

Empire of Liberty: Jefferson's Adamant and Difficult Conquest of the West

3rd Place



By Hayley Schools

Thomas Jefferson was a man of many distinguished endeavors in his lifetime, but possibly one of his most significant, yet often-neglected achievements, was the Louisiana Purchase, which in essence secured the beginning of western expansion in North America through the United States government. The Louisiana Purchase, more than anything, was the foundation for securing American interests in that particular territory. Jefferson was one of the most adamant supporters of his generation in the acquirement of the western lands. Jefferson believed that the acquisition of the west of North America was an essential keystone for the future of the United States as a nation, and often referred to the territory as an "empire of liberty." Jefferson and his generation attached an enormous importance to the west for a plethora of economic, political, and social motivations. They encountered a variety of complications in attaining the west. Two of the most significant complications were the Native Americans and the United States Constitution.

There are many rationales provided as to why Jefferson and his generation affixed such a substantial importance to westward expansion. The west, above all else, was a place for America to expand and progress as a nation: politically, economically, and socially.

Since its founding, America had been revered and accepted as a nation of movement, development, optimism, and people willing to work diligently to achieve and secure these ideals. Expansion was not seen as a mechanism that would dismember and demolish the nation, but rather as an "empire of liberty" (Appleby 109). From a Jeffersonian standpoint, this liberty was for the white man, and was a liberty free from European hierarchies and backward races; it was a place of fresh beginnings for the nation (Appleby 109). It would be a place for the ambitious, self-sufficient individual to cultivate and raise a family, a town, and ultimately a nation (Appleby 109).

For Jefferson and his generation, expansion was the idyllic opportunity to endorse and firmly embed highly-regarded American institutions, values, morals, and ethics. The people who would migrate to the west were moving into virgin land. This territory could be rendered and explicitly cultivated to fit the institutions entrenched in American ideology (Appleby 110). Jefferson felt it was pertinent to establish the principles of political liberty that America esteemed, throughout the western hemisphere, by securing the land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans (Ellis 117). Essentially, Jefferson felt that it was America's responsibility as a national entity to occupy these lands to ensure that credible, respected, and valued institutions and ideals were enacted not only on the North American continent, but also in the western hemisphere. It is no coincidence that Jefferson associated the term "liberty" with the expanding "empire" of the United States. In America, particularly from a Jeffersonian perspective, the word is associated with the prosperity of the individual. Land for men meant personal autonomy and economic opulence (Appleby 110). The vast array of land available allowed limitless Americans to be independent, industrious, and property-holders (Appleby 110).

The concept of Americans having boundless opportunities and abilities to develop un-chartered territory established the economic benefits of westward expansion. The west was seen by Jefferson as a material base for wealth (Appleby 110). Westward expansion meant a few different things for America, economically speaking. The more Americans who were to trek into this territory, the greater revenue the United States government would gain. By officially owning the western territories, the United States

government would also own all of the resources and materials they generated. For example, the Louisiana Purchase covered an immense and critical part of North America, from Canada to the Gulf of Mexico, and from the Mississippi River to the Rocky Mountains (Ellis 101). The port of New Orleans was also encompassed in the purchase, which was one of the most crucial ports at the time for trading, navigation, and access to the Mississippi River (Ellis 101). By gaining these lands, the United States could not only spread the social values espoused in America, but could also physically expand to ultimately economically profit the nation as a whole.

Throughout his life, beginning with adolescence, Jefferson was enticed by the west (Ellis 117). As president and esteemed politician he was virtually forced, and willingly accepted the challenge, to attempt western expansion. A slew of events and pure luck allowed him to establish what he envisioned as an empire of liberty into actual U.S. territory. Through timing, crude diplomacy, and essentially convincing the French diplomats that the United States was willing and prepared to go to war over the Louisiana territory, he achieved this diplomatic venture (Ellis 102). Also, the original land charters granted to individuals and countries occupying the territories were so immense and indefinite that they were very conducive to conflict (Peterson 371). It was a scheme that could not fit independent commonwealths living symbiotically on one continent. Jefferson and his generation could see the potential for anarchy in the future, and desired a nation that was governed by one body and one set of laws. He was persistent, tenacious, and meticulous at achieving his goal (Appleby 107). He desired a nation of people who spoke the same language, and who were governed by a cohesive, decisive authority (Appleby 107).

Jefferson and his generation encountered a variety of complications in securing American interests in the west. Possibly the greatest opposition in the campaign for the west was the Native American Indian population, devoted to keeping the land that they had occupied for many centuries (Appleby 104). Jefferson himself was actually quite intrigued by the Indian culture and language. He even obtained linguistic data to be thoroughly examined and analyzed (Ellis 124). However, Jefferson recognized the critical dependency of gaining the west as official American territory, and overall he viewed the Indians as savages needing modernization. He was willing to integrate the Native Americans into what was considered at the time respectable societal behaviors, but he would not accept them and their hunter-gatherer, semi-nomadic lifestyle (Appleby 104). Civilizing and cultivating the Native Americans was Jefferson's initial proposal; however, if this failed he was willing to enact outright removal of the people (Appleby 105). In a letter to William Clark, Jefferson argued, "the end proposed should be their extermination, or their removal beyond the lakes of Illinois river. The same world will scarcely do for them and us" (Appleby 105). Jefferson was fully aware that his ambitious intentions for the west would inhibit and essentially demolish the Native American life that had existed for literally centuries (Ellis 132). However, Jefferson's political motivations proved to be much more enticing than his humanitarian concerns. The coincidental nature in the empire of liberty is that it is an immense paradox. By expanding and progressively seeking liberty for the American citizens, Jefferson was actually taking away basic liberties and natural rights of the native inhabitants (Ellis 132). Judging by who the founding fathers, including Jefferson, felt deserved natural rights and basic liberties, this denial was not a prevailing concern at the time. Although the term itself did not come into existence until coined by politicians in the 1840's, Jefferson and his generation's precepts in a sense were the foundation for the use of the concept "manifest destiny" to justify American expansion (Edmunds). Jefferson and his generation desired a nation that was sophisticated, modernized, and mobile enough to move forth into the nineteenth century with other developed nations, principally its European contemporaries.

Coincidentally enough, the United States Constitution actually proved to be a primary tribulation in asserting a presence in western lands. The foundation for the physical element of western expansion is ultimately tied to the Louisiana Purchase, which was drafted through treaty in 1803 (Ellis 101). Jefferson was a strong proponent of strict constructionism, and was well aware that the United States

Constitution at the time provided no authorization of the federal government, particularly not the executive branch, to purchase and acquire territory (Garret 96). The purchase was the most significant executive decision in American history (Garret 96). This is an ironic historical fact, considering Jefferson's extensive condemnation of the monarchical and centralized power of the government (Garret 96). Jefferson was somewhat distraught over the controversy concerning the Constitution. He consulted both the Attorney General and the Secretary of the Treasury, who had conflicting views on the matter (Garret 96). In the eminent and utilitarian nature of the situation, Jefferson chose to concur with the Secretary of the Treasury. He considered the circumstances drastic, and not amenable to delay, because he believed the purchase would immediately protect America from belligerent European neighbors and would promote the welfare of the newly formulated Republic (Garret 97). He also drafted an amendment, which he then urged Congress to pass with the greatest expediency (Garret 96). After the territory was purchased, Congress passed the Enabling Act, which empowered the president to take possession of the Louisiana territory and gave him full authority over civil and military matters (Garret 98). The purchase of the Louisiana territory through treaty dictated by the federal government is one of the first constitutional coups regarding implied powers for the president of the United States (Garret 99).

Jefferson and his generation were only the beginnings of American expansion. Political, social, and economic factors that proved to be both relevant and pertinent at the time influenced the decision to purchase the Louisiana territory, and fostered strong American sentiment to expand as a national entity even further. Although there were complications surrounding expansion, with almost any form of progressive change, obstacles are likely to immediately ensue. In fact, almost Jefferson's entire empire from coast to coast was ultimately reached. He had originally envisioned an expanded United States as far south as Cuba, and as far north as Canada (Ellis 118). Although this did not entirely occur, it came exceedingly close, and it's the vision itself, and the proactive nature of Jefferson as a politician, diplomat, and president, which are so immensely significant. Jefferson's ideals of liberty were attached not only to western expansion, but also to the Declaration of Independence, and to nearly every issue concerning the American nation he has come to embody, symbolize, and epitomize.

Works Cited

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Annotated Bibliography

- Appleby, Joyce. 2003. *Thomas Jefferson*. New York: Times Books, Henry Holt and Company. 104-110.

The author of this book examines certain complications that Thomas Jefferson came across while attempting to achieve westward expansion, in particular the Louisiana Purchase. She also delves into societal motivations regarding the expansion process.

- Edmunds, David R. 2003. Native American Displacement Amid U.S. Expansion. PBS Online Conversation. Internet. Available from <http://www.pbs.org/keara/usmexicanwar/dialogues/prelude/manifest/d2deng.html>; accessed 26 March 2003.

Edmunds related the concept of Manifest Destiny to the Native American Displacement and to westward expansion in 1803 through the Louisiana Purchase.

- Ellis, Joseph (Ed.). 2000. *Thomas Jefferson: Genius of Liberty*. New York: Viking Studio (Penguin Putnam Inc.). 116-137.

The author observes Thomas Jefferson's ideals espoused throughout his life. The chapter that pertained to western expansion focused on the causes, effects, and motivations behind expansion and the Louisiana Purchase.

- Garret, Sheldon. 1991. *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press. 95-99.

The author of this book focused upon the political philosophies of Thomas Jefferson. Included in this were the issues dealing with the Constitution during the time of expansion and Jefferson's views regarding executive decision with the Louisiana Purchase.

Jackson, Donald. 1986. The West. In *Thomas Jefferson: A Reference Biography*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson, 369-384 Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc.

The authors of this book went into great detail regarding the Louisiana Purchase and Jefferson's standpoint on expansion throughout both his presidency and his life.