CHAPTER 11

The Triumphs and Travails of the Jeffersonian Republic, 1800–1812

# Focus Questions

. How did Jefferson behave as president, and how did he deal with his predecessors’ federalist programs?

. What were the circumstances that gave birth to the principle of judicial review?

. How was the United States able to acquire the Louisiana territory and why did Jefferson struggle with the purchase?

. What foreign policy challenges did Jefferson face and how did he respond to each?

. Why did Madison ask Congress to declare war on Britain in 1812?

# Chapter Themes

**Theme:** Jefferson’s effective, pragmatic policies strengthened the principles of a two-party republican government, even though the Jeffersonian revolution caused sharp partisan battles between Federalists and Republicans over particular issues.

**Theme:** Despite his intentions, Jefferson became deeply entangled in the foreign-policy conflicts of the Napoleonic era, leading to a highly unpopular and failed embargo that revived the moribund Federalist Party.

**Theme:** James Madison fell into an international trap, set by Napoleon, which Jefferson had avoided. Western War Hawks’ enthusiasm for a war with Britain was matched by New Englanders’ hostility.

chapter summary

The ideological conflicts of the early Republic culminated in the bitter election of 1800 between Adams and Jefferson. Despite the fierce rhetoric of the campaign, the Revolution of 1800 demonstrated that the infant Republic could peacefully transfer power from one party to another. The election of 1800 also signaled the decline of the conservative Federalist Party, which proved unable to adjust to the democratic future of American politics.

Jefferson, the political theorist, came to Washington determined to restore what he saw as the original American revolutionary ideals and to implement his Republican principles of limited and frugal government, strict construction, and an antimilitarist foreign policy. But Jefferson, the practical politician, had to compromise many of these goals, thereby moderating the Republican-Federalist ideological conflict.

The sharpest political conflicts occurred over the judiciary, where John Marshall worked effectively to enshrine the principles of judicial review and a strong federal government. Against his original intentions, Jefferson himself also enhanced federal power by waging war against the Barbary pirates and by his dramatic purchase of Louisiana from Napoleon. The Louisiana Purchase was Jefferson’s greatest success, increasing national unity and pointing to America’s long-term future in the West. But in the short term the vast geographic expansion fostered schemes like Aaron Burr’s to break the West away from the United States.

Nevertheless, Jefferson became increasingly entangled in the horrific European wars between Napoleonic France and Britain, as both great powers obstructed American trade and violated freedom of the seas. Jefferson attempted to avoid war through his embargo policy, which damaged the American economy and stirred bitter opposition in New England.

Jefferson’s successor, James Madison, soon stumbled into a diplomatic trap set by Napoleon, and western War Hawks, hoping to acquire Canada, whooped the United States into a war with Britain in 1812. The nation went to war totally unprepared, bitterly divided, and devoid of any coherent strategy.

# developing the chapter: suggested lecture or discussion topics

* Focus on the rivalry between John Adams and Jefferson, examining their genuine and deeply held differences of principle regarding power, liberty, and the meaning of the new American experiment. Trace the evolution of their relationship, as it eventually revealed (in their letters) the even deeper commitments to American values that they shared.

REFERENCE: Joseph Ellis, *Founding Brothers* (2001).

* Consider the close connection between politics and law in the early history of the Supreme Court, with Federalist Marshall contending with Republican Jefferson. Show the importance of Marshall’s bold new principle that the Supreme Court has the final power to interpret the Constitution.

REFERENCE: G. Edward White, *The Marshall Court and Cultural Change* (1988).

* Analyze the causes and consequences of the Louisiana Purchase, particularly, its long-term implications for the Federalist-Republican conflict. Consider the expansion into Louisiana in relation to Americans’ increasing fascination with the West, spurred in part by the Lewis and Clark expedition.

REFERENCE: Donald Jackson, *Thomas Jefferson and the Stony Mountain* (1981).

* Consider the puzzling problem of the causes of the War of 1812 and, particularly, the issue of maritime causes versus the Western War Hawks’ frontier concerns. Examine the question of whether declaring war against Britain was essentially an emotional and irrational outburst or whether it involved a defense of central American interests and principles.

REFERENCES: Donald R. Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict* (1989); J.C.A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison’s War: Politics, Warfare, and Diplomacy in the Early American Republic* (1983).

# for further interest: additional class topics

* Focus on Jefferson as political philosopher, practical political leader, and enduring symbol of American democracy. Examine the elements of Jefferson’s political ideals and compare them with his actual performance in office. (See boxed quotes by Jefferson on pages 209 and 214.)
* Consider the role of the Supreme Court and judicial review in the American political system in Jefferson’s time and after. Discuss particularly its apparently antidemocratic character.
* Focus on the causes and consequences of the Louisiana Purchase, particularly on its implications for the future westward movement of the United States. Examine the Lewis and Clark Expedition as both an enterprise of geographic and scientific inquiry and as a political maneuver to put an American imprint on the North American continent. (Note that Lewis and Clark traveled far beyond the Purchase territory proper, implying even further expansion.)
* Examine the background and ambitions of the young western War Hawks of 1812, including people such as Congressman Henry Clay. (See boxed quote by Clay on page 222.) Consider the important place of Canada in the thinking of those who pushed for war against Britain.

# character sketches

## Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826)

Jefferson was, after Washington and Franklin, the most celebrated of the Founding Fathers, and the one who most completely combined intellectual genius in many fields with practical political skill.

In his youth, Jefferson was a lighthearted socialite, horseman, and violinist, but he became more serious and philosophical after an unhappy love affair and especially after the death of his young wife in 1782.

A poor public speaker, Jefferson nevertheless excelled at legislative and political work behind the scenes. His literary skill led Franklin, Adams, and the other members of the drafting committee to assign him to write the Declaration of Independence. His original version included an attack on slavery, but this was removed.

Soft-spoken and informal in manner, Jefferson liked to receive visitors at Monticello or the White House in slippers and casual clothes and drape himself across furniture as he spoke. The charge that he fathered children by one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, grew out of contemporary rumors and was published by a hostile journalist in 1802. Although Jefferson’s paternity was accepted as fact within the black Hemings clan, Jefferson’s admirers contended over the years that Jefferson’s nephew was the father. In the late 1990s, DNA tests of Jefferson’s acknowledged white descendants and descendants of Hemings confirmed the very high likelihood that Jefferson did have a liaison with Hemings. On his tombstone, Jefferson listed his three great achievements as being the author of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom and the founder of the University of Virginia.

**Quote:** “A government regulating itself by what is just and wise for the many, uninfluenced by the local and selfish interests of the few who direct their affairs, has not been seen, perhaps, on earth. . . . Still, I believe it does exist here in a greater degree than anywhere else, and for its growth and continuance I offer sincere prayers.” (Letter to John Adams, 1813)

REFERENCES: Noble Cunningham, *In Pursuit of Reason: The Life of Thomas Jefferson* (1987); Joseph Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (1997).

## Meriwether Lewis (1774–1809)

Lewis was Jefferson’s private secretary and leader of the expedition that explored the Louisiana Purchase territory.

He grew up as Jefferson’s neighbor and friend. As Jefferson’s presidential secretary, he supervised White House social life as well as official correspondence.

Jefferson and Lewis had planned an expedition to the west coast even before the Louisiana Purchase. William Clark was the geographer and manager of the expedition, while the better-educated Lewis carried out the scientific and cultural side of the mission. On the return trip from Oregon, Lewis was accidentally wounded by one of his men, who mistook him for a deer.

Shortly after being made governor of Louisiana, Lewis was shot to death in a remote Tennessee inn. Some people claimed he was murdered, but Jefferson said Lewis was subject to frequent bouts of depression and believed he had committed suicide.

**Quote:** “We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized man has not trodden; the good or evil it had in store for us was an experiment yet to determine. … Entertaining, as I do, the most confident hope of succeeding in a voyage which has formed a project of mine for the last ten years, I could but esteem this moment of departure as among the most happy of my life.” (Journal, Fort Mandan, 1805)

REFERENCE: Stephen Ambrose, *Undaunted Courage* (1996).

## Sacajawea (1787?–1812?)

Sacajawea was the Shoshone Indian who served as translator and negotiator on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

The daughter of a chief, she was married, along with another Indian woman, to Toussaint Charbonneau, a French-Canadian *voyageur* who lived with the Indians. Charbonneau became an interpreter for Lewis and Clark at Fort Mandan in Dakota, and Sacajawea joined the expedition even though she had given birth two months before to a son, John Baptiste.

Contrary to legend, Sacajawea did little guiding, but she did translate. When the expedition reached her own people along the Snake River, she was overjoyed and learned that her brother had become chief.

Clark became attached to her son and offered to raise him. After initially refusing, she and Charbonneau joined Clark in St. Louis, left their son with him, and returned to Dakota.

Controversy surrounds whether Sacajawea died shortly thereafter at Fort Mandan or lived to old age on the Wind River reservation in Wyoming. Because she was taken up as a heroine by American suffragists, there are more monuments to her than to any other American woman.

REFERENCE: Ella Clark and Margot Edmonds, *Sacajawea of the Lewis and Clark Expedition* (1979).

## Henry Clay (1777–1852)

Clay was a Kentucky congressman and senator who, along with Webster and Calhoun, dominated congressional politics in the early nineteenth century. Beginning his career as a spokesman for the new West, he spent most of it as a Border State moderate trying to mediate between North and South.

Clay moved from Virginia to Lexington, Kentucky, in 1797 and became the state’s most renowned criminal lawyer. Although initially sympathetic to Aaron Burr’s schemes, he was eventually convinced by Jefferson of Burr’s treasonous intentions.

Eloquent and impetuous, Clay displayed a hot western temper. His lifelong feud with Jackson began when he criticized Jackson’s invasion of Florida in 1819. He maneuvered during his whole political life for the presidency but never attained it. His statement “I would rather be right than be President” can be taken with a grain of salt, since he frequently modified positions for political advantage, notably in the presidential campaign of 1844.

Like other westerners of the time, he loved horse racing, cards, liquor, and dueling—though he finally gave up the last practice.

**Quote:** “An honorable cause is attainable by an efficient war. . . . In such a cause, with the aid of Providence, we must come out crowned with success. But if we fail, let us fail like men, lash ourselves to our gallant tars, and expire together in one common struggle, fighting for Free Trade and Seamen’s Rights.” (Congressional speech, 1811)

REFERENCE: Robert Remini, *Henry Clay: Statesman for the Union* (1991).

## Tecumseh (1768–1813)

Tecumseh was a Shawnee warrior who organized a major Indian confederacy against the United States just before the War of 1812.

His father, a Shawnee chief, was killed in battle with whites in 1774. Between 1805 and 1810, Tecumseh worked to organize his own people and also became well known among the Potawatomies and Kickapoos in Ohio and Indiana.

He was, at first, subordinate to his brother Tenskwatawa—commonly called the Prophet—a Shawnee shaman, or medicine man, who preached a revival of traditional Indian religion. In 1810–1811, Tecumseh expanded his influence across the whole Northwest, persuading each of the tribes not to sell land to the whites without the consent of all. (See boxed quote by Tecumseh on page 222 and boxed quote by William Henry Harrison on page 223.)

Ignoring Tecumseh’s advice, his brother launched a premature battle against General Harrison at Tippecanoe and was killed. Tecumseh and his remaining warriors joined the British side in the War of 1812, but Tecumseh, too, was killed at the battle of the Thames, ending the last Indian attempt at a united front against white advance.

**Quote:** “The Great Spirit…gave this great island to his red children. He placed the whites on the other side of the big water. They were not content with their own, but came to take ours from us. They have driven us from the sea to the lakes. We can go no farther. They have taken upon themselves to say this tract belongs to the Miami, this to the Delawares, and so on. But the Great Spirit intended it to be the common property of all the tribes, nor can it be sold without the consent of all.” (Speech, 1810)

REFERENCE: R. David Edmunds, *Tecumseh and the Quest for Indian Leadership* (1984).

# questions for class discussion

. In what sense, if any, is the idea of a Revolution of 1800 justified? (Note that Jefferson himself always considered that his election represented a genuine revolution—but what did he really mean or understand by that term in this context?)

. How important was establishing the principle of judicial review? Does that principle make more sense than Jefferson’s belief that the states retained the final authority on the meaning of the Constitution? (See boxed quote by John Marshall on page 211.) How important was the failed attempt to impeach Samuel Chase in establishing an independent judiciary? What role should Supreme Court justices play in politics?

. Why was Jefferson willing to fight for the freedom of the sea versus the pasha of Tripoli (who required tribute) but not against Britain (which was impressing American sailors)? Did Jefferson make a mistake in fighting for freedom in only one of these instances? When should America fight for its freedom and when should it not?

. How did Jefferson’s Louisiana Purchase transform America’s understanding of itself and its future? Was it inevitable that the West would become part of a much greater United States, or was there real danger in efforts like Aaron Burr’s to break those areas off from the country?

. How does the period 1800–1812 look if viewed through American Indian eyes? Could the attempt of Tecumseh and the Prophet to unite western Indians against American expansion have created a different dynamic in white-Indian relations?

. Was there any merit at all in Jefferson’s embargo policy? Could some other policy have succeeded? Was Madison’s ill-prepared stumble into war any better than the embargo, or was the United States simply stuck in an impossible position between Britain and France?

. Was America controlling its own destiny in the first decade and a half of the nineteenth century or was it reacting to the destinies of foreign nations and their leaders? Consider the Barbary pirates, the sale of Louisiana, Jefferson’s embargo, and the War of 1812. How influential was Napoleon on American history?

8. See the Examining the Evidence section on the Thomas Jefferson–Sally Hemings controversy. What does this episode say about the state of partisan politics as well as race relations in the early Republic era?

**CONTENDING VOICES: FEDERALIST PAMPHLET VS. W.B. GILES**

**Questions for Class Discussion**

1. How did the Federalist pamphlet from Massachusetts characterize the Embargo of 1807 as well as the presidency of Thomas Jefferson?
2. How did Senator Giles of Virginia view the Embargo?
3. In this dispute, how did partisan, sectional, and economic conflicts interact?