

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

