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DE LA SALLE'S VISION OF A FRENCH EMPIRE IN AMERICA

LA SALLE is the true founder and builder of the French Empire in America. He had shared in the general views on French expansion in America of Champlain, Talon, and Frontenac, but it was he alone who, after his explorations, laid a precise plan, the main idea of which was the establishment of two French colonial bases, in the middle of the American continent, one situated in the region of the Great Lakes and its trading-posts, Fort Niagara, Fort Miami, etc., communicating directly by water with Quebec and the mouth of the St. Lawrence by way of Fort Frontenac, at the end of Lake Ontario; the other established on the shores of the Illinois River, at a point where it never freezes in winter, at Fort St. Louis, in the heart of the region of the Illinois country, rich in natural resources and in men. It is between these two centers that the portage must be made, between the basin of the St. Lawrence and that of the Mississippi. At that place the portage is short and easy. Better still, de la Salle sees clearly that this region must become the stronghold of the French Empire in the heart of the American Continent. There, France will find the necessary supplies, these plains being the richest in the world, and there she will be able to recruit an army. De la Salle is convinced of his ability to organize at once a strong army of fifteen thousand natives with French commanders. With this

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army he will get control of Northern America, if he is given the necessary military supplies. With his genius for organization, and the immense ascendancy he had already won over the natives, his plan would certainly have been carried out in a few months. Let us remember that de la Salle had in a few years so strongly impressed his personality upon his companions, such as Tonty who succeeded him, and on his colony of the Illinois, that the latter, given up by the mother country, continue to support the French establishments in Louisiana, and to provide Indian volunteers. When the mother country withdrew definitely from the New World, the natives begged France to remain in the Illinois country. When the French troops were recalled, the natives united under the command of a half-breed, Pontiac, in order to remain French and repel the British invaders. Through his ascendancy, his prestige, his genius for organization, de la Salle is the direct predecessor of Lyautey in Morocco, or Mangin in the organization of his colonial armies. The same influence is exerted by these men. With their ardent temperaments, restrained by a profound wisdom, guided by sound judgment, they are of the same stock. They radiate an influence even after death.

Another trait in the career of de la Salle deserves to be brought out: his colonial policy was faithfully followed by Bugeaud, Galliéni, and Lyautey, but in different territory and with different means.

De la Salle, before launching upon an adventure, studies men, customs, languages, and it is only after penetrating deeply into Indian life that he takes his first step. His study of the Indian mind precedes actual undertakings and military operations. His hold on the natives comes from his intellectual and psychological self-control. De la Salle knows how to approach a tribe, how to present himself as a messenger of

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peace, how to smoke the pipe of peace with the chiefs. But he can also display his strength in order not to have to use it. When he takes possession of any territory, it is with the full consent of the tribe and its chiefs, to whom he promises the protection of the greatest king on earth. He always makes friends with them and endeavors to find support among the tractable natives, among these tribes of American Indians so often gentle, refined, and hospitable, and to protect them against other warlike and plundering tribes, such as the Iroquois, in the state of New York, and certain groups of Indians from the shores of the Gulf of Mexico.

It is by this method of wisdom, prestige, and cool courage that de la Salle was able to conquer an empire stretching from the Great Lakes to the Gulf of Mexico, and comprising the basins of the Ohio and the Mississippi, without shedding a drop of blood, except among the Quinipissas, near the mouth of the Great River. There he had to defend himself against a night attack. Everywhere else, he was able, through his knowledge of Indian customs, his courage, and his perfect self-control, to make a strong personal impression on the chiefs and to induce them to take him as a protector.

Often the tribe is distrustful, but de la Salle is resourceful; he has brought along thirty Indians, whom he uses both as warriors and interpreters. He also knows how to obtain from friendly tribes guides whom he pays and prisoners of war whom he buys. The former lead him to other allied tribes and the latter to enemy tribes, from which they were taken.

De la Salle made it an absolute rule never to shoot first, and, moreover, never to appear to be afraid of any flying arrows, to remain imperturbable, and not to fire back immediately. Thus he always made a strong impression on the tribes and persuaded them to become his allies. A typical

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example of this method is found in the account of what happened among the Koroas. De la Salle had not gone very far from the tribe of the Quinipissas, who had attacked him at night, and whom he had had to chastise in self-defense by an answering volley which left among them some dead and some wounded. De la Salle was invited to a great feast, in the course of which he noticed that the ranks of his hosts were becoming more and more numerous, and he saw Quinipissas among those present. He understood the situation at once, guessed the intrigues and the reports of the Quinipissas, as well as the hesitation of his hosts. With his usual *sang-froid* he ordered his companions to continue eating, but that each one should take his gun and place it beside him.

The aim of his policy was to obtain from each tribe, or "nation," as he called them, a treaty of alliance by which each placed itself under the protection of the king of France. Thus did he inaugurate the method of the protectorate which he transplanted from France where it was applied to the provinces recently added to the Crown.

The personal influence which he exercised over his entourage and the natives was due unquestionably to this mysterious power which radiated from his strong personality. But de la Salle was also helped by physical and moral qualities. The moral qualities dominated the physical in his make-up. It would be interesting to have a full medical report on de la Salle. In spite of his strong physical appearance, he was often ill. He seems to have suffered from constitutional weaknesses. This condition, and the envious attacks of his enemies, made him irritable and blunt during his periods of illness. This may easily have contributed to his love of solitude. "I have chosen," said he, "a way of living in keeping with my solitary temperament." He was of gigantic stature, well-built, with a fine face. The only likenesses we have of

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him are rare and small miniatures in the collections of Rouen. They reveal a Greek profile, a clear-cut brow, with a short upturned moustache. His face is long and full, with an expression both determined and refined. And yet he was neither a flattering courtier, nor a man of the world. He felt ill at ease in society and in the king's antechambers. The rough vigor of his life contrasted with the extreme refinement of Versailles. He realized it and it made him timid and awkward during his stays in France. His timidity was revealed even when circumstances placed him in the presence of lesser courtiers. Thus in the course of his last visit, he was the victim of the intrigues of a scheming courtier who should have served and obeyed him, Beaujeu, who flattered him, while despising him as a colonial boor. He fell into the trap which actually was the cause of his murder.

His moral and intellectual qualities were also of the greatest help to him: he was by nature endowed with a keen intellect, sound judgment, and complete frankness. His astonishing memory enabled him to learn seven or eight different Indian languages. A calmness and an extraordinary energy were found mingled in him with a contagious enthusiasm. This enthusiasm was in reality only a form of his personal convictions. We may even say that Cavelier de la Salle had in his life but one idea and one ambition, for which he lived and died. For it, he sacrificed his peace, his fortune, his health, and even his life. His guiding star led him to the conquest of a huge empire for France, which was not acquired by violence, but which turned to France as a protector. De la Salle was throughout his life the apostle of that cause and, with absolute unselfishness, made for it the supreme sacrifice.

This spirit was too similar to that of the missionaries for him not to have been in sympathy with them: while the latter

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were leading the natives to the fold of Christianity, de la Salle was bringing them under the protection of the king of France; their collaboration was natural. Moreover, de la Salle always showed himself to be a firm and generous Christian; but his deep-rooted independence, his brutal frankness, his habit of command, so necessary in his enterprises, made him hostile to those who loved only servile or timid souls. De la Salle was never of their number. Of a dauntless courage, he was intrepid in bad fortune, moderate in good, proud of the work to be accomplished, but without vanity, authoritative, because success comes at that price, fair in the treatment of his fellows. Solitary by nature, and with simple tastes, in the course of his expeditions he lived like his men: "Same fare, same clothes, same bed," he would say. Only he does show a certain love of display in solemn ceremonies, when he acts in the name of the King. Like Iberville, he always knew how to be accepted as a chief, even by buccaneers and *coureurs des bois*. Above all, just and unselfish, he was loved for his justice, followed to the end by those faithful companions, Tonty, the Recollets, even the savage Nica; he was the idol of all, "that rugged, fearless figure . . . a perpetual example of the 'vir' and virtue in the noblest sense in which mankind has defined them."²

Cavelier de la Salle is the greatest name in the history of French America. Arriving in Canada at the age of twenty-three, assassinated in America at the age of forty-three, he manifested in those twenty years, in that youthful period of man's life, such qualities that his name is linked to those of the great builders of empire. It was in this short lapse of time that the disinherited son of the Rouen merchant, seeking his fortune beyond the Atlantic, took up again the great unfinished plans for colonization, improved them, established the most appropriate policy, won over to his way of

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thinking the French authorities who had until this time been hostile, and almost without resources, assured their triumphant execution.

Through de la Salle the French Empire in America reaches its highest development. He and Colbert play brilliant rôles in history; the latter dies in 1683. All Colbert's successor can do is to bring about, in 1684, the failure of the last expedition of de la Salle, who was preparing to build in the New World the structure of which he had already laid the foundations. With Colbert and Cavelier de la Salle gone, the extent of French influence apparently continues to grow in America until nearly 1750; but the French Empire becomes like a fortress whose outer walls are expanding while it is being dismantled from within. The disappearance of the great minister and the great explorer marks the beginning of the French decline in America.