Was Jefferson Right To Make The Louisiana Purchase?

Thomas Jefferson is widely recognized as one of the great heroes of American history. Even Jefferson himself was aware of his historical importance, and to help define his legacy, he wrote his own epitaph. On his tombstone, he wanted the following: “Here was buried Thomas Jefferson Author of the Declaration of American Independence, of the Statute of Virginia for religious freedom, Father of the University of Virginia.”

Interestingly enough, he did not include the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. Why would Jefferson fail to include the most important land acquisition in U.S. history as among his greatest accomplishments? As president, he authorized this purchase, ultimately considered one of the greatest real estate deals ever made. A mere $15 million dollars doubled the size of the United States, acquiring economic resources, strategic advantages, and political power. It also removed obstacles to westward expansion, setting the nation on the road to become a continental power.

Why would Jefferson not recognize this as a significant personal accomplishment? Did he not want to seem too boastful, or were there other concerns?

One possible answer is that Jefferson did not want to remind future generations that he had once taken actions that were, quite possibly, unconstitutional. Thomas Jefferson adhered to a strict constructionist view of the Constitution, which means that he believed that government could only take actions explicitly outlined in the Constitution. Unless the Constitution clearly granted a specific branch of government
a given power, it was not allowed. Jefferson had aggressively argued this position since the adoption of the Constitution, and criticized others for breaching this constructionist principle.

In 1802, Jefferson had sent Robert Livingston and James Monroe to negotiate a treaty to purchase New Orleans and West Florida. Jefferson was authorized by Congress to offer up to $10 million for this tract of land. During this time, French Emperor Napoleon offered unexpectedly to sell the entire Louisiana Territory to the United States for $15 million. Jefferson knew the offer of $15 million for this vast tract of land was a bargain, and he did not want too much time to pass for fear that Napoleon might take back his offer. He therefore acted quickly to have the Congress ratify the treaty regarding the purchase. However, his decision created much controversy.

There was not specific language in the Constitution that authorized the government to make such acquisitions of foreign territory, so many people viewed Jefferson’s actions as unconstitutional. They also viewed it as hypocritical, given his previously strict constructionist stance and heavy criticism of others for stepping beyond the bounds of the Constitution. Jefferson made many attempts to validate the authorization, arguing, for instance, that “What is practicable must often control what is pure theory.” He meant that the practical benefits of the purchase were more important than his own personal constitutional beliefs. Certainly, although controversial, the purchase of Louisiana allowed the United States to flourish in ways that one could not have imagined.
So, what do you think? Place yourself in the early 1800s, and decide what position you would have supported. While making your decision, consider the following: Jefferson’s interpretation of the Constitution; the actual specifications of the Constitution itself; the effects the purchase had on trade, resources, international relationships, and expansion; and ultimately the long-term consequences of the purchase on the course of the United States as a whole. To assist you with your decision-making, review the documents provided and answer the question: Was President Thomas Jefferson right to purchase the Louisiana Territory? Use evidence from the documents to support your position.

**Vocabulary Terms**

- **Epitaph**: a commemorative inscription on a tombstone about the person buried at that site
- **Acquisition**: the act of gaining possession
- **Strict Constructionist**: someone who believes in a close or narrow reading and interpretation of a statute or written document
- **Napoleon**: Napoleon Bonaparte was a French general, political leader, and emperor of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries
- **Validate**: to make valid; confirm
- **Flourish**: to thrive
- **Constitutional**: referring to the constitution of a state, organization, etc.
Student Background Essay Questions

1. Why did Jefferson send Robert Livingston and James Monroe to France in 1802?

2. Why was Jefferson’s authorization of the Louisiana Purchase controversial?

3. When Jefferson said “what is practicable must often control what is pure theory,” what do you think he meant? Explain.