

Senate Debates on the Louisiana Purchase

[Note: Transcript begins after fourth complete paragraph in column one.]

LOUISIANA TREATY.

The Senate resumed the second reading of the bill, entitled “An act authorizing the creation of a stock to the amount of eleven millions two hundred and fifty thousand dollars, for the purpose of carrying into effect the convention of the 30th of April, 1803, between the United States of America and the French Republic, and making provisions for the payment of the same;” and having amended the bill—

On the question, Shall the bill pass?

Mr. White moved that the further consideration of the bill be postponed until the second Monday in December next, stating as ground of the motion he had the honor to make, that the question was then involved in much difficulty and doubt. He could not accede to the immediate passage of the bill—that by the day he had named the Senate would be able to act more understandingly on the subject, as it would then probably be ascertained whether we are likely to obtain the quiet possession of New Orleans and Louisiana under the treaty or not, and there would still remain a great sufficiency of time to make the necessary provisions on our part for carrying the treaty into execution, if it should be deemed necessary.

The motion for postponement being stated,

Mr. White rose and made the following remarks:

Mr. President, by the provisions of the bill before us, and which are thus far in conformity with the words of the treaty, we have until three months after the exchange of ratifications and delivery of possessions to pay this money in. Where, then, is the necessity for such haste on the subject? It seems to me to be anticipating our business unnecessarily, and perhaps unwisely; it is showing on our part a degree of anxiety that may be taken advantage of and operate to our injury, and that may serve to retard the accomplishment of the very object that gentlemen seem to have so much at heart. It is not at present altogether certain that we shall ever have occasion to use this stock, and it will be time enough to provide it when the occasion arises, when we see ourselves in the undisturbed possession of this mighty boon, or wherefore are we allowed these three months credit after the delivery of possession? The ratifications have been already exchanged; the French officer who is to make the cession is said to be at New Orleans, and previous to the adjournment of Congress we shall know with certainty whether the First Consul will or can carry this treaty faithfully into operation. We have already passed a bill authorizing the President to take possession, for which I voted, and it will be time enough to create this

stock and to make the other necessary arrangements when we find ourselves in possession of the territory, or when we ascertain with certainty that it will be given to us.

But, Mr. President, it is now a well known fact, that Spain considers herself injured by this treaty, and if it should be in her power to prevent it, will not agree to the cession of New Orleans and Louisiana to the United States. She considers herself absolved from her contract with France, in consequence of the latter having neglected to comply with certain stipulation of the Treaty of St. Ildefonso, to be performed on her part, and of having violated her engagement of never to transfer this country into other hands. Gentlemen may say this money is to be paid upon the responsibility of the President of the United States, and not until after the delivery of possession to us of the territory; but why cast form ourselves all the responsibility upon this subject and impose the whole weight upon the President, which may hereafter prove dangerous and embarrassing to him? Why make the President the sole and absolute judge of what shall be a faithful delivery of possession under the treaty? What he may think a delivery of possession sufficient to justify the payment of this money, we might not; and I have no hesitation in saying that if, in acquiring this territory under the treaty, we have to fire a single musket, to charge a bayonet, or lose a drop of blood, it will not be such a cession on the part of France as should justify to the people of the country the payment of any, and much less so enormous a sum of money. What would the case be, sir? It would be buying of France authority to make war upon Spain; it would be giving the First Consul fifteen millions of dollars to stand aloof until we can settle our differences with His Catholic Majesty. Would honorable gentlemen submit to the degradation of purchasing even his neutrality at so inconvenient a price? We are told that there is in the hands of the French Perfect at New Orleans a royal order of His Catholic Majesty, founded upon the Treaty of Ildefonso, for the delivery of possession of thisterritory to France; but which has never been done—the precedent conditions not having been performed on the part of France. This royal order, it is probably, will be handed over to our Commissioner, or whoever may be sent down to receive possession. We may then be told that we have the right of France, as she acquired it from Spain, which is all she is bound by her treaty to transfer to us; we may be shown the Spaniards, who yet claim to be the rightful owners of the country, and be told that we have the permission of the First Consul to subdue or drive them out, and, according to the words of the treaty, to take possession. Of our capacity to do so I have no doubt; but this we could have done, sir, six months ago, and when one-sixth of fifteen millions of dollars, when they had wantonly violated the sacred obligations of the treaty, had insulted our Government, and prostrated all the commerce of our Western country. They we had, indeed, a just cause for chastising them; the laws of nations and of honor authorized it, and all the world would have applauded our conduct. And it is well known that if France had been so disposed she could not have brought a single man or ship to their relief; before the news could have reached Europe, she was blockaded in her own ports by the British fleets. But that time was permitted to go by unimproved, and instead of regretting the past, let us provide for the future.

Admitting the, Mr. President, that His Catholic Majesty is hostile to the cession of this territory to the United States, and no honorable gentleman will deny it, what reasons have we to suppose that the French Prefect, provided the Spaniards should interfere, can give us peaceable possession of the country? He is acknowledged there in no public character, is clothed with no authority, nor has he a single soldier to enforce his orders. I speak now, sir, from mere probabilities. I wish not to be understood as predicting that the French will not cede to us the actual and quiet possession of the territory. I hope to

God they may, for possession of it we must have—I mean of New Orleans, and of such other positions on the Mississippi as may be necessary to secure to us forever the complete and uninterrupted navigation of that river. This I have ever been in favor of; I think it essential to the peace of the United States and to the prosperity of our Western country. But as to Louisiana, this new, immense, unbounded world, if it should ever be incorporated into this Union, which I have no idea can be done but by altering the Constitution, I believe it will be the greatest curse that could at present befall us; it may be productive of innumerable evils, and especially of one that I fear even to look upon. Gentlemen on all sides, with very few exceptions, agree that the settlement of this country will be highly injurious and dangerous to the United States; but as to what has been suggested of removing the Creeks and other nations of Indians from the eastern to the western banks of the Mississippi, and of making the fertile regions of Louisiana a howling wilderness never to be trodden by the foot of civilized man, it is impracticable. The gentleman from Tennessee (Mr. Cocke) has shown his usual candor on this subject, and I believe with him, to use his strong language, that you had as well pretend to inhibit the fish from swimming in the sea as to prevent the population of that country after its sovereignty shall become ours. To every man acquainted with the adventurous, roving, and enterprising temper of our people, and with the manner in which our Western country has been settled, such an idea much be chimerical. The inducements will be so strong that it will be impossible to restrain our citizens from crossing the river. Louisiana must and will become settled, if we hold it, and with the very population that would otherwise occupy part of our present territory. Thus our citizens will be removed to the immense distance of two or three thousand miles from the capital of the Union, where they will scarcely ever feel the rays of the General Government; they will gradually begin to view us as strangers; they will form other commercial connections, and our interests will be come distinct.

These, with other causes that human wisdom may not now foresee, will in time effect a separation, and I fear our bounds will be fixed nearer to our houses than the waters of the Mississippi. We have already territory enough, and when I contemplate the evils that may arise to these States from this intended incorporation of Louisiana into the Union, I would rather see it given to France, to Spain, or to any other nation of the earth, upon the mere condition that no citizen of the United States should ever settle within its limits, than to see the territory sold for a hundred millions of dollars, and we retain the sovereignty. But however dangerous the possession of Louisiana might prove to us, I do not presume to say that the retention of it would not have been very convenient to France, and we know that at the time of the mission of Mr. Monroe, our administration had never thought of the purchase of Louisiana, and that nothing short of the fullest conviction of the part of the First Consul that he was on the very eve of a war with England, that this being the most defenseless point of his possessions, if such they could be called, was the one at which the British would first strike, and that it must inevitably fall into their hands, could ever have induced his pride and ambition to make the sale. He judged wisely that he had better sell it for as much as he could get than lose it entirely. And I do say that under existing circumstances, even supposing that this extent of territory was a desirable acquisition, fifteen millions of dollars was a most enormous sum to give. Our Commissioners were negotiating in Paris—they must have known the relative situation of France and England—they must have known at the moment that a war was unavoidable between the two countries, and they knew the pecuniary necessities of France and the naval power of Great Britain. These imperious circumstances should have been turned to our advantage,

and if we were to purchase, should have lessened the consideration. Viewing, Mr. President, this subject in any point of light—either as it regards the territory purchased, the high consideration to be given, the contract itself, or any of the circumstances attending it, I see no necessity for precipitating the passage of this bill; and if this motion for postponement should fail, and the question of the final passage of the bill be taken now, I shall certainly vote against it.

Mr. Jackson rose, and was replying at length to Mr. White, when he was called to order by the Chair, as having departed from the question of postponement, in which decision, notwithstanding Mr. White had also departed, and some members expressed a wish that Mr. J.' should proceed, he immediately acquiesced, and sat down.

The further consideration of the bill was postponed until to-morrow. [End transcription]



Th. Jefferson
MONTICELLO