SMALL WARS JOURNAL

smallwarsjournal.com

United States-Haitian Relations from 1791 to 1810: How Slavery and Commerce Shaped American Foreign Policy

by Philip K. Abbott

In 1789, on the eve of the French Revolution, Saint-Dominque (Haiti) was arguably the most valuable colony on earth. It was "an integral part of the economic life of the [agricultural] age, the greatest colony in the world, the pride of France, and the envy of every other imperialist nation."[1] Producing more sugar than all the British Caribbean islands combined, Haiti supplied over forty percent of the world's sugar.[2] For the United States, colonial Haiti was the second largest foreign trading partner, superseded only by Great Britain. As John Adams wrote in 1783, "[Haiti] is a part of the American system of commerce, they can neither do without us, nor we without them."[3] As a national commercial interest, trade with Haiti was especially important for New England merchants, where the French colony purchased sixty three percent of the dried fish and eighty percent of the pickled fish exported from the United States.[4] It not only provided a dynamic outlet for American goods to keep the sugar plantations running, but many producers as well as shippers in America grew dependent on the island market.

However, in 1791, America's founding fathers were faced with a strategic dilemma of a slave rebellion in nearby Haiti and the potential impact it posed on American commerce and the southern plantation system. We see President John Adams and President Thomas Jefferson struggle with how to address domestic pressures regarding the southern plantation system, how to protect America's highly profitable trade with Haiti, and how to maintain its neutrality among the European powers.[5] Having divergent views and radically different assumptions regarding the strategic environment, the formulation of national interests and the use of national power during both administrations became a matter of bitter partisan controversy in shaping American-Haitian relations.

Notwithstanding the changing political environment from President Adam's anti-slavery Federalist Party to President Jefferson's pro-slavery Republican Party, "the most pressing problems were those of practical statecraft; of internal administration, and of foreign policy."[6] In this regard, I see a common trend in United States-Haitian relations from 1791 to 1810, where

[1] C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint Overture and the San Domingo Revolution,* (London: Allison & Busby: 1980), vii.
[2] Patrick Bryan, *The Haitian Revolution and After*, (University of Minnesota Thesis: 1983), 6.
[3] Gordon Brown, *Toussaint's Clause: The Founding Fathers and the Haitian Revolution*, (University Press of Mississippi: 2005), 20.
[4] James Horn, Jan Ellen Lewis, and Peter Onuf, edited by, *The Revolution of 1800: Democracy, Race, and the New Republic,* (University of Virginia Press: 2002), 313.
[5] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause*, ix.
[6] Samuel Griffith, *Sun Tzu: The Art of War*, (Cambridge University Press: 1963), 29.

policymakers and their use of statecraft were heavily influenced by domestic factors, mainly the slave-based plantation system and the enduring vision of commerce as a defining instrument of American power.

Strategic Framework

As Dr. Terry Deibel outlined in his strategic framework model, the formulation of national strategy and foreign policy is a non-linear process and must carefully considered the implications of the strategic environment. This is true in the twenty-first century as it was in the eighteenth century. While it appears as though our founding fathers lived in a much simpler world, many of the same considerations regarding the strategic environment had tremendous impact on national decisions concerning American-Haitian relations in this period. In fact, the cornerstone of American foreign policy during the long and mostly troubled history with Haiti was shaped by the southern plantation system, the black slave revolt in Haiti, and the exhausting war between the European powers Britain, France, and Spain. [7]

Warring European states in a prolonged conflict over resources was the defining characteristic of the international landscape in the eighteenth century. Haiti and the other Caribbean islands became strategic liabilities as a result of the Anglo-French war; proving to be difficult to defend and increasingly more challenging to supply from distant Europe. [8] In order to challenge England's commercial hegemony, Napoleon intended to expand French dominance in the hemisphere by reacquiring from Spain the vast Louisiana territory as the strategic answer to France's foreign policy objective-providing France with a regional logistical and operational base from which to finance Napoleon's military ventures and leverage against America's lucrative export industry in the region.

Remarkably, in the face of overwhelming international threats, the guiding principles of the young American republic remained "the pursuit of free trade with all other nations, abjure all political connection with foreign powers, and avoid entangling alliances." [9] And yet the American continent was surrounded by the three main European powers, constantly challenging America's capacity to match national objectives and resources in the pursuit of national interests.

On September 3, 1783, Great Britain finally recognized American independence by agreeing to terms of a long-awaited peace treaty. Though independence appeared to give the Americans access to wider markets and freedom from trade restrictions, its merchant vessels lost the benefit of British naval protection.[10] Insisting on free-trade and open world markets, the United States was now perceived by the European powers as a legitimate economic threat to their mercantilist system, which put American commercial vessels in peril.

A commercial treaty was not in Great Britain's best interest nor did negotiating through British good offices prove to be a successful means in securing protection for American merchants. Understandably, for the European maritime powers, "the surest path to riches was for a nation to establish a closed trading system in which colonies shipped valuable commodities only to the mother country and brought manufactured goods exclusively from the mother country." [11] By refusing to recognize America's neutrality both the French and the British

[7] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause*, 7.
[8] *ibid*, 191.
[9] Robert Smith, *Keeping the Republic: Ideology and Early American Diplomacy*, (Northern Illinois University Press: 2004), ix.
[10] Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic*, (New York: 2005), 4.
[11] *ibid*, 6.

routinely captured American ships, confiscated their cargo, and impressed their crews.[12] There was seemingly little hope of using only diplomatic persuasion to play off one superpower against the other. To make matters worse, the embarrassing demands imposed on America by the Barbary pirates in the Mediterranean, only confirmed how most Europeans viewed American diplomacy, as naïve and incompetent.[13] Unable to balance available means to national objectives, America's instruments of national power during this period lacked the necessary cohesion and credibility to protect its commercial interests.

Perceived as a weak state that had neither the will, nor the power, nor the treasury to protect its merchant ships, America was in need of a credible deterrent. However, it was not until the ratification of the constitution in 1789 that would strengthen the central government enough to develop a coherent foreign trade policy and the necessary means to protect national interests.[14] Despite threats to America's interests, as demonstrated by the European maritime powers, a navy was determined too costly given the uncertain state of fiscal concerns. This is particularly important because American diplomacy lacked credibility and without coercive instruments of national power, America would be unable to sustain the profitable trade it enjoyed with Haiti. "By the eve of the maritime "Quasi-War" with France in 1798, more than six hundred American vessels ran direct routes to Haiti, all of them dangerously vulnerable to French attack."[15]

President Adams had good reason to be interested in American-Haitian relations, not least of which was foreign trade and the protection of New England shipping. On the other hand, however, southern slave owners had no direct commercial interest in Haiti, viewing the slave revolt more as a direct threat to the country's southern plantation system.[16] As early as October 1791, there were enough Haitian refugees in the United States to create the impression of a national crisis, "the sack of Cap Francais in June 1793 sent some ten thousand more refugees to the United States."[17] In addition to the perceived danger posed by the slave revolt in nearby Haiti on the American southern plantation system, Napoleon's grand strategy to reestablish France's control over the vast Louisiana landmass constituted an existential threat to the territorial integrity of the United States and its economic interests.

Slow in developing more coercive instruments of national power, American statecraft would continue to rely on persuasion and commercial diplomacy as the principle ways and means to implement American foreign policy.

National Objectives

Haiti provided tremendous economic opportunities for the newly formed American republic. Its unique trading relationship with France's wealthiest slave colony secured employment for a great number of American seamen, port workers, and shipbuilders, while the flow of goods through American ports generated significant customs revenues for the newly formed government. Additionally, open trade with the West Indies islands was vital to the American economy in still another way-its favorable trade balance helped to pay for imports from Europe and to ease the country's foreign debt. While America's national objective of

[12] *ibid*, 12.
[13] *ibid*, 100.
[14] *ibid*, 13.
[15] Horn, Lewis, and Onuf, *The Revolution of 1800*, 313.
[16] Ludwell Montague, *Haiti and the United States 1714-1938,* (Duke University Press: 1940), 33.
[17] *ibid*, 34.

preserving a profitable trading system with Haiti was paramount, equally important, however, was the protection of a well-grounded southern plantation system from the perceived threat caused by the slave revolt in Haiti. Lastly, keeping France and the other European powers out of New Orleans was also viewed as a vital national security interest. Unfortunately, America's elements of national power and its will to build up the means to protect national interests during this period remained unconvincing.

Instruments of National Power and Their Effectiveness in Statecraft

During John Adams' single-term in office there was a measurable change in the strategic environment and the exercise of statecraft from that of President Washington. Recognizing the dynamic strategic context and the importance of American-Haitian trade relations, President Adams realized the urgency to place America in a more suitable defensive posture to better protect its merchant vessels from French and British depredations.[18] While a military response appeared out of the question, political and economic diplomacy alone proved to be insufficient.[19] In view of the maritime "Quasi War" with France from 1798 to 1899, where the French navy continued to plunder American trade, on April 27, Congress finally demonstrated the national will and passed an appropriation bill authorizing the purchase or construction of warships, and on April 30, 1798, the Department of Navy was created to manage naval affairs.[20]

Now armed with more persuasive deterrence capability, Adams suspended trade relations with France, but wisely maintained diplomatic relations through special envoys. In the winter of 1798, the creation of American naval might paid off when a fleet of fourteen warships supplemented by about two hundred armed merchant vessels captured more than eighty French ships and drove France's warships from American waters. [21] In support of other instruments of diplomacy, the young navy was now perceived as a credible and feasible instrument of national power.

Unlike Washington and Jefferson, President Adams welcomed cordial relations with Haiti and went so far as to lift the trade embargo imposed by President Washington. Driven by economic necessity, geopolitical realities, and a sense of racial injustice, President Adams successfully forged a more practical approach to United States-Haitian relations.[22] He argued that protecting America's commercial interests in Haiti would require the perception that America was willing to use force to favorably shape international relations. Recognizing the shared interests and seizing on a strategic opportunity, the Haitian rebel leader, General Toussaint L'Ouverture offered to deny France the use of Haitian ports, in which to conduct regional maneuvers, if America promised to supply him with weapons and much needed logistics.

As a Federalist and an antislavery advocate from New England, Adams sympathized with the slave colony's aspirations for freedom. Thus, through political means, Adams extended an invitation for a diplomatic representative of General L'Ouverture to dine with him, marking the first time a man of African descent was the dinner guest of an American President.[23] Adams

[18] Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 98.
[19] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause*, 92.
[20] Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 97.
[21] *ibid*, 124-125.
[22] Horn, Lewis, and Onuf, *The Revolution of 1800*, 324.
[23] David McCullough, *John Adams*, 519.

followed up this meeting by sending Edward Stevens to Haiti as a diplomatically accredited Minister with the instructions to "secure the total suppression of French privateering, the exclusion of French armed vessels from Haitian ports, the free use of Haitian ports by American warships, and the protection of American property from seizure as spoils of war." [24] To provide further assurances to protect America's commercial interests, Adams ordered Commodore Barry to deploy the greatest part of his fleet to Haiti.[25]

On May 22, 1799, General L'Ouverture renewed a trade agreement with the United States and observed a secret treaty to block French ships from Haitian ports. Yet, considering Franco-American tensions, Adams would only give General L'Ouverture verbal assurances that trade between the United States and Haiti would be reopened, refusing to put this agreement in writing. Having a keen appreciation of domestic politics and of southern sensitivities toward a black slave revolt in nearby Haiti, Adams believed that American commerce would be best secured through perceived peace with France than through any official recognition of Haiti's independence. Moreover, although President Adams and Great Britain were occasionally acting in concert against France, Adams remained firmly grounded in the nation's guiding principles by avoiding war with France and not falling into an open alliance with England.[26]

Adams, unlike Jefferson, had long assumed and expressed concern about French designs on New Orleans. He feared that if Napoleon succeeded in quashing the slave rebellion in Haiti and succeeded in gaining control of Louisiana territories, America would become another French satellite.[27] As a maritime nation, America depended on the waterways for its heavy and bulky agricultural and fisheries products to reach Haiti and other international markets. The vast Louisiana territory, not only controlled the Mississippi River valley, the highway for America's commerce, but was also envisaged as the future heartland for the American plantation system. One of the political and economic constraints imposed on the United States by England, Spain, and France was the trade barrier against American's desire to ship goods through New Orleans.[28]

Conversely, during President Jefferson's two terms in office from 1810 to 1809, his political closeness toward France appeared to be based as much on the fear of the slave rebellion in Haiti and its potential influence on the southern plantation system as it was on a desire to acquire the Louisiana territories in support of his vision for western expansion. As a wealthy southern slave holder with an open affection for the French and vehemently anti-Great Britain, Thomas Jefferson's Republic Party viewed Haiti as an existential threat to America's southern plantation system and subsequently reversed Adams' foreign policy objectives with Haiti.

By way of diplomatic negotiations through good offices, and perhaps some "good fortune" made possible by warring European powers and Haitian intransigence, Jefferson was able to appease both the French and Spanish nationals along the strategically important Mississippi River and keep Napoleon out of the Louisiana territory. [29] Additionally, where Adams sent a Minister to Haiti under full diplomatic commission, in effect recognizing General L'Ouverture's government, Jefferson appeared more diplomatically careful not to upset improving American-French relations; choosing to send a Consul to Haiti without as much as a

[24] Montague, *Haiti and the United States*, 37.
[25] *ibid*.
[26] *ibid*, 39.
[27] Thomas Fleming, *The Louisiana Purchase*, (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., Hoboken, New Jersey: 2003), 8.
[28] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause, 17.*
[29] Horn, Lewis, and Onuf, *The Revolution of 1800*, 324.

perfunctory letter from the President of the United States. [30] This confirmed General L'Ouverture's suspicions of a changing American mindset that had no intention of recognizing Haiti's sovereignty.

Inasmuch as Adams had concluded that a week, independent Haiti under indigenous black leaders was preferable to a colony dominated by the French," [31] Jefferson's assumptions regarding the strategic context did not come to the same conclusion regarding Haiti and the Louisiana territories. This is further illustrated in Jefferson's correspondence with the French *Charge d' Affairs* to Washington, Louis Andre Pichon, who claimed that Jefferson assured him "nothing would be simpler than to furnish your army and your fleet with everything and to starve out [Haiti]." [32]

While President Jefferson initially endorsed variations of Adams' *realpolitic*-form of statecraft with Haiti, over time Jefferson's assumptions regarding the strategic context greatly differed from that of President Adams. Having witnessed Adams' political demise as perhaps a result of his perceived close relations with Haiti, Jefferson proceeded with more caution. As a slaveholder who was politically associated with a pro-slavery Republican party, Jefferson assumed that a successful slave rebellion in Haiti would not only pose a significant threat to America's national security, but would create a political and commercial vacuum easily exploitable by Great Britain. Moreover, Jefferson's policy towards Haiti had to account for the fears of the southern plantation owners in addition to their expansionist fervor for more land and slaves as a result of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.[33] The fact that "at the end of the eighteenth century there were more than seven hundred thousand slaves in the United States," [34] gave reason to believe that commerce and slavery would continue to shape United States-Haitian relations.

Although Haiti attempted to maintain the same close economic ties with Jefferson's administration as it enjoyed with President Adams, there was a clear shift in U.S. foreign policy with Haiti as seen in a number of successive trade embargos from 1806 to 1810. The decision to impose an economic embargo on Haiti, despite favorable trade relations, can be interpreted as "domestic symbolism" to appease southern slave owners. Nevertheless, the policy change not only caused long-term, widespread economic disaster for Haiti, but succeeded in polarizing the United States over slavery. As New England merchants and exporters tried desperately to find ways around the embargo, the government found itself obliged to enforce an increasingly divisive and controversial political decision.[35] The trade embargo imposed on Haiti was finally lifted in 1809, but already weakened after twelve years of civil war; the economic damage on Haiti would prove irreversible.

When America's foreign shipping to Haiti finally resumed in 1810, commercial interests had already shifted to more promising markets. With trade so diminished, there was no longer a powerful voice for Haiti in American politics.[36] As a nation polarized over slavery, apathy and hostility soon became the hallmarks of America's domestic attitude towards Haiti, and would ultimately shape United States-Haitian relations for the next fifty years after the embargo was

[30] *ibid.*
[31] Tim Matthewson, *Jefferson and the Nonrecognition of Haiti*, (Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society, Vol. 140, No. 1, March 1996, 25.
[32] Horn, Lewis, and Onuf, *The Revolution of 1800*, 324.
[33] Matthewson, *Jefferson and the Nonrecognition of Haiti*, 25.
[34] Ulrich Phillips, *American Negro Slavery*,)New York and London: 1918), 115-204.
[35] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause,* 290.
[36] *ibid*, 291.

repealed. Perpetuating a policy of non-recognition, it would not be until after the southern states seceded from the Union in 1862, that the United States government would finally recognize Haiti's independence.[37]

Conclusion

For a brief period, America's national interests coincided with Haiti's, and domestic proponents of strong relations had a meaningful voice in shaping America's foreign policy. However, as history makes painfully clear, America had never embraced a black, revolutionary state in its neighborhood, and it was only commercial profiteering that made Haiti so economically appealing. Evan those like President Adams, who openly sympathized with the slave revolt and ventured so far as to amend Washington's trade embargo with Haiti, used statecraft pragmatically.

While American policy toward the Haitian revolution was heavily influenced by the warring European powers, it was primarily a domestic clash between the shipping and merchant interests from the north, and the slaveholding interests from the south that ultimately determined American-Haitian relations between 1791 and 1810. In fact, the ambiguities of U.S. foreign policy toward the emerging state of Haiti was a reflection of how closely balanced those competing interests groups were during this period in American history. It was not only when the combined effects of Jefferson's trade embargo and the collapse of the Haitian export economy that caused the northern maritime interests to disappear from the political debate.[38] The diminished commercial incentive for close relations with Haiti essentially created the political space for American political opponents of the black republic to eventually craft a seemingly anti-Haitian policy.[39] It would take six decades and a civil war in the United States to finally break the stranglehold that anti-Haitian southerners had on U.S. foreign policy.

By accepting the merits of *Sun Tzu's* argument that the acme of skill to subdue the enemy without fighting is the ultimate instrument of statecraft,[40] we must also accept the notion that the lack of strategic vision or a grand strategy can lead to the excessive and damaging use of one's resources. Although Haiti survived the seemingly punitive economic embargo imposed on them by America during this period, the resulting long-term damages to its social structures, to its economic base, and to its prospects for peaceful coexistence with its neighbors, is a socioeconomic legacy Haiti has had to carry into the 21st century.

Colonel Philip K. Abbott, U.S. Army, is currently the Chief, Americas Division on the Joint Staff, J5 Strategic Plans and Policy Directorate. He received a B.A. from Norwich University, an M.A. from Kansas University, and an M.S. from the National Defense University. He served in various Command & Staff positions in the United States and Europe and worked extensively throughout Latin America as a Foreign Area Officer.

[37] Logan, *Diplomatic Relations*, 77.
[38] Brown, *Toussaint's Clause*, 7.
[39] *ibid*, 295.
[40] Griffith, *Sun Tzu*, 77.