Thomas Jefferson & His Democracy: Crash Course US History #10

Crash Course: U.S. History
https://youtube.com/watch?v=_3Ox6vGteek
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/_3Ox6vGteek

John Green From the Past: Hi. I'm John Green. This is Crash Course US History, and today we're going to discuss Thomas Jefferson. We're going to learn about how America became a thriving nation of small, independent farmers, eschewing manufacturing and world trade, and becoming the richest and most powerful nation in the world in the 19th century, all thanks to the vision of Thomas Jefferson, the greatest and most intellectually consistent Founding Father, who founded the University of Virginia and grew twenty varieties of peas at Monticello–

John Green: Me From the Past, get to your desk! In a stunning turn of events, Me From the Past is an idiot and Jefferson is more complicated than that.

(Intro)

So in 1800, Thomas Jefferson, pictured here- this is the third time we've featured Thomas Jefferson on the chalkboard, so we had to go a little Warhol on it. So Jefferson, the Republican, ran against John Adams, the Federalist. 1800 was the first election where both parties ran candidates and actually campaigned and, surprisingly, the Federalists elitist strategy of "vote for Adams because he's better than you" did not work.

Now, both parties realize that it was important to coordinate their electoral strategy to make sure that the vice presidential candidate got at least one fewer electoral votes than the presidential candidate. But then the Republican elector who was supposed to throw his vote away forgot to, so there ended up being a tie between Thomas Jefferson and Aaron Burr. As per the Constitution, the election went to the House of Representatives, where it took thirty-six ballots and the intervention of Alexander Hamilton before Jefferson was finally named president.

Incidentally, Burr and Hamilton really disliked each other, and not in like, the passive-aggressive way that politicians dislike each other these days, but in the four-years-later-they-would-have-a-duel-and-Burr-killed-Hamilton kind of way. A duel which occurred, wait for it, in New Jersey.

But anyway, shortly after the election of 1800, the Twelfth Amendment was passed, making the Electoral College simpler, but not as simple as, say, one person's vote counting as one vote. Anyway, complain about the Electoral College all you want, but without it, we would never have had President Rutherford B. Hayes, and just look at that beard!

So Jefferson became president and his election showed that Americans wanted a more democratic politics, where common people were more free to express their opinions. The Federalists were never really a threat again in presidential politics and, arguably, the best thing that John Adams ever did was transfer power in an orderly and honorable way to his rival, Jefferson.

Jefferson's campaign slogan was "Jefferson and Liberty," but the liberty in question was severely limited. Only a fraction of white men were allowed to vote and, of course, there was no liberty for the slaves.

There's a lot of contentious debate on the subject of Jefferson and slavery, but here's my two cents, which I should not be allowed to contribute because we should only round to the nearest nickel, which, by the way, features Thomas Jefferson. So Thomas Jefferson was a racist and he wrote about black people's inherent inferiority to whites and Native Americans, and the fact that he fathered children with one of his slaves doesn't change that.

George Washington freed his slaves upon his death. Well, sort of. They were supposed to be freed upon his wife's death, but living in a house full of people who were waiting for you to die made Martha want to free them while she was still alive. But with few exceptions, Jefferson didn't free his slaves upon his death and throughout his life, he used the sale of slaves to finance his lavish lifestyle.

And this leads to two big philosophical questions when it comes to history. First, if Jefferson clearly did not think that black people were the intellectual or moral equals of whites and was perfectly comfortable keeping them in bondage, then what does the most important phrase of the Declaration of Independence actually mean?

And the second question is even broader: Does it matter if a person of tremendous historical importance had terrible aspects to their character? Does being a bad person diminish your accomplishments? I don't have a great answer for those questions, but I will tell you that no remembers Richard Nixon for starting the EPA.

But this is very important to understand: Slaves were aware of concept of liberty and they wanted it. So in addition to an election, 1800 also saw one of the first large-scale slave uprisings. Gabriel's Rebellion was organized by a Richmond, Virginia blacksmith who hoped to seize the capital, kill some of its inhabitants, and hold the rest hostage until his demands for abolition were met. But the plot was discovered before they could carry it out and Gabriel, along with 25 other slaves was hanged.

But after the rebellion, Virginians, if they didn't know it already, were very aware that slaves wanted and expected liberty. And the response was predictable: Virginia made its laws concerning slaves much harsher. It became illegal for slaves to meet in groups on Sundays unless supervised by whites, and it became much more difficult for whites to legally free their slaves.

Oh, it's time for the Mystery Document? The rules here are simple: Identify the author, no shock. Fail to identify the author, shock.

"The love of freedom, sir, is an inborn sentiment, which the god of nature has planted deep in the heart: long may it be kept under by the arbitrary institutions of society; but, at the first favorable moment, it springs forth, and flourishes with a vigour that defies all check. This celestial spark, which fires the breast of the savage, which glows in that of the philosopher, is not extinguished in the bosom of the slave. It may be buried in the embers; but it still lives; and the breath of knowledge kindles it to flame. Thus we find, sir, there have never been slaves in any country who have not seized the first favorable opportunity to revolt."

I mean, from the bit at the beginning about the love of freedom, it seems like it could be Jefferson, but the rest does not seem like Jefferson. Probably wasn't a slave, since they were denied access to education precisely because the "breath of knowledge" is so dangerous to the institution of slavery. Oh, this is looking pretty bleak for me, Stan. Mmmmmm.... John Jay? Dang it! Who was it? George Tucker?! Who the John C. Calhoun is George Tucker?! Is there a person watching this who knew that it was George Tucker? Fine... Gah!

Apparently George Tucker was a member of the General Assembly of Virginia and the Mystery Document was a description of Gabriel's Rebellion that suggested a solution to the inherent problem of rebellious slaves. He argued that we should set up a colony for them in Indian territory in Georgia, which, of course, also wouldn't have worked because we were soon to steal that territory.

But back to Jefferson. His idea was to make the government smaller, lower taxes, shrink the military, and make it possible for America to become a bucolic, agrarian, empire of liberty, rather

than an English-style, industrial, mercantile, nightmare landscape.

So how did he do? Well, really well at first. Jefferson got rid of all the taxes, except for the tariff, especially the Whiskey Tax. And then, when he woke up with a terrible, cheap whiskey-induced hangover, he paid off part of the national debt, he shrunk the army and the navy, and basically made sure that America wouldn't become a centralized, English-style state for at least the next 60 years.

Low taxes and small government sounds great, but no navy? That would be tough, especially when we needed ships and marines to fight the Barbary pirates "on the shores of Tripoli," who kept capturing our ships in the Mediterranean and enslaving their crews. This is yet another example of how foreign affairs keeps getting in the way of domestic priorities; in this case, the domestic priority of not wanting to spend money on a navy.

Also, vitally, Jefferson's presidency really marks the last time in history when a Republican president didn't want to spend money on the military. Don't get me wrong: Democrats can do it too. I'm looking at you, LBJ.

As much as he wanted to get rid of any trace of the Federalists, Jefferson found himself thwarted by that imminently conservative and undemocratic institution: the Supreme Court. Jefferson appointed Republicans to most government positions, but he couldn't do anything about the Supreme Court because they serve for life. And since the country was only like, 12 years old, they were all still pretty fresh.

Most important among them was Chief Justice John Marshall, who happened to be a Federalist. Marshall was Chief Justice basically forever and is, without question, the most important figure in the history of the Supreme Court. He wrote a number of key opinions, but none was more important than the 1803 decision in Marbury v. Madison.

Marbury v. Madison is so important because in that decision, the Supreme Court gave itself the power of judicial review, which allows it to uphold or invalidate federal laws. The Court then extended this power to state laws in Fletcher v. Peck and eventually even to executive actions. Like, we think of the main job of the Supreme Court being to declare laws unconstitutional, but that power isn't anywhere in the Constitution itself. Marbury v. Madison gave the Court that power and without it, the Supreme Court would probably be a footnote in American history.

So unlike Marshall, Jefferson and the Republicans were big proponents of strict construction: the idea that the Constitution should be read as literally as possible as way of limiting the power of the federal government. The problem is, there might be things the government wants to do that the Constitution didn't account for, like, for instance, buying a large tract of land from Napoleon, who, as we remember from Crash Course World History, complicates everything.

Let's go to the Thought Bubble.

So yeah, Jefferson basically doubled the size of the US in what came to be known as the Louisiana Purchase. Napoleon was eager to sell it because the rebellion in Haiti had soured him on the whole idea of colonies and also because he needed money. Jefferson wanted to purchase New Orleans because western farmers were shipping their products through the city and when he approached France about this, Napoleon was like, "Hey! How bout I sell you, this!" Jefferson couldn't turn down that deal, so he bought the whole kit and caboodle for $15 million, which is worth about $250 million today. To put that into perspective, a new aircraft carrier costs about $4.5 billion, so he got a good deal.

What's the problem with this? Well, nothing if you believe in a powerful government that can do stuff that's not in the Constitution, but if you're a strict Constructionist like Jefferson, you have to reconcile this obviously beneficial act with there being no mention in the Constitution of the president being able to purchase land in order to expand the size of the US.

So laying scruple aside, Jefferson bought Louisiana and then sent Lewis and Clark to explore it, which they did, even going beyond the boundaries of the Purchase all the way to the Pacific. And this was so cool that it almost makes us forget that it was kind of unconstitutional and a huge power grab for the president.

So the question is: why did he do it? Jefferson's desire to increase the size of the country prompted Federalists to complain that, "We are to give money, of which we have too little, for land, of which we already have too much." By doubling the size of the country, Jefferson could ensure that there would be enough land for every white man to have his own small farm and this, in turn, would ensure that Americans would remain independent and virtuous. Because only a small farmer who doesn't have to depend on the market for food or shelter or anything really (well, except slaves), can be truly independent, and thus capable of participating in a nation of free men. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

And this desire to create a nation of independent farmers producing only primary products helps explains Jefferson's other incredibly controversial policy: the embargo. Jefferson imposed the embargo in order to punish Britain for its practice of impressing American sailors, as well as its blockade of France, with whom Britain was once again, or possibly just still, at war.

So basically, Jefferson wanted free trade among nations and his solution was to get Congress to forbid all American ships from sailing to foreign ports. The theory was that the British were so dependent on American primary products, like wood and cotton, that if we cut off trade with them, the British would stop impressing American sailors and end their blockade.

What's the connection between free trade and Jefferson's agrarian ideal? Well, the idea was that America would trade its primary products for Europe's manufactured goods, so that the US wouldn't have to develop any manufacturing capacity of its own.

Alas, or perhaps fortunately, this did not work. For one thing, Britain and France were too busy fighting each other even to notice America's embargo. So they just continued blockading and impressing. Also, the embargo devastated the American economy. I mean, exports dropped by 80%.

Furthermore, not being able to import European manufactured goods only served to spur American manufacturing. I mean, Jefferson might have wanted Americans to be a bunch of self-sufficient farmers, but Americans wanted European manufactured stuff, like teapots and clocks and microwaves. Well, then how did they cook stuff, Stan? And if they couldn't get that stuff from Britain, they would just make it themselves. So in terms of Jefferson's agrarian ideal, the embargo was a massive failure.

And lastly, the embargo limited the power of the federal government about as much as crystal meth limits cavities. I mean, imposing the embargo was a colossal use of federal power and it was also an imposition on people's liberties. The problem the embargo was supposed to solve didn't go away and, as we'll discuss next week, it eventually led to the US's first declared war.

For now, I want to leave you with this: Thomas Jefferson is revered

and reviled in almost equal measure in American history. The Declaration of Independence, which he mainly drafted, is a signal achievement delineating some heroic ideas for the founding of the United States, but also embedding some of its crucial shortcomings.

And Jefferson's presidency is like that too. He claimed to champion small government, but he enlarged federal power more than Washington or Adams ever did. He imagined an agrarian republic, but his policies led to increased manufacturing. He wanted to foster freedom, but he owned slaves and took land from the Indians. In the end, Jefferson's life and policies encapsulate the best and the worst of us, which is why his presidency is still worth studying closely. I'll see you next week.

Crash Course is produced and directed by Stan Muller. Our script supervisor is Meredith Danko. Our associate producer is Danica Johnson. The show is written by my high school history teacher, Raoul Meyer, and myself, and our graphics team is Thought Cafe.

If you have questions about today's video, please ask them in comments, where they'll be answered by our team of historians and we're also accepting submissions for the Libertage Captions.

Thank you for watching Crash Course and, as we say in my hometown, don't forget to be awesome. Oh! That was a fake out, it's going this way!