

Lesson Forty-Seven

The Louisiana Purchase

LESSON IDEA

To emphasize the unique American system of government and the dangers of entangling alliances with the collectivist governments of Europe.

PREPARATION

Read the "During The Week" section and arrange to borrow or buy the suggested video.

HOW OFTEN have you heard people, when discussing peace between nations, mention the Biblical verse about the lion and the lamb tranquilly lying down together? It might work that way in a future heavenly paradise, but in our present imperfect world, the lamb will most often end up an appetizer. A study of history from the most ancient civilizations to the present confirms that the strong tend to take advantage of the weak. Our nation's Founders sought to base their policies toward European nations on this historic fact. They regarded England, France, and Spain as predators afflicted with an age-old ailment called totalitarianism.

How would you define "totalitarianism"? [Ask each family member.] It means that power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who wield it to force everyone else to do their bidding. In contrast, the American idea entailed limiting government power, and making government the servant — not master — of the people.

Thomas Jefferson served for a time as the American minister to France, where he was able to view the workings of European totalitarianism first hand. He attributed the character of the American people, in part, to the fact that they had "been separated from their parent stock and kept from contamination, either from them or the other people of the old world, by the intervention of so wide an ocean."

George Washington expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote to Jefferson in 1788: "An energetic general government must prevent the several States from involving themselves in the political disputes of the European powers." Washington remained committed to that principle throughout his presidency. His vision for American was one of complete independence. In his farewell address, he asserted: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in

extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation."

John Adams, the New Englander who succeeded Washington as president, agreed. He wisely kept us from becoming involved in European wars and the sort of "guillotine politics" that had characterized the French Revolution.

Thomas Jefferson followed Adams as president. Although their political philosophies had clashed in many ways, the two men were of one mind when it came to this central aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Jefferson wrote to William Short in 1801:

We have a perfect horror at everything like connecting ourselves with the politics of Europe. It would indeed be advantageous to us to have neutral rights established on a broad ground; but no dependence can be placed in any European coalition for that. They have so many other by-interests of greater weight that some one or other will always be bought off.

THE SELF-SERVING and unpredictable behavior of the European nations was obvious to 18th century American statesmen. England, Spain, and France passed their claims on American territory back and forth like chips in a poker game. For example, in 1762 Spain traded Florida to England in exchange for Havana in Cuba and Manila in the Philippine Islands. Later that year, England traded Florida back to Spain. The King of France secretly gave his cousin, the King of Spain, all wilderness land west of the Mississippi (over one million square miles called Louisiana) and on both sides of the river at its mouth (including New Orleans). [Assure that family members understand that the vast territory called Louisiana at that time is not the same as the present state of Louisiana.]

Washington, Adams, and Jefferson undoubtedly have preferred to bring this European land shuffle to an end, along with the influence of the three foreign nations on our continent, but each knew that a neophyte does not sit down at a political

poker table with seasoned card sharks and expect to come away a winner. The best course, they concluded, was to let the Europeans wear themselves out in large and small wars, while America remained aloof, developing and strengthening her political system and economic resources.

The time to bargain came in 1795, during Washington's second term, when Thomas Pinckney negotiated a treaty with Spain that gave the U.S. free navigation rights on the Mississippi River and trading privileges on New Orleans shipping docks for three years. This important diplomatic victory for the new nation opened the door to new growth. Do you know why? [Ask each family member for an opinion.]

F RONTIER SETTLERS began moving west from the original 13 colonies even before America declared independence from Britain. After the Revolutionary War, thousands traveled over the main roads through New England, over the highways of New York, over the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and through the Ohio River valley. Many were penniless or deeply in debt, having spent all they had in the fight for liberty. They sought to make a new beginning in the rich soil of the Ohio valley. As described by trappers and scouts, it was a land of opportunity for those willing to work hard. [Be sure that family members do not confuse this early western migration with the cowboy-and-Indian stories once so popular in the movies and on television. If necessary, look at a map to clarify the point.]

Most settlers earned their livings as farmers, so their success or failure was dependent on finding markets for the flour, hams, cornmeal, tobacco, and wool they produced. During the winter there was time to trap beaver, muskrat, and other fur-bearing animals. Yet none of these items could be sold to neighbors, or to residents of other frontier settlements, since such folks were also farmers and had the same products to sell.

Boston, New York, and Baltimore were good markets for the wool, tobacco, hickory-smoked hams, and furs produced in frontier settlements, but the journey by packhorse over mountains and along wilderness trails was too onerous, dangerous, and costly to be profitable.

Water transportation was cheap, however, and the Mississippi River was nearby. The giant waterway soon became a busy commercial highway replete with fleets of flatboats loaded with

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The intrigues of France and Spain that preceded the Louisiana Purchase are described in Volume VI of John Clark Ridpath's *The History Of The United States*. Another recommended source of information is Thomas Jefferson by John T. Morse, Jr.

food and furs. Upon arrival at New Orleans, buyers waiting on the docks would bid for the cargoes, which would then be loaded on sailing ships bound for markets in Philadelphia, New York, London, or Paris. You can see why the treaty with Spain, granting Americans the right to use the Mississippi and sell their produce in New Orleans, was so important to our nation's growth.

But in 1802, suddenly and without explanation, the Spanish governor closed the port of New Orleans to American trade. Can you imagine what happened? [Encourage discussion, emphasizing the commercial importance of New Orleans and the Mississippi. Denying Americans use of the port would severely cripple the new nation's growth.]

T HE SPANISH CLOSED the port at a time when the cotton crop was about to be harvested and freighted down the river to market. The American frontiersmen were infuriated. Without the New Orleans market, all they had to sell would rot on river docks. There was talk of war, and of raising an army to march on New Orleans. Congress heatedly debated the question. Alexander Hamilton suggested that all Spanish territory east of the Mississippi, including Florida, be seized by American forces in retaliation. Then-President Thomas Jefferson sympathized with the frontier farmers, but urged them to keep their tempers cool and powder dry while he sent James Monroe to Europe to negotiate for purchase of the vital seaport.

Jefferson suspected, but did not know with certainty when the bargaining began, that New Orleans and the vast region called Louisiana (which was larger than the United States at the time) had again changed hands. It was rumored that the King of Spain had secretly given it to Napoleon Bonaparte in exchange for some French-held possessions in Italy. The most secret part of the bargain was France's solemn promise that she would never transfer the territory to

another power. There were also rumors, subsequently confirmed by Robert Livingston, the American Ambassador to France, that Napoleon planned to land an army in Louisiana and begin a campaign of conquest.

The prospect of a French army marching across the American continent did not frighten Livingston. In 1802 he wrote: "Though the sense of every reflecting man about him [Napoleon] is against this wild expedition (for the occupation of Louisiana), no one dares to tell him so. Were it not for the uneasiness it excites at home, it would give me none; for I am persuaded that the whole will end in a relinquishment of the country [Louisiana] and transfer of the capital [New Orleans] to the United States."

BUT THE COMPLICATIONS and frustrations of negotiating with a dictator were monumental. Livingston wrote in the same letter: "There never was a government in which less can be done by negotiation than here. There is no people, no legislature, no counsellors. One man is everything. He seldom asks advice, and never hears it unasked. His ministers are mere clerks, and his legislators and counsellors parade officers."

What form of government is Livingston describing — a republic, monarchy, or dictatorship? Why can it be classified as totalitarian? [Discuss these points. If necessary, refer back to lessons 36 and 37 about the French Revolution, reminding family members that the Napoleon's dictatorship resulted from a supposed revolution for freedom and equality. Review some of the reasons why this result was inevitable.]

Robert Livingston prediction regarding Napoleon's plans in American was correct. French troops landed in San Domingo with orders to capture the island and use it as a stepping stone to Louisiana. But they met far more resistance than expected, and when an epidemic of yellow fever broke out, the army camp disintegrated into a cross between a hospital ward and a cemetery. By the end of 1802, more than 40,000 French soldiers had died from the dread disease.

Disgusted with the San Domingo disaster, Napoleon abruptly abandoned his interest in America and began to focus his attention on the conquest of England. For that ambitious venture

he needed money, not land, so he offered the entire Louisiana territory to the United States for 100 million francs.

It was a stunning bargain for the Americans. Before the erratic French dictator could change his mind, Livingston and James' Monroe (President Jefferson's special envoy for the proposed New Orleans purchase) agreed to the sale, delaying only long enough to argue the price down to 80 million francs — a mere \$15 million.

After signing the treaty that legalized the sale, Livingston remarked prophetically: "We have lived long, but this is the noblest work of our whole lives. From this day the United States take their place among the powers of the first rank; the English lose all exclusive influence in the affairs of America."

Napoleon, obviously relishing the impact that his abrupt act would have on his collectivist British enemy, chortled "I have just given England a maritime rival that will sooner or later lower her pride." [Discuss the significance of the Livingston and Napoleon quotations. The United States had more than doubled its size and had, by gaining control of the Mississippi and New Orleans, cut off the British trade routes from the north while establishing an important American seaport in the Gulf of Mexico.]

The Spanish were outraged by the sale. France had sold land for which she had not yet paid, and which she had promised never to give up. But complaints about broken promises had little effect on Napoleon. France was the superior power, so Spain could protest all she wished. In any confrontation about the matter, the French lion could devour the Spanish lamb at whim.

Concluding Thought

The new American nation, by following the wise course set by Washington, Adams, and Jefferson to steering clear of European wars and alliances, had with a stroke of the pen more than doubled the area of the United States. As Kentucky Senator John Breckenridge phrased it:

Be the results what they may, the acquirement of this country is the most brilliant thing ever achieved — to double the extent of an empire already large without the loss of a man, and, I confidently believe, without the expense of a dollar (for the port of Orleans will reimburse the fif-

teen millions in fifteen years), and without for a moment affecting the ordinary operations of 'the fiscal concerns of' the country, is an event which wisdom and good fortune have now for the first time exhibited.

Looking Ahead

The enormous expanse of land added to the United States was vaguely defined in the treaty that acknowledged its purchase. The French ministers who served as his errand boys had questioned Napoleon about its boundaries and had received no satisfactory answer. "If an obscurity did not already exist," Napoleon is said to have replied, "it would perhaps be good policy to put one there." Accordingly, the French negotiators emphasized the vague wording of the treaty they had signed with Spain, noting that the Louisiana Territory was mainly a wilderness inhabited by savages and suggesting that the question of boundaries be left to future generations. But to the United States, as the new owner, that answer was insufficient. Jefferson immediately proposed a more viable option.

Next week we will move further west and explore the new land.

DURING THE WEEK

Arrange a family showing of the video "An Overview Of Our World" by John F. McManus. Part I defines and analyzes the basic forms of government and explains why the American Founders opted for a constitutional republic as the best safeguard of freedom and shield against government tyranny. In Part II, Mr. McManus describes the conspiracy to establish a collectivist world government, including the methods and objectives of those involved. This popular two-hour video is available for \$20.00 (plus \$3.00 postage and handling) from: American Opinion Book Services, P.O. Box 8040, Appleton, WI 54912.