

# Thomas Jefferson could teach Trump about American Greatness

“The American Dream is dead,” [Donald Trump has proclaimed](#). Trump assures us not to worry because he is “gonna make it bigger and better and stronger than ever before.” And then comes Trumps’ oft-repeated punchline: “We are going to make America great again.”

## Where is American Greatness Found?

In his book [The Concept of Mind](#), the late British philosopher Gilbert Ryle discusses the concept of the “category mistake.” A category mistake occurs when we treat a thing as if it belongs to a category which it doesn’t, such as when we confuse the whole with the properties of the parts. Ryle gives this famous example:

*A foreigner visiting Oxford or Cambridge for the first time is shown a number of colleges, libraries, playing fields, museums, scientific departments, and administrative offices. He then asks, ‘But where is the University? I have seen where the members of the Colleges live, where the Registrar works, where the scientists experiment and the rest. But I have not yet seen the University in which reside and work the members of your University.’*

Ryle gives the further example of a foreigner looking at the sport of cricket and wondering, “Where does team-spirit come from?” He can’t find team-spirit in any of the parts – bowlers, batters, or fielders.

So, where is Trump’s American greatness found? Here are just a few of the parts that Trump has mentioned: manufacturing jobs,

trade balances, and the nationalities of its citizens. Is this really where American greatness is found?

American greatness cannot be found by examining the parts; greatness is a phenomenon that emerges as the parts interact and create much more than we could have imagined.

So the real question is not, "In which parts of America is American greatness found," but, "What enables American greatness?" Trump is clueless about what enables American greatness, but Thomas Jefferson had it right from the start.

### **What Enables American Greatness?**

In [Thomas Jefferson's first inaugural address of 1801](#), he reflected on the duty before him. Rather than proclaiming his own greatness, as Trump often does, he found greatness in the country's founding principles. Greatness was not to be found in men but in ideas and in the documents, especially the Constitution, that enshrine them.

*I approach [my duty] with those anxious and awful presentiments which the greatness of the charge and the weakness of my powers so justly inspire... When I contemplate these transcendent objects [a rising nation], and see the honor, the happiness, and the hopes of this beloved country committed to the issue and the auspices of this day, I shrink from the contemplation, and humble myself before the magnitude of the undertaking. Utterly, indeed, should I despair did not the presence of many whom I here see remind me that in the other high authorities provided by our Constitution I shall find resources of wisdom, of virtue, and of zeal on which to rely under all difficulties.*

When Jefferson wrote of his "powers" he was speaking of his abilities; he was not bemoaning his lack of presidential powers. For Jefferson, what guides a great nation forward is not fallible men but principles:

*Principles form the bright constellation which has gone before us and guided our steps through an age of revolution and reformation. The wisdom of our sages and blood of our heroes have been devoted to their attainment. They should be the creed of our political faith, the text of civic instruction, the touchstone by which we try the services of those we trust; and should we wander from them in moments of error or of alarm, let us hasten to retrace our steps and to regain the road which alone leads to peace, liberty, and safety.*

These principles included:

- “Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political.”
- “Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.”

Jefferson went on to speak of supporting “State governments in all their rights;” of individual rights, such as freedom of press; and obligations of government, such as “economy” and payment of debts.

“Sometimes,” Jefferson observed, “man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others?”

### **Greatness in Principle**

Few politicians today, and neither Trump nor Clinton, have much use for Jeffersonian principles such as the rule of law and peace with all nations.

Jefferson said, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle.”

The American brethren believed in “equal right...to the acquisitions of our own industry, to honor and confidence from

our fellow-citizens, resulting not from birth, but from our actions and their sense of them; enlightened by a benign religion, professed, indeed, and practiced in various forms, yet all of them inculcating honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man.”

Jefferson stressed character. Our rights didn't come without obligation to live by our own highest values. Thus, our rights are guaranteed not only by documents, but by our character. Without “harmony and affection,” Jefferson believed, liberty is “dreary.”

Jefferson's hope that we live by “honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man” has been trampled in today's polarized politics. Of political intolerance, Jefferson warned, “Having banished from our land that religious intolerance under which mankind so long bled and suffered.. we have yet gained little if we countenance a political intolerance as despotic, as wicked, and capable of as bitter and bloody persecutions.”

Near the end of his inaugural address, Jefferson returned to his own fallibility. He said, “I shall often go wrong through defect of judgment.” It is hard to imagine either Trump or Clinton admitting their own “defects of judgment.” Trump and Clinton, devoid of any discernible principles, believe they can guide America. Both seem to think they are smarter than others. Both seem to have contempt for opinions other than their own. Both seem to have little understanding of the founding principles that led to American greatness.

American greatness is not found in countable things or in the rule of men. American greatness is found in our principles and in our character.



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*This article was originally published on [FEE.org](#). Read the [original article](#).*