

Great Book Discussion Questions – *American Sphinx*

The primary thesis of *American Sphinx* is that while Thomas Jefferson is a beloved figure, he is ultimately unknowable (hence the title – Sphinx a mythical, secretive being). Joseph Ellis believes that part of Jefferson's secretive nature is due to the fact that he was able to hold seemingly contradictory opinions of events, beliefs, and people in his mind simultaneously. Our discussion questions will focus on the aspects of Jefferson's philosophy that may be considered to be contradictory.

1. Jefferson believed that men could live in harmony without the requirement of closely defined laws or rules. Is this belief reflected in the Declaration of Independence or in the Constitution of the United States?
2. Did Jefferson's belief in mankind's ability to live in harmony without rules, large government, or closely defined laws impede his ability to govern?
3. Is Jefferson's idea that each generation should be free to interpret and implement its own laws, rules and customs a workable idea?
4. How did Jefferson's idea that a "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants," cause him to view the horrors of the French Revolution? Was Jefferson's view of the French Revolution justified?
5. Based upon the material presented in the book, can we know Jefferson's beliefs on slavery? Do Jefferson's beliefs regarding slavery lend some credence to Ellis' arguments that Jefferson could hold two seemingly contradictory views on the same subject?
6. Jefferson has been cited as a proponent of states' rights, and his arguments for states' rights were used as a means of justifying secession during the Civil War. Similarly, Jefferson's views on limiting slavery to the Southern states, and the failure of the Southern states to address the slavery issue, provided the North with an argument favoring the abolition of slavery. How can one man's beliefs be used to support arguments from both sides in the Civil War?
7. After reading this book, have your views on Jefferson changed? Do you now hold him in greater or lesser esteem, or is your opinion unchanged? Why?