American Biography – Thomas Jefferson (1743 -1826)

Jefferson was born on his father’s plantation on the western frontier of Virginia. His father was a wealthy planter and slave-owner. His mother was a member of one of the wealthiest and most aristocratic families in Virginian society. From birth Jefferson was associated with both the frontier and the aristocratic level of society.

His early upbringing was typical of an upper class boy in his society. His father died when Thomas was 14 and, as his father’s heir, he inherited his property of 1200 ha and over 100 slaves. Two years later, he entered William and Mary College in Virginia. After graduation, he studied law and became one of the foremost lawyers in his colony.

In 1769, he was elected to the House of Burgesses and immediately identified himself with the radical, anti-British forces. In 1774, he published "A Summary view of the Rights of British America", which argued in favour of colonial self government. He became known throughout the colonies as an eloquent and logical spokesman for independence.

His reputation secured him election to the Continental Congresses of 1774 and 1776. He was selected by his colleagues to draft the Declaration of Independence. After two weeks, he completed the task, a task that made him famous both in the colonies and in Europe.

Returning to Virginia, he introduced a law that guaranteed complete religious freedom to all Virginians. He regarded this act as one of his finest achievements. As well, he supported a host of other social reforms which laid, he said, "a foundation for a government truly republican". These acts included the establishment of a public school system.

After two terms as Governor of Virginia, he was elected to Congress in 1783. He was responsible for two important pieces of policy that had a long term impact on American life. He persuaded Congress to adopt a decimal monetary system (using cents and dollars rather than pence and shillings). As well, he authored the North West Ordinance. This act regulated the manner in which the western territories were to be settled.

In 1785, Thomas was appointed ambassador to France. He succeeded Benjamin Franklin, who was the most highly respected and best known American in Europe. Jefferson was regarded as being second in brilliance to Franklin. While in France, Thomas published "Notes on Virginia". It was a response to a series of questions about America that had been sent to all the colonial governors. Actually written in 1780, the book was a wide ranging description of American geography, natural resources, races, economy, commerce, history – but not politics. It gives a good picture of what
the country and its society was like. As well it reflects Jefferson’s personal views on many important issues, such as slavery (which he opposed and believed should be abolished gradually), race relations (he feared that the ownership of slaves would turn whites into petty tyrants) and Blacks (he was convinced that they were and always would be inferior to whites; in fact, he believed that, once slavery was abolished, all the Blacks should be sent to Africa since the two races could not live harmoniously as free men).

In 1789, Thomas witnessed the French Revolution. He was extremely frightened and disgusted by the violence of the Parisian mobs. Although he never changed his support for the need and right of revolutionary action to overthrow an unjust government, he strengthened his opposition to violence. He also reaffirmed his hatred of monarchy and belief in republicanism, his dislike of cities was also re-enforced by his stay in Paris.

He was called back to the United States by George Washington to serve as the Secretary of State, responsible for foreign affairs. As a member of Washington’s Cabinet, Jefferson found himself increasingly at odds with Alexander Hamilton. In particular, Jefferson opposed Hamilton’s interpretation of the meaning of the new Constitution. Jefferson argued that the document had to be interpreted "strictly", that is, as it was written. Hamilton affirmed that it should be interpreted “loosely”, that is, in terms of its spirit.

Their constitutional differences led to bitter disagreements over financial policies.

The two men were also divided over the sort of foreign policy that the United States should adopt after the outbreak of war in Europe in 1793. Jefferson favoured republican France, while Hamilton supported monarchical England.

In the presidential election of 1796, Jefferson ran against his old friend John Adams. Although they were now political rivals, Adams was elected President and Jefferson Vice-President. Representing opposing political parties, they in effect represented a sort of coalition government.

Their political and personal relations grew worse over the next four years. In response to Adams’ signing of the Alien and Sedition Act, Jefferson wrote the Kentucky and Virginia Resolutions. Unintentionally, Thomas’ action established the philosophical justification for the secession of the southern states in 1860 which led to the Civil War.

In 1800, Jefferson ran against Adams for the presidency and won. Adams peacefully left office, an action that established an important principle. Elections, not military might, would decide the fate of governments in the new Republic.

Thomas Jefferson served two terms as President. During these years he managed to keep the United States neutral during the war in Europe. By the Louisiana Purchase he doubled the size of the United States and peacefully removed the French as a potential threat. Ironically, the Louisiana Purchase was based on the sort of “loose” interpretation of the Constitution that Jefferson had vigorously opposed in the 1790s. For the Constitution gave no power to the President to purchase lands.
On the other hand, he suspended many of the basic legal processes – and invented the doctrine of "executive privilege" – made famous by President Richard years later – in his effort to have his Vice-President, Aaron Burr, found guilty of treason.

Thomas was very nervous when he had to speak in public. He had his annual State of the Union speech read to Congress by others. This started a tradition that was to last until the presidency of Franklin D. Roosevelt.

When Thomas Jefferson left the presidency, the Republic was stronger than ever. Democracy was firmly entrenched. At the same time, his political party, the Democratic-Republicans, had forced their rivals, the Federalists, out of national politics. Democratic-Republican Presidents – James Madison, James Monroe, John Quincy Adams – were to control the White House for the next 20 years in what has been called the Virginia Dynasty. In national politics, Jefferson created what could be described as a "one party state".

During his retirement, Thomas established the University of Virginia (1819). Congress purchased his library and it formed the basis for the present day Library of Congress. He died, fittingly, on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the adoption of his Declaration of Independence. For his own epitaph, Jefferson wrote: "Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the statute of Virginia for religious freedom, and the father of the University of Virginia."

Thomas was a many-sided man. Although not trained as an architect, he designed his home at Monticello as well as many important buildings in Virginia. He also invented many practical items, such as the dumb-waiter, a revolving chair, a plow that won a gold medal at a French exhibition, a walking stick that folded into a chair, a letter copying machine and a pedometer that measured the length of his walks. As well, he knew Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, and Anglo-Saxon.

Thomas represented the complexity and contradictions of his countrymen: an ardent liberal, as President he suspended civil liberty laws; an opponent of slavery, he believed in the inferiority of Blacks to whites; a political philosopher, he was practical enough to put philosophical principles aside when he felt it was necessary; an aristocrat and plantation-owner, he became the spokesman of the small, independent farmer, whom he believed were the backbone of American society. He may not have been the best President that Americans have had, but he surely was one of the greatest.

**Question for thought:**
**What were some of Jefferson’s accomplishments as President?**