

Thomas Jefferson

Thomas Jefferson was born in rural Virginia. At the age of twenty-six, Jefferson was elected to Virginia's House of Burgesses. He would later serve as Virginia's governor. Although he was a wealthy landowner, Jefferson supported the civil liberties of the common man. He strongly believed that the people were most qualified to rule themselves and that most decisions about government should be made at the local level. As principal author of the Declaration of Independence, he helped establish the natural rights "of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" as cornerstones of the new nation.

1. How might Jefferson's early years have influenced his views about local government?

2. How might he feel about the federal government's expanding role in the economy?

Before being appointed the first Secretary of State, Jefferson served as government minister to France where he was an eyewitness to the beginning of the French Revolution. Jefferson sympathized with the plight of the unprivileged classes of France. He had seen personally the injustice that existed when the power was in the hands of a few. Even in the midst of an economic crisis, the French nobles refused to give up their tax-exempt status, believing that the middle class and the poor should carry the burden for all public debts. Like Jefferson, the people of France came to believe that they had a natural right to rule themselves. The French Revolution began with the storming of the Bastille, a hated prison for political opponents of the King. Over time it grew bloody with the execution of the king and other nobles. Although disturbed by the violence, Jefferson was confident that liberty would prevail in the end.

1. How might the French Revolution affect Jefferson's view of the Whiskey Rebellion?

2. How did Hamilton's financial plan compare to the policy favored by French nobles?

As Secretary of State, Jefferson found himself in the middle of important disagreements about the direction that the new nation should take. Jefferson and his Anti-Federalists wanted to restrain the powers of the federal government, while Hamilton and his Federalists believed that the government should have considerable power in order to ensure stability. Jefferson strongly opposed Hamilton's financial plan because he feared it created a centralized government that took power that was better kept close to the people in local and state governments. During his time in Europe, Jefferson saw firsthand how economic freedom and political freedom were related. Jefferson warned, "The political state naturally seeks to become too big and too complex for popular control. . . The greater the power of the state, the more dangerous it may become to the rights of men." He believed, "Our country is too large to have all its affairs directed by a single government. Public servants at such a distance, cannot be properly monitored by their constituents" and held accountable for their actions. This "will invite the public agents to corruption, plunder and waste."

1. What historical reasons might Jefferson cite in opposition to a strong federal government?

2. What instabilities could the new nation face that may support Hamilton's argument?

Jefferson opposed Hamilton's plan for the federal government to pay the domestic and state debts. He thought it was unfair to Southern farmers who had been forced to sell their bonds to Northern speculators during hard economic times. He also thought it was unfair for states who had paid their war debts to be taxed by the federal government to help states who had not yet paid their debts. Most importantly, he opposed Hamilton's proposal for a national bank because he believed that the national government was allowed to do only those things that were explicitly stated in the Constitution. Jefferson believed that going beyond a strict interpretation of the document would allow the national government to expand so that it threatened the liberty of individuals and the states.

1. Why would Hamilton's plan benefit the business North more than the agrarian South?

2. How would Hamilton respond to Jefferson's "strict interpretation" argument?

As the argument raged on, the new nation was about to face the first test to the authority of the national government. The excise tax that had been implemented with Secretary Hamilton's financial plan had angered a group of small farmers in Pennsylvania. Jefferson criticized Hamilton's plan as favoring Northern businessmen over farmers. He advocated "equal rights for all, special privileges for none." He believed that the tax placed an unfair burden on the farmers and was a direct attack on the agrarian way of life. He argued that the nation must encourage farmers because small, independent landowners were the best guarantee of a free nation. They would not be under the control of wealthy bosses, but could make free choices about the wisest policies for the good of the country.

1. How might Jefferson justify the actions taken by the rebels in Western Pennsylvania in response to the excise tax?

2. How might Jefferson ease Washington's fears of the masses revolting as they did in France?