Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Robert Livingston, April 18, 1802

The cession of Louisiana & the Floridas by Spain to France works most sorely on the US. on this subject the Secretary of state has written to you fully. . . There is on the globe one single spot, the possessor of which is our natural & habitual enemy. It is New Orleans, through which the produce of three eighths of our territory must pass to market, and from its fertility it will long yield more than half of our whole produce and contain more than half our inhabitants. France placing herself in that door assumes to us the attitude of defiance. Spain might have retained it quietly for years. Her pacific dispositions, her feeble state, would induce her to increase our facilities there, so that her possession of the place would be hardly felt by us, and it would not perhaps be very long before some circumstance might arise which might make the cession of it to us the price of something of more worth to her. Not so can it ever be in the hands of France. . . It (is) impossible that France and the US can continue (to be) friends when they meet in so irritable a position. . . The day that France takes possession of New Orleans . . . it seals the union of two nations who in conjunction can maintain exclusive possession of the ocean from that moment we must marry ourselves to the British fleet & nation. We must turn all our attentions to a maritime force, for which our resources place us on very high ground: and having formed and cemented together a power which may render reinforcement of her settlements here impossible to France. . . This is not a state of things we seek or desire. . .

If France considers Louisiana however as indispensable for her views she might perhaps be willing to look about for arrangements which might reconcile it to our interests. If any thing could do this it would be the ceding to us the island of New Orleans and the Floridas. This would certainly in a great degree remove the causes of jarring & irritation between us, and perhaps for such a length of time as might produce other means of making the measure permanently conciliatory to our interests & friendships. It would at any rate relieve us from the necessity of taking immediate measures for countervailing such an operation by arrangements in another quarter. . .I have no doubt you have urged these considerations on every proper occasion with the government where you are (France). . . Perhaps nothing since the revolutionary war has produced more uneasy sensations through the body of the nation (than France taking over Louisiana). Notwithstanding temporary bickerings have taken place with France, she (France) has still a strong hold on the affections of our citizens generally.—I have thought it not amiss, by way of supplement to the letters of the Secretary of state, to write you this private one to impress you with the importance we affix to this transaction. . . Thomas Jefferson

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