

LOUISIANA PURCHASE - TWO VIEWS

John Bakeless, "History's Greatest Real Estate Bargain"

The Louisiana Purchase has been called "the greatest real estate bargain in history". That judgment is probably correct. . . . But it was much more than a smart bargain in real estate; it was one of half a dozen events without which there would never have been anything like the present United States.

The Purchase made it possible for the United States eventually to become a two-ocean power. It gave us control of some of the most fertile land and some of the richest mines in the world. It gave us control of the Mississippi River, which in the days before transportation by air and rail, was a vital transportation route. Thus the Louisiana Purchase united our country as nothing else could have done. The West – in those days that meant Kentucky and the area around it – decided to stick with the United States. Before the Purchase there had been continual trouble. Farm products could be sold only by sending them down the Mississippi, but the Spaniards controlled New Orleans. Western Pennsylvania even rose in armed rebellion – the Whiskey Rebellion – which had to be put down. There was always the chance that the westerners might leave the United States entirely and throw their lot with Spain. But the Louisiana Purchase made the Mississippi, as well as country reaching to the Rockies firmly American.

Question:

Explain three reasons why Bakeless believed that the Louisiana Purchase was "one of half a dozen events without which there would never have been anything like the present United States"? Which of these reasons do you think is the most important? Explain. Do you think the Louisiana Purchase was a good deal? Explain.

Walter LaFeber, "The Louisiana Purchase: A Dangerous Precedent"

[Jefferson] believed the success of American's great experiment in democracy demanded an expanding territory. In his mind, the republic must be controlled by ambitious, independent, property-holding farmers, who would form the incorruptible bedrock of democracy. . . . But Jefferson's virtuous farmers need land, and their population was growing at an astonishing rate. . . . In less than one year Jefferson had enlarged the central government's constitutional powers more broadly than had Washington and Adams in 12 years. He had set a dangerous precedent, moreover, by arguing that when time was of the essence, the President and Congress could ignore, perhaps violate, the Constitution if they considered it to be in the national interest. . . . John Randolph of Virginia turned against his fellow Virginian for having overthrown Republican constitutional doctrine. There were only "two parties in all States," Randolph concluded. "The *ins* and the *outs*." The *ins* construed governmental power broadly for the gain of their own "patronage and wealth," while the *outs* tried to limit such power. "But let the *outs* get in . . . and you will find their Constitutional scruples and arguments vanish like dew before the morning sun."

Jefferson and his supporters succeeded in transforming the Constitution into an instrument for imperial expansion, which made it possible for Jefferson to resolve the crisis in his great democratic experiment. But the transformation of the Constitution for the sake of "enlarging the empire of liberty" had a price. The President, as Jefferson had demonstrated, could find in the Constitution virtually any power he needed to carry out the most expansive foreign policy, especially if his party commanded a majority in Congress. Loose construction was given the seal of bipartisanship as the Republicans, now the *ins*, out-Hamiltoned Hamilton in construing the 1787 document broadly. Such loose constructionism would be used by others, among them President James K. Polk from 1845 to '46 as he maneuvered Mexico into a war in order to annex California and President Harry S. Truman when he claimed the authority to wage war in Korea.

Questions:

1. Why did LaFeber believe that the Purchase established a bad precedent? Do you agree with him?
2. John Randolph commented that there are only two parties – the *ins* and the *outs*. What did he mean exactly? To what extent does this hold true today?