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What Did Lincoln Really Think of Jefferson?

By ALLEN C. GUELZO JULY 3, 2015

GETTYSBURG, Pa. — “Lincoln hated Thomas Jefferson.” That is not exactly what we expect to hear about the president who spoke of “malice toward none,” referring to the president who wrote that “all men are created equal.”

Presidents have never been immune from criticism by other presidents. But Jefferson and Lincoln? These two stare down at us from Mount Rushmore as heroic, stainless and serene, and any suggestion of disharmony seems somehow a criticism of America itself. Still, Lincoln seems not to have gotten that message.

“Mr. Lincoln hated Thomas Jefferson as a man,” wrote William Henry Herndon, Lincoln’s law partner of 14 years — and “as a politician.” Especially after Lincoln read Theodore F. Dwight’s sensational, slash-all biography of Jefferson in 1839, Herndon believed “Mr. Lincoln never liked Jefferson’s moral character after that reading.”

True enough, Thomas Jefferson had not been easy to love, even in his own time. No one denied that Jefferson was a brilliant writer, a wide reader and a cultured talker. But his contemporaries also found him “a man of sublimated and paradoxical imagination” and “one of the most artful, intriguing, industrious and double-faced politicians in all America.”

Lincoln, who was born less than a month before Jefferson left the presidency in 1809, had his own reasons for loathing Jefferson “as a man.” Lincoln was well aware of Jefferson’s “repulsive” liaison with his slave, Sally Hemings, while “continually piling about liberty, equality and the degrading curse of slavery.” But he was just as disenchanted with Jefferson’s economic policies.

Jefferson believed that the only real wealth was land and that the only true occupation of virtuous and independent citizens in a republic was farming. “Those who labour in the earth are the chosen people of God, if ever he had a chosen people,” Jefferson wrote. He despised “the selfish spirit of commerce” for feeling “no passion or principle but that of gain.” And he regarded banks with special suspicion as the source of all commercial evil. “Banks may be considered as the primary source” of “paper speculation,” and only foster “the spirit of gambling in paper, in lands, in canal schemes, town lot schemes, manufacturing schemes and whatever could hit the madness of the day.”

Lincoln, who actually grew up on a backwoods farm, saw little there but drunkenness, rowdyism and endless, mind-numbing labor under the rule of his loutish and illiterate father. He made his escape from the farm as soon as he turned 21, opened a store (which failed) and finally went into law, that great enforcer of commercial contract. “I was once a slave,” he remarked, “but now I am so free that they let me practice law.”

As an Illinois state legislator, Lincoln promoted a state banking system and public funding for canals and bridges. As a lawyer, according to colleagues, Lincoln was never “unwilling to appear in behalf of a great soulless corporation” — especially railroads — and had no compunction about recommending the eviction of squatters who farmed railroad-owned land.

As president, he put into place a national banking system, protective

tariffs for American manufacturing and government guarantees for building a transcontinental railroad. Lincoln was Jefferson's nightmare.

But Jefferson also held out a second example to Lincoln, as the man who, for all his limitations and fixations, still managed to articulate certain universal truths about life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Lincoln understood that Jefferson's words — if not his practice — formed “the definitions and axioms of free society.” When he was urged during the Civil War to ignore the Constitution’s restraints on presidential power, he echoed Jefferson’s warning against taking “possession of a boundless field of power” by asking: “Would I not thus give up all footing upon constitution or law? Would I not thus be in the boundless field of absolutism?”

And so, Lincoln concluded, “All honor to Jefferson,” who “had the coolness, forecast, and capacity” to fix in the Declaration of Independence the “abstract truth” that all men are created equal, so that it would “be a rebuke and a stumbling block” to anyone who planned to reintroduce “tyranny and oppression.”

This was Lincoln’s other Jefferson, the man who wrote better than he knew, the enemy of “classification” and “caste.”

History is neither a political fable in which all the brothers are valiant and all the sisters virtuous, nor is it a tabloid exposé, full of crimes and follies, signifying nothing but victimization. There is, I admit, a caustic delight in unveiling the frailties of our Jeffersons (and our Lincolns). But the delight turns malevolent when it serves only to strip the American past of anything remarkable or exceptional, or when it demeans or discourages civic engagement and confidence.

Patriotism without criticism has no head; criticism without patriotism has no heart. Lincoln was capable of understanding both the greatness and the limits of Thomas Jefferson and the founders and still come out at the end embracing the American experiment for “giving liberty, not alone to the

people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time.” And so should we.

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