FAILURE
Reversing the genealogies of unsuccess, 16th-19th centuries

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"Fake News", Failed Conspiracies, and Borderland Shenanigans: Spanish Louisiana in the US Press (1796-1798)

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Between 1796 and 1798, Spanish Louisiana, usually disdained by the US press, brutally became a topic of interest that culminated in 1797 with no less than 130 mentions. If the centers of the political and economic life – Philadelphia, New York, Boston – centralized the majority of said mentions, the topic of Spanish Louisiana was broached by publications from Maine and New Hampshire to Georgia, from North to South.

Everything started in July 1796 with a snippet published in a New York paper stating that "a negotiation [was] said to be on foot between France and Spain to exchange the Spanish part of Hispaniola for Louisiana. This [was] a masterly fetch of the French policy to get a footing on the frontiers of the United States". The information was repeated throughout the rest of the year, barely modified, following a pattern of virality in its diffusion from the initial epicenter of New York. The mention of "a letter from Georgia in a Charleston paper" gave even more traction to a rumor fueling a "doom and gloom" narrative that characterized the most pessimistic speculations. In September 1796, both the *Federal Orrery* from Boston and the *City Gazette* from Charleston published the same tribune that announced a possible collapse of the Union: "In the first place, should the French establish themselves upon our South Western frontiers, a speedy separation of the western people, probably of the Southern States, would be the consequence. The first difference between the Northern and Southern States, would induce the southern, or at least the western, to abandon the union as they would unquestionably find protection under the wing of the French government. Indeed, it is no ill-founded conjecture that a jealous, restless, and intriguing people would foment and countenance any little bickering between the States, with a view to render at least one part of them depending on themselves and subservient to their political interests." The initial rumor was yet amplified in April 1797 by a second one that evoked the hypothesis of British attack on Upper Louisiana through US western territories. This viral news cycle reached its apex in June 1797 before a series of articles came and offered a more grounded perspective on the matter of Louisiana. The first rumor – the cession of Louisiana to France – was proved false and vanished, despite isolated resurgences around November 1797. The second one

was debunked too, but also introduced to the failed William Blount conspiracy that leaded to his impeachment, the senator of Tennessee being accused of having initiated negotiations to support a British invasion of Upper Louisiana and reinforce his power in his home state (David Narrett, 2015). Last but not least, the so-called threat of a British attack on Spanish Louisiana found itself at the center of much bickering between the US government and the Spanish representants in the context of the late application of the dispositions of Pinckney's Treaty, and mostly the evacuation of the post of Natchez by the Spanish troops.

The dual notions of failure and success are omnipresent in the sequence presented above. The devouring success of the French *Directoire* is thus opposed to the fated failure of the archaic Spanish monarchy. In that regard, the cession of Louisiana to the French Republic is seen as yet another proof of the military, political, and moral Spanish collapse, as we can see in this September 1796 tribune:

"In the hands of the plodding Spaniards, [the Mexican possessions] do no harm and little good to the world at large; but in the hands of an active nation, Mexico would be a dangerous engine of power."

In other words, the Spanish Empire is presented as the "sick man" of America while the victorious and ambitious French *Directoire* is the threatening ogre that could derail the consolidation of the United States. Indeed, more than the respective geopolitical strengths and weaknesses of Spain and France, the news cycle of 1796-1797 seem to reveal some cracks in the Union. Behind the heated debate about the French threat and the attitude the United States should adopt in that regard, one can see the hesitations provoked by the first transition, from the Washington era to the Adams administration, and the acrimonious tensions between the Federalists, headed by the new president John Adams, and the Democratic-Republicans led by the new vice-president, and Francophile, Thomas Jefferson. Besides, the incomplete integration of the western territories and individual ambitions – William Blount in Tennessee and James Wilkinson in Kentucky – seem to be considered as key weaknesses that could endanger the union. Naturally, one could see in this fearmongering narrative a strategic move to provoke the desired reaction. However, if we consider Blount's conspiracy, or before that, the correspondence between Wilkinson and the Spanish authorities in New Orleans at the end of the 1780's, the image of an unavoidable, Turnerian expansion of the United States to the West and South West needs to be nuanced (Andrew McMichael, 2008). A change of scale is here necessary to complete the analysis. Indeed, the imperial stakes presented by the news cycle of 1796-1797 hid a very local matter that emerged in the correspondence between the Secretary of

State Timothy Pickering and the Spanish Ambassador Carlos Martínez de Irujo published in the press in July and August 1797. In this correspondence, we can see how Irujo, and behind him Carondelet and Gayoso de Lemos, instrumentalized the rumors about the British attack on Louisiana as a pretext to postpone yet again the application of Pinckney's Treaty and the evacuation of the posts of Natchez and Nogales. In a rather unfavorable geopolitical context, the Spanish authorities in New Orleans demonstrated a true capacity of resistance – Gayoso de Lemos put a stop to an Anglo-American conspiration in Natchez in June 1797 thanks to the denunciation by an Irish catholic settler – and a keen ability to exploit the merest cracks in their neighbor's armor. Such a resistance, as seen in the news cycle, helps to paint another picture of the balance of power in Louisiana and reevaluate the dynamics of success and failure attached to the "conquering United States" and the "collapsing" Spanish empire.

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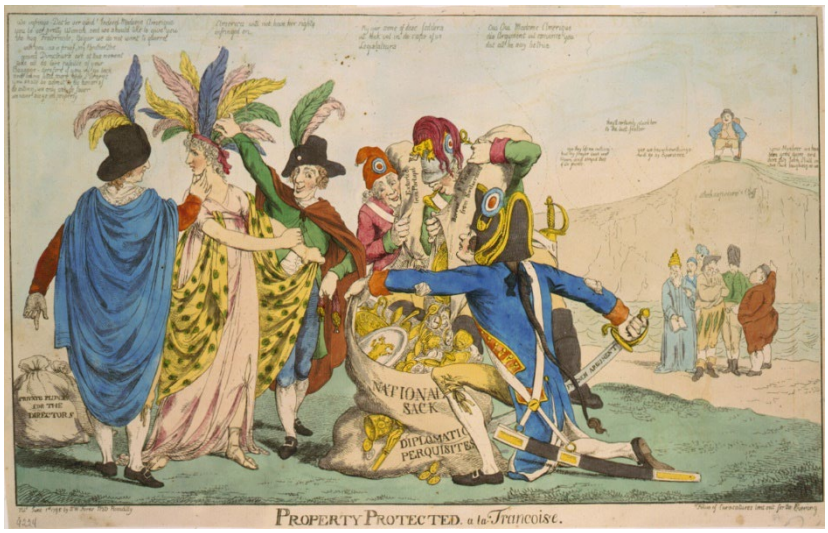

British satire of Franco-American relations after the XYZ Affair in May of 1798; 5 Frenchmen plunder female "America", while six figures representing other European countries look on. John Bull sits laughing on "Shakespeare's Cliff."