Charlottesville: Why Jefferson Matters

Annette Gordon-Reed

Americans have been trying to claim, or use, Thomas Jefferson in one way or another from the time of his death in 1826 up until this very moment.

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"Unite the Right" protesters surrounding counterprotesters at the base of a statue of Thomas Jefferson on the University of Virginia campus, Charlottesville, Virginia, August 11, 2017

I came to Charlottesville, Virginia for the first time in 1995. After four months of feverish work, I had completed a manuscript about what I thought was the biased and, therefore, unreliable way in which historians had handled the question of whether Thomas Jefferson had children with Sally Hemings, an enslaved woman at his plantation, Monticello. My purpose? To go to Monticello and talk with Lucia (Cinder) Stanton, a historian at the Thomas Jefferson Foundation who then, as now, probably had forgotten more about Jefferson than anyone alive will ever know. We met and played what we would later come to call "two hundred questions"—or some variant of the number—where I would ask and posit, and she would respond. A short time later, I was on the grounds of the University of Virginia to discuss my manuscript with Peter S. Onuf, then the Thomas Jefferson Foundation Professor at the university. I didn't know it then, but Cinder and Peter were friends, and we all are friends now. I have come back to Charlottesville many, many times since then, and have slept in no place, besides my home, more comfortably than in the homes of my friends there.

I mention these things to say that the national tragedy that unfolded in Charlottesville last week struck at every aspect of my being—a black person, a friend, an American, and a scholar who has devoted many years to studying Jefferson, slavery at Monticello, and, by extension, Charlottesville. I knew instantly why the men holding tiki torches felt the need to make their case for white supremacy by walking toward the statue of Jefferson that stands in front of the Rotunda he designed for the university he dreamed about and then founded. I also knew instantly that there was a reason the much less remarked upon "counterprotesters" surrounded Jefferson's statue to keep the tiki torchers from reaching it, staking a defiant claim, in the face of superior numbers, to ideas about human equality and progress that

they correctly perceived were under siege that night. I venture that it was not necessarily the man himself, but the ideas associated with him that mattered, and warranted forming a protective barrier around his statue. I have no doubt that the people trying to keep the tiki torchers away from the statue know about the problematic sides of Jefferson. And surely some of the torch-bearers might be troubled about Sally Hemings, although denial may provide a refuge for them. As historians like Merrill Peterson in the late twentieth century and Francis D. Cogliano in the early twenty-first have observed, Americans have been trying to claim, or use, Jefferson in one way or another from the time of his death in 1826 up until this very moment.

Because he was at or near the heart of so many aspects of the American founding for such a long time—longer than any other member of the founding generation—we have had many occasions to ponder Jefferson's complex nature and legacy. The Jefferson of the Declaration of Independence, with its words proclaiming self–evident truths about the equality of mankind and the pursuit of happiness, has inspired people the world over. Every marginalized group in the United States seeking inclusion looks first to Jefferson's words to claim equal citizenship in the United States. Blacks have been in a dialogue with Jefferson and the Declaration from the beginning of the republic. It is not for nothing that the Declaration is called America's creed—even when we know that is far more aspiration than reality.

Aspiration, of course, is a necessary component of progress. And if he believed in anything, Jefferson believed, to the point of naiveté, in progress. His faith in science and the capacity to bring forth new things and "improvements" convinced him that the world would get better and better. Jefferson didn't think America would stand still. The country would move ever forward, with education bringing enlightenment. That was the purpose of his university. It was to this Jefferson that statues have been raised.

But there is the Jefferson who enslaved people, and of the much less known *Notes on the State of Virginia*, written in the decade after the Declaration, in which he offers his "suspicion"—though it was clearly more than that—that whites were intellectually superior to blacks. He was still suspicious near the end of his life, saying that black people had "the best hearts" of any people in the world, but he had never yet encountered a black "genius." He also said that blacks and whites couldn't live together in harmony. Jefferson accepted John Locke's formulation of slavery as a state of war. After America's revolution, he came to view black men, collectively, as potential soldiers. The war taught him that, if given the chance—as the war had—black men would confront the whites who had enslaved them, and would never forgive them for what they had done. So the moral wrong of slavery should be ended, but blacks would have to be expatriated to form their own country, otherwise there would be endless strife that would lead to a race war.

As backwards and alarmist as this may sound, many whites at the time considered this view to be the "enlightened" position. And, as much as we may congratulate ourselves on the country's progress on the racial front, we have, in fact, had some version of a largely one-sided race war (cold and hot) going on since the end of the Civil War. These views about slavery were also offered in the *Notes*, and the passages criticizing the institution were the ones Jefferson feared would cause him the greatest problems with his fellow Virginians and southerners, who were not even close to giving up slavery.

The day following the confrontation at Jefferson's statue, the torch-bearers and their supporters went to another part of Charlottesville for the event that had brought them to the city: a rally to protest the removal of the statue of Robert E. Lee, the Confederate general who fought a war against the country Jefferson helped to found. Not surprisingly, there were mixed views about the Sage of Monticello even in the Confederacy. While some applauded his states' rights philosophy, they abhorred the language of the Declaration, recognizing its inherent and destabilizing power.

Today, a time of intense focus on the personal and of misplaced faith in the importance of sincerity, we question whether Jefferson really believed the words "all men are created equal," as if ideas are only as important and powerful as the personal will of the individual who utters them. The Confederates knew better than that. Ideas can have a power and life of their own. They weren't taking any chances. They saw Jefferson as a public man who had put ideas into popular discourse that could be used in opposition to the society they hoped to build. The Confederates took him at his word, thinking it important to mention him by name and repudiate what they took to be his views. Alexander Stephens's famous "Cornerstone Speech" said that Jefferson was wrong, insisting that blacks were not the equals of whites and, therefore, slavery was A-OK.

I cannot help thinking that the menaced people standing around the statue, no doubt holding many different views about Jefferson the man, symbolize the fragility of the idea of progress and aspirations for the improvement of humankind: the ideals that animated Jefferson in the Declaration, his insistence on the separation of church and state, his belief in public education, religious tolerance, and science. It must be said, they also animated what Jefferson knew by the end of his life to be the pipe dream of solving the slavery question, and wiping away the transgression of slavery, by giving blacks their own country—whether they wanted one or not. When he wrote his will freeing five enslaved men, he requested that they be allowed to remain in Virginia "where their families and connexions" were (an 1806 law would otherwise have required them to leave the state within a year). That is, of course, why all blacks in America should have had the right to stay in the country. He did this while other slave owners were freeing enslaved people on the condition that they be sent to Liberia. The

simple fact is that as brilliant as he may have been, Jefferson had no real answer to the slavery question. Although historians do not like the concept of inevitability, legalized slavery was destroyed in the most likely way it could have been destroyed.

American ideals have always clashed with harsh American realities. We saw that clash on the grounds of UVA. But how do we continue in the face of depressing realities to allow ourselves to hold fast to the importance of having aspirations, and recognize that the pursuit of high ideals—even if carried out imperfectly—offers the only real chance of bringing forth good in the world? In many ways, grappling with that question is what being a scholar of Jefferson is all about. Perhaps coming fully to grips with the paradoxes that Jefferson's life presents is what being an American is about. Even if one rejects that formulation, there is no doubt that he remains one of the best ways we have of exploring and understanding the strengths and weaknesses of the American experiment displayed so vividly last week in Charlottesville.

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