

## Lesson Forty-Seven

# The Louisiana Purchase

### LESSON IDEA

To emphasize the unique American system of government and the dangers of entangling alliances with the collectivist governments of Europe.

### PREPARATION

Read the "During The Week" section and arrange to borrow or buy the suggested video.

**H**OW OFTEN have you heard people, when discussing peace between nations, mention the Biblical verse about the lion and the lamb tranquilly lying down together? It might work that way in a future heavenly paradise, but in our present imperfect world, the lamb will most often end up an appetizer. A study of history from the most ancient civilizations to the present confirms that the strong tend to take advantage of the weak. Our nation's Founders sought to base their policies toward European nations on this historic fact. They regarded England, France, and Spain as predators afflicted with an age-old ailment called totalitarianism.

How would you define "totalitarianism"? [Ask each family member.] It means that power is concentrated in the hands of a few, who wield it to force everyone else to do their bidding. In contrast, the American idea entailed limiting government power, and making government the servant — not master — of the people.

Thomas Jefferson served for a time as the American minister to France, where he was able to view the workings of European totalitarianism first hand. He attributed the character of the American people, in part, to the fact that they had "been separated from their parent stock and kept from contamination, either from them or the other people of the old world, by the intervention of so wide an ocean."

George Washington expressed a similar sentiment when he wrote to Jefferson in 1788: "An energetic general government must prevent the several States from involving themselves in the political disputes of the European powers." Washington remained committed to that principle throughout his presidency. His vision for America was one of complete independence. In his farewell address, he asserted: "The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in

extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible.... Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation."

John Adams, the New Englander who succeeded Washington as president, agreed. He wisely kept us from becoming involved in European wars and the sort of "guillotine politics" that had characterized the French Revolution.

Thomas Jefferson followed Adams as president. Although their political philosophies had clashed in many ways, the two men were of one mind when it came to this central aspect of U.S. foreign policy. Jefferson wrote to William Short in 1801:

We have a perfect horror at everything like connecting ourselves with the politics of Europe. It would indeed be advantageous to us to have neutral rights established on a broad ground; but no dependence can be placed in any European coalition for that. They have so many other by-interests of greater weight that some one or other will always be bought off.

**T**HE SELF-SERVING and unpredictable behavior of the European nations was obvious to 18th century American statesmen. England, Spain, and France passed their claims on American territory back and forth like chips in a poker game. For example, in 1762 Spain traded Florida to England in exchange for Havana in Cuba and Manila in the Philippine Islands. Later that year, England traded Florida back to Spain. The King of France secretly gave his cousin, the King of Spain, all wilderness land west of the Mississippi (over one million square miles called Louisiana) and on both sides of the river at its mouth (including New Orleans). [Assure that family members understand that the vast territory called Louisiana at that time is not the same as the present state of Louisiana.]

Washington, Adams, and Jefferson undoubtedly have preferred to bring this European land shuffle to an end, along with the influence of the three foreign nations on our continent, but each knew that a neophyte does not sit down at a political

poker table with seasoned card sharks and expect to come away a winner. The best course, they concluded, was to let the Europeans wear themselves out in large and small wars, while America remained aloof, developing and strengthening her political system and economic resources.

The time to bargain came in 1795, during Washington's second term, when Thomas Pinckney negotiated a treaty with Spain that gave the U.S. free navigation rights on the Mississippi River and trading privileges on New Orleans shipping docks for three years. This important diplomatic victory for the new nation opened the door to new growth. Do you know why? [Ask each family member for an opinion.]

**F** RONTIER SETTLERS began moving west from the original 13 colonies even before America declared independence from Britain. After the Revolutionary War, thousands traveled over the main roads through New England, over the highways of New York, over the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia, and through the Ohio River valley. Many were penniless or deeply in debt, having spent all they had in the fight for liberty. They sought to make a new beginning in the rich soil of the Ohio valley. As described by trappers and scouts, it was a land of opportunity for those willing to work hard. [Be sure that family members do not confuse this early western migration with the cowboy-and-Indian stories once so popular in the movies and on television. If necessary, look at a map to clarify the point.]

Most settlers earned their livings as farmers, so their success or failure was dependent on finding markets for the flour, hams, cornmeal, tobacco, and wool they produced. During the winter there was time to trap beaver, muskrat, and other fur-bearing animals. Yet none of these items could be sold to neighbors, or to residents of other frontier settlements, since such folks were also farmers and had the same products to sell.

Boston, New York, and Baltimore were good markets for the wool, tobacco, hickory-smoked hams, and furs produced in frontier settlements, but the journey by packhorse over mountains and along wilderness trails was too onerous, dangerous, and costly to be profitable.

Water transportation was cheap, however, and the Mississippi River was nearby. The giant waterway soon became a busy commercial highway replete with fleets of flatboats loaded with

#### FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The intrigues of France and Spain that preceded the Louisiana Purchase are described in Volume VI of John Clark Ridpath's *The History Of The United States*. Another recommended source of information is Thomas Jefferson by John T. Morse, Jr.

food and furs. Upon arrival at New Orleans, buyers waiting on the docks would bid for the cargoes, which would then be loaded on sailing ships bound for markets in Philadelphia, New York, London, or Paris. You can see why the treaty with Spain, granting Americans the right to use the Mississippi and sell their produce in New Orleans, was so important to our nation's growth.

But in 1802, suddenly and without explanation, the Spanish governor closed the port of New Orleans to American trade. Can you imagine what happened? [Encourage discussion, emphasizing the commercial importance of New Orleans and the Mississippi. Denying Americans use of the port would severely cripple the new nation's growth.]

**T** HE SPANISH CLOSED the port at a time when the cotton crop was about to be harvested and freighted down the river to market. The American frontiersmen were infuriated. Without the New Orleans market, all they had to sell would rot on river docks. There was talk of war, and of raising an army to march on New Orleans. Congress heatedly debated the question. Alexander Hamilton suggested that all Spanish territory east of the Mississippi, including Florida, be seized by American forces in retaliation. Then-President Thomas Jefferson sympathized with the frontier farmers, but urged them to keep their tempers cool and powder dry while he sent James Monroe to Europe to negotiate for purchase of the vital seaport.

Jefferson suspected, but did not know with certainty when the bargaining began, that New Orleans and the vast region called Louisiana (which was larger than the United States at the time) had again changed hands. It was rumored that the King of Spain had secretly given it to Napoleon Bonaparte in exchange for some French-held possessions in Italy. The most secret part of the bargain was France's solemn promise that she would never transfer the territory to

