

Brokering a Republican Dream: Thomas Jefferson and the American West



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Preparing to embark from their winter encampment at Wood River, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark held on to a letter of instruction from Thomas Jefferson that delineated the purpose and goals of their now legendary expedition across western North America.¹ Composed on 20 June 1803, nearly a year prior to the expedition's departure on 14 May 1804, the ostensibly simple correspondence mingled with the expedition itself as the long anticipated manifestation of Jefferson's, and indeed America's, enduring and insatiable desire to learn more about the West.² Perhaps inculcated through youthful exposure to his father, Peter Jefferson's involvement in Virginia's Loyal Land Company, which attempted explorations of the Missouri River as early as 1753, Jefferson's interest in the West grew more pungent with age.³ The "Revolution of 1800" fuelled Jefferson's assumption that the American presidency invested him with the means needed to sanction a government-supported exploration of the West, which materialized in the Lewis and Clark Expedition.⁴ Yet however significant the Corps of Discovery's journey and the contemporaneous Louisiana Purchase were to facilitating expansion, they never constituted the roots of American interest in the West. Lewis and Clark's trail to the Pacific was forged by a synthesis of intellectual and practical demands that imbued the West with immense significance for all Americans. The growing importance of North America's "other-half" justified federal expenditures for the Louisiana Purchase and western exploration, while simultaneously yielding a multitude of problems and complications that worked to challenge America's growth and cloud Jefferson's dream of an "empire of liberty."⁵

Amidst European theories about the degeneracy of American plant and animal species and Jefferson's own contradictory notions of the "great chain of being," Americans initially developed an interest in the West that was primarily intellectual in nature.⁶ Confirming the scholarship of European contemporaries such as Cornelius de Pauw and Abbé Raynal, Georges-Louis Leclerc, the Comte de Buffon's, *Histoire Naturelle*, published in 1761, argued that "animal species in the New World were smaller, lacking in vigor, and produced fewer variations than those of Europe because the new continents had remained longer than the rest of the globe under the waters of the sea."⁷ Ever defensive of the American image, Jefferson used *Notes on the State of Virginia* to respond to this idea by forwarding his own theory about the "great chain of being," a concept of "nonextinction" by which "great creatures from

¹ Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 136.

² Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains: Exploring the West from Monticello* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981), 139.

³ *Ibid.*, 5-6, 8.

⁴ Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 170; Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 119.

⁵ Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), ix.

⁶ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 26, 29.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 27.

the beginning of time" could still be alive in the American West.⁸ Farcical to modern scholars, Jefferson believed that carnivorous mammoths "still exist[ed] in northern parts of America"; perhaps they roamed amongst the tremendous active volcanoes which he thought dotted the western landscape.⁹ Arguably the most erudite American of his time, Jefferson conveyed intellectual misconceptions which illustrate just how little Americans knew about the West; exploration and expansion then was driven initially by a desire to affirm the veracity of these ideas which, when disproved, created interest in filling the intellectual void with more accurate knowledge that was equally effective in conveying American exceptionalism.¹⁰

Intellectual perceptions of the West may have matured in realism and accuracy by the time Lewis and Clark departed, but the explorers' instructions still reflected America's thirst for knowledge about land beyond the Mississippi River, which could disprove Europeans such as Buffon and substantiate the American image.¹¹ Instead of looking for mammoths, Lewis and Clark were searching for new plant and animal species thriving among a unique climate and geography.¹² Indeed, as president of the American Philosophical Society, Jefferson nursed a lifelong love of botany and geography, particularly evident in his extensive collection of books pertaining to the West which he began accumulating while in Paris.¹³ Using his own knowledge and connections with other American intellectuals, Jefferson helped Lewis prepare for his journey by sending him to Philadelphia where he learned how to categorize and observe new species and sharpen other necessary scientific skills.¹⁴ The supreme goal of acquiring new knowledge was further evident in the nature and number of journals that Jefferson instructed the pair to keep. Lewis and Clark both had records of their daily observations of geography, climate, plant and animal life, and every other component of the journey; these notes were to be copied "at leisure times, & put into the care of the most trust-worthy of [their] attendants, to guard, by multiplying them, against accidental losses to which they [would] be exposed."¹⁵ To supplement the journals, which were later entrusted to the American Philosophical Society for storage and publication, Lewis and Clark sent Jefferson plant and animal specimens, including prairie dogs and Indian corn, which served as tangible records of their experiences.¹⁶ Yet as informative as the journals and specimens were, expeditions such as the Corps of Discovery would never have trekked across northwestern America without the accompanying political and economic practicality of westward exploration and acquisition.¹⁷

Western America was certainly appealing as *terra incognita*, but eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Americans' interest in the West was equally attributable to the land's practical application in ameliorating both domestic and foreign problems.¹⁸ An emblem of agrarian republicanism, which emphasized a small federal government in a country of yeoman farmers, Thomas Jefferson used his

⁸ Ibid., 29; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1955), 43-44.

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 46, 20.

¹⁰ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 25.

¹¹ Ibid., 136-144.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 78, 87-88.

¹⁴ Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage*, 87.

¹⁵ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 142.

¹⁶ Ibid., 180-181.

¹⁷ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1969), 16.

¹⁸ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness So Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), 19; Peter S. Onuf and Leonard J. Sadosky, *Jeffersonian America* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 181.

presidency to stabilize his republican dream.¹⁹ Republican virtue necessarily “depended upon an increasing supply of land for its yeomen,” but in order for white Americans to expand, the country’s native inhabitants would need to be removed until civilized and ripe for assimilation into white society.²⁰ In pursuing the dream of an “empire of liberty,” Americans developed an interest in lands west of the Mississippi River as a holding ground for displaced Indians.²¹ Indeed, much of Lewis and Clark’s journey was dedicated to learning about the Indians inhabiting lands of interest and gaining their favor through amicability and the establishment of diplomatic relations with their Great Father in Washington; Lewis and Clark were essential to Jefferson’s ultimate policy to “conquer without war.”²² Even as the expedition was inching its way up the Missouri River in the summer of 1804, agents like William Henry Harrison were already negotiating land cessions with Indians such as the Sauks and Foxes, who in November of the same year were manipulated into ceding fifteen million acres east of the Mississippi in exchange for lands on the western shores of the river.²³ Lewis and Clark’s interactions with Indians are illustrative of the West’s importance as a source of land for white expansion and Indian consolidation, but they are equally indicative of international frictions with the European powers, Great Britain and Spain.²⁴

Especially between the American Revolution and the War of 1812, the United States held a precarious role in international politics, exacerbated by border tensions with Spanish settlers in the West and the British in Canada.²⁵ Indians frequently proved to be important components of foreign relations, particularly with the British, who shared Americans’ interest in western trade.²⁶ As British traders from Canada established relationships with western Indian tribes, it grew increasingly important for the United States to begin similar interactions as a way of procuring Indian loyalty, as well as safety and economic prosperity for western settlers.²⁷ Tensions with New Spain were less contingent on diplomacy with Native Americans, but were among the prime reasons investing the West with importance; Jefferson’s “empire of liberty” would be insecure if American borders were constantly threatened by European rivals.²⁸ Of particular importance were New Orleans and the Mississippi River, which were the most accessible outlets for western trade and commerce: “the only easy way out of the West.”²⁹ Spanish control of these integral waterways threatened American commercial interests, as was evident in 1784 when Spain closed the Mississippi River to navigation and nearly incited western Americans to war.³⁰ Indeed, “the immediate significance of the Louisiana Purchase was that it finally resolved the issue of the control of the Mississippi valley, and, in particular, of the great river that formed the West’s major avenue of communication with the outside world.”³¹ While the need for more farmland, a place to remove the Indians, and an end to border conflicts with Europe propelled American interest in the West, the resulting

¹⁹ Peter S. Onuf and Leonard J. Sadosky, *Jeffersonian America*, 35.

²⁰ Reginald Horsman, “The Dimensions of an ‘Empire for Liberty’: Expansion and Republicanism, 1775-1825,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 9 (Spring, 1989): 2; Don Fehrenbacher, *The Era of Expansion*, 36.

²¹ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 218.

²² *Ibid.*, 142.; Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty*, 132.

²³ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 212.

²⁴ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Era of Expansion*, 35.

²⁵ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness so Immense*, 19.

²⁶ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 210.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness so Immense*, 18-20.

²⁹ Buckner F. Melton, Jr., *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002), 71.

³⁰ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 60-61.

³¹ Don E. Fehrenbacher, *The Era of Expansion*, 95.

exploration and expansion which began, most notably, with the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, immediately introduced a new series of challenges to Jefferson's American empire.³²

The enhanced power and authority the Louisiana Purchase granted the United States through territorial growth was undermined by related complications which began with questions about the very constitutionality of the purchase.³³ Jefferson himself was concerned with whether the Constitution allowed for territorial acquisition, but he relieved himself of his doubts in light of the tenuous nature of the agreement and fears of Bonaparte's flippancy in negotiations.³⁴ Yet even as the president and Congress grappled with constitutionality, greater problems arose in defining the purchase's boundaries. France was very deliberate in leaving the boundaries ambiguous, but enduring tensions with Spain necessitated a clearer delineation of the United States' new borders.³⁵ Jefferson worked with the resources in his library to devise a boundary that extended as far west as the Rocky Mountains and east into the western half of Florida, but Spain had a much more limited interpretation of the purchase, if they even conceded its legitimacy.³⁶ Spain's recalcitrance was exacerbated by word of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, which Spain perceived, perhaps correctly, as a mission of conquest, not of peaceful exploration.³⁷ In response, a series of military campaigns aimed at intercepting and stopping the explorers was organized in New Orleans and executed by Nemesio Salcedo, commandant-general of the Internal Provinces of New Spain.³⁸ Although their interception campaigns in 1804, 1805, and 1806 were largely unsuccessful, they are illustrative of just how contentious the border issue was; indeed, the Corps of Discovery was an official military expedition organized under the War Department and executed in accordance with the *Rules and Art of War*.³⁹ Boundary disputes were not exhausted until the Adams-Onís Treaty of 1819, reluctantly ratified by Spain in 1821, nor were they the only major problems associated with the expanding American West.

Irrespective of the size of the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson and other political figures maintained serious concerns about the separation of western American lands from the Union, which nearly came to fruition in the alarming Burr Conspiracy. "Predicated upon a war between Spain and the United States," Aaron Burr and General James Wilkinson conspired between the years of 1805 and 1806 to work in conjunction with disgruntled Spaniards to return New Orleans and part of the Louisiana Territory to Spain, leaving the remaining lands for a new western empire that would be separate from the United States and initially governed by Burr, who was still bitter about his unsuccessful bid for the presidency in 1800.⁴⁰ Although the conspiracy was eventually revealed through Wilkinson's "betrayal" of Burr, the plan served as an alarming reminder of America's tenuous grasp on western lands and settlers; plans for establishing and strengthening territorial government were necessarily invested with greater immediacy.⁴¹ However appealing the three stage process of the Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was in helping those territories' transition into statehood, Jefferson was sure that governance of Louisiana would be much more successful through a less formal approach: the gradual and subjective "extension of rights

³² James E. Lewis, Jr., *The Louisiana Purchase: Jefferson's Noble Bargain?* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 75.

³³ Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty*, 163.

³⁴ James E. Lewis, *The Louisiana Purchase*, 69.

³⁵ Jon Kukla, *A Wilderness so Immense*, 327.

³⁶ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 106; James E. Lewis, *The Louisiana Purchase*, 76.

³⁷ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 153-54.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 248-49.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 254-57.

and responsibilities" as Congress deemed Louisiana ready to receive them.⁴² Decisions about governance were also entangled in questions about the expansion of slavery; "could slavery have a place in an 'empire of liberty?'"⁴³ Congress was predictably divided on the issue, but Jefferson proposed an interesting plan in which foreign slave importation would be outlawed in Louisiana, thereby providing an opportunity to "end slavery *outside* Louisiana" as slaves from the Upper South were traded domestically, decreasing slave populations in states such as Virginia or Maryland.⁴⁴ Ultimately, Congress decided to allow settlers to bring slaves with them into the lower Louisiana Territory, while slavery in the upper territory was temporarily banned in accordance with existing provisions.⁴⁵ Issues such as slavery and the extension of federal powers, which were contended even prior to the acquisition of western lands, only grew with the expanding country. Whatever opportunity the West presented for ameliorating domestic and foreign problems plaguing America, it quickly became enmeshed in a new series of complications that threatened its promise.

Even in the shadows of political and social complexities like the Burr Conspiracy and growth of slavery, however, Thomas Jefferson was ultimately successful in crafting a western empire that whetted Americans' appetites for the successive territorial acquisitions that characterized Manifest Destiny.⁴⁶ Yet the emerging American empire was not a fortunate accident; it was a deliberate product of the intellectual and practical interests that Jefferson and his fellow Americans had invested in the West. The West was an expansive land of opportunity which, for Americans, was integral in acquiring new knowledge and equally important in sustaining the growth of the republic, removal of the Indians, and relief of international frictions with neighboring powers like Spain. Jefferson recognized all these advantages and used them as justifications for the Louisiana Purchase and Lewis and Clark Expedition, even though such endeavors demanded a tremendous investment of federal capital and were frequently eclipsed by their accompanying problems. Although enduring border disputes and governance issues such as the Burr Conspiracy threatened the survival of the expanding republic, they did not inhibit Jefferson from directing America's western conquest and building the foundation of his once elusive "empire of liberty."

⁴² James E. Lewis, *The Louisiana Purchase*, 83.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 84-7.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁶ Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountains*, 113.

Annotated Bibliography

Ambrose, Stephen E. *Undaunted Courage: Meriwether Lewis, Thomas Jefferson, and the Opening of the American West*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996.

Ambrose offers a vivid account of the Lewis and Clark Expedition which is useful in examining the purpose and significance of western exploration. Through Ambrose's journey into the inner psyche of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark as they embarked on their trip, readers may gain greater appreciation for the consequences of such an expedition, augmenting this insight with the numerous journal excerpts and detailed citations that accompany the narrative.

Ellis, Joseph J. *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.

In this book, Ellis offers a fresh interpretation of Jefferson's complex character. Using the motif of an "American Sphinx," Ellis carefully examines the dichotomy between Jeffersonian rhetoric and action in order to paint a middle ground that bridges modern frustrations with Jeffersonian hypocrisy with older, more celebratory recounts of this Founding Father's role in American history. In addition to its unique perspective on Jefferson's life, the narrative is very readable and full of citations that any scholar would find useful.

Fehrenbacher, Don E. *The Era of Expansion: 1800-1848*. New York: Jon Wiley & Sons, 1969.

By relating America's Era of Expansion to the modern American identity, Fehrenbacher successfully connects the reader to the "throbbing potentiality and expansive optimism" characteristic of early nineteenth-century America (p. v). Although Jefferson is only one of several important figures that Fehrenbacher addresses, this book is nevertheless helpful in exploring the context of expansion that Jefferson and his successors operated within.

Horsman, Reginald. "The Dimensions of an 'Empire for Liberty': Expansion and Republicanism, 1775-1825." *Journal of the Early Republic*, 9 (Spring 1989).

In this article, Horsman forges a connection between Jeffersonian Republicanism and the push for westward expansion that was so central to Jefferson's administration. Contrary to common interpretations, Horsman argues that republicanism and expansion were indelibly connected, clarifying any ambiguity regarding Jefferson's decision to expand America's borders.

Jackson, Donald. *Thomas Jefferson & the Stony Mountains*. Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1981.

Undoubtedly the most comprehensive resource examining Jefferson's role in the exploration and growth of the American West. This book is unique in that it looks beyond the Louisiana Purchase and the Lewis and Clark Expedition to delineate the broader environment in which Jefferson's infatuation with the West originated and matured. A detailed index and comprehensive citations further augment this book's usefulness.

Jefferson, Thomas. *Notes on the State of Virginia*, ed. William Peden. Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1955.

Jefferson's only book, *Notes on the State of Virginia* is useful for its brief allusions to the West. These descriptions provide valuable insight into Jefferson's knowledge and perception of western territory in addition to further illuminating his sentiments toward Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon.

Kukla, Jon. *A Wilderness so Immense: The Louisiana Purchase and the Destiny of America*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003.

Often considered the essence of American westward expansion, the Louisiana Purchase was a significant turning-point in the course of American expansion. Kukla thoroughly examines this momentous land bargain along with the important events both preceding and succeeding the 1803 purchase. By focusing more on the acquisition of territory itself, rather than its exploration by expeditions such as Lewis and Clark's, Kukla helps readers focus on Americans' desire for territorial expansion and its consequences, both within the United States and throughout the world.

Lewis, James E., Jr. *The Louisiana Purchase: Jefferson's Noble Bargain?* Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 2003.

Lewis's book contradicts modern notions about the inevitability of the Louisiana Purchase by reexamining the nineteenth-century American mindset which often saw expansion as undesirable and even unconstitutional. Through this approach, Lewis successfully examines the purchase's significance to Jefferson and his American contemporaries and outlines the various problems that were linked with western expansion.

Melton, Buckner F., Jr. *Aaron Burr: Conspiracy to Treason*. New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2002.

Melton's relation of the Burr Conspiracy is the most current and comprehensive summation of the events which occurred between 1805 and 1806. Melton successfully separates his portrayal of Burr from pervasive negative interpretations of the politician, providing the reader with a more objective and thorough depiction of who Burr was and what his plans for the West were.

Onuf, Peter S., and Leonard J. Sadosky. *Jeffersonian America*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.

Although Onuf and Sadosky do not directly address western expansion, they do provide a very appropriate analysis of Jeffersonian Republicanism, which grew integral to Jefferson's relationship with the expanding American West. By examining the tension between Republicans and Federalists in post-Revolutionary America, Onuf and Sadosky describe the environment in which expansion occurred.

Tucker, Robert W., and David C. Hendrickson. *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

In this book, Tucker and Hendrickson probe the early roots of American imperialism by considering the foreign policies of America's Founding Fathers, specifically Thomas Jefferson. The authors provide a cogent explanation which outlines how westward expansion fit snugly into Jefferson's more covert and indirect approach to international relations, eventually constituting the foundation of his "empire of liberty."