Manuel Covo

2 Why did France want Louisiana Back?

Imperial Schemes, Political Economy, and Revolutionary Ventures in a Caribbean Borderland

What is a republican empire?[1] This was a question revolutionary France could not escape as it was fighting a world war for its survival in the 1790s. The Constituent Assembly recognized that all peoples had the right to self-determination, and under the impact of the Haitian Revolution, the National Convention abolished slavery, a central feature of European colonialism. The rule of law was supposed to prevail on a global stage. But the creation of sister republics in Europe and the Egyptian expedition of 1798 called into question the political meaning of the *Grande Nation*'s territorial expansion. Geopolitical realities reflected a more familiar international order in which a French centre dominated subordinate foreign peripheries in the name of "civilization". Did revolutionary France continue the Ancien Régime's imperial trajectory or was it guided by new messianic principles based on a republican ideology?

In this chapter, I address this classic historiographical topic by asking a simple question: why did France want Louisiana back? This focus might seem unconventional, since the colony, ceded to Spain at the end of the Seven Years' War in 1762, was acquired by First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte only in 1800, before being sold to the United States in 1803.[2] Historians have long known that Napoleon renounced Louisiana after his defeat by Haitian troops during

1 I want to thank Megan Maruschke, Matthias Middell, Gilles Havard, and Rafe Blaufarb for their feedback on previous drafts of this chapter. I am particularly grateful to Pernille Røge for her insightful comments. The research for this chapter would not have been possible without the support of the Huntington Library.

2 The diplomatic negotiations preceding the Louisiana Purchase caught the attention of many historians during the first half of the twentieth century. The major proponent of the "frontier thesis", Frederick Jackson Turner, was one of the first to explore the question. Since the 1970s, however, the topic has become somewhat "unfashionable". See F.J. Turner, "The Policy of France toward the Mississippi Valley in the Period of Washington and Adams", *American Historical Review* 10 (1905) 2, pp. 249–279; M.S. Fletcher, "Louisiana as a Factor in French Diplomacy from 1763 to 1800", *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 17 (1930) 3, pp. 367–376; A.P. Whitaker, *The Mississippi Question, 1795–1803: A Study in Trade, Politics, and Diplomacy*, New York, London: D. Appleton-Century Company, 1934; E.W. Lyon, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy, 1759–1804*, Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934; A. DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1976.

https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110619775-002

the War of Independence (1802/03), marking the end of his imperial ambitions in the Americas.[3] Haitians have been credited with indirectly paving the way for the Louisiana Purchase, but the impact of the French Caribbean on the history of Louisiana runs much deeper.[4] French imperial endeavours in North America were shaped by the political and economic circumstances of the West Indies, framed by British-French rivalries. Bonaparte himself had been pursuing a Caribbean policy that had been conceived by preceding regimes. Accordingly, analysing earlier plans for the retrocession of Louisiana opens a window into French imperial imaginations in the revolutionary decade.[5]

First, I argue that these projects were intended to serve the French West Indies and above all Saint-Domingue, the economic powerhouse of the Atlantic world. Because of the failure of the French-American alliance, Louisiana was envisioned to develop into the hinterland of the Antilles, becoming a military base as well as granary for the islands. In other words, it was to be the colony of colonies. From the end of the Seven Years' War to the outbreak of the French Revolution, the French monarchy had intentionally refocused the colonial empire on its island holdings and actively departed from its prior strategy of continental conquests. Yet, during the French Revolution, the French Republic broke with this "no territory" policy and pursued a reterritorialization agenda in order to consolidate its control over the circulation of goods and resources in

3 David Geggus, however, pointed out that the risk of British invasion played a significant role. Among the more recent contributions on the topic: R.L. Paquette, "Revolutionary Saint Domingue in the Making of Territorial Louisiana", in: D.B. Gaspar and D.P. Geggus (eds.), *A Turbulent Time: The French Revolution and the Greater Caribbean*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997, pp. 204–225; L. Dubois, "The Haitian Revolution and the Sale of Louisiana; or, Thomas Jefferson's (Unpaid) Debt to Jean-Jacques Dessalines", in: P.J. Kastor and F. Weil (eds.), *Empires of the Imagination: Transatlantic Histories of the Louisiana Purchase*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 93–116; D.P. Geggus, "The Louisiana Purchase and the Haitian Revolution", in: E. Dillon and M. Drexler (eds.), *The Haitian Revolution and the Early U.S.: Histories, Textualities, Geographies*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, pp. 178–202.

4 Cécile Vidal has recently unearthed the historical depth of that influence: C. Vidal, *Caribbean New Orleans: Empire, Race and the Making of a Slave Society*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019.

5 This chapter builds on François Furstenberg's remarkable work. While Furstenberg examines the complex interaction between France and Louisiana to better understand the consolidation of the early American Republic, I analyze its impact on the history of the French Empire in the revolutionary decade; see F. Furstenberg, "The Significance of the Trans-Appalachian Frontier in Atlantic History", *The American Historical Review* 113 (2008) 3, pp. 647–677; F. Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French: Five Refugees Who Shaped a Nation*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2014.

the empire.[6] Since Louisiana was described by the revolutionary elite as fundamentally French, this expansion was justified according to the notions of popular sovereignty and self-determination.

Second, I demonstrate that France's Louisiana policy was decentralized: administrators in the Caribbean, adventurers on the trans-Appalachian borderland, and Amerindian representatives participated in debates about political economy as well as the appropriation of revolutionary principles.[7] These actors contributed to defining French imperial objectives and strategies. I suggest that Foreign Minister Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand Périgord, who negotiated Louisiana's retrocession in 1800, was only the tip of the iceberg. He was the most visible spokesman in a complex policy-making process that included a multitude of other players and factors. This chapter, by challenging the chronological divide between a period of revolutionary fervour and a moment of counter-revolutionary backlash, situates the first French republican experience in a longer and broader colonial history.[8]

Since the end of the Seven Years' War, the French government had always regarded North America as secondary to its Caribbean interests. The treaty negotiations over colonial territories, following Britain's victory, and the resulting shifts in sovereignties made France's position very clear. Versailles abandoned Canada to the British for the surrender of Guadeloupe and Martinique. Louisiana was promised to Spain as a result of the new 1761 "Family Compact", which led the Bourbon monarchy into war against Britain.[9] Because the plantation economy in Louisiana had never really taken off, the French government perceived the colony as more expensive than profitable. Although the size of the claimed territory had been immense, the non-Indigenous population of French Louisiana had never exceeded 12,000 individuals – a pale figure compared to the 1.6 million free inhabitants of New England.[10] For the same

6 For an analysis of Choiseul's "no territory" policy, see F.-J. Ruggiu, "India and the Reshaping of the French Colonial Policy (1759–1789)", *Itinerario* 35 (2011) 2, pp. 25–43.

7 For the notion of "adventurer" in the borderlands, see D. Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire: The Struggle for Mastery in the Louisiana-Florida Borderlands, 1762–1803*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015.

8 See, e.g., P.R. Girard, "Rêves d'Empire: French Revolutionary Doctrine and Military Interventions in the Southern United States and the Caribbean, 1789–1809", *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 48 (2007) 4, pp. 389–412.

9 Wilson, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy*, pp. 13–35.

10 G.C. Din, "Empires Too Far: The Demographic Limitations of Three Imperial Powers in the Eighteenth-Century Mississippi Valley", *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 50 (2009) 3, pp. 261–292, at p. 266.

reasons, the Spanish government was not very eager to take possession of a colony that was more likely to become a financial burden than an economic boon. However, Madrid saw this territory as a potential buffer and a barrier that would protect Mexico from an expanding British Empire. London accepted France's cession of Louisiana to Spain in exchange for Eastern Florida.

If the loss of Canada and Louisiana allowed Louis XV to preserve France's sovereignty over the sugar colonies, then it also raised a pressing question: how to supply islands whose needs for foodstuffs increased alongside their economic and demographic growth? Indeed, the French Antilles, and especially Saint-Domingue, thrived in the aftermath of the war. The western part of Hispaniola was not only the leading producer of sugar in the world but in 1767 it also exported 15.6 million pounds of coffee, twice as much as it had before 1756.[11] The island's growth in population made this economic expansion possible. Although many migrants came from France, the demographic increase was mostly due to the massive deportation of enslaved people from West Africa. Local crops such as yam and manioc as well as imports from France might have sufficed to feed the workforce in peacetime, but the French government, preparing itself for another war with Britain, viewed peace as an interlude. Since the powerful British navy was capable of cutting the West Indies off from Europe, the colonies needed regional sources of food.[12] Despite the outrage of metropolitan merchants, it was obvious that the hexagon would be unable to supply its West Indian colonies. In the past, Canada had helped meet the needs of the French Antilles, but this resource was no longer an option.[13] The islands had to rely on the consistent contraband trade from New England and the Dutch Caribbean, while irregular imports from France were ill-suited to local needs.[14]

These economic and geopolitical anxieties stimulated a great debate on the colonies among a variety of thinkers, including physiocrats. Was holding onto colonies less profitable than trading with foreign partners? Was slavery the

11 T. Burnard and J. Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016, p. 167.

12 B. Mandelblatt "How Feeding Slaves Shaped the French Atlantic: Mercantilism and Food Provisioning in the Franco-Caribbean during the 17th and 18th centuries", in: P. Røge and S. Reinert (eds.), *The Political Economy of Empire in the Early Modern World*, Houndmills, Basingstoke, 2013, pp. 192–220.

13 J. Mathieu, *Le Commerce entre la Nouvelle-France et les Antilles au XVIIIe siècle*, Montréal: Fides, 1981.

14 D.B. Goebel, "The 'New England Trade' and the French West Indies, 1763–1774: A Study in Trade Policies", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 20 (1963) 3, pp. 332–372; W.G. Klooster, *Illicit Riches: Dutch Trade in the Caribbean, 1648–1795*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 1998.

most cost-efficient form of labour? Should monopolies be abolished altogether?[15] The French debate on the political economy of empire was part of a global transformation that affected most of the Atlantic world after the Seven Years' War. Major changes in commercial regulations, driven by pragmatic concerns, took place simultaneously in all three major European empires. No government implemented unrestricted "free trade"; instead, London, Madrid, and Versailles granted privileges that relaxed specific aspects of their commercial legislations. Britain adopted the Free Port Act (1766), and Spain eventually reduced its monopoly with its Free Trade Act (1778).[16] The changes were not meant to implement some kind of *doux commerce*, a "gentle" form of commerce that, according to philosopher Montesquieu, was supposed to civilize people, make them more reliable, thrifty, and peaceful. In fact, the selective liberalization of trade had predatory aims. In each case, the real purpose was to provide cheap external resources and protect monopolies from foreign rivals. Just like its other European counterparts, the French *exclusif mitigé* (a moderate form of trade protectionism established in 1767) relied on the assumption that the monopoly remained the guardian of global trade.[17] The new legislation permitted the import and export of several minor products, such as timber or cod, whereas the foreign trade of sugar, coffee, indigo, and flour was prohibited.

Preserving French sovereignty over the West Indies and ensuring their protection and provisioning were the main reasons for the Franco-American alliance of 1778.[18] By breaking up the British Empire into rival powers, France made Saint-Domingue less vulnerable to conquest. In addition, through Article 11 of the treaty, the United States committed to "guarantee" the French possessions

15 P. Cheney, *Revolutionary Commerce: Globalization and the French Monarchy*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010, pp. 168–194; A.F. Terjanian, *Commerce and its Discontents in Eighteenth-Century French Political Thought*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013; P. Røge, "A Natural Order of Empire: The Physiocratic Vision of Colonial France after the Seven Years' War", in: Røge and Reinert (eds.), *The Political Economy of Empire,* pp. 32–52; C. Oudin-Bastide and P. Steiner, *Calcul et morale: Coûts de l'esclavage et valeur de l'émancipation (XVIIIe–XIXe siècle)*, Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 2015.

16 F. Armytage, *The Free Port System in the British West Indies, a Study in Commercial policy, 1766–1822*, London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1953; N. Hunt, "Contraband, Free Ports, and British Merchants in the Caribbean World, 1739–1772", *Diacronie* 1 (2013) 13 [Online]; R.L. Woodward, "Spanish Commercial Policy in Louisiana, 1763–1803", *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 44 (2003) 2, pp. 133–164, at p. 148.

17 J. Tarrade, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime: l'évolution du régime de l'exclusif de 1763 à 1789*, Paris: PUF, 1972.

18 M. Covo, *Commerce, empire et révolutions dans le monde atlantique: la colonie de Saint-Domingue, entre métropole et États-Unis (ca. 1778–ca. 1804)*, Diss. Paris, EHESS, 2013, pp. 80–142.

in the Americas. The new country was to become the breadbasket of the French Antilles, providing them with all kinds of foodstuffs. From this perspective, the United States was perceived as a client state subordinated to French colonial interests. France would avoid bearing the costs of direct administration and the emerging country would be able to meet Saint-Domingue's food needs. For this reason, the minister of foreign affairs, Charles Gravier de Vergennes, did not take any steps to recover Louisiana. The United States served France's colonial policy better than a costly French colony could. The revised *exclusif mitigé* (1784) was supposed to assimilate the new American Republic into the French colonial system. The French government hoped to maximize profit without jeopardizing metropolitan interests. A greater variety of goods could be legally imported into and exported from the French West Indies, but sugar, coffee, cotton, and flour remained out of foreign hands.[19]

This arrangement gradually crumbled for a variety of reasons. American traders were not content to exchange only authorized commodities. They smuggled on a large scale the most desirable and lucrative goods produced on the islands. Although the French colonial state was unable to ensure a steady flow of provisions to the islands, Versailles refused to implement a policy of "colonial neglect", which had been predominant in the previous centuries. The king had consented to relax this legislation, but the law was still enforced. The outcry of the French Chambers of Commerce against "American ingratitude" popularized the idea that Louis XVI had squandered the state's money on the American Revolutionary War. France had financed the independence of the United States and shed its blood for American liberty in vain; now the unthankful republic was looting France's wealth.[20]

It was in the light of this disappointment that the real possibility of Louisiana's retrocession surfaced for the first time. French diplomats and consuls in the United States were the first to articulate such a plan. They had witnessed the booming American contraband trade with the Antilles after the war, and they could only acknowledge their helplessness in preventing it from happening. In

19 M. Covo, "Baltimore and the French Atlantic: Empires, Commerce, and Identity in a Revolutionary Age, 1783–1798", in: D. Pretel and A. Leonard (eds.), *The Caribbean and the Atlantic World Economy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015, pp. 87–107.

20 P. Hill, "La suite imprévue de l'alliance: l'ingratitude américaine, 1783–1789", in: C. Fohlen and J. Godechot (eds.), *La Révolution américaine et l'Europe*, Paris: Éditions du CNRS, 1979, pp. 385–398; A. Potofsky, "The Political Economy of the French-American Debt Debate: The Ideological Uses of Atlantic Commerce, 1787 to 1800", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 63 (2006) 3, pp. 489–516; S. Marzagalli, "The Failure of a Transatlantic Alliance? Franco-American Trade, 1783–1815", *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008) 4, pp. 456–464.

1789, the French ambassador to the United States, Eléonor François Élie de Moustier, wrote a long memorandum arguing for a French Louisiana. The main motive was the protection of the kingdom's economic interests in the Caribbean. "As long as France is in possession of the islands", he explained, "it will be important for her to supply them as cheaply as possible, to open new markets for their commodities, and to exclude smuggling." The "embouchure of the Mississippi" could accomplish these three aims. Not only did Louisianans consume great quantities of sugar, coffee, and molasses, but their crops, Moustier emphasized, also met the needs of the French West Indies. In case of retrocession, "timber" and "cattle, horses, mules, sheep, salted beef, poultry of all kinds, form, corn, beans, peas, vegetables" would flow into Saint-Domingue, Martinique, and Guadeloupe.[21] Instead of importing flour from Philadelphia or Baltimore illegally, the French Antilles would find in New Orleans a convenient source for provisioning. This line of argument became the guideline of the Louisiana policy in the revolutionary decade.

Yet, the idea that a French Louisiana would be in a position to feed the Antilles is curious, to say the least. The trade between the French West Indies and Spanish Louisiana had already been legal since Madrid issued a *cédula* (royal decree) "granting new privileges for the encouragement of commerce" in 1782, but at no point did New Orleans export foodstuffs to the islands. The opposite was actually more often the case, since substantial quantities of French flour were re-exported from the Antilles to New Orleans.[22] Under French rule, Lower Louisiana had partly depended on external produce for its subsistence, either from the Illinois country (Upper Louisiana), the British colonies, or the metropole – in the rare years when French ships unloaded cargo in this imperial backwater. Although Louisiana imported goods from Saint-Domingue and Martinique and exported timber, corn, peas, and rice for some years, it was unable to return the trade in flour.[23] After Spain took over the colony, its dependence on external trade had remained a major feature of Louisiana's economy. While its production of tobacco tripled, Pennsylvanian foodstuffs fed its ever

21 This quote and the following ones are translated from French, see Ministère des Affaires étrangères (MAE), Etats-Unis, supplément 7, fo. 279.

22 The French West Indies were the main trading partners of New Orleans in 1786: 56 vessels entered the port that year, see J.G. Clark, *New Orleans, 1718–1812: An Economic History*, London: Pelican Publishing, 1970, p. 228.

23 For a detailed account of the French Louisiana trade with the French West Indies, see: N.M. Miller Surrey, *The Commerce of Louisiana During the French Régime, 1699–1763*, New York: University of Columbia Press, 1916, pp. 367–387. For a focus on New Orleans: S. Lee Dawdy, "La Nouvelle Orléans au XVIIIe siècle: Courants d'échange dans le monde caraïbe", *Annales. Histoire, Sciences Sociales* 62 (2007) 3, pp. 663–685.

growing population.[24] Dozens of American merchants established themselves in New Orleans to conduct that trade. Although yearly wheat production in the Missouri country might have been between 7,600 and 9,000 barrels of flour, half of which reached New Orleans, this level was inadequate to feed the 8,000 inhabitants of New Orleans alone.[25] In commercial terms, the southern Mississippi Valley looked more like an embryonic West Indian colony than a thriving Mid-Atlantic state.

In fact, the geographic, political, and economic realities behind the region described as "Louisiana" were complex and heterogeneous. The 900,000 square miles of land claimed by Spain were significantly underpopulated: the non-Indigenous population never exceeded 40,000 people, a huge contrast to tiny Saint-Domingue and its 650,000 inhabitants.[26] But Louisiana was also an ill-defined borderland, in which Native Americans, Europeans, people of African descent, and settlers from the United States coexisted.[27] Most of these groups had overlapping loyalties and shifting allegiances in a context of constant imperial uncertainty.[28] For that matter, French diplomats could hardly ignore the multiethnic and multicultural demographics of the gigantic Mississippi basin. Since 1763, few Spaniards had migrated to what was supposed to be a buffer for New Spain, a vast territory whose boundaries were contested. Most white inhabitants were of French descent, a group that increased with the arrival of almost 3,000 Acadians between 1765 and 1786.[29] On the east bank of the Mississippi

24 But tobacco production collapsed after the Spanish monarchy prohibited imports from Louisiana in 1789, see B. Coutts, "Boom and Bust: The Rise and Fall of the Tobacco Industry in Spanish Louisiana, 1770–1790", *The Americas* 42 (1986) 3, pp. 289–309.

25 Clark, *New Orleans,* pp. 204, 210–212.

26 Since the borders of the territory were contested by the British and the Americans, it was unclear whether Western Florida was part of "Spanish Louisiana". For the "Florida issue" and the multiple change of sovereignties, see J. Landers, *Black Society in Spanish Florida*, Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999, pp. 69–70. For the demographic calculation, see P. LaChance, "The Louisiana Purchase in the Demographic Perspective of its Time", in: Kastor and Weil (eds.), *Empires of the Imagination,* pp. 143–179, p. 151.

27 D.H. Usner, *Indians, Settlers, & Slaves in a Frontier Exchange Economy: The Lower Mississippi Valley Before 1783*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992.

28 The best synthesis on the complex politics of Spanish Louisiana is S. Hilton, "Spanish Louisiana in Atlantic Contexts: Nexus of Imperial Transactions and International Relations", in: C. Vidal (ed.), *Louisiana, Crossroads of the Atlantic World*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014, pp. 68–86.

29 There was a significant number of colonists of German and Swiss descent as well. For the relocation of Acadians, see C. Brasseaux, *The Founding of New Acadia: The Beginnings of Acadian Life in Louisiana, 1765–1803*, p. 91; C. Hodson, *The Acadian Diaspora: An Eighteenth-Century History*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, p. 195.

River – a territory disputed by Spain, Britain, and the United States – the loose confederations of Chickasaws, Choctaws, Cherokees, Creeks, and numerous "*petites nations*" were demographically powerful, but divided. Their total population might have been "in the neighborhood of 60,000 at the end of the eighteenth century".[30] The slave-based plantation economy was expanding at a slow pace, especially around New Orleans. Almost 8,000 enslaved people were deported from the Caribbean to Louisiana between 1783 and 1792 – a small figure compared to the 250,000 slaves who disembarked in Saint-Domingue between 1781 and 1790.[31] The fur trade and tobacco production, albeit in decline, remained dominant in the Attakapas country. Under Spanish rule, the most striking change was the considerable influx of American settlers from Kentucky and Tennessee, especially in Natchez County, where the population almost doubled between 1788 and 1795 (from 2,700 to 4,900).[32] The Spanish government partly encouraged this migration to counter British claims on the region, but it was rapidly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the phenomenon.[33] Well aware of this transimperial knot, the French government did not engage in any action that could bring about the retrocession of Louisiana.

But France's political climate changed in 1792. The Girondins, who now dominated the National Assembly, were particularly sensitive to the global dimension of the revolution and were looking for ways to dismantle the Spanish Empire.[34] As tensions with Madrid rose, a number of revolutionary "entrepreneurs" drafted secessionist plots involving French-speaking residents and settlers from the United States.[35] The major motive for Louisiana's retrocession, they all emphasized, should be the provisioning of the French Caribbean. A citizen of Kentucky, Captain Gilbert Imlay, proposed, for example, to launch a French invasion of the Spanish colony with the support of the United States in exchange for free navigation on the Mississippi. Louisiana was the "key

30 Whitaker, *The Mississippi Question*, p. 68; E. Ellis, "Petite Nation with Powerful Networks: The Tunicas in the Eighteenth Century", *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 58 (2017) 2, pp. 133–178.

31 J.-P. Le Glaunec, "Slave Migrations and Slave Control in New Orleans", in: Kastor and Weil (eds.), *Empires of the Imagination*, p. 209.

32 Clark, *New Orleans*, pp. 206–212.

33 G.C. Din, "Spain's Immigration Policy in Louisiana and the American Penetration, 1792–1803", *The Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 76 (1973) 3, pp. 255–276.

34 M. Dorigny, "Brissot et Miranda en 1792: ou comment révolutionner l'Amérique espagnole", in: M. Dorigny and M.-J. Rossignol (eds.), *La France et les Amériques au temps de Jefferson et de Miranda*, Paris, Société des études robespierristes, 2001, pp. 93–105.

35 I. Olivares, "Projets d'occupation des colonies hispano-américaines (1792–1793)", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (1992) 288, pp. 201–221.

entry to Spanish possessions", he explained, and New Orleans could become the cradle of French privateering in the Gulf of Mexico.[36] François Lyonnet, who had spent many years in Louisiana, predicted that New Orleans would be in "several centuries, the most commercial city in the world". Maize, rice, and salted meat were to be transported from Ohio and Cumberland to the mouth of the Mississippi. Control of waterways was crucial to an effective imperial plan: the French would then be able to feed the West Indies. Therefore, "[t]he nation, which has been forced to abandon the provisioning of its islands to the Americans, might one day, with the help of Louisiana, do it herself".[37] The American "cosmopolitan patriot", poet Joel Barlow, designed a similar plan entitled "How to recover Louisiana without costing anything to the nation".[38] The "facility of provisioning the islands in all kinds of supplies and timber" was Louisiana's most appealing feature.[39]

In all of these writings, the plot was supposed to be implemented easily since "all *Louisianais* were French" – they were its "abandoned children".[40] Because of their Frenchness, explained the "Creole from Louisiana", Auguste de La Chaise "the planters in the Antilles will find among their generous Louisiana compatriots advances and facilities that they cannot expect from greedy and ungrateful Americans".[41] These revolutionary conspirators claimed that their sense of national belonging to the motherland had never faded since the revolt of 1768, when French-speaking merchants opposed the territory's cession to Spain and the implementation of its commercial monopoly.[42] "Thirty years of habit under a government foreign to their hearts has

36 MAE, Correspondance Politique (CP), Espagne, 634, fo. 462.

37 MAE, CP Etats-Unis supplément 7, fo. 11.

38 For Barlow and his involvement in the French Revolution, see P. Ziesche, *Cosmopolitan Patriots: Americans in Paris in the Age of Revolution*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010, pp. 64–87.

39 MAE, CP Espagne 636, fo. 391, 3 frimaire Year 2.

40 MAE, CP Etats-Unis supplément 7, fo. 17.

41 MAE, CP Espagne 637, fo. 344.

42 C. Vidal, "De Province à colonie et de Français à Louisianais", in: C. Vidal (ed.), *Français? La nation en débat entre colonies et métropole*, XVIe–XIXe siècle, Paris, Éditions EHESS, 2013, p. 77–104. The Frenchness associated with the colony not only survived the Louisiana Purchase, but also grew more salient after its annexation by the United States, see P. J. Kastor, "'They Are All Frenchmen'. Background and Nation in an Age of Transformation", in: Kastor and Weil (eds.), *Empires of the Imagination*, pp. 239–267; F. Weil, "The Purchase and the Making of French Louisiana", ibid., pp. 302–326.

not weakened their attachment to their mother country", Lyonnet explained. He further stated, "[d]o we want to irk a child or punish him, just call him Spanish."[43]

This rhetoric of Frenchness had become a compelling argument because it incorporated the revolutionary principle of self-determination. Indeed, the National Assembly regarded Louis XV's cession of Louisiana to Spain as the epitome of monarchical despotism. When discussing the status of Corsica in relation to France, Deputy Charles Alexis Brûlart de Sillery lamented that the abandonment of North America, this "dismemberment", had happened "without the consent of the nation".[44] Popular sovereignty was no longer compatible with older patterns of treaty-making. The inalienability of French territory should now include the colonies as integral parts of the kingdom. The revolutionary government did not completely discard the idea that this legal principle could induce some retroactive effect. In the aftermath of the annexation of Avignon by local referendum in September 1791, the "return" of Louisiana within the political community of a regenerated France now appeared legitimate.[45] This sense of national belonging and its recognition as a valid principle challenged the long history of European colonialism.

The plan eventually took shape after the outbreak of the French-Spanish war, with Edmond Charles Genet's posting to the United States in 1793. The young ambassador, famous in American history books for his flamboyant speeches and his impetuous decisions, enthusiastically embraced the proposal for undertaking a military expedition.[46] Petitions from French-speaking residents and the creation of a local Jacobin Club emboldened Genet to take action. The ambassador received a number of intrigants who had many ideas to offer on the topic. The merchant from New Orleans Charles de Pauw, the officer Auguste de La Chaise, and the adventurer George Clark plotted the secession of the colony.[47] Striking Louisiana, Spain's weakest point, would accelerate the expected disintegration of its empire. Genet circulated an inflammatory pamphlet from "the Freemen of France to their brothers in Louisiana", hoping to rally behind him as

43 MAE, CP Etats-Unis supplément 7, fo. 15.

44 *Archives parlementaires*, vol. 12, 30 November 1789, p. 336.

45 E. Kolla, *Sovereignty, International Law and the French Revolution*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017, pp. 84–120.

46 The bibliography on Genet is immense, for the most recent account and specific references, see Furstenberg, *When The United States Spoke French*, pp. 286–348.

47 E. Liljegren, "Jacobinism in Spanish Louisiana, 1792–1797", *The Louisiana Historical Quarterly* 22 (1939) 1, pp. 47–97, esp. pp. 49–59. The more recent scholarship has made the case that the enthusiasm for the French Revolution was less widespread than previously thought.

many supporters as possible. Clark was to launch an attack, which nearly materialized in early 1794, but like almost all of Genet's attempts, the plan failed miserably.[48] First, the United States federal government, after hearing of the plan, prevented the raising of American troops due to fear of getting embroiled in an undesired war with Spain. Second, Governor Francisco Luis Hector de Carondelet strengthened Spain's military defence of the colony and cracked down on Jacobin activists. Third, after the elimination of the Girondin faction in France in June 1793, the new Montagnard government condemned Genet's activities in North America.

Yet, new geopolitical circumstances made Louisiana relevant again for French imperial interests. Alliances shifted in 1795: the so-called backward Iberian monarchy reluctantly entered into the French orbit and the American "sister republic" came short of being labelled as an enemy. Not only was Spain defeated by republican France and forced to make peace in Basel, but it also became enmeshed in the global war against Britain as a result of the Treaty of San Ildefonso (1796). At the same time, the Franco-American alliance gradually disintegrated: although George Washington had issued a proclamation of neutrality, he negotiated a treaty with Great Britain – the Jay Treaty (November 1794) – which confirmed the rapprochement between the early American Republic and its former "motherland". To make things worse for France, federalist John Adams defeated Francophile Thomas Jefferson during the presidential elections of 1796. Moreover, the relationship between Spain and the early American Republic was warming up after years of tacit enmity. In spite of French grievances, Manuel Godoy, the Spanish chief of government, relented to American pressures, ceding the east bank of the Mississippi to the United States and legalizing free navigation of the river. Access to New Orleans' entrepôt promised to further expand US commerce in the Gulf of Mexico. This trend was enhanced by the opening of Spanish colonies to neutral trade two years later. As a result, vessels under US and British flags swarmed Spanish ports in the Americas at an unprecedented level.[49]

48 F.J. Turner, "The Origin of Genet's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas", *The American Historical Review* 3 (1898) 4, pp. 650–671; Furstenberg, *When The United States Spoke French*, pp. 303–309.

49 B. Perkins, *The First Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1795–1805*, Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1955; A. DeConde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics & Diplomacy under George Washington*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1958; A.J. Pearce, *British Trade with Spanish America, 1763–1808*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2007; R. Woodward, "Louisiana Commercial Policy", p. 158.

Under these regional circumstances, the rationale for the retrocession of Louisiana transformed under the French Directory (1795–1799). The republican government became increasingly concerned about the growing power of what it called a "British-American league". The aim of retrocession was no longer the creation of a pro-French independent republic allied to the United States and hostile to Spain. Now the French worried about an Anglo-American invasion of the continent since French political and diplomatic elites all strongly believed that the Spanish Empire was about to collapse. The Black Legend was alive and well in most officials' reports: Spanish weakness stemming from their inherent "indolence" and "laziness", they wrote, could offer little resistance to enterprising and greedy Americans. The irony is that Spanish Louisiana had eventually boomed after decades of stagnation under French rule, but that growth was mostly due to the influx of American settlers. The suspicion that minutemen collaborated with British diplomats to scheme for the invasion of Louisiana from Canada was well-founded. A senator from Tennessee, William Blount, had conspired to do just that. Yet, French intelligence unveiled the plot, leading to the politician's impeachment.[50] In fact, Foreign Minister Charles Delacroix was more worried about a softer form of Anglo-imperialism, characterized by two non-military features: the spontaneous migration of American settlers from Kentucky and what he called "the power of the English language". Yet, France's early success in the European wars also fuelled bombastic rhetoric. "Of all the maritime powers", Delacroix boasted, "France alone, allied with Spain, can oppose a counter-weight to England, stop the progress of the English language and the Anglo-American influence."[51]

The major push for retrocession came from the republican administrators in the French West Indies, especially Saint-Domingue. Indeed, France's policy on Louisiana could not be disentangled from the course of the Haitian Revolution and its broader commercial and political consequences. In 1789, US vessels had flocked to Saint-Domingue's ports, taking advantage of rapidly decreasing imports of foodstuffs from a metropole in the grip of a devastating grain crisis. The slave insurrection of 1791, and, even more significantly, the outbreak of maritime war with Britain in 1793, established the hegemony of US commerce on Saint-Domingue. While the British occupied part of the island between 1793 and 1798, the French republican government struggled to secure the necessary provisioning of the colony. They had to face many challenges: the revolution shattered the economic infrastructure of the plantation complex; the abolition of

50 D. Narrett, *Adventurism and Empire*, pp. 234–241.
51 MAE, CP Etats-Unis 45, fo. 186.

slavery in the fall of 1793 decreased the plantations' workforce as many of the "newly free" enrolled in the military; and sugar production was destroyed while coffee exports decreased significantly. The republicans proved unable to exchange colonial products equivalent to the value of food imports from the Americans. Dependency on US trade was all the more unbearable as American merchants preferred trading with the parts of Saint-Domingue occupied by the British, where slavery was still enforced.[52]

The French authorities who had to deal with this commercial dependency clamoured for a Louisiana solution. Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel, the civil commissioners who proclaimed the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue, acknowledged their own helplessness in August 1794. They were fleeing Port-au-Prince under British siege when they wrote one of their final reports:

> The territory and the inhabitants of Louisiana were ceded by our old despots, as an owner would sell his estate and the cattle attached to it. The inhabitants of Louisiana still have the French soul and regret more than ever their old country. This colony is in a position to supply our West Indies with all the objects of subsistence which they now derive from America. Without this competition, our West Indies will inevitably be delivered to the exclusive trade of the United States.[53]

The commissioners employed the now common "Frenchness argument", but, more pointedly, they warned against the emergence of an informal American empire based on de facto exclusive trade. French Louisiana, by opening other sources of supply, would thwart the monopolistic ambitions of the United States. Most colonial administrators and diplomats who had to coordinate the provisioning of the colonies embraced this policy. Jean-Antoine Joseph Fauchet and Pierre Auguste Adet, Genet's successors in Philadelphia, both called for retrocession. Adet, a former member of the Colonial Bureau in the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, was particularly sensitive to the issue: he himself had been part of the first civil commission sent to Saint-Domingue in 1791. He appointed a former governor of Guadeloupe, Victor Collot, to explore the feasibility of a Louisiana annexation in 1796.[54] Donatien de Rochambeau, who had been the governor in Martinique and who would later play an infamous role in the Haitian War of Independence, also hoped that Louisiana would "help

52 M. Covo, "Commerce, empire et révolutions", pp. 508–547.

53 Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer (ANOM), CC9a 9, "Rapport de Polverel et Sonthonax", 13 August 1794.

54 V. Collot, "General Collot's Plan for a Reconnaissance of the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, 1796", *The William and Mary Quarterly* 9 (1952) 4, pp. 512–520.

restore the colonies".[55] In short, the chorus of colonial officials almost unanimously encouraged retrocession.

Ministers in Paris heard their subordinates and endeavoured to recover Louisiana through diplomatic means. During the negotiations with the Spanish in Basel, Delacroix asked Godoy for the west bank of Mississippi, but only acquired the eastern part of Hispaniola, Santo Domingo.[56] This underpopulated colony provided Saint-Domingue with cattle, an essential commodity; yet it could not supply much more by itself.[57] The Spanish trade with the French West Indies, either legal or illegal, had always existed, but it could not compare with and substitute US provisioning. The government postponed the actual annexation of Santo Domingo for fear of creating new problems with a colony that had responded quite unenthusiastically to the Haitian Revolution.[58] But because Louisiana was out of reach for the time being, the secretary of the navy insisted that the Spanish alliance should be taken advantage of: alternate sources of supply could be found in Puerto Rico and Caracas.[59] The government hoped that trade flows would expand. However, republican authorities were met with hostility from the Cuban governor, while Spanish merchants showed little interest in trading with republican Saint-Domingue for political and commercial reasons.[60] On the one hand, they did not really want to help consolidate an abolitionist colony; on the other hand, they preferred exchanging goods with Americans or British captains, whose trade was more lucrative.[61] Cuba, the eastern part of Saint-Domingue, and Puerto Rico did provide convenient ports for French privateering, but they did not open reliable trade routes

55 MAE, CP EU 45, fo. 72, Rochambeau to the government, 3 pluviôse an IV (23 January 1796).

56 A.P. Whitaker, "Louisiana in the Treaty of Basel", *The Journal of Modern History* 8 (1936) 1, pp. 1–26.

57 F. Franklyn, "Juxtaposition et interaction des deux colonies française et espagnole à la veille de la révolution", in: A. Yacou (ed.), *Saint-Domingue espagnol et la révolution nègre d'Haiti*, Paris: Karthala, 2007, pp. 71–79.

58 I. Olivares-Iribarren, "La cession de Santo-Domingo à la France (1795–1802)", *Mélanges de la Casa de Velazquez* 30 (1994) 2, pp. 49–75; Y. Benot, "Comment Santo Domingo n'a pas été occupé par la République française en 1795–1796", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (1998) 311, pp. 79–87. On the relationship between both parts of the island during the Haitian Revolution, see G. Nessler, *An Islandwide Struggle for Freedom: Revolution, Emancipation, and Reenslavement in Hispaniola, 1789–1809*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016, pp. 23–133.

59 ANOM, CC9a 14, Truguet to Delacroix, May 1796.

60 For the context of that relationship with Cuba, see A. Ferrer, *Freedom's Mirror: Cuba and Haiti in the Age of Revolution*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014, pp. 31–145.

61 ANOM, CC9a 14, Rondineau to Truguet, 5 messidor Year IV.

for the hungry republican *département* (department).[62] The Spanish alliance was doomed to disappoint in the long run. As stated in a memo to Director Jean-François Reubell: "We may regret that instead of the Spanish part of Saint-Domingue, we have not asked for Louisiana."[63]

But what would this retrocession mean for French republicanism and the revolution that the Directory attempted to consolidate? The answer to this question sparked much more controversy. Foreign Minister Delacroix asserted that the "commercial independence" provided by retrocession would reinforce and feed off the "general emancipation of blacks". The combined effects of these radical measures would provide France with "great power" in the "Mexican archipelago" and the "capacity to open or close all ports to Americans, at all times".[64] In that sense, revolutionary fervour was clearly viewed as an imperial and pragmatic tool. But the French emissary to Santo Domingo, Philippe Rose Roume de Saint Laurent, pointed out the many political and even constitutional difficulties that a Louisiana retrocession would create. Roume, a native of British Grenada, had been governor of French Tobago in the 1780s and a special envoy to Saint-Domingue in 1791: his long colonial résumé gave him authority in all things related to the Caribbean. In 1796, he authored a report that analysed whether France should attempt to exchange Santo Domingo for Louisiana, balancing the pros and cons. Roume listed the usual arguments in favour of retrocession – the economic incentive and the supposed Frenchness of the colony. He also mentioned that Louisiana could facilitate French smuggling with other parts of the Spanish Empire and spark revolutions around the Gulf of Mexico.[65] Yet, according to him, the counterarguments should prevail. If a general insurrection happened "sooner than necessary" in Spanish America, "it would entirely turn to the advantage of England and the United States" because French merchants would not be in a position to compete with Anglo-American rivals. National interest required "that Spain keeps this gigantic domain of the New World as long as possible". Roume also pointed out how damaging the move could be for French republicanism. Articles 6 and 7 of the Constitution of Year III (1795) had made colonies integral parts of the republic as French departments and prohibited the cession of any territory considering that colonies were to be legally "assimilated" to the metropole. Stationed in

62 M. E. Orozco-Melgar, "Cuba et les îles sous-le-vent : la course comme facteur identitaire", in: Ch. Lerat (ed.), *Le monde caraïbe: défis et dynamiques. Géopolitique, intégration régionale, enjeux économiques*, Bordeaux: Maison des Sciences de l'Homme d'Aquitaine, 2005, pp. 97–116.

63 MAE, CP Etats-Unis 45, fo. 343–344.

64 MAE, CP Etats-Unis 45, fo. 186.

65 MAE, CP Etats-Unis supplément 7, fo. 28–29.

Madrid before being sent to Santo Domingo, Roume had better knowledge of the Spanish Empire's sociopolitical realities and was one of the only officials who looked beyond the cliché of "pro-French Louisianans". He observed that the colony was politically incompatible with republican Saint-Domingue. The planters, he emphasized, were "strongly infatuated with all European and colonial aristocracies. They consider the enfranchisement of the African people as a crime of property [*crime de lèse-propriété*], and since the beginning of the revolution they have hanged and broken hundreds of blacks, suspected of wanting to rebel".[66]

Roume made an important point: the French and Haitian revolutions made many white Francophone residents more amenable to Spanish rule, while the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the abolition of slavery were an inspiration to people of African descent, who were well-connected with unofficial networks of information.[67] As France had decreed the abolition of slavery for the entirety of its empire, the annexation would threaten a bustling economy increasingly based on sugar and cotton.[68] Although the Directory and West Indian officials wanted the colony to become the granary of the islands, local elites envisioned a completely different future for Louisiana. This tension materialized with the influx of refugees from Saint-Domingue who were fleeing the insurrection. At this point, most white colonists had chosen to move to Atlantic seaports in the United States and only several hundred people resettled in Louisiana, but this number was significant in a sparsely populated colony. Most were active participants in New Orleans' Francophone culture yet were hostile to French republicanism.[69] Planters came with unwelcome enslaved people, *los negros franceses* (the French blacks), who, according to Spanish authorities, threatened to incite rebellion. The Haitian Revolution could potentially destabilize the fabric of an already volatile society.

The *cabildo* (the municipal council), which hoped to keep Saint-Domingue's radicalism at bay, lobbied the governor to prohibit the entry of slave trading ships from the Caribbean and prevent the "infestation" of local slaves by subversive ideas. Indeed, two aborted slave revolts in the Pointe Coupée parish had created

66 MAE, CP Etats-Unis supplément 7, fo. 29–30.

67 J. Scott, *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*, New York: Verso, 2018.

68 Garretson, *New Orleans, 1718–1812*, pp. 217–218.

69 The bulk of refugees arrived in 1809, but those who were there in the 1790s already played an important cultural role: they had a theatre, their own newspaper, *le Moniteur de la Louisiane*, etc. See A. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 1988, pp. 46–47, 67–68.

much anxiety. The planters blamed the revolution for the slave conspiracy of 1795, which was rapidly thwarted and brutally repressed.[70] Free people of colour, whose legal and economic circumstances differed substantially from those of the enslaved, were also suspected of being "infected" with French revolutionary ideas. Free *pardo* Pierre Bailly, a member of the local militia of African descent, was indicted twice for pro-French and radical sympathies: once in September 1791 and again in May 1794.[71] Bailly was eventually sentenced to spend several years in a Cuban prison. Governor Carondelet shrewdly utilized these incidents to foster a paranoid propaganda thriving on constant rumours of unrest. Although most French officials paid little attention to these diverging perspectives, it is rather unsurprising that local responses to revolutionary ideas and French imperial schemes differed across social and racial lines.

Taking into account the relationship of Amerindian polities to the French Empire adds additional layers of complication. Choctaws, Chickasaws, Osages, Upper and Lower Creeks, and many other *petites nations* were not equally affected by European endeavours. They did not share the same interests, pursuing different agendas in a variety of geographical settings. Most groups, though, had to play a risky game with the imperial powers competing for dominance over the Mississippi Valley. They attempted to reshape the terms of their existing treaties with the Spaniards but were also losing ground in their ability to contain American settlers' invasion into their lands. Interest in negotiating was originally mutual: the Spanish had attempted to replicate the older French system of alliances with Amerindians in order to combat common enemies, either British or Americans. But the Treaty of San Lorenzo (1795) between Spain and the United States had devastating consequences on Indian nations as Madrid relented to American claims on the northern borderlands of West Florida (today's Alabama and Mississippi). Amerindians had not been invited to international negotiations although they lost most of the rights and guarantees they had obtained from Louisiana's governors. After ceding territories to

70 Historians are still debating the breadth of the conspiracy and the role of the Haitian Revolution in the revolt. See J.D.L. Holmes, "The Abortive Slave Revolt at Pointe Coupée, Louisiana, 1795", *Louisiana History* (1970), pp. 341–362; G.M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth-Century*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995, pp. 343–380; G.C. Din, "Carondelet, the Cabildo, and Slaves: Louisiana in 1795", *Louisiana History* 38 (1997) 1, pp. 5–28.

71 K. Hanger, "Conflicting Loyalties: The French Revolution and Free People of Color in Spanish Louisiana", *Louisiana History* 34 (1993) 1, pp. 5–33, at p. 23.

the United States, the Cherokees, for instance, started migrating westward and made a request for Spanish lands west of the Mississippi.[72]

As their options decreased, French ambitions for Louisiana offered Indigenous communities a glimpse of hope and even an opportunity to reverse the tide. This was the major motive of François Tastanegy, the "great chief of the Creek nation", when he "crossed the seas" "to fetch enemies to Americans and friends to France".[73] Speaking in the name of the *sauvages* (savages), he submitted a series of plans to the French revolutionary governments and managed to play a decisive role in shaping Talleyrand's Louisiana policy.[74] Before being conferred a Creek name, Jean-Antoine Leclerc de Milfort (or Louis Milfort) was born in Ardennes in 1752. At the age of 23, he had migrated to North America in search of adventure, but unlike Gilbert Motier de Lafayette, he did not sympathize with the cause of the American patriots. Instead, he started living among the Upper Creeks in the north of current day Montgomery, Alabama, and even took part in Creek expeditions against the English and the Americans. The most consequential event in Milfort's life was his encounter with Alexander McGillivray, whose father was Scottish and whose mother was half Creek and half French but who was regarded as fully Creek in this matrilineal society.[75] McGillivray's exceptional diplomatic skills propelled him to become the uncontested leader of the Creek confederation by carving out a space for a nation surrounded by American settlers in Georgia and Tennessee, Spaniards of Louisiana, and English colonists. Thanks to his feats on the battlefield and, more importantly, to McGillivray's influence, Milfort had been named "Great War Chief" (or Tastanegy) after a meeting held by the assembly governing the

72 S. Hilton, "Spanish Louisiana in Atlantic Contexts", p. 85.

73 MAE, CP Etats-Unis Supplément 7, fo. 135.

74 Tastanegy first met with Fauchet, the French ambassador in Philadelphia in 1795. He crossed the Atlantic and started lobbying the Committee of Public Safety, future Consul Jean-Jacques Régis de Cambacérès, Minister Delacroix, and afterwards Minister Talleyrand. He was even named "brigadier general". He wrote a semi-autobiographical pamphlet, whose purpose was to remind Bonaparte of Louisiana in 1802. Although the document contains a significant number of mistakes, it remains a great source of information on Creek life in the late eighteenth century. It was republished in C. Buchet, *Chef de guerre chez les Creeks*, Paris: France-Empire, 1994.

75 C. Saunt, *A New Order of Things: Property, Power, and the Transformation of the Creek Indians, 1733–1816*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 67–89; K. Duval, *Independence Lost: Lives on the Edge of the American Revolution*, New York: Random House, 2015, esp. pp. 24–34.

Creek confederation.[76] Although his trajectory might sound extraordinary, Milfort was actually just one of the numerous "Indianized" French people who embraced a lifestyle away from European societies.[77] This phenomenon had been frequent in French North America and did not entirely end with the cession of 1762. Yet, the prominence of Tastanegy in such a powerful Amerindian polity was more remarkable. McGillivray had led a war against Georgia and negotiated treaties with the Spanish governor, but he passed away in 1793. Tastanegy, who was the widower of McGillivray's sister and whose influence probably suffered, now had to take a chance with the French. Although Tastanegy certainly meant to advance his career, his plan should not be discarded as merely opportunistic. There is some level of uncertainty as to the legitimacy of his claims as a formal Creek representative, but being a broker between two worlds, he was particularly well-positioned to serve his adopted people's interests.

Using "we" to alternatively describe the French and the Creeks, he encouraged the Directory to claim Louisiana and stop United States' commercial and territorial expansion, not only in North America but more pressingly in the West Indies. Tastanegy's plan connected Amerindians' interests with those of Saint-Domingue and republican France. Like many others before him, he warned that the trade of the American Republic, if unchecked, would irreversibly "submerge the French Antilles", whereas Louisiana could supply timber, cattle, and mules. More originally, he made the prescient suggestion that the "twenty thousand" white refugees who had poured into US cities from Saint-Domingue should resettle in Louisiana and contribute to its economic growth. "A healthy policy", he wrote, "should not allow great white owners to return to our islands where they made war on blacks. An eternal enmity will divide colours that have fought each other; the result of this enmity will be an interminable war, which the blacks themselves will never forgive."[78] Tastanegy believed that the French Republic could pursue a coherent humanitarian and economically wise policy by striking up an alliance with Indians. Regardless that some

76 This uncommon title revealed the transformation of the Creek regime into a more centralized polity at the end of the eighteenth century, see J. Swanton, *Forty-Second Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology*, Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1928, pp. 40–41.

77 The "Indianization" was not necessarily complete: in most cases, it involved what Gilles Havard calls "multi-identity" and a "flexible sense of cultural belonging". See G. Havard, *Empire et métissages: Indiens et Français dans le Pays d'en Haut, 1660–1715*, Sillery: Les éditions du Septentrion, 2003, pp. 545–548.

78 In that regard, Tastanegy could not be more prescient: after the end of the Haitian War of Independence, Saint-Domingue's refugees migrated in droves to Louisiana.

Creeks, including McGillivray, had many black slaves,[79] he viewed the Creek-French alliance as the counterpart of the abolition of slavery. Again, very prophetically, he ended his letter to the Directory with a warning: the United States "base their prosperity on the total destruction of the true owners of America". Tastanegy's proposals received laudatory reviews from multiple ministers. Laurent Truguet, the secretary of the navy, expressed his enthusiasm for a plan that not only promised "the future prosperity of our trade and our colonies, but also great means of opposing the brazen ambition of the London court and the better disguised one of the American government".[80]

Tastanegy's project reflected an expectation shared by many Native groups in North America. Nostalgia for the "French alliance" had been a predominant feature of Indian politics since the loss of Montreal in the early 1760s. The French, who had the same colonial ambitions as their European rivals, had by no means been disinterested benefactors, but because of their dependence on their Native allies and their demographic inferiority, they had also developed relationships that were less unequal and less destructive than their British counterparts. "Don't abandon your children", implored countless Native leaders in the Illinois country.[81] This explained why the rumour of *Onontio*'s return sparked much enthusiasm in the Great Lakes region in 1798 and 1799, as the news of French-Spanish negotiations on the retrocession circulated across North America. *Onontio* (the "Great Mountain") had been the designation of New France's governor.[82] The new foreign minister in Paris, Talleyrand, who had spent several years in Philadelphia as a political exile and a land speculator, was well aware of Amerindians' inclinations and paid close attention to Tastanegy's offer.[83]

Talleyrand, however, was an unlikely proponent of the retrocession. In the past, he had made repeatedly clear that the independence of American colonies was not only inevitable but would also prove to be profitable to European metropoles. While in London in 1792, before moving to the United States, he expounded on "the true principles of public wealth". To his mind, the "two empires" should sign a convention "which must have the goal of the

79 D. Littlefield, *Africans and Creeks*, Westwood: London Greenwood Press, 1979, pp. 26–31.
80 MAE, CP Etats-Unis 45, fo. 221, 18 ventôse Year IV.
81 G. Havard and C. Vidal, *Histoire de l'Amérique française*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008, pp. 677–678.
82 R. White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991, pp. 450–451.
83 Furstenberg, *When the United States Spoke French*, pp. 235–238, 252–253.

independence of their respective colonies". In addition, he thought that Britain and France should "gather their common efforts" to facilitate the independence of Peru and Mexico.[84] As we know, this alliance never came to fruition, but four years later, back in France, he still believed that the greatest commercial revolution should happen. As a member of the Institut national des sciences et des arts, in the "political economy" department, he delivered several speeches regarding the future of *colonisation nouvelle* (new colonization) in the Age of Abolition. According to him, France should turn to Africa, break away from a labour regime founded on slavery, and embrace a policy that did not necessarily involve territorial occupation.[85] In his *Mémoire sur l'histoire des relations commerciales des Etats-Unis avec l'Angleterre*, he acknowledged that the political independence of the United States did not hurt British economic interests in any way. Cultural ties, not legal monopolies, were the real foundations of a global trade based on credit and "trust". The "English language" was a more powerful commercial tool than conquest or prohibitive regimes.

Therefore, it might sound surprising that Talleyrand strongly supported the retrocession, since Louisianans were supposed to be French at heart and probably keener to trade with France. Yet, Talleyrand also believed that the former colony, if it remained under Spanish tutelage, would be demographically, if not militarily, invaded by their ambitious neighbours; the retrocession was to prevent the hegemony of an Anglo-American empire. The "Americans want to dominate alone in America and to exert a preponderant influence on the political system of Europe".[86] At the same time, the French representative assemblies were debating the future of the French colonial empire and in particular its commercial regime. After months of bitter deliberations, deputies passed the Law of 1 January 1798, which reaffirmed the validity of the abolition decree and re-established the *exclusif colonial* (the colonial monopoly).[87] Once again, Americans were legally excluded from the French West Indian trade. Talleyrand and the Legislature came to the same conclusion but through very different routes. On the one hand, the minister wanted to experiment with *colonisation nouvelle* and prevent an Anglo-American hegemony; on the other

84 MAE, CP Angleterre 585, fo. 181.

85 P. Røge, "'La clef de commerce' – The Changing Role of Africa in France's Atlantic Empire ca. 1760–1797", *History of European Ideas* 34 (2008) 4, pp. 431–443.

86 MAE, CP Espagne 652, fo. 335, prairial an VI.

87 B. Biancardini, "L'opinion coloniale et la question de la relance de Saint-Domingue 1795–1802", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (2015) 382, pp. 63–80.

hand, the Councils advocated a monopolistic approach.[88] Both branches of government, however, agreed on one point: France needed Louisiana.

After years of stalemate, the pace of diplomatic twists and turns accelerated. These last chapters, during which the metropole increasingly lost control over American affairs, are better known. The relationship with the United States deteriorated even more due to the republican administrators' privateering activities in the Caribbean. Commissioners in Saint-Domingue and Guadeloupe raided American commerce in unprecedented ways, in spite of Talleyrand's repeated calls for moderation. After the corruption scandal of the XYZ Affair, the animosity turned into a "quasi-war".[89] Faced with the rise of Toussaint L'Ouverture and his alliance with John Adams in 1799, the government made the retrocession of Louisiana its priority.[90] For years, this plan had come to naught because the Spanish were still clinging to their colony, and the French were unwilling to antagonize their reluctant allies; the reversal of Madrid's policy in October 1800 could not have been more timely. The Spanish government secretly agreed to the cession after the Constitution of Year VIII (1799) had established that the colonies would be governed through *des lois particulières* (particular laws), which made the preservation of slavery in Louisiana legally possible. The official retrocession of Louisiana occurred in 1803 after the colony had been sold to the Americans. Many years of debates and tergiversations resulted in the short-lived French sovereignty, which evaporated in just three weeks. The Louisiana dream dissolved at the Battle of Vertières (18 November 1803) when Haitian armies defeated Bonaparte's troops and chased the French out of North America. But Saint-Dominguan refugees would massively migrate to American Louisiana in the coming years, especially after their expulsion from Cuba in 1809 – a result of Napoleon's invasion of Spain.[91] This refugee population would leave a deep imprint on Louisiana during the nineteenth century and beyond.

---

88 On the idea of "colonisation nouvelle", see B. Gainot, "La Décade et la 'colonisation nouvelle'", *Annales historiques de la Révolution française* (2005) 339, pp. 99–116; M. Dorigny and B. Gainot, *La colonisation nouvelle (fin XVIIIe–début XIXe siècles)*, Paris: APECE, 2018.

89 The bibliography on these events is enormous but dated. See, e.g., U. Bonnel, *La France, les États-Unis et la guerre de course (1797–1815)*, Paris: Nouvelles éditions latines, 1961; A. DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801,* New York: Scribner, 1966; W. Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair*, Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1980.

90 On the alliance, see R.A. Johnson, *Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and Their Atlantic World Alliance*, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2014.

91 N. Dessens, *From Florida to New Orleans: Migrations and Influences*, Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2010; A. White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 166–202.

Conclusion

Why France desired the retrocession of Louisiana was not self-evident. For years, the French monarchy had paid little attention to the colony it had abandoned in 1762, but this neglect ended with the French Revolution. First, with the encouragement of the Girondin government and at the request of many intrigants, Genet fell short of carrying out a military expedition in support of a pro-French secession of the territory. Then, the Directory took consistent diplomatic steps to recover the colony from its new – and reluctant – Spanish ally, although the strategy only paid off when Bonaparte became first consul. The principle of self-determination justified the French claim over Louisiana: its people were supposed to be constitutively French and to wish for annexation by France. Among a significant fraction of the population, these feelings of national belonging, albeit fluid and ambivalent, were real. Republicanism too was meaningful to a variety of Louisianans.

Yet, the political economy of empire drove France's Louisiana policy. Establishing an anchor on the continent would, officials imagined, break Saint-Domingue's commercial dependence on the United States, which was increasingly seen as a hostile offshoot of the British Empire. This priority stemmed from demands articulated on the ground: diplomatic personnel in the United States and colonial administrators in the West Indies played a decisive role in the process. They were the ones who had been dealing with the food dependence of the Antilles for more than a decade. Although they were searching for urgent remedies related to their survival, they also looked back on a French imperial golden age that had never existed, an elusive time of self-sufficiency. For the same reason, nostalgia for the French-Indian system of treaties re-emerged, as Native Americans sought new allies to contain United States encroachment.

Whether the reterritorialization of empire would consolidate or weaken French republicanism remained unclear, since a French Louisiana could expand the revolution on the continent or trigger a counter-revolutionary push-back. In this sense, the history of the French colonial empire during the revolutionary decade is that of a laboratory that cannot not be reduced to a simple clash between colonialism and anti-colonialism. This period of "new colonization" replayed age-old ideas in an ever changing geopolitical context. An imperial obsession, however, was left hanging in the air: Saint-Domingue, the source of wealth and power, that never disappeared from revolutionary imaginations, with or without slavery.