

**HAPPY BIRTHDAY, THOMAS JEFFERSON:
"ATHEIST AND LEVELER FROM VIRGINIA"**

by Nick Gier

Read also "Religious Liberalism and the Founding Fathers" at
www.class.uidaho.edu/ngier/foundfathers.htm

As we celebrate Thomas Jefferson's 266th birthday this week, we need to be reminded about what a controversial figure he was. In the election of 1800 he was called "that atheist and leveler from Virginia." Alexander Hamilton was so committed to preventing "an atheist in religion and a fanatic in politics from getting possession of the helm of state" that he urged New York governor John Jay to block Jefferson's election.

During the 1800 election campaign, rumors were spread that, if elected president, Jefferson would confiscate all the Bibles in the land and replace them with his own version, one in which all references to miracles and the Resurrection were deleted. Jefferson was convinced that Jesus was a deist just as he was, and that the early Church had added unnecessary supernatural events to his life and teachings.

In a 1801 letter to Moses Robinson Jefferson wrote that "the Christian religion, when divested of the rags in which they have enveloped it, and brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent instructor, is a religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expansion of the human mind."

From 1904 to 1957 it was a tradition that every new member of Congress would receive a copy of the "Jeffersonian Bible." Judd Patton, a member of the conservative United Church of God has sought to revive this practice. Since 1997,

Patton has spent \$1,500 of his own money sending 753 copies of the book to members of Congress. Patton realizes that Jefferson was "not a believer in Christ," but he thinks that it is essential that America's representatives read about the moral essence of Christianity.

Jefferson believed the propagation of religious dogma was the cause of much evil in the world, and he was convinced that reason alone could guide the moral life. In a 1787 letter Jefferson had this piece of advice for his nephew Peter Carr: "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God."

In a recent column in the *Idaho State Journal* Richard Larsen called on Jefferson's authority to criticize the Obama administration. He uses the phrase "God-given" rights from our founders assuming that the reference is to the God of the Bible. When Jefferson referred to "Laws of Nature and Nature's God," he was not referring to a deity who intervenes in history and hardens the hearts of world leaders. (So much for their rights and freedom!) Rights are inalienable only if they are guaranteed by the immutable laws found in human nature, immune from divine veto.

Jefferson was convinced that the English Common Law he studied in law school was by far the best reflection of this natural law. That would mean, for example, that Jefferson would have, if abortion had been an issue in his day, supported Edward Coke's position that the human fetus was not a person until late in fetal development.

Larsen appears to use the phrase "God-given rights" to promote an American exceptionalism. The implication is that by having God on our side, we can defeat Europe's "secular socialism" and continue the unfettered capitalism that has nearly destroyed the world's economy. Larsen also seems to be saying that European rights, presumably because they are held by non-believers, are somehow more vulnerable than American rights. Let us remember, however, that it was a born-

again Christian president who threatened our rights more than any other recent chief executive.

I join with Larsen in calling myself a classical liberal. I define that position in terms of the motto of the French Revolution, which I revise as "liberty, equality, and community." The American Revolution was far less violent than the French Revolution, primarily because our founders realized the importance of the traditional values embedded in our diverse communities.

Jefferson was called a radical in politics and a "leveler" because of his sympathy for the French Revolution. Dictionary.com defines "leveler" as "one who would remove social inequalities or distinctions; a socialist." But of course Jefferson was no more a socialist than Obama is, but both of them are classical liberals because, while holding traditional values dear, they believed that equality was just as important as liberty.

In the Declaration of Independence the first principle that Jefferson enunciates is that all humans are created equal. In an 1809 speech in Wilmington, Jefferson said that the "best principle of our republic" is to "secure to all its citizens a perfect equality of rights."

Without equal opportunity and equality of rights, individual personal liberty will be fulfilled by some but denied to many. It used to be a fact that Americans could, by dint of their own efforts, move from the bottom of society to the very top. Today 75 percent of Americans born in the lowest economic 20 percent remain there. How does Larsen explain the fact that in "socialist" Denmark only 60 percent remain in the bottom 20 percent?

People who focus on liberty alone and have no concern for equality or community are called libertarians. They must be disappointed in Jefferson that he did not follow English philosopher John Locke's lead in promoting "life, liberty, and property." Instead Jefferson substituted "happiness" for "property," primarily

because he thought that developing the virtues that lead to happiness was more important than owning things.

One aspect of Jefferson's views is actually way out of line with classical liberal philosophy, based as it is on international free markets. Jefferson's ideal America was a nation of small farmers living virtuously on the fruits of their own labor. True Americans would avoid manufacturing, a market economy, and wage labor, which he thought was degrading to the human soul.

Jefferson would be shocked to learn that until recently financial services alone accounted for 40 percent of America's corporate profits. He would not find Richard Larsen's brokerage profession an honorable one. Making money just for the sake of money would for him lead to the highest degradation of the human soul.

Jefferson disliked the Federalists partly because they "all lived in cities," but Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton encouraged manufacture, banking, and the wise management of debt. Had it not been for Hamilton's successful plan to nationalize the Revolutionary War debt and build up the nation's credit in the world economy, President Jefferson would not have been able to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France.

I have not been able to calculate what percentage of the 1804 federal budget \$15 million would be, but it certainly would come close to what Obama is now spending for equally valuable reasons. Jefferson ignored his own advice that purchasing the Louisiana Territory was unconstitutional, and Obama should likewise ignore latter day Jeffersonians who make the same charge about his spending.

Larsen praises a man with an odd and anachronistic view of the American economy, so we should commend both Hamilton and Obama for realizing that government and private interests must always work together in truly successful human societies.

Nick Gier taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years.