



Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase: Triumph and Tragedy in Western Expansion

By Katherine Cieslak

The Louisiana Purchase of 1803 more than doubled the size of the United States, but it affected much more than just the physical size of the country. The acquisition of the new land exposed citizens and government officials to significant social, economic and constitutional issues. Socially, slavery spread to the west and became a major catalyst in the sectionalism that caused the Civil War. Americans also viewed the Purchase as an affirmation of Manifest Destiny, but the run for open land was a direct source of the Indian problem. Economically, the West was a place for new markets and financial prosperity. Constitutionally, the Purchase exposed questions about federal land policy and whether or not Thomas Jefferson, as President, had any power to add territory to U.S. holdings.

The Purchase was one of the most significant moves in the expansion of the West. In the early 19th century, half of all commerce left the country via the Port of New Orleans. Jefferson realized that he needed control of the port to maintain economic prosperity. He sent representatives to France to buy the port for \$10 million. French leader Napoleon Bonaparte needed the money and sold the whole twelve million acres for \$15 million (Balleck 8).

The Louisiana Purchase was an important addition to the country for several reasons. First, by buying the territory from France, Jefferson removed a powerful enemy from North America (Balleck 8). Second, he more than doubled the size of the United States, with hope that the size increase would provide a long term solution to the growing overpopulation problem. Jefferson subscribed to the ideas of writer Thomas Malthus, who believed that overpopulation could cause societal decay and could "be postponed through an abundance of land available to society, but that it would not forestall the inevitable - societal decay" (McCoy 110). Jefferson hoped that Louisiana Purchase would put off that decay for many years. Thirdly, expansion would greatly support the U.S. economy by opening new markets for agriculture and trade (Balleck 7).

Jefferson's main reasoning for the Purchase flowed from concern to maintain republican ideals. As Barry Balleck put it, Jefferson felt the acquisition of Louisiana was "of crucial importance to all Americans, not just to southerners and westerners, for it pushed far into the future that dreaded day when America would become a densely populated society characterized by inequality, luxury and decadence" (Balleck 11). Expansion also played a major role in heightening sectionalism in the first half of the 19th century. The West was supposed to be the "child that reunited its parents," (Burns) but became the catalyst that drove them further apart.

Until 1821, the U.S. had an even balance of free states and slave states. In 1819, Missouri asked to be admitted as a slave state, causing concern for the delicate balance in Congress. To maintain that balance of slave and free states, Congress paired the admission of Maine (petitioning to enter as a free state) with Missouri. Usually, however, "without limitation, the time, terms and circumstances of the admission of new states are referred to the discretion of Congress." (Wilentz 338). The Missouri Compromise also established the Missouri Compromise Line, which outlawed slavery above the line, with Missouri as the only exception (Wilentz 339).

People who settled the West took their cultures with them and most people--about 80 percent--moved laterally. Southerners saw expansion as a means to expand slavery and agrarianism. The North saw an opportunity to contain slavery where it already existed and establish Western territories as free. The conflicting ideas caused heated debate by the 1840s. In 1846, South Carolina senator John C. Calhoun warned that taking western lands before deciding what to do with them was like "eating arsenic" (Milner 160).

Further aggravating the slavery issue in expansionism, Illinois senator Stephen A. Douglas authored the Kansas-Nebraska Act in 1854. With this act, Kansas and Nebraska entered the Union, each state deciding the slave question by popular sovereignty. Douglas's law succeeded only in causing violence, however. From 1855-58, abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates were involved in "Bleeding Kansas," a small-scale civil war in Kansas over the slavery question (Burns).

Not all the implications of the Louisiana Purchase were negative. The new land convinced easterners to believe in "Manifest Destiny." "Manifest Destiny" was a phrase originated by John O'Sullivan, editor of the *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, in 1845. He used it to describe the popular view that the U.S. was geographically predestined to expand as far west as the Pacific coast. O'Sullivan believed expansion was "ordained by God and necessary for the multiplying millions." He exalted exceptionalism, noting that few countries had ever had such a chance to mold a land with a seemingly united set of values and beliefs (Milner, 169).

Jefferson also believed this, calling the west the "Empire of Liberty" (McCoy 113). He thought expanding was in the best interest of "national security" and was a place that "wherein would reside virtuous agrarian citizens who would secure for themselves and posterity Jefferson's ideals of 'life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness' into the distant future" (Balleck 13).

The common people of the U.S. had just as much enthusiasm for Westward expansion as Jefferson and O'Sullivan, although many of their reasons were more economic than social. Fur traders were looking for new hunting and trading grounds (Hurtado 147), while ranchers needed large areas of land to raise cattle and other livestock. Hunters went in search of buffalo and farmers scoured for fertile land to raise crops (Milner 93). In 1848, the Gold Rush attracted miners and other men and women who wanted to get rich quick to California (Milner 308). Jefferson was a true agrarian and he felt the farmers had the highest calling (McCoy 110). Thus, he would have agreed when a popular pamphlet of the time boasted that the Louisiana Purchase "bolstered the influence of the agricultural class, always the best repository of republican virtue

and it laid the basis for a flourishing commerce in the west that would cultivate an active, industrious and republican people" (Balleck 14).

Not everyone was happy about expansion, however. Indians living west of the Mississippi were now seeing tribal homelands and traditions overrun with white settlers. More often than not, Removal, a program endorsed by Andrew Jackson, forced Indians to give up their land for good. In 1810, Shawnee Indian Tecumseh protested land cessions because he believed the land belonged to the Indians. He said "it [the land] belongs to the first who sits down on his blanket or skins, which he has thrown upon the ground, and till he leaves it no other has a right" (Hurtado 170). Indians were forced to accept white ways in education, business and religion. Crow chief Plenty Coups commented on why Indians gave in to white ways. "Our decision was reached, not because we loved the white man who was already crowding other tribes into our country, or because we hated the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapahoe, but because we plainly saw that this course was the only one which might save our beautiful country for us. When I think back my heart sings because we acted as we did. It was the only way open to us" (Calloway 87).

By purchasing the Louisiana Territory, Thomas Jefferson contradicted his political stance as a strict constitutional constructionist and states' rights supporter (Balleck 1). Opponents attacked him for strengthening the power of the national government, but also for ignoring the boundaries of existing federal land policy. Jefferson knew that he would be severely criticized for using implied executive power and not adhering to strictly stated powers, thus strengthening the federal government. However, he defended his action by noting that, since the power to buy land was not strictly enumerated, then it was no more legal for himself than it would be for the states. "If the acquisition of territory is not warranted by the Constitution, it is not more legal for one state than for the United States" (Balleck 7).

Jefferson's opponents also used Article 4, Section 3, Clause 1, to justify their objections to the treaty. "New States may be admitted by the Congress into the Union; but no new State shall be formed or erected within the Jurisdiction of any other State; nor any State be formed by the Junction of two or more States, or Parts of States, without the Consent of the Legislatures of the States concerned as well as of the Congress" (US Constitution). In a letter to Wilson Cary Nicholas in 1803, Jefferson responded to his opponents' reasoning. "When I consider that the limits of the United States are precisely fixed by the Treaty of 1783, that the constitution expressly declares itself to be made for the United States, I cannot help believing the intention was to permit Congress to admit into the union new states which should be formed out of the territory for which and under whose authority alone they were then acting" (Wilentz 96). Thus, according to Jefferson, the Constitution allows the territory over which the federal government has control to change with time and circumstance.

The Louisiana Purchase was one of the most important events of Jefferson's presidency, playing a role in the physical, social, economic and constitutional aspects of the United States. Sectionalism in the West over slavery contributed to the Civil War, and a growing belief in Manifest Destiny encouraged the Indian problem. The economy experienced massive growth in trade and agriculture. The Purchase also caused some constitutional debate over who has the power to increase federal holdings and how the new lands should be governed.

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