric, celebrating America's past, while revisionists excoriate it and condemn its exploitation of minorities and women. Neither approach leads to a subtle understanding of history. Both groups suppress interpretations that would undermine their own positions, and both have used Jefferson for their purposes. As O'Brien points out, panegyrists ignore or make lame excuses for those of Jefferson's utterances and acts that today seem racist. Revisionists just as avidly disregard evidence that would make Jefferson more complicated than the hypocritical racist they often present.

Surprisingly, O'Brien, in his article and in the book, *The Long Affair*, from which it was derived, combines the two approaches in his assessment of Jefferson. Like the revisionists, he attacks Jefferson for his racial views. But unlike the revisionists, who assert that America's racism and hypocrisy are Jefferson's writ large, O'Brien seems to perceive Jefferson virtually alone as embodying all that is unappealing in the nation's founding, and suggests that Jefferson be expelled from what he defines as the otherwise largely tolerant and liberal "official version" of the American civil religion, which encompasses the other Founding Fathers, the Declaration (which O'Brien would divorce from its author), and the Constitution. Thus, like the panegyrists, whom he justifiably faults for removing Jefferson's troublesome racial views from their assessment of the man, O'Brien would sever America's inventor from his invention. With Jefferson removed, O'Brien's view of America's civil religion resembles the rosy picture painted by the panegyrists O'Brien criticizes.

Jefferson: Egalitarian and
Anti-Capitalist

'BRIEN'S call to eject Jefferson from the American pantheon is bad on two counts. First, O'Brien seems to assume that the worst parts of America's past are

unconnected to the others. Second, he would deprive the United States of the figure central to what is singular and most admirable about the promise of American life -- a promise that is already largely forgotten.

Although O'Brien is more accurate than not concerning Jefferson's racial views, he misinterprets Jefferson's alarm over the power of the federal government. O'Brien's mistake threatens to vitiate the very aspects of the Jeffersonian heritage that Americans most sorely need. Jefferson's opinions on the authority of the federal government and on race, O'Brien maintains, are "the two major factors" that warrant his expulsion from his "place . . . in the American civil religion." But O'Brien mistakenly conflates these issues, assuming that because the South opposed federal power in the Civil War and during the civil-rights crisis of the 1960s, there is a necessary connection between what is often called "states' rights" and those unsavory institutions slavery and segregation. He even argues that slavery was the real issue dividing Alexander Hamilton and his fellow Federalists from Jefferson and his allies, who were suspicious of growing federal strength.

Far from being an exclusively southern doctrine, however, states' rights also flourished in New England, and two U.S. Supreme Court justices from Pennsylvania were among its strongest constitutional defenders. Northern anti-slavery radicals used the doctrine to oppose the federal Fugitive Slave Law by arguing that returning slaves to the South was contrary to the moral norms of northern communities. In contrast, many slaveowners in the early nineteenth century defended a strong national government as the best bulwark against both slave revolts and the "leveling tendencies" of non-slaveholders.

Jefferson opposed the Federalist program not to support slavery but because he was a democrat. Indeed, as the historian Frank Owsley has argued, "Any believer . . . in the right of a people to govern themselves would naturally adhere in the early days of our history to the doctrine of State rights." Some seventy years ago the progressive literary historian Vernon Parrington, in lamenting the association of localism with the support of slavery in the period leading up to the Civil War, explained that the preservation of democracy itself lay at the heart of anti-federalism.

That the principle of local self-government should have been committed to the cause of slavery, that it was loaded with an incubus certain to alienate the liberalism of the North, may be accounted one of the tragedies of American history. [The association of localism with the support of slavery] was disastrous to American democracy, for it removed the last brake on the movement of consolidation . . . surrendering the country to the principle of capitalistic exploitation. . . . The principle of democracy . . .

received a staggering blow from the enlistment of northern liberalism under the banners of a consolidating nationalism.

In opposing the growing power of a centralized government dominated by big capital, Jefferson anticipated much in our political and economic system that we now regret. Commentators are concerned today about a widening gap between rich and poor, and the concentration of political and corporate power; Jefferson and his supporters argued long ago that the national state was in danger of becoming the creature and servant of an emerging national economic elite. Pundits complain that the United States has become merely a "procedural democracy"; Jefferson, understanding the difference between voters and citizens, feared a centralized government and economy exactly because they would deny citizens a rich political life. Whereas the left acquiesced to the wage system, confining its efforts to ensuring higher wages and generous social security, Jefferson insisted that the wage system itself was profoundly undemocratic and exploitative, by definition stripping workers of their economic independence. And whereas conservatives today simultaneously espouse the free market and "family" and "community" values, Jefferson dreaded capitalism precisely because it reduces individuals to abstractions -- anonymous buyers and sellers whose claims on one another are determined solely by their capacity to pay. Human ties, he believed, bind men and women into communities.

It is thus surprising that Americans genuflect to Jefferson, because the political economy of corporate capitalism, which the United States has embraced since the late nineteenth century (when, as the historian Charles Beard has written, Jefferson's America "had become a land of millionaires and the supreme direction of its economy had passed from the owners of farms and isolated plants and banks to a few men and institutions near the center of its life"), represents a repudiation of his principles and the triumph of those of his political enemy, Hamilton. Indeed, as his detractors gloatingly point out, Jefferson is the great loser in American history.

The extent to which Jefferson is America's rejected prophet is clear upon looking at his analysis of the relationship between economic and political life. His preferred course for America is often dismissed as backward-looking "agrarianism." The true agrarians of Jefferson's day advocated large-scale commercial farming -- like the great plantations of Jefferson and his peers -- as the kind that was most economically efficient; but Jefferson, deeming wealth second to other social ends, advocated the small family farm. His idealization of the virtuous "husbandman" and his

belief that all (white) men should be given access to free land arose less from a romantic attachment to the soil than from his understanding of the central importance of economic independence and from his determination to thwart the development of a market-based society.

Jefferson replaced the timeless assumption that most men would labor in dependence on a few landowners, masters, and employers with the astonishing proposition that (white) men should control their own working lives. As long as these men had the option of making a living on their own farms, Jefferson reasoned, they could not be forced into an exploitative wage-labor relationship. Such independent citizens could participate directly in a political process based on local self-rule. Just as important, true community life could develop, because economically self-sufficient and roughly equal citizens would not need to pursue selfish interests at the expense of the common good. In other words, the economic system would not force people to "eat . . . one another."

Jefferson's vision of economic and participatory democracy, making "every citizen an acting member of government," has appealed throughout American history to such eccentrics as Orestes Brownson, Walt Whitman, the nineteenth-century Populists, the Nashville Agrarians, and elements of the "old right" and the 1960s "new left." Whether or not that vision was ever realistic, Jefferson was surely right that economic and political consolidation go hand in hand -- and just as Hamilton intended, the national state has been governed by and for great wealth. Even ostensibly progressive measures are more accurately described by the historian Catherine McNicol Stock's term "corporate-friendly liberalism." Thus, for instance, federal farm programs -- supposedly designed to support that bastion of Jeffersonian economic autonomy the family farm -- have long channeled government support and loans disproportionately to the richest farmers, who have effectively become adjuncts to multinational agribusiness. If, as O'Brien urges, Jefferson is removed from the American pantheon, then we will have no figure to remind us of the democratic promise we lost in pursuing Hamilton's vision. That Jefferson's grand aspirations for what the Populists would later call a "cooperative commonwealth" today seem quaint and irrelevant, and that the militias are perhaps the only prominent political force in America that responds to Jefferson's warnings about the consolidation of power, tell us less about Jefferson than about our own cramped hopes for democracy.

Picking and Choosing

ISTORY is not like a cluster of grapes from which the rotten ones can be neatly discarded. Failing to put Jefferson into a larger context by segregating Jefferson's views from those he believes to be truly American, O'Brien misses the ways in which Jefferson's ideas and opinions reflect broader problems in our past and are bound to our present.

While O'Brien censures Jefferson for his racism, he does not make enough of his slaveholding. In this he follows the current attitude: to ascribe too much significance to slaveholding is to risk being indicted for unsophisticated "presentism" -- for condemning the Founders using a moral standard that did not exist in their time. This position too easily leads many commentators, including at times O'Brien, to treat slaveholding as if it were no more than a fashion of the times and therefore a relatively inconsequential aspect of the Founders' lives. It considers the Founders essentially as twentieth-century liberals who happened to own slaves.

But it was inevitable that slaveholding would be ingrained in the Founders' psychology and outlook, as Jefferson himself recognized in an often-quoted passage.

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. . . . If a parent could find no motive either in his philanthropy or his self-love, for restraining the intemperance of passion towards his slave, it should always be a sufficient one that his child is present. But generally it is not sufficient. 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 the 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.

Not only was tyranny taught and encouraged in the home and even sanctioned by the state; it was, of course, necessary to sustain the institution of slavery. No doubt many contemporary readers are shocked by O'Brien's revelation that Jefferson had his slaves flogged, and severely punished those who tried to run away. But readers' surprise -- and O'Brien's indignation -- is naive. How else could slaves be forced to work and prevented from fleeing? No matter what they accomplished of value, our country's heroes who were slaveholders subscribed to a system built on unlimited violence and were perforce willing to order that men and women

be beaten, maimed, and even killed, as an 1829 decision by the North Carolina Supreme Court Judge Thomas Ruffin illustrated. Although admitting that his logic had horrible implications, Ruffin, with cold-eyed precision, demolished the argument that a master could be charged with assault on a slave.

The end [of slavery] is the profit of the master, his security and public safety; the subject, one doomed in his own person, and his posterity, to live without knowledge, and without the capacity to make anything his own, and to toil that another may reap the fruits. . . . such services can only be expected from one who has no will of his own; who surrenders his will in implicit obedience to that of another. Such obedience is the consequence only of uncontrolled authority over the body. There is nothing else which can operate to produce the effect. The power of the master must be absolute to render the submission of the slave perfect. I must freely confess my sense of the harshness of this proposition, I feel it as deeply as any man can. And as a principle of moral right, every person in his retirement must repudiate it. But in the actual condition of things, it must be so. There is no remedy. This discipline belongs to the state of slavery.

As slaveholders, then, George Washington, James Madison, Patrick Henry, John Marshall, and James Monroe, no less than Jefferson, belonged to, as one contemporary observer noted, "a very different race of men."

Building Democracy on Slavery

ARADOXICALLY, the Founders would probably not have developed many of the ideas for which we most admire them were it not for their participation in the brutal reality of slavery. In *The Long Affair*, O'Brien prefaces his chapter on Jefferson's racial views with a well-known quotation from Samuel Johnson. Johnson, who was hostile to the American Revolution, asked rhetorically and sarcastically, "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of negroes?" Like many of the revisionist scholars he cites, O'Brien uses the quotation to bolster his argument that Jefferson was a hypocrite. Johnson, however, unintentionally put his finger on a crucial relationship.

Not only did a slaveholder draft the Declaration but a slaveholder -- Madison -- drafted the Bill of Rights and was the principal author of the Constitution. Americans elected slaveholders to the presidency for thirty-two of the first thirty-six years of that office's history. Indeed, it is impossible to understand how the Founders

conceived of liberty, equality, and self-government without reference to slavery, which deeply and disturbingly embedded itself in their consciousness. American revolutionaries voiced their determination not to become "slaves" of Britain: this topic, in fact, was the most frequent one in revolutionary discourse.

Furthermore, Jefferson first proposed that the Great Seal of the new country depict "the children of Israel in the wilderness, led by a cloud by day and a pillar by night" (the same imagery, ironically, that black Americans applied to their own plight); he accepted Franklin's alternative of Moses causing the waters to cover the Pharaoh and his chariots as they pursued their slaves. This made the analogy between white Americans and escaped slaves even clearer.

Many contemporary observers connected what Edmund Burke characterized as "a love of freedom" to an intimate familiarity with slavery. In 1775 Burke observed that "these people of the southern colonies are much more strongly attached to liberty, than those to the northward," which he attributed to the southerners' "vast multitude of slaves." Slaveholders, Burke asserted, were "by far the most proud and jealous of their freedom." Timothy Ford, a South Carolina lawyer, explained why. Liberty, he wrote,

is a principle which naturally and spontaneously contrasts with slavery. In no country on earth can the line of distinction ever be marked so boldly. . . . Here there is a standing subject of comparison, which must be ever perfect and ever obvious. . . . The constant example of slavery stimulates a free man to avoid being confounded with the blacks. . . . slavery, so far from being inconsistent, has, in fact, a tendency to stimulate and perpetuate the spirit of liberty.

Knowing full well what they had done to Africans by enslaving them, America's revolutionaries would not permit the same to be done to themselves in any form.

Slavery not only induced Americans to embrace liberty ardently but also nourished the American notion of democracy, while racism encouraged equality among whites, an unpopular idea on the Continent. In 1860 the Alabama statesman William L. Yancey matter-of-factly explained the foundations of American democracy to a northern audience. "Your fathers and my fathers," he said, "built this government on two ideas: the first is that the white race is the citizen, and the master race, and the white man is the equal of every other white man. The second idea is that the Negro is the inferior race." Yancey's remarks strike us today as outrageous, but his interpretation of the basis of American democracy and equality among whites is uncomfortably close to the truth.

Although Jeffersonians looked to a future America made up of small, self-sufficient farms, and Hamiltonians saw manufacturing

towns, in fact one of the greatest sources of wealth in the Colonial period and in the first part of the nineteenth century was large-scale commercial agriculture. The great plantations, of course, depended on a tremendous labor force. At first this force had been composed mostly of indentured servants, who were poor, landless whites -- a situation that replicated the problems of inequality and social control which had bedeviled England for centuries and had led to Bacon's Rebellion, in Virginia, in 1676. English political thinkers were obsessed with the threat that an unruly and undisciplined lower class posed to republican government. In America, however, slavery solved this problem. When black slaves took the place of lower-caste whites, Americans achieved a society in which most of the poor were safely held in bondage. Thus Augustus John Foster, an early-nineteenth-century English diplomat, helped to answer Samuel Johnson's query: Virginians, citizens of "the leading state in the Union," could "profess an unbounded love of liberty and of democracy in consequence of the mass of the people, who in other countries might become mobs, being there nearly altogether composed of their own Negro slaves."

Furthermore, racism, as the historian Edmund Morgan argues, "became an essential, if unacknowledged, ingredient of [America's] republican ideology." The equality and unity of white Americans of different ethnic and religious backgrounds and classes were built largely on a common hatred and fear of black Americans. The Irish, for instance, who were initially regarded in this country as at best semi-barbarous, were able to gain a place in what was called the new "American race," a melting pot of white men, by insisting on being recognized as "not black." Even Abraham Lincoln had a dream for the United States that was at once egalitarian and tragically limited. It was to be a place where "white men may find a home . . . an outlet for free white people everywhere, the world over -- in which Hans and Baptiste and Patrick . . . may . . . better their conditions in life." An America that had originally thrown up a host of political and social distinctions based on birth and property became a far more open and egalitarian society for all those above the racial line. The same northern state constitutions that restricted black suffrage -- regardless of property qualifications -- expanded the suffrage to include propertyless whites. As W.E.B. Du Bois wrote, even the most economically exploited whites were "compensated in part by a . . . public and psychological wage. . . . because they were white."

The troublesome response to Samuel Johnson's question is not that there was a gross inconsistency between principles and practice; rather, in many ways it was the practice that made the principles possible.

Insuperable Prejudice

F Jefferson diverged from the mainstream in stating a belief in the inherent intellectual inferiority of blacks, as O'Brien correctly argues, he was much more in line with contemporary thought in his fear of blacks as alien and dangerous. To Jefferson, blacks were crudely sexual creatures, and he presented as a fact, requiring no evidence or support, their sexual preference for whites, which was as great as that of "the Oranootan for the black woman over those of his own species." Such fears, which led Jefferson to argue that the freed slave had to be literally "removed beyond the reach of mixture" or he would soon be "staining the blood of his master," seem to have formed the core of the prejudice against blacks shared by nearly all white Americans.

As early as 1790 George Washington's protégé Ferdinando Fairfax expressed what would prove to be the great obstacle in the minds of many whites to the emancipation of African-Americans and, later, to granting them full civil rights. Fairfax, who wrote the first detailed plan for the emancipation and colonization of slaves, argued for the latter measure on the grounds that

there is something very repugnant to the general feelings even in the thought of their being allowed that free intercourse, and the privilege of intermarriage with the white inhabitants, which the other freemen of our country enjoy. . . . and as a proof, where is the man of all those who have liberated their slaves, who would marry a son or a daughter to one of them? and if he would not, who would?

These "prejudices, sentiments, or whatever they may be called," Fairfax concluded, "would be found to operate so powerfully as to be insurmountable."

Even if George Tucker, a Virginia intellectual, carefully demolished Jefferson's arguments concerning blacks' intellectual inferiority -- demonstrating how they were inconsistent with logic and with Jefferson's own beliefs -- he nonetheless was as firmly convinced as Jefferson that blacks should be freed and removed from the United States. Emancipated blacks, he argued, "would never rest satisfied with any thing short of perfect equality" -- which meant "amalgamating" blacks and whites, a fate to which, he held, whites would never accede.

What makes Jefferson abhorrent to O'Brien is not that he was a slaveholder but precisely this conviction that slaves should be both freed and expatriated. It would be comforting to characterize this belief, as O'Brien does, as "the Jeffersonian doctrine." Jefferson, O'Brien insists, must be shunned because a multiracial society cannot embrace as a "prophet" a man who believed that free blacks had no place in America. But by this criterion virtually

every major white political figure from the Revolution to the Civil War must also be denounced -- including Madison, Monroe, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Daniel Webster, Francis Scott Key, and Lincoln. Some of these men, like Jefferson, seem to have been personally repelled by the idea of admitting blacks to what was commonly called "the body of the people." For others the motivation to expatriate African-Americans sprang not so much from a low view of blacks as from a low view of whites.

The colonization movement, which advocated transporting free blacks to Africa or elsewhere and which included many of the most distinguished statesmen of the early and mid nineteenth century, officially blamed what it called "invincible" white prejudice, rather than innate racial difference, for the "degradation" of free blacks in American society. Colonizationists pointed to the legal and social prohibitions that free blacks suffered in the supposedly enlightened North -- where, as Alexis de Tocqueville observed, racial prejudice was in fact worse than in the South. In the North "free" blacks were barred from most schools and juries and could not attend white schools, worship at white churches, or labor in white workshops. They were banned from many public conveyances and forbidden to enter many lecture halls, libraries, and museums (and then were disparaged for failing to elevate themselves). The "horror" felt by whites at the "idea of an intimate union with the free blacks," the Maryland colonizationist Robert G. Harper wrote despairingly in 1824, "precludes the possibility of such a state of equality, between them and us, as alone could make us one people."

Using arguments strikingly similar to those of twentieth-century black nationalists, the Connecticut Colonization Society asserted in 1828, with resignation, that whites would never allow blacks to thrive in America: "The African in this country belongs by birth to the lowest station in society; and from that station he can never rise, be his talent, his enterprise, his virtues what they may." Blacks would thus have to leave the United States if they wanted to claim their right to the pursuit of happiness. Although it is tempting to dismiss the colonizationists as unimaginative and trapped within the confines of their times, some of them -- especially Madison, Clay, and Lincoln -- are among the most politically imaginative Americans ever to have lived. They were forced to think deeply and deliberately, as statesmen rarely do, about the far future of their country. Knowing the enormous financial and moral cost of the course they proposed, they could nevertheless see no alternative. Indeed, what is most depressing about the colonizationists' arguments is their prophetic understanding of the power and persistence of prejudice and of the damage it would inflict on the United States.

Whether whites could overcome this prejudice and achieve racial equality -- not whether blacks' capabilities were inferior -- formed the crux of the argument between the colonizationists and the

abolitionists. Most abolitionists, as evangelical Christians, believed that people could be cleansed of their sins through direct access to God and hence "born again" into a life of holiness. Through Christianity, they held, white Americans could subdue their seemingly fixed and insurmountable racial fears and hatreds. Colonizationists were far more pessimistic. Lacking the abolitionist faith in a God that would transform the human heart, they were convinced that society did not have the power to change itself radically even if its course was morally wrong. "Is [prejudice] any less obstinate," a prominent colonizationist asked, "because it is criminal?"

Colonizationists perceived that racial fear and hatred both damaged the people they were directed against and weakened society as a whole, by keeping the population from functioning cohesively. Madison was certain that a healthy society demanded the "complete incorporation" of blacks. But he could not see how such an ideal could be achieved, because he, too, was convinced that the "objections to a thorough incorporation of the two people are, with most of the whites, insuperable." Anticipating the racial problems that would prevail for a century after emancipation -- and that in important ways still exist today -- Madison argued that if free blacks remained in America, the divided society that would result would never be at peace with itself.

If the blacks . . . be retained amid the whites, under the degrading privation of equal rights, political or social, they must be always dissatisfied with their condition, as a change only from one to another species of oppression; always secretly confederated against the ruling and privileged class; and always uncontrolled by some of the most cogent motives to moral and respectable conduct. . . . Nor is it fair, in estimating the danger of collisions with the whites, to charge it wholly on the side of the blacks. There would be reciprocal antipathies doubling the danger.

Tocqueville, in an assessment that could apply to much of modern America, concluded with despair that "the two races are fastened to each other without intermingling; and they are alike unable to separate entirely or combine." He recognized this limbo to be "the most formidable of all the ills that threaten the future of the Union."

America: As Much Black as White

What is perhaps the most famous definition of "American" ever written, J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur simply defined African-Americans out of the American identity: "What then is the American, this new man? He is either an European, or the descendant of an European." But in 1782, when Crèvecoeur, a French writer who had lived in the United States,

wrote, African-Americans made up almost 20 percent of the U.S. population. Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln all regarded blacks as a foreign element, but black Americans continually reminded the advocates of colonization, "This is our home and this is our country. Beneath its sod lie the bones of our fathers; for it some of them fought, bled, and died. Here we were born, and here we will die."

Jefferson, of all people, should have known how intimately and indelibly blacks had affected American life. His first memory, after all, was of being carried by a slave. Jefferson listed his slaves in his Farm Book as members of "my family"; some were literally related to him. His mulatto slave, Sally Hemings, whether or not she was his mistress, was his wife's half-sister. Monticello was always a black-and-white household. In a letter to his daughter in which he mentioned that her niece sent her love, he added, "She always counts you as the object of affection after her mama and uckin [Uncle] Juba." Uncle Juba, or Jupiter, was Jefferson's body servant, and the two had been together since Jefferson attended William and Mary. Jefferson obviously did not think it unnatural that his granddaughter loved this black man more than any other member of her "family" except her mother. In Jefferson's Virginia, the historian Mechal Sobel writes, "Blacks were holding white babies, giving them their first and most significant eye and body contact. They were physically caring for them and teaching them their first words. . . . They were their mummies, aunts, uncles, and playmates, as well as their servants. Their presence and influence were both physical and spiritual." Southern aristocrats' famous manners may have been learned from this close association with blacks. Slaves, often subject to arbitrary punishment, learned to be hypersensitive to other people's moods -- a skill they passed on to the children in their care.

The Virginia that Jefferson knew was described by a contemporary as "New Guinea" because of its large population of African-Americans and the influence they exerted. African attitudes and casts of mind -- aesthetics, perceptions of time, and, most important, approaches to religious experience -- penetrated and altered the dominant English culture there. Significantly, Virginia was the largest and most populous colony and was the starting point of origin of many emigrants to the South, the West, and the Northwest. Thus Virginia's experience of blacks and whites sharing and molding a common culture greatly influenced American culture. Throughout American history whites learned an enormous amount from African-Americans in language, religion, storytelling, music, manners, and cuisine -- so much so that, as Ralph Ellison recognized, "Most American whites are culturally part Negro American without even realizing it." What the writer James McBride Dabbs observed about fellow southerners in the mid twentieth century was just as true for Washington, Jefferson, Madison, and the other Virginians who, as a group, played the most prominent role in the United States' political life in its first

three decades: "The basic fact of our lives," Dabbs wrote, is that "the white Southerner is the man he is because he has lived among Negroes, and they are the people they are because they have lived with him."

America's Other Religion

MORE widely used term to describe what O'Brien means by "the American civil religion" is what the Swedish sociologist and economist Gunnar Myrdal called "the American Creed": the ideals, enunciated chiefly in the Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, of "the essential dignity of the individual human being, of the fundamental equality of all men, and of certain inalienable rights to freedom, justice, and a fair opportunity," which express the "essential meaning" of America. O'Brien maintains that these notions, which are basically the natural-rights philosophy of the American Revolution, form the primary "bonding force" that will increasingly be called on to unite blacks and whites. But the problem is that the creed has always been inadequate to this task.

The creed did, of course, influence attitudes about enslaving people. However instrumental slavery was in the development and acceptance of the creed, Americans recognized that the institution was theoretically inconsistent with such high-minded ideals. "If after we have made such a declaration to the world," a New Jersey man wrote in 1780 in a typical fit of self-criticism, "we continue to hold our fellow creatures in slavery, our words must rise up in judgement against us." Jefferson, Madison, and Lincoln -- the authors of the primary texts of the American creed -- all eloquently made the same argument. Jefferson, unlike many in the mid nineteenth century, scorned justifying slavery with his "scientific" racism. "Whatever be [blacks'] degree of talent it is no measure of their rights," he argued. "Because Sir Isaac Newton was superior to others in understanding, he was not therefore lord of the person or property of others." But these men, who believed that slavery and the American creed were antithetical, still could not conceive of, and had no interest in pursuing, the kind of bonding force between black and white Americans that O'Brien assigns to the American creed.

The creed, as they consistently held, commanded that America set its black inhabitants free. But it did not address what was, as Tocqueville discerned, and what remains the fundamental quandary of American life: it did not command white men and women to overcome the "permanent and insuperable" prejudice that Madison decried, and incorporate black men and women into "the body of the people." Whites in the northern states, after all, were true to the creed's refined and abstract theories of natural rights when they emancipated slaves, even as they daily provided incontrovertible proof of their hatred of blacks, their unwillingness to accept them as equals, and their refusal to face the reality that

the United States was indeed home to African-Americans. In short, the American creed, to reverse the plea of the abolitionists, demanded that the African-American be recognized as a man with certain elemental rights, but it did not -- and does not -- demand that he be treated as a brother.

The evangelical Christianity that persuaded abolitionists that blacks could be incorporated into American society because whites could be redeemed was alien to the Enlightenment philosophy of the American creed. Although Jefferson, Madison, and the other sophisticated aristocrats who formulated the creed were in many ways prophetic about the future course of America, they were -- like today's political and cultural elites -- temperamentally incapable of appreciating the power and potential of the evangelical forces set loose in their country. Jefferson predicted in 1822 that Unitarianism would become the American religion at the very moment when the country was undergoing the Second Great Awakening, in which evangelical Christianity permanently transformed it. Indeed, America's Founders were advocating a bland and neutral deism at what the historian Gordon Wood calls "the time of greatest religious chaos and originality in American history." Methodist membership doubled during the decade in which Jefferson made his prediction; Baptist membership increased tenfold in the thirty years after the Revolution. Evangelical movements would eventually comprise two thirds of the Protestant ministers and church members in the United States -- more than 35 percent of all Americans.

Thus the authors of the American creed were blind to the very bonding force that could potentially redeem America from the racial fear and hatred that they and the colonizationists believed to be insurmountable. Between the Revolution and the War of 1812 Virginians freed more slaves than they did at any other period before the Civil War. Although this might seem to point to the power of revolutionary ideology, historians in fact attribute these manumissions largely to the influence of evangelicalism, which characterized slavery not just as an abridgment of natural rights but also as a "horrid evil." Virginia's white evangelicals became convinced of the sinfulness of slavery because of the shared spiritual life of whites and blacks. Even if Jefferson, who represented the acme of political and cultural sophistication, believed that blacks and whites could never join together in society, Baptists and Methodists -- black slaves and lower-class whites -- were in fact trying to create an interracial society.

Jefferson's Virginia was undergoing a revolution of which he was oblivious. In a society stratified by rank, precedence, and racial caste, common people embraced evangelicalism, which allowed them to shape their culture and their spiritual life rather than be forced to depend on the mediations of political and religious elites. The churches that these early Baptists and Methodists formed were close-knit biracial communities. Often black church members

outnumbered white members, and blacks preached to whites. (In fact, nearly a third of all Methodists in America in 1800 were black.) Blacks and whites embraced one another as "brothers" and "sisters" in Christ: being "born again" elevated all believers to a common level. In their churches blacks and whites testified and prayed together, were baptized in the same ceremonies, were held to the same moral expectations, and were buried in the same cemeteries. Just as important, this early interaction profoundly and permanently influenced the style and substance of southern evangelical Christianity. Even though black and white churches separated after the Civil War, both continued to bear the stamp of early integration. Du Bois called the poor southern whites' church "a plain copy of Negro thought and methods." Today the "southern" evangelical churches throughout the country still possess that character.

As evangelicalism entered the mainstream of southern society, forces extrinsic to the church began to exert pressure. By the early 1800s white Baptists and Methodists had begun to beat a shameful retreat from their initial opposition to slavery and racism, as they accommodated themselves to society. Still, Christianity -- not the "civil religion" of the Enlightenment -- offered the best hope in America for what Tocqueville called the "intermingling" of blacks and whites. Christianity gave slaves -- and, perhaps more important, the descendants of slaves -- a way to live with whites without hating them. Christianity "curbed [slaves'] self-destructive tendency toward hatred. It left them free to hate slavery but not necessarily their individual masters," as the historian Eugene Genovese observes. "It left them free to love their masters as fellow sinners before God and yet to judge their relative merits as Christians and human beings." For all their compromises with the slave system, antebellum "white" evangelical churches in the South remained biracial. In a society that forbade blacks to testify against whites in courts of law, for instance, blacks' testimony in church was heard and accepted and could even overrule whites'. In fact, as John Boles, perhaps the leading historian of southern religion, concludes, "in the churches slaves were treated more nearly as equals than anywhere else in the society."

Like the early Baptists and Methodists, black and white Pentecostals in the first decades of this century believed, as one observer who was first appalled and later inspired said, that the Holy Spirit had the power "to wash away the color line with the blood of the cross." Again, evangelical Christians were the only whites who as a group offered a biracial vision for America, however fleeting -- a vision rooted in emotion and religious conviction rather than in progressive political reasoning.

Finally, of course, the civil-rights movement in the South of the 1950s and early 1960s took its inspiration, leadership, and rhetoric from evangelical Christianity. Its leaders recognized that the success would rest less on a change in the laws than on a

change in the hearts of white southerners. Although northern liberals often saw this as an impossible -- and irrelevant -- goal, Martin Luther King Jr. always spoke of himself as a southerner, and wrote of "our beloved Southland." He recognized what the writer V. S. Naipaul, in his journey through the South in the mid-1980s, would call "the great discovery of my travels": "In no other part of the world had I found people so driven by the idea of good behavior and the good religious life. And that was true for black and white."

When southern whites' hearts did change, it was not because they recognized that they were in political error but because they had "learned to value blacks as a spiritual people too much," as the historian Joel Williamson writes. "Through the blacks they became their own accusers, and their guilt was all too clear. Christ would not do what they had done." The white civil-rights leader Leslie Dunbar described the civil-rights movement, the achievements of which are today regarded as a triumph of the "American creed," in terms that are antithetical to the Enlightenment heritage of that creed -- as the product of "the characteristically theological cast of Southern thought," with its habit of "seeing all lives as under the judgment of God and of knowing, therefore, with certainty the transience of all works of men."

Amazing Grace

INETY-FOUR years ago Du Bois asked white Americans,

Your country? How came it yours? Before the Pilgrims landed we were here. Here we have brought our three gifts and mingled them with yours: a gift of story and song -- soft, stirring melody in an ill-harmonized and unmelodious land; the gift of sweat and brawn to beat back the wilderness, conquer the soil, and lay the foundations of this vast economic empire . . . ; the third, a gift of the Spirit. Around us the history of the land has centred for thrice a hundred years; . . . we have woven ourselves with the very warp and woof of this nation, -- we fought their battles, shared their sorrow, mingled our blood with theirs, and generation after generation have pleaded with a headstrong, careless people to despise not Justice, Mercy, and Truth, lest the nation be smitten with a curse. Our song, our toil, our cheer, and warning have been given to this nation in blood-brotherhood. Are not these gifts worth the giving? Is not this work and striving? Would America have been America without her Negro people?

In the face of this ongoing and inevitable kinship the struggle, exemplified by Jefferson, to assert the separateness of blacks and whites -- an idea that has appealed to members of both races -- is, as Ralph Ellison wrote, a persistent "national pathology." However admirable and valuable, the American creed has proved woefully insufficient in curing that pathology. Political principles have not been able to make black and white Americans truly one people; they cannot wash away the color line, which remains the fundamental and most obdurate problem of American life.

Jefferson's elegant and often abstract Declaration of Independence is, as O'Brien recognizes, a sacred text in America's civil religion. But if we are to overcome our national pathology, perhaps we must look to a simpler text. "Amazing Grace," whose tune is based on an American folk melody, was written in England in 1779, but it is not a popular hymn there. It is, however, beloved in this country and has permeated the culture; as with the Declaration, most Americans know its gist. The hymn and the story of its creation both attest to a characteristically American notion -- the possibility of emotional and spiritual transformation. The author, John Newton, was the captain of a slave ship who forsook the slave trade for the ministry after God instigated a "great change" within him. The song's message -- that man is essentially wretched and powerless to effect his own redemption, but with God all things are possible -- neatly reflects the stark yet ultimately hopeful tenets of evangelicalism, arguably the quintessential American religious experience. As such, it also embodies the creed enunciated by the abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison, which promised that black and white America could become one people: "There is power enough in the religion of Jesus Christ to melt down the most stubborn prejudices, to overthrow the highest walls of partition, to break the strongest caste . . . to unite in fellowship the most hostile, and to equalize and bless all its recipients."

The unyielding national pathology that Ellison described, often equated with America's original sin, has been remarkably impervious to the works of man. If America is to reach the Promised Land to which King gave imperishable expression, then the creed embodied in the Declaration may be of less use than the creed embodied in "Amazing Grace."

Illustrations by Ben Verkaaik

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The Atlantic Monthly; March 1997; What Jefferson Helps to Explain; Volume 279, No. 3;

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