



Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power

Jon Meacham

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In this magnificent biography, the Pulitzer Prize–winning author of *American Lion* and *Franklin and Winston* brings vividly to life an extraordinary man and his remarkable times. *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* gives us Jefferson the politician and president, a great and complex human being forever engaged in the wars of his era. Philosophers think; politicians maneuver. Jefferson's genius was that he was both and could do both, often simultaneously. Such is the art of power.

Thomas Jefferson hated confrontation, and yet his understanding of power and of human nature enabled him to move men and to marshal ideas, to learn from his mistakes, and to prevail. Passionate about many things—women, his family, books, science, architecture, gardens, friends, Monticello, and Paris—Jefferson loved America most, and he strove over and over again, despite fierce opposition, to realize his vision: the creation, survival, and success of popular government in America. Jon Meacham lets us see Jefferson's world as Jefferson himself saw it, and to appreciate how Jefferson found the means to endure and win in the face of rife partisan division, economic uncertainty, and external threat. Drawing on archives in the United States, England, and France, as well as unpublished Jefferson presidential papers, Meacham presents Jefferson as the most successful political leader of the early republic, and perhaps in all of American history.

The father of the ideal of individual liberty, of the Louisiana Purchase, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and of the settling of the West, Jefferson recognized that the genius of humanity—and the genius of the new nation—lay in the possibility of progress, of discovering the undiscovered and seeking the unknown. From the writing of the Declaration of Independence to elegant dinners in Paris and in the President's House; from political maneuverings in the boardinghouses and legislative halls of Philadelphia and New York to the infant capital on the Potomac; from his complicated life at Monticello, his breathtaking house and plantation in Virginia, to the creation of the University of Virginia, Jefferson was central to the age. Here too is the personal Jefferson, a man of appetite, sensuality, and passion.

The Jefferson story resonates today not least because he led his nation through ferocious partisanship and cultural warfare amid economic change and external threats, and also because he embodies an eternal drama, the struggle of the leadership of a nation to achieve greatness in a difficult and confounding world.

Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power Details

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From Reader Review Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power for online ebook

Sharon says

Historically and personally interesting biography of Thomas Jefferson and the times in which he lived. If it wasn't for his stubborn and persistent efforts to keep America a government by the people, we might be a monarchy today. It's astonishing how few men of his day worked tirelessly and for most of their productive lifetimes to fend off enemies who would take over the young states or western parts of the US and to ensure that this country didn't become what the colonists had just left behind.

I found some wry humor in the fact that the political parties haven't changed much in 200 years as far as mud-slinging before elections and opposing each other at every turn. Jefferson understood that opposing parties are essential to our democracy. Jefferson was a fascinating person in both his public and private lives. The book reveals his family life, his quiet hours, his concerns and thoughts, his friendships, and more. This is the most highly researched book I've ever read.

This was a slow read for me, not exactly a page-turner. However, I feel enriched intellectually for the read and will always remember the lessons and history I learned. If more of us would read this kind of history, we would appreciate our country in new ways. What we have today was hard-won and lives were dedicated to providing our freedoms, whole lifetimes, in fact. War isn't the only way to achieve great things. It's definitely not the best way.

Thomas Jefferson's gentle, congenial, and highly intelligent manner belied a steely conviction that served us well. He authored the Declaration of Independence and procured much of the western US for the young states. Jefferson spent some years in France, living as an ambassador. There are many other surprising revelations in this literary biography.

Recommended for anyone who enjoys history, especially of how the US came to be what it is today, and how it almost didn't.

Jay says

A good, very readable "popular" biography of Thomas Jefferson that focuses on Jefferson's use of power and influence to achieve his desired ends throughout his life. Despite pointing out (yet somewhat glossing over) some of Jefferson's flaws, Meacham's biography is nevertheless a little too hagiographic for me to rate it higher than 3 stars.

I enjoyed reading the book, and even gained some new insight into Jefferson, but still came away from it feeling as though Meacham missed the mark a little. I have been a lifelong admirer of Thomas Jefferson, so much so that my dream since childhood was to attend Mr. Jefferson's University. While still a Jefferson admirer - my library is full of Jeffersonian memorabilia, the bloom has somewhat gone off the rose over the years as I have continued to reassess the man in light of more recent scholarship, as well as in viewing the political turmoil of his time through the lens of the political turmoil of the last 20 years.

Meacham's book sets out to sort of "rehabilitate" Jefferson after a couple of decades of multiple critically acclaimed books on Jefferson's political adversaries that have, inevitably, painted Jefferson in less than heroic terms. Meacham accomplishes his goal to some extent, but only at the cost of playing down many of Jefferson's major foibles. An example would be in those instances in which Meacham makes statements along the lines of some might consider Jefferson a hypocrite, but ... Or that some might consider Jefferson to have been paranoid about the alleged Federalist scheme to return the United States to monarchy, but ...

Well, yes, some might. Because, when viewed objectively, Jefferson WAS a hypocrite with respect to a good number of issues and Jefferson WAS paranoid in viewing his opponents in the worst light possible. That doesn't mean that Jefferson wasn't heroic or that he doesn't deserve to continue to be admired. He was, and he does, and Meacham's book is a good reminder of that. But a more critical treatment of Jefferson's use of the same power for his own ends - power that was often, as admitted by both Jefferson and Meacham, extra-constitutional and perhaps even unconstitutional - that Jefferson condemned when used by others, would have provided a more honest and balanced portrayal.

Meacham's title - The Art of Power - gives away what he is really interested in. This book is a portrait of Jefferson for the political class. For the folks who LOVE power and the exercise thereof. For those who view principle and constitutional limits as unfortunate and unwanted impediments to "getting things done". For those who view "making the deal" as the height of political achievement. This is a portrait of Jefferson for the pundits on Meet the Press and Morning Joe. This is a portrait of Jefferson for those who can view the policies and exercises of power of a president from one party as tyrannical and anti-civil liberties, and view the exact same policies and exercises of power - only magnified - when put into practice by a president from the opposing party, as the "art" of getting things done.

There is much to admire about Jefferson. For my tastes, however, Meacham appears to admire many of the wrong things and minimizes many of the less savory aspects of Jefferson's character.

David Beeson says

Looking around the gathered Nobel Prize winners he had invited to a White House dinner, John F. Kennedy declared, 'I think this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together at the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone.'

That quotation, included by Jon Meacham in his enthralling biography of Jefferson, gives a measure of the man, and the man fully deserves such a biography. Not that it's a simple hagiography: Meacham paints his subject in the round, not glossing over the difficult moments in his life story, such as the 1781 moment when, as governor of Virginia, his retreat before the British troops of the bloodthirsty Banastre Tarleton led to serious criticism of his performance, which would never be entirely expunged.

But Meacham goes further. He shows that as well as being a philosopher and a man of principle, capable of drafting the inspiring sentiments of the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson was also a practical politician perfectly prepared to act in ways that some might regard as contrary to those principles, when concrete circumstance demanded it of him. I entirely sympathise with his denunciation of the Alien and Sedition Acts of his predecessor as president, and rival, John Adams; I equally admire him for having the courage to take decisions on his own responsibility to defend his nation against British hostility and to extend its territory through the Louisiana purchase, although by doing so he increased the power of the executive presidency far beyond anything Adams had attempted.

The ability to adhere to key principles, and to uphold them sincerely, while at the same time reaching the compromises needed for the real exercise of political authority, is a talent few have attained and which the world would do well to rediscover today. Jefferson had it in spades.

Of course, at times this brilliantly skillful duality can look perilously like self-contradiction or even hypocrisy. Nowhere is that clearer than in the matter of slavery and, more particularly, the longstanding relationship Jefferson maintained with one particular slave, Sally Hemings, with whom he had several children. Like Washington or Patrick Henry ('give me liberty or give me death'), Jefferson could perfectly well see that slavery was shameful and his new nation would at some stage need to lance that boil; he could equally well see the contradiction between that sense of horror and his continuing to own slaves and, in Hemings's case, to maintain a sexual relationship with one of them – a sexual relationship with someone over whom he had power of ownership.

Meacham does not skirt around these matters but simply states the facts, points to Jefferson's silence on the Hemings issue, and talks about the hints at justification that came from his pen: slavery was simply not an issue that could be tackled at that time, or not for a bearable political cost – though the political cost that would in the end be borne, in a bitter civil war and the first assassination of a president, was arguably vastly higher for having been delayed. In passing, it's worth noting that John Dickinson, fellow revolutionary and member of the Continental Congress from Pennsylvania, hung behind Jefferson in willingness to break decisively from Britain, but far outpaced him in this other, harder field when he freed his slaves – Jefferson only ever freed the Hemings and then only on his death.

What emerges from Meacham's work is therefore a complete picture of a man, a man of towering intellect and courage, which the clear presentation of his failings highlights all the more strongly in contrast. And Meacham presents all this in the most readable of prose (or, in my case listenable, since I chose an audio edition). Both the subject matter and the way the story is told mean that anyone who likes biography and is interested in the man or his times, has to put *Thomas Jefferson: the Art of Power*, at the top of their must-read list.

Shelly♥ says

I loved this book. Really delves into the psyche of Thomas Jefferson, chipping to the core on the things that make him tick. Meacham spends a lot of time in Virginia laying the groundwork for Jefferson's character - how he loved control but hated conflict. And then he builds the bridge to the presidency - detailing his struggles with the executive powers that Hamilton put upon the presidency during Washington's terms and then how he embraced these very powers in his own Presidency.

We get to know the persona of Jefferson - his love of good food, fine wine and the company of others. His charm and casualness invited his enemies to even enjoy dinner with him and call him cordial.

Meacham also tip-toes through the waters of Sally Hemmings and her family. Speaks of Jefferson's faults and foibles (slavery and debt.) He recounts most of the major Jefferson sticking points: Callendar, Hamilton, Maria Cosway, Adams friendship. It's all there, along with other little tidbits of Jefferson lore.

Agree that we really needed a readable one volume Jefferson bio to stand along those of Adams and Washington and Hamilton. This may very well be it.

Mahlon says

I must admit that as a committed Federalist and one who is therefore squarely in the Hamiltonian camp, I've had a tendency to deride Jefferson as a feminine Francophile at times. Therefore it is good to occasionally be reminded of how great Jefferson really was. Meacham Points out that once President, Jefferson had the creative flexibility to rise above party dogma, and make decisions that were best for the country. He also argues quite convincingly that to truly understand Jefferson's character and the reasons behind his core beliefs, you must view the American Revolution as he did, not as an eight year tactical battle, but a 60 year war for democracy. His second surprising point is that in terms of lasting political influence versus Hamilton, Jefferson wins hands down when you consider that with the exception of John Quincy Adams, four of the five presidents elected in the 30 years after Jefferson left office carried on his Democratic ideals.

The best Jefferson biography I've read, if I had a criticism it would be that because Meacham has limited himself to one volume, by necessity he doesn't cover many issues in depth, but he should be lauded for the sheer amount of topics he does manage to cover. Also, given that the book is titled "The Art of Power", he might have given us a few more examples of how Jefferson used it, rather than making the book a straight retelling of life and career.

Steve says

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

"Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power" is author Jon Meacham's fifth and most recent book, having been published in late 2012. Meacham received the Pulitzer Prize for his 2008 biography of Andrew Jackson, and has also written about Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as well as the civil rights movement and the influence of religion in American politics.

"The Art of Power" is by a significant margin the most popular and widely-read Jefferson biography available today. Well-written and fast paced, Meacham's accounting of Jefferson's life is both entertaining and enjoyable, and requires little patience or fortitude on the part of the reader. With about five hundred pages of text, Meacham's work seems to occupy a desirable space for modern biographies – it is comprehensive enough to cover the most salient aspects of its subject's life, but is not so lengthy that it requires an exorbitant commitment of time or attention.

In contrast to the exhaustive accounts of Jefferson's life authored by Dumas Malone and Merrill Peterson, Meacham's narrative almost seems to sprint through the eight decades of our third president's life. Where Malone spends nearly twelve hundred pages describing Jefferson's terms as president, Meacham sets aside slightly fewer than one hundred. But that is part of the delight of this biography: in relatively few pages it manages to capture the essence of Jefferson, describing his core principles and philosophies, outlining his primary accomplishments and failures, and highlighting the contradictions he offers posterity.

But following my five week journey through Dumas Malone's series on Jefferson, I am reminded that

brevity comes at a price. Important nuances in Jefferson's decision-making and complex threads within his life must be ignored in order to maintain the book's brisk pace. Key moments in Jefferson's presidency and the early life of our nation (such as the Embargo of 1807 and the Burr conspiracy) are only afforded minimal attention. But happily, such a pace provides the book no opportunity to find itself bogged down in unnecessary detail or to pursue trivial tangents.

What Meacham accomplishes brilliantly, in my view, is efficiently summarizing and synthesizing the various (and often contradictory) aspects of Jefferson's personality and offering his own view of why Jefferson acted – as a patriarch, as a scientist, as a politician and as a friend – as he did. Though I found many of the author's conclusions less grand and sweeping than they were presumably intended to be, Meacham's perspective on Jefferson was nonetheless insightful and cogently argued.

"The Art of Power" has been criticized by some for portraying Jefferson in too flattering a light. I did not detect this fault, and Meacham seems to harbor no greater sympathy for Jefferson than most biographers do with their subjects. Although Meacham does seem to admire Jefferson, his affection is not without qualification.

Others have pointed out that although Meacham seems to have been quite diligent in his preparation for writing this book (the endnotes and bibliography alone consume over two hundred pages), it contains little that is truly new or revealing. Only Meacham's central thesis – that Jefferson was successful because he was simultaneously a philosopher and a politician, an idealist and a tactical strategist – seems to add a new dimension to a president who has been so thoroughly explored and described.

Finally, I admit to disappointment in Meacham's treatment of the possible (perhaps even likely) relationship between Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. Rather than describing the controversy which has pervaded this issue for over two hundred years, Meacham treats the topic as fully resolved. Only in the extensive endnotes does the reader find a multi-page note admitting to, and describing, the controversy.

In most ways, however, "Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power" lived up to the hype which has surrounded the book since its publication. I found it easy, entertaining and enjoyable to read. It required relatively little from me, but offered disproportionately greater rewards. As a serious student of Jefferson, this would not be my first (or even second) stop on the lengthy journey to understanding Jefferson. However, as an efficient, wonderfully descriptive and generally comprehensive introduction to Thomas Jefferson, I am unaware of better biography.

Overall Rating: 4½ stars

Mlg says

Fascinating portrayal of our third president, a man of startling contradictions. Meacham shows him as a man opposed to slavery, yet who kept over 600 slaves on his plantations. He also participated in the removal of the Indians and believed that if the slaves were to be freed, they should be sent back to Africa. Jefferson's interest in all areas of learning was an exceptional part of his personality.

Jefferson's personal life was equally interesting. His wife died young and extracted a promise from him never to remarry. Apparently his long time relationship with her half-sister Sally Hemmings did not violate that pledge in his eyes. He showered his grandchildren with gifts he could not afford, but made his slave children work on the plantation and showed them no affection. Jefferson's feud with Adams is also a

significant part of the book. When they reconciled, their letters on a wide ranging number of subjects seem to fill the intellectual void that retirement had brought. He was courtly and valued the word of another, yet left debts between 1-2 million dollars.

Great books not only hold your attention, but make you want to learn more about the other individuals in the story. This is that type of book. I can think of at least three or four individuals in his story that would be great biographies to read.

Diane says

This is a marvelous biography of Thomas Jefferson, who is arguably America's most complicated Founding Father. Jefferson is famous for many reasons, but he is often summed up by this contradiction: He wrote "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence, and yet he owned slaves.

(As Jon Meacham noted, it seems Jefferson meant only white, land-owning men were created equal.)

A few years ago I had the chance to visit Monticello, Jefferson's home in Virginia, and I've been interested in reading a detailed biography about him ever since. I listened to this book on audio, which was read beautifully by the late, great Edward Hermann. I've listened to several audiobooks by Hermann, and he's just a fantastic reader.

I loved this book on Jefferson, and was fascinated by the stories it told. It's also a great complement to David McCullough's biography of John Adams. Highly recommended for fans of history.

Personal Note:

The thing I like about reading history is how comforting it is, because it provides context as to how we got where we are today. Unless you've been living off the grid for two years, you know we live in trying political times, both in America and around the world. But these history books show that there have ALWAYS been trying times. America's democracy has ALWAYS been messy and complicated. Our politics have been ugly and contentious since this country was founded. I'm not excusing the behavior of any current leaders — but as Meacham writes (somewhat comfortingly) in his new book, *The Soul of America*, is as a country, we've come through dark times before and we can do it again if we follow our better angels. I'm not religious, but I'll say Amen to that.

Cheri says

It's rare when this happens. I just finished the prologue to this book. This early in the book, I had the overwhelming feeling that I was reading something GREAT. Oh, I'm going to enjoy this book!!!

Rick says

Won this Advanced Readers Edition of - Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power - through GR Giveaways, after some consideration whether I should enter the Giveaway in the first place. I like nonfiction, biography, and history – and this book represented all three – but I had some misgivings. What more can be said of Thomas Jefferson? There already exists a body of work on Jefferson that is spectacular – noting just the five-

volume 1975 Pulitzer Prize winning effort of Dumas Malone (Jefferson and his Time) and the 1997 National Book Award winner of Joe Ellis (American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson) as examples. We even have a Pulitzer Prize winner on one of Jefferson's liaisons: Annette Gordon-Reed's 2009 The Hemingses of Monticello. So when it comes to Jefferson the bar has been set pretty high. But then, this was Jon Meacham – a Pulitzer-prize winner himself (in 2009 for American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House). So I entered and won this copy. Here's my take.

In sum: I found the book a bit plodding. When it stayed on topic – that being how Jefferson maneuvered his way through the various political circles (e.g., Virginia House of Burgesses, Continental Congress, Governor of Virginia, Secretary of State, President) and diplomatic circles (e.g., Ambassador to France), it was a wonderful read. It showed how Jefferson watched and learned and honed his skills – how he developed that Art of Power. But it did not stay on topic enough.

The Prologue sets the tone nicely, but then Part I runs off 55 pages of background and childhood that, while of mild interest, had nothing to do with the Art of Power. The insertion of tangential information that didn't push the Art of Power theme happened often ... often enough that the book is probably 200 pages too long. The book weighs in at around 700 pages, the last 200 or so being Notes, Bibliography, and Index. So we have about 500 pages to work with. Taking out 200 or so pages of peripheral material would have consolidated it into a 300 page focused piece and would have made it much more approachable.

So I have to say I was only mildly interested in the book – it was good not great. It was nicely written and professionally presented, but it just did not rise to the bar it had to reach to earn a spot alongside Meacham's other works. For those that know little about Thomas Jefferson, this would make an excellent primer; for those with basic background on the subject, this volume doesn't add much to the body of knowledge.

Elyse says

In Jefferson's early days of life we learn that he was born into a reputable known family.

Author Jon Meacham tells us that it was said that Jefferson studied 15 hours a day, rising at dawn and reading until 2 o'clock each morning. At twilight in Williamsburg he exercised by running to a stone a mile from town; at Shadwell, he rowed a small canoe of his own across the Rivanna River and climbed the mountain he was to call

Monticello. For Jefferson laziness was a sin.

Like his father, he believed in the virtues of riding and of walking, holding that a vigorous body helped create a vigorous mind. "Not less than two hours a day should be devoted to exercise, and the weather should be little regarded".

Jefferson was always asking questions. He was interested in all topics from literature, science, mechanics, architecture, mathematics, horticulture philosophy, music, politics, art, and 'women'. He shunned organized religion. He was also well versed in linguistics-- speaking several languages.

Jefferson soon became known as a walking encyclopedia.

There was juicy drama between he and women. At times I thought I was reading a fiction story. There were stories about his connections with woman - including rejections before marriage -to a slave - Sally Hemings - that he had a relationship with after his wife died and fathered one of her children.

By age 31....the year was 1774....Jefferson was a husband to Martha Wayles, a father (eventually they had six children), a planter, legislator, and thinker. He he moved to higher ranks of political skill.

I'm still a 'newbie' when it comes to reading about our past presidents--certainly not even close to being a historian....so, I'm aware I don't come to these books with a depth of knowledge as others might -- but little by little I'm soaking in past U.S Political history. I might have to read these books religiously for another 10 years before I might be able to add my contextual thoughts to what I'm learning. -- I'm still learning the basicsthe highlights & achievements-(Lewis and Clark 'Voyage of Discovery', Louisiana Purchase, avoided a war with England, played a role in the revolution, etc.), his personal character - and personal history.

I appreciate that Meacham's writing -- much like David McCullough --presents an enjoyable storytelling - easy flowing writing style.

Jefferson was another early President --one of our founding fathers. He stood for ideals but settled the best of realities. He wasn't much of a speaker - but he could write

Plus we get the story of how Jefferson ended up writing the Declaration of Independence.

Informative-- I learned a lot about Jeffersons strengths and imperfections --read many quotes -- and most, I admired Jefferson's critical skills - his words - his writing and his analyzing issues of power.

Whew.... a little spent but in a good way.....(parts of this book were dry for me compared to the 'storytelling' of the last few Presidents I read lately, and I couldn't figure out if I just needed 'past-President-break'-- or if this 'was' a little less consistently engaging. Still had its juicy moments though ... and I've been working my tush off!

My next political adventure-- (I own the physical book- plus have a library audiobook)....will be: "Valiant Ambition"... George Washington, Benedict Arnold, and the fate of the American revolution. Then... I hope to read "Mayflower", - also by Nathaniel Philbrick. (a few fiction novels always on the burner)

Ralph Strong says

great book

Matt says

Seeking to continue my trek to better understand the birth of America and its Founding Fathers, I tackled Meacham's biography on Thomas Jefferson. Choosing to infuse literary breath into one of the key actors in much of the early creation of the state and its constitutional foundations, Meacham not only offers an over-arching narrative, but delves into the corners of Jefferson's life, allowing the reader to have a better and well-

rounded approach to this key historical figure. While Meacham offers Jefferson's life through nine lenses, dividing his life into smaller and more digestible portions, three significant themes emerge as central arcs to better depict Jefferson's life. A synthesis of the text sees Jefferson as a committed man, a stalwart politician, and a sharp statesman. These themes emerge throughout the text, even with the firm chronological flow of Meacham's tome. A biography worthy of examination for the reader looking to better understand Jefferson and the rumours swirling around his earlier historical depictions.

That Jefferson is a man committed to all he undertakes cannot be denied, based on Meacham's text. The biography moves forward to show that Jefferson, who came from a well established family, grew up with a strong thirst for knowledge. Jefferson always sought to open his mind to new ideas and to learn from whomever he could. He read and spoke as one would imagine a Greek thinker might have done 2 millennia earlier, always asking questions and building his ideas on those who influenced his life. From there, Jefferson became a man not only of knowledge, but one who dabbled in many areas: literature, politics, science, innovation, and even architecture. His passions extended outside of the esoteric, finding his greatest love in women. While Meacham hints at Jefferson's fondness for the opposite sex, there is little to deter the reader from feeling that Martha Wayles was the love of his young life. Their marriage, a decade long, was filled with passion and six children, though few survived. Jefferson took her death personally and used his depression to fuel his aforementioned passions. While rumours around his involvement with Sally Hemings, Meacham handles it with the greatest aplomb, addressing it not as a tabloid scandal but presenting its inevitable occurrence. Whether the Jefferson-Hemings interaction was based on an amorous connection or strictly a power relationship cannot be definitively known, though Meacham does mention reports of the strong physical resemblance of Hemings' children to Jefferson and how his time on his estate matched with the pregnancies. This did not mar Jefferson's life or the high regard in which he was seen. His personal life and interests were strongly supported by Meacham throughout the tome, including his final years at the Monticello estate, where a detailed architectural and design discussion ensues. Jefferson's connection to his personal beliefs are well-rooted in his final years, as he sought to better understand the emancipation movement and the American move towards the abolition of slavery. Meacham argues throughout the tome that Jefferson was a man like no other, with his own interests that fuelled his mind to the bitter end.

Born in Virginia at a time of strong political sentiment and eventual rebellious sentiments towards the British, it is no wonder that Jefferson found himself at the centre of the controversies in his political life. While he served in the House of Burgesses, where another Virginian named Washington made his mark, Jefferson began to hone his political skills and formulated his deeply-rooted beliefs. Meacham argues that Jefferson's passion with the written word acted to propel the revolutionary movement forward as he helped to create the ideas behind the Declaration of Independence and penned the final document himself. This authorship saw him gain much favour within the Colonies, but he became a hunted man by the British Red Coats. His political life resurrected itself after the War of Independence when he headed to Philadelphia as a delegate to the Continental Congress, but soon crossed the Atlantic to work for the new America in Paris. Jefferson took that time to critique the constitutional document presented by the Congress and added his concerns. Jefferson saw the intricacies of the new America and sought to individualise it from the British influence so prominent in the Colonies. Jefferson's political side reared its head again after he accepted a position in Washington's Cabinet at Secretary of State, but became more powerful upon his departure from that body. As Jefferson saw himself as a Democratic Republican (not the oxymoronic phrase it would have today), he realised that there was a need to stand for an independent-minded form of government in America that did not promote a monarchy of some sort, as promoted by the Federalists. He battled the likes of John Adams on this point and, as Meacham illustrates, sought to ensure that the shackles of British oppression did not seep back in with the appearance of a crowned or hereditary monarch in the collective colonial unit. Meacham shows Jefferson's passion for political ideals throughout the narrative and promotes the importance of the first political schism and party politics in 1796. Meacham depicts Jefferson's political knowledge on

numerous occasions throughout the tome, leaving no doubt about his political importance in early America.

The image of strong statesman seems a foregone conclusion when examining Jefferson's political acumen, though the terms differ greatly. In his time as Secretary of State, Jefferson sought to work effectively with the European allies that helped secure a colonial victory, while also mending fences with the British. Jefferson utilised some of his time in the position to build strong ties and promote the new America, while also ensuring that this new state did not fall prey to those wishing to strike on a weakened and somewhat scattered colonial collective. Meacham shows that Jefferson's ideas became his ideals, from which he would not stray. This left him no choice but to leave the role when the Federalists rooted their monarch-centric views within Washington's Cabinet and Jefferson found himself at odds with the likes of John Adams. However, he hoped to push his republican ideas from the outside and eventually in the vice-presidential role, which clashed thoroughly with the aforementioned Adams. It was this that fuelled the great election of 1800, pitting Federalists against the Republican ideals on which Jefferson stumped so heavily. This is also the election that required a deadlock breaking in the House of Representatives, as Meacham depicts both in the preface and with more detail within the tome, where discussion of bribery and promises begat the final sway needed to secure victory. Meacham illustrates that Jefferson sought to push a hands-off approach to the state by positing that there need be time for Americans to find their niche. Jefferson scaled back the military and navy as well, feeling that the revolutionary times were past. Meacham discusses the great embargo with Britain, after a naval clash, and how the president sought to keep war off the table, no matter the public outcry for its use. All this pales in Meacham's great argument surrounding the height of Jefferson's statesman role; the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory from Napoleon. While this might seem a little awkward, discussing land as the highlight of a presidential career, Meacham presents it in such a way as to show how Jefferson used the new constitution to develop its Living Tree doctrine (even though the phrase had not yet been coined in Britain). The treaty for obtaining the land had to be ratified in the Senate, but Jefferson went ahead and made the arrangements. This constitutional see-saw battle helped hone the precedent of executive decision-making and legislative agreement. It happens all the time with multinational treaties and was, as the history buff will remember, the downfall of Wilson's League of Nations. Meacham utilises this example to show how Jefferson could run an effective state, while not dictating his preconceived notions to ensure success. Perhaps it was this that helped solidify the republican movement and helps Meacham argue the position so effectively.

It is quite difficult not to play a comparison game when the reader has delved into numerous biographies about actors whose lives intertwined. Having read McCullough's John Adams and Chernow's Washington, the comparisons rise unsteadily to the surface. Length is the first and greatest discrepancy here. Applause to Meacham for succinctly laying out the life and times of Jefferson, while highlighting many important aspects. While Meacham admits he had not sought to write a life and times of the third president, such was the final project, which skims over many of the areas that were of greatest importance. I would have hoped for more time on the Continental Congress and creation of the constitutional documents, for these were areas of greatest importance to Jefferson in years to come. I would also have loved a further fleshing out of the personal life of Jefferson during his 'down years' and not brief linkages. Had I not read the other two biographies, I would likely not be making these comments, but I cannot unread what I had put in front of me and, like life in general, I bring these experiences to the forefront as I delve deeper in my understanding of the political and historical actors who shaped the world. That being said, Meacham is a wonderful wordsmith and weaves a wonderful tale from start to finish. A plethora of sources and first-hand accounts pepper the text and bring the story to life in ways that few could do with such ease.

One additional theme from the biography comes from its epilogue and author's note. Meacham argues that while Jefferson's views were his own, he could garner much support from those around him, both at the time and in the decades (centuries) to come. Washington and Adams had the greatest respect for the man, as did

the likes of Lincoln, FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Reagan. Jefferson's views could appeal to those across the political spectrum, for they were rooted not in strict ideology, but in nation building and sovereignty. While America had its share of ups and downs, these political giants all turned to Jefferson's Declaration and subsequent republican sentiments to shape the country in the 21st century. For this, his legacy parallels Washington, though for different reasons.

Kudos, Mr. Meacham for this wonderful biographical piece. Thomas Jefferson came to life in this depiction and for that you deserve the greatest of praise. I look forward to examining more of your work at a future time.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

Jay Connor says

The greatest problem with a pragmatic philosopher is that in coming ages people from all perspectives can claim ownership to your ideas and ideals. Jefferson is just such a chameleon whose actions often betray his language. Be wary of the ideologue who self-servingly quotes this founding father -- for likely his pearls of phrase on equality or gun rights or states rights are often more costumed in reality.

All of this is not to take much away from Jefferson's greatness only to diminish from those who have used him in the succeeding centuries to prove one point or another.

The value of excellent history, as Meacham has presented to us here, is to understand context as well as extent of permissible extrapolation for our times. This deep understanding of context as a primary animator of history is perhaps best seen in Joseph Ellis' "Revolutionary Summer" which I reviewed several months ago.

The above notwithstanding, Jefferson is a man of great words. I was particularly reminded of the beauty and relevance of his first inaugural address -- after a very divisive election ultimately decided in the House, he sought to assure and lead the whole: "every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there be any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it."

Julie says

Rather stunned by all the glowing reviews of this book. It struck me that Meacham told, much more than showed, the story of Jefferson. I found myself wishing for more detail at every turn (Ben Franklin lent the word "self-evident" to the Declaration? ... would sure love to know more about that discussion; Jefferson lost his horse and got dysentery on his way to report to the House of Burgesses? ... what must that have been like

in the 1700s?) Perhaps I just couldn't get into the mood of the book, which sometimes happens. I'm moving onto Ellis' American Sphinx to see if I like that better.

Daniel (Attack of the Books!) Burton says

It took me a long time to begin to like Jon Meacham's portrait of Thomas Jefferson in *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power*. As I finished it, however, I found myself a reluctant admirer, appreciative of Meacham's style and of the biography, not to mention of the man.

Meacham is the author of two previous books on American presidents, winning the Pulitzer prize for his look at Andrew Jackson *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*. With *The Art of Power* he delves into the life of one of the most beloved of founding fathers. As he notes in the closing pages of the epilogue, Jefferson has been evoked by more recent American presidents and political figures on both sides of the spectrum, proving to be "an inspiration for radically different understandings of government and culture." This seems to me, and Meacham endorses the idea, to be due to Jefferson's versatility in his lifetime. Rather than a ideologue bound to one philosophy, Jefferson was a pragmatic politician, and while he believed in the principles of freedom he espoused in the words he penned in the declaration, the means he chose to approach and uphold those principles changed depending on his position.

As they say, where you stand depends on where you sit and examples from Jefferson's life are plentiful.

As a member of the opposition party and vice president during the Adams Administration, Jefferson vigorously opposed the Alien and Sedition Acts as a blot on the liberty and freedom promised by the Bill of Rights. And yet, as President, he did not fully wipe out the effects of those First Amendment inhibiting laws. He allowed those punished under the law to be set free, but did not immediately return the fines that had been levied from them.

During this same time as vice president, Jefferson wrote the Kentucky resolution (James Madison wrote the Virginia resolution of the same time) in which he argued, through the proxy of the Kentucky legislature, that the Alien and Sedition were unconstitutional and that the states held the right, and the duty, to declare any acts of Congress that were not authorized by the constitution unconstitutional. It was a divisive argument from the man who drafted the Declaration of Independence, says Meacham, coming from the "voice of the man who believed secession fatal to America instead of the man who wrote about the primacy of states' rights."

Later, as president, Jefferson--the man who had trumpeted the rights of states over the act of the national legislature--acted with executive authority outside of the bounds then available to him, sending military expeditions against the Barbary states and accomplishing the Louisiana Purchase, all without Congressional approval.

[...]Jefferson was to Washington and Adams what Dwight Eisenhower was to Franklin D. Roosevelt and Harry Truman: a president who reformed but essentially ratified an existing course of government.

Jefferson wasn't so interested in doggedly following the rules and norms of his ideology as he was in, for

lack of a better way to put it, finding what worked and finding a way to do it. For man whose life was a study in contrasts (or hypocrisy, depending on your view), pragmatism was necessary. He drafted the Declaration of Independence, yet his earliest memory was of a slave handing him down on pillow to ride in a carriage and he never freed the slaves that he owned, even in death. He trumpeted states' rights, but expanded the scope of the federal government when the opportunity was his. He loved his family dearly, but had no qualms pursuing the married woman of another man and possibly destroying hers.

Indeed, this comes to the thesis of Meacham's book, less a biography than a portrait: "Jefferson hungered for greatness," and he welded power--usually through written word--to obtain it. A benevolent welder of what power he held, Jefferson's overriding description is that of a Renaissance man with boundless interests and whose overriding concern was the "fate of democratic republicanism in America," for to his end he worried about the return of monarchical government, an influence that Meacham found as influential on Jefferson's thinking as the Cold War was on American Presidents from Truman to George H.W. Bush.

The short-comings of Meacham's biography are few, and he does not seem interested in hiding them. Setting out to restore Jefferson's image, somewhat tarnished in recent years by revelations of his sexual relationship with Sally Hemings and acclaimed biographies of Jefferson's rivals (Hamilton, Adams, and Washington, especially) in recent years, Meacham writes with more than a little hero worship, arguing that while there have been many great presidents, none would be as interesting to spend time with as Jefferson, whose career touched on far wider a range than did his contemporary political rivals, or even of other politicians since. Indeed, he is persuasive, and it's a fascinating picture that is difficult to dismiss. Yes, Jefferson is a slave owner, a pragmatic politician, and an occasional philanderer. But he is also a man who at his heart believed in the justice and goodness of man and who to his last day would welcome the friendship of any man who would accept his hand in fellowship.

Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power is an excellent read, and Jon Meacham has written a fascinating and shining portrait of our third president and the lifetime he spent learning to weld, and then using, power.

Susan says

Excellent book. Meacham sees Jefferson not only as the idealist and philosopher who wrote the Declaration of Independence, but as a man who learned from experience and compromised throughout his political career. In fact, at the beginning of his Presidency, the Federalists were frightened that the country fail because real democracy was too dangerous and at the end of his Presidency some of the Republicans were angry that he'd compromised with the Federalists to the extent that he compromised the who idea of democracy. Interestingly, there was talk of secession at both points, and in both instances the North was seen as leaving the union, perhaps to form a country with British possessions in North America (Canada) and to have a more "royalist" government, maybe even go back to British rule.

One of Jefferson's greatest fears was that the new United States would give up the democratic ideal and have a "president for life" or even a younger son of the British king as its king.

His relationship with John Adams was also interesting. The two were close when they were both abroad as diplomats but politics separated them as Adams became the head of the Federalist Party and Jefferson of the Republicans. Only in old age did they reconcile (as a result of a push by Abigail Adams) and carry on a correspondence after Jefferson had retired. Then, they both died on the 4th of July of 1826, Jefferson have struggled to stay alive until July 4th.

Interesting to me that I've always liked Jefferson and felt closer to his main ideas but never read very much about him. Lately though I've read biographies of Adams, Hamilton (Jefferson's Nemesis) and Washington

so have understand the Federalist POV much better, but reading this book reminded me that Jefferson, IMHO, is the closest to the way I think.

The book was interesting on the Jefferson controversy (slavery--he didn't free his slaves at death as did Washington, Sally Hemmings--Jefferson promised his wife not to remarry/sleeping with a slave, who was in fact a half sister of his wife, was not unusual at the time).

I was also reminded that it was Jefferson who commissioned the Voyage of Discovery of Lewis and Clark and who made the purchase of the Louisiana Territory on his own without consulting Congress (thought he at first wanted a constitutional amendment to allow it). It would probably not have happened had he not acted quickly. Those two acts set the scene for American expansion into the west and were therefore far-seeing and critical decisions.

Steve says

I wanted to devour this book the way I had with bios of the other Founding Fathers, but this one was more of a slog than I anticipated. Meacham does a good job connecting all the big historical touchstones of Jefferson's remarkable life: writing the Declaration of Independence (check); serving as an ambassador to France (check); serving in Washington's cabinet (check); winning election as the third president of the U.S., negotiating the Louisiana Purchase, and founding the University of Virginia in his later years(check, check and check). But what's missing is the literary sweep and human drama behind these events, things that David McCullough and Joseph Ellis brought to their subjects with exceptional skills(Adams and Washington, respectively). The Lewis and Clark expedition is barely a footnote here, perhaps because the author knew Stephen Ambrose had already told Jefferson's role in that adventure about as well as any writer could.

We don't get a whole lot of new insight into Jefferson's relationship with Sally Hemings for that matter. To be fair, the book does pick up some narrative steam when Jefferson finally reaches the White House, but that is so far into the book that it's hard to justify the rest of the story's plodding pace. A big disappointment for me.

Brian says

Jon Meacham provides an excellent popular biography on the life of Thomas Jefferson. Without going into too much detail on anyone part of his life the author is able to give you a sample of Jefferson without bogging down in certain places as some authors have done in the past. The subtitle is a little misleading since there really is no tie back to the art of power and there are but a few scant messages about the way Jefferson organizes his power and leadership style. One of the nice things the author does well is try to bring together the events in Jefferson's life that shaped the decisions he would make in the presidency from his time in school and as a lawyer, his failed years as Virginia's governor and finally his time as a diplomat. Jefferson wore many proverbial hats from philosopher, statesman, scientist, and farmer during his life and Meacham captures all of those in this biography. Overall the pragmatic side of Jefferson's leadership shines here and a look at how the philosopher differed with the ideal was thoroughly explored at various points during the book especially during his presidency with regards to the Louisiana purchase and the embargo of English goods. For those looking for an indepth look or have read a lot about Jefferson this is probably not going to shed a lot of new light other than spending some extra time on his years as governor that other biographies skirt over. For those just starting out with the founding fathers I think there is a lot of value here.

Jerome says

Choppy and not as in-depth as it could be, but, in all, this was a great book. Meacham is effective in the limited goals he sets for himself in this new biography of Jefferson. He persuasively argues that Jefferson's fear of monarchists was not simple paranoia or demagoguery. Jefferson was right to fear concentrations of power in "monocrats" -- be they advocates of kings, those seeking to elevate Washington to dictator, or the powerful national banking interests that Hamilton promoted. Jefferson's ability to advocate and then to demonstrate the responsibility of egalitarian rule was his great contribution to American democracy.

Jefferson, of course, was a man full of contradictory and paradoxical beliefs. He was a Democratic-Republican, but acted like a Federalist in office. He pretended to hate politics, but was a remarkably shrewd, even devious politician. He expanded government power while fearing such expansion at the same time. He violated the Constitution more than any other president. He viewed slavery as an evil but owned slaves himself (one of whom, Sally Hemings, he almost certainly exploited sexually). He was not a particularly religious man, but considered the freedom of religion clause in the Constitution one of his signal accomplishments. In short, he was the most devious man not named Ben Franklin.

Despite Meacham's theme of a politician who mastered the art of power to successfully reconcile philosophy with practicality. Meacham treads lightly on Jefferson's philosophy (one of very few omissions in his lengthy bibliography, tellingly, is Jean Yarbrough's study of Jefferson's political and moral philosophy). This is a shame because his portrait of a Jefferson that does not fit the libertarian mold is provocative and interesting. Meacham's Jefferson is less antipathetic to large government, federal and executive power and commerce than is commonly understood today, but Meacham does little to explore further Jefferson's thinking on these and other matters, nor does he attempt any explanation of why the Jefferson of common perception does not fit Meacham's own reading, which would have been very interesting to me. His is a Jefferson more of action than thought.

Meacham also tries to deal with Jefferson and slavery. It's a topic that demanded attention, given the light touch traditionally taken and the mass of new scholarship on the subject. Jefferson's views were, unsurprisingly, complex. He made several early attempts to abolish it, but by midlife he chose the pragmatic route and no longer pursued the issue. He didn't think that white folks and black folks could live together, but kept one of his slaves as a concubine. Meacham is leery of validating Jefferson and Sally Hemings's relationship. He thinks Hemings forced Jefferson to promise to free their children in return for returning from France with him (French law at the time would have allowed her to stay). Interestingly, if this deal was made, Jefferson kept it despite its unenforceability once they returned to Virginia.

The same man who wanted language in the Declaration of Independence attacking slavery and saw as a "fireball in the night" that threatened the country, there is no examination why Jefferson not only kept up his own massive coterie of slaves he also cut back on his comments and observations on why slavery should end. Instead Meacham offers up that Jefferson was comfortable with the essential contradiction of the man devoted to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" who not only kept slaves but did not free them at his death-as did others, like George Washington.

In all, this was pretty good.
