Despite the vast scholarship on Jefferson and Jeffersonian ideology, historians struggle to understand Jefferson while often assuming that his political followers and challengers had less complicated ideas about race and slavery. In that sense, John Boles’s *Jefferson: Architect of American Liberty* and Padraig Riley’s *Slavery and the Democratic Conscience: Political Life in Jeffersonian America* make an interesting comparison. For both Riley and Boles, Jefferson had a cohesive idea of liberty built around his personal beliefs about slavery. Boles’s biography of Jefferson examines him as a statesman devoted to creating a government based on that idea of liberty while Riley’s monograph follows Jefferson’s political vision compared to those of his followers.

Both authors believe that antebellum white Americans knew slavery to be absolutely immoral. Boles assumes that Jefferson wanted to end slavery; he states that in his younger years Jefferson “dared not attack the institution [of slavery] head on” but that he continually thought about legislation that would move Virginia and the nation toward abolition (p. 28). Riley assumes that white northern Jeffersonians accepted slavery as a moral wrong and thus “present a very different intellectual problem from that posed by a slaveholder who believed in universal human freedom yet could not free his slaves” (p. 2). In their political calculations, however, federal happiness was more important than arguments about slavery. Riley’s conclusion sits uneasily next to Boles’s biography. “In many respects,” Riley observes, “the outcome of Jeffersonian democracy, whether one deems it logical or not, was an egalitarian community of white men who protected their own interests by accommodating slavery; doing so required, as southerners made clear, an investment in white supremacy” (p. 251). The Jefferson Boles describes would have been both saddened and unsurprised by this conclusion.

Boles’s biography is well written and constructed; this biography is largely about Jefferson’s public life and Jefferson’s political contributions are central to the narrative. At times, it is not even Jefferson himself but his legal writing that takes center stage. Boles’s analysis of Jefferson’s prose is informative and points to Jefferson’s crucial role
in the creation of the American republic. Jefferson's early years are described in a concise but interesting manner that emphasizes his tenuous hold on Virginian aristocracy. As he is drawn into the politics of the British colonies, we see Jefferson balancing his desire to shape Virginia along with his desire to participate in the new political life of the Continental Congress.

Even as Jefferson moves to France, Boles describes him as having a clear and consistent vision of what the American government could and should become. Like other biographers, Boles credits Jefferson's time in France with sharpening his love of country and republican government. His stay in France also further cements his deep-seated fear of monarchy. After his return to America and his installation in Washington's cabinet, Boles turns to the complicated personal politics of the federal government in the 1790s. Here, Jefferson appears as a skilled and accomplished politician whose egalitarian vision of America is constantly challenged by high Federalists and partisan politics.

Boles credits John Adams's fraught presidency with creating Jefferson's views on that office and sees Jefferson's own terms, at least the first, as his attempt to set America's ship back on the course of egalitarian, republican government. Boles rarely sees Jefferson as in contradiction with himself. Rather than seeing the Louisiana Purchase as an uncharacteristic but necessary action to create an agrarian republic, Boles sees the purchase as the logical conclusion to Jefferson's belief that the president's scope should be narrow but his actions within that narrow sphere should be strong and decisive. Jefferson's second term as president, however, lacked the consistency of purpose and vision that had marked Jefferson's political life to this point in part because his idea of liberty contrasted with the desires of his political followers and the needs of a nation on the brink of war.

In retirement, Jefferson does not cease building a republic. From his role in creating the University of Virginia to his careful treatment of guests to his renewed correspondence with John Adams, Jefferson was careful to lay a cultural foundation for republicanism. In fact, Boles calls him a "secular millenialist, so broad were his expectations for the future of the nation and its role as an exemplar for others" (p. 345). Poignantly, Boles ends his biography with a short biography of Monticello after Jefferson's death. The architect's most beloved physical creation experienced the ravages of republican love—trampled on, worn down, and battered by visitors and cared for by those whose desire to preserve outstripped their ability.

Boles's Jefferson is sure-footed and confident in his vision of America. He is not faultless; Boles notes his financial woes, political maneuvering, and the impossible contradiction that were Jefferson's ideals and actions on race and slavery. But, Jefferson is prescient in seeing what the nation needs and what it could be. Unlike other recent biographies, Boles does not present us with an evolving or changing Jefferson. At times, Jefferson gives in to American society; he will not end slavery, he will not end America's move toward manufacturing, and he embraces a conservative view of race. From his entry into the political world in the 1770s, however, Boles's Jefferson determinedly agitates for a radical republicanism.

While Boles often notes how Jefferson brought his ideas about slavery to the political process, he does so with the unstated assumption that Jefferson thought slavery was morally wrong. There are many moments in his younger years where Jefferson proposed changes to slavery that could have led to abolition. For example, when writing about the Declaration of Independence Boles notes that "had the passage on slavery remained, it could have supported Jefferson's later attempts to promote abolition and the colonization or resettlement of the freed people" (pp. 70-71).

Yet, in the end, Boles views Jefferson as a common eighteenth-century man when it came to race and slavery. In his discussion of Jefferson's obser-
vations on race in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Boles notes that “this voraciously curious reader was summarizing commonplace late-eighteenth-century French and European scientific conjecture, which regularly described Africans as inferior….” A decade later some of his Federalist opponents did attack him for his disquisitions on race, but their motivation was more political than moral” (p. 80). For Boles, Jefferson’s views on race were reflective of social norms while his ideas, if not his practice, on slavery were nothing short of progressive.

Riley’s monograph challenges us to think about the consequences of these unacted-upon ideals as he examines the complex political world of Jeffersonian America. He is interested in northern antislavery advocates who were also Jeffersonian democrats. Increasingly, southerners regardless of party articulated a clear political concern for their rights as slave owners, yet for decades these southern democrats also allied themselves with northerners. This national coalition enabled the expansion of the republic, but how, Riley asks, did this uneasy coalition come to be and why did men who loudly decried against slavery also vociferously support a party that championed slave owning?

In part, the answer is that in compromising with slave-owning southerners, northern republicans came to accept racism and slavery as a necessary evil for the undoubtable good of preserving the union. Riley traces the path of the Jeffersonians from their antimonarchical, anti-elitist, radically egalitarian roots in the 1790s to the unwieldy alliance of southern slave owners and northern egalitarians whose commonality was the shared rejection of black citizenship in the wake of the Missouri Crisis. Jeffersonians did not reject “transatlantic republicanism” because of the blow it dealt to slavery in Saint Domingue and elsewhere; instead, “the Jeffersonian coalition embraced anti-aristocratic republican thought while tempering its antislavery content” (p. 30).

Northern antislavery democrats were willing to temper republican antislavery, Riley argues, because American patriotism became defined by a willingness to preserve the union at any cost. While in the 1790s Democrat-Republicans saw themselves fighting against the monarchical impulse of Federalists, by the first decades of the nineteenth century the idea of republicanism would not be worth the destruction of the union. Thus, the ideals that had brought northern and southern Jeffersonians together were pushed aside as now “those same convictions seemed liable to undermine partisan bonds” (p. 109). Riley argues that northern democrats were both committed to prioritizing the nation and were simply inconsistent in their arguments. They saw no contradiction in demeaning Washington as a slave owner while putting Jefferson on a pedestal. This contradiction was necessary because “Jefferson signified the complicated reconciliation between democratic conviction and the power of slavery” (p. 93).

Without this compromise, Riley suggests, many Americans thought the nation could not continue.

In the anxious years between 1805 and 1808, federal politicians repeatedly engaged in sectional disputes over federal involvement in slavery. The international slave trade, taxes on selling slaves, and even an attempt to move the capital back to Philadelphia all reflected northern concerns about the power of slave states. Riley sees the concern for slave owners’ property rights as tantamount to understanding tensions within national political parties. For example, he stresses that people disliked John Randolph’s manner and questioned whether the democratic party could withstand his manner coupled with his ideas on slavery (pp. 118-119). The outspoken Virginian challenged the ability of national political parties to compromise on slavery while limiting the dangers of sectionalism.

Not all Jeffersonians could bear the pressure to accommodate slavery and slave owners. Some, like Francis Blake, joined the Federalists while oth-
ers, like James Sloane, became vocal opponents of their southern compatriots. But, as Riley notes, “disaffection from the Democratic-Republican party was driven by sectional grievance, not antislavery argument” (p. 148). This infighting could have continued with disastrous consequences had the War of 1812 not “worked to suppress Jeffersonian dissent, particularly on the subject of slavery” (p. 162). This war stoked the flames of passion and “revived fears of oppression and control ... that had marked Jeffersonian ideology in the 1790s and early 1800s” (p. 172). As these fears increased, northern democrats were more willing to compromise over slavery.

While the War of 1812 may have unified the Jeffersonians and weakened the Federalist party, the inherent contradiction of the national Democrat-Republican party continued to grow. Riley outlines this by contrasting the Rotunda depiction of John Trumbull’s *The Declaration of Independence*, completed in 1818, with Jesse Torrey’s *A Portraiture of Domestic Slavery in the United States*, which was published the year before. For Riley, these pieces “point to an ongoing conflict between nationalism and slavery in the post-War of 1812 United States” (pp. 202-03). This conflict would come to a head in the Missouri Crisis, which Riley sees as “the culmination of sectional conflict over slavery during the Jeffersonian era” (p. 203).

Riley’s argument is nuanced, and he teases out the centrality of slavery from the details of congressional debates and political intrigue. At times, rather than refining political categories, Riley shows the futility of categorizing political thinkers in the early republic by political party. And, in an age where scholars are thinking about the connections between slavery, capitalism, and the federal government, Riley’s conclusions reinforce the sense that slavery may have been increasingly recognized as immoral during the early republican period but fears of a failing economy and government would continue to take precedent over issues of morality.

When placed beside Boles’s biography, we can see the longer-term inconsistencies of the age alongside one glaring consistent idea: that America would be a nation for white men. Riley is explicit about this, arguing that “rather than an institution that was taken for granted, that, to modify John Randolph of Virginia, Americans were simply born into, slavery was instead subject to ongoing political negotiation. It required accommodation and toleration. And those acts made all free Americans, especially the white male electorate, responsible for slavery” (pp. 251-52). Boles is more circumspect; he sees Jefferson’s ideas on race as a product of his time and his legislation on slavery continually thwarted. In the aftermath of the Revolution, as Virginia gave up its land claims and future states were envisioned, Boles argues, “abolishing slavery was the paramount issue to no political leader of the time…. No southern state accepted the prohibition on slavery, not even Virginia, whose other two delegates also voted to strike the clause” (p. 117). In different ways, and with different source bases and subjects, Riley and Boles articulate the same conclusion about slavery in the early republic: that it was part and parcel of American democracy.
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