DBQ Question: The issue of territorial expansion sparked considerable debate in the period 1800-1835. Analyze this debate and evaluate the influence of both supporters and opponents of territorial expansion in shaping federal government policy.

In the first half of the 19th century, the United States would expand from what was the original Thirteen Colonies that seceded successfully from England, to include the entire breadth of the continent, from today’s Maine to California. Throughout this period, several expansionist accomplishments were made, including the Louisiana Purchase of 1803, the Compromise of 1820, the Mexican secession, the Compromise of 1850, and lastly the Kansas-Nebraska Act. Each of these, however, and more, were met with numerous proponents as well as opponents to territorial expansion – each for different reasons. However, each and every debate for or against expansion eventually led the United States government’s actions, or lack thereof, and has shaped the country as we know it today.

The Louisiana Purchase was made by Thomas Jefferson of the Democratic Republican Party in 1803. Given the intense feud between the Federalists and the Jeffersonians, many Federalists, including Congressmen, were fundamentally against the purchase of the massive amount of land from a former enemy: France. For example, James Elliot of Vermont states that since “the Constitution is silent on the subject of acquisition of territory… the treaty is unconstitutional” (Doc. A). Ironically, the Federalists had always been loose interpreters of the Constitution; Jefferson himself had to get over his mindset of strict interpretation by the recognition that the mere $10 million he had to pay for the huge potential land was a great bargain. Other Federalists such as Samuel Thatcher of Massachusetts and William Plumer of New Hampshire, agreed also that the Louisiana Purchase was inherently bad for the United States, due to the threat of the Spanish in the South and because it would “destroy the whole weight and importance of the eastern states”(Doc A). However, despite numerous opponents, Jefferson was able to pass the Louisiana Purchase in Congress, as the benefits of acquiring an entire frontier gave many citizens hope of western expansion.

The War of 1812, although it ultimately ended with the Treaty of Ghent which effectively established status quo, was also an outlet for Southern and Western hopes of westward expansion, as well as the acquisition of Canada, which the War Hawks, namely Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, wanted. Whereas the war was popular in the South and West, it was met with distaste by New England under the Federalists (Doc B). This led to the Hartford Convention of 1814, which led to the demise of the Federalist Party. Once again, they did not condone expansion, and in this case, the United States did not acquire any new land. The War of 1812 led to several things in Monroe’s era, however. The Adams-Onis Treaty in 1819 marked the acquisition of Florida from Spain. This time period marked the humble beginnings of the sectional dispute over slavery, with the Compromise of 1820. Since Missouri was to be admitted to statehood, it would skew the balance of slave and free states. The Compromise of 1820 set a border at 36’30, granting Missouri slave states but creating Maine as a new free state. It also stated that no new territory above 36’30 was to become a slave state.
As the Louisiana Purchase gave citizens the ability to move westward almost unconditionally, Native Americans were harmed. This constant westward movement was supported by Frederick Jackson Turner’s “safety value theory,” which stated that when one area became too crowded Americans could always most west and find their own land. However, this caused an afflux of American Indian removal to their own reservations in Oklahoma. This was supposedly justified by Lewis Cass, who stated that Native Americans had “resisted every effort to meliorate their condition… Their moral and intellectual condition [had] been equally stationary… it would be difficult to point a single advantage… from their acquaintance with the Europeans” (Doc C). Andrew Jackson also condoned Indian removal as the Native Americans caused an impediment in westward movement and territorial expansion (Doc. G). Despite this, some supported the Native Americans keeping their land. In Worchester v. Georgia, John Marshall ruled they could. Despite this, the Trail of Tears ensued and western expansion was made to include the land Native Americans had previously occupied.

When James Polk took office in 1845, he had a plan to achieve “Manifest Destiny” which stated that Americans had a divine responsibility to expand itself westward and take the entire continent. In fact, Tyler before him had already annexed Texas in 1844. Even before this, in 1833, an “Eagle Map” of the United States shared a wish to expand itself west to include Oregon and Texas (Doc. E). In 1844, the election campaign of Polk was “50;40 or fight” alluding to the acquisition of Oregon. In Senate, Thomas Hart Benton stated that acquiring Oregon would allow for trade with Asia (Doc. F). Eventually, the US did acquire Oregon although at a compromise border of 49degrees, as well as through the Webster-Ashburton Treaty, a higher border for Maine.

Ironically, John C. Calhoun, a war hawk in 1812 who wanted to acquire Canada, was opposed to Manifest Destiny after the Treaty of Hidalgo. He states that to “spread civilization and religious liberty all over the world…is a great mistake” (Doc. H). Despite this, the acquisition of Mexican secession occurred and statehood was granted to California at the end of the Mexican War. This was when the sectional debate over slavery re-emerged; California would throw off the balance of slave and free states yet again. The Compromise of 1850 ensued; Utah and New Mexico would become territories for popular sovereignty, and a Fugitive Slave law would be in place. In the Kansas Nebraska Act, similarly, the feud over slavery and westward expansion would eventually lead to the Civil War.

All in all, from the Louisiana Purchase to the debate over slavery, the effects of the constant debate over territorial expansion were numerous, and each has led to how the United States looks, book literally and figuratively, today.