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Idealist at Work

The greatest diplomatic triumph in the history of the United States began with a blunder. In July 1801, four months after Thomas Jefferson took over the “presidential palace,” as the unfinished White House was then called, Louis Andre Pichon, the affable young chargé d’affaires of the French Republic, visited the United States’ new chief executive. That such a low-ranking diplomat was France’s sole spokesman in the new U.S. capital was stark evidence of the strained relations between the world’s only two republics. Normally an ambassador would be on hand to handle such an important relationship.

From 1798 to 1800, France and the United States had fought a vicious, undeclared war at sea in which French privateers and frigates had despoiled a staggering \$12 million in U.S. ships and cargoes (the modern equivalent of almost \$200 million). American men-of-war had slugged it out ship to ship with many of these depredators. Fearful of a French invasion, George Washington had emerged from retirement to head a ten thousand-man



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U.S. army, and appointed General Alexander Hamilton as its field commander.

The war had emerged as a byproduct of the larger war France was waging with England. The French were furiously resentful over what they considered American treachery—the United States’ refusal to honor the treaty of alliance it had signed with King Louis XVI in 1778, which had enabled the new republic to win independence from England.

President George Washington had declared the United States neutral in the struggle that erupted between Revolutionary France and England in 1793. He had decided that the French Republic, having beheaded Louis XVI, was no longer the same country with whom the United States had been allied during its revolution. France—and numerous French partisans in the United States—thought there was a distinctly pro-English tilt to this international balancing act. Washington’s successor, President John Adams, partly agreed with this view, and had sent three commissioners to Europe to negotiate an end to the so-called Quasi-War.

Louis Andre Pichon had acted as secretary of the French delegation to this parley and played a major role in working out an agreement that called for a “firm, inviolable and universal peace.” But many skeptical Americans, notably members of the Federalist Party led by Jefferson’s chief rival, General Alexander Hamilton, still nursed violently antagonistic feelings toward France. They found special grounds for complaint about this treaty, in which the United States had abandoned millions of dollars in claims

by U.S. merchants for losses in the Quasi-War. In return, France agreed to release the United States from the Treaty of 1778, which the Federalists considered already defunct.

Thomas Jefferson was not one of these Francophobes. On the contrary, the tall, red haired, freckle-faced president greeted Pichon warmly as the spokesman for a country that stirred his deepest political emotions. For the previous nine years, Jefferson had defended the French Revolution against fierce criticism in the United States. Even when France collapsed into an orgy of mob rule and raw terror in 1793–1794, Jefferson retained his faith in the revolution's redeeming value. Repeatedly he had insisted that "the liberty of the whole earth" depended on a French victory against England and the other European powers that had assailed France after Louis XVI's execution. Rather than permit "this cause" to fail, Jefferson told one friend, he "would have seen half the earth desolated."

Jefferson's followers, who soon coalesced into the Republican Party, often expressed this vehement opinion in riotous demonstrations in the streets of New York and other cities. President Washington viewed these numerous, so-called Democratic Societies as seedbeds of insurrection. Their behavior, combined with the far worse excesses of the French Revolution, convinced conservatives that liberty and equality were dangerous ideas. This conviction became part of the Federalist Party's gospel.

Pichon was hoping for a demonstration of Jefferson's friendship for France. The young chargé asked the president about U.S. policy toward the troubled island of Santo Domingo. Then, as now, it was divided into a French-

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speaking western third (the future republic of Haiti) and a Spanish-speaking eastern two thirds (the future Dominican Republic) with a range of mountains as a geographical barrier between them. Spain had ceded the Spanish part of the island to France in 1795. The French section's sugar, coffee, and indigo plantations once made it France's most valuable overseas possession. The French Revolution had triggered a civil war that wrecked the economy.

Out of the turmoil emerged an extraordinary black leader, Toussaint L'Ouverture, who ruled both enclaves, in which some four hundred thousand ex-slaves lived uneasily with thousands of whites and free mulattoes. Toussaint was immensely proud of his martial prowess and did not complain when his followers called him "the Bonaparte of the Antilles."

Pichon, who spoke excellent English, asked Jefferson what the United States would do if France tried to regain control of Santo Domingo. Would it support such an effort? A smiling Jefferson replied that "nothing would be easier than to supply everything for your army and navy, and to starve out Toussaint."

This was a startling reversal of the policy of President John Adams, who had seen L'Ouverture's emergence as an opportunity to frustrate British and French imperialism in the Caribbean. Adams and his secretary of state, Timothy Pickering, had shipped L'Ouverture's army food and ammunition, which helped them defeat a British army that attempted to seize Santo Domingo. They also sent Edward Stevens, an old friend of Alexander Hamilton, to the island's major port, Cap Francois, where he became

L'Ouverture's trusted friend and adviser and urged him to declare independence.

Jefferson assured Pichon that most Americans had no enthusiasm for an independent Santo Domingo ruled by a black dictator, who was a walking, talking threat to the peace and prosperity of every American state with large numbers of slaves. In September 1800, Virginia had been badly shaken by an aborted rebellion led by two free Africans, Gabriel Prosser, a Richmond blacksmith, and his brother Martin, an itinerant preacher.

Jefferson also told Pichon he thought it was likely that an isolated Toussaint would turn to piracy to finance his rule. There was a grave danger of Santo Domingo becoming "an Algiers in American waters." In the Mediterranean, the Moslems of Algiers and other North African cities regularly preyed upon merchant ships of all nations. Jefferson grandly predicted that if rumors of an early peace between France and England were true, the British would join in a campaign to remove Toussaint from the political scene and reimpose white control on Santo Domingo. England also had islands in the West Indies that were crowded with slaves made restless by the French Revolution's cry of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

A delighted Pichon rushed back to his residence and reported the president's statement to his superior in Paris, Foreign Minister Charles Maurice de Talleyrand-Perigord, one of the most corrupt and devious politicians in the history of France or any other nation. Talleyrand was born into a noble family that traced their pedigree to the year 1000. He was pressured by his father into becoming a

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priest because a boyhood injury had left him with a serious limp. On the eve of the French Revolution, his father secured him the bishopric of Autun—a favor he soon regretted. The son, already notorious for his impiety, sided with the revolutionists and was soon excommunicated by the pope.

When Talleyrand took charge of the foreign office in 1797, he had reportedly exulted: “I am going to make an immense fortune!” One of his first moves was a demand for a huge bribe from American diplomats to settle the growing tensions between the United States and France. The Americans had reacted with public indignation, replying: “No, not a sixpence!” In subsequent telling, this became a fervid slogan: “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute.” The undeclared war soon followed.

The episode deepened Talleyrand’s already low opinion of Americans. In the mid-1790s, he had spent two years in the United States escaping the revolution’s reign of terror and departed with the fixed opinion that these newcomers to the family of nations were boring, self-righteous upstarts who needed to be put in their place. One of the best ways to do this, Talleyrand had concluded, was to check their westward expansion by gaining control of Florida and the Mississippi River basin, establishing “a wall of brass” that the Americans could never penetrate, even if they called on the British for help.

Pichon’s dispatch was soon being pondered by the man who had brought order out of the chaos of the French Revolution—First Consul Napoleon Bonaparte. Born into a family of petty, largely penniless Corsican

aristocrats two years after France purchased the island from Genoa in 1767, Napoleon was educated at elite French military schools. He managed to qualify for a career in the royal army in spite of speaking French with a heavy Corsican accent. The 1789 revolution levitated this strong-willed soldier to ever-increasing power, thanks to his ability to organize and lead men, his readiness to take risks and his utter ruthlessness. The upheaval also instilled in him a carefully concealed loathing for the masses and their violent tendencies.

By the age of twenty-five, Bonaparte was a brigadier general and a man to watch. Seven years later, on November 10, 1799, he led a coup d'état that made him one of three consuls entrusted with executive power. Bonaparte was the only consul that mattered. Under a new constitution, the legislature was an easily manipulated three-tiered affair—a senate that introduced Bonaparte's decrees, a tribunate that debated them, and an assembly that voted their approval. Announcing that the "romance of the revolution" was over, Napoleon imprisoned or exiled radicals and ruled as a civilian, with more authority than Louis XVI ever dreamed of wielding.

The British, exhausted and almost bankrupt after nine years of global war, were ready to sign a peace treaty, leaving this military genius the virtual ruler of Europe. At the Battle of Marengo in 1800, Napoleon had smashed the army of England's chief ally, Austria, and forced Vienna to sign a humiliating peace in February 1801, in which it surrendered the Grand Duchy of Tuscany.

"The Man of Destiny," as millions of admirers called

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Bonaparte, welcomed President Jefferson's invitation to retake Santo Domingo. The conquest of the island was a first step in Napoleon's plan to reestablish France's empire in North America, which it had lost in the Seven Years' War (1754–1761) with England and her continental allies. Talleyrand, the man who had given Napoleon the idea, was equally pleased. It is easy to imagine these two cynics exchanging smiles. The naivete of these Americans! They still thought that the ideals of the French Revolution were alive and meaningful in France. Napoleon—and the artful Talleyrand—knew that only one reality mattered now: power.

If all went well, Talleyrand's vision of French control of the Mississippi River valley would achieve glorious fruition on Napoleon's bayonets. Jefferson and his government would become another French satellite, like Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland, and the petty kingdoms of Germany and Italy. The First Consul would rule not only Europe but also North America. Control of South America would inevitably follow. King Carlos IV of Spain was already terrified of Napoleon's power. Finally, with the gold and silver of the mines of Mexico and Peru, and the bountiful harvests and enterprising seamen of the United States at France's command, the Man of Destiny would turn on England and crush that nation of conniving shopkeepers once and for all.

The supposed peace between the United States and France was called the Treaty of Mortefontaine, named after the country chateau owned by Bonaparte's older brother, Joseph, where it had been signed. The agreement had

been followed the next day by a very different treaty in Spain. The chief negotiator was Lucien Bonaparte, younger brother of the First Consul. Signed at San Ildefonso, a country palace of the Spanish king, this treaty stipulated that Spain would return to France the immense territory of Louisiana, which King Louis XV had given to Spain in 1763 to compensate his Iberian ally for its losses in their struggle with England in the Seven Years' War. In return, Napoleon would place the son-in-law of the Spanish king on the throne of the Duchy of Tuscany and name him monarch of a new kingdom called Etruria. To prove that this was a transaction between firm friends, the First Consul pledged never to cede Louisiana to a third power, for any reason.

It would be hard to imagine a more graphic demonstration of the cynicism of the Talleyrand-Bonaparte team. Within twenty-four hours they solemnly vowed to renew their friendship with the United States at Mortefontaine and cut a deal at San Ildefonso that they knew would rupture this friendship the moment the news got out. Of course, they were presuming that the news would not get out until they were ready to let it out.

What was the territory of Louisiana? Nothing less than the heart of the American continent. It stretched from the Canadian border to the mouth of the Mississippi, and from the western bank of the great river to "the Shining Mountains," the Indian name for the Rockies. As a vital adjunct to this vast "retrocession," Napoleon also wanted the Spanish colonies of East and West Florida, which comprised the present-day state of Florida, plus portions of

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what is now the state of Louisiana on the east bank of the Mississippi up to the thirtieth parallel of latitude. This swatch of the continent had four hundred miles of coastline along which France could create naval bases that would dominate the waters of the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico. Bonaparte ordered Talleyrand to begin bargaining with the Spanish king to add this final touch to his vision of restored colonial power.

Santo Domingo fit into this ambitious scheme as a source of badly needed cash. Napoleon was convinced that the island could again become the cornucopia it had been before the French Revolution. Instead of buying food from the Americans, the way the colony had previously operated, the victuals would now come at bargain prices from French farms in Louisiana. First, however, Toussaint L'Ouverture and his fellow generals—"these gilded Africans" as Bonaparte called them—would have to be eliminated.

While signing preliminary articles of peace with the English in October 1801, Bonaparte obtained their approval to send an expedition to regain Santo Domingo. To bolster his argument, he paraphrased President Jefferson's fears that Toussaint L'Ouverture would turn to piracy. Bonaparte promptly ordered his brother-in-law, aggressive General Charles Leclerc, and twenty thousand of France's best troops to prepare to depart for the Caribbean. So confident was the first consul of swift success, he saw no reason why his beautiful younger sister, Pauline, should not accompany her handsome husband.

The First Consul commanded Leclerc to subdue and

occupy Santo Domingo—a task Bonaparte estimated would require no more than six weeks—and then detach a large portion of his army to take possession of Louisiana. Included in Leclerc's orders was the commitment that clever Chargé Pichon had extracted at the White House: "Jefferson has promised that the instant the French army arrives, all measures will be taken to starve Toussaint and to aid the army."