

Belittle

Thomas Jefferson was the first to use this word to describe Count de Buffon's books on natural history. Efforts to belittle the word "belittle" did not stop people from using the word. | Words and Their Stories

Now, the VOA Special English program *Words and Their Stories*.

Today's word is "belittle." It was first used by Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the United States.

Many years ago, a French naturalist, the Count de Buffon, wrote some books about natural history. The books were a great success even though some critics did not like them. Some critics said, "Count Buffon is more of a poet than a scientist."

Thomas Jefferson did not like what the Count had said about the natural wonders of the New World. It seemed to Jefferson that the Count had gone out of his way to speak of natural wonders in America as if they were unimportant.

This troubled Thomas Jefferson. He, too, was a naturalist -- as well as a farmer, inventor, historian, writer and politician. He had

seen the natural wonders of Europe. To him, they were no more important than those of the New World.

In 1788, Thomas Jefferson wrote about his home state, Virginia. While writing, he thought of its natural beauty and then of the words of Count de Buffon. At that moment, Jefferson created a new word -- belittle. He said, "The Count de Buffon believes that nature belittles her productions on this side of the Atlantic."

Noah Webster, the American word expert, liked this word. He put it in his English language dictionary in 1806: "Belittle -- to make small, unimportant."

Americans had already accepted Jefferson's word and started to use it. In 1797, the Independent Chronicle newspaper used the word to describe a politician the paper supported. "He is an honorable man," the paper wrote, "so let the opposition try to belittle him as much as they please."

In 1844, the Republican Sentinel of Virginia wrote this about the opposition party: "The Whigs may attempt to belittle our candidates...that is a favorite game of theirs."

In 1872, a famous American word expert decided that the time had come to kill this word. He said, "Belittle has no chance of becoming English. And as more critical writers of America -- like those of Britain -- feel no need of it, the sooner it is forgotten, the better."

This expert failed to kill the word. Today, belittle is used not only in the United States and England, but in other countries where the English language is spoken. It seems that efforts to belittle the word did not stop people from using it.

You have been listening to the VOA Special English program *Words and Their Stories*.

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