

FAIR-WEATHER FRIENDSHIP:
AMERICAN DIPLOMACY AND THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION, 1797-1806

Cory Young

Dr. Justin Behrend

State University of New York at Geneseo

Midway through George Washington's first term as President of the United States, his secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson, wrote a regretful letter to Vice President John Adams. A few weeks earlier, a Boston newspaper had published a criticism of Thomas Paine's pro-French Revolution text, *The Rights of Man*, by the pseudonymous author "Publicola." Jefferson believed that Mr. Adams had written the criticism because "the style and sentiments," which markedly pro-British, "raise so strong a presumption." He made his suspicions publicly known, thus pulling the vice president into a controversy of sorts. Eventually discovering that Adams was not the author of the critique—coincidentally, that position belonged to his son, John Quincy Adams—Jefferson apologized, impelled by a sense of respect and friendship toward the elder statesman. "That you and I differ in our ideas of the best form of government," Jefferson remarked, "is well known to us both; but we have differed as friends should do, respecting the purity of each other's motives, and confining our differences of opinion to private conversation."

Though the political rivalry between Adams and Jefferson is one of the best known in American history, as president, the two upheld peculiarly similar foreign policies while navigating the rebellion in Saint Domingue. Despite worldviews guided in part by anti-slavery sentiments, the founding fathers were mostly unconcerned with the welfare of the black revolutionaries. Rather, both administrations were primarily engaged in sustaining—and hopefully bolstering—the fledgling American republic; their policies toward the island colony reflect this priority. Exceptional diplomats, Adams and Jefferson stealthily maneuvered through the chaos of the Haitian Revolution with little regard for the interests of their international allies, Great Britain and France, let alone those of Toussaint and his men. Ultimately, the two founding fathers, abandoning their moral convictions in favor of expedient and protective policies, made Saint Domingue a symbol of their ruthlessly pragmatic agendas.

On August 21, 1791, hundreds of slaves revolted in the French Caribbean. Within three weeks, a Philadelphia newspaper estimated that the rebels were "10,000 strong, divided into 3 armies." All the while, Saint Domingue's whites and her *gens de couleur* (or free blacks) were engaged in their own battle over the right to representation in the French General Assembly. With the advent of slave insurrection, the two groups increasingly united against the rebels, as "[h]orrible massacres and conflagrations" consumed the entire colony. Due to the close proximity of Saint Domingue to the young United States, as well as the distinctly racial nature of the uprising, the American government quickly took notice. Jefferson opportunistically wrote to William Short, then Minister to France: "Nothing indicates as yet that the evil is at its height, and the materials as yet untouched, but open to conflagration are immense." Over the next decade, American foreign policy was largely aimed at obtaining these "materials as yet untouched."

During his tenure as Washington's Secretary of State, Thomas Jefferson made it clear that he was not opposed to circumventing the traditional obligations of alliance in his dealings with France; his loyalties as a Francophile were nearly always subordinate to his loyalties as an American. Under Washington, Jefferson was not afraid to use manipulative diplomatic strategies in order to secure his country's right to trade freely "with neighbors" so that the two lands might exchange "the mutual supplies necessary to relieve mutual wants." He attempted to achieve this through the dual approach of appealing to the old French-American alliance while simultaneously suggesting his willingness to forgo that arrangement if it meant that he could bolster trade in the Caribbean. While serving as Secretary, Jefferson's purposes regarding France were decidedly commercial. In fact, it was only during his first retirement to Monticello

in 1793, amidst negotiations over the controversial Jay Treaty, that his French sympathies overshadowed his economic interests for America.

Thomas Jefferson's private correspondence indicated that he feared the Jay Treaty would create an Anglo-American alliance, but President Adams had no intention of transforming the United States into a one-ally nation. Quite the contrary, his interests were aimed at improving American trade relations in the Caribbean—in spite of deteriorating relations with France—as had been Jefferson's own policy only a few years prior; quasi-war with France did not necessarily constitute quasi-war with Saint Domingue. In September 1798, only two months after Congress formally rescinded America's alliance with an unstable French republic, British Minister Robert Liston approached President Adams. Liston desired to establish an Anglo-American alliance against France, with whom the U.S. was engaged in a *de facto* war, which, coincidentally, developed because of unresolved hostilities surrounding the responsibilities of alliance. The minister went so far as to offer Adams the Louisiana Territory and Florida in the event that the alliance expelled France from the hemisphere. President Adams, the renowned Federalist and Anglophile, turned down this offer on the grounds that Haitian "independence was an event nearly inevitable and in all probability at no great distance." Furthermore, Adams desired a weak and independent Saint Domingue more than a trading colony under the hegemony of a strong European power. The President would quickly prove that he was as capable of strategic manipulation as Jefferson had been as America's first Secretary of State.

With the Quasi-War underway, Toussaint and his troops felt the effects of the United States' embargo against France and all lands under her auspices. Suffering from lack of armaments, the Saint Dominguan general wrote to President Adams claiming that the U.S. had "abandoned" the French colony. Toussaint requested that the Adams administration reestablish commercial relations with Hispaniola; revealingly, the president was more than willing to acquiesce. All he required of Toussaint was a promise that the general would take measures to prevent French privateering of American trading vessels in the Caribbean. Though many Federalists (including Adams' own son) wished to offer Louverture an explicit affirmation of the United States' willingness to recognize the sovereignty of the island, Adams was not so audacious. He preferred to maintain the precedent of neutrality in European affairs as had been established by the Washington administration. This intention, however, was nominal at best, as Adams sent Edward Stevens to Saint Domingue as a consul-general on February 16, 1799 to further negotiations.

Two days later, Adams responded to a call from the French Minister of Foreign Affairs, Charles de Talleyrand, and nominated William Vans Murray to serve as the U.S. Minister to France in peace negotiations. Aware that his fellow Federalists would oppose peace with France, Adams kept this appointment secret from his party. Thomas Jefferson, then Adams' vice president, wrote to James Madison saying: "This [appointment] had evidently been kept secret from the Feds of both houses as appeared by their dismay." The president was not as vehemently anti-French as Jefferson maintained. Adams made his resourceful foreign policy desires explicit during a speech to Congress in the first few months of his term: "I should hold myself guilty of a neglect of duty," he began in reference to the potential peace with France, "if I forbore to recommend that we should make every exertion to protect our commerce, and to place our country in a suitable posture of defence [sic], as the only sure means of preserving both."

Adams was not a war hawk; he was as invested in strengthening American commercial interests as Jefferson, if not more so. Yet this is not meant to suggest that the president would not resort to war to suit his purposes; Adams the diplomat was as cunning as his predecessor

in the State Department. While he sent Murray to Europe “upon the strength of a letter from Talleyrand himself,” which guaranteed that France was ready to receive “any minister plenipotentiary from the United States,” he never abandoned his conferences with Toussaint in Saint Domingue, nor the militarization of the navy against piratical France. In fact, he charged that the “operations and preparations by sea and land” were not to be “relaxed in the smallest degree.” All of France and her dominions were to be “treated in the same matter as if no negotiation was going on.” It was of no consequence to Adams that his “dual policy” of dealing with both France and Saint Domingue was precarious. Peace with France or peace with an independent Haiti made no difference to him, as either would provide similar economic advantages.

Adams did not always feel this way. In April 1799, the president expressed lingering doubts about the best course of action to adopt in the Caribbean. Rufus King, the U.S. Minister to Great Britain, feared that it would be injurious to American trade interests to recognize an independent Saint Domingue. Britain was a free soil nation and therefore had substantially less trepidation about establishing a free black republic in the Caribbean than the United States. “It appears to me that independence is the worst and most dangerous condition they can be in, for the United States,” Adams confided in Pickering. He continued: “This opinion, however, is liable to so much uncertainty, that no great dependence can be placed upon it.” England desired to form a joint company with the United States to manage trade in the Caribbean, a proposal that Adams initially rejected on the grounds of U.S. neutrality with respect to Saint Dominguan independence. By May, however, Pickering had negotiated several “Points of Understanding” with the British, which made Adams more comfortable with the plan to join in the regulating of trade in the French colony: “Upon the whole, I think the negotiation has been conducted with caution and prudence, and the result has my fullest approbation.” Yet there was still the issue of the Adams administration’s own negotiations between Toussaint and Edward Stevens in Saint Domingue. Fortunately, Toussaint was comfortable with including the British in this trade agreement. He consented to protecting Anglo-American vessels against French privateers, thereby reaffirming his desire to open trade between his country and the United States.

President Adams reinstated limited commercial relations between the two neighbors in a proclamation to Congress on 26 June 1799. Jefferson severely opposed Toussaint’s Clause, as it was colloquially known. As a slave-owning Virginia planter, Jefferson feared the repercussions of giving too much support to the black Saint Domingues, whom he believed would inspire rebellion in the Southern states. “If they [the Federalists] are guarded against the cannibals of the terrible republic,” Jefferson snidely remarked, “they ought not to object to being eaten by a more civilized enemy [France].” His fears were no concern of Adams, who continued to advance commercial negotiations with Toussaint. After going so far as to use American naval power to assist the general in expunging André Rigaud, a *gen de couleur*, from his position of power in the Southern province, Adams opened the port of Les Cayes to U.S. merchants. On 6 September 1800, the President fully restored the favorable trade with Saint Domingue.

Within six months, Thomas Jefferson had ascended to the presidency after the phenomenally contested Election of 1800. Although Adams had successfully presided over the restoration of trade with Saint Domingue, as well as the restoration of friendly relations with France in the Convention of 1800, it was not enough to secure his own reelection. Intriguingly, two of Jefferson’s first acts as president were to endorse the policies of his predecessor: first, he oversaw the implementation of the peace with France that Adams had negotiated; second, he implicitly condoned Adams’ English enterprise in conversation with Edward Thornton,

an English diplomat, thereby lending support to a policy he had so vehemently criticized the previous decade: increased Anglo-American relations. While Jefferson did preserve many of the policies of the previous administration, his reason for doing so was guided as much by his own racial prejudices as by his commercial ambitions. In discussion with Thornton, Jefferson revealed that he was content with the Anglo-American regulatory alliance because of the “free and open trade for the subjects of the two countries” with Saint Domingue, but also because of “the prevention of all maritime exertion on the part of the Negroes.”

It was no secret that Jefferson harbored a great fear of insurrection, to the extent that he openly advocated for the transport of free blacks that might promote insurgency in the Southern states. “Wither [sic] shall the colored emigrants go?” he asked St. George Tucker, an abolitionist contemporary. “If something is not done, & soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children.” A little more than a year after the Gabriel Conspiracy, Jefferson suggested to Virginia Governor James Monroe that the United States should “provide for these people [rebellious blacks] by a purchase of lands,” most reasonably, in Saint Domingue. The Caribbean island would “offer more probable & practicable retreat for them,” as the “climates [are] congenial with their natural constitution” and because they are already “established into a sovereignty *de facto*.” In spite of his racially-motivated reservations, Jefferson thought it would be most prudent to send troublesome slaves and freedmen to *Saint Domingue*, as it seemed likely that “their present ruler might be willing, on many considerations, to receive even that description which would be exiled for acts deemed criminal by us, but meritorious, perhaps, by him.” Furthermore, Jefferson expressed that he was no longer worried that such an action might result in negative consequences for the safety of the slave states because of the United States’ superior strength, amassed in part by this reinvigorated trade in the Caribbean.

Why would Jefferson so quickly abandon his sensibilities as a Southern Republican slave owner in favor of cooperation with Toussaint’s “terrible republic?” The answer lies in Jefferson’s substantially greater fear that Napoleon might attempt an armed recovery of the Louisiana Territory—land that Jefferson was determined to obtain on behalf of the United States. Only a few months before he proposed resettlement, in the summer of 1801, the President still desired the destruction of Toussaint’s administration. In fact, in negotiation with the French ambassador to the United States, Louis Pichon, Jefferson expressed an interest in joining forces against the black general: “In order that this concert may be complete and effective, you [France] should first make peace with England, then nothing will be easier than to furnish your army and flee with everything and to reduce Toussaint to starvation.” It was a letter he received around a month later that caused Jefferson to exercise such a dramatic about-face vis-à-vis his foreign policy: “Spain has ceded Louisiana to France, & an expedition is preparing to take possession of New Orleans, & plant a Colony in that country... The intention, *at present*, is to keep the whole a Secret from the government of the United States.”

News that Napoleon was sending General Leclerc to the colony with nearly 45,000 men did nothing to assuage Jefferson’s concern that France intended to forcibly take Louisiana. By fall, Jefferson was prepared to support the independence of Saint Domingue if it meant security for the United States’ interests in Louisiana. Indeed, the President effectively threatened to abandon diplomatic ties with the nation: “The day that France takes possession of N. Orleans fixes the sentence which is to restrain her forever within her low watermark. It seals the union of two nations who in conjunction can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean [the United States and Great Britain].” Thomas Jefferson, the preeminent supporter of France during the eighteenth century, had jumped ship in the name of his nation.

The United States and Great Britain never declared a formal alliance against the French. Jefferson continued to permit U.S. commercial exchange with the black insurgents in the Caribbean, which became a tacit approval of the arming of Toussaint's troops. While this policy clearly opposed French power in the Caribbean, Jefferson, like Adams, continued to negotiate with France. He sent Governor Monroe to France to orchestrate what would eventually become the Louisiana Purchase. Jefferson warned Monroe that if the United States "cannot by a purchase of the country insure to ourselves a course of peace and friendship with all nations," then war "cannot be distant." As such, "the whole [of the] public hope" hinged upon Monroe's diplomacy. Ultimately, Napoleon ceded Louisiana to the United States by way of a treaty on 30 April 1803.

Thus Presidents Adams and Jefferson led the United States through the turbulence of the Haitian Revolution, operating on exceedingly similar agendas of commercial aggrandizement. Though at first it seemed that Jefferson would reverse many of Adams policies for fear of too strong a black republic in the Caribbean, his racially impelled understanding that France posed the greater threat forbid him from doing so. Unfortunately, after the Declaration of Haitian Independence was pronounced on 1 January 1804, Governor for Life Jean-Jacques Dessalines led a series of massacres against the remaining white inhabitants of former Saint Domingue. In response, the Jefferson administration—not forgetting earlier concerns about the implications of recognizing a free Haiti—passed a series of embargoes against this new, fledgling republic. Not to completely abandon the lucrative trade with the island nation, the first embargo only forbade trade in arms. It was not until early 1806 that the United States severed all ties with Haiti, setting in motion a policy of non-recognition that would subsist until the American Civil War. Despite their steadfast commitment to pragmatic commercial diplomacy, it seems the early presidential administrations could not transcend the racial prejudices that would mark the next 150 years of American history.