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American Statecraft in the Founding Generation

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If the Declaration of Independence was, as Thomas Jefferson claimed, an "expression of the american mind" at the time of the country's founding, what did it imply about the American approach to statecraft?[1] Little, if courses in American history and civics are taken as a guide. Overwhelmingly, these revolve around the meaning of the Declaration's most famous lines:

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.

In such discussions, the Declaration's substance is confined to what constitutes the just grounds and ends for domestic rule and to what extent we have lived up to those precepts as a nation.

But that 55-word snippet from the roughly 1,300-word document had obvious implications broader than America's own political order, even then. It was the first public assertion in human history that a government's legitimacy rested on natural right and not on custom, race, religion, or hereditary claims and that these principles were applicable to all men and all governing regimes. In a world of monarchies and despotisms of various stripes, the Declaration's most famous lines could not help but be seen as

a challenge. Writing from Paris, Benjamin Franklin noted, "'Tis a Common Observation here that our Cause is *the Cause of all Mankind*; and that we are fighting for their Liberty in defending our own."[2] (Emphasis in original.)

Given the uncertainty of whether the colonists would prevail in their war of independence against the world's greatest power and whether—should it prevail—a relatively weak and (initially) poorly governed United States would even be able to survive, any challenge that assertion of principle posed might have rightly been seen as distant at best. Nevertheless, as the Declaration's text (in the words of historian David Armitage) "rapidly entered national and international circuits of exchange" and "copies passed from hand to hand, desk to desk, country to country," the claim about what constituted legitimate rule—and the grounds for revolution—could not be ignored completely.[3] As historian Robert Palmer observed,

> The effects of the American Revolution, as a revolution, were imponderable but very great. It inspired a sense of a new era. . . . It gave a whole new dimension to ideas of liberty and equality made familiar by the Enlightenment.[4]

But however the Declaration's assertion of rights was perceived internationally at the time, the document's immediate purpose was more prosaic. To gain assistance from other nations in their war with Great Britain while remaining consonant with international law, the Americans necessarily had to declare that they were a sovereign state and demonstrate their determination to carry on that fight until independence was proven to the world.[5] Accordingly, the Declaration's first paragraph is an assertion that the colonies, having dissolved "the political bands which have connected them" with Britain, are "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature's God entitle them." Similarly, the Declaration's final paragraph concludes, "That these United Colonies are . . . Free and Independent States" and, as such, "have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things

which Independent States may of right do." The Declaration was simultaneously setting out the principles that made America unique among the nations of the world and insisting it was a sovereign state like any other.[6]

Even as it did so, the Declaration made clear that revolution in practice was not something to be undertaken lightly—implying that the new American state could be trusted to be a responsible member of the Atlantic order. After announcing the break from Britain, the Declaration then stated that the actual decision to do so was guided by "prudence." Rebellion was not undertaken "for light and transient causes"; rather, it was justified by the British sovereign's "long train of abuses and usurpations." By conditioning the right to revolt on the lengthy catalog of the king's misrule, the Declaration's authors indicated there would be no automatic confrontation by the "united States" with regimes that were neither liberal nor republican.[7] Indeed, the Declaration implies that, had the British monarch not acted as he had and had the colonists' rights not been repeatedly violated, kingly rule would have remained a legitimate form of rule. In short, the Declaration makes no universal call to arms—unlike the later French and Russian Revolutions.

And yet, although the Declaration of Independence does not stipulate a specific form of government to ensure rights, the principles of equality and consent strongly lean in the direction of republican government. Likewise, while the Declaration's tone indicates it is up to each people to vindicate their own rights when threatened, the founding generation could not have failed to recognize that the spread of liberalism would be beneficial to creating an environment in which Americans' rights were better secured and exercised.

In sum, as the country's founding state document, the Declaration presents a set of principles that are potentially expansive—indeed revolutionary—but in a manner that is quite conservative in their application. The new nation carried forward this outlook throughout its earliest decades.

The circumstances in which the Americans found themselves also dictated such a stance. The United States was a weak state in a sea of

powerful, non-liberal regimes. The first order of business was survival. Second was the adoption of the policies and institutional tools that would make the rights spelled out in the Declaration more secure.

But once the country was stronger and freed of necessity, what would American statecraft look like? What role, if any, would the country's founding liberalism play in how it conducted its relations with other states?

The Model Treaty

The complex character of American statecraft in the immediate period following the country's founding was captured by the Continental Congress's formal adoption of the so-called Model Treaty on September 17, 1776—a template intended to guide America's relations with other states.[8] Above all else, the Model Treaty focused on bilateral, commercial ties between the United States and other nations. It eschewed formal military or political relations. And it said nothing about preferring ties to or discriminating against different kinds of polities. By treating other states as equals and being treated as an equal in return, Congress hoped, the United States could avoid being drawn into the ever-shifting competition among Europe's great powers.

While undeniably the diplomacy of a weak and ideologically isolated state, the Model Treaty was not simply that. The emphasis on opening freer trade with other nations was consistent with the Americans' own commercial inclinations and their interest in breaking down the mercantilist approach of much of Europe and circumventing (to the extent possible) Britain's domination of international trade through its hegemony over the seas.[9] Writing to Congress from Paris in 1780, John Adams quoted favorably from a monograph about the potentially reforming impact of the American approach to trade:

> N. America is a new primary Planet, which taking its Course in its own orbit, must have an Effect upon the orbit of every other. . . .

> . . . She is mistress of her own fortune, knows that she is so, and will manage that Power which she feels herself possessed of, to establish her own System and change that of Europe.[10]

Informed by Enlightenment thinkers, the American interest in free trade had, if only furtively, a broader goal in mind. Americans were aware of Montesquieu's argument that freer trade would gradually promote more peaceful relations among trading states as their interdependence increased.[11] Additionally, freer trade would increase a nation's commerce and, in turn, expand its prosperity domestically. Greater prosperity, distributed more equally among the population, ideally would generate pressure for greater liberalization within states.[12] By promoting a liberalized trading order, Americans would be putting their own "pursuit of Happiness" on firmer ground while potentially furthering a process leading to more liberal-leaning regimes. The similarity in polities would, as Adams wrote about prospects of a treaty with the Dutch Republic, make ties "natural" and connections "easy."[13]

Dire Straits

The Model Treaty's strategic vision was undercut by the reality that the monarchies and imperialist states then dominating the globe were far from "natural" partners for the United States.[14] According to American diplomats abroad, the new nation had to operate in a world in which the existing powers "watch us with a jealous eye, while we adhere to and flourish under systems diametrically opposite to those which support their governments."[15] Imperial powers maintained a mercantilist approach, keeping exclusive trading privileges within their colonial possessions. More broadly, European countries' international affairs rested on a balance-of-powers approach adopted under the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which prioritized national sovereignty over questions of religious confession.

With no real power to leverage or impose its will, the United States could not at that point expect its reform program of liberalized trade and expansive neutrality rights to be an effective basis for statecraft. To survive, the United States would need to play its weak hand as best it could within the existing geopolitical order.

The Congress's immediate goal was to gain assistance from France—the one European power with both the resources to provide that assistance and the desire to enact revenge on Britain for its losses in the Seven Years' War. Relying on the framework of the Model Treaty, the Congress sought that help by offering France favored trading status, without more formal political or military ties. Adams, the Model Treaty's principal author, believed the economic benefits that a liberal trade agreement with the United States would generate for France would be sufficient inducement for the French king and his government to offer significant assistance to the American cause without more formal ties.[16] This belief proved to be overoptimistic, as the French price for assistance was a commercial accord along with a mutual defense agreement. Still, the Americans were not averse to adapting their plans to the situation at hand. While they continued to push a diplomatic agenda abroad that avoided political ties based on the Model Treaty, they were aware of the need to bend to necessity.[17]

With the 1783 Treaty of Paris, the United States secured formal peace with Great Britain and London's recognition of the United States as an independent state with borders encompassing all former British lands east of the Mississippi River, north of Florida, and south of Canada. With other provisions covering fishing rights in the Grand Banks and arrangements satisfying outstanding debts and property disputes between the two countries, the Treaty of Paris was, all in all, favorable for the United States.

But those favorable terms did not bring a respite from America's difficult strategic situation. In the north, west, and south, the United States was bounded by Spain and Britain—two imperial powers that had no interest in seeing the young republic prosper. Although France technically remained an ally, its greater fealty was to Spain, and Spain was focused

on retaining its North American territories of Louisiana and the Floridas. Moreover, in the absence of alternative overseas markets of any significance, American commerce was still highly dependent on trade with Great Britain—a point of leverage for London that prevented the United States from retaliating against Britain's mercantilist measures.

Britain exposed America's impotence most seriously by refusing to vacate a series of forts it had held in the Northwest Territory now belonging to the United States under the terms of the 1783 treaty. When the United States demanded British forces pull back, the British countered by (correctly) saying the Americans had failed to fulfill their own treaty pledges. With only a small standing force and no federal enforcement capacity to make citizens in states abide by the terms of the treaty, the American government was powerless to remove the British military from United States territory. Similarly, when Spain closed access to the Gulf of Mexico for American trade using the Mississippi River, American diplomats could complain but had no capacity to make Madrid reverse that decision.

Equally as problematic, Spain and Great Britain had allies among the Native American nations that had a mutual interest in preventing Americans from moving deeper into the continent. Absent a rightsized force to police the frontier, Americans moving southwest, west, and northwest could not count on protection from tribal attacks. Abroad, Barbary powers captured ships and enslaved the sailors of American merchants attempting to ply their trade in the Mediterranean. With no navy to protect merchant ships, all the Americans could do was pay tribute and ransom moneys to the piratical ministates.

Americans' own ambitions exacerbated the country's difficult strategic situation. Even during the colonial period, many in North America envisioned a continental empire. With no natural impediment to the continent's growth in population, vast amounts of natural resources, and the seemingly endless stretch of virgin lands to acquire and make productive, it was a reasonable projection of the future. Once the United States had secured from Britain the territories over the Appalachian Mountains, there was little stopping the push to the Mississippi. Guided by the spirit

of the Lockean precept that "*As much Land* as a Man Tills, Improves, Cultivates, and can use the Product of, so much is his *Property*" (emphasis in original), the world's largest experiment in "the pursuit of Happiness" was underway.[18]

Nevertheless, if the westward-moving Americans could not be protected from attacks, if they could not bring their products readily to market absent access ports on the Gulf of Mexico, if there was, in short, no effective government to secure their life and property, it was an open question how long they would retain their allegiance to the new government. As George Washington noted in 1784 of those immigrating westward,

> How entirely unconnected with them shall we be, and what troubles may we not apprehend, if the Spaniards on their right, & Gt Britain on the left . . . hold out lures for their trade and alliance. . . .
>
> The Western settlers . . . stand as it were upon a pivot—the touch of a feather, would turn them any way.[19]

Peace, ironically, brought new vulnerabilities, not all of which were a product of hostile states' devising.

To address these vulnerabilities effectively, American statesmen needed better tools and resources. And it was gradually understood that this required a more energetic and more powerful federal government than what the Continental Congress and the Articles of Confederation provided. The "crisis" in governance in the United States in the 1780s was as much about the state of the nation's security as it was about domestic affairs.[20] Reliance on republican martial spirit, Congress as the country's executive, and the states' goodwill to provide for the country's broader needs had proved inadequate during the war and in its aftermath.

Lacking independent taxing power, the federal government was at the states' mercy to fund a military adequate to force the British out of the Northwest Territory, open up the Mississippi, defend settlers from attacks by native tribes, and protect merchant shipping on the high seas

and in the Mediterranean. The individual states did none of these. The inability to protect the frontier also meant the price for the government's sale of Western lands was less than it might otherwise have been, reducing further the government's resources. Nor did the federal government have the power to establish a common commercial policy, meaning there was no possibility of an effective, national response to trade restrictions that Britain or other countries imposed on the United States. Finally, Congress had no means to ensure that citizens of the states abided by provisions in the peace treaty intended to satisfy outstanding debts owed to British creditors—a failure in the treaty's execution that the British government used as grounds for refusing to remove its forces from the Northwest Territory. Alexander Hamilton, writing as "Publius" in *Federalist* 15, summarized the situation: "We have neither troops, nor treasury, nor government."[21]

The Federalist Response

The consensus among those attending the Constitutional Convention—implied initially and almost immediately adopted as the working plan—was that the Articles of Confederation had to be replaced. It was essential that a true state with significant powers be erected if the American republic was to survive in a hostile, non-republican world. As Max M. Edling notes in *A Revolution in Favor of Government*,

> In the Constitutional Convention, there was little disagreement about the need to strengthen the military and fiscal powers of the union. Nor was there disagreement about the need to grant Congress the power to regulate commerce and to enforce treaties.[22]

Institutionally, this meant establishing a chief executive sufficiently independent to act with decision, dispatch, and secrecy. It was these

qualities, in addition to the possibility of a lengthy tenure in office, that made the president "the most fit agent" to conduct the nation's foreign relations and do so systematically.[23] Additionally, it was important that he be made the unquestioned commander in chief over federal and state (militia) forces when called into service. With an executive so constructed, the government would have someone who could not only deal with immediate emergencies and threats but also take advantage of unforeseen opportunities in the ever-changing constellation of global affairs. Finally, an independent executive with the prospect of a lengthy duration in office could also be incentivized to prepare plans that reached beyond immediate concerns.

In terms of powers, this meant especially giving the new federal Congress authorities in taxes, commerce, and the military that either didn't exist for the Congress of the Confederation or were functionally so circumscribed as to be of little use. Under the new Constitution, Congress would have the unilateral power to tax and borrow money—a power essential for resourcing a professional standing army. There were no limits on how much taxes could be raised, the power to borrow, or the size of the army or navy. The power to tax was essential if the federal government was to reduce its foreign indebtedness and, in turn, establish its creditworthiness abroad. Congress was also given the authority to regulate the country's domestic and foreign commerce—thought necessary to present a unified front in the country's trade relations with mercantilist states.[24]

Most broadly, the federal government's enhanced powers and institutional arrangements were thought necessary to preserve American sovereignty and, with it, the liberties articulated in the Declaration of Independence. By 1787, Americans no longer saw governmental power as the primary threat to liberty but rather the key to sustaining it.[25] The country's most basic concern, its "safety and welfare," required a union that was less likely to give offense to other powers by its failure to abide by its agreements but that maintained sufficient strength to deter those same powers—since the latter would not be indifferent to the United States' "advancement" in power.[26] Compounding the difficulty was the

fact that the nation had potential adversaries in Spain and Great Britain in its immediate vicinity. Similarly, because of progress "in the art of navigation," there was less reason to be sanguine about the advantages of having an ocean between America and Europe.[27]

Furthermore, the unrestricted powers given to the Union were appropriate because, the Constitution's advocates argued, it was impossible for a government to know or predict the scale and variety of threats that could arise.[28] True safety, and with it American liberties and prosperity, meant being ahead of the curve on security matters.[29] To resource such a posture and deal with an actual contingency of some unknown scale, it was incumbent that the government have the authority to tax as needed. A dependable revenue stream would allow the government to service the country's debt, maintain the government's credit, and, in turn, borrow as much money as required in a crisis. No major conflict could be resourced sufficiently without loans. Creditworthiness was not only a matter of a nation's reputation but also key to underpinning the nation's security. The Constitution's architects thought these powers, combined with an energetic, independent executive, were necessary to address immediate threats, as well as those on the horizon.

These new capacities were understood to preserve more than just life and liberty. With no limit on reeligibility, presidents might develop and undertake plans to expand what Jefferson would call the "empire of liberty." Combined with the country's expected growth in economic power and population, the government's new tools could, it was imagined, even give the United States the future ability "to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and new world." Defenders of the new constitution were thinking big and long term—"one great American system."[30]

The immediate benefits were substantial. The newly empowered executive could move quickly and decisively with the Neutrality Proclamation to keep the United States out of the conflicts stemming from the French Revolution. He could also oversee foreign relations and conclude a treaty with the British government. While the Jay Treaty was not widely popular, it stabilized commercial relations with Great Britain and

resulted in London finally pulling its troops out of the Northwest Territory. And with new powers in hand, Congress, following the treasury secretary's plan, assumed the country's debt, established a national bank, and created the basis for an American financial system that jump-started the country's economy.

The Washington administration also signed a treaty with Spain that resulted in Madrid agreeing to open the Mississippi River to trade. Combined with the retreat of British forces and treaties with Native Americans in the northwest and southwest, that treaty enhanced the economic and security conditions for settling America's western territories. Andrew Cayton notes that "in a decade and a half," the government "had transformed trans-Appalachia from a potential source of revenue, disunion, and chaos into a region of genuine revenue, growing external security, and increasing loyalty to the United States of America."[31]

Edling raises the question of just how much of this improved strategic situation "can be credited to the new modeling of the federal government." His answer is that "the evidence suggests that Spain and Britain concluded treaties with the United States"—which, in turn, isolated their former Native American allies—"because they did not wish to see the American republic allied with their enemies. With war raging in Europe, the United States was approaching, at least temporarily, the point Alexander Hamilton had dreamed of in *Federalist* 11, when 'a price would be set not only upon our friendship, but upon our neutrality.'"[32]

A Hercules in the Cradle?

Washington was satisfied with his first administration's successes in improving the security of the United States. Nevertheless, by the end of his second term, he was concerned that sectionalism and the growth of political factions—with the latter opening the door to foreign interference in America's foreign and domestic deliberations—could undo the unity that had brought about those successes. As Washington asserted in

his Farewell Address, "your Union ought to be considered as a main prop of your liberty." Union provides "greater strength, greater resource, proportionably greater security from external danger" and, as a result, "less frequent interruption of" the country's "Peace by foreign nations."[33]

Washington's specific advice was to "cherish public credit" as key to having the resources necessary "to prepare for" possible dangers, creating a deterrent that would make it less likely for the nation to spend even more "to repel" attacks. More famously, Washington warned against American citizens adopting "permanent, inveterate antipathies against particular Nations and passionate attachments for others." To do otherwise, to adopt "an habitual hatred, or an habitual fondness" for another nation, would amount to becoming "in some degree a slave." It would undermine the ability to objectively assess what the country's true course should be. Subsequently, Washington laid down that "the great rule of conduct for" the United States "in regard to foreign Nations is in extending our commercial relations to have with them as little *political* connection as possible."[34] (Emphasis in original.)

Washington's guidance in the Farewell Address is not the strategic straitjacket it is often understood to be. Although he undoubtedly wanted his advice to be taken seriously, it's important to contextualize his advice in the particular circumstances the country was facing. A policy of neutrality, in which no formal favoritism was to be shown in the conflict between France and Great Britain, was necessary because the United States could ill afford becoming involved in that clash despite the improvement in the American strategic situation since the Constitution's formal adoption. Despite American gratitude for French support during the Revolution and some sympathy for France's own revolution, revenues from trade with Britain were vital to American government finances, creditworthiness, and economic prospects. The French market was not a realistic substitute to maintain those benefits. More prosaically, the United States had not created a naval fleet or an army of sufficient size to guarantee the country's safety in a war involving the two greatest powers in Europe—despite now possessing the authorities to do so.

Yet prudence is not the same thing as principle. Washington did not rule out any and all political connections.[35] How could he? After all, a political connection with the French had made independence possible. Although Europe's "set of primary interests" had "none or a very remote relation" to America's, he could hardly believe that this would always be the case given the changes he had already witnessed, not to mention America's own ambitions.

Nor was the United States, in Washington's estimation, destined to be the perpetually weak sister on the world stage. "At no distant period," America could—if it maintained "a steady adherence to" his administration's policies—become "a great Nation." Indeed, "the period is not far off," Washington argued, "when we may choose peace or War, as our interest guided by justice shall counsel."[36]

While Washington's Farewell Address was addressed to the whole nation, his principal targets were those who, following Jefferson and James Madison, believed that the country should lean more to the side of supporting France in its war with Britain, given an existing treaty of alliance with the French, France's critical support in America's war for independence, and the view that France's revolution was an echo of America's own. It was a criticism ignited by the president's proclamation stipulating American neutrality in the spring of 1793.

Hamilton, then treasury secretary and writing under the pseudonym "Pacificus," took up the task of defending the administration's policy. His defense is most remembered for the debate it generated with Madison (writing as "Helvidius") over the extent of the president's executive power. But Hamilton's writing was focused largely on explaining why the United States had no obligation to favor France, allowing him to outline his understanding of which precepts ought to guide American statecraft.

Hamilton initiates his argument by noting that the treaty with France was "defensive" in nature. With France having started the war with Austria, Britain, the Netherlands, Prussia, and Spain, the United States was under no obligation to assist the French. Nor did the Americans owe—out of a sense of gratitude for French assistance during the Revolutionary

War—more than what a strict reading of the treaty required. France's help had been driven not by a desire to see the American republican experiment succeed but by a desire to embarrass and weaken its archenemy, Great Britain. Gratitude, Hamilton argues, is a "sentiment" that should not replace the United States government's obligation to consider the consequences of its policies for America's "existing Millions" and its "future generations."[37]

Moreover, America was in no position to help and risked losing far more than what it might expect to gain from assisting France. With treaties of conciliation with Madrid and London not yet concluded, and lacking a navy and army of any significance, the United States could hardly risk being seen as a cobelligerent on France's side. Spain and Britain surrounded the United States in North America; the country had had no capacity to deal with the British Royal Navy on the high seas and, as already noted, had no real substitute for the government revenues generated by trade with England. "Self preservation," Hamilton writes, "is the first duty of a Nation." Laying down a precept that would be echoed in Washington's Farewell Address, Hamilton warns that Americans should be careful "not to over-rate *foreign friendships*" and to be on "guard against *foreign attachments.*"[38] (Emphasis in original.)

Hamilton's defense of the administration's position is certainly realistic but not as constraining as it first appears. When Hamilton argues that Americans should not overrate foreign friendships, he does not preclude ties of friendship altogether; rather, he means one should not let such potential ties cloud one's judgment about one's own country's fundamental interests. As Hamilton himself says, his prescriptions are not to be understood as promoting policies "absolutely selfish."[39] Moreover, by emphasizing America's weakness as one reason for the policy adopted, Hamilton raises indirectly the issue of what the policy might be if and when the United States has become comparatively strong. In a situation in which a country has "*much to hope* and *not much to fear*," there will presumably be greater flexibility in what policies a government adopts.[40]

As part of the argument that French government behavior was "offensive" in nature and, hence, not requiring American support, Hamilton refers to the French government's general declaration in the fall of 1792 that it was willing to use military force to help a population living under a monarchy replace that with a republican government. Quoting from Emmerich de Vattel's *The Law of Nations*—"that it does not belong to any foreign Power to take cognizance of the administration of the *sovereign* of another country, to set himself up as a judge of his Conduct or to oblige him to alter it" (emphasis in original)—Hamilton argues that not only was it the case that France started the war but also that France was now using military force for reasons that violated international law. Accordingly, this was yet another reason for the United States to stand aside from helping the French.[41]

Nevertheless, Hamilton understood that strict adherence to Vattel's rule would have complicated France's assistance to the American revolutionaries whose argument for independence, and hence the right to seek assistance, rested on claims about the British monarch's maladministration of his colonies. To square the circle as a practical matter—and by doing so stay in harmony with the American attachment to the universal rights found in the Declaration of Independence—Hamilton states that, while governments have no right to issue "a general invitation to insurrection and revolution," it is still "justifiable and meritorious in another nation to afford assistance to the one which has been oppressed & is *in the act* of liberating itself."[42] (Emphasis in original.)

Both Washington and Hamilton offered a realistic assessment of America's early strategic situation and articulated prudent policies to fit it. But neither foreclosed a more ambitious role for the United States in the future. To the contrary, they both foresaw a time when the republic would crawl out of its cradle.

Republican Well-Wishing and More

The most famous statement from the founding generation about the Declaration of Independence and American statecraft is Secretary of State John Quincy Adams's July Fourth address before Congress in 1821. There, Adams famously declares that the United States would not go abroad "in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all." But "she is the champion and vindicator only of her own." To act otherwise, Adams argues, would potentially lead the United States down an imperial path in which "she might become dictatress of the world," but "she would be no longer the ruler of her own spirit."[43]

On its face, Adams's prescription is at odds with Hamilton's suggestion that the United States might intervene if an active, liberal rebellion were taking place. However, the restraint Adams prescribes needs to be placed in context as much as Hamilton's and Washington's prescriptions. The indefensible and, ultimately, ineffective colonial rule of Great Britain and the other imperial powers of Europe is the overarching theme of Adams's address. In the case of the United States, distance and the inevitable social bonds of family and local community meant that "long before the Declaration of Independence the great mass of the People of America and of the People of Britain, had become total strangers to each other."[44] Indeed, as Adams privately explained to Edward Everett, the logic of his argument was meant to foreshadow "the downfall of the British Empire in India as an event which must necessarily ensue at no very distant period of time."[45]

Fueling and further justifying this progressive turn in world events, according to Adams, was America's gift to "mankind," the Declaration of Independence.[46] As a state paper announcing independence, it was of no particular consequence, he argued, since throughout history it was not uncommon for one people to break with another. Rather, what was unprecedented was the principle of rights that it set forth: "It was the first solemn declaration by a nation of the only *legitimate* foundation of civil government. It was the corner stone of a new fabric, destined to cover the

surface of the globe."[47] (Emphasis in original.) Colonialism was at odds with the principle of consent; thus, it had obvious revolutionary implications for those living under such rule.[48] Noting in a letter shortly thereafter that he had cast prudence aside, Adams ends the address by urging "every individual among the sceptred lords of human kind" to be filled with the revolutionary "spirit" of the Declaration and "go thou, and do likewise."[49]

If the reaction from foreign diplomats and ministers was any indication, the secretary of state's address was hardly received as articulating a model of American restraint. According to the Russian ambassador, it "was a virulent diatribe against England" and a "miserable calumny on the Holy Alliance" of Austria, Prussia, and Russia—an alliance that was asserting the right to reverse by military force liberal turns in European governance. To the Russian diplomat, it was a clear "appeal to the nations of Europe to rise against their Governments."[50]

Despite Adams's claim to have closeted prudence when giving his address, circumstances undoubtedly played a part in what he said. A number of Spain's Latin American colonies were in rebellion, with some already declaring their independence. Sympathy was high in the United States for giving support to the revolutionaries, with the most notable public advocate being Speaker of the House Henry Clay. And, indeed, there was actual American support, which, while not formal, was not insignificant.[51]

This was not surprising. Following the War of 1812, having once again resisted the global power Great Britain, Americans grew more confident about what they believed the republic's place on the world stage to be. Adams's priority in 1821, however, was settling matters with Spain on the North American continent. Having just finalized the Adams–Onís Treaty, in which Spain ceded Florida and its rights to the Pacific Northwest along with settling outstanding issues regarding the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase, Adams was in no rush to instigate a diplomatic crisis with Madrid. Nonetheless, Adams also believed that Spain was a declining power and would soon lose whatever hold it still had over its Latin American colonies. Rather than retreating from formal recognition of the new states, Adams thought his July Fourth address had implicitly set out "the

justice" of their cause and had prepared "for an acknowledgment" of their independence once that was firmly "established."[52]

Eight months later, the Monroe administration announced its intention to recognize the new Latin American republics. As secretary of state, Adams had the task of drafting instructions for the American diplomats assigned to those states. Notably, his instructions came on the heels of the French invasion of Spain—an invasion sanctioned by the Holy Alliance and intended to restore an absolutist monarchy in Spain. The alliance's success in Spain was not something Adams could ignore, as it related to Spain's former colonies, now republics. "The European allies," he wrote, "have viewed the *cause* of the South Americans as rebellion against their lawful sovereign."[53] (Emphasis in original.)

Moreover, there remained a chance of backsliding in these new states, what Adams called a "hankering after monarchy." To meet this, the secretary told one American diplomat that "among the interesting objects of your mission" would be to "promote" liberal constitutionalism.[54] These were "principles of politics and morals" not limited to America but in fact "co-extensive with the surface of the globe."[55] For Adams,

> the emancipation of the South American continent opens up to the whole race of man prospects of futurity, in which this union will be called in the discharge of its duties to itself and to unnumbered ages of posterity to take a conspicuous and leading part.[56]

This was, Adams wrote, a "mighty movement in human affairs," one in which the United States "*may* . . . be called to assume a more active and leading part in its progress."[57] (Emphasis in original.)

With the Monroe Doctrine following six months later—the doctrine warning the European powers not to interfere in the affairs of the Western Hemisphere—Adams might have said that while the United States was still not looking for monsters to destroy, it was no longer in a defensive crouch when it came to supporting liberalism in the Western Hemisphere. In the

summer of 1824, Colombia's ambassador to Washington approached the secretary of state about a possible "treaty of alliance" to give the Monroe Doctrine greater specificity in the wake of a possible (if perhaps distant) threat posed by the revisionist powers of the Holy Alliance. In response, Adams said there would be no security treaty. But Adams went on to state that, should those powers ignore the Monroe Doctrine, the president would be ready to go to Congress to adopt measures ensuring that the doctrine would be "efficaciously maintained."[58] While diplomatically worded, the thrust of Adams's reply was that the United States would not stay neutral and would even risk war if the European powers interfered in Colombia's affairs.[59]

In December 1824, the diplomats from Mexico, Colombia, and Central America invited the United States to send representatives to a Pan-American congress in Panama. The conference's goal was to develop measures to increase cooperation among the countries. Adams, now president, told the United States Congress in December 1825 that he had accepted the invitation to the congress, whose intent was to "deliberate upon objects important to the welfare of all."[60] And while Adams made it clear that there would be no treaty making the Monroe Doctrine multilateral, he did intend for the American delegation to push the Latin American states to adopt policies respecting free trade and religious toleration—policies that, if adopted, would affect their domestic governance and reinforce ties with the United States.

Because a proposed agenda for the Pan-American congress included deliberating about possible measures to reduce the transatlantic slave trade and the recognition of the black-led Haitian regime, members of the United States Congress from the slaveholding South were quick to criticize Adams's decision to participate in the Panama conference.[61] Adams argued that the conference would be deliberating about matters "of the highest importance, not only to the future welfare of the whole human race, but bearing directly upon the special interests of this Union," and hence, that it was imperative that the United States be engaged in those deliberations.[62]

Congressional critics maintained that, by agreeing to participate, Adams had put the country on a slippery slope of engagement that ran counter to the long-standing policy of nonentanglement and noninterference as expressed in Washington's Farewell Address.[63] Adams countered that his critics were misreading the address's intent and the specific strategic circumstances that had given rise to it. The nation was no longer weak or "surrounded by European Colonies." Pointing out that nearly 30 years had passed since the address had been written, he argued that "our population, our wealth, our territorial extension, our power, physical and moral, has nearly trebled."[64] Moreover, the advent of republican polities within the Americas (a change Adams described as a "great revolution in human affairs") meant that their policy choices were bound to have "an action and counteraction upon" the United States; it was a reality to which the country "cannot be indifferent."[65] In fine, "reasoning upon this state of things from the sound and judicious principles of Washington, and must we not say, that the period which he predicted as then not far off, has arrived." "Far from conflicting with" Washington's counsel, Adams asserted that the United States' participation in the Panama congress "is directly deducible from, and conformable to it."[66]

An Empire of Liberty

Europe's monarchs were never comfortable with the Declaration of Independence's liberalism. But so long as the United States remained weak, isolated, and committed to neutrality, they had less to fear from those explosive principles. In the wake of cataclysmic wars inspired by the French Revolution, however, absolutist monarchies in Europe could no longer be so sanguine about liberalism's weakness.

And, indeed, absolutist rule would soon be challenged in Italy, Greece, Portugal, and Spain. Under Austria's foreign minister, Prince von Metternich, the Holy Alliance agreed to adopt policies to strengthen their rule domestically and, by 1820, were explicitly asserting the right to intervene

militarily against revolutions that threatened other monarchies. This had obvious implications for the former colonial territories, now republics, in Latin America—and potentially for America's strategic interests. With the advent of an explicitly counterrevolutionary program by major European powers, having like-minded states in America's corner of the globe would matter.

The United States would not soon abandon its formal policy of neutrality. But with a firmer sense of its own strength and increased continental security, it was now willing to lean forward to support the principles it had introduced to the world in 1776.

Notes

1. Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/98-01-02-5212.

2. Benjamin Franklin to Samuel Cooper, May 1, 1777, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-24-02-0004.

3. David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Harvard University Press, 2007), 15. "When word of the Declaration had reached the British colony of Nova Scotia, in August 1776, the British governor allowed only the last paragraph of the document to be printed, lest the rest of it 'gain over to them (the Rebels) many converts, and inflame the minds of his Majesty's loyal and faithful subjects of the Province of *Nova Scotia*.'" (Emphasis in original.) Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence*, 74–75.

4. While, up to this point, the British government had been seen as the most liberal and progressive of existing regimes, the American Revolution "dethroned England, and set up America, as the model for those seeking a better world." R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: A Political History of Europe and America, 1760–1800*, vol. 1, *The Challenge* (Princeton University Press, 1959), 282.

5. Emer de Vattel, "Of Nations or Sovereign States," bk. 1, chap. 1 of *The Law of Nations* (London, 1758). As a matter of record, the Continental Congress passed a resolution of independence on July 2, 1776. Hence, the formal title of the July 4 declaration is not the Declaration of Independence but rather "The Unanimous Declaration of the Thirteen United States of America." The July 4 declaration served to announce to the American public and the world the colonies' break from British rule and the principled reasons justifying it.

6. "Americans did believe they were different, but the purpose of the Declaration was the opposite of isolation. It was to create the legal basis necessary to form alliances

with European powers." Robert Kagan, *Dangerous Nation: America's Place in the World from Its Earliest Days to the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 42.

7. Although the Americans declared they were acting prudently in breaking with Great Britain, Europe's monarchs would have rejected the idea that the Americans were living under some crushing despotism or that there was "a [British] design to reduce them under absolute Despotism." However, appearing to follow John Locke's advice from the *Second Treatise of Government* that a people must act "before it is too late, and the evil is past Cure," the Americans could be expected to be ever more vigilant about possible threats from Europe's monarchs. On these points, see C. Bradley Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind: A Moral History of the American Revolution and the Declaration That Defined It* (Encounter Books, 2019), 319; and Nathan Tarcov, "Principle and Prudence in Foreign Policy: The Founders' Perspective," *The Public Interest*, Summer 1984, 53, https://nationalaffairs.com/public_interest/detail/principle-and-prudence-in-foreign-policy-the-founders-perspective. Thompson also notes the frequency of the colonists invoking "the famous Latin dictum *obsta principiis* (to nip in the bud, or to resist the beginnings), which they attributed to Machiavelli's *Discourses on Livy*." Thompson, *America's Revolutionary Mind*, 324.

8. Formally the Plan of Treaties, the template was directly connected to the motion in the Continental Congress to prepare a declaration of independence, with a resolution the following day (June 11) to create a committee "to prepare a plan of treaties to be proposed to foreign powers." Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774–1789*, vol. 5, *1776: June 5–October 8* (Government Printing Office, 1906), 431. On June 12, Adams, John Dickinson, Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, and Robert Morris were appointed to that committee, with Adams taking the lead in the plan's actual drafting. The plan was reported to Congress on July 18 and finally voted on, with no major changes, two months later.

9. "By challenging Britain's mercantilist regime, the Americans appeared not only to serve their own interests, but also those of prospective trading partners and of the trading world generally." Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison House, 1993), 19. The possibility of free trade providing America a uniquely safe strategic harbor is raised by Thomas Paine in his *Common Sense*: America's "plan is commerce, and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all Europe; because it is the interest of all Europe to have America a free port." *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, ed. Moncure Daniel Conway, vol. 1, *1774–1779* (New York, 1894), 88.

10. John Adams to the President of Congress, April 19, 1780, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-09-02-0115-0002. In this lengthy note to Congress, Adams set about copying and summarizing a pamphlet (*A Memorial to the Sovereigns of Europe, on the Present State of Affairs, Between the Old and New World*) written by Thomas Pownall, a former governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Adams, who was favorably disposed to Pownall for his moderate behavior while governor, wrote one correspondent that the argument set forth in the pamphlet accorded

with the principles that informed his drafting of the Model Treaty. John Adams to Edmund Jenings, July 18, 1780, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-10-02-0005.

11. "The natural effect of commerce is to bring peace. Two nations that negotiate together render themselves mutually dependent." *Montesquieu's "The Spirit of the Laws": A Critical Edition*, trans. W. B. Allen (Anthem Press, 2024), bk. 10, chap. 2. Thomas Paine advocated free trade because of its reforming social prospects as well. See Yuval Levin, *The Great Debate: Edmund Burke, Thomas Paine, and the Birth of Right and Left* (Basic Books, 2014), 118. In *Federalist* 6, Hamilton appears to take a contrary view, listing historical examples of commercially inclined polities engaging in conflicts with neighboring states: "Has commerce hitherto done anything more than change the objects of war?" However, Hamilton concludes his analysis by implying that the Union, empowered to regulate trade and commerce—creating in effect a free trade zone among the states—will eliminate the incentive for conflict among states. *Federalist*, no. 6 (Alexander Hamilton).

12. See Adams to the President of Congress.

13. John Adams, "A Memorial to Their High Mightinesses, the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries," April 19, 1781, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/06-11-02-0204.

14. As John Quincy Adams would later note while serving as secretary of state, although such liberal commerce was "altogether congenial to the spirit of our institutions, . . . the main obstacle to its adoption consists in this: that the fairness of its operation depends upon its being admitted universally." John Quincy Adams to Richard C. Anderson, May 27, 1823, in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford, vol. 7, *1820–1823* (Greenwood Press, 1968), 461.

15. William S. Smith to John Jay, December 6, 1785, in *The Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States of America from the Treaty of Peace to the Adoption of the Present Constitution* (Washington, DC, 1837), 5:389.

16. Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (University of Chicago Press, 1954), 126.

17. As Robert Kagan notes, the Americans, such as John Jay and Franklin, were not naive about Europe: "Americans understood the intricacies of the European balance of power, and how to exploit it to their advantage. As colonists they had played on British fears and jealousies of France to further their own expansionist ambitions. As rebels they played on the French desires for revenge. Manipulating European rivalries was the subject of open discussion in the Continental Congress." Kagan, *Dangerous Nation*, 59.

18. John Locke, "Of Property," chap. 2 in *Second Treatise* (London, 1689), § 32, https://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/v1ch16s3.html.

19. George Washington to Benjamin Harrison, October 10, 1784, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/04-02-02-0082.

20. The key domestic issue as set out in Madison's *Federalist* 10 is how the public good and minority rights were to be secured in a system of majority rule. From that

starting point, Madison spells out the advantages associated with an extended republic, as well as the separation of powers, checks and balances, and the division between federal and state authorities. Given the role those arrangements continue to play in American governance, it is little surprise that it remains the analytic focus of so much commentary on the logic behind the Constitution's creation. As a result, more often ignored is the new constitution's expected contribution to the country's security. For example, when describing the "principal purposes" behind the effort to strengthen the Union under the new constitution, Hamilton lists more items associated with foreign and defense policies than domestic ones: promoting a "common defense," repelling "external attacks," establishing "commerce with other nations," and superintending relations "with foreign countries." In contrast, strengthening the Union is said to be relevant domestically for countering "internal convulsions" and regulating commerce "between the States." *Federalist*, no. 23 (Alexander Hamilton).

21. *Federalist*, no. 15 (Alexander Hamilton).

22. Max M. Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government: Origins of the U.S. Constitution and the Making of the American State* (Oxford University Press, 2003), 73.

23. *Federalist*, no. 75 (Alexander Hamilton).

24. As Madison argued at the Virginia Ratification Convention, "The imbecility of our Government enables" other nations "to derive many advantages from our trade, without granting us any return." John P. Kaminski et al., eds., *The Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 9, *Ratification of the Constitution by the States: Virginia* (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1990), 1034.

25. See, for example, *Virginia Independent Chronicle*, "State Soldier," February 6, 1788, quoted in Herbert J. Storing, "The 'Other' Federalist Papers: A Preliminary Sketch," *The Political Science Reviewer* 6 (Fall 1976): 226.

26. *Federalist*, no. 1 (Alexander Hamilton); and *Federalist*, no. 4 (John Jay).

27. *Federalist*, no. 24 (Alexander Hamilton).

28. *Federalist*, no. 23 (Hamilton).

29. See note 7. As Hamilton said at the Constitutional Convention, "No Governmt. could give us tranquility & happiness at home, which did not possess sufficient stability and strength to make us respectable abroad." Max Farrand, ed., *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (Yale University Press, 1911), 1:467.

30. *Federalist*, no. 11 (Alexander Hamilton).

31. Andrew R. L. Cayton, "Radicals in the 'Western World': The Federalist Conquest of Trans-Appalachian North America," in *Federalists Reconsidered*, ed. Doran Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg (University Press of Virginia, 1998), 95–96.

32. Edling, *A Revolution in Favor of Government*, 131.

33. George Washington, "Farewell Address," September 19, 1796, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-20-02-0440-0002.

34. Washington, "Farewell Address."

35. "Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectably defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies." Washington, "Farewell Address."

36. Washington, "Farewell Address."

37. Alexander Hamilton, "Pacificus No. IV," July 10, 1793, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0066#ARHN-01-15-02-0066-fn-0001.

38. Alexander Hamilton, "Pacificus No. III," July 6, 1793, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0055; and Alexander Hamilton, "Pacificus No. VI," July 17, 1793, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0081.

39. Hamilton, "Pacificus No. IV."

40. Hamilton, "Pacificus No. VI."

41. Alexander Hamilton, "Pacificus No. II," July 3, 1793, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0050.

42. Hamilton, "Pacificus No. II."

43. John Quincy Adams, *An Address Delivered at the Request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington; on the Occasion of Reading the Declaration of Independence on the Fourth of July, 1821* (Washington, DC, 1821), 29, https://archive.org/details/addressdelivered1821adam/mode/2up.

44. Adams, *Address*, 14–15.

45. John Quincy Adams to Edward Everett, January 31, 1822, in Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7:197–201.

46. Adams, *Address*, 28.

47. Adams, *Address*, 21.

48. Writing his father in 1816 from London, Adams claims the royalist animosity toward the United States was due to the fact that they thought the United States and not revolutionary France was the "primary" cause for the "propagation of those political principles" that had been the "earthquake" shaking the foundations of European monarchies. See Charles N. Edel, *Nation Builder: John Quincy Adams and the Grand Strategy of the Republic* (Harvard University Press, 2014), 125.

49. Adams, *Address*, 12, 31. Adams noted in a letter shortly thereafter that he had cast prudence aside; on "asking" prudence "to step into the next door, while I should be holding a talk with my countrymen," see John Quincy Adams to Charles Jared Ingersoll, July 23, 1821, in Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7:120.

50. New, more liberal constitutional orders had been established in Naples, Portugal, and Spain in 1820 and in Sardinia in 1821. At the Congress of Troppau, in late fall of 1820, Austria, Prussia, and Russia issued a protocol declaring that such revolutions were threats to other powers and that they could either by peaceful means or by force of arms reverse those changes and bring those states back "into the bosom of the Great Alliance." See Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1956), 355–59.

51. Although the United States government maintained a formal policy of neutrality, the Madison administration allowed rebel ships in American ports. Privateers, outfitted and operating out of American ports, were free to prey on Spanish vessels.

In addition, "a thriving underground trade network, centered in Philadelphia and Baltimore, supplied the rebel movements with arms, supplies, and, in some cases, mercenary forces." William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (University Press of Kentucky, 1992), 86.

52. Adams to Everett.

53. John Quincy Adams to Richard C. Anderson, May 27, 1823, in Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7:452.

54. John Quincy Adams to Caesar A. Rodney, May 17, 1823, in Ford, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7:426–27.

55. Adams to Anderson, 7:486.

56. Adams to Anderson, 7:486.

57. Adams to Anderson, 7:471.

58. Quoted in Charles Wilson Hackett, "The Development of John Quincy Adams's Policy with Respect to an American Confederation and the Panama Congress, 1822–1825," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 8, no. 4 (1928): 508–10, https://www.jstor.org/stable/2506393. As is often noted, the Monroe Doctrine's issuance was made possible because it was assumed British naval power would prevent European interference in Latin America. That's undoubtedly true. But Adams's note to the Colombian diplomat indicates that the United States was prepared to assist in case it wasn't.

59. Earlier, in 1823, British Foreign Minister George Canning had suggested a joint Anglo-American declaration forbidding any European attempts at colonization in Latin America. While Adams was concerned that this might eventuate in the United States getting drawn into British affairs in Europe, James Monroe and former Presidents Jefferson and Madison were inclined to pursue the offer of de facto alliance with London with respect to Latin America. Writing to Jefferson, Madison argued, "With the British power & navy combined with our own we have to fear from the rest of the world: and in the great struggle of the Epoch between liberty and despotism, we owe it to ourselves to sustain the former in this hemisphere at least." James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, November 1, 1823, Founders Online, https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-03-02-0162.

60. John Quincy Adams, "First Annual Message," December 6, 1825, University of California, Santa Barbara, American Presidency Project, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/first-annual-message-2.

61. John Quincy Adams, *Message from the President of the United States* [. . .] (Washington, DC, 1826), 8.

62. Adams, *Message from the President of the United States*, 5.

63. See Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, "Report on Nominations of Richard C. Anderson and John Sergeant to Be Envoys Extraordinary and Ministers Plenipotentiary to the Assembly of the American Nations at Panama," January 16, 1826, in *Compilation of Reports of Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, 1789–1901* (US Government Printing Office, 1901), 4:14.

64. Adams, *Message from the President of the United States*, 10–11.
65. Adams, *Message from the President of the United States*, 3, 11.
66. Adams, *Message from the President of the United States*, 11. See Edel, *Nation Builder*, 213–18.