CHAPTER 7

The Louisiana Purchase: American Expansion and Its Problems from 1803 to 1812

Much was said and written, at the time, concerning the policy of adding the vast regions of Louisiana, to the already immense, and but half-tenanted territories of the United States. . . . It soon became apparent, to the meanest capacity, that, . . . the measure had made us the masters of a belt of fertile country. . . . It gave us the sole command of the great thoroughfare of the interior, and placed the countless tribes of savages . . . entirely within our control; . . . it opened a thousand avenues to the inland trade, and to the waters of the Pacific.1

James Fenimore Cooper was an apt observer of his fellow countrymen and their political mores; it was not without reason that he set the plot of his romance, The Prairie, in the wild expanse of Louisiana, a few months after Jefferson's envoys had taken possession of the area. The first lines of the book, where Cooper described the many positive aspects of the purchase—territorial, economic, commercial, and geopolitical—sized up the extent of the upheaval the purchase of Louisiana implied for the United States. The year 1801, with the election of Jefferson, may have signaled a political revolution in the United States, as the Republicans finally did away with the Federalists and their excessive nostalgia for a hierarchical society, but it was 1803 that heralded the continental turn of the ambitious new nation. By suddenly doubling the territorial area of their country, American leaders could now identify with and invest their energies in a territorial and scientific conquest, which allowed them to give free rein to the missionary calling of their nation and to distance themselves from European turmoil. Among other aspects, the opening of the West gave Jefferson an opportunity to realize
his dream as a man of the Enlightenment and the ideology of progress. The expeditions he launched into the West—those of Lewis and Clark, William Dunbar, and Zebulon Pike—were true scientific voyages with an encyclopedic aim. Because they captured the nation's imagination, they gave U.S. citizens a chance to appropriate the North American continent on the level of emotion and myth. Neither the military intent nor the commercial and political goals of these expeditions were lost on the Spanish, who were attentive and critical witnesses of this expansionist wave. There were victims, too: Native Americans, who were slowly pushed back to the Mississippi; the Louisiana French, whose cultural individuality was not recognized; and the Spanish from both old and new continents. Through these unfortunate partners of the United States, we can gain insight into a nation that found its meaning in an irresistible drive to conquer, wherein it wholeheartedly imposed its civilization without any desire for “exchange” with the other.

The Sale of Louisiana to the United States

The Rebirth of French Colonial Policy

On October 1, 1800, General Berthier signed the Treaty of San Ildefonso, whereby Spain retroceded Louisiana to France. In compensation for territorial losses Spain had incurred by helping France, Louisiana had been ceded to Spain in November 1762, at the end of the Seven Years’ War, which the North American colonists called the French and Indian War. Like other colonies that France had lost in the eighteenth century, Louisiana had vanished from the immediate concerns of the French. A policy of conquest had actually been officially rejected by the Constituent Assembly in May 1790. Although the first plans for revolutionary expansion were debated by the Convention in 1792 and 1793, they aimed primarily at annexing neighboring territories, in accordance with the principle of conquering France’s natural borders.

Still, French leaders soon turned their thoughts again to the colonies they had lost. As Michael Garnier has written, “everyone threw in his two-cents’ worth against the ancien régime for having so cheerfully discarded the riches of Louisiana and its ‘souls’ in 1763.” Louisiana, then, was still part of French colonial memory, or at least of that of the ruling elite. Fleeing the Terror, Talleyrand had come to Philadelphia, where he became friends with the colonist Moreau de Saint-Méry, who was prevented from going home by the continuing rebellion of the blacks in Saint-Domingue. In the evenings at Moreau’s, the exiles entertained the dream of settling down in Louisiana, as indeed many planters who had fled from Saint-Domingue were in the process of doing. In fact, Talleyrand was already speculating on western land.

After the end of the Terror, Talleyrand returned to France and became the
minister of external relations on July 15, 1797. For him, as well as for the victorious and arrogant Directory as a whole, Louisiana and the colonies were once again a priority. In the negotiations that led to the Peace of Basle in 1795, all the French were able to obtain from King Charles IV was the Spanish part of Saint-Domingue, but what they really wanted was Louisiana. When Franco-American political relations deteriorated, after Jay’s Treaty was signed, the French diplomats in Philadelphia shed all scruples. In 1795 a wary French republic asked Pierre-Auguste Adet “to convey to the government every piece of intelligence that he can procure on the states extending to the west and Louisiana, as well as on the disposition of their inhabitants.”

The spirit of the westward journey that Adet sent General Collot on in March 1796 was in fact quite different from that of Michaux’s trip in 1793. The issue at stake was no longer to help the western pioneers to “liberate” the Spanish provinces, but instead to reconnoiter territory that was hopefully one day to become French. An expert mapmaker, Collot gathered information at every stage of a peregrination that took him from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, then down the Ohio and the Mississippi all the way to New Orleans. What caught his attention was the strategic points, that is, the future strongholds “that could prevent American troops from going down the Ohio” once France again took possession of Louisiana. Meanwhile, the philosopher Volney, friend to both Jefferson and Talleyrand, also undertook in the same year a great western journey in the direction of Upper Louisiana; not too keen on the idea of Louisiana being reunited with France, he came back “convinced that it was a fanciful and dangerous plan.”

There was thus no consensus on this plan.

**American Worries**

The renewed colonial policy of France explains why when during the Consulate it finally wrested Louisiana from Spain, it kept the news of this retrocession a secret for as long as possible, in order not to scare the United States. Still, the news spread quickly: on March 29, 1801, Rufus King informed Madison about it, and Jefferson echoed the rumor on May 26 in a letter to Monroe. The French chargé d’affaires, Pichon, soon became aware of the American leaders’ bitter feelings, and they eventually vented their concerns to him. What worried them was that having France as a neighbor in New Orleans and Louisiana involved radically different consequences from having Spain in that position. With regard to the Spanish, Madison said that “it was a peace-loving government, and it always grew tired of fighting soon enough to let one have one’s way.” Pichon denied the retrocession and feigned surprise: why, even if the news were true, would there be a difference between Spain and France? There was indeed a difference, which explained why American leaders were worried: unlike Spain, France was a strong country bent on conquest, and it could only be an obstacle in the
way of U.S. westward expansion, if it did not actually become a rival of the new republic on the North American continent.15 The immediate reaction of American leaders upon learning about the retrocession of Louisiana revealed their long-term plans for expansion, which the French apparently expected given the fact that they kept the news a secret. As Jefferson confided to James Monroe: “However our present interests may restrain us within our own limits, it is impossible not to look forward to distant times, when our rapid multiplication will expand itself beyond these limits, and cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent, with a people speaking the same language, governed in similar forms and by similar laws.”16 To Pichon, too, he remarked that “the U.S. would possess Louisiana by the sheer force of circumstances.”17

By the force of circumstances, what Jefferson meant was the irresistible drive of the pioneers, which he counted on to nibble away at the declining empire of Spain, and which he knew could not operate in a peaceful way if France took possession of Louisiana. However vague and hazy they appeared then, the president’s plans for expansion were quite real, and they would be jeopardized if France took Spain’s place. As Jefferson explained to the minister plenipotentiary in Paris, Robert R. Livingston, in reference to New Orleans: “Spain might have retained it [New Orleans] quietly for years. Her pacific dispositions, her feeble state, would induce her to increase our facilities there, so that her possession of the place would be hardly felt by us, and it would not perhaps be very long before some circumstance might arise which might make the cession of it to us the price of something more worth to her. Not so can it ever be in the hands of France.”18 That the retrocession of Louisiana was of paramount importance to France became even clearer to Jefferson after January 1802, when General Leclerc and his troops landed in Saint-Domingue. Until then, the threat of having France as a neighbor had been merely hypothetical, but that changed with the landing of French troops in an area in which the United States had a commercial interest. Jefferson may have thought that the First Consul and the Minister of External Relations would promote a symbiosis between Saint-Domingue and Louisiana, of the kind that had once existed between the American colonies and the British West Indies. At any rate, the analysis of Barbé-Marbois, by then minister of the treasury, went along these lines: “[Napoleon’s plan] consisted first of subduing the rebel colony by sending there a considerable force. . . . Once the rebels were brought down, a portion of the army was to be transferred to Louisiana. . . . Louisiana was destined to provide the other colony with supplies, cattle, and wood.”19

Whether Jefferson believed in this theory or not, French military operations in Saint-Domingue could only be a cause for concern for American leaders. As Leclerc scored victory after victory over the Saint-Domingue rebel troops in the spring of 1802, American leaders were now faced not only with the problem of future American expansion; they were also concerned about the imme-
diate security of the current national borders in the presence of a future, very powerful neighbor. The chief worry was the New Orleans depot, which the United States had won over in 1795 at the end of an exhausting negotiating process with Spain, and through which all goods from the western states had to pass. These western states had been enjoying an economic boom since 1795, and they had always faithfully voted for the Jeffersonian Republicans.

While Robert Livingston, the American minister in Paris, was trying in vain to secure information about the retrocession of Louisiana, Jefferson thought it proper to speak his mind to Pierre Samuel Dupont de Nemours, who was about to go back to France, in order for Dupont to explain the American position to the First Consul. He formally requested that France refrain from occupying New Orleans if it did not want to run the risk of having the United States side with Great Britain in a renewed war against France: “There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of 3/8ths of our territory must pass to market. . . . The day that France takes possession of New Orleans fixes the sentence which is to restrain her forever within her low water-mark. It seals the union of two nations who in conjunction can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean. From that moment we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.” Dupont explained to Jefferson that his warlike tone could only antagonize Bonaparte. The threats of a military alliance gave way to a diplomatic solution, namely, the purchase of New Orleans and the Floridas, an option that Jefferson had been considering. This solution would at least guarantee an outlet to the sea for westerners in the event that expansion to Louisiana should prove impossible.

While the precise extent of the territory covered by the retrocession was still unclear, in early May 1802 Madison asked Livingston to try to buy New Orleans and the Floridas. The French fleet that General Victor was to lead to Louisiana had not yet left Holland, and Madison even considered the possibility that the arrangement between Spain and France would in fact not go through. Charles Pinckney, the American minister in Madrid, was then ordered to ask Spain for New Orleans and the Floridas. In October 1802 the secretary of state once again asked Livingston to try to secure these territories for the United States. While the French troops in Saint-Domingue were falling victim to yellow fever and the unflinching resistance of the blacks, American leaders grew more and more confident that peaceful negotiations would allow them to achieve their goals. All of a sudden, on October 29, 1802, they received a dispatch from William Charles Coles Claiborne, the governor of the Territory of Mississippi, notifying them that what they had dreaded the most had just occurred. As historian Henry Adams was to explain later, “the Spanish Intendant, Don Juan Morales, had forbidden the Americans to deposit their merchandise at New Orleans, as they had a right to do so under the treaty of 1795.”
The Closing of the New Orleans Depot and Its Political Consequences

Pinckney’s Treaty did in fact include an article conferring to the Spanish a right to deny American commerce and navigation the use of the port of New Orleans. But the same article also bound Spain to provide the Americans, in that event, with an equivalent facility, which Morales did not do. The decision was therefore received as a deliberate affront. The aggressive conduct of General Leclerc toward American merchants in Saint-Domingue and the hostile stance that France was thought to be taking toward Americans were added ingredients to feed the wrath of the westerners. If Morales acted the way he did, they reasoned, it might have been upon orders from France, which was bent upon impeding the development of its young neighbor. As Jefferson observed: “The agitation of the public mind . . . is extreme. In the western country it is natural and grounded on honest motives.” Madison concurred—“The Mississippi is to them everything”—and he quoted the ever increasing numbers of western exports: “The produce exported through that channel last year amounted to $11,622 from the District of Kentucky and Mississippi only, and will probably be fifty per cent more this year.”

Meanwhile, the Federalist wrath, which was less predictable, caught the government unawares. The Federalist diehards, who had little sympathy for France, saw an opportunity to win the favor of the predominantly Republican West and waged a large-scale campaign to support war against France and invasion of the coveted territories. The legislatures of the western states were venting their discontent in addresses they sent to Washington, D.C., which entitled the Federalists to speak on behalf of the whole nation. Their argument no longer centered on the country’s security, but on its honor, its greatness, and its future.

For the Federalist New York Evening Post, the government’s inertia would compel westerners to take New Orleans on their own, which could only result in the dismantling of the American “empire.” From January 24 to 28, 1803, the same paper published a report of a “Memorial on the war in St. Domingue and cession of the Mississippi to France, drawn up by a French councillor of state.” Whether this document was authentic or not, it was especially well suited for stirring up the flame of American patriotism, since it depicted in the most derogatory fashion American institutions and national character. For the councillor of state, France was to assume exclusive navigation rights over the river. The editorialist who commented on this “Memorial” concluded: “[I]t belongs of right to the United States to regulate the future destiny of North America. The country is ours; ours is the right to its rivers and to all the sources of future opulence, power and happiness, which lay scattered at our feet.”

According to this view, the United States and France—both of them powerful and ambitious nations—could not possibly have equal status on the American
continent. The former had a “right” to expansion, and the latter did not. The debate was being moved, then, from the field of diplomacy to that of ideology: on the North American continent, the new nation’s status was special, and privileged over other nations, and it was here that its exceptional destiny should be fulfilled. In the view of the above-quoted journalist, French presence in New Orleans would not only be a hindrance to the economic growth of the western states and territories; it would also put an end to the development of one of the most “promising” nations on earth. As for the Charleston Courier, another Federalist newspaper, its editorialist could not find enough words of praise for the future of this nation of promise: “The mind of man can scarcely prescribe bounds to the probable greatness, and glories of a vast nation, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. . . .” As can be seen here, this kind of nationalistic lyricism drew its epic force from a vision of the nation’s continental expansion.

The Federalists also praised national union and greatness in Congress, where they called for forceful measures with respect to France. In the Senate, Gouverneur Morris urged the invasion of Florida and New Orleans in the name of “national honor,” once again resorting to the nationalist rhetoric he had inaugurated ten years earlier against Great Britain. To display strength, he explained, was to defend one’s honor and thus the country’s independence. Negotiating with Bonaparte without having anything to offer in return would be demonstrating exceptional naïveté. The United States had no other choice but “manly resistance or vile submission.”

While the uncompromising measures that Gouverneur Morris advocated were supported only by a minority, his appeal to consolidating national union through the conquest of New Orleans reflected the opinion of all Americans. As Pichon observed, the United States was more united than ever before: “It is a mistake . . . to think that these [western] states have a desire or an interest to separate from the seaward parts of the Federation.”

The states of the Atlantic seaboard in fact supported their western neighbors through their representatives and senators in Congress. The country’s future was what united the nation, and this future was symbolized by the right to deposit goods at New Orleans. What was at stake was not only present prosperity, but also a great destiny. This was the reason why the difference between Gouverneur Morris and Thomas Jefferson was not one of essence, but of tactics. Whereas Morris advocated rushing into war even before hostilities had broken out again on the European continent, Jefferson preferred to delay entering the war until England once again was mistress of the seas. It was especially important to the American government to avoid frustrating westerners, and to follow a policy that was to their taste. In the end, westerners were the vanguard of American expansion, and they made up the popular army Jefferson was counting on: “Although I am not sanguine in obtaining a cession of New Orleans for money, yet I am confident in the policy of putting off the day of contention for it, till we are stronger...
in ourselves and stronger in allies, but especially till we shall have planted such a population on the Mississippi as will be able to do their own business, without the necessity of marching men from the shores of the Atlantic 1,500 or 2,000 miles thither, to perish by fatigue and change of climate.”

After the commotion that winter over the prospect of the French returning to the American continent, Jefferson invoked the legitimate anger of westerners when he asked Monroe to go to France as envoy extraordinary. Monroe’s mission was to inform the French government about the state of mind of the western population, and to purchase New Orleans and the Floridas. Monroe, who, according to Pichon, enjoyed “great popularity among the western people,” left for Paris on March 8, 1803. His departure was depicted as a final attempt at negotiation, and appeased the political fever. In the spring of 1803 the Tennessee Gazette showed total confidence in the government’s measures and reprinted the official protests to Intendant Morales by the Spanish minister plenipotentiary Carlo Martinez de Yrujo. But this was the eve of combat. The noble cause of expansion, which was crucial to the growth of the early republic, kept the nation on the alert, as Pichon noted: “As for the national mind, . . . it is preparing more and more for any event. Lately a great dinner was given in Natchez where the governor of the Mississippi Territory, Mr. Claiborne, was present. Among other remarkable toasts, the following two were proposed: ‘free navigation on the Mississippi or war’—‘may Mr. Monroe’s mission succeed in full, or fail in full.’”

The Louisiana Purchase

Back in Paris, the news was not good: the Saint-Domingue expedition had failed; General Leclerc’s death was announced on January 7, 1803; and the prospect of renewed hostilities with Great Britain was looming large. These developments gradually forced Bonaparte and Talleyrand to revise their plans for colonial expansion. Following the advice of Barbé-Marbois, the First Consul resolved to sell Louisiana rather than letting it fall into British hands. On April 11 an offer to that effect was transmitted to Livingston. The next day Monroe arrived in Paris with the same orders that the American minister had: to buy New Orleans and the Floridas. What the French proposed to the two diplomats did not match their instructions, and yet they did not hesitate, since it was a desire for expansion, as much as a concern for security, that had led their government to send them both to Paris. How could they refuse to discuss an offer to double the U.S. national territory? On May 2 the treaty was finally signed.

For the measly sum of sixty million francs, the United States had just purchased a huge chunk of territory with a diverse population, one whose geography and precise borders were poorly known. Chance would have it that events and political decisions gave the Americans exactly what they wanted, which they would not have dared to take for themselves. All the letters and debates
that led up to this purchase reflected an expansionist discourse, in which the nation identified itself with a glorious future. Yet that discourse was still shaky and halfhearted; reading some of their statements, one might think that the American leaders only wanted to buy Florida and New Orleans. But their reluctance to have the French for neighbors clearly meant that they intended to settle the whole continent. As Jefferson had written Monroe on November 24, 1801, “it is impossible not to look forward to distant times,” when the United States would “cover the whole northern, if not the southern continent.”

This expansionist discourse was often more clearly enunciated by the opposition than by the administration itself, since the opposition did not have the constraints of a governing party, whereas the administration had to tone down any warlike attitudes out of consideration for powerful and widely feared France. The Louisiana Purchase was Bonaparte’s way of giving Americans the means to realize their dreams for expansion.

Now that the dream was coming true, the continental dimension of the American nation came to the forefront in editorial comments: it was no longer simply a particular feature of the early republic’s future; it was also the visible sign of its exceptional and exemplary mission. As Aristides explained in his column (“Reflections on Political Economy and the Prospect before Us. Addressed to the Citizens of the Western Country”), which was reproduced in the Tennessee Gazette: “In addition to these felicities (uncommon prosperity, liberty, national honor, economy, simplicity, and private virtue) the late cession of Louisiana comes at the most propitious juncture to expand the horizon of our views, and to prompt the wisdom of the nation to the exercise of all those energies which may give to America a character more elevated than that of any other, in either ancient or modern times.”

In his address to Congress on October 17, 1803, Jefferson elaborated on the meaning of that expansion of the national territory. The acquisition of Louisiana promised “an ample provision for our posterity” and guaranteed beyond the Mississippi “a wide spread for the blessings of freedom and equal laws.” The mission of the United States acquired a political meaning: the expansion of the republic meant the expansion of the rule of liberty, a value that the United States was now alone in defending, since the French Republic had turned into a dictatorship.

**Exploration Expeditions**

*National Rivalries Over Much Sought-After Territory: The Northwest*

In the words of Barbé-Marbois, “They had hardly taken possession of Louisiana before they sent out exploring expeditions in all directions to inspect these western regions, which geographers still designate by the names
of unknown countries and wild deserts.” This account is somewhat erroneous: preparation for exploration expeditions had started long before Louisiana was acquired, and therefore was not a result of it, although it is true that the purchase facilitated these journeys considerably.

As we have seen, in 1793 Jefferson had contemplated a continental expedition. It would have been launched under the aegis of the American Philosophical Society, which was ready to subsidize botanist André Michaux in this undertaking, but then interest for this kind of journey had subsided. In January 1802 another member of the American Philosophical Society, Caspar Wistar, mentioned to Jefferson that a book had just been published in London that ought to be of special interest to Americans. The book was entitled *Voyages from Montreal on the River St. Laurence, through the Continent of North America, to the Frozen and Pacific Oceans*, and it was the work of Sir Alexander McKenzie, a British explorer and the first European to have led an expedition across the North American continent. Although it was a scientific voyage, McKenzie's epic was also a journey with an expansionist aim, during which the author had taken note of propitious areas for British colonization and ways of reaching them. Its avowed goal, indeed, was to make it possible for Great Britain to get a monopoly on the fur trade in the interior of the continent and on the Northwestern Coast.

According to historian Donald Jackson, McKenzie’s program was in fact the starting point of an international competition over the control of the Pacific Northwest, and Jefferson was not long in putting the United States into the race. In the summer of 1802 the president ordered McKenzie’s book. It would seem that the closing of the New Orleans depot played a role in his decision to set up a transcontinental exploration expedition; at any rate, in early December he started to organize what was to become the Lewis and Clark expedition, and he communicated this plan to various people. If the measures taken by Intendant Morales were any indication of future French behavior in Louisiana, it would perhaps be sound policy to preempt the French before they too joined the race for the Northwest. This, at least, was the analysis given of Jefferson’s plan by the British minister plenipotentiary in Washington, D.C.

Albert Gallatin, then secretary of the treasury, seemed to think that such an expedition would allow the United States to take control of the Northwest before Great Britain did. What he had in mind was the imminent renewal of hostilities, which the British might use as a good excuse to march from Canada to French Louisiana and, in the process, to take over the Northwest. The important thing was not to waste time, for, according to Gallatin, it was clear that “the future destinies of the Mississippi country are of vast importance to the United States, it being perhaps the only large tract of country, and certainly the first which lying out of the boundaries of the Union will be settled by the people of the United States.” Although Gallatin did not conceal the expansionist, commercial, and military aim of the journey, the U.S. president acted
otherwise. To the British and Spanish ministers plenipotentiary, he merely described the planned journey as a scientific and even “literary” exploration, which was meant to crown a successful administration; as Edward Thornton explained:

The president has for some years past had it in view to set on foot an expedition entirely of a scientific nature for exploring the Western Continent of America by the route of the Great River Missouri, and for tracing the proximity of the sources of this river to the streams, which fall on the other side into the Pacific Ocean. He supposes this to be the most natural and direct water-communication between the two Oceans, and he is ambitious in his character of a man of letters and of science, of distinguishing his Presidency by a discovery, now the only one left to his enterprize. . . .

Nonetheless, the idea that this was a purely scientific expedition did not convince the Spanish minister Yrujo, who clearly explained the geopolitical consequences of such a venture to his government.

In Congress the expedition was described from yet another angle: the journey was meant to foster relations between the western Native American tribes and the U.S. government. The exploring venture was being turned into a journey of commercial canvassing, and its true goal, that is, to reach the Pacific Ocean by following McKenzie’s example, was at first only mentioned in passing: “An intelligent officer with ten or twelve chosen men, fit for the enterprize and willing to undertake it, taken from our posts, where they may be spared without inconvenience, might explore the whole line, even to the Western ocean. . . .” Only at the end of this confidential message did Jefferson unambiguously describe the scientific purport of the journey: “While other civilized nations have encountered great expense to enlarge the boundaries of knowledge, by undertaking voyages of discovery, and for other literary purposes, in various parts and directions, our nation seems to owe to the same object, as well as to its own interest, to explore this, the only line of easy communication across the continent. . . .” In Jefferson’s presentation, this voyage was to allow the United States to take its place among “civilized” nations, and the appropriation passed by Congress was meant to further the development of knowledge. It was in the name of scientific progress that Meriwether Lewis, the man chosen to head the expedition, was to lead his companions through the wild expanses west of the Mississippi. The 1803 expedition was conceived in the spirit of the Enlightenment: Jefferson would rank with Louis XVI and George III among the great patrons of science and progress, while Lewis and his adjunct William Clark (who was Jefferson’s secretary at the time) would be the Bougainville and the Cook of the North American West. Why, then, could Jefferson not announce such a grand goal more openly? Donald Jackson’s surprise is legitimate: why did the American president give priority
to commercial justifications in his message to Congress? The answer is to be found in Barbé-Marbois’s history: “To explore [these territories], to cross them, was in a way to acquire sovereignty over them.”

Since 1790 and the Nootka Sound affair, the doctrine of sovereignty through prior discovery was no longer valid, and the Northwest was indeed an unclaimed area. The Spanish, however, did not acknowledge this, and Jefferson was trying to divert their attention by clouding the issue. The diplomatic conflict between Great Britain and Spain over Nootka Sound on the Northwestern Coast had in fact led to important developments as to the meaning and modes of conquering North American territories that were as yet “unoccupied” (“unoccupied,” that is, by people other than Native Americans). Since the 1750s the Spanish had started to feel the threat of Russian expansionism on their northwestern frontier. The lucrative fur trade emboldened the Russians, who kept enlarging their hunting domain, from Siberia to the Aleutian Islands and eventually to Alaska. Since the Spanish laid claim to the whole of the Pacific Coast of North America, which they called “California,” they decided, at the behest of the energetic José de Gálvez, Inspector of New Spain, to organize explorations in order to counter that threat. The first of these expeditions was launched in 1769; it reached San Diego, then San Francisco and Monterey. The first two missions were created in San Diego and Monterey.

In 1774 the Perez expedition discovered the Nootka Sound harbor on what is today Vancouver Island. In 1775 the Hereta-Bogota expedition discovered the mouth of the Columbia River and made four official land claims, one of them on the 57th parallel north. Although the Spanish were secretive about these journeys, news of their activities spread. When James Cook reconnoitered the area, he made only one land claim at 61°30’ N, which was in observance of Spanish claims. The Spanish authorities were reassured by this and they mistakenly considered that such costly voyages could be discontinued and their rights over these lands be preserved without occupying them. In addition, as Warren L. Cook observed, the silence of the Spanish over their expeditions resulted in weakening their claims based on prior discovery. The principle of “prior discovery” meant that the “discoverers” of a piece of land could lay claim to it and maintain sovereignty over it even without occupying it. In an era of heightened commercial competition, however, such a principle was no longer tenable, as the Spanish were to learn at their own expense.

Starting in 1783 British and American ships searched the Northwestern Coast for precious furs. This is the true context of the famed Nootka Sound affair mentioned earlier. In 1788 a British sailor named John Meares, whose ship, however, flew a Portuguese flag, settled at Nootka Sound, a small bay located on the Pacific coast of Vancouver Island, later abandoned by both countries. There he made a temporary camp, allegedly after having bought the land from the chief of the Native American tribe who lived in the area and was the ori-
gin of its name. In the spring of 1789 one of Meares's partners, James Colnett, came back to Nootka, this time flying a British flag, only to run into an official Spanish party and have the latter discover that the British did not carry Spanish licenses to land on that coast. The ships were seized and the sailors were jailed. For William Pitt, the British prime minister, this crisis was a boon: in this year, 1790, he had the upper hand, since Spain could not resort to the Family Pact and call on France for help; so he could demand the abolition of the principle of prior discovery and the substitution of the principle of occupation. In the Anglo-Spanish Convention of October 1790, the Spanish did not actually cede anything more than Nootka Sound; but they did give up their claims to any territories they did not occupy, which applied mostly to the Northwestern Coast. What Pitt may not have realized is that his new principle would benefit others, and in the first place American sailors. As soon as the 1790 crisis was over, an American captain named Kendrick bought a tract of land in the vicinity of Nootka Sound and then entrusted the property titles to the American Consul in Canton, thus putting the first American landmark on this coast, to be backed up in 1811 by a commercial outpost in Astoria.

By 1803 California had been developed by the Spanish: from San Francisco to San Diego there were eighteen missions, where 13,500 Indians lived. The civil sector had not expanded as much, with Hispanic residents numbering no more than about 1,800 and no new establishments created north of San Francisco, despite new scientific and military expeditions. Spain had still not given up on the rest of the Northwestern Coast, the lands in the interior, New Mexico, Texas, and the West. To the Spanish, these sparsely populated areas (such as Texas, with only four thousand residents), where they did not control the activities of Native American tribes, were to serve as buffer zones between the British, the Americans, and the mines of Mexico. Before 1803 the Spanish themselves had supported attempts at exploring the course of the Missouri (from 1794 to 1797) in order to establish good relations with the northwestern tribes, but no tangible results ensued. After the sale of Louisiana, their determination was strengthened: they would not let the Americans through. At the end of 1802, Yrujo tried to talk Jefferson out of his plan. The president was aware that he was sending explorers across territory that was claimed by Spain; he nevertheless decided to defy Spanish power. In his instructions to Lewis, he did not conceal the fact that after giving notice of the planned voyage to the representatives of France, Spain, and Great Britain, only France and Great Britain had extended him passports for the expedition. Yet Jefferson had decided to go ahead regardless, since two pages further in the instructions, he envisioned his secretary arriving on the Pacific shore, which the latter could not possibly reach without crossing the Spanish-claimed Northwest.

Jefferson's confidence was due in part to Pitt. The Lewis and Clark expedition was clearly presented as a voyage of exploration destined to reconnoiter...
ter unoccupied areas, as opposed to regions that were not claimed by any country at all. From then on, a given territory would belong to whomever first set up trade posts there, gave names to the rivers and mountains, and was able to keep up occupation by maintaining a presence of commercial agents, trappers, and pioneers. Such was now the price for sovereignty over disputed territories. It was up to the Spanish to draw the right conclusions and join the race for fur and outposts if they were capable of it, or so Jefferson seemed to think when launching this expedition. The secrecy he maintained about it was one of his weapons in this battle for a continent.

**American Expeditions from 1803 On**

The two expedition leaders, Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, were both career soldiers, which inevitably underscored the strategic aspect of their voyage across the continent. A mere soldier, however, could not be in charge of an expedition that was also claimed for scientific progress. The kind of man Jefferson had in mind to head the expedition was both a master and lover of nature: he should be brave and healthy, that is, fit for life outdoors; he should be familiar with the “Indian character”; and he should also be an expert in astronomy and the natural sciences. Since no such man could be found in the United States, Captain Lewis would do the job—he knew American nature and forests well, but he would have to undergo, from March to June 1803, intensive training in the natural sciences. For that purpose, Jefferson sent Lewis to Philadelphia, to be instructed by eminent members of the American Philosophical Society. After this “training period,” he should be able to follow his instructions and bring back valuable information to Jefferson as concerned geography (about the Missouri, the Rockies, and the Northwest), ethnology and diplomacy (about various Native American tribes), botany, biology, mineralogy, the climate, and the economy. Lewis left Philadelphia at the beginning of the summer of 1803; he did not come back to St. Louis until September 23, 1806.

In the meantime, the excitement over the Louisiana Purchase had led Jefferson to launch a series of trans-Mississippian expeditions, the goal being reconnaissance of the other rivers of Louisiana (the Platte, the Arkansas, and the Red Rivers) and more detailed maps of the territory. Jefferson imparted his project to William Dunbar on April 15, 1804. Dunbar had become a regular correspondent of Jefferson’s in 1802 and 1803, when Jefferson was concerned about Louisiana and its borders. Dunbar was a prosperous planter in Natchez, and a valuable source of information for the president. He was fond of the sciences, and he had helped the Spanish draw the demarcation line between the United States and Florida in 1798. In addition to his mathematic and scientific knowledge, Dunbar was deeply interested in Native American languages and the geog-
raphy of the area. An expert planter, he also displayed mechanical ingenuity to improve the methods of cotton-growing, inventing the square cotton bale as well as the technique of extracting cottonseed oil. His eclectic character and the range of his skills made him just the kind of man Jefferson liked, and the president entrusted him with the organization of an expedition to the Arkansas and Red Rivers, which would be funded by the three thousand dollars Congress had just approved for this purpose. Dunbar and chemist Dr. Hunter eventually left on October 16, 1804. They did not, however, go to the Arkansas River, because a schism in the Osage tribe had made navigation of the river unsafe; instead, they set out for the Washita River, with orders to go up it.

Dunbar’s was a small expedition, but a serious one scientifically, as is shown by his diary. Besides Dunbar and Dr. Hunter, the party counted some soldiers but no officers, which Dunbar regretted in a rare expression of personal feeling, for the soldiers sometimes lacked proper discipline. On the whole, however, the diary was a simple and rather dry account of the team’s observations. Each day, Dunbar carefully recorded the temperature and geographical position, and described the landscapes he discovered. For a modern-day reader, this somewhat tiring routine is relieved by the intrusion of fancy into the discourse of science. Always one to search for explanatory theories, Dunbar put science

and pure fantasy on the same level. Once, he most seriously reported the description of an American unicorn, which had been mentioned to him by a Canadian he had encountered: “The Canadian pretends also to have seen an unicorn; the single horn he says rises out of the forehead and curls back, according to his description so as to convey the idea of the fossil Cornu Ammonis.” Such hesitations were quite widespread at the time, and reflected the lack of knowledge about the interior of the North American continent (for example, Jefferson himself thought there were volcanoes at the center of the continent).

In spite of this, Dunbar’s diary was that of a scientist and not of a conqueror; or rather, it was both. Dunbar indeed sometimes uttered remarks that betrayed the fact that the purpose of his journey was to reconnoiter territory that was destined to be settled soon thereafter. Often he assessed the quality of the land, in order to determine whether it was farmable or not. One day, in a lyrical outburst, he even evoked the future settlement and welfare of a colonist established on prosperous banks: “In a year or two he arrives at a state of independence, he purchases horses, cows and other domestic animals, perhaps a slave also who shares with him the labours and the productions of his fields and the adjoining forests. How happy the contrast, when we compare the fortune of the new settler in the U.S. with the misery of the half starving, oppressed and degraded Peasant of Europe!!” In such a visionary moment is revealed the whole ambivalence of the notion of progress as Americans perceived it at this time. A demanding and passionate scientist, Dunbar was also an expansionist who was convinced that this expansion meant real progress for humankind. He did not, however, care about Native Americans, whose lands would be taken away, nor about the black slave, whose fate would not be improved along with his master’s fortune. Although cheap land in the United States spared the farmer the fate of the European peasant, and thus the United States was the favored environment for the happiness of mankind, such happiness appeared to be less universal in scope than the advocates of American expansion would have liked.

Only on April 16, 1806, did the expedition for the Red River leave Fort Adams, near Natchez; it started as a failure, however. The Spanish had never been fooled by the dual goal of these American voyages, and they had indeed started to react to this wave of expeditions, which they considered to be threats. On March 12, 1805, Secretary of State Madison received an official brief of protest against the expedition, sent by the Spanish; meanwhile, between 1804 and 1806 Spain ordered four expeditions out of Santa Fe, with the charge of intercepting the Lewis and Clark team. These expeditions failed, but they were indicative of Spanish determination. Since 1805 the Spanish had been justifiably worried by the dubious activities of former vice president Aaron Burr in the lower Mississippi valley, as well as the support he enjoyed locally and the silence the administration kept about this; indeed, they regarded this con-
 spirator as the vanguard of a conquest movement that was aimed at Mexico and supported by Jefferson.76 Since they knew the goal as well as the route of the Red River expedition, the Spanish were able to interrupt its progress at a distance of 635 miles from the mouth of the river, and they forced the expedition back on July 29.77

Yet on July 15, 1806, another expedition was under way, sponsored by General Wilkinson, governor of the Louisiana Territory; it left St. Louis to explore the heads of the Red and Arkansas Rivers. Its leader was Zebulon Montgomery Pike, a lieutenant in the U.S. Army and an experienced explorer. Having decided to approach the Rocky Mountains, Pike and his team got lost and ended up on the banks of the Rio Grande, an unchallenged possession of Spain. His party was arrested in February 1807 by a Spanish patrol, and Pike regained American territory in June. Whether Pike got lost on purpose is a matter of discussion among historians.78 At any rate, the most important expedition, and the one that Jefferson had planned, designed, and launched, that is, the Lewis and Clark expedition, came back to the United States without difficulty, loaded with Indian objects and valuable scientific observations. The triumphal welcome it received was in keeping with the feats it had achieved.

_A Continental Vision of the Nation_

Originally a state secret, the Lewis and Clark expedition had metamorphosed into a national epic. The whole scientific community, at home and abroad, had taken a passionate interest in the voyage; some scientists were sorry not to have been part of it, such as naturalist Constantin Samuel Rafinesque; others, such as Volney, compared the success of the expedition to the greatest events in history.79 The press kept the public interested by printing accounts of the publications of other expeditions, such as that of William Dunbar in 1804 or the New World voyages of naturalist Alexander von Humboldt.80 Lengthy articles reported on the return of explorers in glowing terms, bringing to today's mind the enthusiasm that surrounded the first transatlantic flights, as, for example, in the case of Dunbar's and Dr. Hunter's return to New Orleans after their trip on the Washita River.81 Behind this passion for scientific discovery one clearly senses national pride and patriotism, rooted in love for the land. The various stages of the Lewis and Clark expedition also fed the public’s curiosity. One of these episodes was the arrival in Washington, D.C., of an Osage delegation, which Lewis and Clark had sent there upon taking possession of Upper Louisiana, while they were wintering in Wood River, near St. Louis, and before they got ready to go up the Missouri.82 These Native Americans visited Jefferson during the summer of 1804; they were depicted as exceptional beings—exceptional because they were American: “They are of a gigantic stature, being all [the men] above six feet in height, and well proportioned.”83
A newspaper correspondent noted that they were also more intelligent than any other people, before concluding: “Buffon can produce no fat Englishman or meagre Frenchman superior to these people.”84 The American native was superior to the European. In discovering the continent, its wonders, its secrets, and its riches, Americans also appropriated it and grew attached to it. Through the conquest of the continent, they built a national identity, based on their opposition to Europe. That, however, would have been a merely negative construction if Americans had not added enormous pride and love for their country, the wild expanses of which continually amazed them.85 Thus, the expeditions helped Americans appropriate the continent on an emotional level; they allowed the United States to assert sovereignty over the territories it had just acquired (the Osages now came to Washington, D.C., to meet their new “father,” who would exact complete allegiance from them); the expeditions also amounted to appropriating territory that had not yet been officially acquired, such as the Northwest and soon perhaps the Southwest. In the words of one Enquirer editorialist: “We live on a continent where we may be said to constitute the only nation.”86 Failing to mention the numerous Native American nations who lived in the West, this editorialist suggested that the trip of a handful of Americans had been enough to establish the sovereignty of the new nation over territory that was occupied by others, although not by European nations. Hardly had the continent been explored by Lewis and Clark when it was already becoming the property of the American nation.

The interest of Americans for the continent was, then, nurtured by the publication of exploration accounts, and the fact that they were of national importance was underscored by the president’s active support. In February 1806 Jefferson published a “Message from the President” that included a letter written by Lewis before leaving the Mandan village, as well as geographical accounts by Dunbar.87 The president also oversaw the publication of the travel notes taken by Zebulon Pike in 1805 during an expedition on the Mississippi.88 The welcome Jefferson gave Lewis and Clark was a measure of his satisfaction. Before he even saw them again, Jefferson praised them in his sixth annual address to Congress, on December 2, 1806.89 Meriwether Lewis was made governor of Louisiana, and William Clark the superintendent of Indian affairs in the same area. Thus it was that both remained in the region that had made them famous.

The two explorers took hold of the popular imagination. For the people of Fincastle, Lewis and Clark attained superhuman stature and the aura of mythical heroes: “You have navigated bold and unknown rivers, traversed mountains, which had never been impressed with the footsteps of civilized man, and surmounted every obstacle which climate, Nature, or ferocious Savages could throw in your way. You have the further satisfaction to reflect that you have extended the knowledge of the geography of your country; in other respects enriched Science; and opened to the United States a source of inexhaustible
wealth.”

A popular myth called for a popular literature. The notebooks of the two explorers, compiled by Nicholas Biddle, appeared in 1814 in a form that emphasized the exploration process rather than its scientific content. Culturally and emotionally, the Northwest now belonged to Americans. By crossing the continent Lewis and Clark had improved the geographical knowledge of “their country,” as the people of Fincastle said. Jefferson also commended “the additions he [Lewis] brings to our knowledge of the geography and natural history of our country.” The language of the statesman echoed that of the citizens; both said that the American nation and the North American continent were already one.

Barbé-Marbois described this process in the following terms: “Conquerors expand their states through war: their reigns are marked by the blood of men and the desolation of the countries they subjugate. What they leave behind is nothing but the memory of disaster. The republic of the United States enlarges its borders by sending surveyors and men of science distances of 1,500 leagues. It sets unimpeded the limits of its peaceful conquests and ensures through good laws the durable happiness of the communities who settle in them.”

This idyllic picture, however, needs qualification. As far as the Northwest was concerned, the “peaceful conquests” of the United States were nonetheless conquests, not mere reconnaissance of “unoccupied” or previously acquired territory. As for the territories that were declared to be American—legally or illegally—the happiness that was available for those communities already settled in these areas, such as the many Native American tribes or the French-speaking community of Louisiana, was a function of their ability to adjust to a strictly defined *pax americana*: were they to rebel, the threshold of tolerance would soon be reached. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the Lewis and Clark expedition, while being an expansionist undertaking, had an international scientific dimension. Was it botany or diplomacy? Americans did not choose one or the other; as children of the Enlightenment, they made their own cocktail.

### Expansion’s Rejects

*The Expansionist Passion: Negotiating Over West Florida*

The Louisiana Purchase whetted the American appetite for land and strengthened their national feeling. For their unfortunate partners—Native Americans, Spaniards, and the French of Louisiana—American methods smacked more of greed and intolerance than pacifism and benevolence. No sooner had the treaty been signed, whereby the French sold Louisiana to the United States, that American leaders set out to investigate the exact bound-
aries of the territory they had just acquired. Indeed, the wording of the treaty signed with France, which quoted that of the Treaty of San Ildefonso of 1800, was quite hazy about the exact position of the eastern and western borders of Louisiana: “His Catholic Majesty promises and engages on his part, to cede to the French Republic . . . the colony or province of Louisiana, with the same extent that it now has in the hands of Spain, and that it had when France possessed it, and such as it should be after the treaties subsequently entered into between Spain and other States.”94 Louisiana, as it had been when a French possession until 1763, did encompass the whole Ohio valley and extended eastward to the Perdido River. Then, however, upon the negotiations that ended the Seven Years’ War, France had ceded to Spain only the west bank of the Mississippi plus New Orleans; the Floridas fell to Great Britain (West Florida, which spread from the Apalachicola River to the Mississippi, and East Florida, which corresponded roughly to Florida as we know it today).95 Since East Florida had never belonged to France, the United States could not claim it openly in 1803. West Florida, on the other hand, was more uncertain, since it had been part of French Louisiana until 1763. Was it, or was it not, included in those possessions that were returned to France by Spain, and then turned over to the United States?

Had the obscurity in the wording of the treaty been deliberate on the part of the First Consul, as Barbé-Marbois claimed?96 Or, on the contrary, was it obvious that West Florida was part of the 1800 retrocession and, consequently, of the 1803 treaty, as Livingston claimed shortly after the treaty was signed?97 Historians remain divided on this issue: admirers of Jefferson and Madison, such as Irving Brant, have felt that Livingston was right,98 while more critical observers of the American president, such as Henry Adams, have considered that this line of reasoning was simply an additional weapon in a war of conquest.99 What is important for the present study is not to arbitrate between Spain and the United States on this count, but to observe the passion with which the president and the secretary of state, both southerners and slave owners, strained to wring out of Spain “very satisfactory” borders for the Louisiana territory.100

During the summer of 1803 Jefferson wrote a long historical account, entitled “An Examination into the Boundaries of Louisiana,” which allowed him to conclude that West Florida belonged indeed to the United States.101 Since Madison and Jefferson had not given up on acquiring the whole of Florida, they proposed sending to Madrid a special mission led by James Monroe, for the purpose of purchasing East Florida, while at the same time obtaining a recognition of American sovereignty over West Florida.102 Confident that the Spanish Empire was about to collapse, the American leaders thought a diplomatic mission should suffice. If they did not obtain what they wanted through diplomacy, they would take it anyway. As Madison said, “We are the less disposed also to make sacrifices to obtain the Floridas, because their posi-
tion and the manifest course of events guarantee an early and reasonable acquisition of them."\(^{103}\)

As it turned out, this American contribution to the carving up of the Spanish Empire was not as trouble-free as it seemed. Spain had never given its consent to France for the sale of Louisiana to a third country; it vented its anger through

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**Louisiana and the Treaty of Paris in 1783** (Marshall Sprague, *So Beautiful a Land: Louisiana and the Purchase*, p. 182)
its minister in Washington when Congress started to legislate over West Florida in November 1803. Indeed, Congress resorted to a legal and fiscal pretense (protecting the United States from smuggling) to pass a bill that included the area around Mobile into the Mississippi district (this was called the “Mobile Act”). This amounted to annexing the area, and it could not fail to rouse Spain, or for that matter France, which did not want to be accused by Spain of endorsing these encroachments. When power was transferred between France and the United States, on December 20, 1803, in New Orleans, Prefect Laussat declared to Wilkinson and Claiborne that Louisiana did not extend all the way to Mobile.

Jefferson was forced to temper his enthusiasm, and he tried to correct the negative impression the Mobile Act had made. In his annual address of November 8, 1804, he declared that the goal of the act had been misunderstood by Spain, and he added: “Candid explanations were immediately given and assurances that, reserving our claims in that quarter as a subject of discussion and arrangement with Spain, no act was meditated, in the meantime, inconsistent with the peace and friendship existing between the two nations.” As for the borders of Louisiana west of the Mississippi, the United States also tried to extend the boundaries of its purchase as far as possible. If Monroe could find a way to negotiate with Spain, his orders were to assert the claims of the United States all the way to the Rio Bravo (today the Rio Grande)—in other words, over all of Texas. As the U.S. government was pressing him to go to Spain, Monroe ignored Talleyrand’s uncooperative attitude, and he finally left to carry out his mission in December 1804, shortly before the French minister of external relations openly disavowed American attempts at obtaining West Florida. Thus supported by France, Spain was now able to counter American wishes and forestall any negotiation, and as a result, Monroe had to leave Madrid again in May 1805. The responsibility for the failure of these negotiations did not, therefore, lie solely with France, as has been claimed. They failed also because Spain, when given a chance, did everything in its power to slow American expansion, the inevitable advance of which it sensed through the Lewis and Clark expedition and the activities of Aaron Burr.

As in 1803, Jefferson first considered an alliance with Great Britain in order to be able to occupy the Floridas and the area corresponding to the state of Texas today. Once again, however, he preferred to resort to diplomacy—this time in France, where Talleyrand now intimated that he would support the United States. In a confidential message to Congress dated December 6, 1805, Jefferson played two hands: while announcing that France was willing to help the United States, he did not rule out the option of obtaining the territories by force. Jefferson had in fact already made up his mind: in order to overcome Spanish opposition, he wanted to buy Florida through the mediation of France. When, however, the American president was finally able to give the
minister plenipotentiary Armstrong authorization to negotiate the purchase, it turned out that Napoleon no longer needed money. This little flurry of diplomatic activity continued until 1809, with France alternately offering and refusing to help.

Although the details of this maneuvering may seem of little interest, they must not be neglected. Because of the determination of American leaders to obtain Florida—and even, possibly, Texas—the foreign policy efforts of the United States were concentrated on very specific geopolitical goals, which led the new nation away from the generous ideals it wanted its mission in the world to be associated with. In order to secure Florida, Jefferson’s government was willing to help Napoleon trample Spain. Through the contempt he showed this oppressed nation and its representatives, Jefferson imitated French behavior toward Spain. He wrote James Bowdoin, the minister plenipotentiary in Spain: “We expect therefore from the friendship of the Emperor that he will either compel Spain to do us justice, or abandon her to us. We ask one month to be in possession of the city of Mexico.” In moments of impatience, Jefferson betrayed even more ambitious objectives, similar to those of Aaron Burr, whose activities he had just condemned: “Our southern defensive force can take the Floridas, volunteers for a Mexican army will flock to our standard, and rich [rewards] . . . will be offered to our privateers in the plunder of their commerce and coasts. Probably Cuba will add itself to our confederation.”

Nevertheless, in order to obtain Florida, Jefferson needed to avoid offending the old colonial nation of Spain too much. In December 1805 Jefferson and Madison met with Francisco de Miranda, the Venezuelan revolutionary who had proved himself in the armies of the French Revolution. It is known that on this occasion Miranda confided his plans for an expedition to the secretary of state. Yet in February 1806, when the general left New York for Caracas, the American administration failed to show solidarity with the South American revolutionary, and actually took action against those who had made his departure possible. To spread “the blessings of freedom and equal laws” was an objective the United States wanted to implement first and foremost on territories that belonged to them. Insofar as the only links that the United States had with Spanish America were of a commercial nature, the 1807 embargo was to further accentuate the redirection of American efforts to the interior of the continent. Only in 1810, at the beginning of Madison’s administration, did the United States become seriously interested in Latin America and support revolutionary movements there; even then, the amount of help the North Americans extended to South Americans should not be overestimated.

At any rate, in September 1810 the war with France put Spain in a critical situation, and this created an opportunity for a group of Americans residing in West Florida to put into practice the kind of popular expansionism that Jefferson had so often predicted. Having formed a convention, they proclaimed...
the independence of the state of West Florida on September 26, and asked to join the American republic. On October 27, 1810, the new president, James Madison, who had in fact had a hand in these proceedings, extended U.S. authority over that area, alleging that West Florida belonged to the United States by virtue of the Louisiana Purchase, and provisionally integrating it into the Orleans Territory. In December of that year, the territory was occupied in part by American troops. The following year, Madison had Congress authorize him to take possession of East Florida if a foreign power tried to appropriate it. Lastly, in March 1812, on the eve of the war with England, a group of “patriots” occupied the island of Amelia in East Florida, although they were unable to take the capital, St. Augustine. It was perfectly clear, however, that Florida was bound to be occupied by American troops some time soon—to be determined by the international situation and the boldness of the frontier citizens.

**Indian Policy**

Besides the Spanish, another group fell victim to the great movement of expansion: Native Americans. Yet of all the presidents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it was probably Jefferson who was the most sincerely interested in Native American cultures. He asked not only Lewis and Clark, but other explorers as well, to record Indian vocabulary and to observe Indian customs. This was already archaeological work of sorts, for the president did not doubt that Native American civilization was doomed by the inexorable and beneficial advance of American civilization. Far from being acknowledged and accepted, the Native American cultural identity was bound to disappear: Native Americans had to adopt the way of life of the white settlers, that is, if they wanted to join in the general march of progress. As Jefferson blandly put it to the Seneca chief Handsome Lake: “a little land, well-stocked . . . will yield more than a great deal without stock or improvement.” Once they became true farmers, Native Americans would in addition be able to sell their surplus of land and consequently buy more farming tools. All’s well that ends well—since through the same deal the pioneers would be satisfied by the sale of former Native American hunting grounds. Like Henry Knox, Jefferson thought expansion should be peaceful and did not envision the possibility that Native Americans might refuse to go along with that scheme. His good intentions, however, were tainted with what historian Reginald Horsman calls “ambivalence.” Was it out of a desire to see their situation improve that Jefferson wanted Native Americans to become farmers, or was it merely a way to obtain more land from them? The following letter by Jefferson, dated February 16, 1803, would seem to favor the second analysis: “Among the Indians two objects are principally kept in view: 1. the preservation of peace 2. the obtaining lands. Towards the latter object we consider the taking the Indians to agriculture as
the principal means from which we can expect such effect in future. When they shall cultivate small plots of earth . . . they will sell from time to time to help out their personal labour in stocking their farms . . . .”121 And yet his interlocutor, Handsome Lake, had come for the very purpose of asking him that Native Americans not be forced into selling their lands unless they wanted to. The tribes from the old Northwest, that is, east of the Mississippi, were generally dissatisfied with the land sales Governor William Henry Harrison pushed them into.122 The chiefs of the Six Nations of New York State requested that their remaining lands be made nontransferable, a request that Jefferson politely, but firmly, refused.123

Native Americans, however, decided that they would not disappear without putting up a fight. Their resistance took the form of a great political and religious movement aimed at pan-Indian unity. Among the Senecas, the prophet Handsome Lake had become disgusted at the shameful state that alcohol reduced his compatriots to; he preached temperance and the return to past customs, which was essentially a means of counteracting the influence of land buyers who often relied on alcohol to persuade the Native Americans to sell.124 With the northwestern tribes, it was Tenskwatawa, the Shawnee prophet, who spread the good word and tried to accomplish a regeneration of Native American culture. His brother Tecumseh gave this religious movement a political dimension by attempting to unite all the tribes east of the Mississippi, from the Northwest to the Southwest, in this effort to restore the old culture.125 The actions of the two brothers started to bear fruit in 1805, and one can sense Jefferson’s irritation at this in his second inaugural address. As a man of progress and the Enlightenment, he resented the success of these “prophets” with theories he viewed as reactionary. In Jefferson’s view, the Native Americans were driven out by the inexorable stream of American expansion, and since hunting was no longer open to them, they had been provided with all the necessary implements for agriculture. These measures were dictated by the “humanity” and generosity of the American leaders. And yet, as Jefferson deplored, some conservative Indians let themselves be misled by their priests. In terms that recall his attacks upon the Federalists at the outset of the French Revolution, Jefferson denounced the obscurantist spirit that influenced the Native Americans, and concluded with these words: “in short, my friends, among them is seen the action and counteraction of good sense and bigotry; they, too, have their anti-philosophers, who find an interest in keeping things in their present state . . . .”126 In sum, whoever would not follow the road to progress as Jefferson saw it was automatically considered a victim of fanaticism and reactionary views. By no means could the American president admit the possibility that Native Americans might follow a road to development other than the one he had sketched out: “civilization” through education, agriculture, and Christianization.
The French-Speaking Population of Louisiana

The cultural difference of the Louisiana French-speaking population who had just been integrated into the Union was not recognized any more than that of Native Americans. Since the birth of the United States, the American citizen had implicitly been defined by his conformity to certain criteria, namely, that he be white, a Protestant, and an English speaker. In *The Federalist* no. 2, John Jay defined the American people as “a people descended from the same ancestors, speaking the same language, professing the same religion, attached to the same principles of government, very similar in their manners and customs.” The French-speaking population of Louisiana, needless to say, did not exactly fit that description. Like Native Americans, the Creoles were characterized in American eyes by their “ignorance.” On September 29, 1803, William Charles Cole Claiborne, the governor of the Mississippi Territory, wrote to Jefferson that “until a knowledge of the American Constitutions, laws, language and customs, is more generally diffused, a state government in Louisiana would not be managed with discretion.” For the planter William Dunbar, the ignorance and prejudices of the Louisiana people were an important fact to be conveyed to the administration. In January 1804 Claiborne, who by now was governor of New Orleans, once again stressed the expensive tastes and lack of education of the Louisianans, and their ensuing inability to take part in the civic life of a republic that was founded on virtue. It is difficult to see what Claiborne could have based such a harsh judgement on when he did not speak French and could therefore not evaluate his new constituents very well. At any rate, since he thought the Louisianans were strongly attached to France, he decided to Americanize them as quickly as possible.

Article III of the Franco-American treaty of 1803 stipulated that the inhabitants of Louisiana be “incorporated in the Union of the United States, and admitted as soon as possible, according to the principles of the Federal constitution, to the enjoyment of all the rights, advantages and immunities of citizens of the United States.” Jefferson thought, however, that a transitional period was in order. Already on July 11, 1803, he told Horatio Gates that in his view, the newly acquired territory would not have a separate administration, and the New Orleans area would instead be annexed to the Mississippi Territory. Furthermore, Jefferson went on, American laws should be introduced among its population, and for this to occur a sufficient number of Americans must be incorporated into it so that they could take control of the legislature and government.

The point was that such responsibilities could not be entrusted to the “Creoles” of Louisiana: their superior numbers had to be neutralized by a massive influx of American immigrants. Then, the more recent arrivals could in a perfectly legal way take control of an American-style government. Congress indeed went
along with Jefferson’s ideas: while passing the territorial act of March 26, 1804, it denied Louisianans the right to elect their representatives to the legislature. The Louisianans, who so far had basically accepted American domination without protest, balked at this treatment, which so clearly made them second-class citizens. Jean-Etienne Boré, mayor of New Orleans, had already written Jefferson to ask that French be kept as the official language;\(^\text{134}\) in the spring of 1804 Louisianans organized meetings, drafted statements that they themselves took to Congress, and resigned from official positions they held. Their reaction caused a bit of a stir, and in 1805 the provisions of the first territorial act were softened, so as to allow Louisianans to elect one delegate per district to a general assembly.\(^\text{135}\)

The Louisiana Purchase doubled the area of the United States and thus considerably reinforced feelings of national unity and identity. Indeed, the western expeditions lay the foundations of a national myth—that of the conquest of the West—which was rooted in a love for the virgin land and a great pride in discovery. American expansion became the basic ingredient of the national feeling, in which everyone consciously partook in the greatness of the nation and forged a patriotic bond based on a love for the American land. Yet with all its emphasis on progress, expansion was not free of ambiguities. Its very success encouraged attitudes of intolerance toward those who were left out or those who did not agree with it. The strength of the United States scorned the weakness of Spain, and while an interest in Native American cultures continued to exist thanks to Jefferson and other enlightened minds, the military power of the tribes was no longer an object of fear, and it now went without saying that they would have to cede their lands whenever asked to do so. On that score, the threatening tone of John Quincy Adams was quite revealing: “But what’s the right of a huntsman to the forest of a thousand miles over which he has deliberately ranged in quest of prey? Shall the liberal bounties of Providence to the race of man be monopolized by one of ten thousand for whom they were created?”\(^\text{136}\) For Jefferson, American expansion could not be turned down by those it encompassed, since it was a popular, democratic kind of expansion that brought political liberty along with the progress of civilization. Yet at the same time Jefferson felt that American civilization was a superior one: it had to be deserved and its purity preserved. Louisianans learned this unpleasant lesson when their customs and language were openly criticized, and when they were deemed unfit for democracy. The paternalistic advice that Jefferson extended to Native American chiefs was a far cry from the cautious negotiations that George Washington had conducted with them a decade earlier. In the span of ten years or so, the American nation had grown stronger and more confident: this was no longer a time for fearing Indian attacks, but for visions of a grand continental future.