

[Sacher on Kastor, 'The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America'](#)

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Peter J. Kastor. *The Nation's Crucible: The Louisiana Purchase and the Creation of America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004. xiii + 311 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-10119-5.

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An Apprenticeship for Liberty

Most Americans know that the Louisiana Purchase was one of the great real estate bargains in history. The traditional story usually begins and ends with Thomas Jefferson buying a vast territory that nearly doubled the size of the country and contributed to the spirit of manifest destiny. This triumphant version focuses on the acquisition of territory. Reading Peter J. Kastor's *The Nation's Crucible* will convince one that concentrating on the acquisition of land tells an incomplete story and dismisses the real importance of the Louisiana Purchase. As Kastor explains, many Americans believed that "expanding American territory would be difficult; expanding the American nation might be impossible" (p. 48). The history of the Louisiana Purchase is the history of the incorporation of a diverse group of people into the United States. *The Nation's Crucible* skillfully articulates the struggle to incorporate Louisiana and Louisianans into the United States as a complex question touching upon such diverse issues as political economy, loyalty, and race. For Kastor, the Louisiana Purchase not only helped shape the meaning of America for residents of Louisiana but also for the United States as a whole.

In explaining this process, Kastor debunks many myths including that of the "Americanization" of Louisiana. Traditionally, books have contended that, in the aftermath of the Purchase, the French and Spanish residents of Louisiana engaged in a losing ethnic battle with American settlers. Ultimately, these groups became American, though the rate at which this transformation occurred varies from work to work. Kastor convincingly contends that this process should more accurately be termed incorporation, for it was not simply a battle for ethnic supremacy. In fact, most of the residents of Louisiana did not want to return to French rule but instead wanted their political rights as Americans. Tension between the federal government and those in Louisiana rested on differing opinions regarding the length of time it would take for this incorporation to occur. For example, the 1804 "Remonstrance of the People of Louisiana" objected not to the acquisition of Louisiana but to the Governance Act of 1804 which established an undemocratic territorial government under the leadership of William C. C. Claiborne. In other words, while the federal government stressed an apprenticeship period, these protesters, rather than wishing to avoid incorporation altogether, wanted the process to occur immediately.

Kastor contends that the issue of incorporation led to another question--who would and who would not be included as members of this nation state? In addition to white men, free blacks, slaves, and Native Americans competed to have a place in the polity. Slaves attempted to use the ambiguous

status of Louisiana to escape to Texas or to stage a major revolt in 1811. Free persons of color in New Orleans emphasized their loyalty to the regime, their property ownership, and their militia participation in order to show their interest in incorporation. In western Louisiana, the Caddo negotiated with the federal government and Spanish Mexico in order to form a Neutral Ground where they maintained much of their own independence. In the long run, the Caddo, along with Louisiana's slaves and free people of color, were unsuccessful in their efforts at incorporation. White Louisianans concurred with national government officials that race would be the key determinant of citizenship (though this barrier was not completely impermeable). Kastor's nuanced discussion shows that this conclusion was neither preordained nor unchallenged by these groups.

In both his study of Native Americans and slaves, and elsewhere in the work, Kastor demonstrates the artificial distinction between domestic and foreign policy. He persuasively argues that while geographically Louisiana stood on the edge of the United States, its affairs were certainly not peripheral to American policy makers. Whether in the 1806 Burr conspiracy, in the negotiations with France for the purchase, in the negotiations with the Spanish regarding the region's borders, or in the struggles over the ending of the international slave trade, events in the territory were uppermost in the minds of the nation's leaders. Even in the setting up of a territorial government based on a combination of real and fictive kinship, national leaders, including Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Henry Clay, learned lessons regarding national identity from events in Louisiana.

The Nation's Crucible ends in 1821 with the ratification of the Transcontinental Treaty which provided the final definition of Louisiana's borders. In terms of U.S. history, this concluding point makes sense. Louisiana historians, however, might find his chosen point of termination to be frustrating. With Kastor having redefined the story of Louisiana's territorial period, one would like to see how he believes this reinterpretation of the territorial period would lead to a reinterpretation of the early years of statehood. So many Louisiana historians posit state history as a conflict between the French Creole population and the American population that Kastor's reorientation of the territorial period should have a significance for others looking at later eras in the state's history. Of course, historians always wish that their counterparts would have started their narratives earlier or ended them later, and certainly in this case the omission does not detract from the overall value of the book.

In judging Kastor's work, one must look not only at his claims regarding Louisiana, but also to his broader assertions regarding the national character. Historians agree that this era represented the creation (or attempted creation) of a national identity. They disagree, however, on whether the most important elements of this culture should be ascribed to political culture, language, religion, republicanism, the emerging market economy, or other factors. Kastor's contention that the discussion over the status of Louisiana's population contributed to this discussion is a welcome addition to this scholarship. Some might object to the importance that he attaches to Louisiana and to his grand assertions that it "shaped every facet of foreign and domestic policy" (p. 77) of the Jefferson administration and that "the incorporation of Louisiana had defined an American nation" (p. 228). While some will dispute these extensive claims, Kastor unquestionably has provided a perspective that needs to be considered in any discussion of American character.

Overall, Kastor tells an important and extraordinarily complex story in an interesting and accessible manner. He deftly weaves foreign policy, national politics, and territorial history, while not slighting

any of these perspectives. His study will become the standard for territorial Louisiana and his substitution of "incorporation" for "Americanization" should have a lasting impact on the study of Louisiana history. Even for those interested in other aspects of Louisiana's history, Kastor's blending of multiple perspectives including international, national, and local, and white, black, and Native American sets a standard that other scholars of Louisiana history should emulate.

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