

Napoleon, Jefferson, and the Haitian Revolution

By Mark Lore



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The bloody 1791 slave revolt in Saint-Domingue—the French colony that became the nation of Haiti—and the colony’s successful war of independence from France in 1802 left a trail of major consequences in their wake. They haunted Napoleon Bonaparte who, as he sat in his final exile in St. Helena, confessed that “The business of Saint Domingue was a great stupidity on my part...it was probably the greatest error of judgment I ever committed in administration...” (Broers 371). The revolt haunted Thomas Jefferson in a different way. In 1797, Jefferson wrote that “only a single spark is wanting” for the rebellion to spread to the North American mainland, in which case “we shall be the murderers of our own children” (Broers 377).

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The historian Michael Broers has written, “Napoleon Bonaparte and Thomas Jefferson were the two most intellectually gifted leaders in the western world at the dawn of the nineteenth century, and their inter-

action, first over Saint Domingue, but even more over the Louisiana Territory, ensured that they both left indelible marks on the futures of their respective continents” (Broers 387). Their interaction also had the effect of dooming Haiti to diplomatic and economic perdition for much of the 19th century, a history from which it still suffers today.

I have long been fascinated by the Haitian revolution—the only successful slave rebellion in history—and the impact it had on the fledgling United States. It related directly to the diplomatic negotiations that produced the Louisiana Purchase. As Jefferson’s words foretold, it also fortified in the southern United States a deep fear that a Haiti might be replicated at home—which did much to stiffen southern attitudes over the ensuing decades leading to the Civil War.

It is a story often told in bits and pieces, but rarely as an interlinked narrative, involving high-level geopolitics, charismatic personalities, and a major turning point in global race relations.

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In the late 1700s Haiti was not the very poor and troubled Caribbean failed state that we know today. Rather it was France’s colonial jewel-in-the-crown. Despite its small size (about that of Massachusetts), the value of its production was greater than all of Europe’s other hemispheric colonies combined; it accounted for 40% of Europe’s sugar, 60% of its coffee, and an astounding 40% of all of France’s overseas trade (Roberts 300). By 1790

its exports were easily worth more than any of the original thirteen North American colonies. It ranked second only to Great Britain among America's trading partners (Egerton 169).

To build this tiny powerhouse, European planters imported into the island close to 800,000 Africans as slaves during the 18th century (Slave Data Base). This dwarfed the slave trade into North America during the same period. Why the huge disparity? For one thing, relatively few women made the Middle Passage to Haiti, so there was little natural growth. For another, the cruel conditions of slave labor in Haiti's relentless agro-industrial economy meant an *attrition* of the force by an estimated five to ten percent a year (Dubois 21). This required a steady flow of replacements.

Such disequilibrium could not last long. By the end of the 18th century, there were only 40,000 whites in the colony, overseeing an African slave force of a half-million or more. The brutality of Haiti's slave economy was pushing its unbalanced society to a breaking point. That break came in 1791, following the French Revolution, which clearly inspired it. In August of that year, slaves on some of the sugar plantations launched what some historians have called the largest slave revolt in history (Dubois 5). They burned the fields, smashed equipment, massacred white owners and their families, and seized *de facto* control of the colony. Tales of the horror of that time have come down through generations; for example, the famous 19th century Creole pianist, Louis Gottschalk, cited family histories of "grievous recollections" of "properties devastated" and "daughters and wives, fallen into the power of their former slaves [...] put to death after having been subjected to the most horrible outrages" (qtd. in Geggus 209).

A former slave, Toussaint Louverture, was Haiti's George Washington.

Following the revolt, Toussaint took advantage of post-revolutionary sympathies and distraction in France to introduce the world's first constitution abolishing slavery and racial discrimination. But he was content with *de facto* rule, not challenging Paris, and in fact tried to maintain some vestige of the old plantation system. For a decade Haiti, while remaining technically a colony, enjoyed self-rule and benign support—or at least indifference—from the Jacobins in France and the Federalist administrations of Washington and Adams.

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But then, in France, power shifted. Napoleon emerged as First Consul in 1799. By 1801, there was a pause in the endless wars with Great Britain. Free to turn his attention to Haiti, Napoleon sought to reassert control, reestablish slavery, and revive the sugar and coffee earnings so badly needed by the French treasury to pursue his European wars. Haiti was also to be, along with New

Orleans, a springboard for Napoleon's quest for empire in the Western Hemisphere. He saw the Mississippi Valley as a breadbasket that would feed the re-enslaved Haitians (Egerton 170).

So, in late 1801, Napoleon dispatched to Haiti a formidable 20,000-man armada of his best troops under the command of his brother-in-law, General Victor Charles Leclerc. The intention was to re-impose the old colonial order: "Rid us of these gilded negroes," Napoleon is supposed to have ordered (Dubois 36). Leclerc's army easily occupied the coastal cities and towns; Toussaint and his forces withdrew into the mountains. Toussaint himself was tricked into surrendering and wound up later dying in 1803 in a freezing jail cell in France. But the fight continued under his top general, Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

What had by now become a full-scale colonial war of liberation intensified through the year of 1802. Dessalines's soldiers staged unremitting guerrilla strikes from their mountain retreats, exacting a bloody toll on the French forces. The French responded in kind with cruel retaliation against both slave troops and civilians. But, most tellingly, the French suffered grievously from yellow fever, against which they had little immunity. Within six months, Leclerc's force was reduced from its original 20,000-plus to only a few thousand survivors. Leclerc himself would perish by the end of the year. In Paris, Napoleon was coming to realize that his dream of western empire was lost. As renewed warfare with Britain loomed, the First Consul, ever the master strategist, was ready to cut his losses.

At this point, enter Thomas Jefferson. During his first two years as president, 1801-1802, Jefferson's Francophile leanings led him to generally support French aims in Haiti. He attempted to embargo the Toussaint regime. He promised to send supplies to Leclerc.

He was anxious to propitiate Napoleon; American shipping on the Mississippi River was burgeoning and needed guaranteed access through the French-held port of New Orleans. Finally, as a southern politician and slaveholder, Jefferson fervently supported the collapse of slave power in Haiti lest its example spread to the southern United States.

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And yet...politics is never simple. Jefferson quickly found that backing France in Haiti brought a host of complications. For one thing, many Americans opposed French expansion in the hemisphere. In particular, Jefferson faced growing alarm from his southern supporters. They feared that France (in most Americans' minds still a radical land of rebellion and regicide) might actually pose a future threat to the United States—specifically, that it might use a reconstituted position in Haiti and in its vast “Louisiana” claim beyond the Mississippi to foment slave unrest east of the river. Napoleon’s evident intention to reoccupy Haiti and the unexpected size of the Leclerc expedition only exacerbated matters. In backing France in Haiti, Jefferson

found himself in an untenable political position domestically.

As a result, by late 1802, Jefferson and particularly his Secretary of State, James Madison, had grown reluctant to support French aims. They retracted earlier promises to help supply Leclerc’s beleaguered army. They expressed mounting concern with possible French interference with American trade through New Orleans. Finally, in early 1803, Jefferson appointed his close confederate, James Monroe, to travel to Paris with instructions to negotiate some sort of assured access to the port of New Orleans.

It was just at this time that the collapse of the Leclerc expedition began to resolve Jefferson’s political dilemma. With France out of the way, he could deal with—that is, isolate—Haiti on its own terms. Second, although Jefferson didn’t know so at the time, the defeat in Haiti and looming re-initiation of conflict with Great Britain caused Napoleon suddenly to reverse direction completely (there are advantages to dictatorship). His treasury was strapped and Haiti was no longer the valuable real estate it once was. Instead of a North American Empire, the First Consul now saw the financial and diplomatic advantages of negotiating not just New Orleans, but all of “Louisiana” with the United States. This opened the door to the final chapter of this story: the Louisiana Purchase.

So it was that when Monroe arrived in France in April 1803, he had no idea of what was about to fall in his lap. Before the American envoy even had a chance to present his credentials, Napoleon had authorized his foreign minister, Charles Talleyrand, to offer US Ambassador Robert Livingston the sale of the entire Louisiana territory—875,000 square miles, doubling the size of the United States, today comprising some or all of

thirteen states—for an eventual sum of less than four cents an acre! (Roberts 322). After several weeks of haggling, the terms were settled, and the treaty was signed in May 1802. When the deal was done, Ambassador Livingston is reported to have said, “We have lived long, but this is the noblest work of our whole lives” (Fleming 129).

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Rejoicing was less evident on the French side. Talleyrand was privately opposed, as were Napoleon’s two brothers, Leopold and Joseph. There is a story that the brothers accosted their sibling while taking his bath to argue passionately against the treaty. It was to no avail. Napoleon didn’t “suffer fools gladly,” not even his brothers. At one point during the heated discussion, the First Counsel is said to have arisen naked from the water to splash them both until they were thoroughly soaked into silence (Roberts 323).

Surprisingly, there was also controversy in Washington. The opposition Federalists had long been impatient with Jefferson’s preaching on minimal national government and strict construction of the constitution. They amused themselves by charging the president with hypocrisy for

submitting such a sweeping treaty, and furthermore one that acquired vast new lands, a power nowhere specifically mentioned in US law or its founding document. Jefferson was discomfited and embarrassed, which is what the Federalists wanted. Of course, at the end of the day all had to recognize the enormous benefits from the sale. The treaty passed overwhelmingly in the Senate in October 1803.

* * *

The global implications of the Haitian revolution were profound.

First, it sounded the virtual death knell for French colonialism in the Western Hemisphere, and, through the Louisiana Purchase, helped to propel the new United States on its own course of empire. A newly-confident and aggressive US began to challenge the incursions of other European powers in the hemisphere, leading to the War of 1812, the Monroe Doctrine, and other confrontations throughout the 19th century.

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Second, the Haitian revolution was a “fire bell in the night,” signaling that the political, economic, and social

model of slavery in the western world might not last forever. In an 1893 speech dedicating the Haitian pavilion at the Chicago World’s Fair, Frederick Douglass declared, “We should not forget that the freedom that you and I enjoy today [...] is largely due the brave stand taken by the black sons of Haiti ninety years ago.” Douglas, who had served as US Minister to Haiti after the Civil War, concluded that Haiti was “the original pioneer emancipator of the 19th century. [...] Until Haiti spoke, the church was silent, and the pulpit dumb” (qtd. in Davis 158).

Douglass had it essentially right. The Haitian revolution was the first anti-colonial racial war and the first mass emancipation of a slave society, as well as leading to the second republic to achieve independence in the Americas (Matthewson 140). As historian David Brion Davis puts it, “The Haitian revolution impinged in one way or another on the entire emancipation debate from the British parliamentary move in 1792 to outlaw the African slave trade to Brazil’s final abolition of slavery ninety-six years later” (158). It “showed blacks that liberation was a possibility in historical time” (Davis 158). Among whites, however, Davis adds, “the revolution reinforced the conviction that slave emancipation in any form would lead to economic ruin and to the indiscriminate massacre of white populations” (158). Nowhere were these fears stronger than in the southern United States, as we shall see.

The national implications for the US were no less important. The Louisiana Purchase brought a vast expansion of American presence and economic activity beyond the Mississippi—including the expansion of slavery and its dilemmas. It can be said that westward expansion “set off the dynamic that led to the Civil War” (Lemann). At the same time, the continuing fear of Haiti-like rebellions in the American South encouraged

southern intransigence *vis-à-vis* the North (Matthewson 123).

In fact, they had reason to fear. Gabriel’s Rebellion near Richmond in 1800, the New Orleans uprising in 1811, and later outbursts such as Nat Turner’s rebellion were all directly inspired by the Haitian example (Sidbury 11, 39). According to the seminal work of historian Herbert Aptheker, “American slaveholders trembled for their own security [...] and their always precarious sense of ease was further jeopardized by the appearances and tales of refugees [that is, from Haiti] arriving at Charleston, Norfolk, Baltimore and Richmond” (Aptheker 41).

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But the deepest and most tragic results of this history were for Haiti itself. In the years following her independence declaration in 1804, the world’s foremost powers refused to recognize the Haitian government. Part of the reason was horror at the rebels’ renewed and extreme violence against the remaining one percent white population at the time of independence, many of whom were indiscriminately butchered at Dessalines’s order. But in broader terms, the reasons were a mix of racism, defense of slavery and deference

towards France, which only gave up its colonial claims in 1825. When it did so, it was only at the price of a ruinous indemnity of 150 million francs (about \$20 billion today), which represented a constant drain on the Haitian treasury for generations afterwards (Dubois 102). Britain's attitude was governed by its relations with France, particularly post-Napoleon, and its concern for its own Caribbean holdings. Spain, sovereign of the eastern two-thirds of Hispaniola—today's Dominican Republic—was actively hostile, fearing Haitian incursions.

Perhaps most importantly, the US government, which could have been Haiti's natural trading partner and political protector, refused for over half a century to recognize Haiti's existence. Instead, responding to domestic southern pressure, Jefferson initiated an embargo of US trade with Haiti until 1810. His successors conspicuously exempted the country from the 1823 Monroe Doctrine, in effect turning a blind eye to France's bullying of its former colony. The US in fact did not formally recognize the Haitian government until 1862, in the middle of the Civil War.

So, in its first decades, the new Haitian state existed with minimal international ties, political or economic. Its economy had been decimated by the years of its independence struggle. Its formerly rich plantation-based trade was destroyed, replaced by subsistence agriculture. Sugar and coffee production moved off to Jamaica and other British colonies and to Brazil.

Thus isolated, Haiti went into a defensive crouch during the 19th century, building fortifications and a large military establishment. This establishment propped up the remnants of the former black and mulatto elite that traditionally controlled the ports and export trade. It all amounted to a power structure that skimmed off what little wealth

remained and entrenched itself through what the historian Laurent Dubois has described as “a style of exclusivist, indeed oligarchic, rule constructed around extensive presidential power” (Dubois 81). All these tendencies were reinforced by the 1915 invasion by US marines, which introduced a twenty-year occupation that exacerbated the rifts within Haitian society (Dubois 9). For most of the some eighty years since the Marines departed, Haiti has remained mired in poverty and subject to bad and authoritarian governments.

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To claim this much significance for the Haitian Revolution may surprise the reader. After all, the American and French revolutions at the end of the 18th century had already turned the world upside down. Slavery had become so widespread, so economically important and so cruel that rebellion and change were inevitable. In retrospect, Napoleon's ambitions upon taking power were too grandiose—he would probably eventually have had to consolidate and retract even if the Leclerc expedition had succeeded. By the same token, Jefferson and the bumptious young nation that he headed certainly already had eyes on the western lands and would have quite likely acquired them at some point, by

force, by settlement (remember Texas!) or by treaty.

We don't know what might have happened. History is all contingency. What we do know is that, as Frederick Douglass proclaimed, a certain number of slaves on the smaller part of a small island set in train a series of events that shook the world and that did much to shape the United States during the first seventy-five years of its history. What we also know that the racist legacy of US foreign policy during the same period—and into the 20th century—did much to contribute to the sad state of Haiti today.

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