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ROBERT CAVELIER, SIEUR DE LA SALLE'S ADVENTURES AND TEXAS: THE MAKING AND BREAKING OF FRENCH COLONIAL POLICY

by Sandra M. Petrovich

After 1661, *de facto* French Secretary of State Jean-Baptiste Colbert involved himself with colonial policy. He wanted strong, self-sufficient overseas territories and his colonial strategy required forceful officials who could make immediate decisions. Overseas officials and French explorers such as Rene Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle, while usually obedient, sometimes did not follow Colbert's mandates.[1] Most of the challenge ensued because these men knew they were far from Colbert and usually could do as they pleased.[2] La Salle and his partner, Louis de Baude, Comte de Frontenac and Governor of Canada (first term: 1672-1682), made a habit of maneuvering around Colbert's mandates to explore and make a profit.

La Salle and Frontenac perceived clearly Colbert's rules and colonial vision for New France (Canada) and North America in general, where Colbert wanted to promote a stable, agrarian culture and large families. The fur trade, New France's major revenue source, undercut Colbert's concept. The minister regarded the fur trade as a force that could undermine the compact colony he envisioned if uncontrolled. Colbert wanted two things: to restrict the fur trade and to control westward expansion. A booming fur trade would necessitate western garrisons, which Colbert rightly envisioned as sparsely populated, weak, and prone to attack.[3] For Frontenac, Colbert's commands would restrict the fur trade and westward expansion.

However obvious Colbert's colonial vision, Frontenac and La Salle made illegal profits by capitalizing on their positions of authority, their distance from France, and their clients among the colonists. The king's need for strong military men as leaders in frontier areas caused Colbert to suffer Frontenac and La Salle's sometime disobedience and insouciance. However, Colbert had a limit to his patience and did not hesitate to take action against insubordinate officials.

Frontenac immediately realized that wealth could be made in the fur trade. A seasoned soldier with a pressing need for money, the governor ignored Colbert's order not to involve himself with the fur trade and went about making his contacts, both French and Amerindian. No doubt the mission Indians near Montréal helped the count begin his education about one side of the fur trade, and by accepting partnerships with experienced traders, Frontenac gained quick access to the European end of pelt trading. Through his office and prestige, Frontenac attached to himself the cream of the New France entrepreneurs: Sieur Bairze, Sieur Le Bére, as well the ambitious adventurer Robert Cavelier, Sieur de La Salle.[4]

Before Frontenac arrived in Canada, Colbert refused permission for

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Intendant Jean Talon to build a garrisoned fort on Lake Ontario to guard the area from Iroquois or English attacks.[5] Frontenac improved upon Talon's idea and in connivance with La Salle established not a garrison but a fur trading post on the Kataracoui River near the eastern part of Lake Ontario in 1673. The governor finally reported to Colbert the existence of Fort Frontenac.[6] Predictably, the minister expressed displeasure, but Frontenac claimed that the fort and a soon-to-be-built barque would secure the lake for the French, while adding that its placement was strategic to tap incoming trade.[7]

To further his ambitions Frontenac continued his partnership with La Salle, whose land grant they used to promote their western adventures for fur and to form a monopoly.[8] In 1676 Frontenac ordered the construction of a fort at Niagara to block the western Algonquian access to Albany and to monopolize the fur trade without informing Colbert.[9] With Albany as a trade *entrepôt*, natives reaped excellent prices for their furs and inexpensive European goods, while the English and Dutch obtained pelts that they sold in Europe at a large profit. Frontenac hoped to intrude into this trade. Frontenac was only beginning his fur-trading enterprise. With Frontenac's backing, La Salle circumvented Colbert's non-expansion policies and gained permission from the king on May 12, 1678, to explore the Mississippi Valley and establish forts as needed.[10] La Salle opened a trading post on the Saint Joseph River in 1678 and in 1680, Frontenac and La Salle built Fort Crèvecoeur on the Illinois River and Fort Prudhomme on the Mississippi River below the Ohio River. Alone, La Salle built Fort Saint Louis at present-day Port la Vaca, Texas.[11]

Louis XIV directed the governor to issue permits to trade to keep tabs on the number of traders and discourage the outlawed western trappers known as *coureurs de bois*. However, the king did not envision that Frontenac would fill his pocketbook by issuing trading licenses to clients, such as La Salle.[12] Colbert ordered an end to this practice on May 30, 1675.[13] Frontenac got around this ordinance by issuing not trading but hunting licenses until the king commanded him to cease this practice in 1676.[14] The enterprising Canadian governor improved his troubled finances at the expense of Colbert's policy.

Despite the clarity of their orders, La Salle and Frontenac had room to maneuver due to Colbert's increasing absorption in the Dutch War, 1672-1678, and drastic reduction of communications across the sea.[15] They made illegal profits by capitalizing on their position of authority, their distance from France, and their clients among the colonists. They did obey many of the orders of Louis XIV and Colbert, but they were the most independent where it concerned their own or their colonial clients' interests.

Colbert did not shy from privately admonishing Frontenac for his misconduct. A stream of letters from Colbert censured Frontenac for misusing his authority and disobeying Colbert's ruling against western expansion.[16] On December 4, 1679, Colbert wrote a letter to Frontenac revealing his opinion of him. He stated that he hoped "that you [Frontenac] can change the conduct that you have given up to the present, because [the King] sees clearly that you are not capable of adopting the spirit of concord and of tolerance necessary for

impeding all the dissensions which arise and which are always the main cause of defeat and ruin in the new colonies."[17] Such words would have proven instructive of La Salle some six years later! Frontenac received a harsh letter from Louis XIV, charging him with self-promotion and poor service.[18] To the king's indictments, Frontenac replied: "Your Majesty will clearly understand that I never suffered more than when I was represented as violent and as a man who would trouble the Officers of Justice in the performance of their duties... ."[19] Frontenac refused to be held accountable for his illicit colonial dealings.

Robert René Cavelier, sieur de La Salle, also was headstrong, resourceful, and creative, and refused to be held accountable. By 1667 he and his team had discovered or mapped the Great Lakes, the Ohio River, and some points to the south.[20] Frontenac systematically supported the exploration of the West, with La Salle as his most famous protegé. By the 1670s, La Salle had explored much of the Illinois country.[21] In 1678, La Salle persuaded the reluctant Colbert and Louis to allow him to establish the above mentioned forts, ostensibly to protect French claims but actually to tap into rich fur-trading areas. La Salle's western explorations and business arrangements angered the Iroquois League, a confederation of Iroquoian people who had a long-standing animosity towards the French. The League protested French encroachment into land they wanted by attacking the Illinois and Miami people, groups friendly to the French and active in La Salle's western fur trade, in the 1680s.

La Salle's two most famous voyages occurred during the same years. The first occurred in 1682, when he followed earlier explorers Joliet and Marquette's track along the Illinois River. Traveling downstream, La Salle and his party encountered generally friendly natives as they headed for the Mississippi River, or the Colbert River, as it was called in his day. The expedition made its way to the Gulf of Mexico, then turned around and returned to Québec. In Québec, La Salle met Frontenac's replacement, Joseph-Antoine Le Febvre de La Barre, a luckless lawyer turned colonial governor. The king had sent an order revoking permission to explore any more land in North America, and commanding that La Salle and his party be compensated for this loss of a job.[22]

Having never met La Salle, Governor de La Barre sided with merchants who resented La Salle's rivalry in the fur trade. The new governor needed an excuse to remove La Salle from control of the lucrative trading post of Fort Frontenac. Using his legal skills, La Barre found an excuse. He professed that La Salle gave up his claim to running the fort when he "abandoned" the post the year before. Actually, before the exploration La Salle left a capable subordinate in charge, hardly the act of a man abandoning his claim. Deaf to any protests, La Barre ousted La Salle's handpicked commander from the lucrative fort to put in his own client.[23] With such a thin case against the explorer and a pressing need to profit from the fur trade, La Barre unearthed an ancient charge against La Salle. The governor ordered La Salle removed from the fort and brought to the authorities to explain his questionable actions with the Iroquois League. In 1674, the former *intendant*, Jacques DuChesneau, who hated Frontenac and thus such allies as La Salle, accused the explorer of

compromising the French position when he dealt with the Iroquois. Years later, La Barre used this old accusation and ordered La Salle to take a ship to Paris to explain his actions and "false discoveries."[24]

La Salle went directly to Paris to plead his case for the need for French exploration. The king was scarcely interested in La Salle's claims of exploration, which he considered useless. La Salle wanted to create an establishment in Louisiana, and to do this, he realized he had to make the exploration of the Gulf Coast desirable. To make his claims more attractive, he professed that the Mississippi River flowed into the Río Bravo (Río Grande), the back door to New Spain, an error of 250 leagues. One must consider that even though La Salle lost his compass on his voyage down the Mississippi, he had proven himself an excellent observer. Pierre Le Moyne d'Iberville, the "father" of Louisiana, later noted that La Salle made the error so he could "see himself near the mines of New Mexico and thereby to induce the court to set up in that country establishments which could not but be very profitable thereafter."[25] As Louis was ever prepared to entertain ideas about seizing land from the Spanish, he listened with interest. Colbert passed away in 1683, and his son, Jean-Baptiste Colbert, Marquis de Seignelay, took his place. Seignelay, well-trained by his father, was planning with Louis a war against Spain, and they looked favorably upon attacking Mexico after Spain's declaration of war in 1683. They approved a second La Salle expedition and recalled La Barre for what they considered gross incompetence.[26]

The war between France and Spain had ceased on August 15, 1684, with the Truce of Ratisbon. In that same year La Salle gained the king's permission to set up a French colony along the Gulf of Mexico. La Salle had convinced the king that it would be advantageous for the French to have a base to attack and harass Spanish shipping as well as a claim to lands that the Spanish did not yet occupy. The tradition of privateering and buccaneering raids in the seventeenth century was reaching a close, yet it was still viewed as a viable way to damage an enemy during war. Great cooperative ventures between the French and English, such as Henry Morgan's raid on the City of Panama, were major victories for both nations in 1670-1671. Louis did not totally approve of these actions, but he allowed La Salle to set up a French colony in Spanish territory. La Salle left Rochefort on July 24, 1684, and reached the French-held island of Saint Domingue before word of a treaty of truce reached the Caribbean, and continued his voyage with four vessels and 280 people.[27]

The voyage is famous for the disasters that struck the group. One large problem occurred between La Salle and naval commander Tanguy le Gallois de Beaujeu. They disliked each other and La Salle's natural distrust of people did not help the situation. Other problems involved illness and a Spanish privateering raid off Hispaniola that left the group one ship short. Also, upon coming to the island of Saint Domingue, some of La Salle's men joined a local privateering venture and left the party.[28] In this atmosphere of bad luck, the group failed to find the Mississippi River, where the colony was to be located, and upon entering Matagorda Bay, they lost the storeship *Aimable*, which was wrecked on the shoals.[29]

One of the colonists observed that upon arrival, "From afar we saw something like men, but someone said that they were big birds."[30] These birds were either brown pelicans or they were the Karankawan Indians who were indigenous to the area. Some days later they met the people of that land and found that they were being watched and scrutinized by them. The natives told the French, "if they wanted to, they could have killed us, being hidden in the rushes."[31] Yet they only watched. The colonists traded with the natives, but their stores were decreasing because of the loss of their ship. To make matters worse, blankets were left unattended by the French and were taken by the Amerindians.[32] La Salle knew of this, and sent a party of men into the village to retrieve the blankets. He instructed his men that the natives either had to give back the blankets or the French would take canoes as compensation. The canoes would only be returned when the blankets were brought back to the French. La Salle's nephew was put in charge of this venture, and he was forced to take three canoes.[33] Not being able to drag them back, they made a fire and went to sleep to wait for help to arrive. While they slept, "The savages who saw the fire came there. Finding them asleep, they shot arrows at all who were there. They killed two outright and seriously wounded three who returned to the camp injured and again sounded the alarm."[34] French relations with the indigenous people were not the best. These are not the chronicles of a successful colonial venture.

The colony somehow managed to survive, yet the numbers dwindled to 180 persons. Part of this loss was not due to death but rather to the fact that Captain Beaujeu left for France.[35] This and other factors, such as malnutrition and disease, dropped the French population, and there were at least one to three deaths a week reported during the first year.[36] The colonists suffered a great blow when their remaining ship went down in a squall. La Salle and his people were no longer able to leave by the convenient sea route.

Stranded, the French settlers managed to build a fort named Saint Louis in the first year that they spent at Matagorda Bay, and the colony survived for two more years. Racked with death and no hope of rescue, in 1687 La Salle left the colony in an attempt to find a French fort also called Saint Louis, located on the Illinois River. At this point, only forty colonists remained and help was needed badly. "Borrowing" the Amerindians' canoes without giving anything in exchange, La Salle brought the wrath of the natives down upon the squabbling colonists he left behind at the fort. Murder was planned, and one of La Salle's men shot and killed him in the wilderness of East Texas before he found any European help. The remaining colonists did not fair much better. Shortly after La Salle departed, as retaliation for their lost canoes, a group of Karankawa attacked Fort Saint Louis and killed all of the colonists except for a few children. These children were taken into the native villages, tattooed, and incorporated into the indigenous way of life until they were found by the Spanish.[37] The French crown's first attempt at colonizing the Gulf Coast ended in tragedy.

In many respects Colbert's ideas concerning holding defendable positions and development without expansion was realistic. La Salle's colony was too

far from French support so the people had to depend upon themselves. Native American hostility, lacking a supply line, and far from the reach of Versailles, Fort Saint Louis' demise was a strong example of the correctness of the minister's policy. Unexpected disasters such as the sinking of his ships and the desertion of his men amply proved to La Salle the reason Colbert had been so insistent on compact, self-sufficient colonies that had organized government, supply lines, and stood prepared. La Salle's adventures in Texas proved to Louis XIV the soundness of his late minister's policy.

NOTES

[1]A.V. Petrovich, "At Wit's End: Colbert and the Governors Jean-Charles de Baas and Louis de Baude, Comte de Frontenac," *Proceedings of the French Colonial Historical Society*, 20 (1996), pp. 50-58.

[2]Petrovich, "At Wit's End," pp. 50-58.

[3]This policy becomes clear when perusing Colbert's letters and instructions to the governors of New France. See Jean-Baptist Colbert, *Lettres, instructions, et mémoires de Colbert*, 12 vols., Pierre Clément, ed. (Paris, Imprimerie Nationale, 1862-1869), vol. 3, part 2, pp. 557-600, for examples as well as *Documents Relative to the Colonial History of the State of New York*, 15 vols. ed. and trans. E.B. O'Callaghan (Albany, Weed, Parsons, and Company, 1856-87; hereinafter NYCD), 9, pp. 39-44. William Eccles, in *France in America* (New York, 1972), shows this traditional notion of a compact colony, as does Gustave Lanctot, *A History of Canada*, 3 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1964).

[4]*Royal Fort Frontenac*, Richard Preston, ed. (Toronto, 1958; hereinafter RFF), pp. 121 and 319; and *Report de la Archivist de la Province de Québec*, edited by P. Roy (Montréal, 1927-1932; hereinafter *RAPQ*), 1, pp. 26-52, 60-78.

[5]The refusal came because Colbert wanted to stop Canadians from migrating west, and Lake Ontario constituted the west. See RFF, pp. 102 and 300. In the margin of the letter is Colbert's answer: "Establishment on Lake Ontario. To wait." An *intendant* was a government official, equal in power, but not prestige, to the governor. His exclusive duties were finance, police, and justice.

[6]*RAPQ*, 1, p. 68.

[7]*RAPQ*, 1, pp. 26-52, 58.

[8]*RAPQ*, 1, p. 78; and *Loix et constitutions des colonies françoises de l'Amérique sous le vent*, 6 Vols., edited by Louis E. Médéric Moreau de Saint-Méry (Paris, 1784-90), 4, p. 402.

[9]*Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents*, 72 vols., edited by R.G. Thwaites (Cleveland, 1896-1901), 60, p. 134.

[10]*RFF*, pp. 125 and 323.

[11]Eccles, *Canadian Frontier*, (New York, 1967), p. 109.

[12]See *Archives de Québec: ordonnances, commissions, etc., etc. des gouverneurs et intendants de la Nouvelle France*, 2 vols., edited by P.G. Roy (Beaucerville, 1924), 1, p. 210, for a sample of the permits.

[13]*RAPQ*, 1, p. 85, Colbert to Frontenac, May 30, 1675.

[14]*NYCD*, 9, p. 126. King to Frontenac, April 15, 1676.

[15]Regrettably, the French archives contain little for North America ca. 1674-1678.

[16]See Colbert, *Lettres*, vol. 3, part 2, pp. 557-61, 574-81, 585-90, and 641, Colbert to Frontenac, June 13, 1671, May 17, 1674, April 22, 1675, and December 4, 1679.

[17]Colbert, *Lettres*, vol. 3, part 2, p. 641, Colbert to Frontenac, December 4, 1679.

[18]Colbert, *Lettres*, vol. 3, part 2, pp. 644-49, King to Frontenac, April 30, 1681.

[19]*RAPQ*, 1, p. 129, Frontenac to King, November 2, 1681.

[20]See *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1966; hereinafter DCB).

[21]Philip Boucher, *Les Nouvelles de France* (Providence, R.I., 1992), p. 55.

[22]*DCB*, 1, p. 178.

[23]*DCB*, 1, p. 178.

[24]*DCB*, 1, p. 179.

[25]*DCB*, 1, p. 179.

[26]French ardor for Spanish riches was fueled, no doubt, by Solís y Rivadeneyra's *Histoire de la conquête du Mexique* (Paris, 1684, 1691, and 1705).

[27]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage to the Gulf of Mexico", trans. A. Bell, in Robert S. Weddle, ed. *La Salle, the Mississippi, and the Gulf: Three Primary Documents* (College Station, TX., 1987), pp. 84-87.

[28]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 88.

[29]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 109. There is some recent confusion about the name of the ship that sank. Archaeologists salvaging one of La Salle's ships recovered cannons with the name *Belle*. The written record names the sunken ship as the *Aimable*. One answer can be found at the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, Mélanges Colbert #133, f11, where a partial ship list of vessels once in service to the Comte de Vermandois names the *Belle Aimable*. Future research into insurance claim records, port records, and written reports may further clarify the issue.

[30]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 105.

[31]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 110.

[32]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 112.

[33]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 112.

[34]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," pp. 112-113.

[35]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 113.

[36]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 110.

[37]Minet, "Journal of Our Voyage," p. 112.