So who was Thomas Jefferson? Historians generally are mixed in terms of what to think about Jefferson. Here are a few facts. He was more folksy than Federalists, and a lot of members of his own party.

He hated public pomp and ceremony. He hated powdered wigs, he wore plain clothes. He had red hair -- that doesn’t signify anything, but historians always mention it. He had bounced back from both personal and political disasters. In 1782 he was in debt, his house burned, he lost his wife, lots of personal disasters. His revolutionary term as Virginia governor was marred when he retreated from a possible capture rather than risk it. He was labeled a coward. He was a rationalist, or a deist (we are not entirely sure which); at any rate he was neither a Christian nor a churchgoer.

Jefferson was brought up in the informal and carelessly intellectual atmosphere of Virginia. As a young man he was full of high spirits and high jinx, fond of riding, hunting, playing the violin and reading. As he mature he acquired an intellectual curiosity for practically every subject. He was an inventor (dumbwaiters wheeled desk chair), a naturalist, an architect, a natural mathematician and a political philosopher. He designed both his own house (Monticello) and the entire campus of the university of Virginia (which he founded). He wrote books and pamphlets on everything - natural history, math, politics and education especially. He was one of the greatest conversationalists of his time. Throughout his life he enjoyed freedom, leisure and meeting new people.

Politically, Jefferson was the opposite of Hamilton. Although he felt that a strong national government would be an asset in international affairs, he worried at what such a government might do on the domestic scene. He was a strong advocate of the saying that a government that governs least governs best. “I am not a friend,” he said “to a very energetic government.” He feared that a strong government would place limitations on the liberty of its people. He had fought for freedom against the British Crown, and the control of an official church. He disliked cities with their manufacturing interests and large banking organizations. He felt that these institutions were dangerous in a republic because they eroded the population of free, independent, landholding small farmers. He believed that America and Americans could remain free and happy if it remained a rural nation.
Historian’s assessments of Jefferson are mixed. If a historian likes Alexander Hamilton, than they dislike Jefferson, and vice versa. Some progressive historians like to make Thomas Jefferson a sort of premature new deal democrat. Some give him all of the trappings of a late 20th century liberal. Some like to give him all the trappings of a Reagan Republican. A feature of Jefferson’s life that helps make him fit so many molds is the fact that over a long and busy life, Jefferson wrote statements that range across a lot of subjects, and cover a wide range of ideas. His two most consistent and enduring themes, however, were agrarian Republicanism, and a distrust of a federal government that was too energetic, too powerful, too domineering toward the states. So, having staked out a couple of areas that help to define what Jefferson was, let’s look at a few areas that Jefferson wasn’t, but some historians like to think he was.

**Thomas Jefferson and Slavery**

How do we deal with the fact that the father of the declaration of independence was a slaveholder. Historians have squirmed around on that one for 5 generations. There are a couple of ways to explain it. 1) Thomas Jefferson never meant the Declaration of Independence to apply to blacks. The problem is that he specifically stated that natural rights applied as much to black Africans as to white Americans. If they applied to blacks in Africa, and they were inalienable rights, then they must logically have applied to Africans in America. 2) Jefferson believed that Africans were biologically and intellectually inferior to Europeans. This is an accurate statement of Jefferson’s thought, but Jefferson argued that such inferiority in no way lessened one person’s natural rights. 3) Jefferson believed that slavery was wrong. This is true in terms of his thought, certainly, but not his actions. Thomas Jefferson opposed slavery on paper — he asked, how could patriots inflict on others bondage worse than that inflicted upon patriots by Britain? But Jefferson was, and remained a slaveholder all his life.

When he married in 1774, he acquired ownership of 1800 acres and 300 slaves. He became one of the largest planters in Virginia. When a slave ran away, Jefferson went to the same lengths that any other planter would to get them back. He ran ads in the Virginia gazette, and when the slaves were returned he flogged them. Thomas Jefferson was reluctant to sell his slaves, but when he was in debt and confronted with the alternatives of selling land and selling slaves, he sold slaves. Slave breeding was a profitable business for Thomas Jefferson, as it was for many great planters. Historians use a statement from Jefferson to point to his essential humanity. Thomas Jefferson told his overseer to give his pregnant slave only light duties on the plantation. Historians often fail to quote the next sentence, where Jefferson says that he doesn’t want to interrupt the reproductive pregnancy, because a slave child brings more money than a pregnant woman could possibly produce with her labor. Thomas Jefferson’s manumission record isn’t very good; he only freed 2 slaves in his lifetime. 2 of his slaves bought their freedom, and on his death he freed 5 more. 5 to 7 of his slaves were related to him by blood. He deeded 200 slaves to his heirs. Not a very good record when compared to George Washington, for instance, who freed all of his slaves in his will, and provided them with funds to settle in the northwest. What we see in Thomas Jefferson’s record on slavery is an early 19th century southern planter aristocrat. Other planter aristocrats condemned slavery in their written works and kept slaves, his record on treatment of his slaves is not inhuman for his times, but neither was he a saint.

**Jefferson and the Indians**

Another area to review his record is on Indian policy. The villain here is supposed to be Andrew Jackson, but Thomas Jefferson’s record is very like Jackson’s. He wrote a letter while president that said we should be friendly with Indians if they became farmers, spinners, weavers, and we could convert them from hunters to farmers by getting them into debt. Then they will either settle down and become like us, or will be forced to give up their ancestral lands and move across the Mississippi.

If a tribe went to war to protect their land, then the military should defeat them, forcibly move them across the Mississippi, and take their land. This is not quite a Jacksonian solution, after all the Cherokees had become farmers, spinners and weavers, and Jackson booted them anyway. But it is hardly much different. This is also a fairly typical white attitude toward Native Americans during the late 18th and 19th century. Native Americans should be respected, but only at a distance from whites, or if they became, in effect, whites, by adopting white culture, and lifestyles.

**Jefferson and Education**

A third area is education. In 1800 only the Northeast had public schools. Everywhere else education was one of the things that separated the haves from the have-nots. In the south, the planters educated their children at home with tutors, and then sent them either to William & Mary, or abroad to Britain or France for their more advanced education.
Thomas Jefferson is often cited as a Virginian with an opposing view, a champion for public education in the south – a kind of 18th century John Dewey. This argument rests on his Plan of Education. He proposed three levels of schools: 1) elementary: every white child would attend for 3 years. 2) a system of boarding schools financed at public expense, or with tuition paid by wealthier parents (still cheaper than private tutors). Each year 1 poor deserving student from each 10 grade schools would be sent to a boarding school. Over 3 years all but 10 of these poor students would be dropped. The others would be educated at William & Mary at public expense. As Thomas Jefferson said, “ten talented students would be raked from the rubbish each year.” Remember that education is not necessarily a democratic thing, it is used just as frequently to indoctrinate the young into society, to promote conformity rather than democracy. Thomas Jefferson himself stated that his program was designed to fit the young into the social order – “to teach children that happiness does not depend on the condition of life in which chance has placed them.” The chief beneficiaries would be the planters who would pay less tuition for their children’s education, and order in Virginia, in which the most intelligent poor youths would gain the opportunities that education provided the rich in Virginia, and thus be less likely to lead the poor against that society. Thomas Jefferson was, after all, a student of revolution. As an aristocrat he feared them. He knew that rebellion and social change might be fomented by one gifted person who was frustrated by a society that held him down. His education plan was designed to place the 10 most talented potential troublemakers each year, and incorporate them into the Virginia aristocracy. This is hardly a democratic view of education!

Revolution of 1800?

What is significant about the “Revolution of 1800”? First, and perhaps, foremost it is the first peaceful transfer of power from one party to another in the history of the American federal system. It is an acid test of the constitution. Some nations had and have failed in this process. The second important feature of the election of 1800 is that Jefferson was able to successfully put together a coalition of interests and politics that transcended region. Jefferson’s political base rested on an alliance between New York and Virginia, and as long as that alliance held together Republicans dominated national politics. The Jacksonian Democrats would be able to forge a New York/Virginia alliance that would also stand the test of time until regional issues became unavoidable. So this alliance becomes a precedent of sorts – a recipe for political dominance. Another important element in the election of 1800 was that Thomas Jefferson and his party learned the secret of public opinion in a republic. The way to political success is through the common man. It is a lesson that the Federalists never learned, and that the Republicans will, within two decades, forget.

Jefferson’s first task as president was to install a new government. He began to purge Federalists from government service and replace them with Republicans. Jefferson used appointments to control Congress and his party. Burr supporters found that there were no federal appointments for them. By controlling state patronage Thomas Jefferson was able to control Congress; he would never need to resort to a veto. The dire warnings by Federalists that Jefferson would destroy or replace the Constitution never came to pass; Thomas Jefferson said that it was a good constitution, but that under Adams and his Federalists, bad men had abused it. Jefferson, having replaced the “bad men” in the civil service, then went after the “bad men” in the judiciary. He impeached and removed Judge John Pickering (who was a Midnight Judge, and also happened to be nuts), then went after Samuel Chase. Chase was also a Midnight Judge, but he wasn’t nuts, in fact he was generally respected, and so Jefferson’s attempt to remove him failed. Thomas Jefferson was not to try this means of reducing the Federalist balance of power in the judiciary again.

Reducing Federal Expenditures

As part of his philosophy of reducing federal government Thomas Jefferson decided to reduce government expenditures. He closed several American diplomatic posts, began to pay off the national debt, he canceled and cut all existing taxes except tariffs.

Jefferson was especially concerned with the establishment and maintenance of a large and powerful navy. Such things were very expensive, and benefited only merchants and manufacturers, not farmers. Jefferson argued that a great navy wasn’t necessary to an agrarian republic. He proposed the construction of a large number of gunboats that could be used as a defensive force to protect American waters. Jefferson felt that the United States would not need any ships to fight abroad. He felt that we needed naval vessels only for the defense of our shores from foreign invasion. These boats would be manned by a naval militia that could be recruited quickly in times of danger. The project was a failure. Many of the boats in Jefferson’s "mosquito fleet" were unseaworthy. Of several dozen built only some eight were ever used. A big problem was that, in the age of sail, sailors had to have the skills necessary to make sail ships run. While a militia makes sense on land
where the only skills necessary are the ability to load and fire a weapon, and to occasionally duck, a civilian naval militia was a pretty silly idea. Most of the “mosquito fleet” rotted in American ports. The eight that were actually used were used as troop transports in the war with Tripoli and were hauled by United States men of war.

The Barbary War

The rulers of Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli on the North African coast were pirates. Their little kingdoms made their living by plundering commercial ships and selling the goods in the east. By about 1750 the governments of most European countries paid these kingdoms tribute so that their merchant ships would be left alone. The federal government had adopted the same policy. Jefferson felt that the payment of tribute was too costly and embarrassing to the United States government. He decided to end this system by a show of force. Between 1802 and 1805 an American squadron defeated the Tripolitanian pirates and the United States government finally secured a peace treaty with Tripoli that provided for peace without tribute. With the outbreak of the war of 1812 the Barbary pirates decided to challenge the United States again. The United States government was unable to react until the British were defeated, but in 1815 an American naval force under Commodore Decatur attacked and took Tripoli with a brilliant marine landing. The pirates surrendered and never troubled American shipping again.

Party Battles

The political tranquility of Jefferson’s first term was not to last through his second. His second administration was riddled by factional strife and political intrigue.

Republican factions - local quarrels within the Republican Party, especially in New York and Pennsylvania led to serious trouble for Jefferson in Congress. Jefferson’s greatest political opponent in Congress became a fellow Republican, John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia. Randolph led a small, but noisy, group of anti-administration Republicans in the House of Representatives. Randolph was one of the first “real characters” of Congress. Federalist William Plumer wrote in 1803 of his striking presence:

Mr. Randolph goes to the House booted and spurred, with his whip in hand, in imitation, it is said, of members of the British Parliament. He is a very slight man but of the common stature. At a little distance, he does not appear older than you are; but, upon a nearer approach, you perceive his wrinkles and grey hairs. He is, I believe, about thirty. The Federalists ridicule and affect to despise him; but a despised foe often proves a dangerous enemy. His talents are certainly far above mediocrity. As a popular speaker, he is not inferior to any man in the House. I admire his ingenuity and address; but I dislike his politics.

The important thing to remember here is that, even in his first term in office, Jefferson had difficulties, not only with federalists, but also with members of his own party.

The Louisiana Purchase

Jefferson wanted to acquire the east bank of the lower Mississippi. He was in no hurry. It belonged to a weak and conciliatory European power, Spain, so he could safely wait. But France reacquired it from Spain by a secret treaty. Now a powerful nation held the fate of American western trade. Although technically France owned the port of New Orleans, it was still administered by the Spanish. The United States engaged in sort of leisurely talks with France on the subject until Spain closed the port of New Orleans to American trade. At the same time, Napoleon got an urgent reason to sell. He had planned to create a sort of American empire from Haiti to Canada. He put a large army together to make his plan possible, and it was soundly defeated in a slave insurrection in Santo Domingo. At the same time Napoleon suffered a series of military setbacks in Europe,
and needed to consolidate his efforts to his European Empire. His drive for world domination would just have to be put on hold, so he decided to sell off his American holdings to the United States negotiations were rather sticky, however, the French owned it, but hadn’t actually paid for it, the Spanish possessed it, but didn’t actually own it. The United States government didn’t actually want all of it, and didn’t think that they could afford all of France’s American holdings if they did want it. The British tried frantically to stall the sale.

At this point, in 1803, congress appropriated $2 million for the purchase of the port of New Orleans, and sent James Monroe to Paris to join Robert Livingston in the negotiations. Monroe arrived in Paris on April 12, 1803. And was astonished that napoleon, while setting in his bathtub, had offered to sell all of Louisiana to the United States for $15 million. On April 30, Monroe signed a treaty to purchase the territory from France, although at the time the actual borders of the territory that he was purchasing were only sketchily described.

Jefferson was faced with a number of problems. First the delegates who had signed the treaty with napoleon had no authority to do so. Second, the federal government had just paid some $15 million for a pig in a poke. Third, Thomas Jefferson, the strict constructionist, had to figure out how he could make this blatantly unconstitutional action constitutional! One of his cabinet members suggested that this wasn’t a land purchase, but a border adjustment! That was a bit much. Thomas Jefferson finally decided that it was enough that it benefited the nation. So the United States doubled its size at the stroke of a pen to become the largest and most underdeveloped nation in the western world. But, after all was said and done, what did we have – all the land from the headwater of the Mississippi, the Red River, and the Missouri River. What that meant we didn’t know. So Lewis and Clark were dispatched to find out. We also faced new questions that had to be worked out as to the political situation of the new territory. Was Louisiana a territory of the United States to be treated as the Ohio territory had been treated? Was it a colony of the United States (that didn’t sound good)? What rights did the residents already settled in Louisiana have?

Aaron Burr’s Conspiracy

Another problem with the Louisiana Purchase was posed for the United States when Aaron Burr decided that he might want to help himself to some of it! Another problem that we faced over Louisiana was could we keep it? We owned it, we had bought it from France, but owning and keeping are often two different things. Louisiana was certainly large enough to be a viable nation on its own. Two people who seemed to have thought so were Aaron Burr and James Wilkinson. Burr you have met. Wilkinson was a United States general. He was the poorly paid governor of the Louisiana Territory. He was also a double agent, spying on the Spanish for the United States and on the United States for the Spanish. Burr ceased to be vice president in 1804. He was under indictment for killing Alexander Hamilton. He went west. Burr and Wilkinson met and concocted a scheme for Louisiana. We don’t know exactly what they had planned, at most it was a grandiose idea to put together a vast empire that included not only north America west of the Mississippi, but also Central America, an empire that would run from Canada to Panama. Burr visited a lot of important and influential westerners, the most important of whom was Andrew Jackson. He began to hire troops, build boats, and stockpile arms, as well. We don’t know exactly what he told Jackson, but whatever it was, Jackson pondered the offer, liked the idea, assumed that it was really Jefferson behind it, and wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson and said what a great plan it was that Burr had told him about. By 1806 more information had begun to leak about Burr’s activities, as well, and Jefferson began to worry.

Jefferson got the military in Louisiana to arrest the Burr. Wilkinson was in command of the army, so at first he stalled, then finally decided better Burr than him, and betrayed Burr, who was captured in Mississippi by United States Marshalls. Burr was lucky – had his old crony, Wilkinson, managed to arrest him, Burr probably would have been “shot while trying to escape.” Burr was haled to Washington and tried for treason. John Marshall conducted the trial. Marshall played the role of both judge and quasi-defense attorney. The rule of law in the constitution, taken from the English constitution was that you had to have at least two witnesses to any act of treason.
This made conviction impossible, so Burr walked. Thomas Jefferson then had him arrested on a charge of state treason. Marshall bailed him out, but by this time Burr is beginning to get the message that the United States was not a healthy place for him, so he went abroad. He returned many years later. We know this because he appears in New York City practicing law, marrying in his 70s and fathering two children, then, in his 80s, his wife sued the old scoundrel for divorce on grounds of adultery!

**Foreign Affairs**

Jefferson now found himself caught between two super warring powers. While France and Britain plunged all of Europe into war Jefferson struggled to maintain neutrality for the United States.

British maritime policies – the British merchant interests had become alarmed at the growth of American shipping and trade after Europe had gone back to war with France in 1803. British merchants were able to get the British government to create a policy that was hostile to American shipping. The British forbade neutral shipping to trade with France. They also made it difficult for neutral ships that attempted to land in French ports to go on to neutral ports in Europe or the Indies. Finally, in 1807 the British Navy blockaded all neutral ports in Europe that refused to fly the British flag. This policy was designed to force neutrals to trade only with Britain. British interests would then have a monopoly on trade with the European continent.

Impressment of seamen – the British persisted in attempts to apprehend deserters from the British navy. British warships stopped and searched American vessels on the seas and removed suspected deserters. The Chesapeake incident is an example. In June of 1807 a British warship, the HMS Leopard ordered the American naval ship, the Chesapeake to stand to for boarding. The captain of the Chesapeake refused and the Leopard fired on the Chesapeake after receiving fire the American ship complied.

The United States was outraged. For a British naval ship to treat a neutral vessel in this manner was an act of war. To make matters worse, the incident had taken place in or very near American waters. The incident prompted Jefferson change United States policy.

Napoleonic reaction – the British policies against trade on the Continent seriously hindered French trade. Napoleon retaliated with a series of policies of his own. In November of 1806 he created the Berlin Decree, which forbade commerce with the British Isles and ordered that all ships coming from England or her colonies should be seized. In the Milan Decree of 1807, the French declared that all ships that traded with British ports were legitimate prizes of war to French military and privateer vessels. By the end of 1810 French authorities began to confiscate all American ships that entered French or French allied ports.

Jefferson felt that the best way to stop this war of policy was to practice “peaceful coercion.” Jefferson was convinced that he could make the European powers honor neutral trade again by beginning an economic boycott. Congress passed a series of non-importation acts between 1806-1807, which excluded British manufacturers' goods from United States ports. After the Chesapeake incident congress passed the Embargo Act. This act placed an embargo on all foreign commerce. It remained in effect until 1809. It aroused more protests from New England merchants than from French or British commercial interests, however. After the repeal of the embargo act, congress passed the Non-Intercourse with Great Britain and France Act (1809). This act opened up trade with all countries except Great Britain and France. The problem was, though that by 1809, the only nations in Europe that weren’t part of Napoleon’s empire were British allies, and were eager to keep Britain happy. So there wasn’t much of anywhere American trade vessels could go.

**Summation of Jefferson’s Presidency**

Overall Thomas Jefferson did a pretty incredible job. 1) He reduced the Federalist Party to ashes, virtually creating a one party nation. 2) During his presidency the size and population of the United States doubled (although he is directly responsible for only the former). 3) He dedicated the nation to continental territorial expansion. 4) Manufacturing boomed, primarily as a result of the embargo, which both created a demand for American made goods and moved investment capital out of international shipping and into domestic industry. 5) He kept the United States out of war. 6) He presided over a period of nationwide prosperity. 7) Ironically, he went a long way to expand both the power and the legislative role of the president. Thomas Jefferson used party organization and patronage to control Congress. He had a legislative program and he exerted party leadership to push his agenda through. He was the first president to realize that to be a national leader he had to be a party leader. He went a long way to develop the presidency into a power in national government. Ironically, the Thomas Jefferson presidency was in some ways a victory for the Hamiltonian view of how the U.S. government ought to function.

He also helped to make his successor, James Madison, the first war president. It often happens that great presidents leave big messes for their successors. So it was with Jefferson. He had avoided a war, but his policies, and
subsequent history, made it virtually impossible for Madison to do so.

**Madison's Tribulations**

In 1809 James Madison succeeded Jefferson as president. Madison hoped that the United States could negotiate its way out of commercial difficulties with the European powers. The British Minister to Washington (David Erskine) convinced Madison and Secretary of State Robert Smith that Great Britain would rescind her policies if the United States would reopen trade. Accordingly, Madison reopened trade with Britain. As it turned out, the British government repudiated Erskine's agreement. Madison was forced to restore nonintercourse with Britain. All the Erskine fiasco really did was worsen U.S./British relations.

Macon's Bill no. 2 (1810) - with Madison's approval, Congress passed a Bill submitted by Nathaniel Macon that reopened trade with both France and Great Britain. The Bill stated that if either country would cease to violate American neutrality then nonintercourse would be started against the other country. Napoleon reacted by stating that the French would repeal all restrictions against American shipping. Napoleon lied. French ships continued to seize United States merchant ships; French ports in Europe and the Indies continued to stay closed to American shipping, but Madison, naturally hostile to Britain and badly stung by the Erskine fiasco, reacted to the announcement by restoring the boycott against Britain. Within a few months Madison severed diplomatic relations with Britain altogether in mid-1811.

Ironically. A few months later the British foreign secretary announced the immediate repeal of all restrictions on American trade (but not impressment). The change in policy was brought about when British merchants, losing money because of the American boycott, complained to Parliament that the American trade had to be reopened. But the announcement came too late. On June 1, 1812, Madison asked for a declaration of war against Britain. He got it on June 18. This began the War of 1812. The fact is that the British still refused to compromise on the most important public opinion issues that created friction between the United States and Great Britain, impressment, Indian affairs, border disputes, so Madison had to ask for war, even though doing so would plunge us into one of the most boring lectures in history.

**The War of 1812**

Causes: impressment, Indian affairs, forts on the Ohio frontier, war hawks who wanted to annex Canada. There was domestic opposition, but not much. Federalists say Madison is on the French payroll. A lot of what it was a residual revolutionary attitude -- Americans must, and will be independent, never a satellite to any other nation.

As always the United States entered the war unprepared. We had an army of 6,000 soldiers and a navy of 18 war class ships. The British had 250,000 men and 600 ships. Most of our army was on the frontier; the war would be fought primarily on the east coast. The best militia units were on the frontier fighting Indians, and were, thus unavailable, the second best was in the northeast (especially New England), but the anti-war movement in New England prevented them from doing anything in the war. The governors of Massachusetts and Connecticut even refused to call up their state militia.

The events: Britain occupied much of Maine, they burned Washington after the brave local militia broke and ran before the first shot was fired. The American defense of the capital collapsed so quickly that British officers who occupied the deserted white house found the president's dinner set on arrival, and managed to eat it for him while it was still warm. After dinner they burnt the white house. It got its name from the white wash used to disguise the burn marks. The British navy successfully blockaded the eastern seaboard, and suppressed American trade.

A few firsts of the war: canned goods for rations on both sides; floating mines, basically garbage cans filled with black powder were used by the Americans. They were pretty effective, until the British started carrying American prisoners on ships to stop it.

The war began with wild enthusiasm, until people began to realize that it was real, people were getting killed, and the United States wasn't doing very well. Then the war fever soured in a number of areas, especially New England. The height of opposition occurred with the Hartford Convention in 1814-15. Disillusioned New England federalists demanded that their states be let out of the war. They were terminally embarrassed when they made their demands public just before news broke of the United States victory at the battle of New Orleans. They appeared to be demanding the United States surrender at the moment when we were actually winning. Ironically, we had already won. The Battle of New Orleans was fought a few days after the British at Ghent in Belgium signed a peace treaty giving the United States much of what she demanded. The British were not particularly worried about the United States, but napoleon had recently broken free and had raised another French war machine.
Napoleon was a much more worrisome enemy, and closer to home. So the British were willing to make peace with the United States so that their hands were free to fight Napoleon.

Madison always gets less press than Jefferson. It’s probably not very fair. Madison didn’t suspend the Constitution to stifle criticism as Adams had, more or less during the Quasi-War with France. We won the war, didn’t get much out of it in the short run, but its the last time we had to fight Britain, and a growing friendship began between the two nations thereafter. The victory was a big morale boost at home; we had established credibility as a world power, and established our right to economic independence our trade was never dictated by an outside power again. At the end of the war Britain cut her Indian allies loose, without British support the Indians were easily smashed by a veteran American army.

The end of the war marks the high-water mark of American Nationalism. It is the birth of that period of our history called the “Era of Good Feelings.” It also marks a shift in focus among Americans. Until 1816 we tended to look east to the seaboard where our population was concentrated, where our trade with Europe was. After the war Americans began to look west, and soon so shall we.
By the mid 1820s it had become fashionable for wealthy Europeans to tour the United States. In the past the fashionable activity was to take the grand tour, a tour of Europe in early adulthood, then when an affluent European got older, to visit favorite places in Europe selectively.

In the 1820s, it became popular with the European upper class to take an American tour when older. Lots of Europeans came over, and they wrote letters, books, and memoirs about what they saw here. They are interesting because these people saw differences between Americans and their European cousins that the average American was likely to miss. So, what did they see?

The big word is change, constant and rapid change. Tourists were astonished to see new ideas, new inventions, new innovations, growing in the cities and even the country on the nation with a rapidity that they found bewildering. A French traveler noted, “men change their houses, their climate, their trade, their condition, their party, their sect; the states change their laws, their officers their constitutions/ the soil itself, or at least the houses, partake in the universal instability. The existence of a social order in the bosom of this whirlpool seems a miracle, an inexplicable anomaly.”

The pace of life in America was much faster than in Europe. Americans never stood still. Americans changed places of residence, jobs, professions, with a speed and frequency that horrified Europeans. In Europe most people were born in one place and spent most of their lives in the same place, held the same job, not only for one lifetime, but also often passed it down for generations. Alexis de Tocqueville wrote:

An American will build a house in which to pass his old age, and sell it before the roof is on; he will plant a garden and rent it just as the trees are coming into bearing; he will clear a field and leave it to others to reap the harvest; he will take up a profession and leave it, settle in one place and soon go off elsewhere with his changing desires.”
Francis Grund wrote of Americans, “life consists of motion; and, as far as that goes, the United States present certainly the most animated picture of universal bustle and activity of any country in the world. Such a thing as rest and quietness does not even enter the mind of an American.”

The pursuit of the almighty dollar: one traveler noted that the pursuit of money in the United States resembled nothing so much as a “holy crusade.” Francis Trollope, an English lady tourist, noted, that one ‘never overheard Americans conversing without the word dollar being pronounced between them. Such unity of purpose, such sympathy of feeling, can, I believe, be found nowhere else, except perhaps, in an ants’ nest.”

Business dominated American life: Grund wrote, “is as if all America were but one gigantic workshop, over the entrance of which there is blazing the inscription ‘no admission here except on business.’” Michel Chevalier, a visiting French nobleman was not entirely happy to note that “everything is here arranged to facilitate industry; men of business, instead of being scattered over the town, occupy a particular quarter, which is devoted exclusively to them...the manners and customs are altogether those of a working, busy society. From the moment he gets up, the American is at his work, and he is engaged in it till the hour of sleep. Pleasure is never permitted to interrupt his business. Even mealtime is not for him a period of relaxation, in which his worried mind seeks repose in the bosom of his friends; it is only a disagreeable interruption of business, an interruption to which he yields because it cannot be avoided, but which he abridges as much as possible.”

America was a place where fortunes could be made... and broken, and made again. In Europe by the early 19th century, there were very few opportunities for the poor to gain wealth. Society was very stratified. It might be possible for a wealthy industrialist to go broke, but there was little opportunity for a poor person to strike it rich. In America there were undreamed-of opportunities. Several tourists remarked that Americans might not make one fortune, but might make, lose, and remake fortunes several times. Michel chevalier noted that in America, “riches and poverty follow on each other’s traces, and each in turn occupies the place of the other. Whilst the great men of one day dethrone those of the past, they are already half overturned themselves by those of the morrow. Fortunes last for a season, reputations, during the twinkling of an eye.”

All of the visitors were struck with American equality (always excepting slavery). They were struck with the narrowness of the social ladder. Wealth was distributed much more equally than in Europe. The difference between the wealthiest and poorest Americans was much smaller than in Europe. There were few beggars, and few families of enormous wealth. Social mobility was so malleable that Americans all saw themselves as equal to each other -- regardless of their current personal wealth. Any assumptions of superiority based on wealth, or for that matter, much of anything else was regarded as un-American. Tourists were horrified that everyone, regardless of status, shook hands with everyone else. Terms like “lady” and “gentleman” which were fraught with social meaning in Europe were meaningless pleasantries in America. To admit to social distinctions in public was considered incorrigible behavior. More than one tourist from Europe was taken aback when they found that, in a frontier hotel where they stopped for the night, they were seated at dinner next to their valets, of maidservants. The hosts were equally taken aback, if the tourist informed them that this was their servant who should be fed in the “servants’ quarters.” A German traveler noted that a group of legislators were trying to get through a crowd in an American city one day. To facilitate his movement, one of them yelled out “make way! We are the representatives of the people!” they received this reply. “Make way yourself! We are the people themselves!”

Just about this time -- the 1820s and 30s -- people start to refer to household servants as “the help.” the word “servant” implies difference of class, and class is un-American. “The help” didn’t carry the same implications. Europeans were appalled. So were some Americans. John Randolph of Roanoke wrote, “I love liberty, I hate equality!” this emphasis on equality made public opinion a chief determiner of policy. Politicians now begin to look with even closer scrutiny at the likes, dislikes, prejudices, and attitudes of the “common man.” popularity becomes more important than good policy. A European military officer on tour reported home that in the militia in the north the privates elected their officers, who were not necessarily the most able, but were the most popular. This, he noted, violated all sense of propriety and order.

Americans also took pride in all of this. These attitudes of equality were inexorably tied to American notions of nationalism. Equality was tied up in liberty, and liberty in the American republic itself. Dare to criticize the republic and you risk a brawl.
Humility was not among the character traits listed by Europeans of Americans. Americans were brash, loud, lacking in refinement. Their table manners were a source of constant horrified fascination to visitors. Americans ate poorly prepared and seasoned food quickly, efficiently and quietly. They washed it down with water, or whiskey or ale. They ate together. Europeans saw dining as something that was defined by class. Americans didn’t. They saw dining as a necessity that provided energy for business and industry. Dress and fashion provided much the same problem. In Europe what you wore defined who you were. The clothes both made and defined the social status of the man. In America, Europeans couldn’t use the signals of dress to identify a person. Confused Europeans couldn’t tell whether they had just shaken hands and were conversing with the president of the local bank, the mayor, or a day laborer in his best suit.

The place of women also confused European visitors. Americans presumed that all women were ladies. The period produced an almost nauseating praise of the American woman. Harriet Martineau, an English Feminist who visited America in the early 1800s was practically driven nuts by this new American literature of praise. James Fennimore Cooper wrote of American women, “we believe them to be the repositories of the better principles of nature. Retired within the sacred precincts of her own abode, she is preserved from the destroying taint of excessive intercourse with the world. She must be sought in the haunts of her domestic privacy, and not amid the wrangling, deceptions and heart-burnings of keen and sordid traffic [business]. The husband can retire from his own sordid struggles with the world to seek consolation and correction from one who is placed beyond their influence.” American upper class women were expected to retire into their homes, concern themselves with the “gentle arts,” and ignore such sordid activities as politics and business. We might compare this with the woman on the frontier. There women were no better off than men, and in some cases worse. One in three frontier women died of childbirth. They worked in the fields and defended their homes with the rest of the family, and did the housework.

Some inequality existed in the period, especially in the great northern trade cities like New York, Philadelphia and Boston, and in the South where the great planters had their own social distinctions. Northern magnates imitated European styles and tastes. But they still couldn’t meet Europeans standards of gentle breeding. The British say that it takes three generations to make a gentleman from a successful tradesman, three generations living at leisure on money that you didn’t earn. Rich Americans didn’t want to wait, so, in the 1820s and 30s the first self-improvement book industry appeared. The first were manuals of manners – how to be a gentleman in 10 easy lessons. 28 such were published in the 1830s – most were best sellers.
It took a lot to make a European style gentleman out of an American style gentleman... Here is an example of a social gathering of society gentlemen at a recital described by British tourist Francis Trollope: “the gentlemen spit, talk of elections and the price of produce, and spit again.” And at a theater, “men came into the lower tier of boxes without their coats; and I have seen tucked up to the shoulder; the spitting was incessant, and the mixed smell of onions and whiskey was enough to make one feel even the drakes’ acting dearly bought by the obligation of enduring its accompaniments. In other words, it might take more than a how-to book to turn American wannabe gentlemen into refined European style gentry.

In the South you could tell who was important in society by military titles. Planters were militia officers, the higher the rank in society, and the higher the rank in the militia. Colonels and majors dominated southern society. Mrs. Trollope tells of a trip on a steamboat up the Mississippi. She notes that, “the gentlemen in the cabin would certainly from their language, manners, nor appearance, have received that designation in Europe; but we soon found that their claim [to be gentlemen] rested on more substantial ground, for we heard them all addressed by the titles of general, colonel, and major.” on remarking that it was strange that there were no captains among them Mrs. Trollope was told that the captains were all on deck. She goes on to describe the eating habits of these military gentlemen...”the total want of all courtesies of the table, the voracious rapidity with which viands were seized and devoured, the strange uncouth phrases and pronunciation; the loathsome spitting, from the contamination of which it was absolutely impossible to protect our dresses; the frightful manner of the feeding with their knives, till the whole blade seemed to enter the mouth; and the still more frightful manner of the cleaning of the teeth afterwards with a pocket knife, soon forced us to feel that we were not surrounded by the generals, colonels, and majors of the old world; and that the dinner hour was to be anything rather than an hour of enjoyment.”

American religion astounded Europeans, who were convinced that a stable society demanded, if not absolute uniformity of religion, then at least a stable state church. But by the 1820s there was no national state religion in the United States, and most states had ceased to have any established, state funded religion. Instead there were dozens of religious sects, ranging from the staid and conservative Episcopal Church (the American Church of England) to Pentecostal sects. By European standards the United States should have been plunged into anarchy and atheism at best, religious civil war at worst. But in fact what happened was a sort of free market for religion. Preachers had to compete with each other for their congregations. In general this meant that religion, no matter what the sect became attuned to the needs of as wide a range of worshipers as possible. Since the 1830s saw an upsurge in demand for revivalism, ministers of all sects competed to give the people what they wanted. The result was a new revivalism in America, often called the second great awakening. There was a bewildering diversity of religions, every year saw the variation, schism of existing sects, and recombination into yet more sects. Simultaneous acceptance of religious toleration and strong religious feeling in America shocked Europeans. But, they began to realize that religious diversity didn’t necessarily mean anarchy and atheism.

A Methodist Camp Meeting.

Americans created and accepted a sort of “free market” in religion, just like everything else. Ministers had to compete with each other to fill their churches. As a result, while there were lots of different denominations in the U.S.: they gradually became quite similar in order to give worshippers what they wanted in the way of worship.
They also began to realize something that they had really known anyway, that majority rule didn’t immediately establish complete liberty for all, and instead it might cause a tyranny of the majority. Combine majority rule with an obsession with public opinion, and you can suppress any minority. Alexis de Tocqueville made the observation that “nothing in the united states is capable of resisting the majority.” If you are within the very wide realm of the mainstream in religion or politics in the United States you can defend your right to be a bit different. But if you are outside of that mainstream, public opinion and majoritarianism will destroy your right to be different, and maybe you. In Connecticut, Roman Catholicism was outside the mainstream. The result was the burning of convents and Catholic churches. Mormons were hounded out of New York, Illinois, Ohio, and their founder, Joseph Smith was murdered. They were finally forced to find refuge in Utah, even then chased by United States troops. In politics you can be a Jacksonian Democrat, or a Jeffersonian Republican, a Whig, or even a lonely Federalist, but if you a politically active Abolitionist, look out, even in places where abolitionism was beginning to become fashionable as a social position like Massachusetts.

The American press also confused Europeans. There were just so many newspapers. Between 1833 and 1837 in New York 34 new papers were started. Everybody read the papers. They were cheap, easy to read, and violently partisan. They proliferated as propaganda media. And became the first mass media. Jackson understood the power of the press as a propaganda instrument. He was not the first; the revolutionary papers had been a propaganda tool of either patriots or Tories; newspapers were employed in the political propaganda wars of the federalists and republicans. Papers could shape and direct public opinion, and could direct political action. Newspapermen were seen as despicable characters, but Jackson knew their power and employed them with regularity. The newspaper became the field upon which politics, especially presidential politics, were played.

So what does all this mean? What was happening in the United States in the 1820s? How would it shape the nation? Remember, in the early 1800s a debate had begun over what the nation was to become. What was the place of national government? The answer appears from these ideas that the nation was growing in its own way and its own time. Most Americans were democratic and majoritarian in their politics (a Jeffersonian legacy), but they were acquisitive free marketers, out for what one historian has called “the best chance.” they might worry about the results of wealth, and they were certainly much more enthusiastic about the market than Jefferson, but they were into the market up to their elbows, getting all they could from it. We will explore the implications of this in more detail over the next few classes as we enter the age of Andrew Jackson.