

of the twentieth. Both presidents seem to have engaged in politically reckless conduct; in Jefferson's case, fathering Eston six years after allegations appeared in the national press. And both offered evasive denials to the charges. In 1805 the Massachusetts legislature staged a mock impeachment trial of Jefferson, citing several grievances including the accusations about Sally Hemings. Jefferson acknowledged one charge (propositioning a married woman in his youth), but asserted that all the others were false. Otherwise he remained silent, leaving denials to political supporters and family. Nor did the scandal affect Jefferson's popularity. He won the 1804 election by a landslide, and his abiding position was that his private life was nobody else's business, and should have no bearing on his public reputation.

Foster and colleagues' findings renew questions about Jefferson's tortured position on slavery. If Jefferson's relationship with Hemings began in the late 1780s, it would mean that he began to back away from a leadership position in the anti-slavery movement just around the time that his affair with Sally Hemings started. Jefferson's stated reservations about ending slavery included a fear that emancipation would lead to racial mixing and amalgamation. His own interracial affair now personalizes this issue, while adding a dimension of hypocrisy.

Over the past 30 years, research into Jefferson has cast a shadow over his credibility as America's prophet of freedom and equality. Recent work has also emphasized his massive personal contradictions and his dexterity at playing hide-and-seek within himself. The new evidence only deepens the paradoxes.

Jefferson is, with Abraham Lincoln and George Washington, one of America's secular saints. His face looks out from the nickel, the two-dollar bill, the memorial near the Tidal Basin, and Mount Rushmore. His unique capacity to project inspirational words and ideas onto American public life has made him all things to all people. As an icon, Jefferson's legacy has been reinterpreted by every generation. Now, with impeccable timing, Jefferson reappears to remind us of a truth that should be self evident. Our heroes — and especially presidents — are not gods or saints, but flesh-and-blood humans, with all of the frailties and imperfections that this entails. □

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