American Sphinx Study Guide

American Sphinx by Joseph Ellis

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

American Sphinx traces the trajectory of Thomas Jefferson's life at key points in his career. Author Joseph Ellis focuses on Jefferson's high points of achievement. These include the writing of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's sojourn in Paris and his first term as president. Two of Jefferson's respites at his beloved plantation, Monticello, are also included. This technique allows Ellis to focus on Jefferson's most outstanding achievements while glossing over embarrassments such as Jefferson's term as Governor of Virginia. The prologue and appendix of the book address the most burning question that people often have about Jefferson, his alleged relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings.

As a stylish young aristocrat, Jefferson traveled to the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1775. Jefferson was surrounded by brilliant speakers in Philadelphia, including John Adams and Ben Franklin. Throughout his life, Thomas Jefferson was a poor public speaker. Public speaking was so awkward for the tall sandy-haired young man that when he was in Virginia, he composed a list of important points for his fellow legislators to consider in drafting a state constitution. When it came time to address the assembly, Jefferson pled illness and simply sent the written list.

Jefferson's list was so successful that it was published throughout the colonies as "A Summary View of the Rights of British America." The pamphlet was met with great acclaim, and among the revolutionaries, Jefferson's reputation as a writer preceded him. The Congress gave Jefferson several assignments. He was chosen to serve, with John Adams and Ben Franklin, on a committee to draft a Declaration of Independence justifying the war. Adams was aware that he and Franklin would be called upon to debate the Declaration, so he chose the committee member with the lowest profile to draft the resolution. According to Adams, Jefferson did it in "a day or two."

After the war, Jefferson was sent to Paris as an ambassador. John Adams and Ben Franklin were also ambassadors to France at the time. Adams, just eight years older than Jefferson, adopted the younger man almost as a son. Jefferson, whose wife had recently died, stayed with the Adams family while he established a home. In France, Jefferson first revealed his gift for political agility. He also developed close relationships by letter with two protygys, James Madison and James Monroe.

Ellis next portrays Jefferson at Monticello after enduring a difficult term as George Washington's Secretary of State. Jefferson believed that the U.S. should be a republic, a group of autonomous states formed into a loose trade alliance. He frequently conflicted with Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of Treasury, who favored a very strong centralized government. Ultimately, Jefferson ran for president against his old mentor John Adams and lost. During his sojourn at Monticello, Jefferson healed his wounds sufficiently to consider another run for president. This time he was victorious.

Jefferson's stellar first term as president is highlighted. During this time, Jefferson repaid a significant national debt. The U.S. enjoyed a prosperous economy and international

harmony. Most importantly, Jefferson led the purchase of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon, doubling the size of the U.S. overnight. Ellis skips over Jefferson's insignificant second term to focus on his waning years at Monticello, especially his renewed correspondence with his old friend and nemesis, John Adams. Providentially, both men died on the same day: July 4, 1826, exactly 50 years since the publication of the Declaration of Independence.

Prologue

Prologue Summary and Analysis

Jefferson is probably the most beloved and admired of American presidents. He is claimed by liberals and conservatives and by Democrats and Republicans. Both William Jennings Bryan and Clarence Darrow have claimed that Jefferson shared their views of evolution and creation. Both Franklin Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover claimed to have followed Jefferson's ideals in their very different ways of handling the Depression.

The author was amazed to find 400 people attending a rather scholarly evening devoted to Jefferson in 1993. He had expected about 40. An actor portrayed the president in a historically accurate way. Ellis points out that the audience was too well mannered to ask the two provocative questions that most people have, about Jefferson's slave ownership and his relationship with Sally Hemings. Sally Hemings was a slave Jefferson inherited from the family of his wife, Martha Wales. Hemings was a quarter black and had reportedly been fathered by Martha Wales's father, John Wales.

Jefferson was perennially accused of having an affair with Hemings after his wife's death and of fathering several of her seven children. Despite rich oral history on the topic among the black community, few historians have accepted the claims. Ellis dismisses the Sally Hemings issue as simply "slanderous assaults on their character [that] were, and always had been an integral part of public life." He also says that unless genetic tests are conducted, the allegation will be forever impossible to prove or disprove.

Ellis argues against presentism, the tendency to apply current social and ethical standards to the behavior of past eras. It would be unfair, for example, to accuse a man of Jefferson's time of sexism, when the equality of women was not even a concept. While this is true, judging Jefferson as a slave owner is not presentism. Even among the standards of his own time, Jefferson's attitude towards slavery was inconsistent and inexplicable. Many men of Jefferson's time refused to own slaves on moral grounds. The question arises because Jefferson himself argued so persuasively that slavery was immoral and should be eliminated in the Constitution of the new nation. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that Jefferson reverently believed in human dignity and freedom, as long as it didn't conflict with his own wealth and comfort.

The issue of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings, whom Ellis calls "Black Sal," is not presentism, either. Even by the standards of the day, having an affair with a slave and fathering children by her was considered unethical. As several historians have pointed out, there is no such thing as consensual sex between a master and a slave. Many slave owners did require sexual services of their slaves, just as many men raped lower-class women at the time. Neither behavior was considered moral or admirable. It was certainly not considered conduct befitting a Founding Father of the nation.

Politicians during Jefferson's day were admired and even revered. They were expected to represent the best that mankind had to offer.

Ellis's comment on the Sally Hemings debate is, "Well, the truly defining truth about the Sally Hemings story is that we will never know." He goes on to say that such a dalliance is completely out of character for Jefferson. However, a few years after the publication of *American Sphinx*, an article appeared in *Nature* stating that DNA tests had proved unequivocally that Jefferson had fathered at least one son with Sally Hemings. Joseph Ellis then reversed his position and published articles that argued that Bill Clinton could not be judged too harshly in the Monica Lewinsky debacle because other presidents were far from perfect. The only living direct male descendant of Thomas Jefferson is Eston Hemings, a black man who changed his name to Eston Jefferson once the DNA test results became known.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary and Analysis

Jefferson must have cut quite a figure on June 20, 1775 as he arrived in Philadelphia for the first Continental Congress. As the junior member of the powerful Virginia delegation, he arrived in an opulent carriage with three slaves outfitted in elaborate costumes. Little is known about Jefferson's early history because all records were destroyed in a fire in Shadwell, Virginia. He was born in 1743, attended the College of William and Mary and studied law. By all accounts, he was tall and thin with gingery hair, not a very attractive young man. He was considered a legal scholar but a very poor public speaker.

In 1768, Jefferson decided to build a house and run for the House of Burgesses, the local governing body. Those two decisions shaped his entire life. The house, Monticello, was to become his showpiece, his hobby and his refuge from troubled times. The cause of friction was his career in politics, which progressed rapidly. An uncle of Jefferson's on his mother's side of the family, named Peyton Randolf, was the most powerful figure in Virginia politics. In 1772, Jefferson married Martha Wales Skelton, a beautiful young widow in delicate health, and her fortune doubled Jefferson's wealth.

In Philadelphia in 1775, Jefferson was far from a central figure. He was a writer among brilliant orators. He seldom spoke and was compared to a non-English-speaking guest at an elaborate dinner party: always on the periphery, unable to join in. A key facet of Jefferson's personality was his lifelong avoidance of conflict. It was a lively time in American politics, with some of the best minds of any age arguing about the nation's future. Jefferson had a strong aversion to any kind of spirited debate and was unable to participate.

Jefferson would probably have gone through life entirely unnoticed, except for a pamphlet that he had published the previous year. In July 1774, Jefferson had drafted a set of instructions for the Virginia delegation. Displaying his usual fear of confrontation, Jefferson stayed away from the actual debate, claiming to be sick. Friends were so impressed by Jefferson's instructions that they arranged to have them published. Soon they were picked up by newspaper editors in several colonies. Before he traveled to Philadelphia, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" had made Jefferson a minor celebrity.

Jefferson's political beliefs were radical, even for those revolutionary times. He claimed in the pamphlet that private citizens had settled the colonies without any aid from the British Parliament. Therefore, the British had no right to govern them. He also launched personal attacks on George III, the king of England. Most remarkably, he claimed that George III had forced slavery on a reluctant American people as a way of increasing revenue. Despite its obvious flaws and inaccuracies, the pamphlet became the first draft of the Declaration of Independence.

Several of Jefferson's arguments were based on untruths. The early colonial settlers did, in fact, have assistance from the crown and parliament. Slavery was not forced upon the colonies by the English king. Most of all, Jefferson collaborated in perpetuating what has come to be known as the Whig interpretation of history. In 1066, in what became England, the Normans defeated the Saxons at the Battle of Hastings. Along with several historians of his day, Jefferson subscribed to the belief that the Saxons had a society that existed in perfect harmony without taxes, rulers or laws. Like all of Jefferson's utopian societies, it was false. Still, Jefferson traced the decline of history to the Norman belief that all land belonged to the king.

Some of the revisionist history that Jefferson wrote he clearly knew to be false. Like any politician, he was capable of inventing and publicizing a story for his own benefit. The glamorization of the Boston Tea Party, a prank by a group of hooligans, was an example in point. However, according to Ellis, Jefferson wholeheartedly believed other facets of revisionist history, albeit without evidence. The Saxon utopia was one of those ideas. Like many men of his time, Jefferson idealized nature. He believed that the natural world, and everything in it, including man, was perfect. All of his life Jefferson had an affection for immaculate gardens, the perfect harmony of Indian tribes and peaceful local communities. The fact that none of these existed except in Jefferson's imagination only made them more attractive to him.

As the youngest and lowest-ranking member of the Virginia delegation to the Continental Congress, Jefferson was given several assignments. The first was to calculate the cost of a war with England. Jefferson concluded that the war would probably last about six months and that the cost would be $3 million. Next, the leadership recognized his writing abilities, asking him to draft an address called the "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms." In fact, the American Revolution had already started, and George Washington had left Philadelphia to command the troops.

The "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms" illustrated two central features of Jefferson's personality. First, he had a propensity to present questions as dichotomies between good and evil. Throughout his life, Jefferson never learned the technique, or accepted the necessity of, compromise. Everything was black and white to Jefferson. The most difficult days of his life were those spent in compromise. This is evident in his early writing, when he paints England and especially George III as entirely evil.

The second characteristic of Jefferson's personality is one shared by many writers. He did not like to be edited. When John Dickinson questioned the wording and tone of several sections, Jefferson complained vehemently. Jefferson's letters indicate that he was still bitter about the changes decades later. In fact, although Jefferson was a great writer, Dickinson's edits made the document even stronger. In particular, Dickinson inserted the most quotable lines: "Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign assistance is attainable."

During the winter and spring of 1775 to 1776, Jefferson retreated to Monticello, where he found the peace and harmony he craved. He tried unsuccessfully to avoid returning to Philadelphia, pleading first a migraine and then his mother's recent death. In reality, his wife Martha was in ill health. Always delicate, Martha was pregnant for the third time. She suffered a miscarriage during the summer, while Jefferson was in Philadelphia.

In May 1776, Jefferson returned to Philadelphia. He continually lobbied to be recalled. This was in part because, like most of his contemporaries, Jefferson regarded the crafting of state constitutions as more important than the work of the Continental Congress. He longed to be in Richmond, where the real action was, helping craft the future of Virginia. Instead, Jefferson's presence was required to maintain a quorum for Virginia in Philadelphia. There, John Adams gradually grew to admire the retiring young man, regarding him almost as a son. As a committee leader, Adams chose Jefferson to write the Declaration of Independence partly because of the younger man's political obscurity. "No one at the time regarded the drafting of the Declaration as a major responsibility or honor."

The Declaration, which was to be the pinnacle of Jefferson's career, was drafted in just a few days. Although Jefferson was no doubt inspired by many authors, including George Mason, John Locke, James Burgh and Thomas Sheridan, the work was his own original thought. It was based in part on his earlier works, "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" and the "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms." In some ways, those two served as first drafts, or pre-writing, for the Declaration. Jefferson showed the first draft of the Declaration of Independence to John Adams and Ben Franklin, the two committee members whose opinions he valued the most. They suggested a few changes, which he accepted. One of these was to change the phrase "sacred & undeniable truths" to "self-evident truths."

On June 28, Jefferson's completed document was presented to the Congress. He sat by silently and sullenly while they made major changes in a work he regarded as perfect. The Congress cut the document by one quarter, excising a diatribe against King George III, among other changes. Jefferson continued to rail against these changes even fifty years later, saying that the Congress had "mangled" his writing.

One part of the Declaration that was problematic for the Congress was Jefferson's stance on slavery. Jefferson inexplicably vilified George III both for starting slavery and for trying to end it. First he claimed that slavery was an immoral institution that England had forced on the unwilling colonies as a way to generate more revenue. Then, he maintained that King George III had unlawfully tried to deprive the slave owners of their rightful property by suggesting that slavery should be abolished. The Congress quickly recognized that the two views were incompatible, even if Jefferson was inherently unable to. They excised the offending passages altogether.

The revised Declaration was accepted on July 4 and sent to the printers. It was widely published in newspapers immediately. On August 2, the Congress signed the parchment copy of the declaration.

Jefferson continued to lobby to return to Monticello. He was accused by some factions of being too radical and by others of offering only lukewarm support for the Revolution. Throughout his life, political maneuvering sapped his strength, which he replenished at his idyllic retreat, Monticello. Finally, in September, he was replaced by Richard Henry Lee, and Jefferson left Philadelphia. He was soon offered a position as an ambassador in France, which he declined, pleading that personal matters required his attention at home.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary and Analysis

Jefferson rode into Paris in an even fancier carriage than the one that had conveyed him to Philadelphia. The elaborate phaeton had been handcrafted by slaves at Monticello and sent by ship to Europe. He was accompanied by his twelve-year-old daughter, Martha, a tall, angular girl who was usually called Patsy. She was quickly installed in a convent boarding school. A nineteen-year-old mulatto slave named James Hemings accompanied Jefferson as his personal servant. Jefferson hoped that the slave would learn the fine art of French cookery during their time in Paris.

Jefferson's fame had increased, although he was not generally known as the author of the Declaration of Independence. His political career was best described as undistinguished. He had served two ignoble years as Governor of Virginia, from 1779 to 1781. The war made massive concessions necessary. Under Jefferson's guidance, the state's economy was a disaster, and Virginia was unable even to supply its quota of soldiers for General Washington's army. When the British, led by Benedict Arnold, invaded Richmond, Jefferson ignominiously fled on horseback. The Virginia Assembly launched an investigation against him for cowardice and dereliction of duty, although the charges were eventually dropped.

In 1782, Martha Wales Jefferson died. She had endured seven births in ten years, although all but three of the babies died in infancy. After Martha gave birth to Lucy Elizabeth, the couple's third daughter, she was ill for several months with complications from childbirth. She finally died. Oral history suggests that she extracted a deathbed promise from Jefferson that he would never marry again, because she did not want her three girls raised by a stepmother. Jefferson was inconsolable. He cried through the night for six weeks and never married again.

Jefferson had developed political protygys in James Madison, James Monroe and William Short. Madison and Monroe were to follow him in the presidency, ensuring that for the first twenty-four years of the 19th century, Jeffersonians ruled the nation. The letters Jefferson and Madison exchanged over a fifty-year friendship serve as the most enduring record of Jefferson's life.

The other two Ambassadors to France were John Adams and Ben Franklin. John Adams became an even closer friend. Jefferson was first exposed to a companionate marriage, a rarity in the 1800s, in John's relationship with his wife, Abigail Adams. Despite Jefferson's deep love for his deceased wife Martha, there was no suggestion of intellectual equality between them. Their relationship was based solely on a domestic partnership. In Abigail, Jefferson found a woman who could discuss the issues of the day as an equal one moment and give him childrearing advice the next. While there was never any suggestion of impropriety in their letters, a flirtatious banter suggests easy friendship.

Abigail Adams encouraged Jefferson to bring his second daughter to France. The four-year-old Maria Jefferson, better known as Polly, was being raised by slaves in Virginia. Jefferson complied but then failed to meet the girl's ship when it docked in London. Instead, he sent a man who spoke only French, a language the girl had never heard. Abigail insisted on accompanying the man herself. She chastised Jefferson for his neglect, saying that Polly had no memory of a father and did not even recognize his photograph. Abigail continued to provide helpful and apparently welcome parenting advice from London. John Adams had been appointed ambassador to the distrusted English, charged with the futile task of trying to wring economic concessions from the Crown.

Jefferson first demonstrated his amazing dexterity to tailor his writings to the audience in France. Ellis calls this flexibility, although others might call it hypocrisy. Jefferson very publicly became a Francophile, lavishly approving all things French, from cooking and wine to architecture and salon society. Privately, he wrote a travel guide for Americans decrying the "corruption" and "debauchery" of Europe, in particular France.

Slavery was illegal in France. Jefferson constantly assured the French that it would be outlawed by the U.S. constitution and fade peacefully, while expressing very different views to friends at home. To them, Jefferson voiced fears that unless slavery was eliminated, racial war would be the result. He opined that the racial conflict would never end until one race or the other was exterminated.

During this period, Jefferson exchanged a series of passionate love letters with Diana Cosway, a married beauty. It is impossible to determine from the letters if the two were sexually intimate. What is apparent is that the woman was not Jefferson's intellectual equal and that however passionate their meetings, he preferred the idealized version of their liaison on paper.

Jefferson still clung to the ideal of a utopian society, so civilized that laws were unnecessary. He rejected political parties, saying that if he could only get into heaven as part of a party, he would not go at all. This is especially ironic as Jefferson was to become the leader of the Republican Party in just a few years. Jefferson saw the eventual shape of the new republic as a group of autonomous states, with a weak federal government that handled mutual defense and trade agreements but had no power to levy taxes.

Jefferson's view of France was equally optimistic. On the eve of the French Revolution, Jefferson was sure that France would achieve a perfectly just constitution without bloodshed. His response to French politics was as agile as to American, with Jefferson alternately reviling Louis XVI as a drunkard and painting him as a wise, just ruler. In one of his most famous letters, Jefferson questioned whether any generation should be bound by the laws of the previous one. James Madison gently reminded him that there were no sharp demarcations between generations, but a gentle blending.

Despite Jefferson's protests that he wanted only to serve out his time in France and then retire to Monticello, when George Washington was elected president, he offered Jefferson the position of Secretary of State to the fledgling nation. Jefferson accepted.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary and Analysis

By 1794, Jefferson retired to Monticello to heal his considerable political wounds. Although it was fashionable for politicians to feign reluctance at the time, Ellis suggests that Jefferson truly wanted to retire from public life. Life spans were much shorter in the 1800s than they are now, and at fifty-one, Jefferson was in his waning years. Jefferson is famously quoted as saying, "'I have my house to build, my fields to farm, and' - an intriguingly dutiful way to put it - 'to watch for the happiness of those who labor for mine.'" This last was apparently a reference to Jefferson's paternalistic role with his slaves.

During the years since Paris, Jefferson's friendship with James Madison had matured into a collaboration of equals. As Secretary of State, Jefferson had engaged in vile public clashes with Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury. Hamilton was everything that Jefferson was not. He was of low birth, of Scottish extraction and a military hero with a dashing air of authority. It is no wonder that the aristocratic Jefferson, who idealized peace and saw self-determination as the highest form of harmony, reviled the man. Jefferson's hatred of Hamilton was personal and almost obsessive.

At Monticello, Jefferson found a measure of the domestic bliss that he sought. Patsy married Thomas Mann Randolph, Jr., scion of another fine Virginia family. The two settled nearby and eventually provided Jefferson with eleven grandchildren. Despite his wealth and breeding, Randolph was mentally unstable. In later life, Patsy confessed that she always loved her father more than she loved her husband. Polly married John Wales Eppes, a dark and handsome young man from a fine Virginia family. Tragically, she died in childbirth, just as her mother did.

Jefferson's financial picture was less than rosy. Although he preferred to think of himself as a hardworking farmer, in fact Jefferson was a southern plantation owner. Like most of that breed, he was deeply in debt. Specifically, Jefferson owed over 6,500 pounds to English and Scottish firms. Some of the debt he had inherited with his father-in-law's estate. The rest of it, Jefferson ran up himself. His lifestyle was lavish. He spent extravagantly, indulging in rare books, fine wines and expensive furnishings. He was in the habit of making expensive architectural changes even to hotels and rented houses when he traveled. When he returned to Monticello, it was to begin a constant round of renovations. Jefferson was unable to pay even the interest on his debts. It is difficult to make comparisons with modern dollars, but Jefferson's debt probably amounted to several hundred thousand dollars in today's money. Jefferson sold off 11,000 acres, but he was still unable to meet his debts. This was a life-long problem.

One of the difficulties was that, like most Virginia aristocrats, past and present, Jefferson equated land with wealth. As one of the state's largest landowners, it was difficult for

him to imagine that he was impoverished. When he returned to Monticello, Jefferson intended to raise cash by planting wheat instead of tobacco. This laudable plan failed for two reasons. First, unseasonable weather spoiled the crops. Second, Jefferson's land had been so badly treated over the years that it was not fertile enough to generate any large cash crop.

Jefferson turned to nail making to raise cash. This was his most successful financial enterprise, eventually raising about $1,000 per year. The nail-making factory was a paradox because it represented exactly the type of industry that Jefferson railed against. Black youths between the ages of ten and sixteen worked over hot forges from dawn to dusk. Jefferson inspected their output daily, extorting them to higher production. As a former slave later recalled, "'[He] gave the boys in the nail factory a pound of meat a week. . . Give them that wukked the best a suit of red or blue; encouraged them mightily.'" It was exactly the type of child labor that Charles Dickens memorialized in his novels, except the workers were young male slaves instead of poor whites. Jefferson seemed completely unable to see the contradiction and extolled the virtues of the operation in his letters.

At this point in Jefferson's life, he owned between 100 and 200 slaves. As the financial realities of his situation sunk in, he became less vocal in his objection to slavery on moral grounds. Jefferson recognized that his most liquid asset was the large number of slaves he owned. He publicly withdrew from the slavery debate, leaving it for the next generation to resolve. Jefferson often referred to his slaves in his letters as his "extended family" and proclaimed that slaves should not be sold or hired out without their consent. Yet, Jefferson also sold over 100 slaves during this period, to raise cash for his debts. Despite Jefferson's preaching on the evils of mixing the races, he sold Mary Hemings to a white farmer who had fathered her two children.

Jefferson seems to have been one of those southerners who genuinely believed that his slaves were happier and healthier than they would be in any other walk of life. Jefferson reconciled the slavery paradox in part by insulating himself from it. The slaves he came into daily contact with were lighter, and treated better, than usual. When he sold slaves, he chose those from his more remote holdings, not Monticello. He stayed away from the fields, where he would have to witness his overseers mistreating the slaves. Only a privileged minority were allowed to live at Mulberry Row, Monticello's slave quarters. These included the Hemings family.

Jefferson inherited Betty Hemings and her children from his wife's father, John Wales. The children were notably lighter than their mother was, and it was rumored that at least six of them had been fathered by John Wales. This gave a different meaning to Jefferson's allusions to his slave "extended family" as the literal truth. This trend continued into the next generation, with several of Betty Hemings's grandchildren being mistaken for Caucasians, although they were born into slavery. Only the lightest of the Hemings were allowed to act as house slaves. Visitors to Monticello frequently did not realize that they were being served by slaves.

James Madison was well aware that his old friend would be unable to resist public life permanently. When he sensed that Jefferson's political wounds had healed, he gradually began to draw Jefferson into political debates. Jefferson still abhorred his archrival, Alexander Hamilton. He suspected Hamilton of misappropriating federal funds and of falsifying the accounting ledgers. Jefferson believed, with some accuracy, that Hamilton hoped to increase the national debt to force a stronger centralized government. When the U.S. signed the Jay Treaty, Jefferson saw it as favoring England over France. He objected, since he had developed an almost pathological hatred of England. In fact, the treaty was reasonably even-handed. It delayed the inevitable war with England until 1812, when the U.S. was more financially and politically stable.

By 1796, Madison was letting Jefferson know in coded letters that his name was being put forth as the Republican Party's candidate for president, to succeed George Washington. At that time, campaigning was considered undignified. Politicians were expected to affect a modest reluctance to serve. Jefferson's old friend John Adams was the Federalist candidate. In a closely watched contest, Adams defeated Jefferson in an electoral vote that took weeks, with fourteen states voting. Jefferson wrote an effusive letter of endorsement and congratulations to his old mentor, but on Madison's recommendation, he never sent it. Jefferson offered Madison the consolation that at least Adams had been an effective bar - likely the only effective bar - to a Hamilton presidency.

In a magnanimous gesture, Adams offered both Madison and Jefferson powerful positions in a bipartisan government. Madison was offered the plum ambassadorship in Paris. Jefferson was offered a seat in the cabinet, which would only take him a few hundred miles from his beloved Monticello. Instead, on Madison's advice, Jefferson abandoned his old friend to become the leader of a powerful political party. He realized that despite Washington's best efforts, tough years were ahead for the young nation. Jefferson positioned himself perfectly to assume power when Adam's Federalist Party failed. Jefferson and Adams were never such close friends again.

Although Ellis doesn't explore the issue, it is interesting to wonder what American politics would be like today if Jefferson and Madison had accepted Adam's bipartisan proposal. Instead of party politics, would bipartisan governments be the rule in American government?

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary and Analysis

In contrast to Jefferson's opulent arrivals in Philadelphia and Paris, his arrival in Washington, D. C. to assume the presidency in 1801 was austere. Jefferson walked the few hundred yards from his boardinghouse to the Capitol. He was preceded by a company of militia bearing drawn swords and followed by a small parade of dignitaries. The parade included several Republican congressmen and two members of the outgoing cabinet. The lack of pomp was entirely intentional, since Jefferson had been elected on a platform of restoring pure republican values, including minimizing federal government and reducing the national debt.

The most remarkable thing about the transfer of power is that it happened at all. In Europe, regimes were often overthrown violently. Americans were aware that they were creating a new world order with the predictable, peaceful transfer of power from one elected official to the next. The previous administration was ridiculed for trying to create a little Rome when it renamed Washington's Goose Creek the Tiber. Jefferson promised a return to austerity and fervor of "the Spirit of '76." Jefferson inherited a stable and peaceful international scene.

No one was quite sure what to expect of President Jefferson. He had long led the voice of dissent against the establishment. Now, he was the establishment. Jefferson had recently voiced his support for limits to federal power including limiting presidents to one term, setting shorter terms for senators and especially setting limits on the nation's borrowing power. Federalists insisted that Jefferson would dismantle the federal government. In the Whig tradition, Jefferson regarded all political power as inherently corrupting. His critics were partly right when they argued that to Jefferson, government itself was the problem.

Jefferson's vice president was the mercurial, ambitions political schemer Aaron Burr. Burr's rival was Alexander Hamilton, a man of similar ambitions. The two clashed frequently, and there was little wonder when they finally dueled just a few years later. Burr, bereft of any code of honor, shot Hamilton in the spinal cord. It is difficult to imagine a man more unlike Jefferson, but the new president was only too aware that he owed his election to Burr's support.

James Madison became his Secretary of State. Albert Gallatin, a Swiss-born intellect, was his Secretary of the Treasury. Gallatin was perhaps the only man in America who could hold his own in a debate on fiscal policy with Alexander Hamilton. As a chief executive, Jefferson learned an Olympic detachment and the art of delegation from Washington's successes. From John Adam's mistakes, he learned to avoid sulking and paternalism. His ideal was the noiseless, congenial and invisible operation of the government.

One of Jefferson's primary goals was the elimination of the national debt. He saw public debt as the inevitable cause of "the English path," by which he meant a cycle of debt and corruption ending only in revolution. At the time, the national debt was $112 million dollars. With Gallatin, Jefferson came up with a plan to repay $7 million dollars per year for 16 years. Since the total U.S. budget was only $9 million per year, this ambitious repayment plan left just $2 million per year for the operation of the federal government.

Jefferson was determined to eliminate all taxes as he paid off the debt. Among the more extreme of Jefferson's cost-saving measures was dismantling the U.S. Navy. This course of action almost proved disastrous in the War of 1812 against England's powerful fleet. Jefferson argued that armies and navies create wars rather than preventing them. He reduced the bloated federal bureaucracy and considered closing all American embassies in Europe.

As a president, Jefferson's speaking abilities did not improve. He made only two speeches during his entire term in office - his two inaugural addresses. He mumbled so badly through the first one that even close observers had to wait to read the text in the newspaper. Jefferson hosted a series of intimate dinner parties for congressmen, visiting dignitaries and their wives. The groups gathered as often as two or three times a week. Jefferson eschewed all protocol in seating, to the point that the wife of a British minister referred to his administration as "barbaric."

Jefferson's duplicity continued. Even as he voiced inspiring words uniting republicans and federalists in his first inaugural address, he vowed to eradicate the Federalists in his personal letters to friends. Part of this was Jefferson's distinction between federalists as those who believed in a strong central government and Federalists, members of the reviled political party. Jefferson's attempts to act as a common man struck some as touching humility. Others saw the clumsy efforts of an aristocrat trying to feign ordinariness.

Jefferson's election coincided with a new sense of nationalism sweeping the country. Jefferson fueled this trend when he made the Louisiana Purchase, paying Napoleon $15 million dollars and doubling the size of the U.S. overnight. Spain had ceded its North American holdings to Napoleon. This represented a huge security risk, in part because the French now controlled the Mississippi and the port of New Orleans. Napoleon needed cash to fund European wars and entered into negotiations to sell the land. The purchase was consistent with Jefferson's vision of the U.S. as a nation of independent yeoman farmers rather than an industrialized nation.

Overstepping James Madison as Secretary of State, Jefferson handled most of the negotiations with the French himself. He appointed a Virginian he could trust completely, James Monroe, as special envoy to facilitate the negotiations. Controversially, Jefferson bypassed Congressional approval and made the decision to proceed with the purchase himself. At just three cents per acre, it was simply too good a buy to pass up.

The president was far more successful in retiring debt professionally than personally. He continued to spend lavishly. The wine bill alone for his first year in office was $10,000.

He also continued his habit of rationalizing what was expedient. Jefferson justified the traditional Washington political patronage on the pretext of ousting vile federalists while reestablishing republican principles.

As president, Jefferson suffered many attacks in the press. First, he was lampooned for his belief that giant wooly mammoths still roamed North America west of the Mississippi. This belief was fueled by Jefferson's idealism, since extinction conflicted with his idyllic view of nature. Next, Jefferson was accused, inaccurately, of being an atheist. The accusations were fueled by the president's continued friendship with Thomas Payne. In just a few years, Payne had gone from a revolutionary hero to an obnoxious alcoholic. His latest tract, the *Age of Reason*, attacked Christianity as thoroughly as *Common Sense* had attacked monarchy.

The most sensational and most enduring allegations against Jefferson involved miscegenation with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, the "African Venus." Ironically, the most vocal of Jefferson's detractors on this issue was James Callender. Callender was a Republican newspaperman who Jefferson had used in the past to skewer his political opponents, including John Adams.

Ellis dismisses the allegations as completely unfounded. "Although a long-term sexual relationship with one of his slaves was not in character for Jefferson, who spent much of his adult life creating distances between his personal perceptions and the palpable reality of slavery and who consistently fled from intimacy in favor of highly idealized and sentimentalized versions of affection, the duplicity that was espoused in his dealings with Callender was wholly in character." Showing an ability to compartmentalize that rivals Jefferson's own, Ellis argues that Jefferson was capable of intellectual, but not sexual, duplicity.

Ellis also argues that Jefferson had a long history of sentimentality. Jefferson, he argues, was far too self-protective to allow himself to be vulnerable. Ellis dismisses the idea that Jefferson was "sexually promiscuous." What Ellis fails to consider is that Jefferson may have viewed a discrete affair with a woman who lived in his house and was under his complete control as the less risky alternative. If he engaged in such a relationship, Jefferson shielded himself from the public embarrassment of courting a society matron. It is also interesting that Ellis chooses to characterize a single, long-term sexual liaison as "sexual promiscuity." Regardless of the truth or fallacy of the rumors, the scandal has dogged Jefferson ever since.

John Quincy Adams and others came to Jefferson's defense. They insisted that the Federalists were focusing on imaginary scandals because they had lost all real political issues. The attacks on his personal life forced Jefferson to reconsider his long-term support of the free press. Jefferson had been certain that a free press was essential to a republic. His idealism led him to believe that journalists would be more interested in uncovering the truth than in printing sensational rumors.

Jefferson's tendency to view the world as a series of dichotomies came into play. He had long ago decided that the Indians he idealized as living in perfect harmony were

good, while the Indians who attacked forts were bad. Just as there were good federalists and vile Federalists, in Jefferson's view, now there were good journalists and bad journalists. The divisions were permanent and pervasive. Once a journalist or a federalist went bad, he could never be redeemed.

Jefferson also waged a battle of skirmishes against the federal judiciary. He hated the judiciary on principle. The very existence of judges interfered with Jefferson's idealist belief in the innate goodness of mankind. John Adams had appointed a number of "midnight judges" just before his term in office ended. These included John Marshall as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. Jefferson considered these judges his person enemies and launched several attempts to have them impeached. In his battles against the judicial system and the Supreme Court, Jefferson was no more successful than subsequent presidents were.

Despite the difficulties of his first term, Jefferson was one of the most effective presidents the nation has ever seen. As the term drew to a close, he suffered a personal blow when his younger daughter Maria, called Polly, died in 1804. Like her mother, Maria died from complications of childbirth. Disheartened and more than a bit wounded, Jefferson still consented to serve another term.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary and Analysis

In 1809, Jefferson retired to Monticello permanently. Today's scholars know far more about this period of his life than any other. As the last surviving Founding Fathers, Jefferson and Adams were treated with a respect that approached reverence. Both men were acutely aware of their roles in history.

Jefferson found a measure of the domestic bliss that he had always craved at Monticello. His reddish hair was entirely gray. He kept it cut short, in the new fashion, rather than tied in the revolutionary queue. His days followed the predictable pattern of an aristocratic gentleman. He was constantly tended by his black slave Burwell. Mornings were devoted to correspondence and gardening. In the afternoons, Jefferson rode Eagle, his favorite horse. Evenings were devoted to socializing. Jefferson drank cider and malt liquor with meals. He avoided hard liquor but had three or four glasses of wine each day.

Monticello was host to a constant stream of dignitaries who came to view the living legend. Often they stayed for several days, with the house party totaling up to fifty people. Besides these guests, tourists often wandered through, tearing off pieces of wood as souvenirs and striking up conversations with guests. Monticello became so crowded that several times a year, Jefferson retreated to Poplar Forest, an octagon-shaped retreat in Bedford County, some ninety miles away.

Jefferson received more than 1,000 letters each year and wrote lengthy, painstaking responses to each one. John Adams wryly noted that he had the good sense to be unpopular as a president and to ignore the few letters he did receive from the public.

After the passing of years, Adams and Jefferson began to communicate with each other civilly again. From the days when they were so close in France, a chasm formed between the two men. It started during Adams presidency, when Jefferson subsidized libelous accusations against Adams by James Callender. During Jefferson's second term, the two men exchanged vituperative letters.

Jefferson's second term was much less successful than his first. Against all odds, Jefferson and Gallatin had been able to retire a considerable amount of debt during the first term while reducing taxes and making the Louisiana Purchase. In 1803, France and England renewed hostilities. Jefferson had all but eliminated the U.S. Navy, making American ships easy prey for either side in the war. Jefferson had little choice but to pass the Embargo Act, which effectively closed all ports in the U.S. to trade. It was an economically crippling move.

The Embargo Act passed in 1807. Almost immediately, Jefferson announced that he would not seek another term in office. With a year remaining in office, Jefferson turned

all decisions over to Madison and Gallatin. "...he was clearly played out as president. 'Never did a prisoner, released from his chains,' he observed the day before Madison's inauguration, 'feel such relief as I shall on shaking off the shackles of power.'"

Friends encouraged Adams and Jefferson to set aside their political differences and behave civilly as ex-presidents. On January 1, 1812, Adams wrote a short note to Jefferson. The two began an exchange of letters that lasted the remainder of their lives. They entered into a self-conscious classical dialogue. Each man was intensely aware that he was writing for posterity, and they tried to outdo each other in alliteration and metaphor.

Despite Adams and Jefferson's resolutions, some politics crept back into the conversation between the two men. Adams resented Jefferson's growing fame as the author of the Declaration. He found it difficult to repress all his political thoughts. Jefferson found Adams a confusing mix of good and bad. Try as they might to put their ideological differences aside, the two frequently squabbled. Still, they were able to remain friends. In his last letter, Jefferson asked if his grandson Jeffy, Thomas Jefferson Randolph, could visit Adams at Quincy. The young man was eager to know as many of the Founding Fathers as possible.

Soon after Jefferson's retirement, he outlined a tract addressing the charges that he was an atheist. He insisted that he was a follower of Jesus but had no respect for most organized religions. Later, Jefferson spent his time writing a revisionist autobiography for posthumous publication. In it, he accused Hamilton and Adams of plotting to establish George Washington as the monarch of America.

Jefferson's views on slavery continued to be complex. He was in favor of abolishing slavery gradually, but only if owners could be compensated. He believed that emancipation would only work if the newly freed slaves were deported, perhaps to Africa or Santo Domingo. The ex-president became increasingly angry that the young men of the next generation had not developed such a plan. At first, Jefferson argued that expansion of slavery into the new western territories was immoral. Then, he joined other Virginian politicians in lobbying to allow the expansion of slavery into Missouri and beyond. The reasoning was that the western territories were so vast that they could somehow dissipate slavery, where it would eventually cease to exist without effort. Once again, Jefferson's idealism, this time his faith in the healing power of land, prevailed. Adams strenuously disagreed, but the two managed to remain friends.

Many historians have argued that Jefferson's revisionist writings should be ignored as the ranting of an old man suffering bankruptcy. Jefferson foolishly co-signed a loan for a friend who was forced to default, leaving the ex-president with a monthly payment of $1,200 in addition to his own massive debts. Jefferson was forced to the realization that he would have nothing but debt to leave his daughter and grandchildren. Monticello would have to be sold after his death. He was forced to sell his library of 7,000 volumes accumulated over a lifetime for the relatively paltry sum of $23,950.

As the debts continued to mount and Jefferson's health failed, he made one last desperate attempt to save Monticello for his daughter and her children. Jefferson owed over $100,000 - several million dollars in today's terms. He asked the Virginia legislature to allow him to conduct a public lottery. At first, his request was rejected. Then, friends and admirers lobbied on his behalf, and the legislature reversed their decision. Despite the lottery and the auction of Monticello and all his slaves after his death, his descendants were still left with huge debts. In his will, Jefferson freed only five of his slaves. This included two of Sally Hemings's sons, Madison and Eston. Sally Hemings was not mentioned in the will.

The one bright spot in Jefferson's last years was his founding of the University of Virginia, originally called Central College. Jefferson envisioned an academic village without administrators, where faculty and students would live and work in harmony. Ever the idealist, Jefferson's sweeping plan included a statewide system of schools. The legislature funded only the college. It has been recognized by the "American Institute of Architects as 'the proudest achievement of American architecture in the past 200 years.'"

Jefferson was too ill to accept an invitation to attend the 50th anniversary celebration of the publication of the Declaration of Independence in Washington. Instead, he sent a carefully drafted message. Remarkably, both Jefferson and Adams died on the same day: July 4, 1826, exactly fifty years after the ratification of the Declaration of Independence by the Continental Congress.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary and Analysis

Scholars will likely still be arguing about Jefferson's legacies well into the 22nd century. Without a doubt, Thomas Jefferson's popularity has only increased with time. Jefferson is the most popular historical figure on the Internet.

Jefferson would disapprove of many changes that have occurred in the U.S. since his death. These include the erosion of states' rights in the Civil War, the increase in military might in the Cold War and increased urbanization. Although his writings have been used to justify racial equality, Jefferson certainly never meant them to. Along with everything else, Jefferson believed wholeheartedly in the innate supremacy of the white race.

Other changes Jefferson would approve wholeheartedly. These include the abolition of slavery and the separation of church and state to preserve religious freedom. It is ironic that this separation is enforced by the government institution that Jefferson hated the most, the Supreme Court. As historian Joyce Appleby has pointed out, "'The true Jeffersonian legacy is to be hostile to legacies.'"

John Adam's final words were "Thomas Jefferson lives." He was factually incorrect, since unknown to Adams, Jefferson had expired about five hours earlier. In many important ways, however, Jefferson's legacy of idealism and revolutionary spirit lives on.

Appendix

Appendix Summary and Analysis

Politicians have long been subjected to rumors of sexual scandal, and Thomas Jefferson was no exception. The most enduring scandal of Jefferson's life was the alleged relationship with Sally Hemings, a quadroon slave he inherited from his father-in-law. "Indeed the alleged liaison between Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings may be described as the longest-running miniseries in American history."

During Jefferson's first term as president, James Callender printed scurrilous, vengeful allegations that Jefferson was the father of all five of Sally Hemings's living children. These rumors gained credence because Callender had previously revealed the adulterous affair between Alexander Hamilton and Maria Reynolds. Hemings had several children whose father was obviously white, and some of their features resembled Jefferson's. Callender also reported, accurately, that while still a young, unmarried man, Jefferson had made improper advances to a married woman, Elizabeth Walker. Jefferson admitted these charges and publicly apologized to the woman's husband, John Walker "but claimed it was the only charge 'founded on truth among all their allegations against me.'"

In 1873, Madison Hemings gave an interview in which he said that according to his mother, all five of her children were fathered by Thomas Jefferson. This was verified by another former Monticello slave. At the same time, one of Jefferson's granddaughters revealed that Jefferson told his daughter Martha that his nephew, Peter Carr, fathered Sally Hemings' children.

In the 1950s, historians verified that Jefferson was at Monticello with Sally Hemings nine months before the birth of each of her children. Sally never conceived in his absence, despite the fact that Jefferson was often away in Philadelphia and Washington.

According to Ellis, such a long-term affair would have been completely out of character for Jefferson. First, he had spoken out repeatedly about the evils of miscegenation, or mixing of the races. In addition, Ellis is confident that Jefferson was "almost feminine" and sublimated all of his sexual energy in intellectual pursuits after his wife's death. "Within the scholarly world, especially within the community of Jefferson specialists, there seems to be a clear consensus that the story is almost certainly not true."

Ellis's final bit of evidence is that the last two of Sally Hemings's sons, Madison and Eston, were born after Callender's allegations were published. Ellis reasons that if an affair existed, Jefferson would have ended it when it became public. "...for those predisposed to disagree with my conjectures about the unlikelihood of the relationship, the most disquieting piece of evidence they will need to absorb also relates to timing. For if the story is true, Jefferson's withdrawal from a leadership position in the

antislavery movement began at the same time that the affair with Sally Hemings allegedly started."

As discussed in the Prologue section, within a few years of publishing *American Sphinx* Ellis changed his views. Faced with DNA evidence that he called "conclusive," Ellis agreed that Eston Hemings was fathered by Thomas Jefferson and not by Peter Carr. This revelation exposes Jefferson as a human, with human failings. Despite his complexities, or perhaps because of them, Jefferson forever remains the symbol of revolutionary fervor and America's premier idealist.

Characters

Thomas Jefferson

John Adams

John Dickinson

Martha Wales Skelton Jefferson

Martha "Patsy" Jefferson

Maria "Polly" Jefferson

Lucy Elizabeth Jefferson

Abigail Adams

James Monroe

James Madison

Alexander Hamilton

Sally Hemings

Objects/Places

The Declaration of Independence

Jefferson was selected to pen the Declaration because he was a little-known figure at the first Continental Congress in Philadelphia. He wrote it in just a few days, in his room. Jefferson's authorship was not widely known until his first term as president, which began in 1801.

"A Summary View of the Rights of British America"

One of the reasons that Jefferson was able to complete the Declaration so quickly was that he had already penned two documents about the same principles. "A Summary View of the Rights of British America" was the first. The "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms" was the second. The summary was penned and published before Jefferson was sent to Philadelphia, so among a select few, his reputation as a writer preceded him.

Monticello

Jefferson's beloved retreat and masterwork, Monticello represented idyllic domestic bliss to Jefferson. He often protested his wish to leave public life and retire to Monticello. Jefferson began renovating the property on his return to France and wound down the renovations just before his death. Tragically, Jefferson's lavish spending resulted in enormous debts, which required that Monticello and its contents be auctioned after his death.

France

Jefferson was one of three American ambassadors in France from 1784 to 1789, along with his close friend John Adams and the statesman Ben Franklin. Although Jefferson railed privately about the debauchery of the European salon society, he became a devotee of all things French, from food, wine and fashion to architecture.

Jefferson's Writing Desk

During the summer of 1775, Jefferson commissioned cabinetmaker Benjamin Randolph, a cousin on his mother's side, to make a writing desk for him. He purchased a Windsor chair to go with it and used the two while drafting the Declaration of Independence. Today, the desk and chair are among the most valuable exhibits at the Smithsonian.

The "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms"

Jefferson's first writing assignment in Philadelphia was creating an address that justified the American colonies' revolt against England. His success on this assignment encouraged the Congress to assign him to the committee to draft the Declaration of Independence. On the committee, John Adams delegated the writing to Jefferson, the junior member.

Philadelphia

Jefferson was a reluctant delegate to the Continental Congress in Philadelphia in 1776. First, he pled illness and his mother's recent death to avoid going. Then, he lobbied constantly to return to Monticello, where his wife was suffering through yet another difficult pregnancy and ultimately, a miscarriage. He remained in Philadelphia only because his presence was required to secure a quorum for Virginia.

Washington, D.C.

Washington D.C. was a humble burg with dusty streets that turned to mud in the winter. Jefferson was the second president to live in the White House. Until his inauguration, he stayed in a common boarding house just a few hundred yards away.

The University of Virginia

Jefferson founded Central College, which became the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. He based the plan on an academic village, and he designed the buildings, which are recognized as some of the finest in the U.S.

Mulberry Row

Mulberry Row was the name of the slave quarters at Monticello. Here, Jefferson surrounded himself with the lightest and best treated of his many slaves, who acted as servants in his house.

Poplar Forest

After Jefferson's retirement from public life in 1816, Monticello was frequently host to visiting dignitaries and a constant stream of tourists. Jefferson was forced to seek refuge several times per year at Popular Forest, the octagon-shaped house on his Bedford Country estate, about ninety miles from Monticello.

Themes

The Declaration of Independence

At the Continental Congress in 1775, Jefferson was a writer among orators. He was not handsome, was a poor speaker and would never have been elected president in the television era. Instead, as the most junior member of the powerful Virginia contingent, Jefferson's gift for writing was recognized. He was given a task that no one else wanted, forging the Declaration of Independence. This was based on Jefferson's previous experience drafting the "Declaration of the Causes and Necessity for Taking Up Arms." Jefferson's entire political career was based on the remarkable document that he crafted. If he had not written the Declaration of Independence, it is unlikely that anyone would now remember Jefferson's name. He most assuredly would never have become president.

Although Jefferson was the author of the Declaration of Independence, he did not participate directly in writing the constitution. In fact, depending upon whom he was writing to, Jefferson was often opposed to any form of federal government at all. It is easy to forget from our modern perspective that in the period just after the Declaration of Independence, many people saw the future of North America as a series of separate states, loosely coordinated for trade and mutual defense, but each with its own government. In fact, Jefferson's vision was almost exactly like the current European Union. This was in part because he believed that any national government must be a tyranny, while state governments would be republics that would respond to the wisdom and honesty of the men who ran them.

The preamble to the Declaration of Independence is one of the most beloved of American writings, but it is interesting to note that even Jefferson required multiple drafts, and astute editing, to "get it right." The original version read: "We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness." The final version, memorized by millions of schoolchildren, was only created after astute editing by the Continental Congress: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Idealism

Thomas Jefferson was the most idealistic of men, living in an idealistic age. The American Revolution was spawned by a group of men who rejected the tyranny of colonialism and monarchy. They felt that the average man, despite a lack of royal blood, could be trusted to make wise decisions. They embraced the ideal that men should be free to rule themselves. This belief carried with it a faith in the intelligence and

benevolence of the average man that is almost wholly absent from the modern version of American democracy. In fact, today we expect leaders to lie and accept that many people are dishonest, immoral or wantonly violent.

Jefferson was even more idealistic than his counterparts were. The expression "Jeffersonian democracy" is often used inaccurately to mean a specific type of republican government. In fact, the form of government Jefferson truly believed in more closely resembles anarchy. Jefferson's most cherished belief was that men are wholly good and that if men were left to their natural instincts, no government would be necessary. He believed that Native Americans lived in a blissful state of perfect peace and harmony without any government or ruling structure. In fact, most Indians lived in clans that had both leaders and a council of elders to make decisions. There was as much strife within the average tribal group as there is in schools or workplaces today. Jefferson's world of perfect harmony where all men would respect each other's rights spontaneously existed entirely in his own mind.

One of the expressions of Jefferson's idealism was his retreat at Monticello. The outside world proved troublesome in many ways that required compromise. Jefferson was never good at dealing with the practicalities of government. He required frequent retreats to Monticello where he could create the perfect harmony he so craved in an illusion of perfect domestic bliss.

Complexity

Despite Jefferson's idealism, or perhaps because of it, Jefferson was an extremely complex man. He seems to have been able to hold two conflicting opinions simultaneously by compartmentalizing them in different aspects of his life. Nowhere was this more evident than in Jefferson's views on slavery. He was aware that there was a huge gap between the belief that "all men are created equal" and the reality of being a slave owner. He clearly believed that slavery was immoral and lobbied to have it made illegal in the emerging nation. Yet, he owned hundreds of slaves and freed only a handful on his death. While living in France, where slavery was illegal, Jefferson took pains to conceal the fact from the slaves who attended him. This deception by Jefferson ensured their permanent enslavement.

The peace and prosperity that Jefferson so treasured at Monticello, a southern plantation, was made possible only through the forced labor of slaves. There is no evidence that Jefferson treated most of his slaves with unusual kindness. As Jefferson wandered around the grounds of Monticello, contemplating the perfect harmony and peace that was sure to result from mankind's freedom, he must have often passed the squalid slave quarters where his miserable workers lived spiritually and physically impoverished lives.

The Declaration of Independence meant exactly what it said, that all men are created equal. Specifically, to Jefferson and his contemporaries, it meant that all free white educated males who owned property were created equal. Although these seem like

unreasonable restrictions to us, in 1776 they represented a giant leap in human rights. Jefferson never considered non-property owners worthy of citizenship. He would be shocked and dismayed to find his immortal words used today to justify the civil rights of non-whites and women. Those were not possibilities that he ever entertained in his lifetime. Part of the Declaration's greatness is that it has proven so durable in extending freedom far beyond the vision of the original founders.

Style

Perspective

The central thesis of *American Sphinx* relates to Ellis's interpretation of Jefferson's many complexities. Many historians have noted that Jefferson often related radically different opinions to different audiences at the same time. Some see this as evidence of hypocrisy or even amorality. Others suggest that Jefferson was a consummate politician, practicing spin control. Either view is at odds with Jefferson's distaste for political maneuvering when it affected his work.

While an ambassador in France, Jefferson repeatedly assured the French that the American constitution would ban slavery, while admitting in letters to Madison that this was impossible. Slavery was illegal in France, and any slave transported into the country could immediately claim his or her freedom. While assuring French friends that slavery was an immoral institution, Jefferson assiduously concealed French law from the slaves who accompanied him, illegally and permanently depriving them of their freedom.

Ellis suggests that Jefferson truly believed both what he was telling his French friends and what he was writing Madison. In Ellis's view, Jefferson was a man capable of compartmentalizing different parts of his intellectual and moral life so completely that he could call up the appropriate "self" at will. Ellis suggests that the struggle to maintain these separate compartments was stressful. This stress is what required Jefferson's frequent retreats to Monticello, not some fervent desire to be a gentleman farmer.

Tone

In what some will see as an excess of self-congratulation, Ellis describes his own writing style as "cinematic." In fact, the tone of the book is dry and academic. Ellis focuses on his own conclusions rather than painting a believable portrait of Jefferson or illuminating the man's many fascinating contradictions. These conclusions are often presented without examples or evidence as a foundation for them. While Ellis is a respected academic historian and his conclusions are no doubt creditable, they would be more believable to readers, not to mention more entertaining, if they were linked to specific incidents in Jefferson's life.

Ellis's underlying thesis in *American Sphinx* is that Jefferson was a gentle, idealistic soul who was troubled by conflict and political maneuvering all his life. He simply ignores any evidence that doesn't support this view, such as the Virginia Assembly's investigation of Jefferson for cowardice and dereliction of duty in the invasion of Richmond by British forces. This underlying thesis is best illustrated with a quote from page 89: "What his critics took to be hypocrisy was not really that at all. In some cases, it was the desire to please different constituencies, to avoid conflict with colleagues. In other cases it was

an orchestration of his internal voices, to avoid conflict with himself." Ellis goes on to say that both types of dispute - internal and external - grew out of Jefferson's' deep dislike of disagreement. This was underscored by a belief that conflict was unnatural and that harmony was nature's way of signaling universal truth. These conclusions would be easier for many readers to accept if the evidence for them was presented, as well.

Structure

The structure of *American Sphinx* resembles a series of academic essays relating to Jefferson at various points in his life. Ellis tries to present a snapshot of Jefferson at different crucial periods. Unfortunately, there is seldom enough detail about Jefferson's life and personality to bring these snapshots into clear focus. Instead, the information is presented around a few main themes within each section. The themes present Ellis's own points of view without much corroborating evidence. There is never an explanation of how Ellis arrived at his conclusions or any allusion to possible different perspectives. The result is that the reader knows much less about the facts of Jefferson's life than about Ellis' own opinions.

Ellis makes the choice to begin Jefferson's saga with his greatest achievement, writing the Declaration of Independence in Philadelphia in 1776. None of Jefferson's formative years or early experiences are discussed. This is in part due to a lack of evidence concerning Jefferson's early years, but it leaves many readers with their most important questions about Jefferson unanswered.

The average reader has two questions approaching a book of this type: What was Jefferson like? How did he get that way? With his selection of format, Ellis chooses to ignore the second question. No early history of Jefferson's life is discussed. Instead, the reader first encounters Jefferson just before he pens the Declaration of Independence.

Quotes

"The first panel [at the Jefferson Memorial in Washington D.C.], which attracted more attention than the others, contained the most famous and familiar words in American history: 'We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.'" Prologue, pg. 9

"Before editorial changes were made by the Continental Congress, Jefferson's early draft made it even clearer that his intention was to express a spiritual vision: 'We hold these truths to be sacred & undeniable; that all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness.'" Prologue, pg. 9

"Adams, like Lee, would be needed to lead the debate on the floor. That was considered the crucial arena. Jefferson was asked to draft the Declaration of Independence, then, in great part because the other eligible authors had more important things to do." Chapter 1, pg. 49

"Context is absolutely crucial. For all intents and purposes, the decision to declare independence had already been made. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, published in January, had swept through the colonies like a firestorm, destroying any final vestige of loyalty to the British crown." Chapter 1, pg. 49

"After Lee's resolution was debated and passed (July 1-2), the Congress took up the wording of the Declaration; it made several major changes and excised about one-quarter of the text. During the debate Jefferson sat silently and sullenly, regarding each proposed revision as another defacement." Chapter 1, pg. 50

"Actually, Jefferson's personal belief that slavery was morally incompatible with the principles of the American Revolution was not cause for worry. He had made his position on that controversial subject known on several occasions in the Virginia Assembly and the federal Congress." Chapter 2, pg. 87

"The Jeffersonian ideal, in short, was not a specific version of balanced republican government. It was a world in which individual citizens had internalized their social responsibilities so thoroughly that the political architecture Madison was designing was superfluous." Chapter 2, pg. 101

"By January 1794, [Jefferson] was finally convinced that his public career was over. 'I hope to spend the remainder of my days,' he declared, 'in occupations infinitely more pleasing than those to which I have sacrificed 18 years of the prime of my life.'" Chapter 3, pg. 118

"'[Slave] Children till 10 years of age to serve as nurses. From 10 to 16 the boys make nails, the girls spin. At 16 go into the ground or learn trades.'" Jefferson's plan for his slaves, Chapter 3, pg. 150

"Writing in coded language to Monroe in France, Madison explained that 'the *republicans* knowing that *Jefferson alone* can be *started with hope of success mean to push him.'* By the early spring of 1796, whether he knew it or not, [Jefferson] had become the standard-bearer for the Republican party." Chapter 3, pg. 160

"Jefferson was an excellent hater and a skillful polemicist, but he more than met his match in the Federalist press and pulpit, where the expiring condition of Federalism as a viable political movement only intensified the desperation of its defenders." Chapter 4, pg. 213

"It was the last morning of his life, which, as if orchestrated by providence, happened to be July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary to the day of the publication of the Declaration of Independence. He had fallen into coma the preceding evening and awoken to ask the physician and family gathered around the bedside, 'Is it the Fourth?'" Chapter 5, pg. 238

"Primitive Christianity, in his view, was similar to the original meaning of the American Revolution: a profoundly simple faith subsequently corrupted by its instutionalization." Chapter 5, pg. 259

"He therefore saw to it that one of his most unequivocal condemnations of slavery was prominently placed in his autobiography: 'Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free. Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever, that considering numbers, nature and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune, an exchange of situation, is among possible events...The Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with us in such a contest.'" Chapter 5, pg. 263

"His life had always been about promise. And his enduring legacy became the most resonant version of the American promise in the national mythology. But in his life, if not his legacy, there were some promises he could not keep." Chapter 5, pg. 290

Topics for Discussion

The Declaration of Independence is one of the most admired pieces of writing in the world, yet Jefferson produced it in just a few days. Why do you think he was able to accomplish so much so quickly?

What are some of the changes that members of the Continental Congress made in the Declaration of Independence?

What was Jefferson's reaction to the changes the Continental Congress made in his writing? Was Jefferson's response unusual for writers?

How would you explain Jefferson's belief that slavery was immoral and his ownership of hundreds of slaves?

The Founding Fathers clearly never meant for women or black people to have the privileges of citizenship. Do you think they were right or wrong, and why?

Jefferson believed that the least federal government was the best federal government. Do you agree? Discuss what responsibilities the federal government should and should not have.

Jefferson believed that men were innately good and that they would live in perfect harmony with each other without any laws. Do you think this is possible? Why or why not?