

# Empire of Liberty or Empire of Slavery?

## Lesson Plan Template

**Title:** Empire of Liberty or Empire of Slavery?

**Descriptive Subtitle:** Thomas Jefferson's Great Conundrum

**Grade level:** high (9-12)

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**Duration:** 90-120 mins

**Overview:** This three-stage lesson explores Thomas Jefferson's plans to create an "Empire of Liberty" and the problems he faced in realizing his goals. In so doing it considers the state of abolitionism in the early-nineteenth century, westward expansion, and the complications posed by the 1820 Missouri Compromise. What links these subjects are the disconnect created by the seemingly incongruous pairing of Jefferson's progressive vision for his new nation and the preservation of the institution of slavery. More broadly, the issues explored here could help lead students to consider long term causes of the American Civil War in future lessons.

Students will use both primary and secondary source materials to explore the conundrum faced by Thomas Jefferson when it came to reconciling his complex and often incompatible views. Students will ultimately use the evidence they have assessed to judge whether Jefferson did indeed set about the establishment of an "Empire of Liberty" or whether instead he set the groundwork for an "Empire of Slavery".

### **Prior knowledge:**

Students will be required to draw upon knowledge regarding the Declaration of Independence, the American Revolution, and the creation of the US Constitution, which should have been covered earlier in the school year.

## Standards:

*Common Core State Standards: English Language Standards: History/Social Studies, Grade 11-12:*

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1, 11-12.2, 11-12.3, 11-12.4, 11-12.5, 11-12.6, 11-12.7, 11-12.8, 11-12.9.

*History and Social Science Standards of Learning for Virginia Public Schools, Grade 11:*

Virginia and United States History: VUS.1 (a, b, c, d, e, f, h, i) VUS.6 (a, b)

## Objectives:

*Students will understand the complexity of debates over the abolition of slavery in the early United States and the issues raised by westward expansion.*

*Students will analyze primary documents and draw conclusions on their significance and wider implications, evaluate the views of historians, and synthesize their own analysis of primary and secondary materials to draw their own evidence-based conclusions.*

*Students will know that Thomas Jefferson's ideals were hard to live up to, that Jefferson ultimately failed to achieve all of his pre-revolutionary aims, and that the seemingly paradoxical approach Jefferson took towards ending slavery in the US – in reality – had no simple solution, as subsequent decades would come to show all too clearly.*

## Steps:

[*Italics* are used to indicate information that teachers might want to consider (in combination with their own interpretations/knowledge) when responding to students' responses and questions.]

### **Part I: Empire of Liberty (c.35 mins)**

1. Using the **PDF slideshow**. Display **Slide 1** and explain to students that you will begin by considering: how Jefferson's ideas for the United States differed from those of other founding fathers such as John Adams and Alexander Hamilton.

(2 mins)

2. **Slide 2:** Use this slide to provoke student discussion. Tell the students to work in pairs and come up with five words that the picture evokes for them about the sort of America Thomas Jefferson wanted to create.

(2 mins // TT4)

Write these words down so that students can see them, and encourage students to explain them. Then invite reactions from others in the group.

(5 mins //TT9)

3. **Slide 3:** Introduce the idea of a Yeoman Farmer, and the idea that Jefferson wanted to create a nation of such farmers. Ask one student to read aloud the quotation (**Source 1A** on **Document 1** – also written on **Slide 3**) and invite the group to discuss what this might tell us about the nature of the America that Jefferson sought to build. Point out to the group that this vision placed Jefferson at odds with many of the other founding fathers – particularly those labelled the Federalists, such as John Adams, who focused their attentions more on the urban settlements along the eastern seaboard.

(4 mins // TT13)

4. **Document 1:** Distribute copies of **Document 1** to pairs of students. Ask students to read the two extracts carefully. Their task is to try and explain in one line (per extract) what Jefferson meant by the phrase “Empire of Liberty”.

Ask students to feedback their sentences to the group on the **Source 1B**. Then ask the students if anybody has a very different sentence (until volunteers run out). Attempt to stimulate discussion about differing interpretations.

*Examples might include: “To Keep surrounding areas friendly” or “to gain fertile and extensive lands”*

(7 mins // TT20)

5. Repeat this exercise for the **Source 1C**.

*Examples might include: “to spread self-government” “to spread a superior system”*

After this, ask the students whether they see any big differences (or even contradictions) between the different sources. Again, attempt to stimulate discussion about differing interpretations.

(7 mins // TT27)

6. Slide 3: Return the students’ attention to **Slide 3** and the **Source 1A**, which you discussed earlier. Ask the students to consider what they think was necessary to create an “empire of liberty” such as that envisaged by Jefferson. In their pairs, get them to choose **three** things that they feel was necessary to create an “empire of liberty”.

(4 mins // TT31)

Get students to feedback their answers and, in each case, explain which one of these they think is most important

(4 mins // TT35).

[Here the lesson can continue straight on, or students can be told that the lesson will continue next time by exploring the problems with the idea of an “Empire of Liberty” – if homework is necessary, you could get the student to write up a half side of in the style of Jefferson outlining what an “empire of liberty”

would be, or to research the other issues that divided Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans]

## **Part II: “Empire of Slavery” (c.35 mins)**

1. Using the **PDF Slideshow**. Return to up **Slide 1** and introduce the next aim: to explore how Thomas Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty” was not as easy to realize as it might have first seemed.

(2 mins)

2. **Slide 4:** Ask the students to once again consider the picture of Jefferson’s farm. Tell them that this area was called Mulberry Road. Ask them what they think is missing from the present day picture that might have been there in the late eighteenth century. (*As well as workers houses, animals, farmers, the key absence that you are looking for is an enslaved workforce*).

(2 mins // TT4)

3. Slide 5: Introduce the information on **Slide 5** – ask students to consider how Jefferson can have an “Empire of Liberty” that is built upon slavery. Do they think this works? How does this work if Jefferson himself had slaves? As one final question – ask them why they think Jefferson did not free his slaves, either in his life, or even after his death?

*Some issues you could consider: money (slaves were valuable and would have cost a good deal of money), property rights (he saw them as property in the same way as livestock), debts (Jefferson lived with great deal of debt and died owing vast sums of money), what to do with the free population (Virginia had a law that did not allow African Americans to remain in the state once freed unless they had special dispensation- this would split up families), danger (Jefferson believed too many free African Americans would pose a threat to white southerners as they would seek revenge).*

(6 mins // 10 mins)

4. Handout **Document 2:** Direct students’ attention to **Source 2A** – ask them to see what this source tells us about Jefferson’s view of slavery. Give them two minutes to read/highlight the source and then ask for their ideas. Intervene or prompt as necessary to get students debating the difficulty of reconciling this source with what we know about Jefferson.

*Some issues you could consider: Jefferson is suggesting that the best situation would be for an end to slavery as an institution in the American colonies (note the date is 1774 – just before the Revolutionary War). He calls the practice of slavery deeply wounding to human rights. He also says that before enslaved peoples are freed, the importation of further slaves must end. He goes on to blame the British for upholding the slave trade and suggests that it is against the interests of American colonists.*

*You could consider the issue of hypocrisy. Students have been told that Jefferson is a slave-owner and continued to own slaves until his death in 1826 when he freed only five of them – the rest were sold or given to new owners in Jefferson’s will. This was long after the British had left in 1783. How can he deplore the crime of slavery and yet see it on his plantation every day?*

(5 mins // 15 mins)

5. Direct students to **Document 2, Source 2B**. Tell them that this source is (written one year after Source 2 A), by Dr Samuel Johnson, the author of the first great dictionary of the English language. Ask them to read/highlight the source and consider what this British author and scholar is saying and how it fits with or conflicts with what Jefferson is saying? After a couple of minutes ask them to feed back their ideas to the rest of the class.

*Some issues you could consider: Students might feel upset by the first paragraph where Johnson suggest that American colonists are complaining about being “enslaved” by the British and that they should realize that they are luckier than they think they are. He also suggests that the colonists are only harshly treated because they will not behave. However, the second paragraph is the more important, as Johnson points to the hypocrisy of those slaveholders who call on the British for their “freedom” whilst denying it to the enslaved people that they keep – sometimes literally – in chains.*

(5 mins // 20 mins)

6. Finally, direct students to **Document 2, Source 2C**. Introduce it by pointing out that Jefferson continued to believe in abolition until he died. He argued that his generation had made one big step for liberty in the Revolution, and therefore it was up to the next generation to make the move towards abolition. Though many Americans thought slavery would fade over time, and die a natural death after the end of slave importation, many – like Jefferson – thought that there was a bigger problem in having a large free black population in the South. He felt that slavery was part of a “race war” between “white” and “black” Americans, and that a large free black population would seek to assert power over white southerners through force if they were able to. Ask students to read **Source 2C** and highlight what Jefferson sees as the best solution to this problem.

*Some issues you could consider: Jefferson suggests moving African Americans either to Native American lands, British lands, or expatriating them to the Caribbean or even back to Africa. You can tell them (when they feed back their own ideas), that the US set up a colony in Liberia to send formerly enslaved black people “back” to Africa. Also worth noting is the situation in Haiti – the French colony where blacks and formerly enslaved people had seized control of the government – Haiti later becomes the first modern black republic (to the horror of many in the US South).*

After students have fed back their ideas. Ask them why they think colonizing formerly enslaved African Americans in Africa wasn't chosen as the ultimate solution?

*Some issues you could consider: Expense is probably the most telling. Slaves were expensive – slaveholders would want compensation, plus the passage to Africa and setting up of the colony would require vast sums of money, deporting the workforce of the South would obviously have a huge impact on production, property rights would be infringed if southerners were forced to give up their slaves, and slaves might not want to be sent to Africa – many had been in the US for generations and had families from which they would not want to be separated.*

(5 mins //TT25)

7. Plenary: Divide the class into two – one side arguing that Jefferson's “Empire of Liberty” as it existed was the best of a difficult situation, and the other arguing that Jefferson was a hypocrite (such as those described by Dr Johnson). Get the two halves of the class to share ideas and then

select two debaters (2 from each group).

Get one student from group 1 to outline three key arguments, then one student from group 2 to do likewise. Finally, the second student from group 1 responds to the three points made by the first student from group 2, and the second from group 2 responds to the points made by the first student from group 1.

Sum up by pointing out that Jefferson came up with a solution – but perhaps not a very good one and you will explore it next time.

(10 mins // TT35)

[Homework (if appropriate/necessary): Research when slavery was abolished in various states prior to the civil war and draw up a list of dates of abolition on a state by state level.]

### **Part III: Empire of Liberty or Empire of Slavery?**

1. **Slide 1:** Return one final time to Slide 1. Ask the students what the images are on this slide. (One being Jefferson and one being an image of the Louisiana Purchase – made in 1803 when the USA bought the former French colony of Louisiana from Napoleon Bonaparte). Ask them the final big question: how the Louisiana Purchase, which doubled the size of the United States would have affected Jefferson's vision for an "Empire of Liberty".

*Some issues you could consider: More land for farmers, lessens needs to cities/urbanization, settlement, Native Americans – it is possible that the spread of slavery will be raised, but – if not – raise it).*

When the students have shared and discussed their ideas, develop the issue of slavery. Where it is in the nation (primarily the South) and where it would spread. Ask them how they would expect it to spread into Louisiana? (*Here they might recall learning about the Missouri Compromise earlier in school, which is fine, but might also discuss the environment (suitability of land for slave agriculture).*)

(5 mins)

2. Display **Slide 6** for the class. Explain the Missouri Compromise briefly, and then direct students to **Document 3**. Ask students to read/highlight **Document 3** looking for how Jefferson sees a new solution to the issue of slavery in the Missouri Compromise. Give them five minutes to read the document and try and get their heads around it.

*Some issues you could consider: The letter discusses the issues of colonization (expatriation) but that is not the new solution discussed here. Jefferson instead sees the spread of slavery across the continent as the solution. He thinks that by spreading slaves out – it will eventually lead to the end of slavery. He doesn't clearly explain how this works.*

Ask students for their response to your question. Hopefully someone will get it right, if not direct them to the appropriate section and explain (as above). Now ask them how does spreading slavery across the continent make it more likely to end?

*Some issues you could consider: Jefferson's primary fear was that enslaved people offered a threat as large groups in the South (similar to the long and bloody rebellion in Haiti) – if spread out, this fear would lessen – slaves would always be outnumbered. Potentially, the enslaved people might be treated better in the short to medium term – Jefferson suggests. He felt that in time people would become more educated and enlightened and call for an end to slavery on a state by state basis as they had in the North. On an indirectly related note, Jefferson's primary fear in this letter is that the division caused by the Missouri Compromise between anti-slavery and pro-slavery voices in the North and South, might lead to the break-up of the union (his worst fear, especially as a Founding Father). Be sure to reiterate that Jefferson felt that slavery should be permitted to spread (as, in his opinion, in the long run this was the best solution to the problem of slavery in his Empire of Liberty)*

(8 mins //TT13)

3. Handout the final document, **Document 4**. Explain to the students that this document contains the views of two leading historians of Jefferson's era – Gordon Wood and Peter Onuf. Tell them that these are both extracts from larger books, which focus in on Jefferson's reaction to the Missouri "crisis" – the division in the country that led to the Missouri Compromise. Ask them to read **Source 4A** and write a two sentence summary of Wood's interpretation of Jefferson's response to the Missouri Crisis. When they have had three/four minutes, ask them to read out their summaries. Try and focus them in on the historian's interpretation rather than simply what Jefferson said/thought.

*Some issues you could consider (indicative only – you might well interpret the source differently): Wood suggests that Jefferson had the Missouri crisis all wrong. He suggests that Jefferson thought the North was only interested in making money and that they were not driven by a moral dislike of slavery in reality. Wood argues that this was a mistake and that the moral issue was present and important. Jefferson found it helpful to convince himself that Federalists (whose politics he detested, and whom he saw as a threat to his dream of a farmer republic) were self-interested hypocrites.*

Guide discussion of the source.

(5mins //TT18)

4. Next, ask the students to read **Source 4B** and write a two sentence summary of Onuf's interpretation of Jefferson's response to the Missouri Crisis. When they have had three/four minutes ask them to read out their summaries. Again, try and focus them in on the historian's interpretation rather than simply what Jefferson said/thought.

*Some issues you could consider (indicative only – you might well interpret the source differently): Onuf suggests that the main reason for Jefferson's advocacy of the spread of slavery into the former Louisiana Purchase territory, was related to his deeply held beliefs in state and individual rights (which students will have studied when looking at the forging of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights). For Jefferson, slaves were property, and property rights were sacred, as were other individual and states' rights. Thus to forbid slavery against the will of citizens or new states, and to stop people taking their property (slaves) to this territory, was a violation of his deeply held beliefs.*

Guide discussion of the source.

(5 mins //TT23)

5. Final classroom task: Get students to use their notes and handouts from all three sections of this lessons sequence to draw up a table with two columns. On one side they will list ideas that suggest Jefferson was attempting to create a true “Empire of Liberty” (under the heading “Empire of Liberty”) and on the other that in reality he was creating an “Empire of Slavery” (under the heading “Empire of Slavery”). Allow them to help neighbors if you wish, or help them yourself circulating around the room. This will take a while so allow them to use up the rest of the time available barring roughly two minutes where you will set the assessment task.

(10 mins //TT33)

6. Homework: Now that you have begun to look at the two difficult to reconcile parts of Jefferson’s vision of an “Empire of Liberty” you are going to write an essay. Title: “Empire of Liberty or Empire of Slavery: Thomas Jefferson’s Great Conundrum”. In your essay, you will need to address both sides of the question (liberty/positives *and* slavery/negatives) before reaching a conclusion. Use primary and secondary sources to support your argument. (Length set to challenge your students)

**Materials:** For this lesson you will need:

- A **projector** (for the PDF Slideshow) or all materials would need to be printed.
- **PDF Slideshow** (EOLEOS\_Slideshow)
- **EOLEOS Document 1** (Includes Sources 1A, 1B and 1C)
- **EOLEOS Document 2** (Includes Sources 2A and 2B)
- **EOLEOS Document 3** (Includes Source 3)
- **EOLEOS Document 4** (Includes Source 4A and 4B)

**Assessment(s):** Assessment will largely take place via student feedback in the form of written and oral responses to questions set in a variety of tasks, from individuals and groups. Some students will also demonstrate their understanding in a short debate. The **final assessment** will be an essay-based task that summarizes the learning from across all three parts, allowing students who are less vocal to demonstrate their understanding.

### **Assessment Criteria for Essay Task**

For the essay, students need to provide the following:

- A short introduction outlining the two sides of the argument
- Demonstrate an understanding of the “positive” elements of Jefferson’s “Empire of Liberty” – which might include: the “yeoman farmer” ideal, states’ rights, individual liberties, living up to the Bill of Rights, the difficulties he envisaged would be caused by abolition, and his commitment to (eventual) abolition throughout his life.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the “negative” elements of Jefferson’s “Empire of Slavery” – his inconsistent logic, his view of slaves as property, his desire to expatriate and later to disperse slaves, his personal slaveholding etc.
- A short conclusion that reaches a reasoned judgement.

**A grade/Level 4:**

Answers will show:

- a firm understanding of the demands of the question
- a wide range of examples will be used (both primary and secondary sources), and examples will be clear and specific
- both sides of the questions will be addressed relatively equally
- communication will be very strong and the essay will be well organized
- good conceptual awareness
- the essay will avoid narrative treatment, stay analytical, and reach a reasoned judgement

### **B grade/Level 3:**

Answers will show:

- a solid understanding of the question
- a good range of largely accurate examples will be used (both primary and secondary), examples will generally be accurate if not always well-explained
- both sides of the questions will be addressed (perhaps not equally)
- the essay will be organized and show a good level of communication skills
- some conceptual awareness
- largely analytical, but might veer into narrative treatment at points
- reaches a judgement/conclusion, but not necessarily well-reasoned

### **C grade/Level 2:**

Answers will show:

- a limited understanding of the question
- a limited range of examples will be used (maybe only primary), examples should be accurate but explanation might not be as strong

- treatment might well be unequal between the two aspects of the title question
- the essay will be less well-organized but show an adequate level of communication skills
- little conceptual awareness
- largely narrative treatment
- reaches a judgement but without clear reasoning

### **D/E grade/Level 1:**

Answers will show:

- a limited understanding of the question
- a poor range of examples will, probably broad and lacking specifics
- treatment likely to be unequal to each side of the question
- organization limited
- no real conceptual awareness
- narrative treatment
- no, or little, judgement shown

### **Accommodations:**

Differentiation by expectation, choice of students for oral feedback tasks, by expectation in essay task.

Perhaps a sample writing frame could be provided for weaker students.

Students with reading difficulties might be afforded more time on the reading tasks, or given highlighted documents, where – in longer sources – the most important text is highlighted for them

### **Sources used:**

*Online Primary Materials [All accessed 14 July 2016]*

Jefferson to James Madison, 20 December 1787, *Founders Online*,  
<<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-12-02-0454>>

Jefferson to George Rogers Clark, 25 December 1780, *Monticello Online*,  
<<https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/empire-liberty-quotations>>

Jefferson to James Madison, 27 April 1809, *Monticello Online*,  
<<https://www.monticello.org/site/jefferson/empire-liberty-quotations>>

Draft of Instructions to the Virginia Delegates in the Continental Congress (MS Text of A Summary View, &c.), July 1774, *Founders Online*,  
<<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-01-02-0090>>

Samuel Johnson, *Taxation No Tyranny: An Answer to the Resolutions and Address of the American Congress*, 1775, *Samuel Johnson Online*,  
<<http://www.samueljohnson.com/tnt.html>>

Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, 24 November 1801, *Founders Online*,  
<<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-35-02-0550>>

Thomas Jefferson to John Holmes, 22 April 1820, *Founders Online*,  
<<http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-1234>>

## **Secondary**

Peter S. Onuf. "Age of Jefferson". *Coursera* <<https://www.coursera.org/learn/ageofjefferson>>

Peter S. Onuf. *Jefferson's Empire: The Language of American Nationhood*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2000.

Gordon S. Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

*Thomas Jefferson*  
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