JEFFERSON AND THE AMERICAN INDIAN: A TROUBLING LEGACY

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps no statesman in American history provides historians with such dramatic contradictions as Thomas Jefferson. Whether one examines his views on slavery, attitudes about miscegenation, or his insistence on states' rights, actions often seemed to directly counter words. Though the contradictions are interesting and evoke passionate discussions among any who care to visit the American past, they are also deeply troubling and merit more than a casual or surface analysis. Jefferson mattered and his actions in so many areas would leave a powerful legacy.

This research will focus on yet another Jeffersonian "puzzle," that of his attitudes and actions concerning Native American people, by focusing on two questions. First of all, what were Jefferson's perceptions of the original inhabitants of North America and what shaped those perceptions? And secondly, how did his perceptions impact his decision-making as chief executive in the area of Indian policy? The pursuit of such questions will hopefully enable us to further grasp the legacy of Jefferson in this vitally important area of our history.

COMMENTARY ON METHOD

My intention from the outset of this project was to focus primarily on the words of Jefferson himself and not secondary commentary. His voluminous record of letters and addresses provide ample material on almost any subject imaginable. For a project of this very limited scope, however, it became necessary for me to limit my analysis to a couple of "episodes" that reflect his attitude and actions in a general way for a specific period. The first "moment" that I chose to examine was Jefferson in the early 1780s. He was an influential yet still maturing politician at that point and had published <u>Notes on Virginia</u> in which he included lengthy commentary on his impressions of Native Americans. The second moment for analysis was Jefferson at the mid-point of his presidency. By that time he had a clear record concerning

"Indian policies" that can be examined. Beyond the initial questions guiding this research, I was interested to see if Jefferson's attitudes changed over time? Was there an evolution in his thinking, or did he remain fixed on original principles? I attempted to let Jefferson speak for himself as much as possible, keeping in mind that my choice of documents and my own biases would invariably get in the way. As with any complex historic figure, I found that simply reading the words of Jefferson is problematic and I have been led to the conclusion that he often "cloaked" his real thoughts in diversionary language.

Beyond the documents, there are a myriad of good secondary sources on the subject of Jefferson's Native American policy which helped me deal with issues of context. Since the middle 1970s, and spurred on by a growing interest in the complex histories of minority groups within the American mosaic, historians have begun to focus more exclusively on this aspect of the Jeffersonian legacy. Bernard Sheehan, Woody Holton, Joseph Ellis, and Anthony Wallace have all produced works that helped me understand this topic in a broader way and I drew on them liberally as noted. These authors also helped me to better appreciate the complexity of the topic and, as expected, my final analysis is barely an introduction to an immense topic.

Finally, beyond documents and other sources, I had the rare opportunity to absorb Jefferson by living on "the Lawn" at the University of Virginia for several days, and going "up the mountain" to Monticello several times. Whether standing in his study, walking through the "Indian" hall, imagining what life was like on Mulberry Row, or seeing what he saw as he gazed out the west entrance of Monticello, one is struck by the Jefferson environment in a powerful way. It is difficult to comprehend this most intriguing of figures without seeing and feeling that environment.

PART 1: JEFFERSON THE SPECULATOR

Before examining Jefferson's attitudes in the early 1780s, it is important to establish some background concerning the pre-Revolutionary period, or what we may think of as Jefferson's formative environment. In his recent book, Jefferson and the Indians, Anthony Wallace points out that young Thomas Jefferson grew up in "an eighteenth-century Virginia that was hot with the fever of speculation in Indian lands," and that Jefferson's personal involvement in land speculation began as early as 1757 when, at the

age of 14, he inherited a portion of his father's share in the Loyal Land Company. Twelve years later, in February of 1769, the 26 year old Jefferson made the "first of several investments of his own in western real estate" (Wallace, 21). Jefferson's "hunger for western wealth," of course, was shared by many names familiar to students of American history: George Washington, George Mason, Patrick Henry, Benjamin Franklin, and Richard Henry Lee, just to name a few (Holton, 37).

By the time Jefferson made his first land acquisition, white settlers had already crossed the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia and others were streaming south along the Shenandoah Valley from Pennsylvania (Holton, 37). Jefferson, like other speculators of the period, was operating under the well-established legal practice of petitioning the general assembly of Virginia for the right of purchase. If the lands were "cleared of the Indian title, and the assembly thought the prayer reasonable" the property was granted to the petitioner. If the land had not yet been ceded by the Indians, the petitioner would have to "purchase that right" and the assembly would have to verify that claim and the "reasonableness of the petition" (Koch and Peden, 235). In either case, speculators hoped to profit from the resale of those lands to the flood of white settlers moving into the region.*

Though a seemingly straightforward process, land speculation was always complex due to various competing groups on the frontier, including several Indian tribes who were often at odds, white squatters who began to develop the land prior to official title-granting, the elite class of Virginia speculators, and the representative of the British Crown in the colony, the Governor. Woody Holton, in his book <u>Forced Founders: Indians, Debtors, Slaves, and the Making of the American Revolution in Virginia</u>, offers the following example of that complexity. Just before Jefferson began to apply for western land grants, the Cherokee Indians of the region signed a treaty with the British government through which they retained all the land that Jefferson claimed. Washington, Jefferson, and every other member of the House of Burgesses asked the imperial government to revoke the "Treaty of

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**** Anthony Wallace recounts the important history of the Treaty of Lancaster (1744) and the role that Thomas Lee of Stratford Hall played in the early years of Virginia speculation in lands in chapter one of his book <u>Jefferson and the Indians</u>. The discussion provides excellent contextual information for understanding the situation of the 1760s.***

Hard Labor," as it was known. In the petition, the Burgesses implored the British government to annex Kentucky and all of the land north to the mouth of the Kanawha River. Acceptance of the petition by the Crown would greatly enhance the financial situation of the Virginia speculators and solidify their allegiance to the Mother Country (Holton, 4-5). The Crown and the colonials would therefore work together to advance westward movement.

The 1768 petition confronted London officials with a legitimate dilemma, one they had been dealing with since the British victory over the French five years earlier in the French and Indian War. By granting the petition, they would surely be inviting western settlement and the potential for expensive conflict between white settlers and native people on the frontier. If their memories were long enough, they would recall "Pontiac's Rebellion" of 1763 and the terrible difficulties associated with it. They would recall the issuing of the Proclamation of 1763 that prohibited colonial governments from approving surveys or issuing patents for any lands west of a line running from Lake Ontario south to the Gulf of Mexico. Indeed, they were living with the difficulties created by that Proclamation, a terribly unpopular measure among Virginia speculators, to say the least. The petition of 1768 was ultimately denied, but the aggressive desire for western land continued unabated (Wallace, 36). Through a loophole in the inconsistently enforced Proclamation of 1763, the British Crown was free to continue making purchases of Indian lands west of the original line, thus sending mixed signals to the colonials. In 1768, for example, the Crown negotiated the Treaty of Fort Stanwix with the Six Nations of the Iroquois through which they purchased vast tracts of land. In an often repeated story, however, the Iroquois were the only native people consulted during the negotiation and the land being purchased was actually claimed by other native groups who challenged the actions of the Iroquois (Holton, 10).

It was during the aftermath of such purchases that we see the beginnings of a "land rush" in Virginia and Kentucky, a rush based on the erroneous perception that the British government would quickly ratify the Stanwix cession and eventually repeal the Proclamation of 1763. It was within this context, then, that Jefferson became actively involved in land acquisition. In fact, between 1769 and 1777, he attempted to acquire approximately 35,000 acres of land, all of which lay west of the Appalachians. The story of Jefferson's attempts and his involvement with several Land

Companies during this period is complex and beyond the scope of this research. Nevertheless, Jefferson clearly had an interest in western land acquisition by the time of the American Revolution, and he and other Virginia speculators faced a frustrating battle with the British Crown and other colonies over land grants and acquisitions for many years (Holton, 11-13).

It was in the midst of this confusing period of speculation that Jefferson and other Virginians became increasingly aware of Anglo-Indian conflicts on the frontier. Like others of his generation, Jefferson came of age absorbing the notion of Native Americans as the "enemy." The French and Indian War, for example, was fought while Jefferson was in his teens and he was aware of many of the critical events associated with the war. Ten years later, in another dramatic conflict between the last Royal Governor Dunmore of Virginia and the Shawnees in Kentucky, Jefferson, now a veteran of several years of Virginia politics, was confronted with another dramatic example of conflict. By the time of "Dunmore's War" in 1774, as it later came to be called, Jefferson was becoming increasingly involved in the growing movement for independence, but we can assume that his thoughts were never too far away from the Virginia frontier and the triangular conflicts over land ownership involving colonial speculators, Native Americans, and the British Crown. In fact, it is plausible to argue that the revolutionary movement was, at least in part, spurred by the increasing pressure that Jefferson and others of his class were feeling because of disputed land claims and potential conflict with the Indians (Holton, 29-38). Freedom from British restraints concerning westward movement would be advantageous to Jefferson and others of his class. Two years after Dunmore's War, the articulate 33 year old Virginian felt compelled to include this curious indictment of King George in his famous Declaration of Independence: "He has excited domestic insurrection among us, and has endeavored to bring the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian savages, whose known rule of warfare is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes, and conditions of existence" (Koch and Peden, 26).

PART 2: JEFFERSON THE PHILANTHROPIC NATURALIST

There is little doubt that Thomas Jefferson was a multi-layered and complex personality. The same man who aggressively sought to control lands in the western frontier for profit carried with him a romantic vision of the west

and its aboriginal inhabitants. The only book the prolific Jefferson actually published in his lifetime, Notes on the State of Virginia, contains a good deal of data and commentary on those inhabitants. The Notes, in large part, were a response to the French naturalist the Comte de Buffon's work, Histoire Naturelle. Buffon advanced the theory that the "peculiar environment" of the New World had retarded the development of its flora and fauna, aboriginal people, and even the European colonists who chose to settle there (Wallace, 76). Jefferson responded to Buffon in a format that included a set of queries posed by Francois Marbois, the secretary of the French legation in Philadelphia, followed by Jeffferson's response. Eventually published in 1785, the Notes included several notable passages about Native Americans. In response to Query VI, a general description of the nature of the New World, for example, Jefferson made these observations:

> **The Indian of North America being more within our reach, I can speak of him somewhat from my own knowledge, but more from the information of others better acquainted with him, and on whose truth and judgment I can rely. From these sources I am able to say, in contradiction to this representation, that he is neither more defective in ardor, nor more impotent with his female, than the white reduced to the same diet and exercise; that he is brave, when an enterprise depends on bravery . . . that he will defend himself against a host of enemies, always choosing to be killed rather than to surrender . . . he meets death with more deliberation, and endures tortures with a firmness unknown almost to religious enthusiasm with us; that he is affectionate to his children, careful of them, and indulgent in the extreme . . . that his friendships are strong and faithful . . . that his sensibility is keen, even the warriors weeping most bitterly on the loss of their children . . . (Jefferson, 94).**

Jefferson paints the picture of a brave, strong, affectionate, and sensitive person in this passage – hardly a dehumanizing image. Bernard Sheehan in his work, Seeds of Extinction: Jeffersonian Philanthropy and the American Indian, makes the case that Jefferson's language here is consistent with many of his age who viewed the New World as pristine and the aboriginal inhabitants as part of the almost paradisaic natural environment (Sheehan, 15). Indeed, the concept of the Indian as "Noble Savage" became prominent

in much of the literature of the period and Jefferson seems to have accepted that notion (Sheehan, 90).

Nowhere is that idea more clearly seen than in Jefferson's inclusion in his Notes of the following account of the murder of the family of John Logan, also known as Tachnedorus, a leader of the Mingo Indians:

> **In the spring of the year 1774, a robbery and murder were committed on an inhabitant of the frontiers of Virginia by two Indians of the Shawnee tribe. The neighboring whites, according to their custom, undertook to punish this outrage in a summary way. Col. Cresap, a man infamous for the many murders he had committed on those much injured people, collected a party, and proceeded down the Kanhaway in quest of vengeance. Unfortunately a canoe of women and children, with one man only, was seen coming from the opposite shore, unarmed, and unsuspecting an hostile attack from the whites. Cresap and his party concealed themselves on the bank of the river, and the moment the canoe reached the shore, singled out their objects, and, at one fire, killed every person in it. This happened to the family of Logan (Tachnedorus), who had long been distinguished as a friend of the whites. This unworthy return provoked his vengeance . . . (Jefferson, 95-96).**

In retaliation for the death of his family, Jefferson continued, Logan launched a war against white settlers. In response, the Royal Governor, Lord Dunmore, sent a contingent of the Virginia militia into the frontier to battle the forces of Logan in the heretofore mentioned conflict known as Dunmore's War. At the conclusion of the fighting, a dismal ending from a Native American point of view, Logan sent the following statement to Lord Dunmore who, in turn, had it published in the Virginia Gazette:

> **I appeal to any white man to say, if ever he entered Logan's cabin hungry, and he gave him not meat; if ever he came cold and naked, and he clothed him not. During the course of the last long bloody war (the French and Indian War), Logan remained idle in his cabin, an advocate for peace. Such was my love for the whites, than my countrymen pointed out as they passed, and said "Logan is the friend of white men." I had even thought to have lived with you, but for the injuries of one man. Col. Cresap, the last spring, in cold blood, and unprovoked, murdered all the relations of Logan, not sparing even my women and children. There runs not a drop of my blood in the veins of any living creature. This called me for revenge. I have sought it: I have killed many: I have fully**

> **glutted my vengeance. For my country, I rejoice at the beams of peace. But do not harbour a thought than mine is the joy of fear. Logan never felt fear. He will not turn on his heels to save his life. Who is there to mourn for Logan? Not one. (Jefferson, 96).**

Why Jefferson chose to include this story in his writings has consistently fueled scholarly speculation. In fact, years after the publication of his Notes, Jefferson was publicly challenged by Maryland Attorney General Luther Martin, Cresap's son-in-law, as to the accuracy of the account and the Logan speech (Wallace, p. 4). In 1800, Jefferson published an Appendix to the Notes on the State of Virginia, giving a thorough defense of his sources of information. He remained committed to the story for the remainder of his life.* Unraveling Jefferson's motives is difficult, but what seems clear is that the account of the Cresap massacre of Logan's family and the speech delivered to Lord Dunmore were included to counter Buffon's derogatory portrayal of aboriginal inhabitants of North America. Here was an Indian, John Logan, who befriended whites and spoke as eloquently as any highly educated European of the day. Here was an Indian leader who became victim to the uncontrolled and vicious actions of a few unruly and greedy white people who then naturally chose to retaliate. In short, Logan embodied a romantic vision of the aboriginal people of the American wilderness. As historian Charles Miller points out in his book, Jefferson and Nature, Jefferson's defense of the Indian "relied on both universal and environmental conceptions of nature, showing temperaments of both an Enlightenment scientist and an American nationalist" (Miller, p. 64). In Jefferson's view, Buffon was simply misguided in his scathing analysis of the New World.

In addition to Jefferson's complimentary, if not tragic, view of the native people, however, there was a clear implication in his writings that the aboriginal people of North America were simply at a lower stage of development than that of their European neighbors. In this regard he was certainly consistent with the Enlightenment era notion of the "chain of being" present in nature. This conception of order categorized natural elements from lowest to highest and was easily applied to humankind. In his Notes, Jefferson places the Indian in a middle position "within the human species between the white man and the Negro" (Sheehan, p. 24). Thus in

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**** "Logan's Lament", once printed, apparently had a life of its own. Washington Irving included it in his Sketch Book and it later became part of the McGuffey Readers, thereby becoming a standard for American school children in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its popularity, it seems, indicates the power of the view of the Indian as "noble savage" in American popular culture (Wallace, p. 1).***

a letter to General Chastellux in 1785, we find Jefferson contending that he was . . . "safe in affirming that the proofs of genius given by the Indians of North America place them on a level with whites in the same uncultivated state" (Papers of Jefferson). It follows from this perception, then, that the native people are in need of the "civilizing" impact that positive contacts with Euro-Americans will bring. Interestingly enough, Jefferson even encourages the amalgamation of the red and white races and suggested that such intermixing would be would be natural and beneficial* (Miller, p. 65). This philanthropic view, of course, fit very well with Jefferson's view of the American future. The native people would gradually become more "civilized," move away from their culture of hunting and gathering, and become yeoman farmers in true Jeffersonian fashion. Jefferson saw this as the inevitable consequence of ever-increasing white-native contacts.

PART 3: THE PRE-JEFFERSONIAN CONTEXT

It is evident that many factors shaped Jefferson's perceptions of native people during the first half of his life. As was the case in so many areas of his life, the simple fact that he had taken the time to study them, as documented in his Notes on Virginia, indicates his unusual curiosity for the subject. In addition, we know that he was fascinated with the western frontier and saw the future of the young nation developing in that direction. Further, his own desire for western lands is well documented and indicates that Jefferson was very similar to other men of his age in that regard. The question remains, how would these formative years and early attitudes shape or guide Jefferson's actions when he came to political power fifteen years later? As with any president, of course, Jefferson inherited developments and policies of previous administrations and before we can understand his actions, we must briefly examine the broad outlines of the earliest Indian policy of the new nation.

Jefferson's encouragement of inter-marriage between white and native people was directly counter to what he had to say on that subject regarding whites and blacks. In fact, Jefferson made devastating remarks concerning African-American slaves in his Notes, remarks that clearly illustrate his late 18th century worldview. You will find those comments in Query XIV of the Notes.

Once victory had been achieved in the Revolution, westward settlement became evermore intense. During the 1780s white-native conflicts continued and the struggling national government began to formulate policies for dealing with land issues. Jefferson, interestingly enough, spent much of this period as US Minister to France and was therefore divorced from much of the turmoil of domestic politics. Nevertheless, he did play a major role in developing two critically important laws passed by the new government, the Land Ordinance of 1785 and the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. The Land Ordinance provided for the survey and sale of territory that had been ceded to the US by the individual states and purchased from the native inhabitants. The Northwest Ordinance, the more famous of the two land laws, clearly showed the Jeffersonian philanthropic influence. It required that "The utmost good faith shall always be observed towards the Indians, their lands and property shall never be taken from them without their consent, and in their property, rights and liberty, they shall never be invaded or disturbed, unless in just and lawful wars authorized by Congress; but laws founded in justice and humanity shall from time to time be made, for preventing wrongs being done to them, and for preserving peace and friendship with them" (Wallace, p. 163).

Though perhaps well-intentioned, the humane rhetoric embodied in legal language was frequently overcome by a policy of conquest. In fact, between 1784 and 1789 the United States signed a number of treaties with Indian people both north and south of the Ohio River that were fraudulent at best (Wallace, 163). In addition, the instability of the Confederation Government complicated matters more and some sort of central authority was needed to stabilize the frontier regions of the growing nation. The new Constitution, ratified in 1788, was generally vague regarding the Indian tribes even though it strengthened the federal hand in negotiating with the native people. Henry Knox, the new nation's first Secretary of War, expressed the apprehension that at least some in government were feeling about problems on the frontier in a series of reports presented to the national Congress. In June of 1789, for example, Knox made the following comments in response to a series of disturbances between whites and Indians along the Wabash River:

> **It is presumable, that a nation solicitous of establishing its character on the broad basis of justice, would not only hesitate at, but reject every proposition to benefit itself, by the injury of any neighboring community, however contemptible and weak it might be, either with respect to its manners or power . . . The Indians being the prior occupants, possess the right of the soil. It cannot be taken from them unless by their free consent, or by the right of conquest in case of a just war. To dispossess them on any other principle, would be a gross violation of the fundamental laws of nature, and of that distributive justice which is the glory of a nation (Prucha, p. 13).**

Knox's language here indicates his general agreement with the Jeffersonian view of native people and, again, illustrates the bifurcated nature of early Indian policy. In August of 1789, for example, the War Department was officially established with Indian affairs placed under the agency's jurisdiction* (Prucha, p. 14). This was consistent with the view of the tribes as separate nations as implied in the Commerce Clause (Article I, Section 8, Clause 3) of the US Constitution, but certainly tells us something about the perception of the native people as potential, if not actual, enemies to be confronted.

Finally, three other features of the pre-Jeffersonian period related to Indian policy warrant some discussion at this point. Beginning in July of 1790, the US Congress passed the first of several "Trade and Intercourse" acts to regulate trade with the various tribes. As Francis Paul Prucha states in an introductory statement related to the first of these laws, they "were originally designed to implement the treaties and enforce them against obstreperous whites . . . and gradually came to embody the basic features of federal Indian policy" (Prucha, p. 14). Essentially, the national government was attempting to bring some order and consistency to a heretofore chaotic situation. Secondly, in December of 1793, President Washington proposed the

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**** This jurisdiction was maintained until 1849 when Indian affairs fell under the newly established Interior Department. As early as 1824 a "Bureau of Indian Affairs" had been created as part of the War Department, but for many years there was tremendous debate in government circles as to what agency should actually control federal Indian policy. Debates continued beyond the transfer to the Interior Department in 1849, but eventually the BIA became part of the Interior Department. Consequently, federal tribes have a unique relationship with the Executive Branch of the US Government.***

establishment of government trading houses that would provide a more permanent and systematic means of dealing with the various tribes in the frontier regions. Between the mid-1790s and 1822 such trading houses (often called the "factory system") became a permanent feature of the federal Indian policy. Each trading house would be managed by an agent appointed by and responsible to the President.

The final feature of this period that will enable us to better understand Jefferson's presidential tenure relates to the ongoing military actions against various tribes by the US Government. The conflicts that occurred in the northwestern frontier of the nation provide a representative picture of such military actions. It was in that region of the country that American attempts to coerce the Miami nation "yielded two military catastrophes" known as "Harmar's Defeat" and "St. Clair's Disaster" (Steckmesser, p. 94). The famous Miami Chief known as Little Turtle managed to defeat a large force of Kentucky and Pennsylvania militia men under General Josiah Harmar in the area of the Maumee-Wabash portage (present day Ohio) in late 1790. One year later, Little Turtle again successfully beat back American forces under Major General Arthur St. Clair near the headwaters of the Wabash River. The defeats of both Harmar and St. Clair brought a strong reaction from President Washington, and in 1792 he persuaded the Congress to approve a new 5000-man army for duty in the western frontier. He chose Revolutionary War hero Anthony Wayne as commander of the new force. Among Wayne's officers were Meriwether Lewis, William Clark, and William Henry Harrison, men who were destined for future fame stemming from dramatic frontier experiences (Steckmesser, p. 95). For two years, as Wayne prepared his troops, negotiations continued with the Miami over the boundaries of the future state of Ohio. Ultimately the negotiations failed and in the late fall of 1793, Wayne began to march into the region. In August of 1794, Wayne and the federal army engaged the Miami and other tribes of the region in what came to be known as the Battle of Fallen Timbers, a resounding victory for Wayne and a tragic defeat for Little Turtle. In August of 1795, native leaders signed the Treaty of Greenville, relinquishing two-thirds of modern-day Ohio. It was after Greenville that settlers began to stream into the Northwest Territory (Steckmesser, p. 97).

In summary, by the late 1790s the national government was operating with what may be described as a "split personality" when it came to Indian policy. On the one hand, there were those in government who sincerely wanted to establish strong ties with the native people through regulated trade and peaceful interaction, followed by an inevitable assimilation of native into anglo culture. On the other hand, the aggressive impulse for western land was overwhelming and led to an ongoing pattern of flimsy negotiation followed by violent conflict. In either case, the native people were being asked to give up their culture or their land, or both. It was in this environment that Jefferson was elected president in 1800.

PART 4: JEFFERSON AS CHIEF EXECUTIVE

> **The continued efforts to introduce among (our Indian neighbors) the implements and practice of husbandry, and of the household arts, have not been without success . . . they are becoming more and more sensible of the superiority of this dependence for clothing and subsistence over the precarious resources of hunting and fishing; and already we are able to announce, that instead of that constant diminution of their numbers, produced by their wars and their wants, some of them begin to experience and increase in population (Koch and Peden, p. 301).**

Thomas Jefferson, now 58 years old, drafted these comments as part of his first annual message to the Congress delivered in December of 1801. Having assumed the presidency eight months earlier, his election is often viewed as a political "revolution" due to his professed belief in greater austerity in government and a more democratic approach to politics than the Federalist regimes of Washington and Adams. For eight years, from 1801-1809, the legendary figure from Monticello, this "democratic" man who had been in public service for well over 25 years, would guide the national government. The excerpt from his first annual message, in many respects, captures the essence of Jefferson's vision for the aboriginal inhabitants of the United States and its western territories. It is evident that by the time Jefferson had risen to the presidency he had spent many years thinking about the western frontier and the native people living there. In some respects, he was uniquely qualified to deal with the issues that confronted him in this regard. Any Chief Executive of the nation inherits developments and initiatives from previous administrations. Additionally, however, each brings a

unique personality and combination of experiences into the circumstances particular to their tenure. As a conclusion to this research, Jefferson's policies regarding Native Americans will be briefly analyzed. Again, his own words will guide the research as much as possible. How did Jefferson's previous experiences and attitudes concerning Native Americans impact his decisions while in office? Had those attitudes changed since his early musings regarding the native people recorded in his Notes of 1785? And finally, did Jefferson innovate in the area of Indian policy, or simply maintain the status quo?

The early fascination that Jefferson exhibited regarding Native Americans certainly continued into his years as president. There is no evidence that Jefferson ever attempted to visit any native communities in the trans-Appalachian areas while president, but we know that he often met with Indian delegations while serving as governor of Virginia, secretary of state, and president (Wallace, p. 127). Those meetings are well documented and indicate his greater than average interest. One such meeting occurred during Jefferson's first year in office and involved a Seneca prophet named Handsome Lake. The Seneca tribe occupied lands along the Genesee and upper Allegheny rivers in New York state and had a history of working with the newly established US government going back to the days of the Washington Administration. Under the direction of Chief Cornplanter, a half-brother of Handsome Lake, the Senecas were attempting to become farmers and adapt the technology of the Euro-Americans. In addition, Quaker influence had been strong among the Senecas and a mission had been established in 1798 with an emphasis on farming, education, and trade. Handsome Lake emerged from this atmosphere in 1799 promoting both the Quaker program of secular reform and a revival of native religious beliefs and ceremonies. In addition, he emphatically banned liquor and prohibited further land sales to white settlers or the US government.

Handsome Lake and the Seneca delegation arrived in Washington, D. C. in 1801 and were entertained by Jefferson at the White House. We can only imagine the sensation that such a visit would create in the capital city. Jefferson would find Handsome Lake a most appealing figure, of course, because his revitalization program among the Senecas coincided nicely with Jefferson's vision of a gradual movement toward "civilization" by the native people. We know that the Seneca prophet addressed Jefferson as "Dear

Brother," not "Father," a sign that he viewed the President as a partner rather than an overlord* (Wallace, p. 291). We also know that the two men discussed banning the sale of liquor to the Indians and putting a stop to further land purchases. In a follow-up letter to Handsome Lake several months later, Jefferson again articulated his respect for Indian property rights and his belief that Handsome Lake's program was exactly what the Seneca needed:

> **You remind me, brother, of what I said to you when you visited me last winter, that the lands you then held would remain yours, and shall never go from you but when you should be disposed to sell. This I now repeat, and will ever abide by. We, indeed, are always ready to buy land; but we will never ask but when you wish to sell; and our laws, in order to protect you against imposition, have forbidden individuals to purchase lands from you; and have rendered it necessary, when you desire to sell, even to a State, that an agent from the United States should attend the sale, see that your consent is freely given, a satisfactory price paid, and report to us what has been done, for our approbation . . . Nor do I think, brother, that the sale of lands is, under all circumstances, injurious to your people. While they depended on hunting, the more extensive forest around them, the more game they would yield. But going into a state of agriculture, it may be as advantageous to a society, as it is to an individual . . In all your enterprises for the good of your people, you may count with confidence on the aid and protection of the United States, and on the sincerity and zeal with which I am myself animated in the furthering of this human work (Avalon Project: "Indian Addresses").**

Another clear example of Jefferson's continued fascination with the native people can be seen in the instructions he gave to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark prior to their famous journey of discovery. Through a strange confluence of events involving Napoleonic schemes, a slave revolt in Haiti, and European warfare, the French government presented Jefferson with the largest real estate deal in history. The purchase of Louisiana, an area comprising the inner third of present-day United States, captured Jefferson's

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This may be a minor thing, but I mention this fact because in the convention of the day, Jefferson often began his addresses to native people with the words, "My Children," indicating a paternalistic attitude. Recall that Presidents through the early years of the republic often referred to themselves as "Father" when addressing native people.

imagination like no other event of his presidency. The Lewis and Clark expedition had as its primary charge the pursuit and exploration of an all-water route to the pacific ("northwest passage") for "the purposes of commerce" (Ambrose, p. 94). Establishing commerce, of course, would require knowledge of the Indian tribes of the region. Jefferson, therefore, instructed Lewis to study the various tribal nations regarding their languages, traditions, the extent of their possessions, their relations with other tribes, their occupations, food, clothing, prevalent diseases, laws, and their commercial needs (Annals of America, Volume 4, pp. 160-162). Jefferson's meticulous instructions reflect an Enlightenment era man who was still very much caught up in the naturalist history of the continent. Indeed, Jefferson enthusiastically received Indian artifacts from the Corps of Discovery and in 1805 began developing his "Indian Hall" at Monticello which visitors still admire today.

Jefferson's intense curiosity about the various native people, however, did not mean that he was committed to helping them preserve their cultures in the face of growing westward movement. Despite the rhetoric of his addresses to native people, Jefferson remained committed to securing new lands in the west, both north and south of the Ohio River. We know that he had discussed removal of the Indians into the western areas of the nation for many years and he saw it as a practical solution to the white-native frontier conflicts (Holton, p. 214). In a letter to Benjamin Hawkins dated February 18, 1803, Jefferson provides the rationale for his thinking on the subject:

> **The promotion of agriculture, therefore, and household manufacture, are essential in their preservation, and I am disposed to aid and encourage it liberally . . . While they are learning to do better on less land, our increasing numbers will be calling for more land, and thus a coincidence of interests will be produced between those who have land to spare, and want other necessaries, and those who have such necessaries to spare, and want lands . . . In truth, the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them is to let our settlements and their meet and blend together, to intermix, and become one people. Incorporating themselves with us as citizens of the US, this is what the natural progress of things will of course bring on, and it will be better to promote than retard it ("Jefferson Papers"/ UVA).**

Whether or not Jefferson actually believed that there would be such peaceful cooperation between the two cultures, we may assume that in his most idealistic moments he was able to convince himself of that.

In a letter to Northwest Territorial Governor William Henry Harrison written at around the same time, we find a much more "Machiavellian" sounding leader:

> **When they withdraw themselves to the culture of a small piece of land, they will perceive how useless to them are their extensive forests, and will be willing to pare them off from time to time in exchange for necessaries for their farms and families . . . We shall push our trading uses, and be glad to see the good and influential individuals among them run in debt, because we observe that when these debts get beyond what individuals can pay, they become willing to lop them off by a cession of lands . . . In this way our settlements will gradually circumscribe and approach the Indians, and they will in time either incorporate with us as citizens of the United States, or remove beyond the Mississippi ("Jefferson Papers"/ UVA).**

The spirit and specific language of this letter, of course, is contradictory to the letter Jefferson had written to Handsome Lake in 1802. The intriguing question for historians to explore, therefore, is which "Jefferson" most accurately represents the man – the benevolent diplomat or the aggressive political operative? Unfortunately, the historical record supports the latter. Between 1801 and 1812, for example, the Jefferson-Harrison Indian policy in the Northwest resulted in fifteen major land cessions by various tribes* (Steckmesser, p. 120). Furthermore, the purchase of Louisiana in 1803 made the removal of eastern tribes to the west more feasible than ever, a possibility Jefferson had been contemplating for several months prior to the actual purchase (Wallace, p. 273).

While we can never be crystal clear on Jefferson's motives, it is evident that by the end of his first term his Indian policy had reached its mature form. The following elements were present in the policy: an attempt to maintain peace with the native people while preventing white encroachment and other

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****The story of these cessions is tragic and complex. Ultimately two Shawnee brothers, Tecumseh and Tenkswatawa, emerged attempting to unify the tribes of the region to effectively resist white incursions. Harrison defeated the confederated tribes at Tippecanoe in November of 1811, a victory that made him a hero of the western frontier.***

abuses; the use of a non-profit, whiskey-free chain of fur posts to counter British influence, while encouraging Indian debt that could be paid off by land cessions; the employ of superintendents and agents under the direction of the War Department; an encirclement of the eastern tribes, compressing them into an enclave between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River; the offer of a "civilization" program that encouraged Euro-American agricultural practices; and the offer of land in the Louisiana Purchase territory for those who rejected the civilization program as the alternative to their extinction (Wallace, p. 225).

By the time Jefferson was ready to begin his second term, then, his evolving Indian policy had been set in motion. Interestingly enough, he devoted a significant portion of his Second Inaugural in March of 1805 to that subject:

> **The aboriginal inhabitants of these countries I have regarded with the commiseration their industry inspires. Endowed with the faculties and the rights of men, breathing an ardent love of liberty and independence, and occupying a country which left them no desire but to be undisturbed, the stream of overflowing population from other regions directed itself on these shores. Without power to divert or habits to contend against, they have been overwhelmed by the current, or driven before it. Now reduced within limits too narrow for the hunter's state, humanity enjoins us to teach them agriculture and the domestic arts, to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence and to prepare them in time for that state of society which to bodily comforts add, the improvements of the mind and morals . . . But the endeavors to enlighten them on the fate which awaits their present course of life, to induce them to exercise their reason, follow its dictates, and change their pursuits with the change of circumstances, have powerful obstacles to encounter; they are combated by the habits of their bodies, prejudice of their minds, ignorance, pride, and the influence of interested and crafty individuals among them, who feel themselves something in the present order of things, and fear to become nothing in any other. These persons inculcate a sanctimonious reverence for the customs of their ancestors; that whatsoever they did, must be done through all time; that reason is a false guide, and to advance under its counsel, in their physical, moral or political condition, is perilous innovation; that their duty is to remain as their Creator made them, ignorance being safety and knowledge full of danger. In short, my friends, among them is seen the action and counteraction of good sense and bigotry. They, too, have their anti-philosophers who find an interest in**

> **keeping things in their present state, who dread reformation and exert all their faculties to maintain the ascendancy of habit over the duty of improving our reason and obeying its mandates (Koch and Peden, pp. 315-16).**

Here we see Jefferson, then, at the outset of his second term, justifying his approach to the native people. His fundamental thinking had not appreciably changed from 25 years earlier. Those in the Indian community that resisted Euro-American civilization were simply afraid of the change that was only natural. They were misguided and dangerous. Progress was inevitable and required fundamental change. The clock could not be reversed. The 62 year old leader had set the wheels in motion.

PART 5: CONCLUDING COMMENTARY

In the final analysis, Thomas Jefferson was no innovator when it came to dealing with the Native American people. Bernard Sheehan makes the case that Jefferson "reflected accurately . . . the basic thinking of his age on the subject of Indian-white relations" (Sheehan, pp. 5-6). Federal Indian policy, first formulated during Washington's regime and culminating with the removals of the 1820s and beyond, was consistent in many respects. It was generally accepted by those in power that "savagry" would recede, "civilization" would march forward into the west, new lands would be obtained by treaty or other means, and white population would continue to move into what had once been Indian territory. To be sure, many believed that there was a moral obligation by whites to deal fairly with the native people and to help them during this period of transition. Tragically, however, Indian culture could survive only "by ceasing to be Indian" (Ellis, p. 239).

We are left, then, with a series of troubling and paradoxical conclusions concerning this revered American president. First of all, we know that Jefferson was truly interested in the native people from an anthropological point of view. He dedicated a significant amount of time and energy to furthering his understanding of them and this made him, at the very least, unique among his contemporaries. Secondly, despite that interest and a humanitarian tone in many of his letters and addresses, he set policies in motion that culminated in their removal. For the remainder of Jefferson's life after leaving public office in 1809, the values and administrative structure

that he created regarding Indian policy would be continued by men like William Henry Harrison, Lewis Cass, Andrew Jackson, and William Clark, all of whom had served under him. Third, and most disturbing, the same man who wrote those powerful and inspiring words about truths that were "self-evident" and rights that were "unalienable," the same leader who spoke with and wrote eloquently about the native people, was willing to participate in their demise. Simply put, he was apparently unable to apply such a radical vision of liberty to non-white people. Joseph Ellis, author of <u>American Sphinx</u>, a study of the Jeffersonian character, asserts that Jefferson actually "created a particular style of leadership adapted to the special requirements of American political culture" that is still relevant today, a style "based on the capacity to rest comfortably with contradictions" (Ellis, p. 361). Ellis' conclusion is that Presidents have to be able to appeal to very different constituencies simultaneously – each must hear what you want them to hear. A man of Jefferson's intelligence, we might assume, understood the "disconnect" between his actions and his words concerning Native Americans. We might further assume, however, that he was at his core a pragmatic politician who understood the limitations of public policy. The advance of the growing American population into the western frontier simply could not be stopped. Though not a complimentary view of Jefferson, it is a view supported by the evidence.*

Should we, therefore, condemn Jefferson and the men of his age? How should we deal with him in our history classrooms of the 21st century? What should the role of historical gatekeepers be at this point? One point of view suggests that there are always dangers in "presentism" – that is, applying the standards of our own time to previous generations. It is too easy for us to condemn the policies of Jefferson from our vantage point two hundred years later. On the other hand, the purely antiquarian approach to the past -- studying it simply for its own sake -- seems overly cautious and primarily entertaining. There are lessons to be drawn from our past and history *should* instruct and guide present actions. In this regard, we should be fearless and balanced in our role as gatekeepers of historical knowledge; fearless in the

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**** One encounters the same troubling contradictions concerning Jefferson's attitudes concerning African-Americans and slavery. For an excellent discussion of that issue as well as a general discussion of the legacy of Jefferson, I suggest the Epilogue and 1998 Appendix of Ellis' book.***

sense that we pursue truth wherever it leads; balanced in the sense we examine many and varied perspectives as we reconstruct the past. The "lost voices" of history must be reawakened.

The history of Indian-white relations, of course, presents special challenges for all of us. As with any controversial topic, there are many "versions" of what really happened, versions that are often diametrically opposed. Listening for the lost voices of history naturally means being open to experiences very different from our own. Charles F. Wilkinson, author of <u>American Indians, Time, and the Law,</u> addressed that issue in a lecture at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in April of 1990:

> **One barrier that American Indians have long faced . . . is that public understanding of their core issues comes slowly. Special Indian rights are complex and history based, emerging from the deep past . . . In every instance, the Indian position is fragile because it finally depends on the willingness of opinion leaders in the majority society to learn about the experience of another people . . . The historical search I suggest is not done out of guilt or romance; it is not a sentimental exercise. Rather, an understanding of a people and their social, legal, and economic experience ought to be reached because it is the essential basis for judging what wise policy ought to be and for assessing how the rule of law ought to operate (Satz, p. xi).**

Wilkinson's words are certainly relevant for the study of any controversial area of the American past. In this era of contentious political debate over what we should or should not include in our study of history, particularly when dealing with the history of other cultures, Wilkinson seems to "have it right." Our study should not be driven by guilt, romance, or sentimentality. Rather, it should be guided by a search for the truth even if the truth makes us uncomfortable, shakes us from long-held perceptions, or causes an American icon to tumble from the pedestal. Ironically, it was this search for truth that became central to the spirit of the Enlightenment. And it was that same spirit that drove Jefferson and others to question the conventional wisdom of the day. Two hundred years later, Jefferson would argue, the pursuit must continue.

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