

U.S. National Security and Party Politics: The Consensus on Louisiana, 1789-1803

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WITH THE TWO HUNDREDTH ANNIVERSARY of the Louisiana Purchase, it is appropriate to once again examine the developments surrounding this sea change in American history. The purchase has been celebrated as the result of the vision of one man, Thomas Jefferson, and as the beginning of the great western expansion of the U.S. Yet the purchase should be understood not simply in the context of western expansion but also of a young republic's quest for national security. In an oft-quoted statement, Jefferson declared:

There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural and habitual enemy. It is New Orleans The day France takes possession of New Orleans, fixes the sentence which is to restrain her forever within her low-water mark. . . . From that moment, we must marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.¹

Jefferson was doing more than indulging in political hyperbole or expressing some solitary inspiration. He was reflecting a political consensus among national leaders that had developed since the founding of the Re-

¹J. F. Watts and Fred L. Israel, eds., *Presidential Documents: The Speeches, Proclamations, and Policies that Have Shaped the Nation from Washington to Clinton* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 34-35.

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public. It stressed the need for access to the Mississippi River and the importance of the Mississippi Valley to national security.

An important party to this consensus, Federalists, has been accorded only a minor place in histories of the purchase. In United States history textbooks, for instance, the reaction of the Federalists to the purchase, if it is mentioned at all, is only given one or two sentences and generally focuses on the opposition in New England.² The support of leading Federalists, such as Alexander Hamilton, John Adams, and John Quincy Adams, is seldom mentioned.

The United States' concerns over Louisiana between 1789 and 1803 have been the subject of much study, but less attention has been paid to the role these concerns played in prompting leading Federalists to support purchase of the territory. Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick's work on the early republic, *The Age of Federalism*, shows the importance of national security concerns to the early Federalist governments, but it does so by looking at domestic politics and not directly at attitudes about Louisiana and, in any case, ends with Jefferson's assumption of the presidency.³ James Lewis in *American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood* notes leading policy makers' "commitment to securing the goals of the Revolution against the problem of neighborhood . . . as they responded to changing conditions throughout the New World between 1783 and 1815."⁴ But he makes little reference to the attitudes and reasons behind Federalist support of the purchase and says nothing about pre-1800 rumors of retrocession of Louisiana to France.

Other studies make more of Federalist enthusiasm for the purchase. Daniel Lang in *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic* argues that party leader Alexander Hamilton saw the acquisition of "those countries [Louisiana and the Floridas] as essential to the permanency of the Union."⁵ Alexander DeConde's *This Affair of Louisiana* notes that even before 1800 it was not Republicans alone who saw possession of Louisiana in the United States' future. "Like Jefferson, policy makers in the new

²See, for example, Irwin Unger, *These United States: The Questions of Our Past, Concise Edition*, 2nd. ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 1: 185; John Mack Faragher et al., *Out of Many: A History of the American People*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2003), 250; Robert A. Divine et al., *The American Story* (New York: Longman, 2002), 1: 260.

³Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁴James E. Lewis, Jr., *The American Union and the Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783-1829* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 13.

⁵Daniel Lang, *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic: The Law of Nations and the Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 123

American government thought of Louisiana and the Floridas as being held by the Spanish in a kind of trusteeship.⁶ Federalist leaders besides Hamilton “also desired Louisiana and the Floridas.”⁷

But Federalist reactions to the Louisiana Purchase merit further study. The national security concerns faced by Federalist administrations between 1789 and 1801 helped lead Federalists who had served in these governments as officers and diplomats—they might be termed national Federalists—to a consensus with Republicans on the status of Louisiana. They accepted Jefferson’s purchase, in spite of opposition within their own party and the possibility that the new territory, like other parts of the West, would become heavily Republican.

Louisiana’s strategic and economic importance was immense. The western portion of the U.S. needed use of the Mississippi River and New Orleans for their economic growth. Louisiana’s position on the west bank of the Mississippi gave its rulers the ability to control traffic along the river and by extension commerce on the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers as well. Louisiana also included the Mississippi’s mouth; whoever controlled it could potentially exercise an economic stranglehold on the American west. But the region was more than a source of threat to U.S. commerce; it also offered a site from which invasions could be launched as well as a breeding ground for threats to the internal unity of the country. There were those who wished to detach the western country to create a new nation. A large number of Native Americans, many of whom had reason to be hostile to the U.S., were encouraged in their enmity by European residents of Louisiana. Accordingly, between 1789 and 1803 the region would, on more than one occasion, become a source of concern for the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson administrations. These concerns prompted many national Federalists to support the acquisition of the region, in spite of differences over specifics with the Republican president who accomplished it.

By the time a new national government took power in 1789, Louisiana was already seen as a source of potential threats to the Republic. For its part, the Spanish leadership understood that a strong and growing U.S. would one day wish to control and cross the Mississippi, threatening their nation’s possession of Louisiana. In order to strengthen their hold on Louisiana, the Spanish crown in 1789 officially opened the doors of Louisiana

⁶Alexander DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana* (New York: Scribner, 1976), 49.

⁷*Ibid.*, 68.

and West Florida to foreign settlement. Immigrants were granted permission to move personal property onto 240 to 800 acre tracts of land.⁸

The young nation saw this proposition as a serious threat. It might encourage Americans to move farther west, beyond the boundaries of the U.S. In January 1790, George Washington recorded in his diary the concerns of George Nicholas of Kentucky:

That Spain is playing a game which, if not counteracted will depopulate that Country & carry most of the future emigrants to her Territory . . . that persevering steadily in this conduct will drain the western Settlements. That these considerations ought to make the Federal Government take (he thinks) the most decisive steps as to the rights of Navigating the Missisipi, and induce it to pay particular attention to the gaining the affections of the Western people.⁹

At the same time, there were fears that Spain was kindling Native American opposition within the boundaries of the U.S. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton told George Beckwith, “[W]e cannot prove it positively, but have every reason to think, that he [a Spanish officer] has been using endeavours to check or even frustrate our negotiations with the Creek Indians.”¹⁰

The worries over Spain’s relationship with the Native Americans had a basis in fact. The Barón de Carondelet, Spanish governor of Louisiana, saw Native Americans as a means toward accomplishing the difficult task of protecting Louisiana from possible encroachments by the U.S. With two regiments, artillery, a small fleet, and sufficient funds to secure native and provincial forces, he could “answer for Luisiana and the exclusive possession of the Misisipi River for Spain, in spite of all the power and all the forces of the American States.”¹¹ He wrote of the potential role of the Native Americans: “I have proposed the means by which Luisiana can be sheltered from their [U.S.] attempts, and by which all their possessions can

⁸A Proclamation, September 2, 1789, *Territorial Papers of the United States*, ed. Clarence E. Carter and John P. Bloom (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1934-1975), 2: 214

⁹*The Diaries of George Washington*, ed. Donald Jackson and Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1979), 6: 14.

¹⁰Hamilton in conversation with George Beckwith, August 7-12, 1790, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Harold Syrett and Jacob Ernest Cooke (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-1987), 6: 547

¹¹“Extracts of a report from Carondelet . . . 1793,” Louis Houck ed., *The Spanish Regime in Missouri: A Collection of Papers and Documents Relating to Upper Louisiana Principally within the Present Limits of Missouri During the Dominion of Spain, from the Archives of the Indies at Seville* (Chicago: R. R. Donnelley & Sons, 1909), 2: 14.

be devastated by means of the Indian tribes who are our allies . . . who, fearful of the invasion of the Americans, will always, whenever incited by presents and arms, be ready to wage the most destructive kind of war."¹²

For American leaders, national security and economic interest dovetailed from the beginning. Their posture towards Louisiana was dictated by the importance of open access to and use of the Mississippi River. Washington wrote to Marquis de Lafayette that the official position of the U.S. with respect to Louisiana was that the nation wanted "scarcely any thing but the free navigation of the Mississippi (which we must have and as certainly shall have as we remain a Nation)."¹³ The importance of the Mississippi to the existence of the nation would be a continuing theme of the first three federal administrations, particularly as the population and commerce of the trans-Appalachian West continued to grow.

As American politics in the 1790s took a turn toward the factional, the initial disagreements between the supporters of Hamilton and Jefferson over the national debt and the national bank would extend to most areas of domestic and foreign politics. But while the two sides often disagreed over specifics, there was essential agreement on Louisiana's place in U.S. foreign policy. This became evident as early as the Nookta Sound Controversy of 1790, which raised the issue not only of Louisiana but of war with Britain.

As tensions between Britain and Spain rose over the Spanish seizure of British property on Vancouver Island, American officials became increasingly concerned that the U.S. would be caught in the middle. British action against the Spanish could lead to part or all of Louisiana and the Floridas ending up as British possessions. In July, Washington noted that Gouverneur Morris, who was acting as special emissary to Britain, saw a rupture between Britain and Spain as inevitable and that he was "apprehensive" about the British moving against New Orleans. Morris believed that British possession of the region would be "injurious" to the U.S.¹⁴ The British still occupied forts on U.S. territory, and concerns about war were further exacerbated when word spread that Benedict Arnold had been in Detroit reviewing the militia. This led members of the administration, in-

¹²Ibid., 2: 13.

¹³George Washington to Marquis de Lafayette, August 11, 1790, *Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1931-1944), 31: 88.

¹⁴July 1, 1790, *Washington Diaries*, 6: 80.

cluding Washington, to believe that the British had designs on the Spanish Mississippi.¹⁵

Washington asked Secretary of State Jefferson to consider U.S. foreign policy in light of the potential war between Britain and Spain. Jefferson responded on July 12, 1790, counseling delay and neutrality while not ruling out military action. He argued that there were a number of possible outcomes of a war over North America. If the British took control of the Spanish possessions he saw a number of risks to the country, including a threat to American unity. “[S]he will possess a territory equal to half ours, beyond the Mississippi, she will seduce that half of ours which is on this side of the Mississippi.”¹⁶ He was also concerned by the possibility of having one powerful neighbor—the British—instead of two—the Spanish in Louisiana and the British in Canada—who could be played off one another. He suggested to Washington that the administration tell the British that the U.S. would remain neutral but would also be concerned about any changes on its borders. In a statement foretelling his words of 1802, Jefferson suggested to the president that “we should view with extreme uneasiness any attempts of either power to seize the possessions of the other on our frontier.”¹⁷ Jefferson also informed Gouverneur Morris that the U.S. would remain a neutral power as long as the British carried out their treaty obligations and “attempt no conquests adjoining us.”¹⁸

But Jefferson also saw war between Britain and Spain as an opportunity to advance U.S. interests on the frontier. He believed that Spain, at the very least, needed to keep the U.S. neutral in a conflict. When he wrote William Carmichael, chargé d'affaires in Madrid, Jefferson proposed that if Spain ceded all her possessions east of the Mississippi (East and West Florida, which included all of the Gulf Coast east of the river), she might secure “the rest of her territory, and [make] an Ally, where she might have a dangerous enemy.”¹⁹ A few days later, Jefferson wrote William Short, chargé d'affaires in Paris, that he wanted a quick conclusion to negotiations, as “[i]t cannot be expected we shall give Spain time, to be used by

¹⁵Ibid., 6: 86. Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, July 11, 1790, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd, L. H. Butterfield, Charles T. Cullen, John Catanzariti, and Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1950-2003), 17: 25.

¹⁶Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, July 12, 1790, *The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series*, ed. Dorothy Twohig (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1987), 6: 59.

¹⁷Ibid., 6: 61.

¹⁸Secretary of State to Gouverneur Morris, August 12, 1790, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 17: 127.

¹⁹Jefferson's Outline of Policy on the Mississippi Question, *ibid.*, 17: 116.

her for dismembering us.”²⁰ Securing the United States’ place on the Mississippi and a port of its own would be the price for U.S. neutrality.

As the summer progressed and the prospect of war between Britain and Spain on the North American continent seemed to grow, what began as a foreign policy question became a question of war and peace. George Washington now called on his cabinet, as well as the chief justice of the United States Supreme Court, to advise him on the position the U.S. should take if the British asked permission to cross American territory to attack Spain’s American possessions, most likely New Orleans, and what should be done if they crossed without permission.

All five men responded to the president’s query. Their thoughts reflected concern over the ownership of the vast western lands and for the complex place Louisiana had in U.S. policy. Each man perceived the movement of British troops through U.S. territory and the potential transfer of Louisiana to the British as a problem for the U.S. They shared a common concern for the potential growth of the British Empire in North America. They all perceived such a transfer as a threat not only to the economy but to the nature of the Republic itself. This issue thus placed Louisiana squarely in the center of national security concerns.

Jefferson had become worried enough about the possibility of Britain gaining control of Louisiana and the Floridas “that in my opinion we ought to make ourselves parties in the *general war* expected to take place, should this be the only means of preventing the calamity.”²¹

John Jay, chief justice of the United States, believed, “in the present State of Things it would doubtless militate against the Interest of the U.S. that the spanish Territories in question should be reduced, and remain under the Government of his B.[ritannic] Majesty.”²² But in the end he felt fears of the British gaining the Floridas needed to be balanced against other national concerns: “as the State of their [U.S.] affairs strongly recommends Peace, and as there is much Reason to presume that it would be more prudent for them *at present* to permit Britain to conquer and hold the Floridas, than engage in a War to prevent it, such Inquiries would be premature.”²³

Vice President John Adams and Secretary of War Henry Knox also emphasized peace. Adams expressed his belief in “neutrality, as long as it may be practicable.”²⁴ This would be a neutrality in which the U.S. would

²⁰Secretary of State to William Short, August 10, 1790, *ibid.*, 17: 122.

²¹Thomas Jefferson to George Washington, August 28, 1790, *Papers of George Washington*, 6: 356.

²²John Jay to George Washington, August 28, 1790, *ibid.*, 6: 353.

²³*Ibid.*, 6: 356.

²⁴John Adams to George Washington, August 29, 1790, *ibid.*, 6: 358.

not officially side with either power but also do nothing that gave advantage to one side or the other: "To grant . . . permission to march troops through the territory of the United States, from Detroit to the Mississippi, would not only have an appearance offensive to the Spaniards, of partiality to the English, but would be a real Injury to Spain."²⁵ Knox wrote, "the passage of British troops would be to effect an object directly contrary to the interests and welfare of the United States. If therefore the demand should be made, it may be refused, consistently with the principles of self preservation, and the law of Nations."²⁶ But, when he considered the whole of U.S. interests, he concluded war was to be avoided as it would harm U.S. commerce and with it the source of public revenue, jeopardizing the U.S. economy.²⁷

Hamilton took the longest to respond. His letter dated September 15 was both long and complex. He believed that if current Spanish policy barring the Mississippi to the U.S. did not change, the U.S. "may have a more urgent interest to differ with Spain than with Britain."²⁸ But the British gaining Louisiana would allow them an "increase of the means of annoying us."²⁹ He believed that a British Louisiana and Floridas would be more open to Americans than under the Spanish, which could lead citizens in the western U.S. to shift their allegiances. Britain's expanded presence on the continent would also give it even greater influence over the native populations in the region. He was also concerned that Louisiana could become the chief supplier of Britain's Caribbean and Canadian colonies, thus reducing demand for the goods of the East Coast states. These concerns reflected Hamilton's more general belief that British conquest of the region was a serious threat to U.S. security. As to the immediate question, if the British chose to pass through U.S. territory on their way to Louisiana without permission but stayed away from U.S. forces and citizens, then placing a grievance before the British government would be sufficient. But if U.S. forces in the region were forced to allow the British through, then war would be necessary.³⁰

The crisis highlighted the extent of the consensus among national leaders over the importance of Louisiana and the Floridas to the nation. Future Federalist leaders agreed with Jefferson that the transfer of Louisiana to Britain would be contrary to American interests. In addition, both Jeffer-

²⁵Ibid., 6: 358-359.

²⁶Henry Knox to George Washington, August 29, 1790, *ibid.*, 6: 365.

²⁷Ibid., 6: 366-367.

²⁸Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, September 15, 1790, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 7: 53.

²⁹Ibid., 7: 46.

³⁰Ibid., 7: 46-47, 56.

son and Hamilton advised that war might be necessary under certain circumstances, such as if British troops crossed U.S. territory without permission. The possibility of war also highlighted a number of issues for the U.S. with respect to its western boundaries. Was the U.S. West defensible? How critical was ownership of New Orleans to the U.S. and should the nation attempt to gain control of the city? These questions would shape the attitudes of national leaders toward the region until they were answered by the purchase.

In September, Hamilton wrote to Washington that he had been informed that the Spanish would agree to U.S. rights to navigate the Mississippi and in July had informed their viceroy in Mexico not to interfere with U.S. vessels on the river.³¹ But this was only a temporary solution to the long-term problem of access to the Mississippi.

The Nootka Sound crisis eased when Britain and Spain signed a convention in October 1790, but the importance of Louisiana to the U.S. had become clearer. When talking to Maj. George Beckwith, acting as unofficial representative of Lord Dorchester, governor of Canada, Hamilton took a tone regarding New Orleans that viewed national security as involving more than simply containing a military threat. He insisted that a port on the Gulf of Mexico was necessary to the economic survival of the American West and made clear that the U.S. “look[ed] forward to the possession of New Orleans.”³² When later asked directly about possession of New Orleans, Hamilton answered, “The rapid increase of our Western country is such, that we must possess this outlet, in a very short space of time, whatever individual interests may be opposed to it, the general advantage of the States points it out most evidently.”³³

U.S. administrations continued to worry that European powers would try to limit the nation’s growth not only by controlling the western bank and mouth of the Mississippi but by interfering with Native Americans in the southwestern U.S. and Spanish possessions of Florida and Louisiana. In September 1792, Andrew Pickens informed Charles Pinckney, governor of South Carolina, that “all agreed that the Spaniards are using all their influence with the Southern Indians to engage them against the United States.”³⁴ The preceding month, Washington had expressed concern about Spanish interaction with natives in the Floridas. He had a report of the “extraordinary interference of the Spaniards in West Florida . . . of their en-

³¹Alexander Hamilton to George Washington, September 21, 1790, *ibid.*, 7: 63.

³²Conversation with George Beckwith, September 25-30, 1790, *ibid.*, 7: 71.

³³Conversation with George Beckwith, October 15-20, 1790, *ibid.*, 7: 112.

³⁴Andrew Pickens to the Governor of South Carolina, September 13, 1792, *Territorial Papers*, 4: 169

deavouring to disaffect the four Southern tribes of Indians toward this Country And that every exertion is making by the Governor of West Florida to obtain a full and general meeting of the Southern Tribes at Pensicola.”³⁵ Both Washington and Hamilton also heard reports of Spanish promises to “support the Indians in preventing” U.S. efforts to run a “boundary line” between the Creeks and U.S.³⁶ Referring to such interference with U.S. efforts to secure peace with the native tribes, Washington even asserted that “there is a very clear understanding in all this business between the Courts of London and Madrid; and that it is calculated to check . . . the rapid encrease, extension and consequence of this country.”³⁷ Despite the recent tension between Britain and Spain, Americans believed the two nations understood that limiting American growth was in their mutual interest.

Accordingly, the administration kept a close eye on the Spanish in Louisiana. Washington learned in August 1792 that Spain had sent “[f]ive Regiments of about 600 men each, and a large quantity of Ordnance and Stores” to New Orleans.³⁸ While a small force by twenty-first century standards, it was significant considering the small size of the U.S. Army at the time.³⁹ In June 1793, Washington informed Henry Knox that he wanted to know “in as unsuspected a manner as the case will admit . . . what number of Troops have lately arrived at New Orleans.” He considered the information important enough that “no reasonable expense” was to be spared in gathering it.⁴⁰

Concern over free navigation of the Mississippi eased with the Pinckney Treaty of 1795, which secured this right as well as Spanish agreement to allow U.S. merchants to deposit goods at New Orleans. But the larger issue of American interests remained very much alive, for the expansion of the French revolutionary wars made another European power a factor in the Louisiana question. In February 1793, Jefferson was informed of French plans to attack “the mouth of the Missi., and sweep along the bay of Mexico Southwardly, and that they would have no ob-

³⁵George Washington to the Secretary of State, August 23, 1792, *Writings of George Washington*, 32: 128-129.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 32: 128; Tench Coxe to Alexander Hamilton, November 8, 1792, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 13: 28.

³⁷George Washington to the Secretary of State, August 23, 1792, *Writings of George Washington*, 32: 130.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 32: 129.

³⁹In 1797, the Army had an authorized strength of 3,300 personnel. Morris MacGregor, “The Formative Years,” in *American Military History*, ed. Maurice Matloff (Washington: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1988), 115.

⁴⁰George Washington to the Secretary of War, June 14, 1793, *Writings of George Washington*, 32: 503.

jections to our incorporating into our government the two Floridas.”⁴¹ France had been resurrected as the most powerful player on the European continent, and her expanded colonial aspirations combined with her military power could make her a hard neighbor with which to deal. As Spain was increasingly seen as a weakened power in Europe, the greatest threat—outside of potential Spanish intrigues with the native population—became the reestablishment of a French empire in North America.

Fear of revolutionary France had always been particularly strong among the Federalists, making the idea of a French Louisiana of special concern to them. They had good reason. By 1796, rumor had it that France would regain control of Louisiana from Spain. Alexander DeConde has noted that suspicions of French colonial aspirations grew with Georges Henri Victor Collot’s mission to “reconnoiter the Ohio and Mississippi valleys.” Collot concluded from his efforts that in order to secure Louisiana it would be necessary to unite it with the part of the U.S. west of the Alleghenies.⁴² French colonial aspirations on the North American continent thus posed a threat to the unity of the U.S.

With the growing success of the French armies in the revolutionary wars, apprehension only increased. In 1797, John Quincy Adams wrote his father from The Hague that France wanted war with the U.S. and hoped to create a southern republic to act as a French ally and counterbalance in the region, similar to the Italian Republic in southern Europe.⁴³ Congressman Fisher Ames expressed the growing concerns of the Federalists with the threat Louisiana posed to national unity when he wrote Hamilton in January 1797: “The western country scarcely calls itself dependent on the union. France is ready to hold Louisiana. The thread of connection is slender & that event I fear would break it.”⁴⁴ Spanish weakness made “that event” seem all the more likely. U.S. secretary of state Timothy Pickering wrote Hamilton in March 1798 that it appeared the Spanish had decided to withdraw any forces that might be on U.S. territory and that “[p]erhaps these orders may have resulted from Spain’s seeing or fearing the necessity of ceding Louisiana to France—and hence concluding that she might as well do a grateful thing to us before the surrender.”⁴⁵ Pickering wrote, on

⁴¹Notes on Conversations with William Stephens Smith and George Washington, February 20, 1793, *Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 25: 244-245.

⁴²DeConde, *Louisiana*, 82-83.

⁴³John Quincy Adams to Joseph Pitcairn, March 31, 1797, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington Chauncy Ford (New York: Macmillan Company, 1913), 2: 154-155.

⁴⁴Fisher Ames to Alexander Hamilton, January 26, 1797, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 20: 485.

⁴⁵Timothy Pickering to Alexander Hamilton, March 25, 1798, *ibid.*, 21: 375.

April 1, to Gen. George Mathews at Natchez that he hoped the Spanish were evacuating Natchez and Walnut Hills (in present-day Mississippi) and that they would come under the possession of the U.S. because he feared Spain could not resist French desires to regain Louisiana.⁴⁶

As war between the U.S. and France loomed in 1798, Louisiana was increasingly understood to pose a military threat. Rufus King wrote John Marshall from London that “France has formed and will not be diverted from her plan respecting the United States France expects to find *un point d’appui* in Louisiana and to begin from thence her operations against the United States.”⁴⁷ Winthrop Sargent, acting governor of Kentucky, wrote Pickering that he had been informed that “the French and Spaniards are preparing and indeed determined to attack and take the Illinois Country as far as and including Vincennes and that a War between the United States and those powers was inevitable.”⁴⁸ A few days later, he noted “recent alarming reports of large reinforcements to the spanish Garrison upon the Mississippi and the Opinion entertained that they are hostilely disposed towards the United States.”⁴⁹

As tensions grew between the U.S. and France, former president Washington came to the conclusion that if war broke out the American South was most likely to be the first target. The United States’ southern flank was vulnerable because of its military unpreparedness, its slaves who could be armed, and the fact that it was “more contiguous to their Islands, & to Louisiana & the Floridas, if they can obtain possession of them.”⁵⁰ In November 1798, Washington asked Alexander Hamilton and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney if it was probable that France would gain possession of the Floridas and Louisiana and, if they did so, what the risks were to United States and what could be done to limit them.⁵¹

In June 1799, Washington again expressed his concern on this score: “I question whether the evil arising from the French getting possession of Louisiana and the Floridas would be *generally* seen, until it is felt.”⁵² Later in August, he considered the potential threat to the nation:

⁴⁶Secretary of State to George Mathews, April 1, 1798, *Territorial Papers*, 5: 16.

⁴⁷Rufus King to John Marshall, April 2, 1798, *The Papers of John Marshall*, ed. Herbert A. Johnson, Charles T. Cullen, and Charles F. Hobson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1974-2002), 3: 425.

⁴⁸Winthrop Sargent to Secretary of State, January 8, 1798, *Territorial Papers*, 3: 496.

⁴⁹Winthrop Sargent to Judge Symmes, January 14, 1798, *ibid.*, 3: 498.

⁵⁰George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, July 14, 1798, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 22: 20.

⁵¹Queries Propounded to Major Generals Hamilton and Pinckney, November 10, 1798, *Writings of George Washington*, 37: 14.

⁵²George Washington to Jonathan Trumbull, June 25, 1799, *ibid.*, 37: 250.

if the Policy of this Country, or the necessity occasioned by the existing opposition to its measures, should suffer the French to Possess themselves of Louisiana and the Floridas, either by exchange or otherwise, I will venture to predict without the gift of "*second sight*" that there will be "no peace in Israel." Or, in other words, that the restless, ambitious, and Intriguing spirit of that People, will keep the United States in a continual state of Warfare with the numerous tribes of Indians that inhabit our Frontiers.⁵³

Given such prospects, Hamilton favored the United States taking possession of Louisiana from Spain if possible. In March 1798, Hamilton told Pickering: "If *Spain* would cede *Louisiana* to the UStates I would accept it, absolutely if obtainable absolutely, or with an engagement to *restore* if it cannot be obtained absolutely."⁵⁴ He saw French possession of the region as extremely dangerous to the U.S. On April 12, 1798, he wrote: "With the [French] acquisition of Louisiana, the foundation will be laid for stripping her [Spain] of South America and her mines; and perhaps for dismembering the United States. The magnitude of this mighty mischief is not easy to be calculated."⁵⁵ Hamilton wrote Harrison Gray Otis in 1799 that "I have been long in the habit of considering the acquisition of those countries as essential to the permanency of the Union, which I consider as very important to the welfare of the whole."⁵⁶

Federalists thus had for twelve years considered the issues of ownership of Louisiana, yet when the time came and a decision had to be made, the party split over the issue. While many Federalist leaders at the national level were moving more towards expansion as a means to enhance both military and economic security, a number of notable but more regionally-based Federalists opposed it, even when they recognized the threat Louisiana posed.

In particular, prominent New England Federalists, led by men such as Fisher Ames and by the Essex Junto, opposed the purchase of Louisiana. In October 1803, Ames wrote, "that the acquiring of territory with money is mean and despicable. For as to the right of navigation, &c. the Mississippi, that was our own before; and the nation that will put its rights into negotiation, is deserving of shame and chains. . . . As to the money we are

⁵³George Washington to Governor Jonathan Trumbull, August 30, 1799, *ibid.*, 37: 348.

⁵⁴Alexander Hamilton to Timothy Pickering, March 27, 1798, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 21: 380.

⁵⁵"The Stand IV," April 12, 1798, *ibid.*, 21: 414.

⁵⁶Alexander Hamilton to Harrison Gray Otis, January 26, 1799, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 22: 441.

to pay, I care not for it. As to the territory, the less of it the better.”⁵⁷ But, as noted, even Ames had seen a potential threat in French possession of Louisiana. In May 1802, Ames wrote that the French would find a use for her troops, and that Louisiana was one logical place for their deployment. In 1803, after the Spanish refused the U.S. right of deposit and the territory was transferred to France, Ames had commented that “Louisiana is a subject of popular irritation, and of temporary embarrassment to the powers that be Yet Kentucky may possibly break its bridle, and rush into business.”⁵⁸

While some have been encouraged by the opposition of such men as Ames to see the debate over the Louisiana Purchase as a party issue, Federalists versus Republicans, it is not that simple.⁵⁹ Louisiana’s potential impact on the U.S. had since 1789 been a source of concern for nationally-minded Federalists—not only Hamilton but a significant number of other Federalists supported the acquisition of all or part of Louisiana.

Rufus King saw the transfer of Louisiana into the hands of Napoleon as a significant threat to the young Republic. In 1802, King wrote to Hamilton that he knew “of no measure from abroad, which is capable of such extensive and injurious effects as the cession of Louisiana and the Floridas to France.”⁶⁰ He went on to point out that the French were preparing an expedition for Louisiana, unless the slave revolt in St. Domingue turned out to be a sufficiently large problem. As historian Robert Ernst noted, when the purchase took place, King recognized, as did most northern Federalists, that the additional territory would lessen the influence of his own region in national politics but that the long-term benefits to the nation would outweigh the short-term losses. The only alternative was to accept Napoleon as a neighbor. King understood the necessity of possessing Louisiana for the nation’s security against both Napoleon and other foreign powers.⁶¹

Gouverneur Morris took Rufus King’s position a step farther. He saw the purchase as not only good for national security but for the economic

⁵⁷Fisher Ames to Christopher Gore, October 3, 1803, *The Works of Fisher Ames with a Selections of His Speeches and Correspondence*, ed. Seth Ames (1854; reprint, New York: Burt Franklin, 1971), 1: 323.

⁵⁸Fisher Ames to Dwight Foster, February 6, 1803, *ibid.*, 1: 317.

⁵⁹See, for example, David Carson, “Blank Paper of the Constitution: The Louisiana Purchase Debated,” *Historian* 54 (Spring 1992): 477-490; James Banner, *To the Hartford Convention: The Federalists and the Origins of Party Politics in Massachusetts, 1789-1815* (New York: Knopf, 1970).

⁶⁰Rufus King to Alexander Hamilton, May 7, 1802, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 26: 3.

⁶¹Robert Ernst, *Rufus King: American Federalist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 281-282.

interest of New England. He insisted, "I am content to pay my share of fifteen millions, to deprive foreigners of all pretext for entering our interior country. If nothing else were gained by the treaty, that alone would satisfy me."⁶² Louisiana was more dangerous to the South and West than to New England. It was a natural rival to the former regions but a natural economic ally of the latter. Morris saw Louisiana as competing with southern agricultural interests, while the North offered "useful and I may say necessary commercial agents. Good management, therefore, on our part cannot fail to conciliate them."⁶³ The two regions could become interdependent, and in the end, "the interest of New England is the same with that of Louisiana."⁶⁴ He also believed that if the treaty was seen as a bad deal, the blame would fall on Jefferson.⁶⁵

John Adams and John Quincy Adams also favored acquisition. The younger Adams, who was serving in the Senate at the time, embraced the purchase, though he believed it was necessary to gain the consent of both the U.S. and Louisiana before it could be carried out. He went so far as to propose a constitutional amendment that would give Congress a more general power of annexing new territory, an idea not foreign to either Secretary of State James Madison or President Jefferson.⁶⁶ In 1804, John Adams wrote his son, "I do not disapprove of your conduct in the business of Louisiana. I think you have been right, though I know it will become a very unpopular subject in the Northern States."⁶⁷ The elder Adams, years after the purchase, wrote Josiah Quincy that he had been pleased by it. He saw it as the only way to secure navigation on the Mississippi and with it the loyalty of the western territories. He believed the West might well have either joined with a European power or set itself up as independent. He defended the constitutionality of the purchase by arguing that while the constitutional convention might not have specifically defined the power to add territory, it was a prospect that in some form (such as conquest) had to have been in delegates' minds at the time.⁶⁸

⁶²Jared Sparks, *The Life of Gouverneur Morris* (Boston: Gray & Bowen, 1832), 3: 183.

⁶³Ibid., 3: 206.

⁶⁴Ibid., 3: 205-207.

⁶⁵Ibid., 3: 183.

⁶⁶John Quincy Adams to John Adams, August 31, 1811, *The Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams*, ed. Adrienne Koch and William Peden (New York: Knopf, 1946), 274.

⁶⁷Jack Shepherd, *The Adams Chronicles: Four Generations of Greatness* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1975), 227.

⁶⁸*The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States with Life of the Author; Notes, and Illustrations*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (1850-1856; reprint, Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1969), 9: 631-632.

Hamilton's position had been consistent in supporting the acquisition of territory he considered important to the nation. He wrote Charles Cotesworth Pinckney in December 1802, "I have always held that the Unity of our empire and the best interests of our Nation require that we should annex to the UStates all territory East of the Mississippi, New Orleans included."⁶⁹ By 1803, Hamilton was advocating military intervention to prevent the French from taking possession of the greater Louisiana region. In the New York *Evening Post* of February 8, 1803, he argued that there were two possible solutions to the problem caused by the French acquisition of Louisiana. The first was to buy the region. The second was to take it by force, then negotiate. He considered the second course to be a better one and more likely to be successful. But he doubted Jefferson's ability to handle the problem of Louisiana.⁷⁰

After the purchase had been negotiated, Hamilton wrote favorably of the agreement. In the New York *Evening Post* on July 5, 1803, he argued that Louisiana was "an important acquisition, not, indeed, as territory, but as being essential to the peace and prosperity of our Western country."⁷¹ While the vastness of the land and the lack of population made consideration of its role in the nation a matter for future political thought, he saw New Orleans as an immediate and valuable prize which would be of "immense benefit to our country Provided therefore we have not purchased it too dear, there is all the reason for exultation which the friends of the administration display, and which all Americans may be allowed to feel."⁷²

By 1803, most "national" Federalists saw the acquisition of Louisiana as a matter of security, defense, and national unity and thus found common ground with Jefferson and the Republicans. From the founding of the Republic until the purchase, fears and concerns over foreign invasion, the ability to navigate the Mississippi, foreign influence over Native Americans, and the economic viability and loyalty of the West kept Louisiana a significant concern for leaders in both parties.

⁶⁹Alexander Hamilton to Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, December 29, 1802, *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 26: 72.

⁷⁰For the *Evening Post*, February 8, 1803, *ibid.*, 26: 83.

⁷¹"Purchase of Louisiana," July 5, 1803, *ibid.*, 26: 129.

⁷²*Ibid.*, 26: 133-134.