

**“We are all Federalists.
We are all Republicans.”
An Evaluation of Thomas Jefferson’s Presidency.**



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Although Americans of the present day may regard him as one of the most democratic and accomplished Presidents in the history of the United States, citizens of the early nineteenth century may not have felt that they benefited greatly from Thomas Jefferson’s actions while in office. His two consecutive terms in office were ones of chaos and ill will between the two newly formed parties, the Federalists and the Democratic-Republicans. This hostility was obviously a major factor in people’s opinions of Thomas Jefferson as a person, and also as a leader tending to their concerns as citizens. Even before taking office, Jefferson anticipated the partisanship in Congress and the many different beliefs of the voting public; he attempted to create a spirit of bipartisanship, claiming in his inaugural address that, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We are all Federalists. We are all Republicans” (Jefferson 115). Jefferson did not realize or anticipate that the animosity between the two parties would last throughout his entire eight years as President (Ellis 238).

Thomas Jefferson’s controversial presidency began, appropriately, with a much-disputed election, where, after a tie in the Electoral College, the House of Representatives voted 36 times in order to elect Jefferson over Aaron Burr (who became vice-president) (Whitney 142). Jefferson, a Democratic-Republican, was viewed as a radical by the more conservative party in the United States, the Federalists. John Adams, Jefferson’s predecessor, viewed him as so dangerous to the fate of the country that he did not even attend the new president’s inauguration (EncartaOnline). The citizens of the time were torn as well. Those who maintained voting privileges (namely the white, male landowners) were divided in opinion; women and the entire slave population had no voice at all, as was socially and legally accepted at that time (Pugh 56).

As one of Aesop’s fables so wisely states, a person cannot please everyone all at once. Thomas Jefferson learned this well from the first action that he took as President; he reduced the national debt by balancing the budget. In order to balance the budget, Jefferson dramatically cut funding to the army and to the navy, weakening the military and leading people to fear vulnerability to attack. At the same time he learned Aesop’s important fable, he also learned to make concessions in other areas. Along with cutting military funding, he also repealed the internal duties that George Washington, the nation’s first President, had set in place. This met with approval from the Republicans and also from the western frontiersmen, who hated the excise tax on whiskey and had been physically forced to pay (EncartaOnline). Coming through this first decision fairly unscathed, Jefferson’s next action would prove more difficult to survive, on a personal and a political level.

The famous case of *Marbury versus Madison* in the Supreme Court was more infamous for the new President. Jefferson told his Secretary of State, James Madison, to withhold certain

judiciary commissions granted by John Adams (a Federalist President) to other Federalist appointees. This caused Marbury, one of those appointees, to bring a suit against Madison for failing to deliver his commission. Jefferson made it publicly known that he would not follow Chief Justice John Marshall's decision if he were to rule in favor of Marbury. Jefferson obviously felt secure enough with his newly Republican Congress not to fear impeachment (Appleby 183). His bold statements gave the Federalist party even more grievances with the President, and they did everything in their power to make them publicly known. Now, Jefferson was not only considered a dangerous radical, but also a disobedient son. The loss of approximately twenty judiciary seats created a major political disadvantage for the Federalists and their supporters, which the previous President, Adams, had sought to avoid. Jefferson's political enemies were continuing to grow distant, resisting joining in the bipartisan spirit that Jefferson had suggested in his inaugural address.

In what is regarded by current society as his greatest accomplishment in office, Thomas Jefferson's next major action was to purchase land, thereby increasing the size and fertility of the United States. The problem that most citizens in Jefferson's time had with the Louisiana Purchase was not the act of purchasing more land; it was the hypocrisy involved on their President's part. Jefferson, from the very beginning of his political career, had always adopted a strict interpretation of the Constitution, allowing the government to do only what it specifically stated, and not allowing anything else. This strict constructionist viewpoint came into conflict with Jefferson's purchase when he bought the land without adding a clause or amendment into the Constitution allowing him to do so. Even though he purchased the Louisiana territory with the majority approval of Congress (every Federalist voted against it), he failed to make it perfectly clear which parts of the Constitution allowed him the right to make that purchase (Ferling 124). The Federalists, setting aside the fact that they preferred a loose interpretation of the Constitution (the same kind that Jefferson had used to buy "Louisiana"), now added "hypocrite" to the long list of names acquired by Jefferson, and the breach between the two parties was widened further.

At this point in his term of office, his Republican supporters, and most United States citizens, considered Jefferson politically successful. He had expanded the country, maintained peace, and balanced the budget while repealing internal taxes. He was carefully concerned with his country's needs, and the needs of the citizens in it, and the Republicans realized this. However, the Federalist faction of the country looked for any way possible to condemn Jefferson. They found another occasion of impropriety when Jefferson thought it appropriate that there need be no more "formal" dinners at the White House, and that when guests did come, they would not need to follow the rules of etiquette set forth by England. This offended many diplomats and ambassadors from other countries who had to rush to the table to get a seat as it was "first come, first served." Jefferson also dismissed formal clothing and occasionally met guests in worn suits and slippers (Ellis 354). The guests that he offended, namely British diplomat Anthony Merry, and the Marquis d'Yrujo from Spain, were influenced by the affair enough to be increasingly sympathetic to Jefferson's opponents, the Federalists. The "Merry Affair," however unpopular with aristocratic visitors, was not an issue to the people in the United States. Most United States citizens saw this gesture as Jefferson himself did, as an escape from the aristocratic British traditions that all Americans had wanted when they founded the first colonies. This action took the "pomp and circumstance" out of politics, while simultaneously reinforcing Jefferson's commitment to democracy. Jefferson was not finished shocking the Federalists, and continued with his bold expansion plans in 1803, near the end of his first term in office.

Jefferson bought 50 million acres of land in Mississippi from the Native American Choctaw tribe at an outrageously cheap price. Because the Indians were poor, they thought it best to sell their land in order to stay alive in their quickly changing environment. They were not at all happy about Jefferson's "land-grabbing", and grew increasingly angry at their President's actions and eventually rallied against the entire white population under the leadership of a Shawnee chief (EncartaOnline). White citizens saw no major problems with the newly acquired land. They were glad that their new President had taken the initiative to expand the United States from "sea to shining sea," as the popular "manifest destiny" ideology dictated. On the other hand, black slaves, like Native Americans, had many grievances with the purchase. They knew that the more Southern states there were, the more slaves states there were, and Jefferson had just increased the "slaveholding area" of the United States. Black Americans certainly did have a right to be angry, and also a right to voice their anger, but because they were not allowed to vote, their opinions remained stifled.

Jefferson also faced the issue of slavery and racism in the early nineteenth century. Most well-to-do planters in the South and some elites in the Northern states had slaves including Jefferson himself. Most citizens of the time, following contemporary social standards, saw nothing wrong with slavery. This discussion is one that sparks many debates about the contradictions of Thomas Jefferson's behavior mainly because he claimed to disapprove of slavery and attempted to abolish it in the new territories gained by his administration, while at the same time owning slaves. The famous line regarding slavery in his book, Notes on the State of Virginia: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just" states his abhorrence of the slave trade and at the same time his faith in God (although many Federalists branded him an atheist) (Mapp 447). Obviously, if they had had this evidence, black slaves would have been outraged with Jefferson. As it was, few could read and almost none had access to any books let alone political writings. This brings forth another contradiction about Thomas Jefferson. He wished for free education for those who could not afford it (which eventually led the United States to support a public school system, which we now praise Jefferson for beginning), and eventually succeeded in establishing the University of Virginia (after retiring from politics), which accepted underprivileged citizens as well as those who could afford it (Appleby 102). However, Jefferson felt it necessary neither to educate the population of black slaves in the country, nor to give them equal rights. He spoke of every citizen being equal and the equality of all men, but his actions did not correspond with this belief. "The minority possess their equal rights which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression" (Jefferson 215). By his own words, Jefferson is an oppressor and therefore a hypocrite to many scholars today, but in his own time, this hypocrisy was never publicized or understood by those to whom it was applicable.

Jefferson was reelected by a landslide electoral vote in 1804. Throughout his first term as President, he had managed to maintain the support of his own Republican party, no matter how distant the Federalists grew. However, in his second term, as the Federalists were too weak to compete, his opposition came mainly from within his own party.

Thomas Jefferson disenfranchised many members of his party through two major instances. First, the Yazoo fraud incident, in which a number of land speculators bribed the Georgia legislature into selling them land at a cheap price, created the division between Jefferson and a group of Republicans, led by John Randolph. The citizens of Georgia disapproved of this action and promptly elected a new legislature, which nullified the sale. Jefferson saw this as

unfair of the new legislature, and encouraged Congress to pass a law, which would pay the speculators their money. Randolph and his supporters believed that Jefferson was being too lenient, and with their opposition, the bill did not pass Congress (EncartaOnline). The second incident and "last straw" for Randolph and many of his followers was Jefferson's request for two million dollars for "domestic purposes." Randolph believed that Jefferson was attempting to bribe Napoleon into selling him Florida. John Randolph made this publicly known and people heard about the "backstairs dealings" of their President (Mapp 273). To Randolph, Jefferson was untrustworthy and too forgiving of criminals, but the common citizens really felt no differently about the President after these incidents. The citizens who joined Randolph's effort against Jefferson were small in number, and previously active in politics, but they were effective in preventing Jefferson from getting much accomplished in his second term.

Jefferson continued to follow his ideas boldly, and members of his party were continuing to doubt and disagree with him on many issues. One such issue was the incident of a British ship attacking the Chesapeake, an American vessel. Jefferson was determined not to start a war, and many citizens thought that he should. This issue was highly publicized and the public heard about the incident and their President's reaction to it. They felt that Britain had wronged them once again, and that Jefferson did not care, or was not mentally strong enough to engage in a military conflict (Pugh 181). Although the Chesapeake Affair disenfranchised many former Republicans, the way that Jefferson chose to show England his disapproval was, perhaps, his worst political move as President. The Embargo Act, which prevented the exportation of American goods to European soil, damaged the fragile economy by stifling trade, and obviously American citizens did not benefit from it. Traders began to smuggle their goods, and the Federalists once again questioned Jefferson's strict interpretation of the Constitution. They said that it gave him no right to establish such rules in peacetime (EncartaOnline). This time, however, not only was Jefferson's image and reputation damaged, but the country's economy was as well. Also, the Federalist segment of the population was not the only one making accusations; those Republicans who had a stake in the matter (traders, for example) were very displeased with Jefferson. The President even commented, "This embargo law is certainly the most embarrassing one we have ever had to execute. I did not expect a crop of so sudden and rank growth of fraud and open opposition by force could have grown up in the United States" (Jefferson 58). In order to alleviate the extreme pressure being put on him and the devastation to his newly formed country, Jefferson created the Non-Intercourse Act, which was a milder version of the Embargo Act; it banned only exportation to England and Spain.

Did Thomas Jefferson meet the needs of the citizens in America in the early nineteenth century? During his first term, he expanded the nation, balanced the budget, sought to bring about the end of aristocratic traditions, and kept the country peaceful. His second term, obviously not as successful, was marred by such incidents as the Randolph Rebellion and the Embargo Act. His enemies, namely the Federalists, would call him an "anarchist, an atheist, and a revolutionist," but the majority of citizens, mostly white males, did not share these opinions at the time. To them, he was concerned with their needs and the expansion of the country, but he sought to avoid war so much that he made several regrettable decisions, which made it difficult for them to support him through everything. The other large portion of the population, composed of Native Americans, black slaves, and white women, was overlooked by Jefferson concerning equality issues. They all knew that Jefferson spoke of equality, but still had grievances with the President because of his actions, which did not reinforce his statements.

Jefferson set many precedents in office, such as the spirit of bipartisanship and the idea of a two-term limit, but the people of his times did not remember him for those. They knew him as brilliant and fair-minded, they realized that no man was perfect, and most importantly, perhaps, they understood that no man, not even Thomas Jefferson, could correct all the wrongs of society.

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