



The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson

Forrest McDonald

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Thomas Jefferson occupies a special niche in the hagiology of American Founding Fathers. His name is invoked for a staggering range of causes; statist and libertarians, nationalists and States' righters, conservatives and radicals all claim his blessing. In this book, Forrest McDonald examines Jefferson's performance as the nation's leader, evaluating his ability as a policy-maker, administrator, and diplomat.

He delineates, carefully and sympathetically, the Jeffersonian ideology and the agrarian ideal that underlay it; he traces the steps by which the ideology was transformed into a program of action; and he concludes that the interplay between the ideology and the action accounted both for the unparalleled success of Jefferson's first term in office, and for the unmitigated failure of the second term.

Jefferson as president was a man whose ideological commitments prevented him from reversing calamitous policy stances, a man who could be ruthless in suppressing civil rights when it was politically expedient, a man who was rarely, in the conventional sense of the word, a Jeffersonian. McDonald's portrait reveals him to be at once greater, simpler, and more complexly human than the mere "apostle of liberty" or "spokesman for democracy" that his adulators have relegated him to being.

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