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Following his subject from the drafting of the Declaration of Independence to his retirement in Monticello, Joseph Ellis unravels the contradictions of the Jeffersonian character. A marvel of scholarship, a delight to read, and an essential gloss on the Jeffersonian legacy.

American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson Details

Date : Published April 7th 1998 by Vintage (first published 1996)

ISBN : 9780679764410

Author : Joseph J. Ellis

Format : Paperback 440 pages

Genre : History, Biography, Nonfiction, North American Hi..., American History, Politics, Presidents



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Jeff says

"American Sphinx", Joseph J Ellis. 1996. Historical revisionist, Joseph J. Ellis, ostensibly enjoys championing himself as a renegade historian, unafraid to attempt to topple one the most well respected and admired of America's founding fathers. Recklessly wielding his anachronistic values upon Thomas Jefferson, "American Sphinx" escalates into a full contact assault on one the most important and revered figures in western culture. Thomas Jefferson is no longer the successful plantation owner, but a hypocritical slave owner. Jefferson is no longer humble and soft spoken, but simply 'nervous and unsure of himself'. Jefferson's tenacious pursuit of his many interests are depicted as merely self indulgent and 'materialistic'. Ellis mostly appears foolish in his attempt to elicit controversy. It is disturbing that this desperate and amateurishly written book, has become as widely read as it has. In lieu of a three hundred page book, "American Sphinx" would have been more appropriately formatted as a three minute segment on National Public Radio.

Nathan says

I suppose I knew what I was getting into with this book. The subtitle hints at the fact that this is a pretty thoroughgoing psychological history, rather than a historical narrative. Ellis posits Jefferson as an inscrutable figure shielded from effective analysis by a contradictory philosophy as well as a reserved personality. Both of which may be true, but both of which made this book scanty on real insight. Ellis doesn't spend much time asking why Jefferson was the way he was (a pretty worthwhile question, I think), instead showing, in rather too much detail how he was: an aristocratic populist, a slaveholding champion of individual liberty. The contradictions are there, to be sure. Ellis just leaves it at that a little too patly.

As a character study, it's fair to say that a good bit of this book is speculative. Ellis recounts the competing ideologies and their theoretical underpinnings of several major characters (there is a good comparison/contrast of Adams and Jefferson here), but he often ignores or forgets the complexity of human nature, reducing a man to a particular ideology's figurehead.

His style is commensurately abstract. Dealing primarily with questions of philosophy and character, he assumes a rather lofty, nebulous tone that conveys his intent well enough, but can start to drone after a while. That's a shame, since the beginning of his discussion hinges on correcting the popular image of Jefferson; I can't imagine that the layperson who ostensibly has this limited view of Jefferson would be interested enough to stick with this dense little book.

This is a history of ideas, of beliefs and of ideals. But too often, it neglects the historical, and in so doing obfuscates the ideas, beliefs and ideals it tries to explain. Frustrating.

Darwin8u says

"God was not in the details for Jefferson; he was in the sky and stars."

? Joseph J. Ellis, American Sphinx

Ellis' biography of Thomas Jefferson's character is a more difficult task than one might imagine at first. Jefferson while brilliant with words is also a founding father of smoke. He was comfortable with ambiguity, but saw things in black and white. He had a great ability to mask his feelings and deceive himself. He was a visionary and prophet in the mountains whose biggest creation was not concrete. Washington created the Great Man of America. Hamilton created America's government. Madison created our Constitution. Adams helped to create the revolution. Jefferson created an idea and an ideal. His vision of personal freedom and liberty floated in a realm of make-believe, but also in a place of dreams. It was an ideal that was clear enough to seduce generations of Americans, but opaque enough to allow that ideal to be held by opposing forces.

Ellis doesn't try to tackle the whole of Jefferson. His biography jumps around and almost completely jumps over his Vice Presidency, his second term as President, etc. Ellis isn't trying to re-travel the well-traveled histories. He wants to figure out the complexities of the man. He wants to put the smoke into a bottle. He does a pretty good job. However, he missed the boat by a couple years on Sally Hemings and gave Jefferson a bit too much credit on that. But he doesn't pull many punches. He captures the paranoia of Jefferson, his ideologies, his contradictions, his issue with slavery, his ability to bend when needed and get around his own hypocrisy. It is a good biography, just not a great one.

Renee says

American Sphinx posits that Thomas Jefferson is not a hypocrite but such an ardent political idealist that he compartmentalized the aspects of himself that he psychologically could not deal with and so self deceived himself. Isn't that the very definition of a hypocrite?

I've perused several reviews who believe Ellis is biased negatively against Jefferson, and that's just not true. I think Ellis is an ardent fan of Jefferson, but wisely, he doesn't shy away from Jefferson's faults; however, he also doesn't completely relay the entirety of Jefferson's life to the reader. He deliberately skips over Jefferson's time as Secretary of State and Vice President (both times of poignantly partisan behavior) and his second presidential term. This is by no means a complete biography, but it is very readable -- particularly if you already know a little about Jefferson's life.

This was certainly more of an investigation into Jefferson's political realm as his personal life was touched on only briefly.

I don't want to give the impression that I didn't enjoy this biography. I rather loved it, despite its flaws. Rather like Jefferson himself. Jefferson is so fascinating in his contradictions: Enlightenment thinker and writer, slave owner; revolutionary politician, fearful of government. Regardless of his influences in writing the Declaration of Independence, who cannot love him for that little piece of legislative nuance? I honestly couldn't put this tome down.

I also can't help but love Ellis' title. I fully commend its appropriateness.

Sara Shefchik says

The second half of this book was more intriguing than the first. Ellis gives several examples of paradox in the politics/philosophies of Jefferson. One must consider the context when reading about any of our founding fathers but I can't help but being pushed away from Jefferson towards Hamilton on the political spectrum of the time. Nonetheless, Jefferson is very intriguing. I now believe that no politician should ever quote Jefferson because he lived in a very different time and his philosophies are impossible to make relevant in modern times. We can honor him for his contributions but never use him as a supporter for any political agenda in today's world (Democrat or Republican). My ignorance has put all of these men on pedestals like Gods but just through reading just 2 books on 2 of them shows me the parallels between politics then and now and shows me they were imperfect men being politicians. Now I feel the need to pick up books on Adams, Madison, and Marshall but that will have to wait until next summer!

Jamie Collins says

I enjoyed this very much. It's not a straight biography of Jefferson, but as the subtitle says, it's an attempt to analyze his character. The book is very readable if you are reasonably familiar with the important people and events in the early years of America.

It's a fascinating study of the man's inherent contradictions, the most obvious being that Jefferson was a slaveowner who became famous for his writings on equality and personal freedom.

In my 1996 edition of this book, Ellis writes that he does not believe that Jefferson had an affair with Sally Hemings. Ellis decided that Jefferson "lacked the capacity for the direct and physical expression of his sexual energies". (I thought this a rather strange view, considering that Martha Jefferson's health was eroded by repeated pregnancies.) In later editions of the book, Ellis acknowledges that a 1998 DNA study offered proof that at least one of Sally's children was fathered by Jefferson, and it was therefore likely that they were all fathered by him. I wonder if this revelation made Ellis question any of his other conclusions about Jefferson's character?

Mike Mcfarland says

This book is more a series of portraits than a biography. It doesn't tell Jefferson's story in one long arc, but rather captures him at significant periods of his life. This method works well for Ellis (see: Founding Brothers), probably because the broader view allows him to write more lyrically than a stick-to-the-facts biography would allow.

What emerges from Jefferson's portraits is a man with extraordinary powers of self-delusion. These powers enabled him to bemoan slavery while owning slaves, deny ambition while pursuing high office, and defame contemporaries while protesting his innocence and friendship. Jefferson's hypocrisies are known to most people, but this book really drives them home.

Ellis doesn't focus solely on Jefferson's flaws, though, Which is not to say that Jefferson was wholly Ultimately though, whatever his glaring personal flaws, his words and ideas retain a powerful ability to inspire people. Without the Declaration there is probably no Bill of Rights, no French Declaration of the

Nancy says

I am clearly overwhelmed by this book. There are so many things that stand out in this analysis of Jefferson and his influences in development of American government. I feel compelled to go into more detail than usual, purely for my own dissection of the aspects that seemed so pertinent to our current political situation. I had read this with the idea of balancing the negative perspective on Jefferson in the book "Hamilton." Ellis is both critical and complementary, writing on Jefferson's weaknesses, then steering toward his strengths and accomplishments. The author gives voice to both Jefferson's detractors and his defenders, the real human man as opposed to the glossy textbook image. My own impressions remain mixed. Among the things that confirmed my opinions, was Ellis's explorations of Jefferson's many inconsistencies in his principles versus actions,

Jefferson's years in France fell at the time their revolution was brewing and did much to shape his ideas about generational sovereignty - "the earth belongs to the living." One should not in his opinion make acts that would bind another generation. In an ideal world perhaps, but was this a realistic understanding of human nature? *"Moreover the doctrine of generational sovereignty was yet another version of his utopian radicalism. Madison was surely correct to declare the entire belief wildly impractical and utterly incapable of implementation, but that was beside the point. For the vision of each generation starting from scratch, liberated from the accumulated legacies of past debts, laws, institutionalized obligations and regulations, allowed Jefferson to conjure up his fondest dream, a world where the primal meaning of independence could flourish without any restrictions, where innocence had not yet been corrupted."* The debts and burdens of one would not be passed on to the next? Interesting from many angles but also in light of the fact Jefferson was heavily in debt for the lifestyle he insisted was necessary for a diplomat in Paris, AND heavily in debt on the estate he inherited from his father in law.

He was in general opposed to a strong central government. In a letter to Abigail Adams, he wrote, "The spirit of resistance to government is so valuable on certain occasions that I wish it to be always kept alive. I like a little rebellion now and then. It is like a storm in the atmosphere." Ellis analysis goes on to say, "His remarks suggested that his deepest allegiances were not to the preservation of political stability but to its direct opposite." He opposed Federalist visions of an energetic national government because in his view it undermined the original intentions of the American Revolution, wherein lay the opposition to any power accumulated by the King and court. Jefferson hated the balances of power, disliked the Judiciary the most, followed by the Senate. Leaving states to domestic governing and laws and the federal government controlling international relations and policies would have been in line with his philosophy. . But how could this rapidly growing country present a unified front on the global stage if we are so divided regionally, especially two plus centuries later, on our current trajectory? And there appears to be the SAME agrarian/southern vs. urban intellectual/northern divide that has evidently haunted this country for centuries! Fascinating.

Neither was Jefferson an initial supporter of the Constitution, although being in France during its writing, he was negative from afar, preferring the indirect representation through his friends Madison and Monroe. Evidenced in another letter, "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants. It is its natural manure." If he couldn't find support for changes to the Constitution, then his interest lay more in developing a Bill of Rights. While he held obvious affection for his life in France, he was also intensely critical of certain elements of monarchy and lifestyle in his private letters. He totally

misinterpreted the potential for violence in the developing stages of the French Revolution and assured his government that changes could be possible without a drop of blood being shed. Later in life, it was shown he doctored some notes so as to not give the impression his fondness for France had created a blind spot.

His internal battles of ideology versus action is further evidenced in his claim that he wavered and backed off taking a firm public stand on abolition and kept slaves himself. There are numerous documented examples of correspondence where it is evident he is addressing his widely varying comments to please its intended audience. He had an intense dislike for conflict and a strong sense of refinement as well as an idealized vision of government. This doesn't even address the Sally Hemmings business as this book came out before the DNA evidence was in. My edition however does contain an addendum. Jefferson realized there was a difference between Northern and Southern ideas on abolition, and hoped the North would leave the South to work out its own solution. His expectations included gradual emancipation, AND extradition or relocation of the slave population, the latter he also came to realize was no longer possible as the years went by. He was troubled by the Missouri Question. His idealized vision of the westward expansion diluting and diffusing the slavery problem was also unrealistic. In addition, Jefferson does little to champion any causes for the Native American population. While he treated leaders with respect and admiration "mingled with a truly poignant sense of tragedy about their fate as a people... the seeds of extinction for Native American culture were sown under Jefferson."

Ellis keeps stressing that Jefferson portrayed himself as a private man who disliked conflict, but was also strongly opinionated, competitive and managed his conflicts from afar. During his tenure as secretary of state he felt he was a misfit. In those years, the foundations for the republican party were laid in firm opposition to the Federalists. "And he dispensed political invective of his own, or rather had surrogates do it in his behalf..." He ran away from open differences of opinion. Madison was often the one to do his bidding and this "placed an extremely talented spokesman at the point of attack while allowing Jefferson to remain behind the scenes and above the fray," but this arrangement "gave credence to the charge that Jefferson was a devious manipulator who played cowardly games with the truth." This was certainly true in his feud with Hamilton, "fueled by his own personal demons." His obsessive opposition to Hamilton's banking system was a reflection of his own indebtedness. He wanted to fix publicly what he couldn't fix privately.

Ellis is not completely critical by any means. Perhaps one of Jefferson's greatest contributions during his presidency was the Louisiana Purchase. He wrangled the deal while going against his own goals of retiring the national debt and was accused of being unconstitutional, lacking Congressional approval thus wielding improper use of executive power. He didn't stick to legalities if he thought the outcome was still in the nation's best interests. His internal contradictions continued in terms of not allowing representatives in the newly acquired territory any voice in Congress. There is agreement on the importance of neutrality in a still developing nation even though the methods of implementation were in question. Jefferson was also spearheading the early development of public education and what would become the University of Virginia. Interestingly enough, his ideas on university education were very reflective of his ideology of lack of central control. He rejected class levels, traditional rules and any curriculum requirements - no specific courses of study. AND it should be self governing.

America is also not the Christian nation that so many of today's conservative right wing argues and it was certainly not in our responsibility to convert anyone. Jefferson had written that he didn't care what his neighbor's faith was, twenty gods or no gods, it didn't matter. This caused a fervor among the Federalists who accused him of being an atheist and a heretic. Jefferson wrote a response about the merits of Jesus as a role model and was later quoted in a letter to Benjamin Rush as saying he did reject "the corruptions of Christianity, but not the genuine precepts of Jesus himself." While he viewed himself a Christian, he wanted to separate a pure simple faith, especially in the moral merits of the person of Jesus, from its institutionalized

incarnations. He clearly believed in separation of church and state.

Ellis suggests that Jefferson descended into a “nearly pathological mentality” in his last years, partly due to mounting debts, and “self imposed isolation” that resulted in his sources of political information being “highly partisan and narrowly provincial.” That being said, one can not remove Jefferson’s much debated legacies from their historical context. Ellis puts it quite eloquently when he says, “It should be abundantly clear that the ingrained reticence of historians to translate Jefferson across the ages is rooted in more than mere timidity, it is grounded in a fuller appreciation of the sea of change that separates his world from our own. To extend the image of sand castle on the beach, it is not just that successive waves of change have swamped Jefferson’s core convictions, it is also that the shape of the entire shoreline has been completely reconfigured.” Times have changed and then again they have not.

While of opposing viewpoints and often in conflict with each other, Jefferson and Adams mended their friendship in their later years. Writing frequently in a manner which appeared to be posturing for posterity, they sometimes argued ideology and other times either avoided the discussions or simply agreed to disagree. What had been the real goal of the Revolution? Their differences still ran deep. I loved some of the comparisons Ellis draws of the two men in the final chapters. “Criticism of an idealist by a realist.” Theirs was a clash between “a romantic optimist and an enlightened pessimist.” “The classic debate between a rationalist and an empiricist.” “Something obviously more than a liberal and a conservative. Jefferson’s formulation rendered all political history into a moral clash between benevolent popular majorities and despotic elites...” to which Adams answers, “The fundamental Article of my political Creed is that Despotism, or unlimited Sovereignty, or absolute Power is the same in a Majority of a popular Assembly, an Aristocratical Counsel, an oligarchical Junta and a single Emperor.” Wow - how pertinent is that for today!? “For better or worse, American political discourse is phrased in Jeffersonian terms as a conversation about sovereign individuals who grudgingly and in special circumstances are prepared to compromise that sovereignty for larger social purposes.”

Tony says

AMERICAN SPHINX. (1996). Joseph J. Ellis. ****.

This work was subtitled, “The Character of Thomas Jefferson.” Ellis had previously written a book on the same theme as this one, but about John Adams. What made this work on Jefferson a bit more difficult to write was the lack of early personal letters and documents that were all destroyed in a fire at Jefferson’s home. Much of Ellis’s comments on Jefferson’s early life were developed on an inferential basis – relying on letters and documents written by his friends and associates to their circle of associates. Once past this early stuff, however, Ellis had plenty of primary material – all of which he put to good use. I learned a lot about Jefferson – the man – that I didn’t know before, and re-learned much that I had forgotten. The title of the book was aptly chosen: Jefferson was essentially a silent man, keeping most of his thoughts to himself. He was much happier when he was at Monticello, working on his house and in the midst of his books. The two major achievements that most people remember from their history classes about Jefferson was that he wrote the Declaration of Independence, and was in office and negotiated the Louisiana Purchase. The real story of his writing of the Declaration is thoroughly explored in this work – both in its antecedents and in the changes wrought after its submission to the Continental Congress. The other item that has gotten a lot of play among historians and us common people is the Sally Hemings affair. Ellis has devoted an extensive chapter (as an Appendix) on this topic. Where does Ellis stand? I’ll leave that up to you to find out. Jefferson himself was very confused as to how to evaluate his contributions to our country during his terms in office. It is interesting to see his list of accomplishments as he rated himself as he was President. “At some point during

the year before his elevation to the presidency Jefferson wrote an uncharacteristically personal note to himself under the title, 'Memorandum of Services.' 'I have sometimes asked myself whether my country is the better for my having lived at all,' he mused to himself. 'I have been the instrument of doing the following things; but they would have been done by others; some of them, perhaps, a little better.' He then went on to list a curious version of his public accomplishments, placing the dredging of the Rivianna River alongside the drafting of the Declaration of Independence, importing olive plants from France beside the efforts to end the slave trade...The two presidential accomplishments that gave him the most satisfaction were the Louisiana Purchase and the retirement of a substantial portion of the national debt." Overall, this is a fine examination of Jefferson the man, viewed much in the light of his own opinions. Recommended.

Kelly says

Thomas Jefferson has always been my favorite of the Founding Fathers. I won't deny that part of it is because I do like a good scandal. :) But the other part is because he's simply fascinating. I've always loved the combination of ego and indulgence, passion and beautiful reason that he exhibits. I love his writings. This book is by the same guy who did "Founding Brothers" (which is also fascinating and won a Pulitzer Prize), so the guy knows what he's talking about. He doesn't reveal much /new/ about Jefferson, it's more about the perspective on him that he brings. Really makes him seem alive and close to the reader. It does say its about his character, and that's very true. And since that is the most fascinating part about him? That makes for a good, interesting read.

Julie says

This book is a well disguised attack on Jeffersonian ideals of smaller government...accomplished through lengthy "psychoanalytic" attacks on Jefferson's character. It amazes me that so many find this illuminating and deserving of the Pulitzer Prize. Ellis chiefly does this by showing Jefferson to be a secretive, ultimately anarchic radical who was incapable of perceiving the need for political governance under the Constitution (the "necessary evil" described by Paine in Commons Sense).

Perhaps most telling is the fact that Ellis goes out of his way to explain that he does not consider Jefferson to be insane: "Jefferson was not--let us be clear and emphatic on this point--a mentally unstable person or a man with latent paranoid tendencies. The conspiratorial character of his political thinking in the 1790s...was a common feature of the political literature of the time, and substantial traces of the same feverish mentality can be found in the private correspondence of the entire political leadership...Unless one is prepared to make sweeping psychiatric charges against the vanguard members of the entire revolutionary generation...psychiatric appraisals of Jefferson himself should be recognized as both misleading and unfair." (pp. 155-56 of the paperback edition).

If this in fact is how Ellis really feels about Jefferson, then WHY does it take him 155 pages to get to this statement? And Ellis loses no time in renewing his attack; indeed only letting up on Jefferson long enough to allow him one moment of reverential glory in his description of Jefferson's First Inaugural Address (pp. 214-221).

Indeed, Ellis' other major attempt at denying his own methods of psychological attack is not contained in the

main narrative of the book at all; rather, buried in the footnotes for pages 183-186 (note 65). In it Ellis discusses his mistrust for psychohistory and the empirical methods of modern psychoanalysis, whether Freudian, neo-Freudian, or Ericksonian. If Ellis is so skeptical, then why is he so eager to embrace their methods?

The problem with Ellis is that he simply does not agree with Jefferson's ideals. Do not miss his afterword, "The Future of an Illusion," in which he asserts "after 1865, Jefferson's...convictions about the proper distribution of power between state and federal governments, if not completely washed away, were permanently put on the defensive" (p. 352); "the New Deal was in fact the death knell for Jefferson's idea of a minimalist government" (p. 353); and "no one seriously contemplates the elimination of Social Security or the Federal Reserve Board" (p. 355).

Bad news for you, Ellis. We Jeffersonians are still out there.

If you read this book, rush to the nearest bookstore or library and read Ron Paul's "The Revolution: A Manifesto." Make sure to get one for Joseph Ellis, too.

Steve says

<http://bestpresidentialbios.com/2013/...>

"American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson" by Joseph J. Ellis was published in 1996 and won the 1997 National Book Award in Nonfiction. Ellis is a well-known author and history professor focusing on the revolutionary era. He is probably best known for his Pulitzer Prize winning book "Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation" and has written about Presidents Washington and Adams as well.

"American Sphinx" has been described by some as a "psychological history" of Jefferson, but it is really much more than that: it is part character analysis, part personality profile and part history book. What it is not is a traditional biography or even an abbreviated narrative of Jefferson's entire life - but as I have discovered by now, this is par for the course for a Joseph Ellis book on a revolutionary-era president.

Instead of following the story of Jefferson's life in a single, continuous arc "American Sphinx" focuses on five significant periods in his life, observing his thoughts and actions during each of these periods and considering what can be learned about this enigmatic man. In this manner Ellis reflects on the many contradictions Jefferson presents as well as the difficulty he offers those who wish to portray Jefferson either as a hero or a villain, when he is certainly far more complex than that. (Not unlike many of us, he is a little of both...)

But rather than focusing dogmatically on just those five specific periods of his life (while he was in Philadelphia during the Second Continental Congress, in Paris as a diplomat, at Monticello after resigning as secretary of state, during his first presidential term and during his ultimate retirement to Monticello), Ellis pulls as much historical context from the "uncovered" periods as is needed to fully understand appreciate the points he makes and the conclusions he draws.

This book has been called dense by some and, less frequently, one-sided. But it is certainly neither. In contrast to his previous character analysis ("Passionate Sage" about John Adams written three years earlier), Ellis's book on Thomas Jefferson is surprisingly sprightly and effervescent, lacking the overly-academic feel of the earlier work. And it is remarkably well-balanced; throughout "American Sphinx" Ellis is careful to note Jefferson's brighter and darker sides, observing his flaws and singing his praises where due.

Of particular interest toward the end of the book, Ellis examines Jefferson's legacy – noting those aspects which have survived the past two-hundred years undiminished (his emphasis on religious freedom, for instance) and which have been forced to bend to the will of American history and changing times (his zealous pursuit of limited government in almost all circumstances...except when he was president, of course). It is at this point that one of Ellis's central points – that Jefferson's actions cannot be easily judged outside the context of his time in history – is most forcefully made.

Overall, I was surprised at how much I enjoyed "American Sphinx," particularly as Ellis's previous character analysis (on John Adams) possessed an overly dry and academic tone. "American Sphinx" on the other hand was colorful and dynamic, while also deep and insightful. But make no mistake- this is not the perfect book for someone just getting acquainted with Jefferson. Even though Ellis replays a great deal of Jefferson's life in order to fully support his conclusions, this is not a comprehensive account of Jefferson's entire life. However, as a third or fourth book on Thomas Jefferson, "American Sphinx" truly excels.

Overall rating: 4¼ stars

Jonfaith says

A provocative survey of an enlightenment thinker and statesman who could never outdistance his contradictions. My friend Mark Prather selected this for samizdat and a number of us read such and with a formality of discussion. The passage of a couple decades would likely have adjusted those younger impressions.

Matt says

A convincing and pleurably readable psychohistory of - let's face it - a very eccentric man. Especially interesting are the passages where Jefferson's official actions are placed in the context of deep personal motivations and conflicts. For example, the author suggests that Jefferson's determination to reduce the national debt was largely based on his inability to pay off his own crushing personal debts. What he could not do for himself, he did for his country.

Like his subject, the author seems almost obsessed at times with certain aspects of Jefferson's contradictory personality, especially his views on slavery. It seems intolerable that the same man who wrote the most famous and eloquent summary of American views on liberty and equality, and who early in his career called in strong terms for the eventual abolition of slavery, could have failed so remarkably in his own life on such a fundamental moral question. Yet while it isn't very useful to condemn a historical figure based on modern values, it is also important to remember that many of Jefferson's contemporaries viewed slavery in basically present-day terms. Jefferson certainly knew about their arguments and even agreed with them, at least in principle. But his own economic situation and his fear that liberation would lead inevitably to vengeful

insurrection caused him to continue to hold "the wolf by the ears," right up to his death.

It's always difficult to know what to make of Jefferson. Ellis repeats several times that Jefferson was a moralistic thinker, a man of absolute blacks and whites. But one comes away with the impression that he was in fact all shades of gray. He is the sole author of the Declaration of Independence and he heavily borrowed ideas and even language from other writers. He opposed domestic government power viscerally and was responsible for the extra-constitutional purchase of Louisiana, probably his most important achievement as president. He opposed military buildup during the Adams administration and benefited from it when he sent a fleet to fight the Barbary pirates. He argued, bizarrely, that slavery would dissipate and eventually disappear if it were allowed to expand into the western territories. In the end, he defies neat description, and like so many great men and women, one can read in him what one wishes. He is, as John Adams put it, "a shadow man."

The Sally Hemings affair, which is not after all very important, is mercifully relegated to a few brief comments at the end of the volume.

Finally, my favorite sort of thing: trivia that's interesting only to other nerds. It was Jefferson, and not Washington in his Farewell Address, who coined the term "entangling alliances."

Gary Hoggatt says

I have read and enjoyed two books by Joseph J. Ellis in the past. Several years ago, I first encountered Ellis with *Founding Brothers* and found it a great look into the revolutionary generation. More recently, I read *His Excellency: George Washington* a couple of months ago and really enjoyed Ellis' presentation of Washington (see my review of *His Excellency* here on Amazon). So it was with high expectations that I started *American Sphinx*. Unfortunately, those expectations were not met.

Sphinx is not a biography of Jefferson. Its goal is only to look at his "character" by reviewing selected portions of his life, primarily the writing of the Declaration of Independence, his time in Paris as diplomat, his first presidential term, and retirement. Almost entirely glossed over are his youth, his time as Washington's Secretary of State and his second presidential term. I felt that, not having a full picture, it was harder to jump from period to period, as, for example, the discussion of Jefferson's retirement made oblique references to difficulties in his second term, but did not explain much about them. This biographical issue may not have been as pronounced had I previously read a dedicated Jefferson biography, but unfortunately my exposure to him this far has been through general histories of the Revolution and biographies of his contemporaries.

Now, as for Ellis' discussion of his character itself, I found it difficult to follow. Ellis continually discussed various issues that caused Jefferson to say one thing and think another, or not think about it at all, with frequent - over-used, even - references to Jefferson's "psychological dexterity." I really felt that, after reading *Sphinx*, that I didn't have much better a grasp on Jefferson than I had at the start, as Ellis seems to either make excuses for Jefferson's inconsistencies and/or fall back to the "psychological dexterity" theme again. Another overused phrase was "Jeffersonian." That may sound odd at first, but describing Jefferson and his thoughts and actions as Jeffersonian over and over again doesn't tell me much. It's like saying the color red is very reddish repeatedly. It doesn't add to the reader's understanding.

Additionally, Ellis spends far too much time discussing what Jefferson has meant to American history and

what Jefferson would think of this or that modern development. Frankly, that's not what I was looking to get out of this book, and don't see how it relates much to the reality of Jefferson and his times. References comparing America Online and Jefferson's thought only serve to make the book seem dated.

Speaking of dated, Ellis makes frequent skeptical mention of Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings. Scientific evidence uncovered since this book was published has made it clear Jefferson did indeed father children with Hemings. To his credit, Ellis has changed his opinion on the matter in the face of the new evidence. Unfortunately, that doesn't do anything to prevent these sections of the book remaining irrelevant or misleading as written.

I listened to Sphinx on audio book, read by Susan O'Malley. I was not particularly impressed with the narration. O'Malley seemed rough and halting far too often, as if she was looking at the book for the first time as they were recording her.

All in all, I was disappointed by Sphinx since, as I've said, I'd enjoyed Ellis' work before. Perhaps I should have read Sphinx after reading a general Jefferson biography, but one of Ellis' usual strengths is making history accessible and enjoyable to those who aren't as well-read on the topic. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case with Sphinx.

Kathleen says

I get the sense you either love him or you don't. We're not talking hate, necessarily, just a sliding spectrum of dislike ranging from never having considered the Jeffersonian point of view to a deep concern for what is at best naivety and at worst willful duplicity. Ellis provides only the highlights of Jefferson's life, focusing on periods of accomplishment or intellectual growth, but it is a solid starting point for understanding how Jefferson fits into the early narrative of the American experiment.

Suzanne says

I loved the title. The iconic image of Jefferson takes a bit of a hit in this non-traditional biography. He was a brilliant, creative, imaginative and inventive man who helped transform our world with his vision on the role of government and in his writings. He was also a deeply flawed human being. He loved beauty and lived so beyond his financial means that, at his death, his beloved Monticello had to be auctioned off. He despised slavery yet, without them, could not afford his lifestyle. Since this book was written, his suspected, and at the time scandalous, relationship with his slave Sally Hemmings and the possibility that he fathered her children, has been confirmed by DNA research. His unbridled ambition in politics left many an opponent in the dust, including John Adams.

It is a slow read, well-researched and cited by one of our countries great historians.

Matt says

I've only read one other book about Jefferson but I've read several others about the founding fathers and I'm absolutely convinced that this is the best I'll ever read about Thomas Jefferson.

Ellis writes incredibly well- poetic, detailed, erudite as all hell, and smoothly- with grace.

He captures what must have been Jefferson's consciousness. Not his mind or soul or heart so much as all three put together and the cloud of ideas and opinions he carried with him, as we all do.

Complex man and a complex book, but Ellis handles everything put together here with amazing organization and balance.

So gorgeously written that I had to read more by him, and I did. Founding Brothers was first-rate, and the Washington book was good enough, but this is truly an all-surpassing masterpiece.

If you're reading this, I'm sure that you are not going to find a better entryway into a key part of the American Psyche and the history of our land than this book.

I never reread but I am seriously going to give this one a second spin sometime.

the problem is, I'll have to buy a whole new copy since the one I have is underlined like the proverbial motherfucker.

Seriously, I can't even read between the lines now. I took so much away from it I'm still sorting out what it all means.

It's that good. Dig it!

Brian says

It started when I was reading Ambrose's *Undaunted Courage*, this niggling feeling of discomfort I get when reading a book when the author seems to be taking opportunities to lionize his/her subjects – or at the very least, portraying them in a simplistic, single facet. I've had this issue with Ambrose before (and I know enough about his writing to stay away from his excoriated Eisenhower bio), and while I enjoyed his bio of Meriwether Lewis, it was his portrayal of Thomas Jefferson that had me scratching my head. Was he the late 18th / early 19th century version of our 21st century John Muir? What was really behind the mask – I wanted to learn more.

Before taking up a direct source on Jefferson I turned to his greatest enemy, Alexander Hamilton, an historical figure I knew vaguely. Several friends had recommended Chernow's bio; I wasn't disappointed. It is a masterful work of research, writing and – most importantly – proper distance from the biographer's subject. I'll reserve more about that work for a review to be written later under that book's entry – the importance here is that it painted Jefferson in such a terrible light that I couldn't imagine that Chernow would be so even-handed with Hamilton but turn the blade on Jefferson. Was he being unfair to our third President, or was he showing the man for who he really was, just as he was doing with Alexander Hamilton? It was time to turn to a book specifically on Jefferson.

Rather than take-up one of the many volumes of biography on Jefferson I was most interested in understanding the man, his character, in light of his times. I try very hard not to bring any historical figure into my current day's morality and civic sensibilities (Joseph Ellis calls this *presentism*, the perfect word for that notion) – I try to see the man or woman for all that they were given their particular environment.

American Sphinx was exactly the book I was looking for, a brilliantly researched and beautifully written book about the thing I am most interested in: the character of Thomas Jefferson.

If you are a huge Jefferson fan I'll save you my polemics and tell you to read no further because I really can't stand the man. He was well written, extremely smart, and to some, a very good friend. In his time on the national scene I can find two instances of where he contributed greatly to the founding of a fledgling new republic: the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Louisiana Purchase. OK, I'll throw in him green-lighting the Lewis and Clarke expedition as a third. Almost everything else about the man screams a two-faced, punctilious, pig-headed didact that was a venomous back-biting man to every and anyone that crossed his very misguided utopian world view – with the exception of John Adams, with whom he worked extra-hard when out of office to bury the hatchet and re-work their friendship. Yes, yes, there are exceptions to this, but make no mistake, Jefferson's anti-Federalist stance and his willingness to stoop to the lowest mudslinging (perpetrated by his underlings, Madison being his chief agent) makes the Trump / Clinton election look tame. I've got a whole lot to say about this guy, so here goes:

1. Jefferson's Agrarian Myth

Throughout his life and career Jefferson believed that the USA should be an agrarian society; light industry if you please, but certainly no manufacturing. The Louisiana Purchase was an attempt to continue the growth of the country to the Pacific Ocean to provide a seemingly endless swath of land for the once-and-future farmers of America to till the land. The Hamiltonian vision of commerce, banking and the pillars of the current day global economy were an anathema to Jefferson. He held so strongly to this unrealistic idyll that he would stop at nearly nothing to fight for his beliefs, including a nearly treasonous episode or two with the French while serving as SOS under Washington.

2. French Revolution

Even with blood in the streets and everyone in America with common sense horrified at The Terror in France, Jefferson could not bring himself to see the truth behind the Jacoban menace. He believed, late in life, that the Revolution could have been a peaceful transition, if not for "cowardice and indecision" – mostly attributable to the king's failure to side with the future than the past, which he blamed on the king's *wife*. In his own words, years later: "I have ever believed that had there been no queen, there would have been no revolution." He thought that the pressure of the forces that caused the revolution became unmanageable because of the meddling of a single woman....

3. Politics as unusual

In a world of bombast and testosterone Jefferson's reticence might have been a breath of fresh air. Hamilton, Adams, etc were men that could give fist-pounding oratories for hours – Jefferson, never. He preferred to work behind the scenes and mostly with the pen. So far so good.

But Jefferson played a game of consistent deception and denial. Hypocrisy never bothered Jefferson; however, he never owned being a hypocrite. This is the worst kind of politician, never mind human being, and over a long enough period of time, you will be found out. This is exactly what happened between Jefferson and Hamilton (when TJ was Secretary of State and AH was Secretary of Treasury under Washington). Jefferson did everything he could to undermine Hamilton behind the scenes – once Hamilton was onto his game, he outmaneuvered him to finally force his resignation in frustration. Jefferson never abandoned his belief that Federalists were nothing short of traitors who had betrayed what he believed to be self-evident principles of "pure republicanism" (i.e. freedom from the meddling of government) in favor of a coercive federal government that put into place the very things that the Revolution was fought to remove. This wasn't a matter of differing political theories – Jefferson found the Federalists full-on monarchical (not true) *traitors* - it was a gauntlet that could never be picked back up; but because Jefferson hated direct

confrontation (e.g. he was the only major Founding Father other than Franklin that did not see battle – in fact, he fled the oncoming British army in VA as governor rather than organize the militia in defense) he spilled his venom in the press and in back room dealings to subvert his enemy, however he could.

Jefferson claimed to hate political parties. He was the one that started them.

4. Black and White politics, figuratively

For all of Jefferson's brilliance and ability to balance two completely opposite beliefs as true -and not believe this to be hypocrisy – Jefferson had a life-long response to all complex political conflicts: transform the miasma of opinions and forces into a simplified and exaggerated two-sided contest between good and evil. This might be why FDR, Reagan and Bill Clinton all have turned to Jefferson for proof-text source material in their political battle cries against the evil du jour; but any human that has lived with their eyes wide open for 20+ years on this planet understands that human interactions are rarely ever black and white – and politics, never. A politician that plays this game is very, very dangerous – history has proved this point time and again.

5. Black and White politics, literally

I'm not going to try and grab the slave-owning Jefferson and pull him into the 21st century and take him to task on the biggest blight on America – but I absolutely *can* judge him by what he wrote about slaves, African-Americans in general and also by the measuring stick of other Virginia contemporaries.

Jefferson hated slavery but not enough to ever really do anything much about it, other than write letters and thoughts that were all over the map and like many things Jeffersonian, conflicting. His way of dealing with the slavery issue was to sweep it under the map for another generation to deal with and hope that it would disappear of its own accord. This from the guy who wrote the Declaration of Independence. Hey Tom, why didn't you use that logic when it came to the British problems and King George's heavy hand? He was at his worst when the Missouri Question reared its head. Jefferson's take? Let slavery spread itself across the USA, it would upend itself from spreading itself so thin. Say what??? Even Adams, who at this point in his correspondence with TJ was light handed had to take him to task. One of the worst, morally bankrupt and wrong-headed idyllic notions from a man full of them.

Jefferson believed that Indians could be integrated into American society but that blacks had no chance.

The final measurement on Jefferson about the slave issue is his legacy of his own slaves. Washington, another Founding Father that abhorred the institution and wished it gone, also realized the impossibility of creating a republic out of the 13 colonies if the abolition of slavery were to be put on the table, put his money where his heart was and freed all of his slaves in his 1799 will. True, he was the only FF to free his slaves upon death, but as a fellow Virginian that could have taken a page from the Godfather of the USofA, Jefferson refused to follow in-step and only freed a handful of slaves upon his death. Not included in that list was Sally Hemings, which is the cause for my biggest issue with Jefferson.

6. Sally Hemings

Whether or not Jefferson had a liaison with his slave Sally Hemings has been the longest running Presidential soap opera in American history. Did he or didn't he? In November of 1998, a DNA comparison between Jefferson's Y chromosome and the Y chromosome of Hemings descendants proved a match between the white Jefferson and the Hemings family line. During the 1950s an authoritative six-volume bio of Jefferson by Dumas Malone's research revealed that Jefferson was at Monticello nine months prior to the birth of Sally's children, several of which favored him strongly in facial features. These facts put the burden of proof that there was no liaison back on the nay-sayers.

Sally was a slave – property - and by that definition she had no rights and no way to give her denial to sexual congress with her owner. Without consent a sexual act is considered rape, by any definition. Not every “Southern Gentleman” slept with their slaves, but this President did.

But let’s say that it was consensual, or even that there was love between Thomas and Sally. What kind of monster, that father’s children by a woman that he “loves”, would not mention her in his will - to free her from the horrors of the industry that he claimed to loathe? Viewed in either lens that is scumbaggery, pure and simple.

I kept wanting to find something to deeply admire about Jefferson, I really did. I give him props for the Declaration – but I also like Knut Hamsun's writing, in spite of him being a Nazi sympathizer - just because someone can write beautifully isn’t enough for me to want to build a monument for them. Americans love their heroes, and once they achieve membership in the pantheon we find it difficult to separate the man from the myth. I’m sure there are many other great things that Jefferson did as a leader, and if I were to ever turn to another bio of him I might find other things that he did to benefit the world; but for now I’ve had enough of TJ and am putting him back on the shelf where he belongs and not retaining him in my personal collection of historical figures that made the planet a better place.

Damian says

As I read "American Sphinx", an odd thing happened. The more I learnt about Jefferson the less I liked him. The Jefferson of Ellis' biography is an arrogant, obsessive ideologue, whose successes are the lucky results of others' hard work, and whose failures are inevitable given his substantial flaws. As someone who was looking to like Jefferson, this was all pretty disappointing.

Ellis' biography follows Jefferson from his first entrance into public life right until his providential death on July 4th 1826 (and the same day as his friend/enemy John Adams). Over the course of this journey, we see Jefferson evolve from a quiet but brilliant polemicist into the leader of the "Republican" faction, which calls for a small and relatively weak central government.

In modern terms, Jefferson of course would have been a contradiction: a progressive who fought his entire life for smaller government. It's this defying of modern political boundaries that allow both sides today to claim as their own.

If Ellis has "an angle", it is his attempt to delve into Jefferson's psyche. His contradictions were too overt, argues Ellis, yet his dialogue too sincere to be hypocrisy. His conclusion is that Jefferson was a master not (just) of deception but of SELF-deception -- he "compartmentalized" certain ideas in parts of his brain where they needed not be bothered by other contradictory ideas that he held just as sincerely. Thus, the small-government president who purchases Louisiana from the French, the anti-slave crusader who is himself a slaveowner, the self-indulgent aristocrat who surrounds himself with luxury, yet spend his entire life in crushing debt, and passes his debt to his children when he dies. This is not hypocrisy, argues Ellis, this is "compartmentalization".

Of course such an argument sounds ridiculous when stated so baldly, and I think for good reason. Ellis is attempting to draw deep psychological conclusions from sources that are entirely public: letters that

Jefferson wrote, often with the intention of their being published. Positions he publicly took, or speeches he gave. Each and every one of these had an agenda, and while we may want to believe in "compartmentalization" since it leaves intact the image of the honest Jefferson, there's another much more obvious explanation that Occam demands we accept: political expediency.

Even if -- horror of horrors -- Jefferson turns out to have been a politician, he remains one of the most visionary and influential of our history, and if I took one major realization away from this book, it was this: that one of the central essences of our American flavor of democracy -- the conscious limiting of the rights and powers of the central government, and the constant clamoring for smaller and less at the federal level -- comes directly and almost singularly from Jefferson. Had it been up to Washington, Adams and Hamilton, early democracy in the United States would not doubt have taken a far more European form. As is, Jefferson and his disciples (Madison and Monroe) provided a crucial opposition voice at a crucial time -- a voice that continues to resonate in today's conservative circles and the Tea Party movement. And while I might not agree with that voice all the time, I'm glad it's there.

I would not recommend this book to others as an introduction to Jefferson for three reasons. The first, the psycho-babble described above. Second, the book's odd chronology -- it leaves large gaps in the Jefferson story, including for example, his entire tenure as Secretary of State under Washington, and his second term as president. Was this period really so uneventful, that it doesn't deserve mention? (And really practically no mention is given.)

Third is, I really can't be sure that the portrait Ellis is painting might not itself be a politically skewed one. His portrayal so one-sided that one puts down the book longing for a more objective take. I suspected throughout that Ellis felt his own conclusion so strongly -- that Jefferson was a self-deceiver -- that he was arguing it with his every decision of inclusion or omission. The result is a Jefferson that is at best, a self-deceiver, at worst, a craven hypocrite.

One way or another, Jefferson -- whether the Jefferson of American Sphinx or the Jefferson of Wikipedia -- DOES end up disappointing, if only because the soaring of his ideals clashes so jarringly with his somewhat uglier reality.
