

Information on Thomas Jefferson

Background: Thomas Jefferson was born in Virginia in 1743. When his father died in 1757, Jefferson inherited a great deal of property. Three years later he entered the College of William and Mary, where he studied law. In 1769 he was elected to the Virginia state legislature. Six years later he was appointed to the Virginia delegation of the second Continental Congress. During this time, his skills as a writer were recognized and he was selected as the principal author of Declaration of Independence. After the American Revolution, Jefferson served as the U.S. Minister to France until President Washington called him back to serve as the country's first Secretary of State. Jefferson served as Vice President under John Adams, and then in 1800 was elected the third President of the United States. He served two terms as president and then retired in his Virginia plantation, Monticello. Perhaps his most important achievement while president was the purchase of the Louisiana Territory, which doubled the size of the United States. He sent Meriwether Lewis and William Clark on the famous Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore this newly acquired land. Coincidentally, Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

View of the nature of the human beings: Despite Jefferson's well-to-do upbringing, he was a strong believer in the abilities of the "common man." He was convinced that people, when given enough information on an issue, were capable of making smart decisions. On the other hand, he believed that power concentrated in the hands of a few leaders was dangerous. Jefferson thought that people who had too much power might be tempted to govern for their own benefit and not do what was best for everyone. Therefore, according to Jefferson, the power of any government must ultimately rest with the people, so that all interests are represented. The purpose of the government, he believed, is to carry out the wishes of the people.

Best Type of Government: Because he believed in the ability of people to govern themselves, Jefferson favored giving more power to state governments. Jefferson felt that government power should not be concentrated in one central or federal government, but should be spread out among the individual states as well. Similarly, he thought states should give decision-making power to their various communities. In this way, the power to govern and make decisions would lie in the hands of the people whose lives were most affected by these decisions. While Jefferson realized that the Articles of Confederation had some serious problems, he was not, like some, ready to get rid of it entirely. He liked how the Articles protected the rights of states and individuals from being taken over by a powerful federal government.

Constitution: When the members of the Constitutional Convention wrote the Constitution, Jefferson was serving as the Minister to France. Upon learning of the details of the Constitution, Jefferson generally accepted it. However, he did have two serious concerns. First, Jefferson was uncomfortable knowing that the Constitution placed no limit on the number of four-year terms that a president could serve. He feared that one man could be elected over and over and become like a king. Second, Jefferson was critical of the fact that the Constitution contained no Bill of Rights to protect citizens' rights. Without one, he was afraid that the rights of individuals might be abused by the federal government. Not surprisingly, Jefferson strongly supported the addition of the Bill of Rights to the Constitution.

In addition, Jefferson believed that the federal government only had powers that were specifically spelled out in the Constitution. His belief was supported by the Tenth Amendment to the Constitution, which states that the powers not specifically given to the federal government belong "to the states respectively, or to the people." This narrow, or "strict," interpretation of the Constitution clearly limited the power of the federal government.

Political Party: Jefferson's beliefs about strong states' rights, limited powers for the federal government, and a "strict" interpretation of the Constitution were contrary to the ideas of many members of President Washington's administration. However, many other political leaders of the time agreed with Jefferson, and they formed their own political party. They called their party the Republicans. Not surprisingly, Jefferson became the party's leader.

Ideal Economy: Jefferson also had strong views about America's economy. Like his political philosophy, Jefferson felt that the "common man" should be at the center of the U.S. economy. He envisioned a country filled with small, independent farmers. Since these people were their own bosses, Jefferson believed they would work hard and create prosperous lives for themselves. This would allow the entire nation to prosper as a whole. Because individuals would be largely self-sufficient, the federal government would not have to take an active role in the economy, thus limiting its powers. The job of the government, then, would be to do little more than keep the country safe and secure from foreign threats.

Alexander Hamilton

Background: Alexander Hamilton was born in the British West Indies in 1755, the son of James Hamilton and Rachel Lavine, who were not married. Hamilton's father abandoned the family when he was ten, and his mother died three years later. Young Hamilton had started working as a clerk in a countinghouse (an office in which business is transacted or bookkeeping is done) at the age of 11, and by the time he was 18, Alexander had so impressed his superiors that they sent him to King's College in New York. When the American Revolution broke out, Hamilton again distinguished himself and was soon asked by General Washington to become an aide. After the war, Hamilton earned his law degree and was elected to represent New York in the Continental Congress. When President Washington launched the first federal government under the new United States Constitution, Alexander Hamilton was named the country's Secretary of Treasury. Hamilton left the cabinet six years later, and in 1804 he was killed in a duel by political rival Aaron Burr.

View of the nature of human beings: Perhaps influenced by his difficult childhood, Hamilton held a generally negative view of the nature of human beings. He viewed people as generally ignorant, selfish, and untrustworthy. He felt that most people's actions were determined by their "passions" and self-interests. He did not think people usually based decisions on what was best for everyone; instead, he believed people acted selfishly. As a result, Hamilton thought that a small, sensible group of men must govern for the people. This elite group – of which he was a member – held the important responsibility of using their collective talents and wisdom to govern in the best interest of all people.

Best Type of Government: Hamilton was a strong supporter of a powerful central or federal government. His belief was that government power should be concentrated in the hands of those few men who had the talent and intelligence to govern properly for the good of all the people. Hamilton feared that if most government power was given to states or to the people, it was more likely that self-interest on the part of individual states or people would determine decisions, not what was best for everyone. Not surprisingly, Hamilton was a sharp critic of the Articles of Confederation precisely because it gave too much power to the individual states and not enough to the central government.

Constitution: While Hamilton strongly opposed the Articles of Confederation, he was a strong supporter of the United States Constitution. In his mind, the Constitution corrected the most serious problems of the Articles of Confederation. It provided for a strong executive – the president – to provide leadership for the country, and it also gave more power to the federal government over the individual states. In fact, if Hamilton had had his way, the federal government would have been made even more powerful – such as a life term for the president – than it was under the provisions of the Constitution. When it came time for the various states to approve the Constitution, Hamilton took a leading role in rallying support for it. Through a series of essays that he helped to write, known as the Federalist Papers, Hamilton explained his understanding of the Constitution and the powers that it gave to the federal government. These essays were extremely important in helping to win support for approval of the Constitution in the various states.

In his writing, Hamilton argued that the federal government had wide-ranging powers. He pointed out that Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution stated that Congress had the power to make any law "which shall be necessary and proper." According to Hamilton, the wording of this clause gave the federal government broad powers. Those people who supported this idea were said to believe in "broad" or "loose" interpretation of the Constitution. Using the "broad" interpretation of the Constitution, the federal government would be able to exercise much power in making any laws which seemed "necessary and proper."

Political Party: As the states decided whether or not to approve the Constitution, there was serious debate as to whether it gave too much power to the federal government. It is important to remember that America had just fought a war for independence largely because the central government in England had had, in the opinion of Americans, too much power. In this debate, many politicians shared Hamilton's views that a strong federal government, fewer states' rights, and a "broad" interpretation of the Constitution was necessary for the survival of the young nation. These men banded together during the approval process and formed the nation's first political party, known as the Federalists. Hamilton, of course, became one of the party's leading spokesmen.

Ideal Economy: Hamilton also held strong opinions about America's economy. In keeping with his political philosophy, Hamilton believed that an elite few, rather than the general population, had the ability to lead America's economy. Rather than continuing as a nation of small farmers, he favored an industrial economy. He wanted the elite – the small number of wealthy, well-educated citizens – to lead America's businesses, factories, and companies. Hamilton believed these business leaders had the responsibility of making economic decisions that were not only best for their companies, but also for their employees and for the country's economy as a whole. Hamilton also favored the establishment of a government-sponsored national bank – later called Bank of the United States – that would help these businesses by loaning them money. A national bank would also tie the interests of these economic leaders to the interests of the federal government, since the federal government was aiding their businesses through the bank.

EQ: How did the ideals of Hamilton and Jefferson compare? What impact did their relationship have on the history of America?

Comparing the Ideas of Hamilton and Jefferson

Directions: Individually or with your group, complete the chart below for your historical figure. Then, examine the posters made by your classmates about the historical figure you did not study. Record your findings.

Issue	Hamilton	Jefferson
Nature of Human Beings		
Best Type of Government		
The Constitution		
Political Party and Its Ideas		
Ideal Economy		

