

Jefferson by Leo Rosten

¹WASHINGTON WAS A CITY OF MUD and tree stumps—without streets, without lights. The Vice-President, Thomas Jefferson, lived in Conrad's boardinghouse. He ate with the other boarders and, so deep were his convictions about equality, always sat at the foot of the table. He sat there while the House of Representatives debated whether to put him or Aaron Burr (they were tied in electoral votes) in the White House. He even sat there on the morning of March 4, 1801. Then, plainly dressed, he walked alone to the uncompleted Capitol to be sworn in as third President of the United States.

²He was a very tall, emaciated Virginian, with reddish hair and penetrating eyes, oddly shy, unfailingly courteous, but rather rustic in manner and in- elegant in carriage. His inaugural address disappointed many—for he was no orator: His voice was not resonant, not beguiling; he shrank from bombast; above all, he appealed to reason, not emotion. More than any of the brilliant men of a remarkably brilliant generation, he believed in the common man's decency and intelligence.

³Incredibly gifted, he could “calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause.” He knew Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Spanish, Old English. He was a masterly statesman, a superb horseman, a great architect (his home at Monticello, the Mall in Washington, the University of Virginia). His omnivorous curiosity played across a dozen fields, from history and philosophy to botany, chemistry, zoology. He was intrigued by gadgets and invented ingenious clocks, calendars, desks, stoves, wagons, storm windows, plows.

⁴He was only 33 when he wrote the Declaration of Independence. His phrases electrified the world then, as they still do today: “all men are created equal... endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights...Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness...Governments. . . [derive] their just powers from the consent of the governed...We mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.”

⁵His mother bore the proud name of Randolph, yet he despised aristocratic pretension. He inherited a fine estate and adoring slaves, yet detested slavery: “This abomination must have an end, and there is a superior bench reserved in Heaven for those who hasten it.” In Virginia, he introduced a law that would have given gentlemen like himself an unheard-of right—to free their own slaves. Congress wrote his antislavery views into the ordinance establishing the Northwest Territory.

⁶He was as fearless a champion of freedom as ever walked the earth: “I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” “The mass of mankind was not born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred ready to ride them.” The law he wrote for Virginia guaranteeing religious freedom was among the first in history. He was one of the men responsible for the Bill of Rights, which protected the lowliest citizen against the power of the state: the right to think, speak, write, protest, believe what one pleases (“God hath created the mind free”); the right to a home police could not enter without lawful cause; the right to trial by jury, with a counsel of one's own choosing; the right never to be tried twice for an

offense, nor forced to testify against oneself; the commanding proviso of “due process of law.” And he never forgot that he was fighting “not for ourselves alone, but for the whole human race.”

⁷How can we appraise the debt democracy owes him? He was far ahead of his time in advocating free public schools and public libraries. “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free...it expects what never was and never will be.” He was a pioneer exponent of states' rights, as against Federal power, and the supreme strategist of irrevocable separation of the powers of church and state. He founded the Democratic party—and Abraham Lincoln said that every party “regards Jefferson as its patron saint.” He extolled the common man, yet knew that man's best hope lay in the emergence of “a natural aristocracy...of virtue and talent.”

⁸He spurned the pomp and panoply with which John Adams had surrounded the Presidency; he ignored diplomatic protocol, kept his door open to the humblest petitioner. Bitterly opposed, denounced as crafty, ambitious, dissembling, he would not permit the slightest infringement of that freedom of expression he held sacred. “For God's sake, let us freely hear both sides...Error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.” He attacked the Alien and Sedition Laws, under which the Government could deport troublesome foreigners or prosecute “subversives” whose only crime lay in criticizing official policy. Coercion, he acidly remarked, “has made one half of the world fools and the other half hypocrites.”

⁹His vision always turned westward. He boldly purchased from Napoleon the vast lands stretching from the Mississippi to the Rockies for \$15,000,000—about three cents an acre. He carefully

organized the Lewis and Clark expedition. He played the game of international power with consummate finesse (“honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none”) and kept the young country out of the bitter wars that spread from Europe to the New World. He propagandized for freedom of the seas a hundred years before the major powers recognized its wisdom.

¹⁰Twice governor of Virginia, minister to France, our first Secretary of State, twice President, he refused a third term. He had no taste for personal power and yearned to leave politics for “the tranquil pursuits of science.” More romantic than anyone guessed, he so loved his wife that he promised never to remarry should she die before him—and he kept his promise, rearing their daughters alone.

¹¹The brilliance of his mind, the beauty and clarity of his thought are scattered through 18,000 letters. After he left the White House, countless friends, luminaries from all the world streamed to Monticello to pay him homage. He was so generous a host that he had to sell his 10,000-volume library to raise money; even then, only a public subscription saved his beloved home.

¹²He died on July 4, 1826—fifty years to the day after the July 4 he had done so much to immortalize Monticello and all its contents were sold to pay his debts. He had written his own epitaph: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom and father of the University of Virginia.” He was called “the pen of the Revolution.” But he was more than that. He was its conscience. —LEO ROSTEN

FROM *LOOK* MAGAZINE, “THEY MADE OUR WORLD,” 30 JULY 1963.