Introduction: Thomas Jefferson, (born April 2 [April 13, New Style], 1743, Shadwell, Virginia [U.S.]—died July 4, 1826, Monticello, Virginia, U.S.), draftsman of the Declaration of Independence of the United States and the nation’s first secretary of state (1789–94), second vice president (1797–1801), and, as the third president (1801–09), the statesman responsible for the Louisiana Purchase. An early advocate of total separation of church and state, he also was the founder and architect of the University of Virginia and the most eloquent American proponent of individual freedom as the core meaning of the American Revolution. (For a discussion of the history and nature of the presidency, see presidency of the United States of America.)

Long regarded as America’s most distinguished “apostle of liberty,” Jefferson has come under increasingly critical scrutiny within the scholarly world. At the popular level, both in the United States and abroad, he remains an incandescent icon, an inspirational symbol for both major U.S. political parties, as well as for dissenters in communist China, liberal reformers in central and eastern Europe, and aspiring democrats in Africa and Latin America. His image within scholarly circles has suffered, however, as the focus on racial equality has prompted a more negative reappraisal of his dependence upon slavery and his conviction that American society remain a white man’s domain. The huge gap between his lyrical expression of liberal ideals and the more attenuated reality of his own life has transformed Jefferson into America’s most problematic and paradoxical hero. The Jefferson Memorial in Washington, D.C., was dedicated to him on April 13, 1943, the 200th anniversary of his birth.

Parliament was congealing. Although he made few speeches and tended to follow the lead of the Tidewater elite, his support for resolutions opposing Parliament’s authority over the colonies was resolute. In 1774 he wrote A Summary View of the Rights of British America, which was quickly published, though without his permission, and catapulted him into visibility beyond Virginia as an early advocate of American independence from Parliament’s authority; the American colonies were tied to Great Britain, he believed, only by wholly voluntary bonds of loyalty to the king. His reputation thus enhanced, the Virginia legislature appointed him a delegate to the Second Continental Congress in the spring of 1775…His chief role was as a draftsman of resolutions. In that capacity, on June 11, 1776, he was appointed to a five-person committee, which also included Adams and Benjamin Franklin, to draft a formal statement of the reasons why a break with Great Britain was justified…He later claimed that he was not striving for “originality of principle or sentiment,” only seeking to provide “an expression of the American mind”; that is, putting into words those ideas already accepted by a majority of Americans.

…On July 3–4 the Congress debated and edited Jefferson’s draft, deleting and revising fully one-fifth of the text…He returned to Virginia in October 1776 and immediately launched an extensive project for the reform of the state’s legal code to bring it in line with the principles of the American Revolution. Three areas of reform suggest the arc of his political vision: first, he sought and secured abolition of…all those remnants of feudalism that discouraged a broad distribution of property; second, he proposed a comprehensive plan of educational reform designed to assure access at the lowest level for all citizens and state support at the higher levels for the most talented; third, he advocated a law prohibiting any religious establishment and requiring complete separation of church and state. …Jefferson had overseen the publication of Notes on the State of Virginia. This book, the only one Jefferson ever published, was part travel guide, part scientific treatise, and part philosophical meditation….Notes contained an extensive discussion of slavery, including a graphic description of its horrific effects on both blacks and whites, a strong assertion that it violated the principles on which the American Revolution was based, and an
apocalyptic prediction that failure to end slavery would lead to “convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of one or the other race.” It also contained the most explicit assessment that Jefferson ever wrote of what he believed were the biological differences between blacks and whites, an assessment that exposed the deep-rooted racism that he, like most Americans and almost all Virginians of his day, harboured throughout his life.

…His major concern about the new Constitution was the absence of any bill of rights. He was less interested in defining the powers of government than in identifying those regions where government could not intrude…. As Hamilton began to construct his extensive financial program—to include funding the national debt, assuming the state debts, and creating a national bank—Jefferson came to regard the consolidation of power at the federal level as a diabolical plot to subvert the true meaning of the American Revolution. Initially, at least, his policies as president reflected his desire for decentralization, which meant dismantling the embryonic federal government, the army and navy, and all federal taxation programs, as well as placing the national debt, which stood at $112 million, on the road to extinction. The major achievement of his first term was also an act of defiance, though this time it involved defying his own principles. In 1803 Napoleon decided to consolidate his resources for a new round of the conflict with England by selling the vast Louisiana region, which stretched from the Mississippi Valley to the Rocky Mountains. Although the asking price, $15 million, was a stupendous bargain, assuming the cost meant substantially increasing the national debt. More significantly, what became known as the Louisiana Purchase violated Jefferson’s constitutional scruples. Indeed, many historians regard it as the boldest executive action in American history. But Jefferson never wavered, reasoning that the opportunity to double the national domain was too good to miss. Finally there was the campus of the University of Virginia at Charlottesville, which Jefferson called his “academical village.” Jefferson surveyed the site, which he could view in the distance from his mountaintop, and chose the Pantheon of Rome as the model for the rotunda, the centrepiece flanked by two rows of living quarters for students and faculty. …Unlike every other American college at the time, “Mr. Jefferson’s university” had no religious affiliation and imposed no religious requirement on its students. As befitted an institution shaped by a believer in wholly voluntary and consensual networks of governance, there were no curricular requirements, no mandatory code of conduct except the self-enforced honour system, no president or administration. Every aspect of life at the University of Virginia reflected Jefferson’s belief that the only legitimate form of governance was self-governance.