Interview with Thomas Jefferson.

What went through your mind when you were asked to help draft a Declaration of Independence?

While drafting the Declaration of Independence in 1776, I intuitively knew that this was going to be a defining event in my life. At first, I wanted to return to Virginia to help write that state’s constitution, but the Second Continental Congress appointed me to the five-person committee to draft a document for its consideration. This gratified me.

In spite of drawing on documents, such as the Virginia Declaration of Rights, state and local calls for independence, and my own draft of a Virginia constitution, I was a little skeptical about writing Declaration of Independence. However, I wrote a statement of the colonists' right to rebel against the British government and establish our own based on the premise that all men are created equal and have the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

Through the many revisions made by the committee, me, and the Congress, I retained my role in writing the defining document of the American Revolution and, indeed, of the United States. Now, I can say that I am proud of my role in writing the Declaration of Independence.

How did purchasing the Louisiana Territory change the way you did things?

Purchasing the Louisiana Territory was a critical decision for me. This was partly because the Constitution did not provide the national government with the authority to make land acquisitions. Since I was a former Anti-Federalist, I have a strict interpretation of the Constitution and believe the president only had the powers the Constitution gave him.

I pondered hard whether a constitutional amendment might be needed to legalize the purchase. I feared tyranny. I wanted a strong, central government in terms of foreign affairs. I later concluded that the president’s authority to make treaties could be used to justify the agreement. The Louisiana Purchase was therefore designated as a treaty and submitted to the Senate for ratification. The Senate ratified it and the United States took possession of the territory. The general opinion of Americans at the time of purchase was that I was being hypocritical by going through with it. The U.S government borrowed money from English and Dutch banks to pay for the acquisition. This purchase did contradict my commitment to reduce the national debt swiftly. Although I visioned that westward expansion was very important, purchasing the Louisiana territory was still a bold action. Buying over 600 million acres of land at less than 3c an acre was an economic as well as a political victory for me and for the United States because it avoided a possible war with the French. A France that was determined to become a global power directly competing with Britain in North America as well as in Europe might easily have triggered an earlier resumption of war if I had not purchased this territory. At the time, Britain and France were at war in Europe, and if France had not sold Louisiana, that war would most likely have spread to North America sooner.