

## Biographical Briefing: Thomas Jefferson

**Directions:** The Reader will read the following "Biographical Briefing" aloud to the group. After each segment, discuss the "Stop and Discuss" questions. Make sure you carefully read the entire handout. You will use this information to create a visual representation on the ideals of 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 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 the 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 to his Virginia plantation, Monticello. Ironically, Jefferson died on July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

Stop Here  
& Discuss



- What positions did Jefferson hold during his career?
- Based on these positions, what types of abilities do you think he had?
- Are there any clues in Jefferson's background that tell you whether he had a more positive or negative view of people? Explain.

**View of the nature of 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.

Stop Here  
& Discuss

- What words might Jefferson use to describe the “common man”?
- What dangers did he see in a small group of people controlling the government?
- Considering his attitudes toward the “common man,” do you think Jefferson would favor a strong central government or a government that distributed power among the states and 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.

Stop Here  
& Discuss

- Did Jefferson believe in a strong or a weak central government? Explain.
- What were Jefferson’s feelings about the Articles of Confederation?
- What problems do you think Jefferson might have had with approving the U.S. Constitution?

**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.



- What concerns did Jefferson have about the U.S. Constitution? Why?
- Did Jefferson support a “loose” or “strict” interpretation of the Constitution? Explain.

**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.



- What effect did Jefferson’s views have on other politicians of the time?
- What were the views of the Republicans? Explain.

**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.



- What were Jefferson’s ideas about the American economy?
- How was Jefferson’s economic philosophy similar to his political philosophy?