

Thomas jefferson's actions vs. beliefs



Thomas Jefferson was a Democratic-Republican who served as the third president of the United States. While many people believed in a strong central government, Thomas Jefferson believed the opposite. As a founder of the Democratic-Republican party, he believed that most of a country's political power should reside in the state and the federal government's abilities should be as limited as possible.

While many agreed that the federal government was free to overlook the constitution in order to accomplish their goals, Jefferson believed in a strict translation of the constitution, regardless of what the federal government desired. He valued individual liberties, states rights and equality. However, once he became president, Jefferson was not persistent in abiding by his true beliefs and ideologies. Occasionally, he would disregard the constitution in order to achieve what he felt were his presidential duties. Although his actions as president did not reflect his political views, Thomas Jefferson felt it was necessary to abandon his personal beliefs in order to serve the people and do what's best for the country.

Thomas Jefferson was a strict constructionist. He believed that rather than interpreting the constitution liberally, the government should base their actions on the terms specifically stated. In other words, the government doesn't have any powers beyond what is written. The constitution was created to protect the people's rights and prevent any governmental power from becoming too strong. Therefore, if the government disobeys the constitution, they would be abusing their power by failing to completely protect the people's rights. In 1798, John Adams passed the Alien and Sedition Acts, which were four federalist-based laws. The Alien and Sedition

Acts permitted the deportation of foreigners, unauthorized protesting the government, and made it difficult for foreigners to vote. When Thomas Jefferson realized that Congress was completely violating the constitution, he wrote The Kentucky Resolution, attacking these laws and the government. In these resolutions, Jefferson explained that Congress was exercising power not explicitly granted to them in the constitution. By passing an act that forbade public opposition to the government, Congress was violating the first amendment, freedom of speech. Jefferson knew that if the government continued to pass unconstitutional acts, they would become too powerful. He was anti a strong central government because he feared tyranny and believed that the wishes of the people should guide the country. These resolutions emphasized Jefferson's firm belief in dominant states rights and strictly abiding by the terms in the constitution. Nonetheless, when elected as president in 1801, Jefferson did not always base his actions on a literal interpretation of the constitution.

Though he did not uphold his personal beliefs, one of Jefferson's achievements as president was the Louisiana Purchase. In France, Napoleon led his French Army on a campaign to conquer land. He needed money to fund his battles and decided to sell Louisiana because this land was no longer of importance to him. During Jefferson's presidency, Napoleon offered the Louisiana Purchase to the United States in exchange for 15 million dollars, cheap for over 800, 000 square miles of land. Jefferson and Congress agreed to this offer and ultimately purchased the territory. However, the constitution does not specifically permit the executive branch to buy land from a foreign nation. Jefferson was a strong believer in interpreting the

constitution literally and agreed that a government's actions should be strictly based on the constitution. Thus, buying this land countered his personal beliefs. Also, Jefferson discussed passing an amendment to authorize the purchase with congress, proving his decision to buy the territory was unconstitutional. Although acquiring the Louisiana Purchase contradicted his political views, Jefferson's duty as president was to serve the people. Jefferson felt his responsibility was to buy the land because it benefited the people in many ways. The Louisiana Purchase was the area of land between the Mississippi River and the Rocky Mountains. This land was very important to many people, especially farmers, because they were reliant on access to the Mississippi River and the Port of New Orleans to obtain money by trading goods and crops. Additionally, this land doubled the size and strength of the country, creating 13 new states. Western expansion was important to Jefferson and buying this land both achieved his personal goals and benefited the people. While he did not uphold his personal beliefs, the Louisiana Purchase was considered one of Jefferson's greatest accomplishments.

Similar to the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson's actions were contrary to his beliefs on slavery. He opposed slavery, yet as president he was a slave owner, had an affair with a slave, and did nothing to eliminate slavery. However, he believed in equal rights and attempted to abolish slavery before he became president. In 1776 when he was appointed to write the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's job as author was to explain the values and principles of the upcoming country. One of his most famous quotes from the Declaration is all men are created equal. By writing all men,

Jefferson was referring to all men, regardless of their race and social status. He also added an anti-slavery clause to the document, but it was then removed from the final Declaration. Even as governor of Virginia, Jefferson passed a law that prohibited importing slaves because he believed it would lead to ultimately abolishing slavery in the state. In 1781, Jefferson wrote a book called *Notes on the State of Virginia* in order to answer people's questions about the state. In this book, he openly criticized slavery to an extreme. Jefferson explained that he opposed slavery and wished to abolish it for good. He believed that slavery was a moral problem because it demeaned the slave owners more than the slaves because the slave owners were disobeying people's natural rights to freedom and liberty. While Jefferson denounced slavery and attempted to abolish it before presidency, he enslaved over 600 people. He worked for many years on a plantation at Monticello and enslaved many families there. Additionally, he had a relationship with Sally Hemings, a slave of his, and had six children with her. Although he opposed slavery, Jefferson felt it was necessary for the country to have slaves. Selling slaves and slave labor helped Jefferson pay back country debt and ultimately reduce the debt by 30 percent. Additionally, most of the country's economy was dependent on agriculture, and slave labor enhanced America's cultivation. By upholding his beliefs, Jefferson wouldn't be able to save the country from extreme debt. Thus, during the country's financial collapse, he had to sell slaves for the good of the country. He put aside his personal beliefs of equality in order to help the country grow and prosper.

Another example of Jefferson's political views conflicting with his actions was when he sent the American fleet to fight the Barbary pirates, known as the Barbary wars. The Barbary pirates were a group of people from North Africa who would often raid merchant ships and hold people for ransom. The pirates would then demand tribute, a large payment, from a country in exchange for stopping their attacks. Before the American Revolution, the US did not have to worry about Barbary pirates attacking their ships because Great Britain would pay the tribute to the Barbary states for them. However, once America became independent, the British no longer had to protect the states and they stopped paying the tribute to the pirates. America became an easy target in the eyes of the Barbary pirates and they were forced to pay the expensive tribute to them. However, once Jefferson became president, he stopped paying the tribute in order to stand up to the pirates. Since they did not pay the pirates, the Pasha of Tripoli, a Barbary State, declared war on the United States in May, 1801. In response, Jefferson sent the American navy to Tripoli in order to blockade the state. When he sent the navy into Tripoli, there was no vote in congress that permitted him to do so. According to the Constitution, Congress has the power to declare war, not the executive branch. Therefore, by dispatching the American squadron without the official permission of congress, Jefferson was loosely abiding by the terms in the Constitution. Although he was not upholding his belief in a strict interpretation of the Constitution, Jefferson felt it was his duty as president to put an end to the Barbary conflict. The Barbary states were urging the US to pay tremendous tribute to them, draining the country of money. If they did not pay tribute, the Barbary states would destroy their merchant ships and imprison many American citizens, attempting to terminate the country's

trading business. Jefferson made a bold decision on his own to send in American ships to Tripoli because he believed this would save the country's commerce. His job as president was to do what's best for the country, despite what he personally believed.

Finally, by passing the Embargo Act in 1807, Jefferson did not adhere to his personal political beliefs. During Jefferson's presidency, Britain and France were at war. In order to prevent British success, France restricted the US from trading with Britain by seizing America's merchant ships if they carried British goods. Britain retaliated by using the same technique as France. They began to hinder US trade with France by conquering American merchant ships. They then passed a decree that required other countries to pay them before trading in Europe. However, the US was a neutral country and did not want any part of the war. In response, Jefferson passed the Embargo Act, prohibiting trade with any foreign country. However, this act was contrary to Jefferson's beliefs. The Constitution specifically says that the government's job is to regulate trade with other countries. By prohibiting US merchant ships from sailing to other countries' ports, Jefferson eliminated all trade completely. He did not stand by the requirements of regulating the country's trade stated in the Constitution. Also, he passed additional harsh laws, penalizing people who did not obey the act. Many people couldn't make money because their jobs were reliant on trade. Though he did not abide by the Constitution, Jefferson believed cutting off all trade would stop the countries from seizing their merchant ships. He did not want the US, a neutral country, to be caught in the middle of the Napoleonic wars. By depriving Britain and France from American goods and trade, Jefferson

reasoned that the countries would immediately refrain from attacking their ships. He took this action because he believed it would ultimately benefit the country's commerce and show other countries that they cannot disrespect the US without consequences. Despite loosely upholding the constitution, Jefferson intended to protect and assist the American people in the best way possible.

Jefferson's decisions as president did not always reflect his political views, but his decisions were made to fulfill his job. A president's responsibility is to serve the citizens of the country, in spite of personal interests. Taking on the yoke of presidency required Jefferson to suspend his personal beliefs for the country's best interests. Though he was a strict constructionist and believed in strong states rights, Jefferson exercised federal power in order to achieve his political goals. He felt it was necessary to carry out loose construction and centralize his power in order to accomplish what's best for the country. Jefferson knew that abiding by his personal beliefs would not be good for the country as a whole. He concluded that his political views were not what the country needed to thrive, so he made decisions that went against the grain of who he was. Though Jefferson wanted to uphold his political views, he understood that disobeying them would best fulfill the country's needs. Taking on the responsibility of serving the people can cause a president to make decisions that conflict their beliefs. When Abraham Lincoln was president during the Civil War, he felt it was his duty to ensure the Union's triumph and pass the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves. However, in order to achieve this goal, he removed the writ of Habeas Corpus without

Congress' permission, disobeying the Constitution. Habeas corpus gave anyone who was arrested the right to a judge before they went to jail.

This law induced rebellion because people were not worried about being unlawfully arrested. Therefore, during this time of war, Lincoln felt it was necessary to suspend this law because it limited people's rights to be brought before a judge, suppressing southern rebellion. Though he did not uphold the Constitution and took away power from the legislative branch, he felt it was necessary in order to help the country win the war. Lincoln wanted to unify the country and revolts from the South prevented unification. He believed removing Habeas Corpus would keep the nation together. Lincoln strayed away from presidential requirements to protect the greater good of the country and ultimately succeeded. Just like Jefferson, Lincoln disregarded the terms stated in the Constitution because his job as president was to serve the people. In order to best accommodate and benefit the people, Lincoln went beyond his scope of authority. Before presidency, Lincoln believed in supporting the constitution and literally abiding by it. However, when he realized overlooking the terms benefited the country, he took a bold action and defied the constitution. When presidents take on the responsibility of assisting the people, they stray away from personal interests and requirements in order to accomplish what's best for the country.

Barbary Wars, Office of the Historian. Accessed November 21, 2018.

<https://history.state.gov/milestones/1801-1829/barbary-wars>

<https://assignbuster.com/thomas-jeffersons-actions-vs-beliefs/>

Commander in Chief: Barbary Pirates, Bill of Rights Institute. Accessed November 21, 2018. <https://billofrightsintstitute.org/educate/educator-resources/lessons-plans/presidents-constitution/barbary-pirates/>

Dueholm, James A. Lincoln's Suspension of the Writ of Habeas Corpus: An Historical and Constitutional Analysis, *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 29, no. 2 (2008): 47-66. Accessed November 29, 2018. <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.2629860.0029.205>

Jeffersonian Ideology. *USHistory.org*. Accessed October 24, 2018. <https://www.ushistory.org/us/20b.asp>

Jefferson, Thomas. The Kentucky Resolutions. Passed November 16, 1798.

Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1997.

The Alien and Sedition Acts. *USHistory.org*. Accessed October 30, 2018. <https://www.ushistory.org/us/19e.asp>

Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*. New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1964.

Thomas Jefferson's Monticello. *Thomas Jefferson, A Brief Biography*. Accessed November 6, 2018. https://www.monticello.org/site/plantation-and-slavery/thomas-jeffersons-attitudes-toward-slavery#footnote5_lrhx23e

Yon, Richard. *The American Presidents*. Edited by Frank N. Magill. California: Salem Press, 1964. <https://assignbuster.com/thomas-jeffersons-actions-vs-beliefs/>