

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

DIPLOMATIC HISTORY BOOK REVIEW: BEFORE 1900

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO

DR. FEINMAN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

DAVID GLAUBER

DAVIE, FL

12 NOVEMBER 2003

## Book Review

Cerami, Charles A. *Jefferson's Great Gamble: The Remarkable Story of Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Men Behind the Louisiana Purchase*. Naperville: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2003. 309 pages.

---

By the end of April 1803, the United States had agreed to the largest territorial purchase in the history of the world. For fifteen million dollars, the United States agreed to purchase the Louisiana Territory from France. This acquisition not only doubled the land size of the United States, but it also eliminated a threat to the nation's security. The purchase gave Americans a sense of superiority in North America and in the Western Hemisphere at large. Author Charles A. Cerami, in his intriguing, analytical, and suspenseful book, *Jefferson's Great Gamble: The Remarkable Story of Jefferson, Napoleon, and the Men Behind the Louisiana Purchase* attempts to relive the excitement and anxiety from both the American and French perspectives that led to the decision to sell the Territory and the final acceptance and purchase of the Louisiana Territory.

From the Treaty of Paris that was signed in 1783, recognizing American independence from Great Britain, the U.S. was given new land in the west, expanding the country's western border from the Allegheny Mountains to the Mississippi River. Slowly, frontiersmen wanted to search this unknown land in the West. But at the same time, northerners feared that this expansion into cities neighboring the Mississippi River could result in war because the Spanish could view the expansion as encroachment towards their Louisiana Territory. Most northerners feared a war with Spain, especially because the national government at its inception was weak and filled with turmoil.

Cerami points out the common belief of the citizens of young America was that the country had become too diversified to exist as one state; it was the U.S. Constitution that became the savior of the experiment in democracy that was the United States. The Constitution granted the national government powers that allowed it to deal with internal affairs on a larger scale and expanded its powers in dealing with international relations. This larger role for the national government was responsible for making the government more stable.

But the stabilization that the Constitution brought was threatened after Napoleon Bonaparte, the First Consul who ruled over France, secretly forced Spain to give the Louisiana Territory back to France, which had given it to Spain as part of the Treaty of Paris in 1763 that ended the Seven Years War. However, the United States would not discover this information until 1802. In the meantime, they would deal with widespread rumors that circulated within the government that France had a desire to reacquire the Louisiana Territory once again. Cerami, building up to the climax, contends that if France took possession of the Louisiana Territory that it would have been a threat to a “free” United States because France would have restarted their “old” rivalry with Great Britain in Canada, and the U.S. would have been forced to take sides and be annexed as part of the country that the U.S. sided with. Cerami genuinely makes the reader feel the threat that the U.S. could have faced and masterfully builds suspense throughout the book.

At the time the U.S. learned that France owned the land west of the Mississippi, Robert Livingston was the U.S. minister plenipotentiary to France. As the holder of this diplomatic position, Livingston became a key figure in the purchase of the Louisiana

Territory. However, Jefferson and his secretary of state, James Madison, were not very fond of Livingston and had only assigned him to his post in France because of political pressure from officials in Livingston's home state of New York. Holding a grudge with Livingston because of his "forced" appointment, Secretary of State Madison, an official who would have been expected to hear and respond regularly to correspondence from Livingston, completely and recklessly ignored him. This was a childish political game that could have put the United States in great danger because France was increasingly becoming a major power during the early years of Napoleon Bonaparte's reign.

However, there were certain messages that Jefferson and Madison did convey to Livingston, but only when it suited their needs. After hearing early rumors that Napoleon was making a move to regain the Louisiana Territory from Spain, Madison used Livingston to pass along the message that if France controlled New Orleans, the city where goods were deposited before being shipped along the Mississippi River, the Floridas, and the Mississippi, that it would stir up westerners in the U.S. and inspire "jealousies and apprehensions which may turn many [U.S.] citizens toward a closer connection with France's rival, [Great Britain]."

After learning about Napoleon's treaty with Spain, a treaty which gave France possession of Louisiana, the western part of the Mississippi, and what was believed to include East and West Florida, the U.S. House of Representatives emphasized to Jefferson that he should write a message to Livingston voicing U.S. concern about Napoleon taking formal control of Louisiana because they did not think France understood the U.S.'s strong opposition from Jefferson's unemotional and composed speeches. As Cerami attests from his studies, Jefferson's letters carried the emotion that

his speeches lacked. But still, a problem in communicating the strong U.S. opposition persisted. Livingston, trying to be more diplomatic and friendly with the French government, toned down the intensity of Jefferson's hostile words. This frustrated Jefferson, as well as Secretary of State Madison, but they were not willing to replace Livingston with a more subservient minister because they wanted to prevent Livingston from running for Vice President in the 1804 election as he desired. Even though Jefferson, Madison, and Livingston were all Democratic Republicans, it seems clear a political game of geography was being played; simply put--Jefferson and Madison were southerners and Livingston was a northerner. This means that Jefferson and Madison wanted to keep control of their party centered in the South.

Napoleon in France realized that he would have trouble in taking formal possession of Louisiana, not only because of American opposition, but because the French Colony *Santo Domingo*, near America, was in the middle of a slave revolt and the island was being destroyed by battles as well as disease that was spreading from mosquitoes that plagued the island. Therefore, Napoleon could not use his colony as a base to launch an attack on America if necessary. Furthermore, Jefferson threatened Napoleon by saying that he would enter into an alliance with Great Britain if Napoleon insisted on trying to claim Louisiana. As a result of all the hassles, the French First Consul decided to sell not only New Orleans as the U.S. desired, but also the entire Louisiana Territory to the U.S. Napoleon justified his decision to sell the Territory by reiterating disinformation that Madison gave to him, claiming that the U.S. did not want and was not ready to add more territory because it would only create further problems in

America. Napoleon, the warmonger, also realized that he could use the money from the sale to fight an impending war with Great Britain.

However, Livingston, did not know how much he could offer for the Louisiana Territory, as Jefferson nor Madison responded to such questions from him. In fact, their only response to Livingston was to send a fellow southerner, James Monroe to Paris with a higher diplomatic position than his northern counterpart, Livingston. Monroe was the one who was authorized to enter into negotiations. Jefferson wanted the South to take credit for the achievement of adding land to the United States and at the same time, undermine Livingston, who happened to be a great northern diplomat. Without Monroe, it is clear that Livingston would have successfully negotiated with France, but instead he was forced to share joint credit for the purchase with Monroe. On November 30, 1803, France ceremoniously took possession of Louisiana from Spain. Then, twenty days later, on December 20, 1803, the United States officially doubled the size of its country by adding the Louisiana Territory. This achievement assured Americans of an increased sense of security, and also gave to them a feeling of superiority over North America and the entire Western Hemisphere.

Cerami, in his research of the diplomacy involved in the Louisiana Purchase, consulted a sufficient number of books, which were seemingly used to develop background information on the characters involved in the diplomatic process. In addition, the author used an article, entitled *Diplomatic History* from the *Journal of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations*. But for the most part, Cerami made use of transcripts, notes, and letters of official correspondence that were collected and compiled by the United States Congress in 1903 to commemorate the centennial of

the land acquisition of the Louisiana Territory. He contends that the letters helped to create “a virtual roadmap of the path to agreement”

Historian and author Charles A. Cerami has recounted the purchase of the Louisiana Purchase in a humanistic, and interpretive nature, making it possible for the general audience to realize and understand in depth that the Louisiana Purchase was more than a land acquisition that doubled the size of the United States. It made Americans feel superior and believe that they were in charge of the continent where they resided and in the western hemisphere at large. For scholars, *Jefferson's Great Gamble* is a refreshing look into the politics and the deceit that were involved, leading to negotiations and the purchase of the Louisiana Territory. The book also serves as a good biographical source of how the world diplomats involved in the purchase responded to each other. Anyone who wishes to be “enlightened” on the sale that transformed America would greatly benefit from the vast research that Cerami has amassed. At a cost of \$22.95, much like the benefits/costs of the Louisiana Purchase, this book is a steal.