

## SHOULD WE DUMP JEFFERSON AND JACKSON?

In an August 2015 newsletter, the Executive Committee of the La Plata Co. Democratic Party announced its intention to peel the Jefferson-Jackson label off the party's annual dinner and replace it with another, presumably more P.C., moniker. The extreme informality and lack of transparency of the decision process was, well, transparent: "...the Executive Committee has been approached many times with requests to change the name of our largest fund-raising dinner..." "...Many of you filled out our table survey at the 2015 JJ Dinner..."

More disheartening was the total lack of substantive arguments for the change: "...We are not the only county considering such a change. State Democratic Party officials in several states are discussing re-naming their Jefferson-Jackson Dinner as well. States considering the change include Connecticut, Colorado, Iowa, Maine, Missouri, and Virginia, and the list continues to grow. Who knows, maybe we will start a trend for other states and counties with the name we choose!..." Is trendiness a serious argument?

Symbolic gestures are an old staple of party politics, but before we commit ourselves to a new public posture, perhaps we might pause to ask: What exactly are the symbols we are juggling here? For many--perhaps most--party members who were excluded from this process, dumping Jefferson and Jackson seems ill advised, first on **philosophical** grounds. So with apology to the well-versed, let me recount briefly what Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson have stood for in the political history of both our country and the Democratic party.

Jefferson is the guy who bequeathed us our founding vision: "...We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all Men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness..." This is the guy who, with his flawed fellow Founders, inserted in our founding documents the libertarian values of the French and Scottish Enlightenment, the pillars upon which our civic edifice rests.

The Bill of Rights--first 10 amendments to our Constitution (1791)--is loaded to the brim with nuggets of Jeffersonian Enlightenment: self-governance, freedom of speech, assembly and conscious, universal franchise and equal representation, impartial rule of law and speedy trial by jury, above all the primacy of Reason over Blind Faith and the strict separation of Church and State.

Yes, Jefferson was a flawed man--slaver owner, male chauvinist, sexual exploiter. Yes, he was a man of his times and not entirely impervious to self-serving motives. And yes, thank Goodness the times **have** changed. But then, more credit to Jefferson for having been far ahead of his time. Indeed so far ahead that he tried--in the Continental Congress in Philadelphia (1776) and again in the Virginia General Assembly--to nudge the young republic toward eliminating slavery. He was defeated both times by his fellow Southerners, though not for lack of trying. But it was **his** text that became the law guaranteeing religious liberty in Virginia (1786). And in spite of his patrician provenance, he insisted on equal access to the political process for the poor and landless.

So before we pitch this flawed prophet of our Democratic republic for being not quite perfect, let us remember Christ's caution: "...Let he who is without sin cast the first stone..." And let us remember that the subsequent gradual extension of human rights and civil privilege--to the poor, the non-white, women, Native Americans, the disabled and GLBT--has been a direct extension of our Jeffersonian Bill of Rights.

Andrew Jackson is more of a mixed bag, due in part to his humble origins, lack of the "right" privileged education, and his explosive temper. But he is still our first Populist president, who fought for the rights of the working-class and the Western and Southern poor against the entrenched slave-owning Southern aristocracy and the Eastern banking and manufacturing cabals. Alas, a flawed man too, cruel to the Indians, nasty to the Brits and Spaniards, and a slaver to boot. But let us remember that the last two great Democrats who managed to move this country forward and extend Jeffersonian rights the less privileged --Franklin D. Roosevelt and Lyndon B. Johnson--were just as flawed; as were the twin martyrs John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King.

Here is what John F. Kennedy had to say about Jefferson in his address to American Nobel laureates in 1962: "...this is the most extraordinary collection of talent, of human knowledge, that has ever been gathered together in the White House, with the possible exception of when Thomas Jefferson dined alone..." Here is what our greatest Republican president, Abraham Lincoln, said in 1859: "...The principles of Jefferson are the definitions and axioms of a free society...". So what symbolic message, exactly, are we proposing to send in discarding the JJ label? That we have transcended our Jeffersonian Enlightenment and Jacksonian Populism?

There are equally strong arguments why scrapping the JJ label would also be an unfortunate **political** move. The Democratic party has been, for 100 years now, a complex coalition, at its best bridging over the diverse interests of the urban working class, the poor, struggling farmers and ranchers, the educated middle class, ethnic minorities and immigrants. Its most successful advances toward equity and social progress have always depended on keeping this coalition intact, often by the barest of threads. But the Democratic coalition in La Plata County is frayed and creaking. The show is run, almost exclusively, by the educated, secular, lily-white, urban elite of Durango.

In contrast, rural La Plata Democrats tend to be poorer, less educated, church-going and heavily Spanish and Ute. They tend to feel de-valued and ignored by the Party organization. And they tend to **not** attend JJ dinners, Party picnics and Exec. Committee meetings. In unloading the traditional JJ values of the grand Roosevelt coalition, one will also be unloading the party's rural membership. There are fewer of those, to be sure, but Democrats cannot be elected in La Plata County without them. So the party had better think twice before rushing to divest itself of its Jeffersonian libertarianism and Jacksonian populism.

It may perhaps be worth noting, lastly, that the values of our Jeffersonian Enlightenment are currently under a determined attack from two distinct quarters--the Fundamentalist Christian Right at home, and Jihadi Islam abroad. It would be a bloomin' shame if the La Plata County Democratic Party joined these know-nothing twins in their unholy crusade.