1

The Revolution and Its Precedents

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The Declaration of Independence's forthcoming 250th anniversary highlights the American Revolution as a transformative event while pointing to questions about America's role in the world. Walter McDougall evocatively contrasted the United States' role as a promised land set apart from old-world quarrels for more than a century after its founding with its later transformation into a crusader state imposing its vision around the globe. His framing in the 1990s stood at odds with triumphalist descriptions of the unipolar moment that followed the Cold War, but it tapped concerns that came to shape an increasingly contentious debate over the next quarter century.[1]

Those arguments point to an important set of questions, but what the struggle for independence meant for the United States and the world emerges at least as clearly from exploring precedents—both older precedents used to justify or understand the American Revolution and new ones set by the conflict. Upholding the claim to independence staked in 1776 shook the kaleidoscope of European politics to lasting effect by establishing the first new state since the Dutch Republic in the 1580s. Observers then had to discern the new picture and where they fit into it. Unspoken assumptions revealed by precedents indicated the thinking behind that process.

When Britain recognized American independence with the 1783 Treaty of Paris, Edmund Burke noted how "the appearance of a new state, of a new species, in a new part of the globe . . . has made as great a change in all the relations, and balances, and gravitation of power, as the appearance of a new planet would in the system of the solar world."[2] The image appealed

to mechanistic assumptions in 18th-century thought while emphasizing the challenge of adapting to a different situation—as the new element American independence had added to the mix of European politics had upset a political balance already in flux.

Arguments made in the Declaration of Independence and by the example of successful revolt gave other peoples from the 1780s a ready template for their own circumstances.[3] Commentators linked the clash between Britain and its colonists with larger debates on liberty and governance. French leaders seeking revenge against Britain and recovery of their own position overseas expected that prolonged fighting would leave both sides exhausted, to France's own benefit. Intervention brought the French instead a crippling deficit that paralyzed governance within a decade, bringing on a revolution there and an independent American republic that severed ties with France in the 1790s. The United States exerted its own pull abroad even while struggling to resist foreign pressure during its turbulent early decades.[4]

Debates over politics and governance responded to events just as political action looked to the ideas those debates had aired for guidance or justification. Precedent conferred legitimacy on actions while giving contemporaries struggling to understand new changes a map to follow.

Lessons of the Dutch Revolt

The Dutch Revolt against Spain in the late 16th century, which established the Dutch Republic as a sovereign, independent state, provided the most obvious comparison for American independence. From the Stamp Act onward, the British and colonists alike drew a parallel with the clash between Philip II and his Dutch subjects as a cautionary tale on mishandling disputes. The Dutch Stadtholder William V, a cousin of the British king, saw the Declaration of Independence as a parody of the 1581 Act of Abjuration that repudiated allegiance to Spain. So did Hendrik Fagel, the secretary to the States General, who found comparing the actions

of George III to Philip II's tyranny unreasonable. John Adams and other Americans, however, appealed to a community of experience with the Dutch. In both cases, the struggle for self-government became a war of national independence against a powerful empire aided by foreign intervention. Britons, Americans, and foreign observers looked to the earlier conflict as a guide.[5]

And there was much to learn from that precedent. Attempts to tighten royal control at the expense of customary local privileges and raise taxes against resistance by representative bodies drove the Netherlands to revolt in 1565. As a collection of provinces only recently welded into a political unit, the Low Countries had a tradition of rebelling in defense of their liberties that restricted arbitrary power. Their elites and population viewed allegiance as contingent on respect for their privileges and good governance. Costs from recent wars demanded revenue they resisted providing. Philip II's determination to impose religious orthodoxy by stamping out Protestantism reinforced an authoritarian turn backed by military force. Armed resistance brought a series of revolts that led to a civil war backed by English and French intervention, which then drew the conflict into a wider struggle across Western Europe.[6] The States General of the Netherlands formally repudiated their allegiance—and the king's authority—on July 26, 1581, in an Act of Abjuration that outlined the duties of princes to their subjects.

Not created by God for their rulers to submit and serve as slaves, subjects had claims of their own. The edict invoked positive and natural law to define a ruler who "deprive[s] them of their ancient liberty, privileges and customs" as a tyrant to be renounced and replaced before recounting actions that justified the break. "Despairing of all means of reconciliation and left without any other remedies and help," the Dutch abandoned Philip II "to pursue such means as we think likely to secure our rights, privileges and liberties."[7]

Even this cursory overview shows why Americans, notably Adams and Benjamin Franklin, compared their own struggle to that of the Netherlands. The South Carolina patriot William Henry Drayton spoke in 1776 of

forcing George III to treat with the United States "as a free and independent people," just as the Dutch had made Philip II, whom he called "the most powerful prince in the old world," yield.[8] The Treaty of Antwerp in 1609 recognized the seven provinces as an independent Dutch Republic, and the Treaty of Münster formalized those terms in 1648. Two years later, an English writer, Owen Feltham, pointed to that struggle as the moment that checked Spain's ascendancy and began its decline.[9] The Dutch Revolt produced a flood of books in English, French, and Spanish, along with Latin volumes, engaging a transnational debate among men of letters. Prominent humanists, including the French historian Jacques Auguste de Thou, who lived through the struggle; the jurist Samuel von Pufendorf; and the English diplomat Sir William Temple were among those authors, along with Voltaire and Montesquieu, who took up the story generations later. Americans with a humanistic education or legal training, including Thomas Jefferson and others among the founders, would have read their works or been familiar with the arguments.[10]

Debates around the Dutch Revolt engaged questions about rights of resistance and foreign intervention in civil strife. Hugo Grotius, who wrote a history of the conflict in its shadow, limited the right of resistance to extreme circumstances because a promiscuous right threatened anarchy, "A Mob where all are speakers, and no Hearers."[11] Quoting Cicero that "any Peace is preferable to Civil War," he tapped 16th-century fears of divided authority and unrest that Thomas Hobbes and others also expressed. Grotius allowed resistance in which a ruler violated an established constitution either by abdicating, designing the destruction of his realm's people, or usurping a share of sovereignty held by a senate or people in a mixed regime. Even then, prudential action had to account for disturbance to the state and the destruction of innocents.[12] A century later, Emer de Vattel, an influential Swiss jurist, agreed that resisting a tyrant making war on the nation became self-defense but insisted that such defiance required intolerable evils and the long denial of justice to a people whose patience had been exhausted. He also distinguished rebellion from civil war between balanced parties, with the latter allowing foreign states

to mediate or even aid the party they deemed to have the better cause.[13] The right to intervene under international law he asserted in 1758 would justify France and other countries in later supporting the United States against Britain.[14]

Precedents at Home

Other 17th-century precedents shaped responses to the American struggle for independence. Portugal's successful break from Spain in 1640 offered a weaker parallel; it had been independent as a separate monarchy with a distinct identity before Philip II took its crown in 1680 as the closest heir after its king died. But just as in America, foreign assistance played a critical role in that struggle, with the Dutch, English, and French intervening to reduce Spanish power for their own ends.[15] Upheavals within Britain during the 17th century—both the civil wars of the 1640s and the Glorious Revolution in 1688—that occurred in the shadow of nearby events in the Netherlands provided a reference point for comparison. Colonists and British alike saw the American Revolution through memories of the English Civil War, with New Englanders using rhetoric against Charles I to justify their own struggle.[16] Congress also took several grievances against George III from the Declaration of Rights that the Convention Parliament in 1689 issued to publicly justify deposing James II. Indeed, Charles James Fox, a British sympathizer to the colonists, thought Americans in the Declaration of Independence "had done no more than the English had done against James II."[17]

What the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper described as the general crisis of the 17th century fueled important debates over sovereignty, liberty, and political order amid the breakdown of governing systems in Europe that failed to adapt under strain.[18] Writing by Hobbes, James Harrington, and John Locke in the shadow of civil war in the British Isles and Continental unrest had lasting influence on political thought. A Commonwealth tradition among men who called themselves real or true Whigs kept alive

principles of toleration, popular consent, and checks on executive power from the mid-century interregnum.[19] Their arguments resonated more in 18th-century America than in Britain, where upholding the political settlement following 1688 that established parliamentary supremacy and then the Hanoverian succession after 1714 made claims to a right of resistance suspect at best.

Indeed, competing precedents drew colonists and the metropole apart. British consensus accepted that the balanced constitution resting sovereignty with the King-in-Parliament joined principles of monarchy, aristocracy, and democracy in a dynamic equilibrium that secured liberty and property. Court Whigs thought it repudiated Stuart tyranny and the anarchy the interregnum had unleashed. Balance checked usurpation, whether by royal tyranny, aristocratic faction, or the people themselves. William Blackstone, Jean Louis de Lolme, and William Paley made mixed government canonical in their successive writings.[20] Even aside from the clash over imperial reform in the 1760s, the American preoccupation with older controversies from the previous century that their British counterparts thought had been settled created an important conceptual gap.[21]

The revival of intense Anglo-French rivalry in the 1740s that lasted until Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo in 1815 also shaped America's path to revolution, with the Seven Years' War a key episode.[22] Both in scope and its lasting effects, that conflict became the British Empire's first "great war." A vast program of naval mobilization and subsidies for European allies and colonists won sweeping gains that left Britain's rulers "captivated by but also adrift and at odds in a vast empire abroad and a new political world at home."[23]

What seemed a shared triumph for Britain and its colonies brought strife as bills for its stupendous cost came due. Fifty years of "salutary neglect" intended to avoid contention that might cause wider disruption had already ended. Deploying an army to check the French on the Ohio and then seize Canada exposed tensions even as Britain posted significant troops among colonists for the first time. Schemes to raise taxes and tighten metropolitan control emerged from the experience of military

commanders and officials. Postwar expectations across the Atlantic diverged sharply from those of colonists anticipating a more secure and equal partnership within the empire and ministers determined to make regulation effective using parliamentary authority. That gap in perspective made disagreements harder to resolve, and removing a threat from France left colonists freer to challenge metropolitan authority.[24]

Winning the struggle for mastery in North America and securing maritime supremacy during the Seven Years' War brought other precedents to the fore. The balance of power, a concept that long shaped diplomatic thinking, reached beyond Europe to encompass maritime trade and colonies. Mercantilist theories influenced jurists who shaped international law. Partition treaties in 1698 and 1700 recognized the principle of a colonial balance of power, and the potential union of French and Spanish domains prompted the 1701–14 War of the Spanish Succession.

Britain, however, upset the overseas balance mid-century with strictly enforced blockades even before taking colonies from its foes.[25] Its admiralty courts in 1756 made enemy goods carried by nonbelligerents subject to capture. Neutrals denied a trade in peace could not conduct it during wartime as a temporary expedient for evading blockade. Besides keeping the Dutch from supplying French colonies, the "rule of 1756" punished them for neutrality. What the British deemed their maritime rights to impose strict blockades became a grievance to states that relied on free navigation.[26] Grotius's argument in *The Free Sea* (1609) that no monopoly could be established on the seas rightly open to the use of all nations and replies by English jurists claiming sovereignty in home waters provided important legal context for the later dispute.[27] Usurping maritime commerce enhanced Britain's wealth at the expense of other powers while making France and Spain second-rate powers, as Louis XV's foreign minister, the Duc de Choiseul, had presciently warned in 1758. That dynamic, he argued, was sufficient cause to unite Europe in curbing its ambitions.[28] British gains at the peace created an undercurrent felt over subsequent decades.

Diplomatic changes in Europe that left Britain isolated were less obvious than domestic and imperial challenges, but they would shape its

problems in America. Concerns about cost had pushed ministers to seek peace rather than press for additional gains, but sharply ending the war and the subsidies it provided to stem its cost alienated an abandoned Prussia. Near defeat curbed Frederick II's aggression, turning a successful poacher who had extended his realm at Austrian expense into a more cautious gamekeeper with a stake in preserving his gains along with the status quo in Central Europe.[29]

Peace left France defeated and weakened, Prussia and Austria worn out, and Russia secure in the east and north. Competitive spheres diverged over the 1760s, with Eastern Europe disengaged from Western powers and Britain diplomatically isolated. Anglo-French rivalry overseas mattered less for Continental powers than their own interests beyond the Rhine, where Britain had little to offer.[30] Informed observers in London recognized the danger of lacking allies. Charles Jenkinson, a treasury official and member of Parliament, presciently warned in 1767, "We shall begin the next war with two enemies at a time," facing France and Spain with the Dutch neutral at best. Other European states jealous of Britain's commercial position would then strive to profit from the struggle.[31]

Unrest in America facilitated France's revenge and defense of the equilibrium Britain had disrupted. Choiseul sent agents to report on American sentiment from 1764, while Charles Gravier de Vergennes, who followed him in 1774, developed plans to secure France from conflict in Europe while allying with Spain.[32] Recovery from defeat took a decade, in which Versailles drew back on several occasions. Choiseul's immediate successor, the Duc d'Aiguillon, made an overture for cooperation the British rejected in 1773, turning the French back to cautious hostility with Vergennes appointed in his place. Tension in America dented British prestige. George III's remark in 1774 that "we must get the colonies into order before we engage with our neighbors" captured the situation, while a warning the next year by Sir Joseph York, ambassador to the Dutch Republic, that losing the colonies would make Britain "the scorn of Europe" expressed a growing concern about Britain's reputation. France, with its European borders largely secure, had a favorable position to strike a blow by the mid-1770s.[33]

A Transformed Global Order

The outbreak of the American Revolution is an oft-told story, but its swift and profound transformation of European international relations remains underappreciated. It broke long-standing precedents of European affairs and created a new and unfamiliar order.

The degree of sudden change was a function in part of persistent uncertainty about the precise nature of the American conflict with England. As noted, the Revolution's development as a constitutional dispute over liberties and local self-government highlighted parallels with the Dutch Revolt that contemporaries recognized.[34] And composite monarchies in which separate realms or states shared a single ruler were a recognizable framework to interpret the conflict.[35] Americans saw their relation to the British Crown in those terms. Franklin repeatedly distinguished the Crown's sovereignty over those possessions from that of the legislature, and he complained in 1767 that "every man in England seems to consider himself as a piece of a sovereign over America."[36]

Colonial appeals to George III for protection against ministers and Parliament clashed with how the British, including the king, who described himself revealingly as fighting the battle of the legislature, understood their constitution, under which unitary sovereignty rested with the King-in-Parliament.[37] Compromise became hard, especially after the Boston Tea Party brought coercive measures colonists resisted. British ministers saw the Declaration of Rights and Grievances by the Continental Congress in October 1774, with its accompanying trade boycott, as a move to intimidate them into concessions. What seemingly began over tea, as a German observer remarked in 1778, became a dispute over kingdoms.[38]

Congress acted as an effective national government after the clashes at Lexington and Concord, with British authority collapsing as rapidly across the other 13 colonies as in New England. Local communities filled the gap, managing their own affairs in a contingent, open-ended process that transformed American politics.[39] The royal proclamation on August 23, 1775, declaring the colonies in revolt effectively announced war, but rather

than suppressing rebellion, British forces now had to defeat and displace an enemy regime.[40] Congress issued a series of state papers, including one on July 6, 1775, that justified taking up arms, presenting the case that culminated in the Declaration of Independence. Franklin noted how Vattel's work had been continually in their hands, with the jurist's arguments guiding congressional resolutions and policy. Adams and Richard Henry Lee recognized that securing foreign aid required formal separation from Britain so American representatives could have the status regular trade demanded.

The increasing need for supplies made recognition a pressing concern that Congress addressed through official documents, including model treaties, to enact independence through agreements of trade and alliance.[41] But despite Vattel's recent case for outside powers taking sides in civil war, established rules for neutral trade assumed war between independent states rather than groups within them. It remained unclear whether Americans fit that category or were merely exceptionally successful rebels until France recognized the United States in 1778. French action gave cover for de facto, if not de jure, recognition by other states.[42]

Sustaining resistance had made Congress look beyond American shores for support. Adams saw independence as the essential precondition for relations with other states that might provide aid once fighting had begun. Established trading networks through the Netherlands and Spain provided military supplies, even though the colonial economy was hampered by a lack of specie. Covert French and later Spanish aid funded American purchases, and both governments allowed the use of their ports. Vergennes remained cautious into 1776, and transferring supplies through a private company afforded plausible deniability.[43] A confrontation in South America with Portugal, a long-standing British ally, preoccupied Madrid until 1777.

Hopes to restore Britain's prestige in Europe by a quick victory prompted Lord George Germain, who directed the war in America as colonial secretary, to send an unprecedented force over the Atlantic in 1776. Concerns about alarming France or Spain kept Britain from

fully mobilizing its navy to blockade colonies and support its army's operations. Besides practical difficulties covering such an extended coastline, an effective blockade would have also risked conflict with foreign governments that ministers sought to avoid. Needing peace in Europe to settle the American revolt, they also feared that weakness might embolden rivals there.[44]

Catherine II gave an early sign this resistance was a possibility by refusing a British request to hire 20,000 Russian troops for service in America. In contrast, Hanover, George III's other realm, had already provided five regiments for Gibraltar that freed British regulars. Bringing Russian troops into British pay had been considered in earlier wars for European service, and it fit the long-established *Soldatenhandel*, whereby German princes leased soldiers and regiments, but Catherine II rejected out of hand an offer she viewed as treating her empire as a minor principality and her as "a glorified *Landgräfin*" rather than ruler of a great power. The tsarina's adviser Nikita Panin noted that a colonial revolt might set a dangerous example but stressed the prospect of trade opportunities and curbing British dominance at sea.[45] Officials in London turned instead to Germany, where Hesse-Cassel and Brunswick had offered regiments. Known as Hessians (after the region most of them came from), those nearly 30,000 trained and disciplined men proved critical to British efforts.[46] But the minor states providing those troops marked the exception to the British diplomatic isolation that tightened from 1778.

The American struggle for independence never followed a linear path. Advantage shifted back and forth, with the outcome uncertain before the final months.[47] Britain recovered from the forced withdrawal of its army from Boston in 1776 to capture New York and New Jersey, driving George Washington's Continental Army over the Delaware River. Resistance seemed near collapse, as Samuel Adams and Washington both remarked.[48] Defeats at Trenton and Princeton, however, knocked the British back, with Saratoga later a humiliating loss. French intervention forced the British to abandon captured Philadelphia and concentrate at New York in 1778, where Charles d'Estaing's fleet temporarily isolated them. British troops

under Sir Henry Clinton later recovered the initiative to mount successful campaigns in Georgia and the Carolinas by capturing Charleston in 1780, a defeat for the United States comparable to Saratoga. British ministers thought another successful campaign would force the French to make terms, and Washington lamented in April 1781 "that we are at the end of our tether, and that now or never our deliverance must come."[49] Yorktown resolved Washington's fears, but it was an awfully near-run thing.

John Burgoyne's surrender at Saratoga opened the way for French intervention, though Vergennes also feared that Americans risked defeat without direct support. Their independence, he recognized early, would redress the imbalance of power by throwing considerable weight behind France or some other state while denying Britain the advantages of controlling them.[50] French preparations for hostilities, including a long-term naval mobilization project, were ready in early 1778, as diplomats settled terms for an alliance stipulating that neither party would make peace without American independence.

The alliance committing France to join the war offered more than the commercial treaty Congress had sought. Formally announcing the commissioners in a presentation before Louis XVI on March 20, 1778, marked the first official reference to the United States as a sovereign, independent state. Spain held back from such recognition and for a time suspended its financial assistance, but New Orleans, which it controlled, remained a supply route through the Mississippi.[51] Careful French diplomacy avoided repeating the division of effort between Europe and overseas colonies that had produced defeat in both during the Seven Years' War. It kept in check tensions over a disputed succession in Bavaria and between Russia and the Ottomans that might have started a larger war. The cool responses that British overtures drew from Austria, Prussia, and Russia helped Vergennes's efforts to shape a favorable environment as tensions with Britain grew before the open break.[52]

The expanded global war in 1778 forced Britain to shift resources from North America to keep hold of vital interests in the Caribbean and change its overall strategy. Efforts to regain the mainland colonies gave way to

a strategic defensive combined with opportunistic attacks exploiting local vulnerabilities to keep Washington on guard.[53] Fighting would also extend beyond the Western Hemisphere to European waters—Gibraltar and the Channel Islands both faced attacks—and India, but not Europe, where peace defended France's landward flank. With Americans treated as legitimate belligerents rather than rebels from the start, the conflict already had turned, as Sir George Savile remarked, "by degrees from a question of right and wrong between subjects, to a war between us and a foreign nation."[54] The alliance with France hardened that tendency. Spain joined the war as an ally of France—though not formally of the United States—in 1779, after failed mediation overtures to Britain. The collapse of Anglo-Dutch relations over trade with America and carrying cargoes for belligerent powers then added a traditional ally to Britain's growing list of foes in late 1780.

Disputes over neutral rights became an important factor as Britain asserted a legal claim to impose strict blockades that other states resisted. While circumstances during the Seven Years' War had favored that insistence, diplomatic isolation now created a different situation, which France exploited. Halting trade in naval stores—timber, hemp or rope, and other items used to maintain ships—between countries on the Baltic and France and Spain sparked clashes that brought the Dutch into the war and promoted a league of armed neutrality that complicated British efforts.[55] Because seizures affected trade beyond consignments for America, Austria's Joseph II called such "despotism at sea" an "incredible and intolerable" burden.[56]

While Denmark, Sweden, and Prussia protested the seizure of their ships, the former two governments had weakened their case by conceding the expansive British definition of contraband in past treaties. The Danish foreign minister, however, sketched principles for liberal trade that Russia would later propose formally.[57] Catherine II's Declaration of Armed Neutrality in 1780 stipulated free navigation between ports for nonbelligerent ships, protections for persons and their effects outside recognized contraband, and enforcement close to shore for a blockade

to be legally effective. While Russia had long supported liberal rules for wartime trade at sea, the issue largely helped raise the tsarina's prestige by defending neutral maritime states. It caught Britain off guard, especially when France and Spain accepted Russian terms, even as a bluff Catherine never intended to uphold by force. Sweden and Denmark acceded to the league, with Austria, Portugal, and Prussia signing the next year and Naples in 1783.[58] Frederick II looked to profit from whatever opportunities the American war offered while reflecting on whether British power had peaked and begun to decline.[59]

Mediation offers implicitly recognized a new status for the United States, if not the sovereign independence Americans claimed. Spain had already offered its own before joining the war and suggested its 1609 armistice with the Dutch as a precedent. Austria proposed mediation in 1779, with Russia later joining the overture. While they approached Britain, France, and Spain rather than Congress, Russian plans envisioned American representation at a conference in Leipzig to discuss terms and implicitly expected them to decide their own fate. The Russo-Austrian proposal in May 1781 for a general negotiation at Vienna invited Americans who would settle a separate peace with Britain unless either party requested mediation. Financial strain on France made Vergennes willing to consider discussions, but France's commitment to American independence made settling on acceptable terms unlikely.[60] Open to an accommodation with the French and Spanish, British ministers refused to negotiate with Americans, and George III rejected interference by any foreign state "in the terms for bringing my rebellious subjects to a sense of their crimes." Ironically, such intransigence favored the United States after Yorktown by preventing a less favorable earlier compromise based on territory held by each side before then.[61]

While Germain and George III wanted to persevere, they had neither the military force nor the political support to do so. Lord Frederick North, the prime minister, took the news of Yorktown like a gunshot to the body and declared it all over.[62] A new British administration would try to divide the enemy alliance by offering Americans concessions to induce a separate peace. Fighting beyond America continued with British naval

victories in the Caribbean evening the balance with France. Spain's inability to capture Gibraltar forced Madrid to lower its terms as its French ally felt increasing financial strain. Lord Shelburne, who replaced Germain as colonial secretary and later became prime minister, directed American negotiations, which followed a separate track from those with France treating for Spain and the Dutch, and he hoped at first to keep the 13 colonies in a loose relationship with Britain. He soon yielded to reality in conceding political independence while aiming to preserve effective rather than de jure control by economically dominating the United States as its primary trading partner and financier.

A position that followed earlier assessments during the struggle would guide subsequent British policy toward the United States. Shelburne offered generous frontiers up to the Mississippi River, though he refused Franklin's demand for Canada. The agreement settling terms with America on November 30, 1782, would not take effect until France and Britain also settled the next year. A final treaty signed in Paris on September 3, 1783, specifically acknowledged the former colonies "to be free sovereign and independent states."[63]

Precedents for Revolts and Revolutions

British recognition in 1783 secured de jure standing for the United States' de facto independence, making the Treaty of Paris one of the country's founding documents. It highlights the relational side of independence, with its validity resting on formal acceptance. Rights had to be acknowledged for them to carry weight. Americans sought to uphold their standing with other states while strictly defending the symbols and substance of sovereignty. Hence the persistent insistence on reciprocal treatment by foreign governments.[64] Eighteenth-century jurists, as David Armitage notes, had not resolved the question of how, when, and under what terms states might acquire the rights of sovereignty and equal standing that Vattel argued natural law provided. Third-party recognition for many

authorities did not suffice and lacked constructive force until the former sovereign renounced its rights.

A party refusing obedience might effectively come to possess the independence it demanded and thereby turn the dispute into one between independent states, but the sovereign could construe aid from an outside party as an act of war. Americans had forced the question of recognition to create a new precedent, with the Treaty of Paris confirming the change much as Spanish recognition had done earlier for the Dutch. European jurists accordingly incorporated the Declaration of Independence and other American documents into the positive law of nations as precedents alongside earlier international treaties.[65]

Ideological concerns about republicanism in the United States mattered less for other countries than practical considerations around trade and neutral rights at sea that shaped their actions. One Venetian account saw "the rebellion of the Anglo-Americans" at the point of forming ideas "capable of subverting all nations," but another Italian found the colonists' will to preserve liberties menaced by reform legitimate and natural. Tuscany's Hapsburg Grand Duke Leopold, who would succeed his brother Joseph II as Austria's ruler, took a sympathetic interest while corresponding with Jefferson's friend Filippo Mazzei and studying Pennsylvania's constitution as a guide to reform.[66]

Local preoccupations shaped the reception of American news transmitted through Paris or the Netherlands, whose culture then remained in the French orbit, often copied directly from British publications.[67] Spanish authorities feared the example it set for their own American empire, with the Count of Aranda warning in 1783 that the United States would eventually grow into a power eager to absorb Florida and Mexico. Revolts in Peru and La Plata, along with earlier protests in the 1760s, sharpened those concerns. Francisco de Miranda, a Venezuelan officer who fought at Pensacola and subsequently lived in the United States, saw its independence as "the infallible preliminary to our own."[68] Latin America's independence, however, came much later, from internal and European dynamics rather than influences from the United States.

The effects of independence over the next few years tested expectations. Britain lost the war for America, but France gained neither trade nor prestige to compensate for expenses that brought its public finances into crisis by the late 1780s.[69] Fear of decline had driven the British to persist against growing odds. George III saw the war in 1781 as a contest over "whether we are to rank among the Great Powers of Europe or be reduced to one of the most inconsiderable." Others echoed his alarm, fearing "imperial sway, national dignity, ostentation, and luxury must with our commerce be annihilated" on losing America. Joseph II, who thought it a product of British misrule, told his brother Leopold in 1783 that Britain was no longer a great power but instead a second-rank state, comparable to Sweden or Denmark.[70]

Recovery instead followed a clean political break with America. Adam Smith and Josiah Tucker had shown that the advantages of American trade to Britain did not rest on direct political control. Shelburne became the first of many British figures hoping to dominate the United States economically as its best customer and primary supplier of finance and manufactured goods without the burden of governing or defending it. The conflict, like earlier wars, ceased to be a point of partisan dispute and passed into history.[71] William Pitt accepted the outcome without apologizing for the effort when he told Parliament in 1787 that "our resistance must be admired, and in our defeats we gave proofs of our greatness and almost-inexhaustible resources."[72] Those resources left Britain well positioned for the next crisis, which soon came.

The historian R. R. Palmer famously located American independence in an age of democratic revolutions between 1760 and 1800, but the period's instability was more apparent to contemporaries than was popular involvement with politics. Domestic and international tensions paralleled the general crisis of the preceding century. The instability's expressions within states took different forms, from Pugachev's Revolt in Russia and royal coups in Denmark and Sweden to the American crisis and a failure of institutional reform in France.[73] Diplomatic rules that set a premium on compensation for gains by others and indemnities for services to allies or

a state's own losses destabilized Europe from the 1760s, making conflict more likely and the stakes far higher in what became a zero-sum game.[74]

Equilibrium faltered in the 1780s as foreign defeats upset domestic politics while internal disruption impeded protecting interests abroad. Losing a political struggle in the Netherlands to Britain became a catalyst for the French Revolution, and the ensuing distraction that removed France from international politics helped the British face down Spain over the Nootka Sound dispute in 1790 and gave Austria, Prussia, and Russia a free hand in their final partitions of Poland. Revolution swept aside restraints on mobilizing French resources behind aggressive moves beyond the country's borders. The war that began in 1792 would last more than two decades, until Napoleon's final defeat at Waterloo in 1815.

That protracted conflict reached over the Atlantic just as American examples influenced early stages of the French Revolution. Washington and Franklin had both become celebrities in fashionable circles, with the former embodying an increasingly popular type of civic virtue looking back to republican Rome. Exemplary men impressed Europeans more than documents French revolutionaries themselves seem not to have quoted.[75] A tradition-minded revolt against Joseph II's centralizing reforms in the Austrian Netherlands did take the Declaration of Independence in 1790 as a model for repudiating allegiance. It modified American precedent along with older forms of protest for their own purposes.[76]

French revolutionaries would soon reject the examples from America and Britain that some of them had originally embraced, while foreigners—including Americans like Gouverneur Morris and John Adams—rejected their project. Adams used Enrico Caterino Davila's 17th-century history of the French Wars of Religion as a precedent to frame the unfolding events in France with a 1790 pamphlet titled *Discourses on Davila*.[77] Friedrich von Gentz, a German admirer of Burke and later private secretary to the Austrian Chancellor Prince Klemens von Metternich, denied that the American Revolution followed the same principles as that of France in a pamphlet John Quincy Adams translated and published in 1800. It was, Gentz insisted, a defensive political change rather than an overturning

of social and moral order. The federal Constitution of 1789 then secured orderly government under law.[78] France's unfolding revolution changed the context for understanding events across the Atlantic that observers with different views cited for their own arguments or purposes.

Precedents for American Foreign Policy

New precedents emerged from what American independence meant to other states amid a protracted global war and how the United States tried to uphold it. Lesser states had a recognized place within the international order as buffers separating interests of larger powers, which Burke's image of a new body in the solar system recognized. Their role, however, came under increasing pressure as they sought to avoid being swamped by currents they could not control. Distance did not spare the United States. Indeed, it struggled with problems other neutral powers had faced during the American war for independence.

Precedents from those years became a foundation for the country's approach to foreign relations. John Adams had insisted that neutrality in European wars was the basis of real, if not nominal, independence, as foreign states otherwise "would find means to corrupt our people, to influence our councils," making Americans "little better than puppets, danced on the wires of the cabinets of Europe."[79] French demands for support triggered a debate that divided Washington's cabinet and showed how foreign disputes could divide Americans. Along with Washington's later warning against "entangling alliances" in his Farewell Address, the neutrality proclamation sparked the Pacificus–Helvidius Debates in published letters between Alexander Hamilton and James Madison.[80] Conspiracies by James Wilkinson and, later, Aaron Burr highlighted vulnerabilities along with the government's limited means to control peripheral regions.[81]

Frequent trade and cultural ties, Secretary of State Edmund Randolph argued in 1794, brought the United States the same rights and privileges

as other states despite the country's newly recognized sovereignty and geographic location "without the European circle."[82] Upholding those claims in practice, however, required force along with diplomacy. The United States fought the Quasi-War with France from 1798 to 1800, until a new French government headed by Napoleon conceded the principle of free navigation the United States demanded.[83] Attacks on American ships by Barbary States in North Africa led Jefferson to send a squadron to the Mediterranean. Defending American neutrality and the freedom of navigation and trade shaped foreign policy as it became harder to avoid conflict.[84]

The French Revolutionary Wars ended in the early 1800s with fundamental differences unresolved and another round of conflict likely. Britain, which had purged the Orient of European rivals while defeating local powers, had secured a near monopoly of overseas trade, which cast it in the invidious position of decrying French ambitions as its own gains rose.[85] Gentz described jealousy of British power in 1800 as the dominant principle of Europe's political writers. Britain's wealth meant poverty for the Continent, while its industrial and commercial might were hateful monopolies.[86] Americans, as an envoy to London declared, believed the British prolonged Europe's agony for their own advantage by setting unreasonable peace terms.[87]

Even as he recognized the danger France posed until the Louisiana Purchase, Jefferson saw alignment with Britain during the 1790s as a strategic error that curbed American independence. He hoped Russia, which had sponsored a failed armed neutrality effort in 1800, might serve as a counterweight and defender of neutral rights.[88] Russian officials similarly looked to the United States as a counterweight to Britain, which not only ruled the waves but persistently waived the rules to its own advantage. Count Nikolai Rumiantsev, Alexander I's foreign minister, considered British control over his country's overseas trade an affront and a threat of "dominion something like they had in India." Priorities changed as French pressure on Russia grew, but the United States remained a factor in political calculations.[89]

Neutrality became untenable as the war revived in 1803 following a brief peace between Britain and France. Jefferson cited the Royal Navy's 1807 bombardment of Copenhagen to secure the Danish fleet alongside Napoleon's aggressions as proof of an epoch marked by "the total extinction of national morality."[90] British sea power locked French imperial ambitions into Europe, where other great powers resisted Napoleon's efforts to build a counterweight by dominating the Continent.[91] The United States could not avoid involvement without giving up its own trade. Jefferson's Embargo Act, in response to the rival belligerents' measures, provoked domestic opposition while perplexing the British as a self-defeating policy. Clashes with the Royal Navy, unresolved border issues, and ambitions to gain Canada led to an American declaration of war that made the United States effectively Napoleon's partner at a point when the larger conflict began turning against France.[92]

The War of 1812 was a second war for independence from Britain and a theater of the larger struggle that closed at Waterloo in 1815. Ending in a draw, in which both sides accepted the status quo ante bellum and the United States held New Orleans at the mouth of the Mississippi River, the conflict showed that Americans would fight for national honor and sovereignty, but it left them chastened by the experience. The danger of being drawn into European disputes underlined the importance of neutrality to preserving independence and the difficulty of maintaining it.[93] American leaders over the coming decades took the War of 1812 as an example of what to avoid by following the guidance of Adams and Washington.

Latin American independence soon put those principles to the test with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, effectively separating Europe and the Americas to the United States' advantage. Differences stand out from Britain's earlier struggles with its colonists. Spanish officials contained revolts more effectively, and the character of the colonial societies they ruled neither allowed for popular participation in governance nor created an experienced political class that could lead. Rebellion operated typically as a negotiating position that triggered further bargaining rather than armed repression, and concessions to it did not compromise fundamental legitimacy.[94]

Crisis came only when Napoleon's occupation of Spain in 1808 created a power vacuum across an empire based on royal absolutism.[95] The postwar period restored monarchy, then struggled to impose rule on colonies where elites had seized power often to preserve order and their own position against chaos. Stability in ethnically divided societies proved elusive amid escalating violence. Washington and other founders of the United States, with Franklin a significant exception, had less experience with Europe than the liberators of Spanish America, but they had greater practical experience of governing than those later men and a political order adapted to republican principles. Such differences mattered. European ideas and the more immediate experience of the French Revolution cast a longer shadow over Latin America than precedents in the United States did.[96]

The Declaration of Independence stands out as an exception in providing a template for revolutionaries asserting claims. Haitians issued a declaration in January 1804 modeled on that of the United States, albeit directed to their own people rather than a candid world. Spanish declarations of founding documents circulated through Latin America. An Ecuadorian called the Declaration of Independence "the true political decalogue," though his counterparts looked for equality and home rule instead of independence and separation. Venezuela became the first to make that wider demand for independence in 1811, followed over the decade by Argentina, Chile, and other regions farther north.[97]

Latin America's revolutionaries, however, struggled to establish a viable political order that could sustain their claims by mobilizing resources and popular support to govern effectively. Madison captured their problem when he noted the difficulty of creating a government able to control the people and itself that could thereby avoid swinging between anarchy and tyranny. Countering ambition with ambition secured a balanced political order for the United States, but the achievement rested on institutions and practices from Britain that Americans kept when they claimed independence, along with traditions of local self-government. Having largely inherited a system of political organization, they did not have to create

one, but those conditions did not provide a template to apply in very different circumstances.[98]

Spain's inability to enforce its authority over the colonies in revolt created the conditions by 1815 that Vattel had argued would justify recognition. Foreign governments, including the United States, accordingly faced a decision they sought to avoid. John Quincy Adams likened the situation in late 1817 to debates over the French Revolution, when "ardent spirits" would rush into the conflict without regard for consequences. He saw only troubles on all sides in a cauldron of unrest, "which will soon be at boiling heat."[99] Those troubles bolstered arguments from the 1790s for American neutrality, and the United States delayed recognition until the new republics showed they could sustain the independence they claimed. An 1820 revolution in Spain that began among soldiers destined for America, along with its parallel in Naples, threw European politics into disorder. French intervention backed by other powers to restore the Spanish king raised concerns about whether it would extend to the New World. European states lacked the capacity to aid Spain, whose efforts had already failed, but their opposition to revolution made recognition a symbolic issue for governments determined to contain unrest closer to home.[100]

Events leading to the Monroe Doctrine show how European states treated the United States as part of the international system and Americans' reluctance to restrict their own freedom of action. Britain granted the Latin American republics de facto recognition in 1821 to protect its trade and curb piracy while urging other powers to follow. It also sought backing from the United States to keep France from leveraging influence over Spain into a stronger position in the New World.[101] Hostile rhetoric by Continental European powers had raised fears that made James Monroe and several former presidents, including the Anglophobic Jefferson and Madison, open to cooperation. John Quincy Adams pushed instead for a unilateral declaration that would uphold neutrality while excluding new European involvement in the Western Hemisphere. Such a declaration also kept the United States out of European questions about which it lacked the means to act effectively. The Monroe Doctrine, along with

accompanying but less noted diplomatic letters, made that point to lasting effect. It became a lasting principle in American foreign policy, albeit with more attention to excluding foreign influence in the New World than restraint toward the Old World.[102]

One and the Same System

The absence of general war in Europe between Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo and the outbreak of World War I favored American detachment. European conflicts over that near century tended to be limited in scope and duration, which contained their effects. The most devastating conflicts, including the American Civil War, occurred elsewhere. By contrast, protracted struggles during the 18th and 20th centuries, including the Cold War, made neutrality difficult.

Whether as colonial subjects of the British Crown or citizens of the United States, Americans found it hard to stand apart from general wars in Europe that became global conflicts. The long 19th-century peace, however, allowed the United States to grow and resolve its own disputes without foreign interference. Concerns about freedom of navigation and neutral rights faded from view without the conflicts that had made them pressing issues. Fears during the 1780s and 1790s of foreign domination never came to pass. Americans instead focused on their own country's development. The eventual transition from wealth to power in the late 19th century again transformed America's place in the international system that securing independence had provided.[103]

John Quincy Adams revealingly cited the first Treaty of Amity and Commerce with France in 1778 as a pivotal document. Its preamble was, he told the American minister to Colombia in 1823, to commercial relations with foreign governments what the Declaration of Independence was to internal government: "The two instruments were parts of one and the same system."[104] His words highlight the connection between the American Revolution and the United States' role in the world. Precedents

that shaped them shed light on the story, as do the precedents established after independence over the early decades of the republic. They provided a guide for statesmen grappling with challenges in those years and a map for observers today looking back to understand one of the most pivotal moments in modern history.

Notes

1. Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World Since 1776* (Houghton Mifflin, 1997); and Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no. 1 (1990–91): 23–33, https://users.metu.edu.tr/ututba/Krauthammer.pdf. Francis Fukuyama introduced the concept with an influential parallel take in Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (Free Press, 1992). Robert Kagan makes a case against McDougall's position in Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Knopf, 2006).

2. *The Works and Correspondence of the Right Honorable Edmund Burke*, ed. Charles William et al., 2nd ed. (London, 1852), 2:453.

3. David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 13–15.

4. Paul W. Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics 1763–1848* (Clarendon Press, 1994), 38–39.

5. G. C. Gibbs, "The Dutch Revolt and the American Revolution," in *Royal and Republican Sovereignty in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Memory of Ragnhild Hatton*, ed. Robert Oresko and G. C. Gibbs (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

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7. E. H. Kossman and A. F. Mellink, eds., *Texts Concerning the Revolt of the Netherlands* (Cambridge University Press, 1974), 216–28.

8. Stephen E. Lucas, "The Plakkaat van Verlatinge: A Neglected Model for the American Declaration of Independence," in *Connecting Cultures: The Netherlands in Five Centuries of Transatlantic Exchange*, ed. Rosemarijn Hoefte and Johanna C. Kardux (VU University Press, 1994), 199–200.

9. Parker, *The Dutch Revolt*, 239–40, 265–66, 270. Feltham's point resonated in 18th-century Britain and the United States amid fear of losing power or political virtue. Ironically, the Dutch Republic's decline from great power to complacent prosperity became a cautionary tale for John Adams. See also Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Fears of a Setting Sun: The Disillusionment of America's Founders* (Princeton University Press, 2021).

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13. Emer de Vattel, *The Law of Nations* [. . .], ed. Bela Kaposi and Richard Whatmore (Liberty Fund, 2008), 425–26, 429–30.

14. Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 133–34.

15. J. H. Elliott, "The Spanish Monarchy and the Kingdom of Portugal, 1580–1640," in *Conquest and Coalescence: The Shaping of the State in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Mark Greengrass (Edward Arnold, 1991), 65.

16. J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), 266–67, 356–68.

17. Lucas, "The Plakkaat van Verlatinge," 191. Armitage notes that Vattel cited William III's 1688 expedition as a precedent for intervention. Armitage, *Civil Wars*, 133.

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