

STATEMENT TO THE NEW YORK CITY COUNCIL HEARING ON REMOVING THE
D'ANGERS STATUE OF THOMAS JEFFERSON FROM CITY HALL

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Removal of the David D'Angers statue of Thomas Jefferson from City Hall would be a direct attack on a symbol of the democratic values New Yorkers hold dear. The statue *specifically* honors Jefferson for his greatest contribution to America, indeed, to humankind: the basic idea – radical then, radical now – that *all* men are created equal, the idea that animates the Declaration of Independence, and that connotes religious freedom. Nothing like it had ever been stated or even imagined before as the basis for a political order without kings or hereditary aristocrats or theocrats. It is an idea so capacious and audacious that it outstripped the realities of Jefferson's time, nourishing abolitionists, women's rights' advocates, and every other variety of human rights champion down to *our* own time.

There were those who said, while he still lived, that Jefferson the slaveholder could not have *really* meant what he wrote, that some people really *were* created more equal than others. *But never, in public or in private, did Jefferson back off from or seek to amend or modify his finest contribution.*

There is no honoring Jefferson without reservation, but there is no dishonor in that, *with respect to slavery and racial justice as with every other struggle for equality.* By removing his statue we would forget how America's racist proslavery leaders came to repudiate Jefferson's Declaration as a collection of "self-evident lies" -- standing rebukes to their barbaric cause. Nor can we forget that Jefferson's enduring words and actions set the very standard by which *we* find *him* wanting, the standard to which Dr. King appealed when he quoted Jefferson on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. Lincoln, meanwhile, warned that those who would forsake Jefferson were "the vanguard – the miners and sappers – of returning despotism." To disown Jefferson now, with despotism on the rise in our country as never before in our lifetimes, would be a symbolic blow, especially to the most vulnerable among us, for whom Jefferson's cry of equality remains the last best hope.