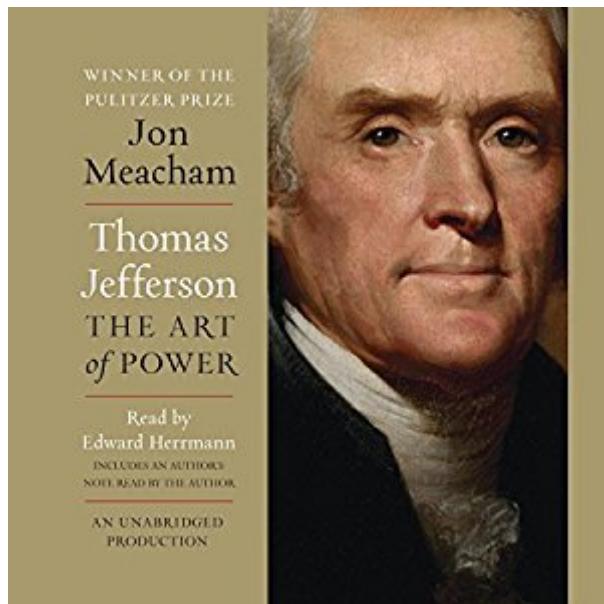


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Thomas Jefferson: The Art Of Power



Synopsis

In this magnificent biography, the Pulitzer Prize-winning author of *American Lion* and *Franklin and Winston* brings vividly to life an extraordinary man and his remarkable times. *Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power* gives us Jefferson the politician and president, a great and complex human being forever engaged in the wars of his era. Philosophers think; politicians maneuver. Jefferson's genius was that he was both and could do both, often simultaneously. Such is the art of power. Thomas Jefferson hated confrontation, and yet his understanding of power and of human nature enabled him to move men and to marshal ideas, to learn from his mistakes, and to prevail. Passionate about many things - women, his family, books, science, architecture, gardens, friends, Monticello, and Paris - Jefferson loved America most, and he strove over and over again, despite fierce opposition, to realize his vision: the creation, survival, and success of popular government in America. Jon Meacham lets us see Jefferson's world as Jefferson himself saw it, and to appreciate how Jefferson found the means to endure and win in the face of rife partisan division, economic uncertainty, and external threat. Drawing on archives in the United States, England, and France, as well as unpublished Jefferson presidential papers, Meacham presents Jefferson as the most successful political leader of the early republic, and perhaps in all of American history. The father of the ideal of individual liberty, of the Louisiana Purchase, of the Lewis and Clark expedition, and of the settling of the West, Jefferson recognized that the genius of humanity - and the genius of the new nation - lay in the possibility of progress, of discovering the undiscovered and seeking the unknown. From the writing of the Declaration of Independence to elegant dinners in Paris and in the President's House; from political maneuverings in the boardinghouses and legislative halls of Philadelphia and New York to the infant capital on the Potomac; from his complicated life at Monticello, his breathtaking house and plantation in Virginia, to the creation of the University of Virginia, Jefferson was central to the age. Here too is the personal Jefferson, a man of appetite, sensuality, and passion. The Jefferson story resonates today not least because he led his nation through ferocious partisanship and cultural warfare amid economic change and external threats, and also because he embodies an eternal drama, the struggle of the leadership of a nation to achieve greatness in a difficult and confounding world.

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Customer Reviews

THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE ART OF POWER, by Jon Meacham is a great read, I enjoyed it Prologue through Epilogue. It is lively, interesting and insightful. I have read quite a lot on the Revolutionary Era, including several other biographies of Thomas Jefferson, and even so I learned a lot about Jefferson in the reading of this book. However, there are elements of the book with which I take exception. Mr. Meacham states in the Author's Notes that this biography is, in part, a reaction to recent biographies of both George Washington, John Adams and Alexander Hamilton which have revised opinions of these three men, especially Hamilton. He writes, "Then came nearly two decades of highly acclaimed biographies of John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and George Washington that understandably emphasized the virtues of their protagonist, often at Jefferson's expense" (pg. 507). He cites specifically Joseph J. Ellis's A Passionate Sage: The Character and Legacy of John Adams, but I imagine he would also include in that list A John Adams, by David McCullough and Ron Chernow's two most recent works: A Washington: A Life and A Alexander Hamilton (all of them highly readable, excellent biographies). Mr. Meacham does a good job--better than most--helping his reader understand that there was during the post-revolutionary period a real fear in certain quarters that the United States could revert to a monarchy. Not so well done in this book is separating over-heated political rhetoric from what Jefferson actually believed. The fact is, a man as unquestionably intelligent and savvy as Jefferson would have known the difference between hyperbolic political rhetoric--even his own--and reality. It is clear that by the end of Washington's second term Jefferson and the Republicans (largely whipped up by Jefferson and Madison) were frustrated and chaffing at the bit. Even then, I cannot accept, as Mr. Meacham seems to imply, that Jefferson put much store in all the monarchical conspiracy

theories that had political currency at that time. On balance most historians seem to believe that it was Jefferson's actions and political maneuverings during the Washington administration which help ignite and escalate the overwrought, highly negative atmosphere that convulsed politics during Washington's second administration and beyond. However, Mr. Meacham does not see it that way. Rather he explains Jefferson's third-party maneuverings and obfuscations as a natural reaction to the situation in which he found himself and what, at his time, would have been expected of a man in his station. I did not completely accept this. Jefferson's relationship with Philip Ferneau and the National Gazette is not fully explored in this book and leaves the reader with the impression that Jefferson was only tangentially involved with the newspaper that regularly ravaged Washington and his administration. But at least Mr. Meacham does allude to the connection. What is a more egregious omission is any exploration of how duplicitous Jefferson (and especially Madison) became in dealing with Washington in his second administration. Although Washington knew and understood that he had political differences with the two men, he still considered them trustworthy confidants. He had no idea the degree to which, through indirect means, the two men were so actively working against him. Jefferson and Madison continued to allow themselves to be taken into Washington's confidence never once indicating that they were anything other than loyal friends. This I think is an essential part of Jefferson's character and should not be excluded from a biography of his life especially one whose stated thesis is to show how artful, skillful and subtle was his accumulation and use of power. The final difference I have with *THOMAS JEFFERSON: THE ART OF POWER* is the thesis that Mr. Meacham proposes at the beginning of the book and attempts to support throughout: that Jefferson's vision for America, which contrasted with Washington's and Hamilton's allowed him and his proteges to control the Presidency for 40 years with only one four year interruption by John Quincy Adams. It is, of course true enough that Madison, Monroe, Jackson and Van Buren were disciples of Jefferson. But Mr. Meacham's argument that Jefferson accomplished this feat by opposing and triumphing over the policies of Washington and Hamilton is not accurate. In fact, Mr. Meacham seems to believe that Jefferson was able to win the Presidency because, "He understood the country was open to--even eager for-- a government that seemed less intrusive and overbearing than the one Washington and Adams had created" (pg. 352). While it is true that Jefferson and his proteges could not wait for Washington to exit the stage, the country itself never gave that indication, not in the slightest degree. Had he run, Washington would have easily won a third term. Adams, of course, was defeated for reelection, but that was not a rejection by the voters of Washington. Adam's defeat was due more to yawning cleavage in the Federalist Party and the electoral advantage created by the 3/5 clause of the constitution giving a significant Electoral

College advantage to states with large slave populations, than to any rejection of Washington, his policies or his style of governing. Moreover, what Jefferson did to consolidate his hold on power was adopted in deed, if not in word, the Hamiltonian idea that the country needed a stronger central government governed by a stronger executive. For all of Jefferson's concern over what he characterized as monarchical power grabs by Washington, Jefferson did more to increase the power of the President with the Louisiana Purchase than Washington did in his entire presidency. And that by no means was the only time Jefferson broadened and consolidated powers of the presidency. Where Washington had used restraint, Jefferson often resorted to expediency. Many such incidences are skillfully explored in this book. The inconstancy they pose to Jefferson's rhetoric are attributed by Mr. Meacham to "pragmatism." In reality, they were actions which if Washington or any other Federalist had engaged in would have been hailed as auguries of monarchism by the Jeffersonians. The part of this book I found most insightful and interesting is Mr. Meacham's discussion of the debt assumption crisis. I had always believed that Hamilton got the better of Jefferson in this bargain which both resolved the crisis created by the debt incurred by the state during the Revolutionary War and sited the nation's capitol on the Potomac. However, Mr. Meacham does an excellent job of explaining all of the many and complicated subtleties, which seemed to be overlooked by other historians, which came in to play here. He argues persuasively how, even though Hamilton got what he wanted in the bargain, Jefferson also negotiated some meaningful concessions. The bargain struck between these two antagonists was actually much more balanced than I originally believed. Having pointed to a few differences with Mr. Meacham and his view of Thomas Jefferson, I very thoroughly enjoyed this book and will most likely read it again. It is beautifully written, meticulously researched and goes a long way to re-balance the modern image of Jefferson, reminding its readers the debt that is owed to the drafter of the Declaration of Independence and the Sage of Monticello.

I've read a couple books on Thomas Jefferson in the past. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, and *Thomas Jefferson: An Intimate History* to name a couple. Up until this newest book by Jon Meacham, I thought that the essential character of Jefferson was essentially unknowable, a man of contradictions and hiddenness. Yet, Meacham manages, in his large but fascinating and quick read, to illuminate Jefferson through a new pair of eyes: that of his leadership. In doing so, we meet a new Jefferson, sometimes wily, always intelligent, always forward thinking. Jon Meacham wrote one of my favorite books, *American Lion: Andrew Jackson in the White House*, which I've read at least twice and listened to on my iPod while running each

summer. Meacham has a way of writing his history that manages to avoid the endless onslaught of names and trivial facts, and truly centers on the person. By doing so, he creates a momentum in his writing that's compelling and hard to put down. Meacham's unique spin on Jefferson (if spin is the right word more of a focus) is how he developed his leadership and vision for America. This focus causes Meacham to rush in his writing through Jefferson's early years (before you know it, he's attending the second Continental Congress) and getting him to the national stage as quickly as possible, which was refreshening and never abrupt. He paints some familiar portraits of Jefferson, that of a hard working student in Williamsburg, a devoted husband (before being a bit of a scalawag in the wooing of women), and that of a slave owner who knew his status was wrong and failed to do anything about it. Because of this, Jefferson comes alive in his pages. While not overtly revelatory, the book manages to be revelatory because you feel, after reading it, that you know better this sphinx of a man. The challenge of any historian is trying to make a subject that many people have written about new; authors of Washington and Lincoln biographies suffer the same fate. Because of the strength of Meacham's writing style, though, and the speed in which you can devour the pages, Jefferson is illuminated. If you haven't read any book on Jefferson, this should be your initial entry into his world. It will be a journey, much like that of Jefferson and his wife as they traveled up the steep mountain of Monticello after they were married, which promises to bring much joy and excitement as you discover this man. And for those of you, like myself, who know a little of his story, it's still well worth your time.

This is a great compilation of Jefferson's life and with the emphasis on the art of power...how Jefferson maneuvered behind the scenes with his writing skills and his intellect. The book was great, and is the one that is recommended by Monticello as the best work on Jefferson in one volume. I did feel like I got the objective view of Jefferson's power plays and excessive spending more in David McCullough's book on "John Adams" which deals with Adam's antagonist. The one thing that I was really upset over with this book, is that the book itself is thick (800 pages), and the book (paperback) began to literally fall apart at page 136. One large section came completely loose from the binding (paperback) and then the pages began to unravel individually as you tried to turn them. This made trying to read the book in any fashion other than lying flat virtually impossible with the sections and pages falling out, and trying finish the book was frustrating to say the least. Any publisher should know that an 800 page book is going to be hard to keep the pages together and should have taken measures to reinforce the binding for a book this thick.

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