The United States was conceived in idealism and in paradox. America joined the family of nations dedicated to the proposition that “all men are created equal,” that all are endowed with the inalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, and that they have a natural right to rebel when those rights are denied. So said Thomas Jefferson in the American Declaration of Independence, summing up truths that Americans had learned in the 18th century Enlightenment, or Age of Reason, a time of momentous intellectual and scientific advancements that began in Europe and spread to America. Enlightenment thinkers in Europe stressed a belief in natural law, human progress, and government as a rational instrument, ideas that profoundly influenced Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and most other American patriots. The ringing prologue of Jefferson’s Declaration, in fact, drew much of its inspiration from English philosopher John Locke, who had held that all human beings were innately equal and good and were entitled to “life, liberty, and possessions.”

Yet in 1776, enlightened America held some 500,000 Africans in chains. Jefferson himself and George Washington, the commander of the patriot army, were large slaveholders. Indeed, slavery existed in all thirteen states and was an indispensable labor force for the patriot cause. Even so, many northerners, in a burst of revolutionary idealism, moved to abolish the institution in their states. Vermont was the first to do so, in 1777. Massachusetts outlawed it by a judicial decision six years later. New Hampshire removed it by “constitutional interpretation,” and Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Connecticut all adopted gradual emancipation programs. When New York and New Jersey finally freed their slaves, the institution of bondage became peculiar to the South—hence the term peculiar institution.

The story was dramatically different in the South. True, some individual masters, swept up in the spirit of the Revolution, voluntarily manumitted their slaves. But most southern planters and political leaders refused to follow the lead of the northern states. Because those states had so few slaves in relation to their white population, white southerners liked to ask what the northerners had to lose in adopting emancipation. Southern whites did not see how they could abolish slavery, not with their heavy concentration of slaves (in some places they outnumbered whites) and their corresponding large investments. For white southerners of the revolutionary generation, however, slavery was more than a labor system, more even than a means of race control in a region brimming with blacks. It was the foundation of an entire patrician way of life, so interwoven with the fabric of southern society— as a potent status symbol, as personal wealth, as inheritances and dowries—that it did not seem possible to remove it.

And what of Jefferson, perhaps the most enlightened southerner of his day? In Jefferson, we meet an American anomaly: the antislavery slaveholder. Jefferson truly hated slavery; he damned it as “this blot in our country,” this “great political and moral evil,” and he devised a specific plan to get rid of it in Virginia—by gradual emancipation and colonization of the freed blacks outside the state. Yet Virginia never adopted his plan, and Jefferson himself was so much a part of his slave-holding culture— and so much in debt— that he felt unable to free his own slaves while he was alive (he did, however, provide for the liberation of five of his skilled workers upon his death). It is not unfair to point out that Jefferson’s illustrious political career— among other things, he was revolutionary governor of Virginia, United States minister to France, Washington’s Secretary of State, and the third President of the United States— was made possible by slave labor.

In this selection, a distinguished Jefferson reflects on his “many-sided and multi-talented man,” especially on his contradictions concerning slavery and race. In doing so, Douglas Wilson raises a crucial point about the perils of presentism— that is, of intruding today’s values and attitudes upon the past. To do that, he warns, risks distorting history. What annoys him is that too many Americans today seem unable to discuss the past in its own terms, unable “to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions.” As an example of
presentism, Wilson discusses the story of Jefferson’s liaison with his house slave, Sally Hemings. The author denies the story as wholly out of character for Jefferson. But even if it were (and it was) true, does it matter? This leads Wilson to a profound question that all of us ought to ponder. “How should we remember the leading figures of our history” he asks. “By their greatest achievements and most important contributions or by their personal failures and peccadilloes?” Wilson emphatically sides with the first position.

Of Jefferson’s many achievements, Wilson contends that his “pre-eminent contribution to the world was the Declaration of Independence.” In discussing that contribution, Wilson confronts even worse examples of presentism: the view of Jefferson as a ranting hypocrite for trumpeting liberty and equality, yet failing to free his own slaves, and as an inveterate racist for his observations about the traits of black people in his Notes on the State of Virginia. Frankly, those observations are offensive to read today. Yet Wilson reminds us that they were speculative, “a suspicion only,” and maintains that Jefferson would have readily discarded them had he encountered an outspoken, literate African American such as Frederick Douglass. Addressing the question of why Jefferson did not free his slaves, Wilson observes that the great Virginian faced formidable obstacles in the context of his time and place. Then Wilson turns the whole question around. Instead of asking why Jefferson continued to hold slaves, the question ought to be, “How did a man who was born into a slaveholding society, whose family and admired friends owned slaves, who inherited a fortune that was dependent on slaves and slave labor, decide at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declared that it ought to be abolished?”

As for the Declaration of Independence, Wilson makes a convincing case that Jefferson mean to include both blacks and women in his philosophical conception of equality. The author goes on to establish a powerful connection between Jefferson’s Declaration and Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg during the Civil War. The Gettysburg Address, Wilson points out, “invested Jefferson’s 18th century notion of equality with an essentially new meaning and projected it onto the future of the nation.” As a result, Americans today have a different view of the prologue of the Declaration than did Jefferson’s generation.

“Today, makes yesterday mean.” Emily Dickinson’s gnomic utterance contains at least one undoubted truth—that the perspectives of the present invariably color the meanings we ascribe to the past. Nothing confirms that so readily as the changing reputations of historical figures, whose status often appears indexed to present-day preoccupations. It may be inevitable that every age should refashion its historical heroes in a contemporary idiom, but doing so carries with it an obvious inherent danger. In imposing Today’s meanings on Yesterday, we run the risk of distorting it—whether willfully, to suit our own purposes, or unintentionally, by unwarranted assumptions and because of meager information. In this way we lose track of what might be considered the obverse of Emily Dickinson’s remark: that Yesterday has meanings of its own that are prior to and necessarily independent of Today’s.

Thomas Jefferson is one of the few historical Americans who need no introduction. Even the most abbreviated knowledge of American history, at home or abroad, includes the author of the Declaration of Independence. Identified around the world with democracy and human rights, Jefferson’s name and words have been invoked for two hundred years in the cause of freedom and political reform. But here in his own country, where the name synonymous with democracy is exhibited everywhere- on counties, cities, schools, streets, and every imaginable form of institution, business, and product- it sometimes seems that the man himself is receding from view, and that what is commonly thought and said about him gets harder and harder to reconcile with the great national hero. With the…. Two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of his birth, in 1743, its seems appropriate to note some of the ways in which Thomas Jefferson is remembered by the American public and to examine the historical lens through which the man and his contributions are seen. Only a generation ago Jefferson was still considered to be and treated as an object of veneration, so closely identified with the spirit
of America as to constitute a problem for this historian. In 1960 Merrill D. Peterson confronted this problem in one of the most revealing works on Jefferson scholarship, *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind*, which surveys what Jefferson has meant to succeeding generations of Americans. “Where the object is Jefferson,” Peterson wrote, the historian’s obligation to historical truth is compromised, in some degree, by his sense of obligation to the Jefferson symbol. Jefferson occupied such an important place in the symbolic architecture of this nation that the search for the elusive *himself* from the vaunted summit, Objectivity, must not be allowed to empty the symbol of meaning for “Jefferson’s children.”

It is a measure of the change that has occurred in the past thirty years that the one thing Jefferson’s children nowadays are most likely to associate with him, apart from his authorship of the Declaration of Independence, is a sexual liaison with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings. College teachers are often dismayed to discover that many if not most of their students now regard this as an accepted act. But this is not all. In the prevailing ethos of the sexual revolution, Jefferson’s supposed liaison is widely received with equanimity and seems to earn him nothing more reproachable than a knowing smile. For must, such a liaison is apparently not objectionable, and for some, its presumed reality actually seems to work in his favor, showing him to have been not a stuffy moralist but a man who cleverly managed to appear respectable while secretly carrying on an illicit relationship. In effect, something that before the 1960s would have been universally considered a shameful blot on Jefferson’s character has become almost an asset. Confirming this state of affairs is the case of a prominent black civil-rights leader who complained not long ago that Jefferson’s alleged relationship with Hemings is not forthrightly acknowledged by the proprietors of Monticello, Jefferson’s residence, and who frankly confessed that this liaison had for him a positive effect in showing that, though a slaveholder, Jefferson was well disposed toward black people.

Although the charge that Jefferson had fathered several children by one of his slaves was first made public in his lifetime, by a vindictive journalist and office-seeker, James Callender, it was believed mainly by those who disparaged Jefferson for political reasons and was not credited by Jefferson scholars or the public at large. But that began to change in 1974, when Fawn M. Brodie published a widely read book on Jefferson in which she attempted to establish the truth of Callender’s charge as a prime biographical fact. Brodie’s these about Jefferson and Hemings is an embellished and controversial reading of the evidence, but what is more significant in the present context is that her story was well geared to the dispositions of her audience. She insisted that her object was not to pillory Jefferson or to make him out as a moral monster but merely to depict him as a man. If, as a widower, he fell in love with a beautiful slave girl and took her as a mistress when she was fourteen years old, it was “not scandalous debauchery with an innocent slave victim,” she assured us, “but rather a serious passion that brought Jefferson and the slave woman much private happiness over a period lasting 38 years.”

Brodie’s benign version of the story has proven persuasive, and where previous versions had depicted such behavior as scandalous, hypocritical, or shameful, Jefferson and Hemings are represented as a pair of happy lovers, bravely defying the conventions of a sexually puritanical and racist society.

Compelling as this picture has proved to the American public, most Jefferson scholars and historians have remained unpersuaded. It is true that Jefferson was extremely protective of his personal life and went to considerable lengths to keep it private, but it does not follow, as Brodie would have us believe, that he must therefore have had something to hide. In accounting for Jefferson’s behavior in the context of his own time, rather than ours, it is difficult for knowledgeable authorities to reconcile a liaison with Hemings with much else that is known about him. Jefferson implicitly denied the charge, and such evidence as exists about the paternity of Heming’s children points not to Jefferson but to his nephews. It is, of course, impossible to prove a negative, but the real problem with Brodie’s interpretation is that it doesn’t fit Jefferson. If he did take advantage of Hemings and father her children over a period of 20 years, he was acting completely out of character and violating his own standards of honor and decency. For a man who took questions of morality and honor very
seriously, such a hypocritical liaison would have been a constant source of shame and guilt. For his close-knit family, who worshipped him and lived too near him to have been ignorant of such an arrangement, it would have been a moral tragedy of no small dimensions.

But haunted as he was by other troubles and difficulties, there is no sign of this sort of shame or guilt in Jefferson’s life. That is why Brodie must present Jefferson and Hemings as a happy couple and their supposed life together as giving satisfaction and lasting pleasure. And whereas there are grounds for suspecting a liaison, such as the terms of Jefferson’s will and the testimony of Heming’s son Madison, there are no grounds whatever for believing in what Brody called the “private happiness” enjoyed by Jefferson and Hemings. That is pure speculation. Because Brodie’s thesis deals in such unwarranted assumptions, the great Jefferson biographer Dumas Malone regarded it as “without historical foundation.” But what makes it possible for the American public to take the Sally Hemings story to heart, even more than the suspicious circumstances, seems to be a prevailing presentism.

“Presentism” is the term historians use for applying contemporary or otherwise inappropriate standards to the past. An awkward term at best, it nevertheless names a malaise that currently plagues American discussions of anything and everything concerning the past: the widespread inability to make appropriate allowances for prevailing historical conditions. The issue of presentism is hardly new, but it has perhaps been amplified of late by the debunking and revisionist spirit of the times and the effect this has had on public perceptions. As the uncritically positive and unabashedly patriotic approach that for so long characterized the teaching of American history in the public schools has abated, the emphasis has steadily shifted to the problems and failures of the past. The sage of the glories of the old West has thus given way to a saga of exploitation and greed. Pride in conquering the wilderness has yielded to the shame of despoiling the land and dispossessing the indigenous peoples. What seems to have happened is that a laudably corrective trend has predominated to such an extent that the emphasis seems somewhat reversed, and parents complain that they scarcely recognize the history their children are taught.

With a built-in emphasis on what had previously been ignored or suppressed, it is hardly surprising that almost all the revisionist news, at least where traditional American heroes are concerned, is bad. A question that was once reasonably clear has become a muddle: How should we remember the leading figures of our history? By their greatest accomplishments or by their personal failures and peccadilloes? Can one category cancel out the other? In a sense these reversals of fortune are inevitable, inasmuch as nothing ever keeps its place in a world of incessant change. It is perhaps an instance of what the historian Henry Adams called the law of acceleration— the tendency of change to come faster and faster— that John Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., whose murders elevated them to martyrdom, should both come in for reappraisal while their memories and legacies are still fresh. Do the revelations about such things as Kennedy’s womanizing, his not-so-heroic war record, and his non-authorship of a book for which he accepted the Pulitzer Prize detract from his positive accomplishments as President? Do the revelations about King’s philandering and his plagiarism as a graduate student have any bearing on his conspicuous achievements as a civil rights leader? Or is this a case of asking a question backward? Is it perhaps more appropriate and revealing to ask, are the significant contributions of Kennedy and King, which affected the lives of millions of Americans, in any way diminished by subsequent revelations about their shortcomings and failings in other areas?

In this climate the difficulties of judging a figure like Thomas Jefferson by an appropriate standard are considerably compounded. One who writes voluminously over a long time may easily have his own words quoted against him or cited to prove that he held views later modified or abandoned. Jefferson was preeminently such a person… In some ways that are little recognized, Jefferson is surprisingly modern and accessible to the present age. His pronounced notions about health, for example, which seemed somewhat odd to previous generations, appear nowadays in an entirely different light. He believed strongly that regular exercise was
essential to physical and mental well-being. As a college student, he developed a regime of daily running to keep himself fit, and he came to believe in later life that walking was the most salutary form of exercise for the ordinary person. On the subject of diet he also held strong views, which minimized meat and animal products and emphasized instead the prime importance of vegetables. For our own time, at least, Jefferson turns out to have been something of a health-food prophet.

Whether his leading ideas on politics and government will prove as resilient remains to be seen. In spite of his great reputation as a statement, many of these have proved as counter to the prevailing currents of American history as his prejudice against large cities and manufacturing. He could never reconcile himself, for example, to the Supreme Court’s deciding the constitutionality of laws and acts of the executive— a development he regarded as unwarranted and disastrous. His preference for a small central government and his insistence on the prerogatives of the states have been strongly rebuffed, if not virtually obliterated, by decisive turns in our national development. Although history cannot be reversed, the relative size and power of the central government is once more (or still) at issue, as is the proper scope and authority of the Supreme Court. Even Jefferson’s views on the disadvantages of large cities have today a resonance that was unheard or unheeded by previous generations.

Because he was attracted to laborsaving devices and was an ingenious adopted and adapted of new gadgets, Jefferson has gained a reputation as an inventor, but aside from a few items— an innovation moldboard for a plough, a revolving bookstand— he probably invented little. Though he used and enthusiastically promoted the polygraph, a machine for making simultaneous copies of a written document, he did not invent it, and could not even keep his own in repair. But the fact that Jefferson is perceived as an inventor tells us something about the way he is valued. Abraham Lincoln was much interested in inventions and even went so far as to have one of his own patented, but this fact has made little impression on his admirers and is entirely absent from the legend.

President Kennedy paid a famous tribute to the multiplicity of Jefferson’s talents, but they have always been regarded as astonishing. James Parton, one of Jefferson’s 19th century biographers, gave his dazzling range of abilities a dramatic accent when he characterized his subject as a man who “could calculate an eclipse, survey an estate, tie an artery, plan an edifice, try a cause, break a horse, dance a minuet, and play the violin.” And Parton was describing a young Jefferson who had not yet written the Declaration. When the world’s leading scientist and explorer, Alexander von Humboldt, came to visit Jefferson in Washington in 1804, he came to see not the President of the United States of America so much as the president of the American Philosophical Society and the author of Notes on the States of Virginia (1785). Had he visited the President at his home in Virginia, he would have seen what was perhaps the finest private library in America, which later became the foundation of the Library of Congress.

Not all of Jefferson’s extraordinary talents are fully recognized by the public at large. One that is not is his great achievement as an architect. Self-taught from books and, until he went abroad, almost without worthy architectural models to observe, Jefferson managed to design a number of memorable structures. The residence of his that crowns (and names) a small mountain in the Virginia Piedmont has become one of the most familiar objects in American iconography. And Jefferson can claim credit for not just one Monticello but two: the domed structure represented on the back of the nickel is his second version of the house, which superseded the first one on the same site, and is dramatically different.

Part of the evidence for Jefferson’s distinction as an architect is found in his beautifully detailed drawings, some of which reveal fanciful structures that were never built. But his most original and most imaginative design, and the one recognized by professional architects as among the greatest of all American architectural achievements, is his “academical village”— the campus of the University of Virginia. In forming his conception Jefferson effectively reinvented the idea of the university, from the innovative curriculum to the unique arrangement and design of the buildings. Here those seeking his monument have only to look about them.
Although he was a many-sided and multi-talented man who left a lasting imprint on a number of endeavors, there seems to be little doubt that Jefferson’s preeminent contribution to the world was the Declaration of Independence—particularly its enduring affirmations of liberty and equality. In the prologue of the Declaration these affirmations were made the axioms from which the rights of resolution and self-government could confidently be deduced. The idea of individual liberty was not, of course, original with Jefferson, or exclusively an American invention. It was fostered in Western Europe by philosophers, religious dissidents, and political rebels, but it took root tenaciously among transplanted Europeans in the New World and, with the founding of the American republic, received its most durable expression in the Declaration of Independence. To the Declaration’s studious and deeply learned author, many of what had passed in the history of the world for the prerogatives of governmental power were arbitrary and intolerable restraints on individual freedom. In fact, it is not too much to say that Jefferson’s reigning political passion was a hatred of tyranny. And although his fear of the tyrannous abuse of power has sometimes been judged excessive, it is hard to argue that tyranny has ever been, or is even now, in short supply.

If it is possible to reduce so complex an issue to its simplest terms, one might venture that for Jefferson the paramount political issue in the American Revolution was what he called liberty and what we now call personal freedom, or choice. It was and remains the virtual sine qua non of American culture, something that Americans from the first have been strongly conscious of and willing to fight for. But what has become the most familiar and the most quoted phrase in the Declaration—“all men are created equal”—is about something else. It is an intriguing fact that although Americans generally understand that the prologue to the Declaration is their charter of freedom, even more indelibly impressed upon their imagination is its affirmation of the ideal of human equality.

How could the man who wrote, that “all men are created equal” own slaves? This, in essence, is the question most persistently asked of those who write about Thomas Jefferson, and by all indications it the thing that contemporary Americans find most vexing about him. In a recent series of some two dozen radio talk shows, I was asked this question on virtually every program, either by the host or by a caller. Most often, those who point to this problem admire Jefferson, and they appear as reluctant to give up their admiration as they would be to give up the principle of equality itself. But they are genuinely baffled by the seeming contradiction. The question caries a silent assumption that because he practiced slaveholding, Jefferson must have somewhat believed in it, and must therefore have been a hypocrite. My belief is that this way of asking the question, as in the cases of Kennedy and King, is essentially backward, and reflects the pervasive presentism of our time. Consider, for example, how different the question appears when inverted and framed in more historical terms: How did a man who was born into a slaveholding society, whose family and admired friends owned slaves, who inherited a fortune that was dependent on slave and slave labor, decide at an early age that slavery was morally wrong and forcefully declare that it ought to be abolished?

Though stating the same cause, these are obviously different questions, focusing on different things, but one is framed in a historical context and the other ignores historical circumstances. The rephrased question reveals that what is truly remarkable is that Jefferson went against his society and his own self-interest to denounce slavery and urge its abolition. And, crucially, there is not hidden assumption that he must in some way have believed in or tacitly accepted the morality of slavery.

But when the question is explained in this way, another invariably follows: If Jefferson came to believe that holding slaves was wrong, why did he continue to hold them? This question, because of its underlying assumptions, is both harder and easier than the first. It is harder because we are at such a great remove from the conditions of 18th century Virginia that no satisfactory explanation can be given in a nutshell. To come to terms with the tangle of legal restrictions and other obstacles faced by the 18th century Virginian slaveholder who might have wished freedom for his slaves, together with the extraordinary difficulties of finding them viable
places of residence and means of livelihood, requires a short course in early American history. But the question is easier in that there is no doubt that these obstacles to emancipation in Jefferson’s Virginia were formidable, and the risk was demonstrably great that emancipated slaves would enjoy little, if any, real freedom and would, unless they could pass as white, be more likely to come to grief in a hostile environment. In short, the mast whose concern extended beyond his own morality to the well-being of his slaves was caught on the horns of a dilemma. Thus the question of why Jefferson didn’t free his slaves only serves to illustrate how presentism involves us in mistaken assumptions about historical conditions- in this case that an 18th century slaveholder wanting to get out from under the moral stigma of slavery and improve the lot of his slaves had only to set them free.

The inevitable question about slavery and equality partly reflects the fact that most Americans are only vaguely familiar with the historical Jefferson, but delving into his writings and attempting to come to terms with the character of his thought, though illuminating, can create further consternation. The college student confronting Jefferson’s one published book, Notes on the State of Virginia, is nowadays unprepared for and often appalled at what the author of the Declaration of Independence had to say about race. Thirty years ago college students were shocked to find Jefferson referring to the slave population as “blacks,” a term that to them suggested racial insensitivity. But to those born after the civil-rights acts of the 1960s, it comes as a shock to discover that Jefferson, while firmly in favor of general emancipation, held out no hope for racial integration. Believing that an amalgamation of the races was not desirable and would not work, he advocated a plan of gradual emancipation and resettlement. Present-day students are even more shocked to find Jefferson concluding, albeit as “a suspicion only,” that the blacks he had observed were “inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind.” Even his positive finding that blacks appeared to be superior to whites in musical ability rankles, for it comes through to students of the current generation as an early version of a familiar stereotype.

At a time like the present, when relations between the races are in the forefront of public discussion and desegregation is the law of the land, it is not surprising that college students should be sensitive to discrepancies between what they understand to be the prevailing ideals of their country and the views of its most prominent Founding Father. National ideals, however, spring not only from the belief and aspirations of founders but also, as this essay attempts to show, from the experience and efforts of subsequent generations. Though he foresaw that slavery could not prevail (“Nothing is more certainly written in the book of fate than that these people are to be free”), Jefferson can hardly be counted as bigoted or backward for seriously doubting that a racially integrated society of white Europeans and black Africans was truly feasible. As the Harvard historian Bernard Bailyn has written, “It took a vast leap of the imagination in the 18th century to consider integration into the political community the existing slave population, whose very ‘nature’ was the subject of puzzled inquiry and who had hitherto been politically non-existent.” Interestingly, the reasons that Jefferson gave for doubting the possibility of integration- “deep rooted prejudices entertained by the whites; then thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; [and] the real distinctions which nature has made”- are the same reasons often cited by black separatists, who entertain the same misgivings.

But if Jefferson’s being a separatist can be accounted for, what can be said about his invidious comparison of the natural endowments of blacks with those of whites, or with those of American Indians, whom he found to be on par with whites? His own testimony suggests an answer, for he admitted that his acquaintance with blacks did not extend to the African continent and embraced only black people who had been born in and forced to live under the degrading conditions of slavery. “It will be right to make great allowances for the difference of condition, of education, of conversation, of the sphere in which they move,” Jefferson wrote, but it is evident in the hindsight of two hundred years that his estimate of the capacities of blacked failed to make sufficient allowances, particularly for the things he himself named. It is perhaps poetic justice that posterity should be
liable to the same kind of mistake in judging him.

But if Jefferson’s beliefs add up to a kind of racism, we must specify two important qualifications. First, that Jefferson offered his conclusions as a hypothesis only, acknowledging that his own experience was not a sufficient basis on which to judge an entire race. Had he lived long enough to meet the ex-slave Frederick Douglass or hear the searing eloquence of his oratory, he would have recognized intellectual gifts in a black man that were superior to those of most whites. Douglass’ oratory brings us to the second qualification, which is a telling one. Attacking the justifications for slavery in 1854, Douglass observed,

*Ignorance and depravity, and the inability to rise from degradation to civilization and respectability, are the most usual allegations against the oppressed. The evils most fostered by slavery and oppression are precisely those which slaveholders and oppressors would transfer from their system to the inherent character of their victims. Thus the very crimes of slavery become slavery’s best defense. By making the enslaved a character fit only for slavery, they excuse themselves for refusing to make the slave a freeman.*

Although we may find Jefferson guilty of failing to make adequate allowance for the conditions in which blacks were forced to live, Jefferson did not take the next step of concluding that blacks were fit only for slavery. This rationalization of slavery was indeed the common coin of slaveholders and other whites who condoned or tolerated the “peculiar” institution, but it formed no part of Jefferson’s thinking. In fact, he took the opposite position: that having imposed the depredations of slavery on blacks, white Americans should not only emancipate them but also educate and train them to be self-sufficient, provide them with necessary materials, and establish a colony in which they could lie as free and independent people. But if going back to original sources and historical contexts is essential in discerning the meanings that Today has imposed on Yesterday, it is equally important in determining how Yesterday’s meanings have colored Today’s. The concept of equality that is universally recognized in our own time as a fundamental principle of American society only had its beginnings in the 18th century; it did not emerge full-blown from the Declaration of Independence.

Whenever he sent correspondents a copy of the Declaration, Jefferson transcribed the text in such a way as to show what the Continental Congress had added to his draft and what it had cut out. The process of congressional emendation was clearly a painful memory for him, and the deletion about which he probably felt the most regret was also the most radical of the passages, for it undertook to blame the King of England directly for the African slave trade. It begins,

*He has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere, or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither….Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.*

Had this passage been ratified as part of the official Declaration, then a question often raised in the 19th century- did Jefferson’s mean in include blacks in the language of the Declaration?—would have been susceptible of a clear-cut and demonstrable answer. For, as the political scientist Jean Yarbrough has recently pointed out, this passage says unmistakably that Africans captured into slavery were not a separate category of beings but men, with the sacred rights of life and liberty that are said in the prologue of the Declaration to be the natural endowments of all men. It is precisely in having these same rights that the prologue asserts that all men are created equal. This deleted passage also provides an answer to a question often raised in the 20th century: Did Jefferson mean to include women in the phrase “all men are created equal”? Implicit in the passage is that “men” is being used in the broader sense of “mankind,” for those who were cruelly transported to be “bought and sold” on the slave market were certainly female as well as male.

That blacks and women were meant to be included in the affirmations of Jefferson’s Declaration at a time when they enjoyed nothing remotely like political and social equality underscores a source of continuing
confusion for contemporary Americans - the difference between a philosophical conception of natural rights and a working system of laws and societal values which allows for the fullest expression of those rights. In our own time the stubbornly persistent disparity between these two is often a source of cynicism and despair, but a Jeffersonian perspective would put more emphasis on the considerable progress made in closing the gap. Jefferson himself was sustained by a profound belief in progress. His unshakable conviction that the world was steadily advancing, not only in the material but also in the moral sphere, is abundantly evident in his writings. Though sometimes criticized as being naïve in this regard, he was fully aware that his belief embraced the prospect of recurrent political and social transformations. Writing from retirement at the age of 73, he told a correspondent that “laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind.”

One way of looking at American history from Jefferson’s day down to our own is as the series of changes and adjustments in our laws and institutions necessitated by the ideals implicit in Jefferson’s Declaration. Sometimes the effect of these ideals has been simply to prevent other, incompatible ideals from gaining ascendancy, as in the case of Social Darwinism, whose notions of the natural inferiority of certain racial and social groups were impeded by the prevalence and familiarity of the Declaration’s precept. But without doubt the most important event in the development of the American ideal of equality, after Jefferson’s Declaration, was Lincoln’s address at Gettysburg. Without any warrant from the founders themselves or from subsequent interpreters or historians, Lincoln declared that not only the essential meaning of the Civil War but also the national purpose itself was epitomized in Jefferson’s phrase “all men are created equal.” As Gary Wills has cogently argued, Lincoln at Gettysburg was practicing not presentism but futurism. In the most stunning act of statesmanship in our history, he invested Jefferson’s 18th century notion of quality with an essentially new meaning and projected it onto the future of the nation. Transfigured in the context of the civil war, and transformed by Lincoln into a large and more consequential ideal, Jefferson’s formulation would never be the same. Thanks in large part to Lincoln, Americans no longer understand the prologue of the Declaration as a philosophical expression of natural rights, but rather take it to be a statement about the social and political conditions that ought to prevail.

Jefferson’s Declaration is thus remarkable not only for its durability - its ability to remain meaningful and relevant - but also for its adaptability to changing conditions. At the time when natural rights are widely proclaimed a nullity, the language of the Declaration is universally understood as affirming human rights, and is restored to even those who do not consciously associate their ideas or aspirations with Jefferson. When the black separatist Malcolm X underwent a change of heart about white people and publicly renounced the “sweeping indictments of one race,” he told an audience in Chicago, “I am not a racist and do not subscribe to any of the tenets of racism. In all honesty and sincerity it can be states that I wish nothing but freedom, justice, and equality; life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness- for all people.” Simply to name the most basic American ideals is to invoke the words of Jefferson.

*** DNA testing begun in 1998 and concluded in 2000 proved that there is a genetic link between Thomas Jefferson and the children of Sally Hemings and that Jefferson is MOST likely the father of those children***

**QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER**

1. The story of Jefferson and Sally Hemings has been treated and interpreted in very different ways at different times. What do the varying interpretations say about the periods in which they originated?

2. Wilson says that one should not ask why Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, did not free his slaves but rather how Jefferson, member of a slaveholding society, came to hate slavery. Do you agree with Wilson’s point of view?
3. What are the different meanings of liberty embodied in the Declaration? Which were most current in the 18th century? Which are most current today and why have they changed?

4. Wilson raises the question of whether figures from the past should be remembered for their “greatest achievements” or for their “personal failures.” What are the good and bad sides of revisionism that often stress the faults of great figures? What does this trend in historical writing say about the present?