

Thomas Jefferson's Impact on America and the Survival of the Republican State Through the Louisiana Purchase



By Carey L. Bostian

As our nation's first secretary of state, second vice president, and third president, as well as draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson was perceived by his fellow citizens as one of the most influential people in the short history of the United States. In 1801, his prominent position as leader of the Democratic-Republican political party led to his nomination and election to the office of President of the United States, in which he diligently served two four-year terms. Thomas Jefferson's pivotal decision to purchase the Louisiana territory in 1803 marked the zenith of his political career, but it posed a problem for the Republicans because his actions were widely perceived as a violation of the party's primary principles. However, Jefferson and his fellow party members felt that this land acquisition was vital to the survival of the Republican state and called for a temporary suspension of the stricter terms of their political philosophy.

The Louisiana territory, a tract of land covering more than 800,000 square miles between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains, was first explored and claimed by the French in 1682. American interest in the territory increased during the beginning of the 1800's, when many of the farmers living near the Mississippi River began using the waterway to transport their goods to New Orleans, from which point they were traded and shipped to other nations. Since the French made it difficult and costly for the American farmers to trade from the port, the United States sought to gain trading rights at the harbor. As Thomas Jefferson wrote in his letter to Robert Livingston, the United States ambassador to France, it was "impossible that France and the United States can continue long friends when they meet in so irritable a position" (qtd. Cunningham, 1987, p. 260). Consequently, Jefferson sent Livingston to negotiate an agreement with Napoleon for a small tract of land on the lower Mississippi, where the Americans could build their own seaport for a price of two million dollars or less. Impatient with Livingston's discussions, Jefferson decided to send James Monroe to Paris to offer Napoleon ten million dollars for New Orleans and West Florida. In April of 1803, the two men were informed by Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, Napoleon's foreign minister, that they must purchase the entire territory if they wanted control over any one part, so it was agreed that the United States would buy the Louisiana territory for fifteen million dollars, approximately three cents per acre. The treaty was signed on April 30, 1803.

While many Americans in 1803 saw the Louisiana Purchase as a territory rich in natural resources for citizens to settle, the land acquisition that nearly doubled the size of the United States also raised many controversial questions. The treaty spelled out all of the details concerning the transaction of the land passing from France to the United States, but it did not make it clear as to how the new territory should be governed. Politicians argued about whether to make the land into a colonial possession, add it as one large state, or divide it into a group of states. They also questioned what to do with the French settlers that had already made their home in the region. Much of the opposition to the contract came from the Federalist Party, consisting mostly of

northerners, who argued that fifteen million dollars was too much to pay for a tract of land assumed to be worthless and that the western and southern states would be the only beneficiaries of the purchase.

Another source of opposition came from those who believed in strict interpretation of the Constitution and state rights, since the Louisiana Purchase violated this traditional Republican viewpoint so staunchly upheld by Thomas Jefferson. The Jeffersonian concept of strict constitutional constructionism maintains "according to the still unratified Tenth Amendment that 'the powers not delegated to the United States by the Constitution, nor prohibited by it to the States, are reserved to the States respectively, or to the people'" (Cunningham, 1987 p. 165). Jefferson continually endorsed his position on this matter as was evident during the Congressional debates about the possibility of the national government chartering a private bank. According to Jefferson, the national government did not have the right to erect a bank since the Constitution made no mention of this power, and he felt that doing so would allow the United States to become a nation controlled by an elite group composed of the wealthy and prosperous. Being a farmer himself, Jefferson advocated a strict interpretation of the Constitution in order to protect the rights of American citizens from every socioeconomic class (Balleck, 1992). However, he went against this principle when he authorized the purchase of the entire Louisiana territory, and many questioned his allegiance to his supposed belief that the Constitution should be interpreted in a strict manner. There was no written clause in this document that gave the President the power to incorporate foreign territory into the United States, and therefore, according to Jefferson's concept of exact interpretation, he did not have the authority to sign the treaty with France (Carson, 1992). In one of his private letters, Jefferson acknowledged his moral dilemma when he wrote that "the general government has no powers but such as the Constitution has given it; and it has not given it a power of holding foreign territory, and still less of incorporating it into the Union" (qtd. Cunningham, 1987 pp. 265-266).

Regarding the Constitution as an inflexible document and being wary of a government that concentrated power in the hands of too few people, Jefferson and his fellow party members strongly promoted states' right. As indicated by his ideas clearly set forth in the Kentucky Resolutions of 1799, Jefferson deemed that the national government should have exclusive control over foreign affairs while states retained the right to manage all domestic affairs. He felt that the strong, centralized federal government endorsed by the Federalist Party posed a serious threat to the individual rights guaranteed to each American citizen. In keeping with a policy of strict Constitutional interpretation, Jefferson and other Republicans felt that the civil liberties of the populace would be protected since the administrative power would be more evenly dispersed (Balleck, 1992). By limiting the command of the federal government to simply that which was documented in the Constitution, the Republicans were ensuring that the central administration would never gain enough control to upset the authority of the state governments.

Many of his contemporary Americans hastily assumed that Jefferson's decision to purchase the vast amount of territory west of the Mississippi River not only went against his belief in strict interpretation but also against the idea of states' rights that he continually championed. By electing to sign the treaty without adding an amendment to the Constitution specifically giving the President the ability to increase the land area of the United States, Jefferson opened the door for future leaders to take advantage of powers not specifically enumerated in the text of

the document, lessening the influence of the states in domestic issues. In fact, Jefferson insisted that "to take a single step beyond the boundaries thus specially drawn around the powers of Congress, is to take possession of a boundless field of power, no longer susceptible of any definition" (qtd. Cunningham, 1987 p. 165).

Although Jefferson's acquisition of the Louisiana territory may have seemed to go against his principles, it served to achieve his political party's ultimate goal of preserving Republicanism and guaranteeing national security. Jefferson often voiced his opinion that Republicanism is the only form of government appropriate for the United States, but, as often documented with other republics, growth and development will eventually lead to a more centralized government with the real power of the country resting in the hands of a few (Balleck, 1992). Therefore, he believed, a limited government and a population of ethical citizens are needed in order for a Republican government to endure. The core beliefs of the Democratic-Republican Party, including a strict interpretation of the Constitution and states' rights, were intended to provide a means for prolonging the life of the republic. However, Jefferson saw the Louisiana Purchase as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity providing for the long-term security of Republicanism. By drastically extending the Western boundary of the United States, vast amounts of uncharted territory became available for civilians to explore and settle, dispersing our rapidly growing population. The resulting migration of Americans from the well developed, established cities lining the East coast to the wilderness beyond the Mississippi River served to distribute the populace more evenly, thus postponing the threat of urbanization. While continuing to believe that the mechanisms of strict interpretation and states' rights are crucial to the life of the Republic, Jefferson perceived the purchase of the Louisiana territory as a case in which the ends justifies the means. He felt that it was necessary to go against his beliefs temporarily by taking advantage of powers not specifically assigned to his position through the Constitution in order to ensure the preservation of Republicanism, his political party's fundamental objective. After this temporary breach of principles, Jefferson returned to his original standpoint regarding the structure of the national government (Balleck, 1992).

Although many members of the Federalist Party, and even some members of his own party, criticized Thomas Jefferson for abandoning his beliefs of strict Constitutional interpretation and states' rights when he agreed to the Louisiana Purchase, his actions were ultimately justified by the fact that he was trying to uphold the chief principle of the Democratic-Republican Party, that being to maintain Republicanism. In Jefferson's own words:

when we see ourselves in a situation which must be endured and gone through, it is best to meet it with firmness, and accommodate everything to it in the best way practicable. This lessens the evil, while fretting and fuming only increase your own torments (qtd. Cook, 1993).

Regardless of the opinions of others, Jefferson made a decision that had a tremendous, constructive impact on our nation, and he was willing to stick with this course of action even though it violated his personal beliefs. It took much courage for a man of his authority and prestige to put aside his individual convictions and doubts so that our society as a whole may benefit. His contemporaries recognized this courage, as have Americans ever since.

Works Cited

- Ambrose, Stephen E. (1996). Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West. New York: Touchstone.
- Balleck, Barry J. (1992). When the Ends Justify the Means: Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase. Presidential Studies Quarterly, 22 (4), 679-697.
- Carson, David A. (1992). Blank Paper of the Constitution: The Louisiana Purchase Debates. Historian, 54 (3), 477-491.
- Cook, John. (1993). The Book of Positive Quotations. Minneapolis: Fairview Press.
- Cunningham, Noble E., Jr. (1987). In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- The Treaty of the Louisiana Purchase. (No Date). Retrieved March 27, 2001 from the World Wide Web:
<http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/louisiana/>.