

Jefferson vs polk: expansionism compared



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the span of some fifty years, the United States of America almost tripled the area of its territory. In two separate acquisitions, one by Thomas Jefferson in 1803, and the other by James K. Polk in 1848, not only did the size of the U. S. increase, but also the administrative nightmares associated with territorial expansion. Still just a maturing nation, Jefferson faced a host of difficulties in governing such a vast expanse of land, but adeptly turned the Louisiana Purchase into one of the United States' greatest accomplishments.

Polk, on the other hand, procured his territory through devious means, and failed to see the consequences that would eventually envelop the Union in bitter civil war. It is in the great expansion of the United States that we see two examples of leadership; the masterful, bold practices of Thomas Jefferson, compared to the risky, and hasty actions of James K. Polk. When Thomas Jefferson came into the presidential office in 1801, he had already demonstrated that he was leader with vision, and he carried his concept of republican democracy into executive administration.

Having being elected on the slimmest of margins, Jefferson recognized that the nation was in danger of collapsing either internally or externally. He immediately set upon a course to try and unify the Republican and Federalist camps through lofty ideals of American greatness. Jefferson detested the idea of patronage, and sought to appoint and dismiss government employees not through political affiliation, but on merit and nationalistic posture. This led to Jefferson's first triumph: the appointments of James Madison as Secretary of State, and of Albet Gallatin as Secretary of the Treasury.

It would Gallatin who would engineer the successful reduction of the national debt, of which Jefferson viewed to be a mortgage which had to be paid off immediately. Along with Gallatin, Jefferson embarked on a course of spending cuts and reducing taxes. He repealed the hated tax on whiskey, making him, as Samuel Eliot Morrison wrote, “ immortal in the mountains”. An early test of Jefferson’s character as President was the declaration of war between the U. S. and the Bashaw of Tripoli on May 14, 1801 over the payment of “ tributes”, or bribes to protect American shipping off the coast of North Africa.

Displaying great initiative, the Republican president embarked upon a course of forceful diplomacy, abetted that resolved the Tripoli crisis with a favorable treaty for the United States. Surprised by Jefferson’s boldness, many of his opponents became placated, and his popularity soared. Another issue distressed the President, that of Napoleonic France. Although a diplomatic agreement had been signed earlier, known as the Convention of 1800, Jefferson feared that Napoleon would acquire Louisiana for the purpose of checking American expansion and for the creation of a French empire in North America.

Under Spanish authority at the time of his election, Spanish Louisiana had long been a thorn in the side of American interests. The port of New Orleans was the only viable access for western American trade, and those interests were at the mercy of the Spanish authorities, who could cut off American trade at whim. Yet as bothersome as the Spanish, were the prospect of French control disturbed Jefferson to no end. “ The day that France takes possession of New Orleans... we must marry ourselves to the British fleet

and nation” wrote Jefferson to his minister in France Robert Livingstone on April 18 1802.

Jefferson was convinced that if any foreign country controlled the mouth of the Mississippi, the U. S. would be drawn into every European conflict, something that he and his predecessors deemed would cause the destruction of the United States of America. Later that year, the port of New Orleans was closed to American trade by the still-in-power Spanish governor. This act, along with Napoleon’s dispatch of an expeditionary force of some 30, 000 to Santo Domingo to suppress a slave revolt, forced Jefferson into action.

In probably one of the most decisive acts ever by an American president with regard to chartering a new course for the United States, Jefferson authorized James Monroe as a special envoy to France in order to secure the American purchase of rights to New Orleans. What followed was an extraordinary chain of events that led to the American purchase of the entire Louisiana Territory from France for fifteen million dollars. The vast area included present-day Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Iowa, the Dakotas, and parts of Texas, Colorado, Wyoming, and Montana.

Expecting only to bargain for the port of New Orleans and the Floridas, the thought of the entire Louisiana area incorporated into the Union presented Jefferson with a monumental problem that tore Jefferson to the core: how could he, as an ardent follower of the Constitution’s word, supersede it’s limits and act beyond Congressional provisions. In order to understand the

significance of Jefferson's actions we must look at the implications of the options available to him. The Constitution made no provisions for any President to acquire new tracts of land, let alone incorporate them into the Union.

This action would set precedent of action never undertaken by the executive office, and Congressional powers, henceforth the federal government's power and jurisdiction, would substantially increase, an ideological hypocrisy of the Republican doctrine. Furthermore, Jefferson faced a hostile judiciary, following the precedent-setting *Marbury vs. Madison*, which directly challenged the Constitutional validity of any legislation from either Congress or the Presidential Office.

Given his turmoil about acting outside of strict letter of the Constitution, his situation was further worsened by the news coming out of Paris that Napoleon was looking for a way out of the treaty, and by news from Spain stating that since France had not formally taken over Louisiana, the sale of Louisiana was illegal. With mounting pressure from both sides in the Senate over the validity of his actions, Jefferson was also faced with the fact that he would have to depart from his economic program of cutting spending, let alone requisitioning the House of Representatives to allot some thirteen million dollars for the purchase.

On the flipside, if he did not address the issue immediately, the miraculous opportunity might evaporate, and Jefferson's dream of elevating the United States' status to world preeminence would be beset. On the advice of Madison, Monroe, and Livingstone, who stressed again that if Jefferson did

not accept this offer immediately, Napoleon might balk on the entire deal, Jefferson boldly stated that he must conclude the offer and then put it to Congress to haggle out its validity: “ I pretend no right to bind you. You may disavow me, and I must get out of the scrape as best I can.

I thought it my duty to risk myself to you. ” After scrupulous debate, both houses ratified the agreement, and on December 20, 1803, New Orleans and the Louisiana Territory became incorporated into the Union. As shown before with the Tripoli affair, Thomas Jefferson was bolder in the pursuit of national goals than some who proudly called themselves hardheaded men. The Louisiana Purchase was one of the most significant historical events in American history. It alleviated frontier and Western Americans’ concerns over the accessibility of a port on the Mississippi, crucial to American trade.

The Purchase, more importantly to the course of the United States, released the U. S. from any European colonial entanglements that would certainly have occurred over conflicting interests in New Orleans during times of hostilities. Jefferson had shown great initiative, and through his actions, the vastness and greatness of the United States of America was open to development. The Louisiana Purchase, and its ramifications, allowed the United States to develop a policy of achieving dominance over the Western hemisphere, an ideology that would shape American foreign policy for decades, the Monroe Doctrine.

In the years that followed Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase, another issue gradually took the focus away from Republican-Federalist debates over governments’ role; the issue of slavery in the United States of America would

dominate American politics for over fifty years, and eventually drive it into a depraved civil war. Although there were numerous factors involved, one event in particular would propel Northerners and Southerners into the vicious discord that led to the civil war, President James K. Polk's acquisition of New Mexico and California following the Mexican War of 1846-1848.

James Knox Polk, an obscure Tennessee politician, took the Presidential office much like Jefferson, on the slimmest of margins. Elected on the premise of the ideal of manifest destiny, Polk immediately took the reigns from John Tyler in 1844, and embarked on fulfilling that dream, at whatever cost necessary. In order to appease Northern concerns over the annexation of Texas as an attempt at expanding slavery within the Union, Polk looked northwards to the Territory of Oregon, where slavery had not taken hold.

Polk entered negotiations with the British over who had direct control over the area that comprised Oregon, which was then present-day Lower British Columbia, Washington State, and Oregon. The entire notion that Britain cede all land south of 54°40' was of dubious legality to be sure, but in any case, the shared authority idea formulated in 1818 between the U. S. and Britain did not sit well with the expansionist-minded Polk. These negotiations, however, were intent on securing peace with Britain as so Polk could turn his attentions to his real intent: California.

In 1845, a British observer noted that California, with less than 10, 000 white settlers, was ripe for the taking for anybody who wanted it. Polk, keenly astute, recognized that foreign occupation of California was indeed a possibility, and took steps to assure American influence in the area. Months

before the events that precipitated the Mexican War, Polk ordered the American Navy in the Pacific to stand on alert and to take the Californian ports if war with Mexico could be “ ascertained with certainty”. This not only symbolized Polk’s desire to capture California, but also showed that he was ready to act in excess of the Executive Office.