

Jefferson Never Said "That Government Governs Best Which Governs Least"



December 13, 2018 at 10:53 AM

For most of my life I have heard attributed to Thomas Jefferson the phrase "that government governs best which governs least." However after I learned that Thomas Jefferson was so much an admirer of Epicurus, I began to question whether Jefferson would really have made a statement that tends toward an "absolutist" position in stating that one form of government will always be the best.

Turns out the internet has several good pages that point out that there is no documentation that Jefferson ever said that.

Here is the page from Monticello.org and here is another from the Foundation for Economic Education.

It looks like the true source of the quote is many years later from either Thoreau or the "United States Magazine and Democratic Review."

Given Jefferson's many Epicurean viewpoints, I don't think he would likely make a statement like this without qualifiers that would stem from the same principles that Epicurus quoted in PD 30 - 40. Whether a government governs a little, or a lot, is going to depend on the circumstances of its people at a particular time and place, and it's not always going to be "least" any more than it's always going to be "most."

There are many fascinating letters and other documents in which Jefferson illustrated that he was an acute student of Epicurus, and I have collected links to many of them [here](#).