The Nationalist Ferment

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Published by The Ohio State University Press

Rossignol, Marie-Jeanne and Lillian A. Parrott.
The Nationalist Ferment: The Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy, 1792-1812.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/33039.

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On February 28, 1806, Thomas Jefferson signed a law completely prohibiting trade with Haiti, the “Act to suspend the commercial intercourse between the United States and certain parts of the island of St. Domingo.” This measure reflected a radical change in approach in American policy toward the former French colony, insofar as American merchants had always kept up commercial relations with the richest of the Caribbean islands, even at the height of the revolutionary wars, the quasi war with France, and the wars between Saint-Domingue and its former parent country. To be sure, by 1806 Saint-Domingue, which was now Haiti, had been torn apart and ruined by seventeen years of war and civil wars, and the island was no longer quite as necessary to the American export and reexport trade as it had been. By the same token, however, since 1804 it had become the second American nation to be decolonized, after the United States. For Jefferson’s government, interrupting commercial relations with Haiti was indeed the only way to avoid facing certain undesirable consequences of the American Revolution, and especially the problem posed by the incompatibility of slavery and freedom, a problem that the Haitian Revolution once again brought to the fore.

Much more so than the Federalists—who harbored counterrevolutionary views despite their claims on the revolutionary heritage—the Republicans had tried since 1789 to appropriate the revolutionary and authentically democratic heritage of the Revolution of 1776. They did not clearly realize, however, that in so doing they were becoming entangled in its ambiguities. The American Revolution had indeed left unanswered many questions that it had raised, such as the problem that the concepts “liberty,” “equality,” “inalienable rights,” and their universal scope posed for American society. These concepts were written into the Declaration of Independence, but how could they be construed as the foundations of the true American institutions and values if they only applied to whites in a society that upheld slavery? Such was the question that the leaders of the Republican Party should have pondered in the 1790s,
when the rebellion of the black slaves of Saint-Domingue gave it a new urgency. Although they supported the French Revolution, the Republicans in fact chose to ignore the problem of slavery in their own country and refused to consider the Haitian slave revolt to be a true manifestation of the same revolutionary spirit that had arisen in 1776 in the United States and then in 1789 in France. Although until 1804 it might have been possible to entirely ignore the ideological challenge that the Haitian Revolution posed for Americans, this was no longer an option after that date. Once Dessalines had proclaimed Haitian independence, the mere fact of keeping up commercial relations with Haiti would have implied recognition of a "negro government." By implication, recognition of a government that was made up of former slaves would have forced the leaders of the Republican Party to admit that their own society, which they held up as a model in contrast to Europe, was not as democratic as they claimed, since 20 percent of its population was made up of black slaves. By choosing to reject the Haitian Revolution, American leaders thus implicitly limited the universality of their own revolution: the American Revolution had only applied to whites, and such would be the case for many years to come.

It may be tempting to view the severing of ties with Saint-Domingue, whose trade had been so avidly coveted by Americans, as foreshadowing the oppositions that were soon to divide the United States into hostile regions (the abolitionist North versus the slaveholding South). But that would be going too far. To be sure, the Haitian Revolution had a major impact on the development of a proslavery ideology in the South; at the time, however, not just the South but the whole country benefited from slavery and was imbued with a kind of self-satisfaction about it, and the desire for prosperity was more widespread than the religion of freedom. These basic facts should not be overshadowed by the Federalist protests of 1806. The policy that American leaders conducted toward the new Caribbean republic was indeed the expression of a national will, and not the product of exclusively southern and proslavery inclinations.

The United States and the Insurrection of Saint-Domingue (1789–1793)

Most recent historians consider that the American Revolution involved a careful examination of colonial society, including the institution of slavery. Among the hopes cherished by Americans during the revolutionary years, one of the most fervent was to do away with slavery. The ideology of equal rights, which was the basis for the ideals of the new republic, implied universal recognition of these rights, meaning that they should be extended to the slaves. British despotism could not be rejected without also rejecting the very peculiar American despotism that was the core of relations between masters and slaves. As
Jefferson and several other Founding Fathers felt, American citizens could not be democrats among themselves and despots toward their slaves. In 1780, at the height of the American Revolution, Jefferson wrote: “And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other, transforms those into despots, and these into enemies.”

Such indignation clearly reveals that Jefferson was aware of the political nature of relations between masters and slaves: the new nation’s democratic character would be threatened if one admitted a dual political life, granting democracy to some, and imposing despotism on others. According to Jefferson, the ongoing American Revolution was to put an end to the odious “commerce” between masters and slaves and bring about the emancipation of the latter. “I think a change already perceptible, since the origin of the present revolution. The spirit of the master is abating, that of the slave rising from the dust, his condition mollifying, the way I hope preparing, under the auspices of heaven, for a total emancipation, and that this is disposed, in the order of events, to be with the consent of the masters, rather than by their extirpation.”

Nonetheless, in 1787 the Philadelphia Constitutional Convention made no steps toward organizing gradual emancipation of the slaves; instead, it essentially sought to create a compromise whereby each state would be free to settle the issue as it wished. As Jacques Thibau has observed, the text of the federal Constitution does not use the words “slavery” or “slave trade,” and yet the problem of slavery is nevertheless touched upon, albeit in essentially indirect terms. Slavery is indeed acknowledged in Article I, section 2, which in computing the respective weight of each state at the House of Representatives, takes into account “three fifths of all other persons” in addition to “the whole Number of free Persons.” Section 9 of the same article prevented the federal government from outlawing the slave trade before 1808, the trade itself being described as “the migration or importation of such Persons as any of the States now existing shall think proper to admit.” Article IV also allowed the owners of fugitive slaves to reclaim them in nonslave states. Rather than striking a compromise between North and South, the Constitution, as the founding legal document, in fact established slavery at the very heart of national institutions.

In the beginning of George Washington’s presidency, this topic was not on the agenda, unlike Indian affairs, the economy, or foreign relations; in fact, it seemed to have vanished from the immediate concerns of American leaders and the American elite in general. Meanwhile, in France the issue of slavery, because it was linked to the rights of man, was one of the great issues dividing the Constituent Assembly: on one side were the Friends of the Blacks (with Condorcet as their most famous representative), and on the other was the Club Massiac, which defended the interests of the big landowners of Saint-Domingue and therefore upheld slavery. As soon as the Revolution was
announced, Saint-Domingue, which was a great source of wealth for the French economy, fell prey to rivalries between local interest groups: royalists, pro-revolutionaries, independence fighters, and so on. In order to preserve French control over the largest of the Caribbean islands, which was farmed by 500,000 slaves, the members of the Constituent Assembly showed consideration for those who held the keys to its economic power (i.e., the great planters) and paid little attention to the demands of the Friends of the Blacks and to the free mulattos who were asking for equal political rights. Only after the torture of Ogé, a young mulatto who had tried to rouse his brothers to fight for equal rights, did the Assembly wake up to the issue, but then all it did was decree equal political rights for free mulattos on May 15, 1791, and black slavery was not called into question. What followed may have been a consequence or a mere coincidence. In Saint-Domingue, on the night of August 22, 1791, a slave insurrection broke out in the rich northern plain, soon to overtake and inflame the whole island.

Insofar as the issue of slavery was no longer a crucial one in the United States, and as the French Revolution only marginally incorporated it into the revolutionary debate, it is not surprising that George Washington’s government saw the insurrection only as one more slave rebellion, of the kind that was so common in slaveholding societies. In Jamaica, another large island of the Caribbean where insurrections were especially frequent, authorities had even had to sign an agreement with the fugitive blacks who had escaped to the mountains. In the United States, there were 750,000 blacks in 1790, which was a lesser proportion of the population than in the Caribbean islands (South Carolina was the only state with a “black majority,” whereas these Caribbean islands had a ratio of one white to eight or nine blacks). Nevertheless, rebellions, and especially localized outbursts of violence, were not unknown in the United States. Americans, furthermore, were so eager to gain entry into the Saint-Domingue market that they chose to regard this revolt, which actually increased the island’s political and social disorganization, as an opening in the wall of French mercantilism. Whereas the United States had immediately acknowledged the French Revolution as the heir to their own revolutionary principles, they could not or would not give similar acknowledgment to the uprising of the Saint-Domingue slaves. In 1780 Jefferson had realized that the American Revolution contained the promise of freedom for black slaves, but in 1791 he did not understand that Boukman, the first leader of the black insurrection, and his followers were turning this promise into reality.

There were, however, observers at that time who were able to perceive the revolutionary dimension of the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue. A relevant testimony is that of the British historian and counterrevolutionary thinker, Bryan Edwards, himself a slave owner, who passed through Saint-Domingue at the beginning of the slave revolt in 1791. For Edwards, this revolt was undoubt-
edly the product of Enlightenment philosophy, rather than the mere result of hardship and misery:

These reflections necessarily arise from the circumstance which is incontrovertibly proved in the following pages, namely, that the rebellion of negroes in St. Domingo, and the insurrection of the mulattoes . . . had one and the same origin. It was not the strong and irrepressible impulse of human nature, groaning under oppression, that excited either of these classes to plunge their daggers into the bosoms of unoffending women and helpless infants. They were driven into these excesses—reluctantly driven by the vile machinations of men calling themselves philosophers . . . whose pretences to philanthropy were as gross a mockery of human reason, as their conduct was an outrage on all the feelings of our nature, and the ties which hold society together.¹³

However extreme and clearly counterrevolutionary these remarks were, they prove that it was possible for contemporary observers to draw a link between the Saint-Domingue slave revolt of 1791 and the revolutionary spirit that had come of age in 1776 in the United States and in 1789 in France. Although there were in fact a few isolated voices in the United States to make that link, the majority of the political establishment still refused to identify the insurrection as a sister revolution.¹⁴

In fact, American leaders did more than merely deny that dimension to the insurrection that tore apart Saint-Domingue; they even contributed to the attempted repression of the rebellion by lending funds to the Saint-Domingue colonists from 1791 on, for an amount that by 1793 totaled $726,000.¹⁵ Initially the French minister plenipotentiary, Jean-Baptiste Ternant, had been wary of the delegates from the Saint-Domingue Assembly, in view of their royalist and secessionist tendencies. As he was faced, however, with an emergency situation, and unable to secure sufficient help from Paris, he eventually accepted American aid, which George Washington was more than happy to volunteer, as shown in this letter of September 24:

I have not delayed a moment since the receipt of your communications of the 22nd instant, in dispatching orders to the Secretary of the Treasury to furnish the money, and to the Secretary of War to deliver the Arms and Ammunition, which you have applied to me for. Sincerely regretting, as I do, the cause which has given rise to this application; I am happy in the opportunity of testifying how well disposed the United States are to render every aid in their power to our good friends and Allies the French to quell “the alarming insurrection of the negroes in Hispaniola” and of the ready disposition to effect it, of the Executive authority thereof.¹⁶
The American government, then, was ready to help the Saint-Domingue planters in their actions against the rebel slaves. Did this show of solidarity with the masters of Saint-Domingue prove that the American leaders had renounced their ideals, or instead, that they had misunderstood the true scope of the Saint-Domingue insurrection, not realizing that it forecast an actual revolution—that it marked the end of the American Revolution?

U.S. Dealings with the Free Blacks

In 1791 the leaders of the French Revolution had not seen fit to grant freedom to the slaves in the colonies; thus, America and France set similar bounds to the socially acceptable scope of liberty and equality. Such behavior overlooked the military power of the black rebels, which Sonthonax, the Convention’s envoy, had to call to the rescue once he was deadlocked by royalist forces, that is, Spanish and British. In the summer of 1793, in order to procure the aid of the black rebels, Sonthonax gave them their freedom, a decision that was made official by a decree of August 29, 1793: “The Republic desires liberty and equality among all men whatever their color; kings are only happy in the midst of slaves. The Republic adopts you among her children.” The Convention had no choice but to ratify this decision, which it did on February 4, 1794. As David Brion Davis and other historians have noted, blacks mainly freed themselves. In the United States, such a decision, made as it was by the “sister republic” in the name of revolutionary principles, should have had an impact, at least with the Republicans, if not with the Federalists. In fact, by comparison with other issues of the day, it received little comment from the leaders of either major party; and in Congress debates on slavery became less and less heated.

Such a weak reaction, especially on the part of the pro-French Republicans, did not in fact reflect a lack of enthusiasm for the French Revolution. On the contrary, as historian Alfred Hunt has explained, the Republicans managed to dissociate the issue of slave emancipation from the French Revolution, and to remain “pro-French and anti-Black.” After 1791 and again after 1793, a number of refugees from Saint-Domingue, including both white royalists and revolutionary mulattos, headed for the southeastern U.S. coast (especially Norfolk and Portsmouth in Virginia, Charleston in South Carolina, and New Orleans in Louisiana); as a result of this influx, American newspapers were filled with grueling details of racial massacres, and feelings of insecurity grew in the South. These areas, however, remained firmly Republican and friendly toward France throughout the period. Thus, while the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue seems to have strengthened the racial prejudices of white southerners and their fears as landowners, it did not jeopardize, threaten, or shake the dual nature of their political structure. In these southerners’ view, the pre-
carious balance they achieved between their democratic principles and their despotic behavior toward the slaves was not called into question by the emancipation of Saint-Domingue slaves. In the end, slavery consolidated, rather than threatened, the social consensus in the South, and perhaps even in the United States as a whole, for the institution of slavery limited the number of poor freemen, and thus enabled whites to have more common interests—property in particular—than they had topics of disagreement.22

In South Carolina, a state with a black majority, small Republican planters joined with big Federalist planters to pass a ban on importing slaves in 1792; the measure, which was dictated by fears that the rebellion would spread, was renewed year after year.23 The same planters, however, continued actively supporting the French Revolution until 1797; they toned down such support during the quasi war, but reaffirmed it in 1800, as if saying that France and its principles had nothing to do with the events in the great Caribbean island. Americans had thus managed initially to ignore the political consequences that the slave revolt in Haiti had on American society.

After 1793 Americans no longer took part in attempts at repressing the insurrection; instead, they merely took advantage of it to pursue their own goals in the area, the chief one being to obtain a trade monopoly on Saint-Domingue and not let the British occupy the vacancy left by revolutionary France. Despite the capture of ships by the British navy as well as by French privateers, in 1793 American merchants started providing arms and supplies to the various opponents of the wars and civil strife that tore apart the island.24 At the height of the quasi war with France in 1799 and 1800, Adams opposed the loyalist mulatto Rigaud and took the side of Toussaint-Louverture, one of the former leaders of the insurrection, who had gradually assumed power over the island and was guiding it toward independence. Adams’s support took the form of delivering supplies to Toussaint and launching the American navy against Rigaud’s positions.25 It was indeed an American navy ship, the Experiment, that captured Rigaud and handed him over to the British.26 As a result of these maneuvers, the island’s trade did in fact fall to the Americans, who immediately launched a commercial takeover on the Spanish portion of Saint-Domingue even before Toussaint set about military conquest.27

Relations with Saint-Domingue could not, however, be solely commercial. In the absence of official French representatives, the mere fact of dealing with Toussaint, who was leader of the island, more or less amounted to acknowledging the independence of that nation of former slaves. Federalist leaders, such as Secretary of State Timothy Pickering, Secretary of Treasury Oliver Wolcott, or John Adams, all came from northern or central states; they had little sympathy for southern politicians, and little respect for slavery. Yet, however eager they were at the time to improve the lot of their merchants and shipowners, they were not prepared to deal with former slaves on equal footing. The Federalists
and ultra-Federalists were almost unanimously opposed to recognizing the independence of Saint-Domingue, even though independence was a fact, and France could not possibly do anything about it. As a result, when it came to signing a commercial treaty with Toussaint-Louverture, the United States let the British make an official commitment, and did not sign it themselves. In dealing with Toussaint and his delegates, President Adams, just like Lord Grenville, was only trying to annoy France and promote the growth of American trade, not to encourage the development of a new nation.

Once in office in 1801, Jefferson did not put an end to the privileged commercial relations between the United States and Saint-Domingue, even though a reconciliation had occurred between France and the United States after the Mortefontaine Convention. Louis-André Pichon, the newly nominated chargé d’affaires in Washington, D.C., understood from his first interviews with members of Jefferson’s cabinet that above all the United States wanted to preserve their commercial relations with Saint-Domingue, be it at the cost of acknowledging Toussaint’s de facto authority over the island: “When I hinted at these questions, I was told that only commerce was envisioned in Saint-Domingue, and that one had to take things as they came and thus to consider Toussaint as having full authority over the island.”

In order not to antagonize Toussaint, the American leaders took special care when choosing a new consul, Tobias Lear, who replaced Dr. Stevens. They stated that they would not quarrel with the black leader, although they also claimed that they wanted France to get back its colony. The moderate American attitude toward Toussaint—whom France considered to be a mere rebel—ended up annoying even the chargé d’affaires, who was normally pro-American. Pichon thought that the United States would let France take back Saint-Domingue, but not without misgivings. In his opinion, the bottom line was that American leaders wanted France to maintain order and security on the island, thus preventing the blacks from propagating their subversive ideas, while enabling the Americans to keep their trade monopoly:

Everything I have related about the conduct of the government with respect to Saint-Domingue testifies that we shall find willing partners to bring down the colony. But we should have no illusions. Only the fright that a black government arouses dictates these inclinations. From the questions I am asked, and from the insinuations I perceive, I can see clearly that such an arrangement is desired [by the United States] as would leave America with free and indefinite access to this possession, which is for this country a source of wealth.

The American leaders did not actually confide to Pichon their fears about this island, which was now governed by former slaves; it was Pichon who drew these
conclusions. At any rate, even if the American leaders were at one point in a position to pledge help to France, they ceased to do so as soon as they found out that it had just acquired Louisiana. At the same time, foreseeing the impending landing of General Leclerc’s troops on Saint-Domingue, Toussaint officially declared that he would count on American aid in the event of an attack by France.33

As a matter of fact, suppressing the Saint-Domingue rebellion was a less pressing concern for Americans than expanding their trade in an area that they coveted. Meanwhile, Bonaparte wanted to reestablish the mitigated exclusive in those colonies he had been able to get back for France at the Amiens negotiations.34 As a result, General Leclerc’s arrival in Saint-Domingue in February 1802 revived tensions between France and the United States: the French general restricted access to the island’s ports for foreign ships, impounded goods aboard American ships, set prices for such goods but only paid a fourth of the price up front, and finally sent Tobias Lear back to Washington, D.C.35 After Leclerc’s death on November 2, 1802, and the failure of his expedition (18,000 soldiers out of his force of 28,000 died), his successor General Rochambeau used similarly hostile—if not more aggressive—methods against American merchants: “About the middle of the month, General Rochambeau, as he was hard-pressed for money, raised a mandatory loan among French and American merchants of the Cape . . . , and since several of those who were taxed the highest refused to pay up, they were threatened with being deported to France and having their property sold off. In the end, four or five of them were imprisoned along with some Frenchmen, and all paid their way out of prison.”36

Little by little, however, the French forces lost control over the situation, and the American merchants took up their trade with the vacated parts of the island, which was now under the rule of Dessalines, successor to Toussaint.37 Despite criticism from Pichon, Madison saw no reason to step in and put an end to a trade that was unlawful from the French point of view, even though the de facto consequence of that trade was to encourage the rebels. Indeed, if the American president were to ban such trade, the British, as foes of France, would step right in. Whether the Americans furnished them with supplies or not, the rebels would not starve.38 Such an attitude, however, was not acceptable from a supposedly friendly country, and Pichon reacted angrily: “Commerce with the rebels of that colony assumed . . . in the course of March [1804] a shape and public character that appeared to me to offend too openly the dignity and rights of France for me not to make a forceful claim without waiting for orders from the government. Not only has this commerce gone on publicly, . . . but also several of these ships have been armed openly in order to protect this unlawful commerce against our privateers.”39

For the first time in these dispatches, Madison was forced to confess, despite his support of American merchants, that the whole affair was troubling in view

of its multiple internal implications, and he wished that there be as little debate as possible about it. As Alfred Hunt has explained, Americans initially gave precedence to their diplomatic and commercial concerns over their racial antipathies toward the black rebels, and it was only after the massacres of whites by Dessalines that slave owners such as Thomas Jefferson began to turn against Saint-Domingue.

Between 1791 and 1804 the American political elite saw the slave rebellion as a mere localized insurrection, and not as the revolution it really was—one that was heir to their own revolution, albeit with a degree of critical distance. After 1793 the leaders of the early republic dismissed the issue: it was up to France to deal with the political problem that the slave rebellion raised. Meanwhile, the American leaders were only trying to pursue peaceful commercial relations with whoever was willing to pay: the insurrection could by no means have repercussions on the ideology of the new nation, and in no way did it reveal its contradictions. On that count, the Republicans in particular proved to be strikingly inconsistent: most of them supported the French Revolution through 1799, but it never dawned on them that the actions of the black rebels might be construed as a direct consequence of their own revolutionary ideology.

The Threat of Contagion

Never in the course of the many interviews between Madison and Pichon from 1800 to 1804 did the word “slavery” come up. That in itself is not surprising, insofar as even official documents such as the Constitution did not mention “slaves” but rather “other persons.” “Other persons,” however, were also not mentioned in the conversations between the secretary of state and the French chargé d’affaires. Only in 1804, after Dessalines had declared the independence of Haiti, and Rochambeau and his troops had vacated the island (in late November 1803), did James Madison admit that the unlawful commerce with Saint-Domingue involved some drawbacks that were linked to the domestic problems of the new republic. Until then, the “commercial” argument had served as a screen to hide the actual questions that the Saint-Domingue rebellion posed for American society. The nation’s elite did not want to consider the fact that the Haitian Revolution actually called their own slave system into question. North and South were unanimous in this attitude, which could in fact be justified, if need be, in terms of international law: since France continued to assert its sovereignty over the island, it was up to the French to settle the problem. After 1804, however, Dessalines’s declaration of independence destroyed the awkward argumentation and brought to light the embarrassment and uneasiness of the United States.

The Americans were gradually forced to admit that the insurrection of the Saint-Domingue slaves was not a peripheral problem, and that it concerned them as much as it did France, if not more. By proclaiming the independence
of the second decolonized nation in the Americas, Dessalines explicitly linked the founding of Haiti to that of the United States. Since the freedom of Haitian blacks derived from the same universal principles as that of Americans to the north, it heralded freedom for black American slaves in the near future. The birth of Haiti forced American leaders to revive ideals that they had lost or cast aside, and it called upon them to choose once and for all the real political structure of their society: was it to be a true democracy, or, as Jefferson had feared in 1780, a despotic regime in democratic clothing?

This dilemma was all the more bitter, and its resolution all the more pressing, since the Haitian Revolution’s message of universal liberty had already reached the slave populations in the United States. Since 1791 a wave of rebellions and insurrections had been rolling through the southern states, reaching a climax in 1800 with the conspiracy of Gabriel, in Richmond, Virginia.42 If we are to believe the account that historian Joseph Cephas Carroll gave of this conspiracy, the black slaves—unlike their masters—had not dissociated the goal of emancipation from the revolutionary principles of freedom. In the democratic petitions of southern Republicans, the slaves found an incentive to rebellion: Gabriel had every reason to believe in success, since, because of the election, the doctrines of equality and liberty resounded in every valley and on every mountain.43 For James Monroe, who was governor of Virginia at the time of the conspiracy, it was beyond doubt that the cause of the conspiracy lay in the slaves’ growing desire for freedom: “It is our duty on this occasion to remark that the publick danger proceeding from this description of persons is daily increasing. A variety of causes contribute to produce this effect, among which may be enumerated the contrast in the condition of the free negroes and slaves, the growing sentiment of liberty existing in the minds of the latter, and the inadequacy of the existing patrol laws.”44

To prevent the contagion of revolutionary ideas, an act was passed by Congress in 1803 restricting the entry of blacks coming from Saint-Domingue, which was similar to other acts previously passed in the southern states.45 From that moment, which more or less coincided with the final victory of the black revolutionaries over the French army in Saint-Domingue, the question of slavery started to reappear in American political discourse. The Haitian Revolution, however, had changed the nature of the debate: it was no longer a matter of calling for the abolition of slavery in the name of liberty; slavery was now viewed as a threat to social order, to be contained as best one could, in view of the destructive potential against white property that the civil war in Saint-Domingue had revealed. Whether Republican or Federalist, whether for or against slavery, American politicians used Haiti as an illustration of their arguments, always for the same purpose of protecting social order and property.

In 1803 South Carolina decided to take up the slave trade again until 1808. A heated debate took place in the Senate in 1804: those opposed to increasing
slavery tried to impose a tax of ten dollars per imported slave, as a means of curbing or preventing that trade. David Bard, a representative from Pennsylvania, stated that the importation of slaves into the United States should be terminated, for “to import slaves is to import enemies into our countries.” This congressman began with an allusion to hair-raising accounts of the horrors of civil and racial war in Saint-Domingue, which his audience had been able to read in their newspapers since 1791: “Gentlemen tell us, though I can hardly think them serious, that the people of this description can never systematize a rebellion. I will not mention facts, it is sufficient to say that experience speaks a different language.” Having thus given a factual basis to his remarks, he was able to go on with his depiction of the threat that slavery constituted: “Their circumstances, their barbarism, their reflections, their hopes and fears render them an enemy of the worst description.”

Representative Bard did not, however, want to base his rejection of slavery on the sole fear of insurrection. He therefore changed his tactics and resorted to a less impassioned argument, pointing out the ideological inconsistency of the American stance on slavery. How can “Americans boasts of being the most enlightened people in the world,” he asked, if they “hold a million of men in the most degraded slavery?” His conclusion was obvious: “[I]f then, we hold a consistency of character in any estimation, we will give every discouragement in our power to the importation of slaves.” Yet his speech did not culminate in a call for emancipating American blacks. In banning the importation of slaves, Bard wanted above all to ward off the possibility of an insurrection, not to improve American society. The only message that came across from his speech was his opening imprecation that the slaves were the “natural enemies” of Americans. His incomplete reasoning betrayed a primal fear, which Federalists and Republicans shared, as is evident from remarks by other senators.

For example, John Smith, a Republican senator from New York State, warned fellow senators about the nefarious consequences of increasing the number of slaves: “Will you increase their number, and lay the necessary foundation for the horrors of another St. Domingo?” Samuel White, a Federalist senator from Delaware, echoed this warning when he said that it was the duty of the Senate to prevent by all means “the horrid evil of slavery and thereby avoid the fate of St. Domingo.” Likewise, Jesse Franklin, a Republican senator from North Carolina, declared: “We must make laws against slavery, unless we mean to aid the destruction of our southern states, by laying the foundation for another St. Domingo.” For these orators who opposed the expansion of slavery, the true concern was not a magnanimous desire to emancipate the slaves, but the fear of jeopardizing the social order. In their eyes, the Haitian Revolution stood for barbarism and not a struggle for freedom; this was the sole reason why they opposed any further increase in the number of slaves. There was no indication that for them the Haitian Revolution represented the latest
episode in the revolutionary era in America, or was a sequel to the American Revolution. Their attitude was almost wholly reactionary: it was aimed primarily at checking the growing threat that slavery constituted for their property and safety.51

When the discourse did not center on the fear of insurgent blacks, the reasoning was inconsistent, as was the case with the few speakers who actually recognized the dignity of the former slaves’ fight for freedom. After the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, Congress had to organize the new territories. Speaking in this context, John George Jackson, a Republican representative from Virginia, was one of those who thought that the people of Louisiana could govern themselves perfectly well, and did not need to be submitted to a period of disenfranchisement in order to test whether they were fit for democracy: “Allow, for the sake of argument, that the people are slaves. This does not prove that they are not fit subjects of a free government. Look at the ensanguined plains of St. Domingo.” Jackson considered the struggles of the slaves in the former French colony as a symbol of liberty: “[T]he oppressed have broken their chains and renounced their long lost rights. . . . There, notwithstanding the great debasement of the human character, the sacred fire of liberty is not extinguished. Wherever it exists, sooner or later, it bursts forth into an irresistible flame and consumes everything opposed to it.”52 But there was a paradox: when Jackson invoked the spirit of liberty and used the example of the struggles of the Saint-Domingue blacks, his point was to demand full political rights for the inhabitants of Louisiana, a number of whom were in fact slave owners. This brand of despotism, however, was not criticized by John George Jackson.

Furthermore, from that moment on it seemed impossible for American leaders to talk about Haitian freedom; to mention or acknowledge it would amount to declaring that their own system was shaken. So they kept silent, and no direct reference to Haiti is to be found in their writings.53 Only James Monroe, in his London isolation, actually mentioned the unmentionable, though without realizing it. On May 6, 1804, he wrote Madison:

I have seen a proclamation of the negro government in St. Domingo, offering a reward of 40 dollars to the commanders of our vessels, for everyone of its blacks now in the United States, whom they may bring back to the island. This is probably a measure of policy, intended to increase their strength, to enable them to make a better resistance thereafter. It may be otherwise, and in any event may escape the attention of the French government. If you are formally applied to, it is much to be wished, that such a course be taken as to show, we have no interest in the measure and give it no sanction.54

This letter contrasts with the official silence of the administration with regard to Haiti, and by the same token underscores how much this silence concealed.
The first sentence is actually tantamount to a recognition of the black republic, insofar as Monroe analyzes that “proclamation of the negro government in St. Domingo” in the same manner he would have the proclamation of any European nation. Although the former governor of Virginia had suppressed Gabriel’s Conspiracy in 1800, he now not only seemed to accept the fact of a “negro government in St. Domingo,” but he obviously assumed that the American government shared that premise. Hence his advice “If you are formally applied to . . .,” meaning that if the French government requested an explanation, Jefferson’s government was to say that it knew nothing of the matter (as though the American government might helped the black “resistance”). Monroe’s atypical attitude here can be ascribed to his being far away and to the many purely European problems that he was dealing with then.

In the United States, meanwhile, Jefferson’s and Madison’s silence on Haiti revealed their confusion over what their attitude should be with respect to the new republic, whose freedom was the fruit of the only successful slave rebellion recorded in history, as Robert Debs Heinl Jr. and Nancy Gordon Heinl have observed. In 1804 the American government could no longer claim that the Saint-Domingue rebellion was the mere domestic problem of a foreign nation, or that it could avoid dealing with it in the hope that the slaves’ enterprise would fail. The slaves had won, the rebellion had turned into a successful revolution, the hordes of savages had formed a “government” (as Monroe himself noted), and the government looked a lot like a white one. Haiti was not simply a community of fugitive as the United States had hoped it would become. As it was ostracized by the colonial nations of Europe, Haiti had no choice but to turn to the United States, which was now the only other revolutionary nation, since France was ruled by a dictator, in order to secure aid, advice, and a degree of economic cooperation. Indeed it did turn to the United States: at the end of 1803 Dessalines sent Bunel, Toussaint’s former emissary, to plead the cause of Haiti in Washington, D.C., in order to revive the privileged commercial links that had been established between the rebel island and the United States before Leclerc’s expedition. The details of the outcome of that negotiation are not known; but at any rate, it was not successful.

Insofar as the United States was the only nation that remained in contact with the “black government,” and although such contact had taken the form of commercial relations that the government preferred to ignore officially, the position of Americans as slave owners or members of a slaveholding society was indeed becoming untenable. By keeping its ambiguous attitude over the years, the American government had executed a brilliant ruling class maneuver, as David Barry Gaspar puts it; it had managed to preserve the interests of both the merchant class and the planter class, while at the same time maintaining its status as a symbol of democracy for the rest of the world. But now that they were pressed by Haiti, Americans would soon have to choose
between remaining faithful to their avowed ideals and preserving their social order. On March 28, 1804, the newspaper *Aurora*, which was close to the administration, described the ambiguities of the official U.S. position. The newspaper greeted Haiti’s independence warmly: “On this subject we presume there are few who entertain dissimilar sentiments; the right to proclaim independence was unquestionably inherent in the people of that island.” But the article ended on a dark and mysterious note: “However, as respects the relative situations of the United States and St. Domingo, the late occurrence in the latter will make it necessary for us to follow a delicate and circumspect line of conduct, for reasons too obvious for elucidation.”

This was a reference to the massacre of whites in Aux Cayes, which the newspaper had reported on March 18, 1804. A prelude to the systematic massacring of the whites remaining on the island in 1805, this event nourished the growing fears of Americans over the spread of the black revolution, and their final refusal to recognize Haiti or to have any dealings with it.

**Censorship, Cotton, and the 1806 Act**

What kind of solution the American leaders were about to come up with can be gleaned from the coverage that the *Richmond Enquirer* gave on July 23, 1805, of the first Haitian Constitution. On May 20, 1805, Dessalines had ratified that document, the preamble of which contained a declaration about the equality of all men modeled after the French declaration of the Rights of Man of October 2, 1789. The natural right to equality was stated again in Article 3. What is surprising for a Republican newspaper is that certain articles of the Haitian Constitution were omitted. The presentation given by the *Richmond Enquirer* can be usefully compared with those given by the *Raleigh Register and North Carolina Gazette* (another southern Republican newspaper) of July 29, 1805, and by the *Aurora* (a Republican newspaper from Philadelphia) of July 17, 1805. The constitutional articles omitted in the *Richmond Enquirer* (3, 2, and 12) concerned equality (Article 3), the abolition of slavery (Article 2), and the ban on former masters coming back to the island (Article 12: “No white man of whatsoever nation he may be, shall put his foot on this territory with the title of master or proprietor, neither shall he in future acquire any property therein”). Further on, among the general principles of the constitution, one also notices the omission of Article 13, which decreed that former masters would not be compensated. No explanation was given by the newspaper for the missing articles, which were left in blank.

All three newspapers had, however, procured the text of the constitution in the same way: by reproducing the text published in the *Mercantile Advertiser*. Why, then, did only the *Richmond Enquirer* publish it in a truncated version?
All three newspapers were Republican and faithful to the administration. Was there a risk that the readers of one newspaper might be more shocked than the others by the publication of the document in its entirety? Such would appear to be the case, as the wave of insurrections since 1791 had mostly struck Virginia, and in 1805 the population of Richmond was barely recovering from the shock caused by the disclosure of the Gabriel’s Conspiracy. In contrast, the *Aurora*, although a Republican paper, was published in Pennsylvania, where slavery had just been abolished; thus, publishing the Haitian Constitution there would not hurt local sensibilities.

One thing is certain: all the articles omitted in the *Richmond Enquirer* dealt with the implications of the American and French Revolutions for slavery and equality. How could the American republic, founded as it was on liberty and slavery, have recognized a “black government” that affirmed the incompatibility of liberty and slavery? Dealing with Dessalines and the Haitian leaders amounted to admitting that American society was not only a symbol of liberty for the world, but also a symbol of oppression. Haiti’s independence threatened the ideological foundations of the American republic and jeopardized the socioeconomic balance that was a basic ingredient of the nation’s ideological cohesion. The constitution of Haiti clearly showed that, while inspired by the same principles as the American and French Revolutions, the Haitian Revolution had also been a class war, resulting finally in an upheaval of the social order, as white landowners lost control over their property.\(^{62}\) The Haitian Constitution attacked the basic principles of American society: liberty proved incompatible with a particular conception of property, namely the property of slaves. Once independence had been proclaimed and the constitution ratified, the Haitian Revolution was no longer a distant threat.

In censoring the most controversial articles of the Haitian Constitution, the editor of the *Richmond Enquirer*, Thomas Ritchie, was obeying the instinct of self-preservation. His attitude went beyond mere silence: he introduced censorship of the principle of liberty in the country of civil liberties, which Republicans themselves had eagerly defended six years earlier at the time of the Sedition Act. In North Carolina Joseph Gales Jr., editor of the *Raleigh Register*, was soon to follow suit and conform to the mounting pressure for censorship, by discontinuing publication of any pro-abolition writing. Suppressing information in that manner was aimed at preventing its circulation among the population, both white—to protect it—and black—not to encourage it. Haiti itself gradually came to be viewed as a subversive island in ideological as well as political terms.

As Rayford W. Logan has noted, the shock of seeing former slaves setting up a nation may be compared to the effect that the 1917 Russian revolution had upon capitalist countries.\(^{63}\) But because it was novel and unexpected, this shock was not felt by American leaders until some time later. It is easy to under-
stand that there existed a certain amount of ideological confusion in the Republican camp, as is illustrated by James Monroe’s remark and the eulogy of the Haitian Revolution delivered by John George Jackson in the early months of 1804. After the Republicans had fought the Federalists for ten years in order to preserve the democratic heritage of the American Revolution and to support the French Revolution, many of them probably had a hard time accepting the fact that their commitment to the rights of man was not universal and that its international dimension only applied to whites. The Haitian Revolution forced the Republicans to a painful realization, in foreign affairs as well, of the ambiguities of their own system. That is the reason why, until June 1804, the most experienced politicians, such as Thomas Jefferson, only considered Haiti in terms of commercial expansion, and refused to weigh the consequences of continuing relations with the black nation.64

In June 1804 the American government finally made a first move when it lent an ear to Pichon’s complaints about the smuggling of goods into Haiti.65 In November Jefferson requested a bill on that topic in his annual address: “While noticing the irregularities committed on the ocean by others, those on our own part should not be omitted or left unprovided for. Complaints have been received that persons residing within the U.S. have taken on themselves to arm merchant vessels and to force a commerce into certain ports and countries in defiance of the laws of these countries.”66 It is striking that Jefferson did not use the word “France”—probably not to offend the sensibilities of those members of Congress who would have resented being given orders by a great power—but he also avoided the words “Haiti” and “Saint-Domingue.” The latter omission is more remarkable; had Jefferson only wanted to ingratiate himself with France, as he has been accused of, he would have used the term “Saint-Domingue,” which clearly indicated that the United States still considered the island a French possession. It is likely that the vague phrasing of the passage not only reflected Jefferson’s concerns regarding European affairs, but also that it marked, more fundamentally, the beginning of a new attitude toward the black nation on the part of the American government. It would seem that the president of the United States could not utter the name “Haiti,” as though not uttering that name sufficed to wipe the island off the map of the world. On October 3, 1805, Congress passed an act aiming at curbing departures of merchant ships for Haiti, as it had been requested to do.67 This did not prevent American merchants from continuing to supply arms, ammunition, and black recruits to Dessalines, and the French government made an official protest. As the United States was then trying to gain the favor of France in view of a projected purchase of the Floridas,68 Congress enacted a complete ban on trade with Haiti on February 28, 1806.69

As Rayford W. Logan has explained, a purely diplomatic interpretation cannot account for the “indecent” haste with which the bill was passed, and there is little doubt that banning commerce with Haiti was intended to appease France
and to alleviate fears of the consequences that an independent Haiti would have on slavery in the United States.70

If one examines Jefferson's attitude toward Great Britain and France from 1803 on, it appears that the president trusted neither nation, and that he hoped to capitalize on their European quarrels in order to take hold of more territory on the American continent.71 It is therefore improbable that he would have yielded something valuable in return for mere promises; indeed, after 1806 France did not help the United States obtain the Floridas any more actively than it had before. That means that by 1806 Jefferson had come to the conclusion that the trade with Haiti was no longer valuable enough, and that it hampered more than it consolidated the ideological unity on which the American nation rested.

The wars had indeed impoverished Haiti and dismantled its economic structure: by 1804 the island's sugar output had dropped to 23,800 quintals, from 81,700 in 1791. The coffee production had fallen by half. What money would have been available to the Haitian leaders to go on buying American products indefinitely?72 Besides, by 1805 American exports to Haiti made up no more than a mere 4 percent of the country's total exports.73 Northeastern merchants, whom Jefferson had long been protecting against France, could not fault him for taking a measure that hurt them little and that at the same time protected a sector of the American economy that was on the rise, thanks to the recent Louisiana Purchase: cotton growing. Since 1791 Eli Whitney's invention of the cotton gin had given new strength to the languishing farming industry of the southern states. From a total of 945 quintals in 1791, cotton exports had risen to 104,555 quintals in 1800 and 201,915 in 1805.74 Such a massive increase would have been inconceivable without the labor of slaves in growing numbers, who were becoming more and more profitable for their owners. More than ever before, the quest for prosperity was proving incompatible with the propagation of the ideals of liberty, especially in the South. It was thus incompatible, on the international front, with a liberal attitude toward Haiti. The 1806 act that suspended commercial relations between the United States and Haiti was therefore a political decision, dictated by the belated realization on the part of American leaders of what the Haitian Revolution meant for American society and economy. It was their response to the challenge that Haiti posed for a country that already depicted itself as the haven of freedom. That act was the concrete manifestation of an important turn in the foreign policy of the United States toward the former French colony. It also indicated a shift in the direction of the American government's policy of expansion, in the sense that the commercial drive for Haiti was officially abandoned and that westward expansion (with the increase of cotton production as a corollary) became foremost among the long-term goals for the American economy.
Masters and Slaves: What Was at Issue in the 1806 Debate

By 1806 embarrassment and silence no longer fit the bill; what came instead was an unqualified rejection of the new nation. By refusing to recognize Haiti’s independence and by depicting the former slaves as mere rebels, the new French ambassador to the United States, General Turreau, set the tone for the Republican stance during the congressional debates over this measure. For the French ambassador, the Haitian leaders were only “rebels,” and he depicted them in racist and degrading terms. This was the discourse of a colonial power about its rebellious former colony, and yet it was nonetheless taken up with great enthusiasm by General James Jackson, a Republican senator from Georgia. For General Jackson, the Haitians constituted a “horde” that “it must . . . become the interest of every nation having colonies in the West Indies, to extirpate and ship off to some other place.” After much hesitation, the Republicans now became the advocates of colonial nations, and resolutely sided with imperial France. Expressing support for General Ferrand, who was entrenched in the former Spanish part of Saint-Domingue, General Jackson declared that it was neither possible to recognize Haiti nor to trade with it: “As to the total separation of the self-created emperor [Dessalines] and nation of Haiti, and its independence on the parent country, under which gentlemen declared our right of trade founded on the laws of nation—the late attack on that general by the emperor proved it did not exist.” Of course, one cannot overlook the unconscious irony of the use—by a Republican—of the phrase “self-created,” which George Washington had used in 1794 to deny the legitimacy of the democratic-republican societies that supported the Republican Party. Jackson, however, did not merely renounce the Republicans’ past; he clearly announced the choice the American nation had made. Between liberty for all and despotism of some over others, it chose the second option: “The separation was not such as to warrant the arguments used for a right to trade—it would be a fatal argument used against us as respected our southern states by other powers.”

Indeed, the obvious topic of the 1806 debate was neither the rights of neutral countries nor smuggling; what was at stake was the nature and the security of American society. When introducing his bill on December 20, 1805, Dr. George Logan, a senator from Pennsylvania, put the matter in very clear terms: “While we are anxious to have our natural rights respected, is it honorable to violate the rights of a friendly power with whom we are at peace? or is it sound policy to cherish the black population of St. Domingo whilst we have a similar population in our Southern States, in which should an insurrection take place, the government of the United States is bound to render effectual aid to our fellow-citizens in that part of the Union.” In recognizing Haiti,
the United States would have run the risk of having France, or any other nation, recognize any group of rebel black slaves on American soil as an independent nation, and thus of jeopardizing the country’s security and unity. As James Jackson explained: “On the same grounds, a group of runaways and outcasts from South Carolina and Georgia, to the amount of some hundreds now collected on or near Okafauucau swamp in Georgia, might be termed an independent society; or if an insurrection took place in those States, the rebellious horde on creating an emperor, be supplied with arms and ammunition as a separate and independent nation.” What Jackson voiced here was a perfectly fine analysis of the new situation that resulted for the United States from the existence of a black nation in the Caribbean. Haiti was no longer a nightmare or a threat; it was a model for political upheaval and revolutionary change that could very well be applied to the United States. The Haitian Revolution meant that a slave rebellion could truly be victorious. Slaves could seize power and keep it. Keeping power meant more than a mere withdrawal from slave society, as had been the case with the fugitive slaves in Jamaica in the early eighteenth century. It entailed the destruction of a social system based on slavery and its replacement by something else—namely, a true nation—equipped with real armies and real presidents, and determined to get rid of former masters. When the Haitian leaders adroitly claimed to be the logical heirs to the principles of the French and American Revolutions, and when they repeated these principles in their public proclamations (liberty, equality, and natural rights), they could hardly be construed as fugitives or as rebels. One could not destroy them openly without tearing the fabric of American society and bringing to light one of its fundamental ambiguities.

As a consequence of the Republicans’ anti-Haitian stance, the Federalists were able to make a strong ideological comeback. Samuel White, a senator from Delaware, reminded his colleagues that like the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution had been a colonial war of independence: “The people of St. Domingo, as did the people of these States under other circumstances, declared themselves free and independent, determined to take their stand among the nations of the world.” This adept reference to the spirit of 1776 and to the Declaration of Independence was well suited to the Federalist strategy of the early 1800s. As historian Linda K. Kerber has explained, it was not the successes or the principles of the Jeffersonians that made an impression upon the Federalists; rather, it was their failures and contradictions. In an effort to draw attention to the inconsistency of the Republicans’ domestic policies (more democracy) with their foreign policies (no recognition of the black republic), Samuel White elaborated on his comparison of the United States and Haiti in 1804. His speech, however, sounds more like that of a devil’s advocate than that of a sincere partisan of the rights of man. At one point, he extolled the bravery of the Haitian troops: “after a war of so many years with France, we see them
not only yet independent, but having actually besieged the only French force in the country.” But White’s praises were to sound hollow later on when, carried away by his hatred for Napoleonic France, he twice lapsed into racist remarks. In the first of these, he said: “Then, sir, such is the ground we now occupy among nations, that the mandate of a French officer, besieged in the West Indies by a rabble of starving negroes, is a requisition too imperious for us to resist.” And then: “General Ferrand might have been serious in writing such a proclamation or decree, expecting it to have some operation on the feeling and the fear of the ignorant blacks of St. Domingo, but he certainly . . . could never have been crazy enough, for a moment to suppose, that any citizen of the United States, arrived at years of maturity, or rather discretion, would be serious in reading it.”

In 1806 the Federalists had lost a lot of support on account of their aristocratic tendencies, but they were not yet political abolitionists. They simply were waging a battle from behind. Their discourse about respecting Haiti’s independence was primarily rhetorical and was aimed at attacking the Republicans rather than supporting Haiti. As a matter of fact, the Federalist anger soon faded, and when an act was passed in 1808 that definitively outlawed the slave trade, the nation’s elite could feel that the slavery issue had been settled for good. Slavery, according to Winthrop Jordan, was no longer a divisive issue in the union.

The Haitian Revolution could have rekindled the debate on slavery in the United States and thereby brought the American Revolution to its fulfillment through the emancipation of the “other persons,” but this did not occur. At first the United States helped France and the planters; then they were satisfied with capitalizing on the events in Saint-Domingue to further their commercial interests in the area. The shortcomings of such a blind attitude were brought to light by Haiti’s Declaration of Independence in 1804. By rejecting the second decolonized nation of the continent, American leaders opted for maintaining the status quo of slavery, and in this they were followed by the entire elite, Republican as well as Federalist. The 1806 act that banned trade with Haiti, while overtly defined as a token of solidarity with other colonial nations, was meant to crush Haiti, to silence it, and even to negate its existence. The titling of the act even avoided mentioning Saint-Domingue or Haiti; the black nation was referred to as the “part of the island of St. Domingo, not in possession, and under the acknowledged government of France.” The writing of the act introduced even more confusion, insofar as the lawmakers were trying to show that the law did not apply to the Spanish part of Saint-Domingue, which at that time was in French hands: “That all commercial intercourse between any person or persons resident within the United States, and any person or persons resident within any part of the island of St. Domingo, not in possession, and under the acknowledged government of France, shall be, and is thereby
prohibited.” That part of the island that was still under Ferrand’s control was, conversely, “in possession, and under the acknowledged government of France”: the whole point of this long and awkward circumlocution was to avoid naming Haiti and referring to the actual political situation on the island. In keeping with the contradictory nature of their society, American leaders passed a law that upheld that contradiction and prevented the example of Haiti from spreading over their territory. To combat Haiti, they chose silence, not force or violence. The silence of the United States was more than indifference: it signified a rejection of the new nation and everything it stood for, a kind of political censoring of the new nation. Furthermore, by closing off Haiti to American trade at a time when cotton farming was on the rise, the leaders of the early republic demonstrated their desire for continental economic expansion. In that sense, one might think that they were already acting as southerners, were it not for the consensus that seemed to set in across the nation at that time in favor of the “peculiar institution.”