

5. Senator John Breckinridge Supports the Purchase (1803)

Virginia-born senator John Breckinridge of Kentucky, then the ablest spokesman for the West, had sponsored Jefferson's secretly prepared Kentucky resolutions of 1798–1799 in his state legislature. Alert both to western interests and partisan politics, he urged the Louisiana Purchase in this noteworthy speech. He took sharp issue with the Federalist senators, including Senator Samuel White of Delaware, who held that Louisiana would "be the greatest curse that could at present befall us." Breckinridge noted particularly the disagreement of the Federalists among themselves concerning the extravagance of the price, the validity of the title, and the unconstitutionality of acquiring foreign territory. He then launched into his argument, as follows. How effectively did he meet the Federalist objections, especially with reference to the problem of the westerners?

As to the enormity of price, I would ask that gentleman [Senator White], would his mode of acquiring it [by war] through 50,000 men have cost nothing? Is he so confident of this as to be able to pronounce positively that the price is enormous? Does he make no calculation on the hazard attending this conflict? Is he sure the God of battles was enlisted on his side? Were France and Spain, under the auspices of Bonaparte, contemptible adversaries? Good as the cause was, and great as my confidence is in the courage of my countrymen, sure I am that I shall never regret, as the gentleman seems to do, that the experiment was not made. . . .

To acquire an empire of perhaps half [once again] the extent of the one we possessed, from the most powerful and warlike nation on earth, without bloodshed, without the oppression of a single individual, without in the least embarrassing the ordinary operations of your finances, and all this through the peaceful forms of negotiation, and in despite too of the opposition of a considerable portion of the community, is an achievement of which the archives of the predecessors, at least, of those now in office cannot furnish a parallel.

The same gentleman has told us, that this acquisition will, from its extent, soon prove destructive to the confederacy [Union]. . . .

⁵*Annals of Congress*, 8th Congress, 1st Sess., 60–62, 65.

So far from believing in the doctrine that a republic ought to be confined within narrow limits, I believe, on the contrary, that the more extensive its dominion the more safe and more durable it will be. In proportion to the number of hands you entrust the precious blessings of a free government to, in the same proportion do you multiply the chances for their preservation. I entertain, therefore, no fears for the confederacy on account of its extent. . . .

The gentlemen from Delaware [White] and Massachusetts [Pickering] both contend that the third article of the treaty is unconstitutional, and our consent to its ratification a nullity, because the United States cannot acquire foreign territory. . . . Cannot the Constitution be so amended (if it should be necessary) as to embrace this territory? If the authority to acquire foreign territory be not included in the treaty-making power, it remains with the people; and in that way all the doubts and difficulties of gentlemen may be completely removed; and that, too, without affording France the smallest ground of exception to the literal execution on our part of that article of the treaty. . . .

What palliation can we offer to our Western citizens for a conduct like this? Will they be content with the redefined and metaphysical reasonings and constructions upon which gentlemen have bottomed their opposition today? Will it be satisfactory to them to be told that the title is good, the price low, the finances competent, and the authority, at least to purchase, constitutional; but that the country is too extensive, and that the admission of these people to all the privileges we ourselves enjoy is not permitted by the Constitution? It will not, sir.