

Respected and Ridiculed: Jefferson in the Eyes of His Contemporaries



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Thomas Jefferson, the author of Declaration of Independence, epitomized freedom to the American public. He was revered by the people for his outspoken role as one of the fledgling nation's key liberators. The United States was in its infancy, and supporters of the patriot cause cherished any movement away from British roots. Instead of being viewed as Britain's child, the country longed to establish a reputation solidly different from its European founders. Thomas Jefferson provided the nation with just such a drastic break when he was elected third president. Jefferson as a person was revered for his accomplishments and his drive; however, when the public initially considered him as a possible presidential candidate, controversy mushroomed. The two different classes in society—the common citizens and those involved in politics—viewed Jefferson's election in entirely opposing lights. The commoners were confident in his ability to promote the nation in the eyes of foreign countries and create a solid foundation which the country would thrive on for eternity; the political elites considered Jefferson's actions to be rash and were concerned that he did not represent the nation in the fashion appropriate to the time period.

Jefferson promoted the differences of the two political parties. The Federalists and Democratic-Republicans were a relatively new concept to the world community as a whole. Jefferson encouraged the two party system because he conceived it as a means of expressing all the views of American society. This also was a strong issue for the early Americans, who had never before had their voice considered in matters of politics. The people as a whole felt more included in the government that was steering their nation—something that had never been felt in Europe. This adamant element of his campaign gathered strength for his presidency from both aspects of the United States community. He made his feelings very clear in his writings when he stated that,

Wherever there are men, there will be parties; and wherever there are free men they will make themselves heard. Those of firm health and spirits are unwilling to cede more of their liberty than is necessary to preserve order; those of feeble constitutions will wish to see one strong arm able to protect them from the many. These are the Whigs and Tories of nature. These mutual jealousies produce mutual security; and while the laws shall be obeyed, all will be safe. He alone is your enemy who disobeys them. —Thomas Jefferson: Misc. Notes, 1801? FE 8:1¹

¹ Information concerning the opinion of the people and Jefferson about the political parties of the time period can be found from the following works:

(NO DATE). Bibliography. [8 paragraphs]. President Thomas Jefferson Third President of the United States. [Online]. Available: <http://library.thinkquest.org/12587/contents/personalities/tjefferson/tj.html>

Coates, E. (1999). Political Parties. [10 paragraphs]. Jefferson on Politics and Government. [Online]. Available: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations.jeffcont.htm>

Jefferson desired a true agrarian society. He is said to have dressed in less formal clothing than his contemporaries, and was not swayed by popular opinion, even while attending official functions. He also chose to scorn Britain's customarily formal eating rituals -- the most important guests were seated nearest to the host, and the lesser guests formed the end of the table. He did not escort more "important" members of society into his home, as tradition dictated. To Jefferson, all visitors were equal, and should sit where they liked. This behavior, offensive to some foreign dignitaries, was a refreshing change of pace for the people of America. It seemed to keep in line with the very spirit of the new nation -- an egalitarian place, where all had a societal niche. Jefferson spent his presidency implementing plans designed to draw the United States out from beneath British custom and formality.² Jefferson beseeched his companion, James Monroe, to reiterate his fervent concerns about the public's view of Europe through saying,

I sincerely wish you may find it convenient to come here [to Europe]. The pleasure of the trip will be less than you expect, but the utility greater. It will make you adore your own country, its soil, its climate, its equality, liberty, laws, people and manners... Come then and see the proofs of this, and on your return add your testimony to that of every thinking American, in order to satisfy our countrymen how much it is their interest to preserve uninfected by contagion those peculiarities in their government and manners to which they are indebted for these blessings.³

His first step toward accomplishing separation was to expand the country by twice its size -- effectively dwarfing every Western European nation. There is a saying -- "Hindsight is 20-20." The people, at the time of the Louisiana Purchase, did not fully comprehend the impact of this strategic political endeavor. Thomas Jefferson had been greatly revered even before he emerged as the third president of the United States. He enjoyed this easy acceptance--until his decision to acquire Louisiana from France aroused an uneasy scrutiny among the common people, as well as throughout the American aristocracy. Suspicions of an unconstitutional purchase surfaced, as well as concerns about the new territory's benefit to the nation. Never before had such a vast amount of land been obtained in one, peaceful acquisition. On the whole, the country's opinion proved to hold the President responsible for going beyond his authority. Jefferson had no constitutional right to buy the land. Aware of this fact, he had earlier attempted to draw up an amendment to the constitution -- one allowing the purchase of such an enormous area. "Let us go on perfecting the Constitution," he said, "by adding, by way of amendment, those forms which time and trial show are still wanting."⁴ However, the Senate was bogged down in legal procedure,

² For more information regarding Jefferson's informal behavior in office see (2000). Merry Affair. [3 paragraphs]. Thomas Jefferson. [Online]. Available: <http://encarta.msn.com>

³ For further thoughts on Jefferson's opinion about breaking America from Europe see: Coates, E. (1999). Good Government. [10 paragraphs]. Jefferson on Politics and Government. [Online]. Available: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations.jeffcont.htm>

⁴ Once again Jefferson's thoughts on the slow movement of Congress and the imperativeness of the Louisiana Purchase can be seen in:

Coates, E. (1999). Amending the Constitution. [10 paragraphs]. Jefferson on Politics and Government. [Online]. Available: <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations.jeffcont.htm>

and thus slow to respond. During the wait, France began to rethink its offer, and Jefferson, fearing the European nation might pull out of the deal, felt he must act quickly. The imperativeness of his actions outweighed the legal red tape, and Jefferson went ahead – without the Senate’s permission – to make the purchase.

The concern of the people was centered on the nation’s well being. Worry over the implications of such a drastic increase in land area grew stronger. Unity was essential if the new nation was to succeed, and the people feared residents of the new territory might be forgotten – “out of sight, out of mind.” Because the United States’ government and bureaucracy were located almost centrally in the northeast, there were anxieties that the views and needs of new, western settlers might be overlooked in the eastern legislative system. Unity among such a widespread nation seemed a far-fetched concept when compared to the much smaller, successful European countries, and even when viewed alongside the former, colonial United States.

However, by the end of Jefferson’s first presidential term, the people realized how vital the Louisiana Purchase had proved to be. Without control of the Mississippi River, American trade would be inhibited to the point of non-existence. If France had retained the land, it would have regained control of New Orleans, a vibrant port city. Farmers needed to transport crops along the river, as well as to receive raw materials and labor from other countries. If this waterway had fallen into foreign hands, the citizens’ livelihoods would have been devastated, because they would have lost many of the resources necessary for survival. Once citizens understood the severity the loss of New Orleans might have constituted, they perceived Jefferson’s actions as an insightful political advancement of the country’s interests.⁵

By the end of his first term, Jefferson had rightfully earned the trust and favor of the American people, and in the following election, he won a second chance to serve his country. However, Jefferson’s attempts to gain Florida from Spain aroused misgivings among his political colleagues. When Jefferson tried to procure money, Congress did not look auspiciously upon him, because they feared he intended to use the funds to bribe Spain. Jefferson was apprehensive about war with Spain because of the new animosity created in the purchase of Louisiana. Spain resented France for selling what Lucien Bonaparte, Napoleon’s brother, had “given a solemn pledge that France would never part with...except to return it to her ally.” Spain, in resentment of America, created problems for users of the Mississippi by controlling the Eastern portion of the port. This called for action from the government to protect the citizens’ rights to that area. The entire nation, commoners and dignitaries alike, did not feel that acquisition of Spain was the lone solution. They viewed Jefferson’s actions as narrow-minded and feared that he would ruin communication with foreign nations because he had become consumed with trying to increase the landmass of the country. This did not win him favor in the same respect as his first term. ⁶

⁵ Information concerning the feelings of the people or the course taken to attain Louisiana can be found in:
(2000). Louisiana Purchase. [3 paragraphs]. The American Presidency. [Online]. Available:
<http://gigrolier.com>

(2000). Louisiana Purchase. [4 paragraphs]. The History Channel.Com [Online]. Available:
<http://www.historychannel.com>

Spivak, B. (1979). Jefferson’s English Crisis. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

⁶ Further exploration of Jefferson’s involvement in the Spain conflict can be found by looking in
Bowers, C. (1936). Jefferson in Power. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

When dealing with matters of opinion, one must understand the audience. In the case of Jefferson's popularity as president, two very distinctive classes must be examined in order to formulate a clear picture of his acceptance. In the eyes of his political colleagues, Jefferson was viewed as wavering and impulsive. The majority of the Senate looked resentfully on his hasty decision to purchase Louisiana. They felt that he had wrongfully assumed their position in the government and acted as an aristocratic king. The citizens, however, were less begrudging of the President. They saw his actions as imperative and felt he caused no severe harm to the nation. The people were satisfied with the improvements in the country under the leadership of Jefferson and therefore felt he was an accomplished and noble president. Much like every president in history, Thomas Jefferson was both respected and ridiculed by the people he sacrificed himself to protect and empower.