



Thomas Jefferson and the New Empire

By Daniel Callaway

When Thomas Jefferson's plan to purchase a small area of land at the mouth of the Mississippi transformed into an opportunity to acquire Napoleon's entire Louisiana territory, the American republic nearly doubled in geographic size overnight. According to Joseph J. Ellis in *American Sphinx*, gaining nearly half a continent for about three cents per acre was an even bigger steal than the purchase of Manhattan. It was perhaps the most consequential achievement of Jefferson's presidency as well as an example of taking wise advantage of fortuitous circumstances (Ellis 204, 211). Indeed, such an acquisition in terms of land and resources could do nothing but produce significant consequences as far as constitutional, economic, and social issues are concerned. Acting according to what he believed would benefit national interest, Thomas Jefferson wavered from a traditionally doctrinaire interpretation of the Constitution. In the realm of the economy, the United States gained an unbelievable amount of capital and resources as yet undiscovered by the young republic. The Purchase also provided an impetus for westward exploration and settlement that would create inevitable conflict with a brutally displaced Native American population. The Louisiana Purchase itself was not the history lesson. Rather, the lesson lies in how America handled its newly received power.

A beginning stage in acquiring the Louisiana territory was Thomas Jefferson's inaugural address. It reaffirmed Washington's foreign policy ideal of isolation and nonalignment. Jefferson admonished the nation to seek "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none" (Gordon 168). It was this vow against potentially dangerous commitment that would prove a plus for American interest. Settlers west of the Appalachian Mountains found it virtually impossible to ship their bulky produce over the mountains to eastern markets. Rather, they came to depend upon the Mississippi River for transportation of their goods to the port of New Orleans where Americans had gained right of deposit from Spain by the Pinckney treaty in 1795 (Gordon 168).

Jefferson treated the Mississippi Valley with quite a proprietary attitude; the River's impact on agrarian prosperity west of the Appalachians was enormous. In the 1780's, when Jefferson received word that John Jay was negotiating the surrender of American navigation rights on the Mississippi to Spain, he was incensed. Both Jefferson and James Madison described the Mississippi as the "major artery of the American body politic" (Ellis 205). Jefferson had always kept a close eye on the trans-Mississippi continent. In his Secretary of State days, he was comfortable with Spain's ownership of the land and merely saw it as a kind of temporary arrangement until the United States could take the reins. Such certainty shifted in 1802 when rumors reached Washington that Spain had ceded the rights to the territory to

Napoleon. French presence immediately threatened American security and the prospect of westward expansion (Ellis 205).

To add to the friction caused by a major European power brushing alongside the United States, the right of deposit in New Orleans was suspended in 1802. The suspension enraged western settlers who were now stripped of their principal source of financial support. Jefferson stood firmer in the conviction that any foreign nation possessing New Orleans was indeed "our natural and habitual enemy" (Gordon 168). Despite his amicable relationship with the French, Jefferson took immediate steps to negotiate with France for the purchase of New Orleans.

It was at this stage that America's commitment to nonalignment helped her; conversely, France's entanglements in the Anglo-French conflict and elsewhere in the Americas hindered its national goals. Ellis calls Louisiana the "providential gift from the insurgent slaves and malaria-carrying mosquitoes of Santo Domingo" where Napoleon had sent a failed twenty-five thousand man force in order to put down a slave insurrection led by Toussaint L'Ouverture. That very army was intended to proceed to New Orleans after dismantling the revolt in Santo Domingo, but its virtual extinction was an unplanned cause of Napoleon's decision to cut his losses in North America and sell not only New Orleans, but the entire holdings he had obtained from Spain. In essence, the acquisition of Louisiana was not a result of American diplomacy but rather of a turning tide in European history.

Although the Louisiana Purchase manifested many traits of a gift, it was indeed the wisdom of the United States in availing itself to what the Anglo-French War offered that allowed the Purchase to be realized. It was at this phase that Thomas Jefferson adopted one of his Federalist opponents' views--a loose interpretation of the constitution--in order to thwart any likely partisan attempts to diminish his efforts. Jefferson trod cautiously concerning the agreement with France because the Constitution did not specifically allocate authority to the federal government to purchase territory. Noble Cunningham reports in *In Pursuit of Reason* that Jefferson initially suggested a constitutional amendment to provide the necessary power; however, a delay in the proceedings might have led Napoleon to withdraw his offer. So Jefferson decided to purchase the territory under the executive power to make treaties (Cunningham 266). Jefferson did try to set an example against broad interpretation of the Constitution by proposing an amendment approving what had been done, but seeing that his Republican colleagues met the decision with support, the issue of constitutionality was pushed to the margin. The treaty was ratified in the increasingly Republican-ruled legislative bodies.

Jefferson's process of acquisition proves ironic today. He violated his most cherished political principles in order to secure the territory, and he temporarily transformed himself into the monarchical head he had always warned against (Ellis 208). In the Louisiana decision, Jefferson wielded more power than any English monarch over the colonies, explaining, "It is incumbent on those who accept great charges to risk themselves on great occasions. To lose our country by a scrupulous adherence to written laws would be to lose the law itself" (Ellis 208). To Jefferson, the West was indeed America's future. When events produced the opportunity to eliminate European power from America's western border, he seized the opportunity to provide posterity with a seemingly endless horizon. Perhaps he beheld the West as many post-modern optimists view technology--endless and borderless (Ellis 212). It provided hope that America might sustain his agrarian ideal of a society built upon the solid foundation of small

farms and space to postpone the possibility of crowded, congested European conditions. Beyond the Mississippi, Jefferson's eye saw an ever self-replenishing fountain of youth for the American republic (Ellis 212).

Though the Louisiana Purchase did double the size of the United States, virtually creating an empire, such immense expansion could not develop without consequence. Besides setting a constitutional precedent, the Purchase also set a precedent for acquisition of other lands, providing a springboard for the impending conviction of Manifest Destiny. In 1804, Lewis and Clark spearheaded the eager surge to learn more about the new territory and made their way from Saint Louis across the Rocky Mountains to the Pacific Ocean. This inspired more and more American settlers to forge westward; conflict with the Native American population would result.

Jefferson had thought that the Indians could move to the new territories purchased from France. He proposed to Congress that the Indian population could be civilized by being encouraged to settle down on smaller tracts of land, give up hunting, and trade with whites, "leading them thus to agriculture, to manufactures, and civilization" (Zinn 125). However, the Indian in most American eyes was not needed. Indeed, he was an obstacle to be dealt with by sheer force, thus was born the euphemism "Indian Removal." Whites cleared the land between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi for cotton and grain. The cost in human suffering and the loss of life is immeasurable (Zinn 124). Some statistics convey the story of what westward expansion did to the Indian population in the United States. In 1790, there were 3,900,000 Americans, the majority of whom lived within fifty miles of the Atlantic Ocean. By 1830, there were 13 million Americans, and by 1840, 4,500,000 had crossed the Appalachian Mountains. In 1820, 120,000 Indians lived east of the Mississippi. Twenty-four years later, only 30,000 remained. Most had been brutally and inhumanely forced to migrate west (Zinn 124). Thomas Jefferson said as Secretary of State that "where Indians lived within state boundaries, they should not be interfered with, and the government should remove white settlers who tried to encroach on them (Zinn 125)." Such admonishments were not heeded, nor were they enforced. The expansion of white settlers into the western territories delivered shattering blows to the Indian populations.

The Louisiana Purchase also forced the United States to look much more closely at another issue of human maltreatment. The expansion of the United States territory raised the question of which states would uphold slavery. Jefferson already faced the moral paradox of owning slaves and essentially denouncing slavery at the same time. Beginning with the Missouri question in 1819 concerning whether or not Missouri should be a free state, many leaders such as John Adams saw an opportunity to stand against an evil that could put the American republic at risk. Though emancipation would not come until that risk culminated in the Civil War, the expansion of the United States brought the question of slavery into a place where it could be questioned in terms of morality rather than economic benefit (Ellis 266).

The West opened up incredible amounts of economic opportunity for the United States. With complete control of the Mississippi River, agricultural prosperity grew, and new cities were being built throughout the new territories. One acquisition set the precedent for another, and America soon began to covet the land of its new neighbor, Mexico. The Purchase had set a powerful precedent that would spur the United States to push its borders as far as land allowed.

The Louisiana Purchase proved to have epochal status by virtue of its implications. Other than stretching the young republic into a twice-as-big empire, it encompassed new economic prosperity and opportunity, saw the assimilation of new cultures, and fixed previously unseen precedents for constitutional interpretation and the vision for further expansion. However, aside from the apparent benefits from the Purchase, many of the stories of what we did because of the acquisition are indeed parables; they reveal things deeper than the events themselves. Human history uncovers the incredible capacity human beings hold for destruction and maltreatment of one another as well as for sacrifice and greatness. Such stories point to the razor thin line between hero and villain in human conflict, and as Aleksander Solzhenitsyn wrote, that line runs down the middle of the heart of man.

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