

## Chapter 9

### Jeffersonians In Office

Politicians are often accused of making campaign promises they do not intend to keep. This charge was made against Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. While the Federalists had held the presidency, Madison and Jefferson opposed paying the national debt at face value, opposed the Bank of the United States, opposed the Jay Treaty, and opposed a broad interpretation of the Constitution's elastic clause. Yet, once in power, they changed their position on each of these issues. As you read this chapter on what Thomas Jefferson and James Madison did as presidents, try to decide whether these men were hypocrites who changed their political philosophies, or if they just did what they thought was best for the country. In addition, examine the actions of the Federalists who also changed their positions on several crucial issues and try to decide whether they too were political chameleons.

#### *Jefferson's Election and Inaugural Address*

In his inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson stated his own philosophy of government in words almost as eloquent as those he used in the Declaration of Independence.

*(A)ll, too, will bear in mind this sacred principle, that though the will of the majority is in all cases to prevail, that will to be rightful must be reasonable; that the minority possess their equal rights, which equal law must protect, and to violate would be oppression.*

*(E)very difference of opinion is not a difference of principle. We have called by different names brethren of the same principle. We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists. If there are any amongst us who would dissolve this Union or to change its republican form, let them stand undisturbed as monuments of the safety with which error of opinion may be tolerated where reason is left free to combat it.*

*Sometimes it is said that man cannot be trusted with the government of himself. Can he, then, be trusted with the government of others?*

*A wise and frugal Government, which shall restrain men from injuring one another, shall leave them otherwise free to regulate their own pursuits of industry and improvement, and shall not take from the mouth of labor the bread it has earned.<sup>25</sup>*

It still remained to be seen just how much Thomas Jefferson would differ from the two Federalists who preceded him.

#### **Jefferson as President**

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<sup>25</sup>Quoted in Richard Hofstadter, *Great Issues in American History*, Volume I (Vintage Books: New York, 1958), pp. 187-88.

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Once in office Jefferson's style of leadership differed from that of Washington and Adams. He abandoned the Federalist practice of holding weekly receptions, much in the style of British and French kings. Nor did he deliver his speeches to Congress, but sent them by messenger to be read. Unlike his married predecessors, Jefferson, who was a widower, held few formal state dinners. He did hold frequent informal receptions in the morning, when all who wanted could come and visit.

President Jefferson disappointed members of his own party by not removing Federalists from government jobs and replacing them with loyal Republicans. Furthermore, Jefferson did not reverse long-established Federalist policies that seemed to be working. For instance, he did not try to re-negotiate the Jay Treaty, close the national bank, or scale down the federal debt, as many Federalists feared he would.

Nevertheless, Jefferson did follow his own policies in regard to the Sedition Act and the whiskey tax. The former was allowed to expire on March 3, 1801, with Jefferson making no attempt to renew it. The latter was repealed, saving western farmers and costing the U.S. government \$650,000 per year. To save money, Jefferson drastically reduced the size of the army and the diplomatic force, keeping the government "frugal" if not "wise."

In 1800, Americans received disturbing news from abroad. France, under Napoleon's leadership, had taken Spain and thereby secured New Orleans as well as the vast territories west of the Mississippi River. New Orleans was the most important port in America, accounting for the distribution of three-eighths of all U.S. foreign trade.

## The Louisiana Purchase

Hoping to avoid a confrontation with France over New Orleans, Jefferson sent James Monroe to negotiate a treaty with France. Monroe was instructed to offer no more than \$10 million for New Orleans and its immediate surrounding territories. If France refused, Monroe was to go to Britain and negotiate an alliance against France.

Fortunately for the United States, Monroe never had to approach the British. A slave rebellion in Haiti, followed by an outbreak of yellow fever, changed Napoleon's plans for New Orleans. Without a secure base in the Caribbean and with the likelihood of a renewed war with Great Britain, Napoleon decided to sell New Orleans and the entire western bank of the Mississippi and Missouri as far west and north as Montana (see map on next page). This area was one-third the size of the present United States. At the asking price of \$15,000,000 or 3 cents an acre, Napoleon offered the United States the best land bargain in recorded history.

Though not authorized to spend more than \$10,000,000, James Monroe dared not wait to get President Jefferson's approval before accepting this tempting offer. He feared that Napoleon might change his mind at any time. So James Monroe and John Livingston, U.S. ambassador to France, signed the treaty for what is known as the Louisiana Purchase.

Upon learning of the treaty, Republicans in the United States were joyous. But Jefferson harbored some last-minute reservations. Though he wanted to obtain this new land for his country, Jefferson hesitated because the Constitution did not specifically grant him the right to purchase land from foreign countries. Jefferson considered waiting to pass a Constitutional amendment that would allow the Federal government to purchase large tracts of land. Realizing that this might take years, Jefferson put his constitutional scruples aside and reasoned that the elastic clause could be used to justify the purchase of Louisiana, just as it had been used to charter the national bank. Surprisingly, objections to using the elastic clause in this manner rose not from Republicans, but from Federalists. Forgetting their own part in

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acquiring a \$70,000,000 debt and stretching the elastic clause to establish the Bank of the United States, Federalists voiced their objections to the Louisiana Purchase. It was too expensive, they claimed, and the nowhere in the Constitution was Congress specifically granted the power to buy land from foreign countries.

The Federalists' real fear concerning the Louisiana Purchase was not the integrity of the Constitution or the ability of the United States to pay its debts. The real objection was that these new territories would be settled by farmers and become states that would vote Republican.

The Louisiana Purchase and the Federalists' opposition to it served to discredit their party, and highlighted four successful years of Republican rule. As a result, Jefferson was re-elected in 1804 with 62 electoral votes, compared to 14 for Federalist Charles C. Pinckney of South Carolina.

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## American Neutrality Revisited

The gratification of Jefferson's electoral victory, however, was short-lived. Not long after selling Louisiana to the United States, Napoleon resumed his armed conflict with Great Britain, which lasted for ten years. During most of this period, the United States was a pawn in a global chess game between the two greatest powers on earth.

For two years, Americans profited because the shortage of supplies in Europe provided a ready market for American goods. Then Great Britain, the greatest power in the oceans of the world, attempted to blockade France, the greatest power on the continent of Europe. Both tried to deny the other the opportunity to trade with the United States. Great Britain insisted on the right to search all U.S. vessels sailing to Europe. France seized all U.S. ships that had stopped in Great Britain or submitted to searches by British officials.

Violations of American neutrality rights became ever more blatant, as the life-and-death struggle in Europe became more lethal. In 1807 the British resorted to an old-time practice of theirs—seizing U.S. sailors on American ships and forcing them to serve in the British navy. If this was not bad enough, the British made a bold assault on an American ship only a few miles from U.S. shores. In 1807, the British H.M.S. *Leopard* opened fire on the U.S.S. *Chesapeake* because the latter refused to submit to a search for British deserters. The British killed three sailors, boarded the ship and dragged off four alleged deserters. Public opinion in the United States was so angered by British violations of U.S. neutrality rights that Jefferson feared he might force him to declare war against Great Britain. Rather than go to war, Jefferson was willing to forsake neutrality rights and international trade. Consequently, in late 1807, President Jefferson announced a new U.S. policy—a total prohibition on trade with every foreign country.

## Embargo

The embargo, as this prohibition was called, was designed to hurt the British and stop their violations of American neutrality. Due to bumper harvests and new trade routes to Spain the British were not seriously affected by the quarantine on trade with England. However, the embargo backfired on the American economy and did its greatest damage in New England. American ships were forced to remain idle in harbors, goods piled up on wharves, and unemployment became a way of life. Secret and illegal trade with Canada began but was not enough to make up for the lost trade with Europe. The embargo became so unpopular that Congress gave in to pressure and repealed the act shortly before the end of Jefferson's second term of office.

A dejected Jefferson now turned over the difficult problems of defending America's maritime rights to his chosen successor, Secretary of State James Madison. It became Madison's unpleasant task to enforce a newly passed substitute for the embargo. Known as the Non-Intercourse Act of 1809, this law formally re-opened trade with all nations except Great Britain and France. In 1810, a new wrinkle was added to this policy by a law known as Macon's Bill #2. Under this new legislation, trade with Britain and France was resumed, with a twist. Once either of the countries ceased violating the United States' neutrality rights, the U.S. pledged to stop trade with the country that continued to violate those rights.

## Pressure to Wage War Against England

France's Emperor Napoleon Bonaparte decided to use provisions of Macon's Bill to fool the inexperienced American diplomats and government officials. He claimed to have repealed his orders

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prohibiting exports to Great Britain. On the strength of Napoleon's claims (which in fact France did not honor), the United States stopped trading with the British in November 1810. With this act, the movement leading to war with Britain began in earnest.

In 1811, Congress met and elected Henry Clay of Kentucky as its Speaker. Clay was the outspoken leader of a group of Congressmen representing Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee, known as "War Hawks." One of their objectives was to invade Canada and make it part of the United States. They also intended to defeat the Native Americans in the Ohio River Valley whose attacks on American settlers were blamed on Great Britain. By clearing the British out of Canada, the War Hawks expected to stop border raids and expand U.S. boundaries northward. Pressured by the "Hawks," President Madison asked for a declaration of war against Great Britain, which was quickly granted on June 18, 1812.

The United States had real grievances against the British. Between 1808 and 1811, some 6,000 sailors had been taken off U.S. ships and forced to serve in the British navy. The British claimed all these men were British deserters, but many were Americans. If the aim of the war had been to defend America's rights as a neutral country, however, it should have been stopped before it began. Two days before Congress voted to declare war (but many weeks before U.S. leaders received this welcome news) the British announced they were ready to re-open trade with the United States. Most of the support for this war, however, did not come from the states whose ships and sailors were affected. Instead, the support came from states far inland which were interested in taking Canada and/or stopping the British from aiding Native Americans in the West.

## Several Defeats and a Glorious Victory



### Setting Washington on fire

America was totally unprepared for the War of 1812. Several attempts to invade Canada failed, partially because the New York State militia refused to fight in Canada. Control over the Northwest actually fell into British hands before Oliver Perry won a naval victory on Lake Erie, and General William Harrison defeated the British and their Native American allies in the Battle of Thames. An American raid on the Canadian capital ended with the burning of the Parliament building. The British retaliated by capturing Washington, D.C., and burning its government buildings. The British army, however, was defeated outside of Baltimore (on the night that Francis Scott Key wrote the "Star Spangled Banner") and sailed out to sea.

The most decisive battle of the war was fought in New Orleans. Over 2,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded in this contest; American losses amounted to fewer than two dozen. Andrew Jackson was the American commander; his untrained soldiers included frontiersmen, pirates, state militia, and two companies of free black Americans. Since a peace treaty had already been signed in Ghent, Belgium, two weeks before, the battle did not affect the outcome of the war. However, it gave the United States a military hero: Andrew Jackson, and filled the United States with national pride for having inflicted such a decisive defeat on the British.

The War of 1812 ended on Christmas Eve, 1814, with the signing of the Treaty of Ghent. The treaty stated that both sides would stop fighting and return all conquered territory to the other. It said nothing about the violation of U.S. neutrality rights, which supposedly had been the cause of the war. Since fighting in Europe had ended and British violations had ceased and there was no need to reach an agreement on that topic. Other unresolved issues between the United States and Great Britain were

referred to arbitration. The War of 1812 marked the final armed conflict between the United States and Great Britain.

## **The Downfall of the Federalists and the Acceptance of Their Policies**

For the New England Federalists, the war had been an economic victory but a political disaster. Trade with the enemy flourished throughout the war, and Federalist New England emerged as the most prosperous section of the country. Federalist-controlled state governments either refused to provide soldiers or militia and/or refused to fight outside state boundaries. Furthermore, Federalists discouraged individuals and banks from lending money to the hard-pressed government during the war.

In their final folly, New England Federalists met in Hartford, where they made a series of suggestions to reduce the power of the national government, to limit the terms of the President, and to exclude naturalized citizens from serving in Congress. They even hinted at secession if their proposals weren't adopted. With incredibly bad timing, the Federalists arrived in Washington, D.C., just as word of Jackson's victory in New Orleans reached the nation's capital.

The Federalists' desire to reduce the power of the federal government and their less-than-patriotic actions during the war contrasted sharply with the national pride felt in the rest of the country. As a result, the Federalist Party was held in contempt outside of New England and ceased to exist as a national political force.

While the War of 1812 led directly to the downfall of the Federalist Party, it also brought Republicans to accept Federalist programs. Because of the difficulty of waging war without a centralized banking system, President Madison proposed the re-establishment of a national bank. His proposal was accepted by a Republican Congress, and the second Bank of the United States was chartered in 1816. Madison also called for a protective tariff, and in 1816 his Republican Congress passed the first such tariff in America's history. Based upon a strict interpretation of the elastic clause Madison, vetoed a bill for the U.S. government to finance state roads, but he approved funds for the continuation of the national road which he regarded as a military necessity.

### **Suggested Student Exercises:**

1. Give examples of both Jefferson and Madison appearing to abandon the principles they upheld before taking office, and upholding principles they had always supported.. Does it appear that they were inconsistent in applying their own political philosophies, or did they continue adhering to their core principles?
2. Could a similar claim of inconsistency be made against the Federalists?
3. Note the several different methods used to avoid war with Britain and France. Do you think they were wise? Do you believe the United States should have gone to war against Great Britain to protect American neutrality rights? Or do you think that the real reason for going to war had less to do with neutrality rights and more to do with expansion?