



Written by [Steve Byas](#) on June 21, 2016

Neoconservative Michael Gerson Trashes Thomas Jefferson In Attack on Trump

As part of an ongoing effort to attack expected Republican nominee Donald Trump, *Washington Post* syndicated columnist Michael Gerson (shown) tried to disparage Trump's morals and, in doing so, said he was worse than presidents who'd had mistresses, such as Thomas Jefferson's "concubine," because "Trump's worldview offers no limiting principles when it comes to the use and abuse of power." He added that Trump is not an institutionalist, a constitutionalist, or a libertarian — each of which might balance Trump's penchant for divisiveness and belligerence on the domestic and national scene.



In the column, entitled "Trump candidacy reminds GOP that character counts," Gerson said,

Trump's ... pronouncements — doubling down on immigration restrictions and raising questions about the loyalty of Muslim Americans — are counterproductive to the task of counter-terrorism, undermining domestic cooperation on homeland security and complicating relations with allies and proxies.

Neither the claims that Trump's policies would necessarily be worse than a neoconservative candidate — such as Marco Rubio or Jeb Bush — or the blanket condemnation of our past presidents ring with much credence. In fact, the very idea that Gerson is taking this tack is almost ridiculous, especially considering his background.

A prominent member of the administration of President George W. Bush, Michael John Gerson embodies the self-righteous political philosophy associated with Bush's more "moderate" brand of Republicanism: "compassionate conservatism." If Gerson wants to know whom to blame for the rise of Donald Trump, he need look no further than in the mirror. It was the Bush administration's involving the Republican Party in the Iraq War, and pulling it to the left on domestic matters, that led to the party's loss of Congress in 2006 and the White House in 2008.

A former senior fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR), Gerson was the chief speech writer for Bush from 2001 to 2006. But he had much more influence on the Bush presidency than simply composing speeches. He penned the famous words of Bush's second inaugural, "So, it is the policy of the United States to seek and support the growth of democratic movements and institutions in every nation and culture, with the ultimate goal of ending tyranny in our world."

Such hyper-interventionist, hyper-Wilsonian, and globalist rhetoric was certainly striking, but its attempted implementation would have no doubt left dead American soldiers all over the world.

Gerson was the man who developed the "smoking gun/mushroom cloud" mixed-metaphor that was used



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to persuade Congress and the American people that Saddam Hussein was a nuclear threat to his neighbors and the United States. More than anything else, this fear convinced the American people and Congress to support the invasion of Iraq, which, incidentally, played no role in the attacks on 9/11. This leaves one to wonder if Trump could be any worse than a candidate favored by Michael Gerson?

Truth be out, Gerson is a prominent neoconservative who regularly criticizes conservatives in his columns if they deviate from his neoconservative doctrines. In one column, "Letting Fear Rule," he even called conservatives who opposed Bush's immigration bill "nativist bigots." So it is not surprising that Gerson does not like Trump, whose stand against uncontrolled immigration is a hallmark of his presidential bid.

His libel of previous presidents also rings hollow, in at least one case, wherein he made use of the libel that Thomas Jefferson had a slave mistress named Sally Hemings.

Impugning of the character of our third president, and the author of the Declaration of Independence is not unique to Gerson. A recent posting on Yahoo News included the alleged Jefferson-Hemings affair as part of its story entitled "Twenty White House Mistresses Who 'Served' Their Country." In the Yahoo article, the claim is made that "rumor had it that the couple actually had six children together."

Besides reporting unproven "rumor" as serious news, Yahoo's story can be questioned at several points. For example, it also alleged that President James Buchanan had a homosexual affair with another politician, William Rufus King, "when James Buchanan's wife died." The problem is, Buchanan never had a wife. He did have a fiancée, however, who died before their wedding took place.

While Yahoo and other Internet sites can repeat falsehoods and half-truths that are far too often taken as the truth by a gullible public, Gerson's column is widely read by a more serious audience, and is, therefore, a more dangerous libel.

But why attack Thomas Jefferson, one of the most prominent of our Founders? Perhaps Gerson is simply willing to trash a Founding Father, such as Jefferson, if it can help him in his attacks upon Trump, or perhaps he is simply unaware that the arguments linking Jefferson and his slave as lovers are extremely flimsy. Neither explanation is flattering to Gerson.

The charges against the Sage of Monticello in this matter are weak. Jefferson's wife, Patsy Wayles Skelton, died young, following a difficult pregnancy. On her deathbed, she extracted a promise from him that he would never marry again. It was a promise he would honor the rest of his life. It also left him open to rumors of "affairs."

While Jefferson was president, James Callender supported him and his Republican Party (not the same as the modern Republican Party, which was not formed until 1854). But Callender became angry when Jefferson would not appoint him as a postmaster, so he retaliated by accusing Jefferson in opposition newspapers of carrying on with Sally Hemings, one of his slaves. "By this wench Sally, our president has had several children," he insisted.

The story was mostly dismissed at the time, even by political opponents of Jefferson, such as John Adams; however, "juicy gossip" has a way of hanging around.

Then, in 1976 historian Fawn Brodie boldly made the case in her book *Thomas Jefferson, An Intimate History* that Jefferson's supposed affair with Sally began while he served as U.S. minister to France in the 1780s, when she was still a teenager, and the child she conceived in France was Jefferson's.

Despite this book's explosive thesis — that Jefferson had taken the 14-year-old Sally to Paris with him



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and his daughters (Sally's primary job was to watch over the Jefferson girls) — the ugly accusation received little traction until the release of DNA findings in 1998.

In 1998, the English journal *Nature* reported a DNA “match” of a male descendant of Sally's son, Eston Hemings, and a “Jefferson male.” This was presented as “proof” of the nearly 200-year-old rumor that Jefferson had a sexual relationship with a slave girl.

However, a closer examination of the results reveals no such thing.

In a scientific DNA test, the samples must come from those in the direct male line, or male-to-male all the way from the person in the distant past to the present. No DNA from Thomas Jefferson was possible, as he had no living “direct male” descendants.

Because DNA could not be obtained from a direct descendant of Thomas Jefferson, DNA samples were taken from a direct male descendant of Jefferson's uncle, Field Jefferson. Another sample was obtained from direct male descendants of Eston Hemings, Sally's youngest son. A DNA sample was also taken from a direct male descendant of a man named Thomas Woodson because the Woodsons had long contended they were descended from President Jefferson. Importantly, however, Eston Hemings' descendants had never made such a claim.

The DNA tests showed that Eston Hemings was the child of a male member of the Jefferson family, and Thomas Woodson was not a descendant of Thomas Jefferson, or any other Jefferson. This conclusion concerning Woodson contradicts the claim that the “Tom” (thought to be Woodson) whom Callender described in his initial 1802 article was Jefferson's son. This “Tom” is thought to be the boy that young Sally conceived in France. But what about Eston?

The revelation that Eston Hemings was descended from a “Jefferson male” created an immediate sensation, and the unscientific jump to the conclusion that President Jefferson was his ancestor, though Hemings' family stories told another story: that they were descended from a “Jefferson uncle,” not Jefferson himself.

The commission that conducted the DNA work concluded: “After a careful review of all the evidence, the commission agrees unanimously that the allegation [that Thomas Jefferson was the father of Eston Hemings] is by no means proven; and we find that is regrettable that public confusion about the 1998 DNA testing and other evidence has misled many people.”

Despite the commission's conclusions, the spin that the *Nature* article placed on the DNA findings, the way the media chose to report those findings, and the conclusions reached by other sloppy writers (such as Gerson) since, have led to the widespread perception that Thomas Jefferson essentially committed statutory rape of a teenage girl in Paris and continued the affair for several years after his return to Virginia, fathering several children by the slave woman, over whom he exercised legal control.

Doctor Eugene Foster, who conducted the tests, later wrote that he was “embarrassed by the blatant spin of the *Nature* article.” He added, “My experience with this matter so far tells me that no matter how often I repeat it, it will not stop the media from saying what they want.”

Yet, if the DNA indicates a male of the Jefferson line was the father of Eston Hemings, then who else besides Thomas Jefferson is a logical candidate as the father?

Field Jefferson could not have been that uncle, as he had died several years before Eston Hemings' conception. Another paternal uncle of Jefferson's had likewise died years earlier.

Jefferson's younger brother, Randolph Jefferson, however, had earned a reputation for socializing with



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Jefferson's slaves, and he was at Monticello approximately nine months before the birth of Eston Hemings. While Randolph Jefferson was Jefferson's brother, not his uncle, Randolph was known at Monticello as "Uncle Randolph," because, of course, he was the uncle of Thomas Jefferson's acknowledged children by his late wife. According to Martha Jefferson Randolph, her father's younger brother was "Uncle Randolph," and he was always referred to that way in family letters.

While it is not proven that Randolph was Eston's father, it is clearly more likely than the assertion that Thomas Jefferson was Eston's father.

Despite the scant evidence against Thomas Jefferson, media reports at the time of the DNA tests were quick to pronounce him guilty as charged. The *Washington Post* (the paper for which Gerson writes his column, and is syndicated) asserted that the genetic testing "almost certainly proves our third president fathered at least one child by Sally Hemings."

Noted historian Forrest McDonald, a devotee of the greatness of Jefferson's political opponent Alexander Hamilton, was once inclined to believe the rumors, but after carefully reviewing all the evidence, including the 1998 DNA findings, concluded, "I'm always delighted to hear the worst about Thomas Jefferson. It's just that this particular thing won't wash."

While it is understandable that the general public has not heard this evidence, which largely exonerates Jefferson of this serious charge, Gerson should not flippantly use these unproven accusations in his writings against Trump.

However, considering the role Gerson played in dragging the United States into a debacle in the Middle East, this may be the lesser of his sins.

Photo of Michael Gerson: [AvianMaid](#)



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