Narrative: Thomas Jefferson and Prudence

- I can analyze the story of Thomas Jefferson and the Louisiana Purchase to identify examples of prudence in decision-making.

**Essential Vocabulary**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>prudence</th>
<th>Practical wisdom that applies reason and other virtues to discern right courses of action in specific situations.</th>
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<tr>
<td>sovereign</td>
<td>To possess ultimate authority.</td>
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<tr>
<td>yeoman</td>
<td>An owner of a small amount of land.</td>
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<tr>
<td>consolidation</td>
<td>To combine to make into one.</td>
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<tr>
<td>assumption</td>
<td>To take responsibility for.</td>
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<tr>
<td>apostates</td>
<td>A person who renounces a previously held belief.</td>
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<tr>
<td>consternation</td>
<td>Another word for fear or anxiety.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ecstatic</td>
<td>Another word for overjoyed.</td>
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**Narrative**

Prudent leaders are guided by principles to help them make practical decisions in difficult circumstances about what is wise and for the common good. Prudence is at the heart of statesmanship, which is applying wisdom to decision-making in national and international affairs. American politicians are also constrained by constitutional boundaries in decision-making. Constitutionalism and the common good must inform and sometimes supersede their own personal preferences as they have a responsibility to do what is right for the country.

In the 1770s and 1780s, Thomas Jefferson was the draftsman of the Declaration of Independence, member of Congress, governor of Virginia, and a diplomat to France. Jefferson had a strong set of deeply-held political principles. He believed in limited government in a self-governing republic. State and local governments governed best because they were close to the **sovereign** people. Small **yeoman** farmers were economically independent and preserved republican civic.
virtues. Large national governments, standing armies, national banks, federal spending and debts, and religious establishments were all sources of corruption and a threat to liberty. While slavery remained a blind spot in his thinking about liberty and self-government, Jefferson brought these principles to bear in his statesmanship in the new nation.

Jefferson served as secretary of state in the Washington administration and quickly grew concerned about the consolidation of national power. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton’s financial plans, including the assumption of the Revolutionary War state debts and creation of a national bank were particularly worrisome. The creation of a large national debt to be paid with taxes was deeply troubling to Jefferson. Moreover, he believed that the national bank was unconstitutional. He viewed the Necessary and Proper Clause in Article I, section 8 of the Constitution — which granted Congress the authority to make all laws “necessary and proper” to carry out its duties — narrowly and did not believe Congress had the power to authorize a bank. This viewpoint became known as “strict construction” of the Constitution.

The Founders universally despised political parties as factions. However, Jefferson formed the Republican Party (sometimes called the Democratic-Republicans) and helped to legitimize the idea of a loyal opposition, or a minority party that disagrees with the majority in power but remains loyal through commonly held principles. However, his partisanship was not always expressed prudently. Even though he was the Secretary of State, he quietly worked against the policies of the Washington administration he served. He hired publisher Phillip Freneau in the State Department, who started an opposition newspaper critical of the administration. He constantly urged his friend and political ally, James Madison, to “take up his pen” and counter the ideas of Hamilton with essays in Freneau’s paper.

While serving as Secretary of State under Washington and as Vice President under John Adams, Jefferson also made some unwise comments in correspondence with friends that embarrassed him when published. He warned about “political heresies which have sprung up among us” among his rivals in the Federalist Party. He later told a friend, Philip Mazzei, that an “Anglican, monarchical and aristocratical party” endangered the new republic. “It would give you a fever were I to name to you the apostates who have gone over to these heresies,” he stated. He feared that people would embrace what he thought were the dangerous ideas of his political opponents who had strayed from republican ideals.

Jefferson was so aggrieved by their views that he lost his sense of moderation. He complained to President George Washington several times that the ultimate object of Hamilton and others was “to prepare the way for a change, from the present republican form of government, to that of a monarchy, of which the English constitution is to be the model.” Washington grew tired of Jefferson’s
exaggerated claims and the internal divisions that were “tearing our vitals.” He called on Jefferson — and Hamilton — to be more moderate, prudent, and respectful of each other’s political opinions for greater unity.

In 1800, Jefferson was elected president after a particularly contentious election in which political and personal attacks replaced reasonable debate. In his first inaugural address, however, the new president appealed to greater moderation and renewal of a common purpose as Americans united by republican principles and civic virtues. He said, “Every 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.”

President Jefferson implemented his political ideals of limited government and individual liberty in what was called the “Revolution of 1800.” He shrunk the size of the national government, reduced taxes, decreased military spending, and paid down the national debt. However, perhaps the greatest act of his presidency required him to act prudently for the good of the nation, whatever his political convictions.

The following year, Jefferson discovered that Spain had ceded the Louisiana Territory to France. The president was greatly concerned about French imperial designs in North America, especially regarding the Mississippi River and port of New Orleans, which were vital to American commerce. Napoleon Bonaparte sought to counter the British in Canada and crush the Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti) slave revolt. Napoleon sent 40,000 troops to quell the rebellion in the West Indies, which caused even greater consternation for the Jefferson administration.

Jefferson tasked minister to France, Robert Livingston, and special envoy, James Monroe, to negotiate a purchase of the territory. Napoleon was more interested in selling the territory when the force sent to Saint-Domingue suffered severe losses from disease and fighting. In addition, he needed money to wage war when hostilities were renewed with Great Britain.

Jefferson authorized Livingston and Monroe to exceed their congressional instructions and purchase the territory for a much higher price than authorized. Eventually, the price was settled at $15 million for 828,000 square miles of land in the American West. The president was ecstatic, but his Federalist opponents raised partisan objections.

Among their concerns, the Federalists were outraged by the immense cost and constitutional objections about purchasing foreign territory. Jefferson took these concerns seriously. He was in a bind because of his political philosophy about limited government and strict constitutional construction. He considered offering a constitutional amendment to authorize the purchase, but the French pressed hard for an answer and compelled the president to act.
Jefferson decided to act in the best interests of the country and submitted the treaty to the Senate, which quickly ratified it. He acted prudentially for the common good of a growing and expanding nation. He sought to build an “empire of liberty” for American farmers and to secure American national security and status as a great power. While questions about the expansion of slavery and conflict with Native Americans in the territory would cause serious debates during the mid-nineteenth century, Jefferson justifiably celebrated the purchase to advance continental expansion of the new republic. He soon dispatched the Lewis and Clark Expedition to explore the territory, and American settlers were not far behind.
Analysis Questions

- What were some principles that guided Jefferson's political beliefs?
- How did Jefferson display partisanship in ways that were problematic?
- Why were many Americans anxious about Napoleon’s plans for North America? How did that influence Jefferson in his policy decision regarding the Louisiana territory?
- Why did Jefferson consider calling for a constitutional amendment in order to acquire Louisiana? Why did he ultimately not do so? Do you think he made the right decision in doing so?
- Think of another example from U.S. history when an American acted with prudence. How did his/her prudent actions help benefit the country, even if it may have contradicted their personal beliefs?