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Until fairly recently, American historiography has been one-sided . . . tending to make excuses for Jefferson's actions and attitudes regarding slavery: he was a prisoner of his time; a conflicted, even tragic, figure; tormented by the contradictions, et cetera. If one does not make those excuses, the picture is not a pretty one. Jefferson disseminated blatantly racist ideas, and as a politician, he fought to secure the grand expansion of the institution of slavery.

Ted Sublette, *The World that Made New Orleans*¹

If we consider the United States in the 1930s with the Great Depression being felt at its greatest force, the rise of fascism around the globe, and Communism spreading like wildfire, it would stand to reason that a Temple of Democracy may have been timely. Socialism was on the rise, the Robber Barons had robbed too much, and then there was the dust bowl. Add to this the horror of WWI and the great migration just beginning that would empty the south of labor and build the great cities of the North. Things were changing. So, again, it stands to reason that a monument to liberty which would have put many to work near the nation's capital, such an edifice was needed.

This was one stream of influence that led to the Jefferson Memorial. But it is important to remember from the start: There was never supposed to be a memorial to Thomas Jefferson. A clue perhaps can be found in his burial marker:

*Here was buried
Thomas Jefferson
Author of the Declaration of American Independence
of the Statue of Virginia for religious freedom
& Father of the University of Virginia*

Of note is no mention of being Secretary of State, Vice President, or President of the United States. And yet, other than Washington, it is hard to find a president of greater consequence. Only consequences cuts both to the good and to the bad.

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The initial design was not to build a memorial either. Franklin Delanor Roosevelt wanted to build a monument to the Declaration of Independence. The site and space was designed to house the historic document. Think of a Greek temple but without the god or goddess. It was intended to be a temple to liberty.

The plan changed when the National Archives essentially said, "no." The Declaration of Independence will not be relocated. Hence the pivot to the author. If you can't have the text, then we can build a shrine to Jefferson.

The plan changed again when the site proposed by Roosevelt was met with fierce opposition from residents of Washington D.C. who objected to the removal of cherry trees that were a gift of the nation of Japan. Women chained themselves to the trees to stop the work. Another site was proposed.

Even the statue of Jefferson needed to be altered. The bronze for the statue could not be obtained during America's entry into WWII. A temporary statue was put into place only to be removed after the Memorial had been completed for a number of years.

Yet, perhaps the most telling was that the site of compromise was always sinking. The construction was ill-fated.

It is hard to make sense of the Jefferson Memorial. There was nothing pressing about the Declaration of Independence that demanded a monument; there was nothing about Jefferson that needed a monolithic memorial in the 1930s. The timing and intent of what became the Jefferson Memorial may have more to do with creating public works during the depression and the desire for Roosevelt to leave a mark on the capital.

Yet, what seems most problematic to me was the lack of honesty. On two fronts, Jefferson's legacy as a landowner in Virginia and his presidency, were both in need of profound reflection in order for a memorial to be authentic. In the pivot from the Declaration of Independence to its author, it was as if his life went unquestioned.

Nowhere do the best and worst of American history collide more violently than in the figure of the man who annexed Louisiana. Thomas Jefferson was arguably the most influential politician in American history. Though he never set foot in Louisiana, no one had more influence over the course the territory would take. Despite his occasionally expressed misgivings about the institution of chattel slavery, Jefferson's annexation of Louisiana to the United States made him a key figure in American slavery expansion on a previously undreamed-of scale. That created a major industry of traffic in domestically raised humans, which was not an unintended consequence of territorial expansion but an obvious outcome, devoutly desired by Jefferson's constituents.²

As a landowner in Virginia we now know that Jefferson was not only a slave owner, he provided the argument for slavery as his many farms manufactured slaves. As if this were not enough of a challenge for a simple debt of honor, add to this as a president and statesman, we know he promoted the "Empire of Liberty" an ambiguous term that justified acquisition of land without question or conscience. The Louisiana Purchase was by far his more dramatic "acquisition," but it was not the end of his ambition. Jefferson believed America was to be an "empire of liberty."

When we reach the 1930s and consider the warning signs, the bad omens of the monument become memorial, it says a great deal that Jefferson could be remembered without question or apology. And if we consider the "monument mania" of 1870-1920s, then the Jefferson Memorial can be seen as either a capstone of dishonest monuments or his memorial can be seen as the greatest failure.

Unfortunately, the Jefferson Memorial is a great example of what not to build. The negative example is not found in the design, although the location is worthy of a cautionary tale. The negative example is found in the absence of balance. Certainly there were parts of Jefferson life and legacy worthy of remembrance. He is owed a debt of gratitude. And, although he did not die in battle, he did offer his life in public service without great return. Hence, he is owed the honor of one who sacrificed. Yet, the great question of indebted memory when Jefferson is considered is penance. Is not his role in propagation and expansion of slavery something worthy of lament? Is not his views on liberty something we have yet to fully lay aside?

Perhaps the most intriguing function of the Jefferson Memorial is to mark how little honesty the collective memory of the nation could handle seventy-five years after the emancipation proclamation. In this the memorial becomes an unintended confession.

