

#1306

How Shall We Answer Dr. Johnson?

A paper presented to the Sphex Club of Lynchburg
October 11, 2007

By James M. Elson

James M. Elson, was born in New York City and raised in Knoxville, Tennessee, where he attended the public schools, graduated from the University of Tennessee-- Knoxville, and was commissioned in the U. S. Army Reserve, serving two years' on active duty. His post-graduate education includes degrees from The Juillard School and West Virginia University, and study in Germany as a Fulbright Scholar.

After twenty years as a teacher and administrator on the college level, our speaker came to the Lynchburg in 1984 as the first executive director of the Academy of Music Theatre. In 1988 he became the Executive Vice President of the Patrick Henry Memorial Foundation at Red Hill, the last home and burial place of the patriot orator located in Charlotte and Campbell counties. Having earlier retired from the Army Reserve with the rank of colonel, he retired from Red Hill in 2000 and has since indulged his interest in writing history.

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How shall we answer Dr. Johnson? No, not Dr. R. Walter “Whirlwind” Johnson of Lynchburg (1899-1971), coach of tennis greats Arthur Ashe and Althea Gibson for whom the Johnson Medical Center in our fair city is named, but Dr. Samuel Johnson of London, England (1709-1784). In his time, Dr. Johnson was a renowned critic, biographer, moral philosopher, and lexicographer. Those of us who heard Betsey Muhlenfeld’s excellent paper last year learned that Dr. Johnson’s crowning achievement was of *A Dictionary of the English Language*. His life was immortalized in James Boswell’s *Life of Johnson*, considered by many to be the best biography in English.

Dr. Johnson has also gone down in history as a world-class curmudgeon. What is a curmudgeon (you may ask)? My dictionary defines “curmudgeon” as “a crusty, ill-tempered, and usually old man.” (As in many other fields of human endeavor, until recently there have not been equal opportunities for women to become curmudgeons. Still, there have been a few, and I am sure we shall see many more of them in the twenty-first century.)

A young curmudgeon would appear to be an oxymoron. But I believe the little boy in the fairy tale who called out, “The emperor is wearing no clothes!” was well on his way to becoming one. Although as a child, I was not nearly as precocious as that young fellow, I did have a tendency to ask questions or make statements that I should have kept to myself. Unfortunately, the tendency did not abate with age.

You may recall that about twenty years ago thousands, if not millions, of Americans were inspired by Dr. M. Scott Peck’s book, *The Road Less Traveled*. It was indeed a fine guide to living, but I must confess that I found even greater inspiration in this wonderful little volume, which came out at about the same time, titled *The Portable Curmudgeon*. In his introduction Jon Winokur, the compiler and editor, wrote:

A curmudgeon’s reputation for malevolence is undeserved. They’re neither warped nor evil at heart. They don’t hate mankind, just mankind’s excesses. They’re just as sensitive and soft-hearted as the next guy, but they hide their vulnerability beneath a crust of misanthropy. They ease their pain by turning hurt into humor. They snarl at pretense and bite at hypocrisy out of a healthy sense of outrage. They attack maudlinism because it devalues genuine sentiment. They hurl polemical thunderbolts at middle-class values and pop culture in order to preserve their sanity. Nature [has] failed to equip them with a serviceable denial mechanism. . . . Offense is their only defense. Their weapons are irony, satire, sarcasm, [and] ridicule. Their targets are pretense, pomposity, conformity, [and] incompetence. . . . [end quote]

Reading *The Portable Curmudgeon* had a life-changing effect on me. I was so enthusiastic about this book that I gave a copy to Tom Ledford for Christmas a few years

ago. I think this act of kindness encouraged and enhanced his curmudgeonhood.

Following his introduction, *The Portable Curmudgeon*'s editor has posted a list of about seventy-five "World Class Curmudgeons." There are relatively few on the list before Dr. Johnson's time—he was definitely a pioneer. I suspect, this is because in earlier eras and in most places calling things as you saw them might earn you the death penalty or at least time in a king's dungeon. The art of curmudgeonry may be said to have come into full flower during the late nineteenth century in the English-speaking countries with such luminaries as Mark Twain and Ambrose Bierce in the United States, and George Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde in Great Britain. A majority of the names on the World Class Curmudgeon list come from the early and middle years of twentieth century America. The journalist, H. L. Mencken, is an all-time favorite of many connoisseurs. In the movies there were Groucho Marx and W. C. Fields. Most of those on the list who are still active, like TV's Andy Rooney and Jack Cafferty, or the writers William F. Buckley Jr., and Gore Vidal will not be with us forever. (By the way, there are both liberal and conservative curmudgeons.) Where are their successors? Are the late-night comedians with their battalions of gag writers the curmudgeons of the twenty-first century?

Having provided you this brief history of the curmudgeon, I return to Dr. Samuel Johnson and present seven of his epigrams, which I invite you to consider. Please feel free to comment as I go along, if the spirit moves you.

A sampling of the wisdom of Dr. Samuel Johnson:

#1. "Resolve not to be poor: whatever you have, spend less. Poverty is a great enemy to human happiness; it certainly destroys liberty, and it makes some virtues impracticable and others extremely difficult."

#2. "No man is a hypocrite in his pleasures."

#3. "Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful."

#4. "No man but a blockhead ever wrote, except for money." (Well, I guess that makes me a blockhead.)

#5. "A woman's preaching is like a dog's walking on his hinder legs. It is not done well; but you are surprised to find it is done at all." I hasten to add that I believe Dr. Johnson would very likely not have said that had he had the opportunity to hear Betsey Muhlenfeld's disquisition on his dictionary. And I *know* he would not have made the statement had he heard Carolyn Bell on the morning of Wednesday, September 6, 2006,

throwing red meat to the Randolph-Macon Woman's College Wildcats—students and alumnae—from the steps of Smith Hall.

#6. "Patriotism is the last refuge of a scoundrel." The great American curmudgeon, Ambrose Bierce, in his *Devil's Dictionary* opined that patriotism was the *first* refuge of a scoundrel. Today I would amend Dr. Johnson's and Mr. Bierce's statements to read: "Patriotism *or religion* is the first refuge of a scoundrel."

And the last of, my seven epigrams from Dr. Johnson, which is the subject of this paper: "How is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?" [Repeat] Thus this paper's title: "How shall we answer Dr. Johnson?"

Dr. Johnson didn't think very highly of Americans. Boswell, his biographer, tells of this conversation, which took place at a dinner at the home of a Mr. Dilly on April 15, 1778, (right in the middle of our revolution):

From this pleasing subject [which happened to be Christian love], he [Johnson], I know not how or why, made a sudden transition to one upon which he was a violent aggressor; for he said, "I am willing to love all mankind *except an American*": and his inflammable corruption bursting into horrid fire, he breathed out threatenings and slaughter, calling them, "Rascals—Robbers—Pirates": and exclaiming, he'd burn and destroy them. Miss Seward [described by Boswell as "the poetess of Lichfield"] looking to him with mild but steady astonishment, said, "Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured." He was irritated still more by this delicate and keen reproach, and roared out another tremendous volley, which one might fancy could be heard across the Atlantic. During this tempest I sat in great uneasiness, lamenting his heat of temper; till, by degrees, I diverted his attention to other topics. [end quote]

Dr. Johnson was undoubtedly intemperate in this instance, and as a result embarrassed Boswell his friend. But what about "Why is it that we hear the loudest yelps for liberty from the drivers of Negroes?" It appeared in a pamphlet he wrote titled "Taxation No Tyranny," which was published in 1775, the same year Patrick Henry cried, "Give me liberty or give me death!" A potentially embarrassing question for Americans who may have considered it, but there is no evidence that very many did.

The irony is not lost on me that I ended up spending the last eleven and one-half years of my working life as an advocate for Patrick Henry, a man who if not personally a driver of Negroes, was an owner of them and certainly yelped as loud or louder than anyone in insisting on his own liberty and the liberty of his fellow white Americans. Tonight I would like to examine not only what Patrick Henry, the Voice of the American Revolution, said and did about slavery, but also the words and deeds concerning slavery of Thomas Jefferson, the Pen of the American Revolution, and George Washington, the

Sword of the American Revolution. You may rest assured my conclusions will be curmudgeonly—but some of them may surprise you.

It was not all that long ago that the SpheX Club heard a rousing rendition of Patrick Henry's "Liberty or Death" Speech by our member, the late Reverend Haywood Robinson. Rev. Robinson considered it one of the three great speeches in American history—the other two being Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" Speech. As you will recall, Patrick Henry's great oration ends like this:

Is life so dear or peace so sweet, as to be purchased at the price of *chains and slavery*? Forbid it Almighty God! I know not what course others may take; but as for me, give me liberty or give me death!

Chains and slavery. The inventory of Patrick Henry's property at his home at Red Hill in Charlotte County at the time of his death listed sixty-six slaves. Despite his historical reputation as a firebrand, personally Henry was liked by almost everybody. "I think he was the best humored man in society I almost ever knew," wrote Thomas Jefferson to William Wirt, Henry's first biographer. "He had no vice that I ever knew or ever heard of and scarcely a foible," remembered Henry's son-in-law, Judge Spencer Roane. No doubt Henry was a kind master to his slaves. Everyone who mentioned the subject to biographer Wirt said so, although Judge Roane also remarked, "He could buy or sell a horse or a Negro as well as anybody."

The first instance we find any mention of slavery in Henry's writings or speeches is in a so-called "fragment of a manuscript found with his papers" probably written in the late 1760s, when Henry was in his early thirties. In this rambling meditation he compares the society and economies of the northern states to those of the southern states—and not always favorably to the South. "Our country [that is, Virginia] will be peopled," Henry wrote and asked himself, "The question is, shall it be with Europeans or Africans? . . . Is there a man so degenerate as to wish to see his country the gloomy retreat of slaves? No; while we may, let us people our lands with men who secure our internal peace and make us respectable abroad. . ." [end quote]

A few years later, in 1773—two years before the "Liberty or Death" Speech—Henry wrote this to a Virginia Quaker named Robert Pleasants, thanking him for his gift of a book against the slave trade by the reformer Anthony Benezet:

Is it not amazing that at a time when the rights of humanity are defined and understood with precision, in a country above all others fond of liberty; that in such an age and in such a country we find men professing a religion the most humane, mild, gentle, and generous, adopting a principle as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty? Every thinking, honest man rejects it in speculation; how few in practice from conscientious motives?

Would anyone believe I am the master of slaves of my own purchase! I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living here without them. I will not, I cannot justify it. [end quote]

Henry was, of course, *wrong* about slavery being inconsistent with the Bible, and I'm sure he knew it. However, this was not only Henry, the devout and introspective Christian speaking, but also Henry, the self-made man, who, unlike most of the other Virginia Founding Fathers had not achieved his place in the Virginia society of his day by inheriting or marrying into wealth.

Fast forward to June 1788 to the Virginia Convention on the Ratification of the United States Constitution, which had been created at Philadelphia the previous year. Henry led the opposition to ratification in Virginia partly because he believed the document created too strong a central government but, more importantly, because it contained no bill of rights. Henry delivered some brilliant speeches to the convention in defense of liberty—in my opinion the best he ever made. Nevertheless, as the convention came to a close, he and his allies could see that their side was not going to prevail. On the day before the vote for or against ratification was taken Henry said this:

As much as I deplore slavery, I see that prudence forbids its abolition. . . The majority of the congress is to the north, and the slaves are to the south. In this situation, I see a great deal of the property of the people of Virginia in jeopardy and their peace and tranquility gone away. I repeat it again, that it would rejoice my very soul that every one of my fellow human beings was emancipated. As we ought with gratitude to admire that decree of heaven which has numbered us among the free, we ought to lament and deplore the necessity of holding our fellow men in bondage. But is it practicable by any human means to liberate them without producing the most dreadful and ruinous consequences? . . . [end quote]

For me this speech was the low point in Patrick Henry's otherwise admirable career.

Even if you studied social science instead of history in school—you have heard about the Declaration of Independence, which boldly states:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

Today most Americans think they know at least two things about Thomas Jefferson: (1) that he was the author of the Declaration of Independence and (2) that he was the father of children by his slave, Sally Hemmings. Both statements may be contested. Jefferson was the author of the *first draft* of the Declaration, having borrowed heavily from other sources, notably George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights. The

draft then went through a committee of five delegates, of which John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were members. Finally, it was edited by the entire Philadelphia Convention. Concerning Sally Hemmings: DNA tests have proven only that a male Jefferson was the father of her children. Many old-line Jefferson supporters contend that his younger brother Randolph or one of Randolph's sons was the culprit. Other new-line Jefferson supporters, however—some of whom are black and believe they are his descendants—are extremely pleased that they may be related to this American icon. Such is the power of the celebrity.

During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth century, Americans proceeded to turn the Founding Fathers from flesh and blood human beings into marble statues. By 1874 historian James Parton could proclaim, "If Jefferson was wrong, America is wrong. If America is right, Jefferson was right." It was not until 1997, when the historian, Joseph J. Ellis, won the National Book Award for his *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*, which did not always put its subject in a positive light, that negative writing about this quintessential American icon was recognized in mainstream American historical scholarship. Ellis' elegantly written essay, however, was certainly not the first in the closing decades of the twentieth century to challenge the conventional wisdom about Jefferson.

In 1993, the two hundred and fiftieth anniversary of Thomas Jefferson's birth, Paul Finkleman, a visiting associate professor of history at Virginia Tech, presented a highly controversial paper titled "Thomas Jefferson and Antislavery: The Myth Goes On." to the annual meeting of the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. The following year the paper was published as an article in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* to the great consternation of many of its readers.

Finkleman's blast against Jefferson's attitude towards blacks and slavery is certainly the most iconoclastic known to me. In his introduction, Finkleman set forth his thesis with great economy:

Jefferson's "hatred" [in quotes] of slavery was a peculiarly cramped kind of hatred. It was not so much slavery he hated as what it did to his society. This "hatred" took three forms. First, he hated what slavery did to whites. Second, he hated slavery because he feared it would lead to a rebellion that would destroy his society. Third, he hated slavery because it brought Africans to America and kept them there. None of these feelings motivated him to do anything about the institution. [end quote]

During his lifetime, Jefferson wrote only one book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. It was prompted by the request of friends in France for information about a multitude of subjects, both scientific and cultural, in his part of the New World. After the Revolution,

the manuscript of Jefferson's *Notes* made its way to France and was eventually printed in an unauthorized French translation. The first English edition appeared in London in 1787.

In his book Jefferson went into considerable detail about African-Americans and slavery. His comments on the first are fairly extensive and not very complimentary. They appeared in a chapter titled "Laws," and end like this:

I advance it therefore, as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind. . . Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? This unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people. . . Among the Romans emancipation required but one effort. The slave when made free, might mix with, without staining the blood of, his master. But with us a second is necessary, unknown to history. When freed, he is to be removed beyond the reach of mixture. [end quote]

Jefferson's comments on slavery in the *Notes on Virginia* appear in a two-page chapter titled "Manners" and contain this well-known quote:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submission on the other. Our children see this and learn to imitate it . . . The parent storms, the child looks on, catches the lineaments of wrath, puts on the same airs in the circle of smaller slaves . . . The man must be a prodigy who can retain his manners and morals undepraved by such circumstances.

This passage, although I abbreviate somewhat, seems to bear out Professor Finkleman's contention that Jefferson was more concerned with what ill effects slavery was having on whites than on blacks. A few sentences further on Jefferson observes: "For if a slave can have a country, it must be any other in preference to that in which he is born to live and labor for another." Jefferson consistently continued to advocate the exportation of free blacks to Africa, but none of the five slaves he, himself, set free was exported. All were members of the Hemmings family, and thus related either to his deceased wife (Sally Hemmings was her half-sister), to himself, or to his brother.

Some of Jefferson's contemporaries did indeed manumit their slaves, but they were usually few in number. There were, however, some notable exceptions. In 1785 Joseph Mayo, an obscure planter from Powhatan County, freed 150 slaves. Edward Coles, Jefferson's younger and idealistic neighbor, took his slaves to Illinois and freed them. In 1833, seven years after Jefferson died, his kinsman John Randolph of Roanoke

(for whom our local college is named) died. His will stipulated that his approximately 300 slaves be freed and provided money to purchase land for them in Ohio. Coles and Randolph were wise in settling their former bondmen north of the Ohio River. As time went by and the number of free blacks in Virginia multiplied, the state's white population became increasingly uneasy, and the rights of free blacks became more circumscribed.

Then there is the case of Robert Carter III, among the richest of Virginia's Northern Neck planters. Sometimes referred to as "Councillor" Carter, he presided over a vast plantation empire of more than 65,000 acres not far from the seats of the Washington and Lee families. As the grandson of the legendary Robert "King" Carter, he boasted as fine a pedigree as could be found in the Old Dominion. On September 5, 1791, "Councillor" Carter went to the Westmoreland County courthouse and filed a deed of gift, a legal instrument by which his more than 450 slaves were freed gradually in a process that stretched out until 1852. This largest single act of manumission before the Emancipation Proclamation remained an obscure footnote in American history for more than two centuries.

I first became aware of Carter's deed of gift when I discovered an article titled "The Anti-Jefferson" and subtitled "Why Robert Carter III Freed His Slaves (And Why We Couldn't Care Less)" in the Spring 2001 edition of *The American Scholar*. In 2005 a much-expanded version of the article appeared in book form with the title, *The First Emancipator*. The book has been respectfully received but does not seem to have made a great impression in the historical community or with the general public.

I will return to "Councillor" Carter and his deed of gift before I conclude tonight. But first I would like to go on to the third, last, and greatest of not just the Virginia, but all the Founding Fathers. George Washington was, in the words of General "Lighthorse Harry" Lee (father of Robert E. Lee), "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen." Washington is definitely the chief stone-statue Founding Father, standing there, firmly muscled, perhaps six to eight inches taller than everybody else, if not a Roman god, at least a Roman hero like Cincinnatus, a man who could have been emperor but resigned his commission and returned to civilian life. General Washington was not warm and fuzzy. He certainly does not fit into the spirit of our age, and it has been suggested that he doesn't really fit into any American period. The efforts of the folks at Mount Vernon to make the Father of Our Country more user-friendly in their new visitors' center and museum have been, in my opinion only modestly successful.

Unlike Patrick Henry and Thomas Jefferson, George Washington did not yelp about "liberty or death" or write about "all men being created equal." But he *was* like Jefferson in that he left to posterity a paper trail that was extensive but select, and he was like Henry in that he left few ruminations as to his innermost feelings. In his book, *An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America*—first published in 2003, now available in paperback—historian Henry Wiencek traces Washington's evolving attitudes towards African-Americans and slavery, drawing on

a wide variety of sources. Scholars are convinced that he has done a masterful piece of historical detective work, as well as addressing his subject forthrightly. If you are going to read a book on American history anytime soon, I urge you to read *An Imperfect God*. I can tell you that when I re-read it in preparation for this paper, there were still times when it was hard for me to put down.

George Washington's father died when he was eleven, and young George, unlike his two older brothers, did not receive a college education. Like Patrick Henry, he was more or less an autodidact. While other young men from more privileged backgrounds, were enrolled at the College of William and Mary and often carousing and sleeping with slave women, Washington was off in western Virginia, hacking through and surveying the wilderness, sleeping outdoors by himself. He gained military fame, even in England, during the French and Indian War. Washington was fortunate in being able to acquire Mount Vernon from the widow of one of his brothers. Still, he struggled financially to keep up with Virginia's elite. It was not until 1759, when he married Martha Dandridge Custis, the widow of a member of one of Virginia's wealthiest families, that he could live in the style to which he wished to become accustomed. At the time Washington was the owner of forty-nine slaves. Martha brought an estate worth 40,000 pounds, including 16,000 acres of land and eighty-four so-called "dower slaves," to their marriage.

During the next fifteen years under Washington's ever-watchful eye, his plantation at Mount Vernon and the Custis properties prospered. He was an efficiency expert, long before the term came into use. Unlike most of his neighbors, he was aware that cultivation of tobacco for well over one hundred years had depleted the soil of the Northern Neck and was far too labor intensive. He therefore began raising wheat and vegetables. Washington also realized that slave labor was inefficient because there were few, if any, incentives for the laborers. However, he seems to have had no second thoughts about the morality of it. Apparently he could buy and sell human beings as well as Patrick Henry or anyone else.

On April 19, 1775, a month after "the shot heard round the world" on Lexington Green, in Massachusetts, the Second Continental Congress met in Philadelphia. Washington was there, as he had been at the First Congress the previous year. During both assemblies he was, a self-described "attentive observer and witness." John Adams once observed that "Washington had the gift of silence," and true to form, he didn't say much. But many of the delegates had gotten to know him personally, and all of them knew his military reputation. Besides Washington was the only delegate who showed up in Philadelphia wearing his militia uniform and, of course, he looked every inch a soldier. Washington was elected commander-in-chief of the Continental Army on the first ballot.

When he reached Cambridge, Massachusetts, in July 1775 to take over, Washington discovered that his promised army of 20,000 numbered only 14,000 and was poorly supplied. The New England farmers who composed it were, in his words, "an exceedingly dirty and nasty people." He was even more dismayed to find *black* soldiers

carrying arms and awaiting action. Blacks had responded to Paul Revere and had been at Lexington and Concord, and later the battle of Bunker Hill. To put the story in a nutshell, Washington's reservations about black soldiers disappeared as the war went on. They were with him as he crossed the Delaware River to surprise the Hessians at Trenton, they wintered with him at Valley Forge, they fought at the Battle of Monmouth, and they were present at the battle and final surrender of Cornwallis at Yorktown. It is difficult to estimate the exact number of African-American soldiers who fought on the American side in the Revolution, probably somewhere between ten and twenty percent (quite a few fought for the British as well). Historians who have studied the records believe that George Washington won the war with an army that was more integrated than any American military force until Vietnam.

In December of 1775 while Washington was trying to deal with the idea of having blacks in his army, he received a letter which began:

I have taken the freedom to address your Excellency in the enclosed poem and entreat your acceptance, though I am not insensible to its inaccuracies. Your being appointed by the Grand Continental Congress to be Generalissimo to the armies of North America, together with the fame of your virtues, excite sensations not easy to suppress.

Enclosed with the letter was a six-stanza poem of praise for the recipient which concluded

Proceed, great chief with virtue on thy side,
Thy ev'ry action let the goddess guide.
A crown, a mansion, and a throne that shine,
With gold unfading, WASHINGTON! be thine.

The author was Phillis Wheatley, who had arrived in Boston as a child on a slave ship and eventually became the first black, the first slave, and only the third American woman to have a book of poems published. Although her paen to Washington strikes the modern reader as antique in style, its classical allusions, not to mention its subject, captivated Washington. Then the unthinkable happened. Washington wrote the free young black woman a letter of appreciation, which ended with this paragraph:

If you should ever come to Cambridge, or near headquarters, I shall be happy to see a person so favored by the muses, and to whom Nature has been so liberal and beneficent in her dispensations. I am, with great respect, your humble servant, G. Washington.

There is no official record of what transpired between the general and the black poetess when she came to visit. Henry Wienczek, author of *An Imperfect God*, comments:

Washington's meeting with Wheatley and his decision to admit blacks to his army reveal his dawning awareness of something . . . It is hard to credit "the North" for the change in Washington, for Northerners held slaves and some of them resisted enlisting blacks as stoutly as any Southerners . . . Rather one must credit northern blacks for the general's newfound tendency, as tentative as it was, to put aside the customs of mastery and follow humane instincts. Their demeanor, spirit, and patriotism apparently touched him.

Historian Wienczek does, I think, a remarkable job of following Washington's long psychological journey concerning slavery, beginning with his aspiration to become a member of the Virginia slaveholding aristocracy. In its beginning, he, like them, gave little thought to buying and selling his slaves, breaking up families in the process, and in at least one instance raffling off children. The journey ended in Washington's being repulsed by the "peculiar institution." His will freed all of the 123 slaves he owned himself, providing for the continued sustenance of the older ones and the education of the younger ones. Martha's larger number of "dower slaves" were beyond his reach. She certainly had no intention of following his example and undoubtedly she and the members of both her family and Washington's were aghast when they found out what he intended to do.

So why didn't George Washington free his slaves sometime during his lifetime, as "Councillor" Carter had done in 1789, instead of putting the act off until his death ten years later in 1799? As his actions and statements, not only in regard to slavery but other areas of his life indicate, Carter was, to say the least, highly eccentric and seems not to have cared what people thought. Washington had been taught by bitter experience not to expect too much of human nature, but cared very much about his reputation. Carter's behavior, especially his Deed of Gift, eventually alienated him from his family and friends in Virginia. In 1793 he moved to Baltimore where he lived a lonely and aimless existence until his death in 1804. "I do acknowledge that my plans and advice have never been pleasing to the world," he wrote to a daughter the year before he died.

Patrick Henry had been absolutely right when he told the Virginia Convention of 1788, "But is it practicable by any human means to liberate [the slaves of the South] without producing the most dreadful and ruinous consequences?" Jefferson famously said, "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that His justice cannot sleep forever."

Washington, too, had premonitions of what might come if slavery were not abolished. "I can clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union," he stated bluntly. During his presidency the pre-eminent Founding Father made the startling, indeed amazing, remark that if the Union split into North and South, "he had made up his mind to remove and be of the Northern."

Historian Henry Wiencek asserts that when Washington confided to his first biographer, Colonel David Humphreys of Connecticut, his “regret” over slavery,” he invoked “the justice of the Creator,” an invocation Lincoln echoed in 1865 in his Second Inaugural Address:

“Fondly do we hope—fervently do we pray—that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue, until all the wealth piled by the bond-man’s 250 years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, . . . so still it must be said, ‘the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous.’ ”

Dr. Johnson has been keeping an eye on us Americans ever since he arrived in his Anglican High Church heaven in 1784. He knows we have come a long way since Lincoln’s time. He also knows we still have a long way to go towards becoming the kind of society our Founders declared they wanted. Nevertheless, I am bold to address the venerable doctor as follows:

Dr. Johnson, Sir: We here in your former colonies have a saying that God looks after babies, drunks, and the United States of America. Although I will admit that lately we have been sorely trying the Lord’s patience, I believe this still to be true. I know you are not inclined to listen to a small-town curmudgeon from Virginia, so please allow me to quote to you one of your distinguished countrymen who, like you, had a way with the English language, a reputation as a curmudgeon almost as great as your own, and who, if you will forgive my saying so, has gone down in history with even greater fame

Dr. Johnson: Winston Churchill once observed that “Americans will always do the right thing . . . after they’ve exhausted all the alternatives.” As I’m sure you know, Sir Winston, was voted the greatest-ever Briton in the 2002 BBC poll of the 100 greatest Britons in history—although I will admit that Princess Diana’s coming in third does make one wonder.

We American curmudgeons have a saying that no good deed goes unpunished. Sir, I am sure you have followed current events over the years, and I know you are familiar with the following story. But please allow me to tell it to illustrate a point for the ladies and gentlemen assembled here who are too young to remember and may not have had history in school: Winston Churchill’s reward for leading Great Britain to victory during World War II was to be defeated immediately after it ended in 1945 in favor of Clement Atlee and his Labor Party. Nevertheless, two years later, on November 11, 1947, he rose in the House of Commons and declared:

Many forms of government have been tried, and will be tried in this world of sin and woe. No one pretends that democracy is perfect or all-wise.

Indeed, it has been said that democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.

We are still trying, Dr. Johnson, and may God continue to look out for the United States of America, along with the babies and the drunks. Good night, sir. I hope you found an answer to your question somewhere in this paper

**Bibliography for
“How Shall We Answer Dr. Johnson?”**

A Paper Presented to the Sphex Club of Lynchburg by James M. Elson on 11 Oct 07
(All books available in paperback and at the Lynchburg Public Library)

Patrick Henry in His Speeches and Writings and in the Words of His Contemporaries, compiled and annotated by James M. Elson (Lynchburg: Warwick House, 2007). See the Prologue by Judge Spencer Roane; an excerpt from a “fragment of a manuscript found with [Henry’s] papers,” 60-63; Henry’s letter to Quaker Robert Pleasants, 66-68; and his June 24 speech to the Virginia Convention of 1788, 135-137.

American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson, by Joseph J. Ellis (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); winner of the National Book Award in nonfiction. See entries for slavery in the index, particularly 101-106, 171-180, 314-316.

American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence, by Pauline Maier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997).

Notes on the State of Virginia, by Thomas Jefferson, edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1954). See “Query XIV, Laws” and “Query XVIII, Manners.”

“Thomas Jefferson and Antislavery: The Myth Goes On” by Paul Finkelman in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, volume 102, number 2 (April 1994). Available at the Jones Memorial Library.

There are a number of books at the Lynchburg Public Library and in the bookstores on the Thomas Jefferson-Sally Hemmings controversy. A good place to start on the internet is the website of the Thomas Jefferson Foundation (formerly the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation), which at present is taking a neutral position on the “did he or didn’t he?” question.

An Imperfect God: George Washington, His Slaves, and the Creation of America by Henry Wiencek (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003). By far the best study on the subject to date.

In *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*, Chapter 3, “The Silence” (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2000), winner of the Pulitzer Prize for History, Joseph J. Ellis offers a fascinating explanation of why his subjects, who won a revolution and founded a great country, could not rid it of the curse of slavery.

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For aspiring curmudgeons *The Portable Curmudgeon*, compiled and edited by Jon Winokur (New York: Nal Books, New American Library, 1987) is highly recommended.