

Pre-Reading

Name: _____



PRE-READING

Louisiana Purchase

You are preparing to do a VOXPOP role-play with your class. In the role-play, you will be assigned a character and you will represent their perspective in historical debates. Before we begin, read the following passage to learn more about the historical moment you are navigating.

It's August 1803, and an urgent message has just arrived in Washington from our diplomats in Paris.

For months, we've been negotiating with France to purchase New Orleans and West Florida for up to \$10 million. Control of New Orleans is vital - without it, western farmers can't ship their goods down the Mississippi River to market. Last year, when Spain closed the port to American traffic, our western territories nearly erupted in rebellion.

But Napoleon has shocked everyone with a different offer: not just New Orleans, but the entire Louisiana Territory - all 828,000 square miles of it - for \$15 million. This vast territory would double the size of our nation overnight.

Now we face a dilemma. President Jefferson has insisted the federal government can only exercise powers granted by the Constitution, fearing that a broad interpretation would lead to the federal government seizing too much power. He wants to take advantage of this opportunity, but worries he has no authority to do so.

Democratic Republicans generally support expansion westward to create Jefferson's vision of an agrarian republic. But they're torn - can they abandon their constitutional principles for this opportunity? Many urge Jefferson to act quickly, arguing that losing this chance would be catastrophic for America's future.

Federalists oppose the purchase. They argue it's unconstitutional, too expensive, and would dilute the power of the original states. They fear that vast new territories will be impossible to govern and will shift political power away from the commercial Northeast toward the agricultural West and South.

Western Settlers are eager to seize this opportunity. They see the Louisiana Territory as the key to prosperity: guaranteed river access means their farms can grow through trade. The vast new lands promise wealth for those bold enough to claim it, and futures for their children beyond what the crowded East can offer. They don't care about constitutional debates; they care about the boundless opportunities of westward expansion.

Cabinet Advisors, including Secretary of State James Madison and Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin, are working to find a path forward. They see both the opportunity and the obstacles. Can we craft a solution that seizes this moment while preserving constitutional government?

Territory Inhabitants - the French and Spanish colonists, free people of color, and Native American tribes including the Osage, Caddo and others - watch these negotiations with concern. The treaty promises to protect their property and rights, but what does American rule mean for their laws, customs, and sovereignty? Some see opportunity in American trade and democracy, while others fear their way of life will be swept away.

Time is running short. Napoleon could change his mind. Spain is protesting the potential sale. Britain might intervene. We must decide: Should practical considerations override constitutional limitations? How do we balance our principles with this unprecedented opportunity?

*You will decide how the country should structure the Louisiana Purchase.
But first, let's take a look at how we got here and consider the different perspectives on some key issues.*

Territory Size: How big should America be?

Our negotiators were sent to Paris to buy New Orleans and West Florida - just enough territory to secure Mississippi River access. New Orleans is the key that unlocks the entire Mississippi River system. With it, western farmers can ship their goods to market. But now we've been offered the entire Louisiana Territory for just \$5 million more. This would double our nation's size overnight, providing land for generations of farmers and removing a European power from our backyard.

Democratic Republicans and **Western Settlers** support buying the whole territory. They say this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. How else could we acquire so much land so cheaply - about three cents per acre? This would secure not just river access but our entire western frontier. We'd gain valuable resources and room for our growing population to expand for decades.

Federalists worry about governing such a vast territory. Senator Samuel White asks: can a republic effectively govern citizens "two or three thousand miles" from the capital? Won't settlers so distant "alienate their affections from the Union"?

How big should America be? Should we seize this chance to become a continental nation? Or limit ourselves to what we can effectively govern?

Answer: How could buying the whole territory benefit America?

Answer: What risks come with buying the whole territory?

Constitution: How do we justify actions not covered in the Constitution?

President Jefferson faces an agonizing choice. He has always insisted the federal government can only exercise powers explicitly granted by the Constitution. He believes this will prevent future leaders from expanding federal power until it threatens individual liberty.

Some propose a constitutional amendment to authorize the purchase. This would preserve our principles and set a proper precedent. But amendments take time - potentially years. Napoleon could withdraw his offer any day. Spanish officials are already protesting. Can we risk losing this opportunity while we debate constitutional niceties?

Others argue for bold executive action now. Jefferson could act like a "guardian" for the nation, doing what's necessary to preserve our future. Congress can ratify his actions after the fact. In times of crisis, leaders must act decisively. The President must have room to operate to secure our nation's security and prosperity.

But what precedent would this set? If we ignore constitutional limitations when convenient, what prevents future presidents from doing the same? Today it's territory - tomorrow it could be taxes, armies, or civil liberties.

Answer: What are the risks of ignoring the Constitution?
Answer: What are the advantages of executive action?

Governance: How should we govern new territories?

One approach is territorial government. Congress would appoint governors and judges to rule the territory until it's ready for statehood. This would allow time to establish American institutions, teach republican values, and ensure loyalty to the United States. The Northwest Ordinance provides a model: territories evolve toward statehood as their populations grow.

Critics, **Western Settlers** among them, say this makes second-class citizens of current residents. The treaty promises to incorporate Louisiana's inhabitants as citizens "as soon as possible." How can we preach liberty, while governing people without their consent.

The alternative is rapid statehood. Divide the territory and admit new states quickly, giving residents full representation in Congress. This honors our revolutionary principles: Government by consent of the governed. It also prevents the creation of a colonial empire incompatible with those principles.

But would this flood Congress with representatives from states that don't share our values, language, or legal traditions? Would western states, with different interests, overwhelm the original thirteen? And what about slavery - would new states be slave or free?

Territory inhabitants have specific concerns. French and Spanish colonists want to preserve their civil law system, different from English common law. Native tribes seek recognition of their sovereignty and land rights. Free people of color in New Orleans fear losing the rights they enjoyed under Spanish and French rule. Would statehood mean the end of local sovereignty?

Answer: What are the arguments against immediately dividing the territory into states?