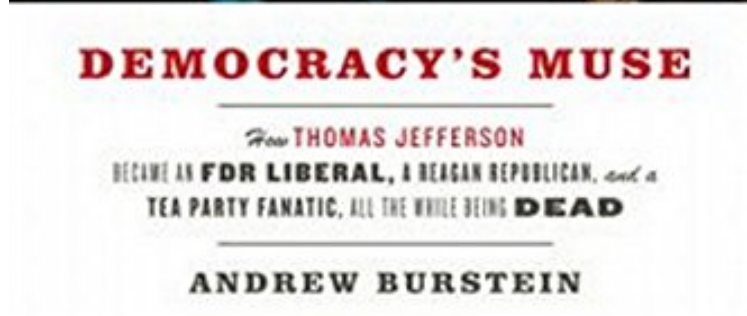


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Democracy's Muse: How Thomas Jefferson Became an FDR Liberal, a Reagan Republican, and a Tea Party Fanatic, All the While Being Dead

Andrew Burstein

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Andrew Burstein : Democracy's Muse: How Thomas Jefferson Became an FDR Liberal, a Reagan Republican, and a Tea Party Fanatic, All the While Being Dead before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be

worth my time, and all praised Democracy's Muse: How Thomas Jefferson Became an FDR Liberal, a Reagan Republican, and a Tea Party Fanatic, All the While Being Dead:

19 of 24 people found the following review helpful. A Blend of History and Rant By Paul Dueweke Andrew Burstein is an excellent writer. I find this attribute both admirable and worrisome. His writing is so clear, yet metaphorical and lyrical, that there is a danger that the reader may give him greater latitude and credibility than I might otherwise give. For example, early in his Preface, Burstein writes Problems occur whenever he [Jefferson] is abstracted. We know that professional politicians require a serviceable narrative when they run for office and are under pressure to draw lessons from the past. Jefferson is but one victim of their interpretive shortcuts. Professional historians strive to temper the excesses of professional politicians, and yet even they have been known to succumb to the temptation to oversimplify Jefferson. History is not a stable narrative; the compulsion to rewrite it is rarely more than half-conscious. That, in a nutshell, is what this book is about. How could you not trust someone who writes like that? WORDS VS. DEEDS The book title Democracy's Muse was wisely chosen once you drop the long subtitle, which reflects more cleverness than wisdom and impartiality. A muse is one who reflects, who is absorbed in thought. A more approachable, but less precise, synonym might be philosopher. Jefferson surely was Democracy's muse. He was surly NOT Democracy's defender. Such notables as Washington, Lafayette, Lincoln, and Churchill were great defenders of democracy. Jefferson's contributions were more contemplative and inspirational. He was a master of great words, not great deeds. It was this realization about a third of the way through the book that raised my worrisome flag. Burstein recurrently uses the famous inscription around the top of the Jefferson Memorial as a vehicle for the reader to engage Jefferson: I have sworn before the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man. But the Jefferson Memorial presents vignettes of Jefferson the purveyor of words, the muse. Not Jefferson the administrator, the purveyor of deeds. For example, Burstein measures FDR's attitude toward Jefferson in terms of what Jefferson said, not what he did. His critique of FDR's attitude toward Andrew Jackson, however, relates to what Jackson actually did. I was getting worried that Burstein, despite his admirable prose, might be missing the bigger picture. But then in Chapter Three, We Confide in Our Own Strength, he reassured me that he is leading the reader toward some truth. In a discussion about, appropriately, Nixon and LBJ, he says: Does that mean Jefferson served politics only when the jauntiest leaders tapped his invigorating prose? Perhaps. But it would be too simple to leave it at that. Burstein then launches into a detailed discussion of how Nixon used Jefferson's deeds as a model for defending the Watergate chaos that was devouring him. Burstein writes In 1807, during the treason trial of Aaron Burr, his former vice president, Jefferson improperly associated with the prosecution, refusing to maintain his distance from the proceedings. More to the point, he invoked executive privilege to deny the court access to a letter that had been subpoenaed from him. Nixon invoked the same privilege in refusing to turn over those Oval Office audiotapes. Quoting Jefferson directly, Nixon affected concern with his higher obligation to country. To lose our country by a scrupulous adherence to written law, the third president had said, would be to lose the law itself. Nixon seized upon that quote. Burstein evocatively makes the transition from Jefferson the muse to Jefferson the executive. It's clear now that there are two Jeffersons as we knew there had to be. For an excellent discussion of Jefferson's successes and failures as a chief executive, check out Heroes, Villains and Dupes by Paul E. Ronan. Ronan is an engineer, and his book contains the objectivity and attention to detail for which we hold engineers in such high regard. FOUR STARS OR FIVE Before I started Chapter 6, I was trying to decide whether Democracy's Muse should get four or five stars. His presentation was masterful, though he sometimes slipped into the world of opinions farther than a historian should slip. His quote of Arthur Schlesinger Jr. that America's racism is so deeply and shamefully inbred in our history is certainly allowable as fact. Schlesinger did actually say that. But Burstein's own charge of the righteous guilt of Americans who are stung by the intractable history of slavery and white supremacy seems to cross the line between fact and opinion that historians sign up to as part of their profession. Then there is the Burstein one-sentence description of one of the great racializations of this century. Burstein writes In February 2012, an unarmed African American teenager, Trayvon Martin, was shot and killed by a volunteer neighborhood watchman in Sanford, Florida, who thought the youth did not belong in his community. That is all Burstein writes about that famous incident before he uses it to assault Gingrich. This one-sentence description is the mainstream-media standard of the event, but one can expect that a professional chronicler of history such as Burstein would dig deeper than the ABC Evening News. If you are interested in knowing what really happened that night, check out the feature, LOOK INSIDE, of the book If I Had A Son by Jack Cashill. That author backs up the real reality with transcripts of the 911 calls, the police reports, and the grand jury testimonies. Burstein could have done that if he weren't agenda driven. I have to admit, though, that I also had an agenda. I was anxious to give my first ever five star rating, and this book early on looked like a candidate. Its halo, however, was plunging maybe out of sight. THEN CHAPTER SIX HAPPENS I'm not going to stand up for the Religious Right (or even for religion), for family values, or for American exceptionalism. Nor will I stand against secularism, multiculturalism, or government expansion. But I do know a political rant when I read one. It's quite clear from Chapter Six that Burstein really does not like Newt Gingrich, the Religious Right, the Tea Party, or pro-family values, which he defines as anti-gay, anti-abortion. At least he is half right. Burstein referred to Gingrich as the shameless presidential

hopeful of 2012 after presenting the following standard list of progressive charges against the wisdom and even sanity of the Christian Right (as embodied in Gingrich). Burstein writes Gingrich was known for such questionably Christian measures as tax breaks for the rich, financial favors for large corporations, and attacks on social programs and health and safety standards in the workplace. There is so much untrue about all these accusations in the context of modern politics, but what really disappointed me was that they have been pounded into the ground by every other Left-leaning political ranter. I had hoped, as I waded through Chapter Six, that Burstein would at least be original, if not graceful. I went back and perused the first couple chapters to reassure myself that Burstein really could do better and he might pull off maybe a four-star in the end.

CHAPTER SEVEN IS THE LAST CHAPTER

One of Burstein's summing-up efforts is to exhibit tolerance, if not acceptance, of the modern Republican Party. It is his commencement into a spirit of cultural ecumenism. Burstein writes But if we still hope to determine whether it is today's Republican or today's Democrat who is closer to capturing the historical Jefferson, we need pose this two-part question: What was more critical to him, (a) an unintrusive federal government, prevented from reaching into the affairs of individuals and families, a government that implicitly supports entrepreneurial energy; or (b) a sensitive federal government, responsive to all of its citizens, especially the most vulnerable, a government that applies every means at its disposal to protect the American people against unjust concentrations of power? There really isn't an answer to the question, because, once again, Jefferson lived in an unreachable past. But the founding era isn't nearly as unreachable as Burstein posits. What he has failed to do with this two-part question is to integrate the very reachable Constitution and the even more reachable ratification writings, such as *The Federalist Papers* and *The Anti-Federalist Papers*. It is clear that Jefferson understood that the main purpose of the Constitution was to restrain the natural tendency of the Federal Government to grow and to increasingly assume powers that the Constitution specifically restricted to the States. I believe that Jefferson's most intuitive warning appears buried in the Declaration of Independence: all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. This is Jeffersonian speak for: People will put off social change until the pain of the current evil drives them to it. One of the core values of both the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists was: To the extent possible, Americans wanted to be governed close to home if they were to be governed at all. Robert Natelson writes on p. 101 of his excellent book *The Original Constitution*: During the ratification debates advocates of the Constitution publicly listed examples of activities over which the federal government would have no authority. They did so to inform and reassure Ratifiers and members of the general public about the limited scope of federal power. Among the activities listed as within the exclusive sphere of the states were marriage, divorce, and other aspects of domestic relations; manufacturing (necessarily including labor relations); other business enterprises; agriculture and other land use; land titles and conveyancing; property outside of interstate trade; commerce wholly within state lines; state and local government; the regulation of most crimes and civil suits; social services; training the militia and appointing militia officers; religion; and education. We see here a list of Federalists promises that the Federal Government would never contain: a Department of Labor, a Small Business Administration, a Department of Agriculture, a Department of the Interior, a Department of Commerce, a Department of Housing and Urban Development, a Department of Health and Human Services, a Department of Education, and probably over a hundred other agencies. Thus the Part (b) of Burstein's question is misstated without reference to constitutional restraints. The sensitive federal government that applies every means at its disposal to protect the American people against unjust concentrations of power is by far the greatest unjust concentration of power we the People face. Even Burstein must have understood this when he wrote that pitiful, dichotomizing question. Burstein's final chapter does not offer the support to lift the rating to four stars. The bottom line Beware a quality writer looking for a subject rather than a quality subject looking for a writer. It seems that Burstein has used America's attachment to our Jefferson legacy as a storyboard for re-spinning tired Leftist notions.

APPENDIX TO THIS REVIEW: American Liberalism vs. American Conservatism

In Chapter Two, Burstein presents a letter by Eisenhower that expresses confusion in the use of the word liberal. It certainly is very confusing to most Americans. Here is what Burstein wrote: The Goldwater phenomenon was so striking that Eisenhower, as a lame-duck president, had taken notice. In October 1960, he wrote a confidential letter to the editor of the *Atlanta Constitution* (never sent), scanning the partisan landscape. The people who nowadays proclaim themselves liberals either directly or indirectly support centralization of power in Washington, he observed. This is the very antithesis of what Jefferson believed and taught, yet we think of Jefferson as a liberal. Fifty-five years ago, it may have been baffling for someone even of Eisenhower's intellect and experience. Today it is much clearer how conservatism and liberalism have exchanged places with each other in America. The American brands of conservatism and liberalism are very different from their traditional, historical forms. Throughout most of the world, conservatism has historically sought to conserve the existing political and social order. Traditionally that meant protecting existing autocratic rulers such as monarchs and despots. Liberalism, however, traditionally has sought to elevate the rights of individuals above the powers of rulers and is thus generally opposed to conservatism. In modern news stories, conservatives might be ayatollahs or dictators while liberals might be professors or journalists. In such a global landscape, the ancient struggle of liberalism as good and conservatism as evil still prevails. This is how young Americans learn the difference between liberals and conservatives. At the time of

the American Revolution, Americans were divided into revolutionaries, being traditional liberal, and the loyalists, being traditional conservative. Thus post-Revolutionary-War America was traditional liberal because they were the winners. Most of the traditional conservative loyalists changed their allegiance to the United States of America, and the rest moved to Canada. Thomas Jefferson was the leading traditional liberal. (Traditional liberal is used here instead of the usual classical liberal. History has never cataloged a group as classical conservatives, so I have used the word traditional for both to avoid criticism by purists and still maintain parity.) Then after 1789, an element of that traditional liberal society led by Jefferson emerged from what was earlier called the Anti-Federalists. They sought to protect the strict constitutional rights of individuals and enforce the strict constitutional limitations on the Federal Government. They came to be known as conservatives. Their goal was to preserve the existing American political structure of minimum government and maximum freedom. Thus a segment of traditional liberals evolved into American conservatives, who were actually more liberal than the remaining traditional liberals (the Federalists). Those remaining liberals had opted for a stronger government which is, ironically, a traditional conservative position. Such expansion of powers was, however, clearly beyond the intent of the ratifiers of the Constitution. Thus, American conservatism harkens back to American founding principles. Unlike traditional conservatism, its heroes are not kings, emperors, and popes. They are Jefferson, Franklin, Washington, and Adams. These were all liberals in their era because they rose up against monarchy. They forged their liberal principles into the United States of America, the only colonial nation of the Americas that rejected the traditional roles of ruler and ruled. In the process, they upended the definitions of liberals and conservatives. Those revolutionary liberals-turned-American-conservatives believed in personal freedom protected by a strong but tightly limited government. Modern America's immersion in globalism has helped us lose touch with that evolution. Part of that global culture is to see conservatives as the evil past and liberals as the hoped-for future. The evil features of global, traditional conservatism have fouled the image of American conservatism. Now here is the irony of America's present conservative-liberal divide. Liberalism harkens back to those same heroes and principles of the conservatives, but with one important difference: personal freedom is not protected by a **STRONG BUT TIGHTLY LIMITED** government but simply by a **STRONG** government strong enough to achieve the perceived goals of liberalism, if one simply morphs the clear wording of the Constitution into a more liberal-friendly form. That morphing has been going on now for two centuries and is called the living constitution. As strong and clearly worded as our Constitution is, the very concept of a tightly limited, federal government has been lost in the two-century struggle for control of the unprecedented, American-wealth-generating machine. The concept of limited powers was not just AN issue of the Constitution; it was THE issue. It was, in fact, THE issue of the entire American Revolution. Since the 1770s, American conservatives and liberals have swapped that core principle. American conservatism today stands for the traditional liberal values of personal freedom with a minimum, decentralized, federal government. American liberalism stands for the same values but with a stronger, less-limited, national government. This has evolved slowly without many, especially the younger generations, being aware of the shift. The transfer of the limited-government principle from liberals to conservatives plus the maligned image of those conservatives promoted by modern liberal institutions (e.g., media, academia, unions, and government itself) have cultivated our present condition of an out-of-control national government. It is very difficult to stand against some of our most powerful and wealthy institutions and adhere to the principles of traditional classical liberalism. It takes great discipline to accommodate those with whom we disagree in our opinions. But to accommodate those with whom we disagree in matters of fact is dishonorable. Differentiating between fact and opinion there is the rub. It requires a high degree of introspection and intellectual and moral integrity. This demand on intellectual discipline is why classical liberalism is nearly extinct. Jefferson, Lincoln, Coolidge, and Kennedy were among the closest to classical liberalism of our presidents. Those who call themselves liberals today (they do not call themselves classical liberals) are actually closer to traditional conservatives since it is much easier to accommodate power and the standard wisdoms plus it is a great deal more financially and socially rewarding than to stand on the principle of maximizing freedom in society. After all, freedom is what classical liberalism is all about. 9 of 10 people found the following review helpful. A Jeffersonian appeal for better history By Leon Venter Jefferson is one of my two favorite American presidents, and I had hoped to learn more about his legacy from this book. It certainly delivered in that regard, but its primary purpose is much more fundamental and practicable: A call to action that reviewer Paul Dueweke seems to have missed entirely because he got bogged down in the minutiae of the partisan messaging and labeling that the book decries. Yes, Burstein has his own political views and you won't agree with all of them, but that's neither necessary nor salient. Part 1 of the book is named Political Setting, and it catalogs and describes the many evocations of Jefferson's name during the FDR, JFK, Nixon, Reagan, and Clinton eras. It's an intriguing approach that provides many interesting insights into each of these men, beyond the scope of the typical presidential biography that tends to focus on an individual, his times, and his interactions with his contemporaries. Part 2 is named Culture Wars, and it's the meat of the book. The author serves up a warts-and-all appraisal of Jefferson's views on slavery, race, religion, and the nature of his relationship with Sally Hemings. He thoroughly debunks many of the misguided, disingenuous, and downright dishonest attempts to depict Jefferson's opinions on these subjects as something other than what they were. It's the means by which he introduces the book's central message, namely that deifying the founders and sanctifying their contributions is unnecessary and

counterproductive. Their value and importance are not diminished by our recognition of their flaws and limitations. It's necessary to recognize that some of their views were specific to their historical context, and that they were no more capable than we of envisioning life two hundred years hence. Jefferson fully expected later generations, better educated and more informed than his, to be able to improve upon the founders' efforts. What Burstein is addressing here is the intractable nature of today's political climate and the causes thereof. Constructive engagement is being crippled by a win-at-all-costs mentality, reflexive gainsaying and the simplistic, binary categorization of all issues as black or white, good or evil, sacred or sacrilegious, conservative or liberal. The real world, its people, and their history are far more complex and nuanced, cloaked in many shades of gray (way more than 50.) Given a sufficiently large body of work, be it Jefferson's writings, the Constitution, or religious texts, politicians can justify any agenda they're pushing by egregiously cherry-picking, misconstruing or adulterating its content. This book fervently and eloquently exhorts us to pursue good history, to weigh all considerations contextually, and to arrive at our own conclusions. Getting beyond the current impasse is up to every one of us. If you have the intellectual, moral and emotional integrity necessary to reevaluate your positions on messages with which you've continually been bombarded, you'll find the author to be a competent guide, and you'll find the book as rewarding and enjoyable as I did. If not, don't worry -- you're in luck because there are plenty of charlatans on both sides of the aisle who will gladly tell you exactly what to think. 0 of 5 people found the following review helpful. Five Stars By Customer Excellent

In political speech, Thomas Jefferson is the eternal flame. No other member of the founding generation has served the agendas of both Left and Right with greater vigor. When Franklin Roosevelt dedicated the iconic Jefferson Memorial on the founders two hundredth birthday, in 1943, he declared the triumph of liberal humanism. Harry Truman claimed Jefferson as his favorite president, too. And yet Ronald Reagan was as great a Jefferson admirer as any Democrat. He had a go-to file of Jefferson's sayings and enshrined him as a small-government conservative. So, who owns Jefferson--the Left or the Right? The unknowable yet irresistible third president has had a tortuous afterlife, and he remains a fixture in today's culture wars. Pained by Jefferson's slaveholding, Democrats still regard him highly. Until recently he was widely considered by many African Americans to be an early abolitionist. Libertarians adore him for his inflexible individualism, and although he formulated the doctrine of separation of church and state, Christian activists have found intense religiosity between the lines in his pronouncements. The renowned Jefferson scholar Andrew Burstein lays out the case for both "Democrat" and "Republican" Jefferson as he interrogates history's greatest shape-shifter, the founder who has inspired perhaps the strongest popular emotions. In this timely and powerful book, Burstein shares telling insights, as well as some inconvenient truths, about politicized Americans and their misappropriations of the past, including the concoction of a "Jeffersonian" stance on issues that Jefferson himself could never have imagined. Here is one book that is more about "us" than it is about Jefferson. It explains how the founding generations most controversial partisan became essential to America's quest for moral security how he became, in short, democracy's muse.

I feel confident in saying that Thomas Jefferson would've approved of Andrew Burstein's interpretation of his political afterlife in this book. I do so because--as Burstein so thoroughly and entertainingly chronicles--seemingly everybody else in American history has felt confident in saying Jefferson would've approved of whatever they were doing or saying about him. (Keith Olbermann) Democracy's Muse is a lively and opinionated look at Jefferson's latter-day admirers. You won't agree with everything Andrew Burstein says about them--but then they disagree so flamboyantly with each other. (Richard Brookhiser, author of Founders' Son: A Life of Abraham Lincoln) Likely to be a landmark in Jefferson studies while making an original contribution to our understanding of the culture war that has become such a toxic element of contemporary politics. (Francis D. Cogliano, University of Edinburgh, author of Thomas Jefferson: Reputation and Legacy) Andrew Burstein's book focuses tightly on the uses and abuses of Thomas Jefferson's legacy. "The politically minded," he writes, "choose to forget that [he] couldn't solve the most intractable problems of his own time; instead, they unearth a morally supportive quote and grant it universal power." ... Does it really matter if politicians revise the Founders' story to suit their own needs? Burstein argue[s] compellingly that it does. Burstein observes that it is hard to challenge the politically sacred without being labeled unpatriotic. Therein, he says, 'lies tyranny over the mind'--the very tyranny that Jefferson warned against throughout his political life.... Eminently readable. (Wall Street Journal) Burstein reviews both how presidents from Franklin Roosevelt to Barack Obama have harnessed the image and words of Thomas Jefferson to bolster their respective campaigns and initiatives and how recent scholars and schemers have grabbed hold of Jefferson's words and memory to do battle over questions of race, science, and religion.... Burstein writes engagingly, and, at times, quite entertainingly. (Daily Beast) Reminiscent of Merrill Peterson's pathbreaking *The Jefferson Image in the American Mind* (1960), *Democracy's Muse* describes a Jefferson whose authority generations of liberals and conservatives have regularly cited, usually through cherry-picked quotes to advance their respective agendas. (Choice) Democracy's Muse forces us to confront the past on its own terms and challenges us to ask the same of our political leaders. (Jeffrey Malanson, Indiana University Political Science Quarterly) About the Author Andrew Burstein is the Charles P. Manship Professor of History at Louisiana State

University. He is the author of nine books, including *Jefferson's Secrets: Death and Desire at Monticello* and the coauthor, with Nancy Isenberg, of *Madison and Jefferson*.