

The Myth of Isolationism, Part I: American Leadership and the Cause of Liberty

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Abstract: *American statecraft has been grounded, both morally and philosophically, in the principles of human liberty and America's sense of justice. Thus, the true consistency of American foreign policy is to be found not in its policies, which prudently change and adapt, but in its guiding principles, which are unchanging and permanent. America is a defender of liberty at home. Abroad, it maintains its independence and pursues its interests while standing for the idea of political freedom across the globe. Because America stands for the principles of liberty, independence, and self-government, its interests are defined and shaped by those principles. The ideal role for the United States as articulated by the Founders gives American diplomacy a perpetual purpose. In the 21st century, the necessity of American independence and leadership is not diminished. From Bunker Hill to the Berlin Wall, the American love of liberty has inspired a commitment to see the cause of liberty triumph abroad, and U.S. foreign policy has reflected this reality.*

There is a renewed popular interest in the foreign policy approach of America's Founders. Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and nearly a decade after 9/11, many are unsatisfied with U.S. foreign policy and have called for a reappraisal of America's objectives, means, and national interest. Foreign policy observers from Walter Russell Mead of the Council on Foreign Relations¹ to Congressman Ron Paul² have also called for a new paradigm in American

foreign policy, one that seeks inspiration and guidance from America's Founders.

There are, however, many misconceptions about America's early foreign policy. Perhaps no misunderstanding is as widespread as the belief that the Founding Fathers of the United States were isolationists who made non-interventionism their guiding principle.

The erroneous belief that America's early foreign policy was isolationist is a fairly recent one. According to historian George C. Herring, the term isolationism did "not become fixed in the American political lexicon until the twentieth century."³ The term itself soon

¹ Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001), p. 77.

² Ron Paul, *The Revolution: A Manifesto* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2008), chapter 2.

³ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations Since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 83.

came to be understood as the antithesis of the increasingly trendy concept of internationalism. By the end of the 20th century, few objected when historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. described America's reaction against Woodrow Wilson's internationalism as a return to the "womb" of "familiar and soothing isolationism" which, according to Schlesinger's Progressive narrative, had been articulated by George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.⁴

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What some historians and politicians dismissively (or winsomely) consider eras of virtuous and glorious isolationism are in fact better understood as periods of uncontested independence when the U.S. was afforded the luxury of following a policy of neutrality. The young American republic did try to remain outside of the torrential affairs of the old and bloody continent. In Washington's words, the United States endeavored "to gain time for our country to settle and mature its recent institutions, and to progress, without interruption, to that degree of strength and consistency, which is necessary to give it, humanly speaking command of its own fortune."⁵ Yet this prudential policy should not be mistaken for weakness or passivity. Indeed, America's early foreign policy was remarkably engaged, and the United States stood for freedom around the world. Why, then, have the Founders been labeled isolationist?

To begin, it is helpful to define what is meant by "isolationist." The term isolationism applies to *a policy of abstaining from economic and political relations with other countries*. By this definition, the best examples of

isolationist foreign policies are offered by 17th century China, 18th century Japan, 19th century Korea, or 20th century North Korea. Considering America's vibrant commercial engagement and interconnectedness to economic markets abroad, America's diplomatic interaction with foreign powers, and America's cultural affinity with Europe, it is clear that the United States of the 18th and 19th centuries cannot accurately be called "isolationist" if the word is to have any meaning at all. To be sure, there have always been isolationist and protectionist voices in American history, just as there have been advocates for imperialism; yet, those few moments, particularly in the twentieth century, when the United States exhibited isolationist tendencies stand out as aberrations in America's engagement with the world. They are not reflective of a consistent foreign policy tradition that harkens back to the Founding.

Most people, however, mean something quite different from "isolationism" when they assert that the United States was or should remain uninvolved politically and militarily in foreign affairs. Their position can be characterized more accurately as "non-interventionist," which is understood as *a foreign policy of political or military non-involvement in foreign relations or in other countries' internal affairs*. A number of people believe that the Founders prescribed a foreign policy that prohibits military action except for defense and restricts American diplomatic or political engagement with foreign countries as a matter of principle.

America's early foreign policies were prudential policies guided by the Founders' affection for republican self-government and their desire to preserve the country's sovereign independence.

The argument for non-interventionism is often backed up with quotes from the Founders and supposed examples of non-interventionist policies from America's early history. Two such examples that are often cited are Washington's 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality in the war between France and Great Britain and

⁴ Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Back to the Womb," *Foreign Affairs*, No. 74 (July/August 1995), p. 3.

⁵ George Washington, "Farewell Address to the People of the United States," September 17, 1796, in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), p. 524.

the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. Properly understood, however, these early foreign policies were not dictated by isolationist or non-interventionist impulses, but rather were prudential policies guided by the Founders' affection for republican self-government and their desire to preserve the country's sovereign independence.

Throughout the 19th century, moreover, the United States provided invaluable support to other peoples around the world who were attempting experiments in self-government similar to its own. The U.S. supported the peoples of Latin America, Greece, and Hungary as they fought for independence. Far from contradicting American political principles, such actions were in fact wholly consistent with them. The United States was not founded to be a solitary fortress or to remain isolated from world affairs. When Washington noted America's "detached and distant position,"⁶ he was acknowledging a geographical reality, not defining a foreign policy principle.

In this essay, we will examine the following important episodes to demonstrate that America's early foreign policies were not inherently isolationist or non-interventionist: neutrality during the French revolutionary wars, the Monroe Doctrine, and America's support of independence movements in South America, Greece, and Hungary. Before we do so, let us briefly sketch the principles that guided the foreign policy of the Founders.

THE FOUNDERS' FOREIGN POLICY

Throughout the 20th century, many scholars and politicians viewed America's Founding Fathers as naïve and isolated innocents in world affairs. Moreover, the academic fields of international relations and foreign policy have steadily replaced history, philosophy, and literature with the scientific method and quantitative research. This social science approach has spawned researchers and practitioners who confine themselves to rigid theories that create an often fanciful understanding of international relations and America's place in the world.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In this intellectual environment, the wisdom and experiences of America's Founders have been afforded little attention. Nevertheless, their principled, common-sense understanding of America's role in the world and their example of statecraft have great relevance for the United States today.

The Founders sought to apply America's principles of liberty, which define its sense of justice, to the circumstances of the day. This prudent approach was essential to securing the blessings of liberty for the American people in a complex and sometimes hostile world.

From the perspective of the Founders, American foreign policy was not thought of in "idealist" or "realist" paradigms. "Interest" was not a dirty word, precisely because it was not the only word. That was why George Washington recommended a foreign policy of independence and strength that would allow America to "choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel."⁷

By emphasizing the importance of both interest and justice, Washington recognized that there are no easy answers to the hard questions of foreign policy. A policy based only on interests would do violence to America's ideals, while a policy based only on ideals would ignore the realities of the world. Therefore, the Founders sought to apply America's principles of liberty, which define its sense of justice, to the circumstances of the day. This prudent approach was essential to securing the blessings of liberty for the American people in a complex and sometimes hostile world.⁸

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 525.

⁸ See Matthew Spalding, "America's Founders and the Principles of Foreign Policy: Sovereign Independence, National Interests, and the Cause of Liberty in the World," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Essay* No. 33, October 15, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/10/americas-founders-and-the-principles-of-foreign-policy-sovereign-independence>.

Early in its history, the U.S. recognized that its sovereign independence could be threatened by international treaties and alliances. America's very first treaty was the 1778 military alliance with France, an alliance that helped to secure American independence. Although it was a treaty of necessity, it nevertheless placed American interests in jeopardy.

During the 1782–1783 peace negotiations in Paris, which officially ended the Revolutionary War, the American delegation had to act independently of their French allies in order to secure peace before France could negotiate away America's hard-won independence by using America as a pawn in the great game of European diplomacy. This early experience in international diplomacy proved to be an exemplary lesson in geopolitics for the new American statesmen: Even the most useful alliances could entangle America in purely foreign questions and risk the independence of the United States. The U.S. would have to guard vigilantly against any encroachments upon its sovereignty—even from allies. Alexander Hamilton gleaned a useful lesson from the experience:

It ought to teach us not to overrate foreign friendships: and to be upon our guard against foreign attachments. The former will generally be found hollow and delusive; the latter will have a natural tendency to lead us aside from our own true interest, and to make us the dupes of foreign influence.... Foreign influence is truly the Grecian horse to a republic. We cannot be too careful to exclude its entrance.⁹

This “Grecian horse” has proven to be a constant threat to the strategic goal of American foreign policy throughout its history: preserving the country's sovereign independence.

The Founders remained cautious of becoming too involved in the “ordinary vicissitudes” of foreign pow-

⁹ Alexander Hamilton, Pacificus No. 6, in *The Federalist on the New Constitution written in 1788* (Hallowell: Glazier, Masters & Smith, 1842), p. 427.

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ers. This is why Washington cautioned against permanent military alliances that restricted the future independence of America to act in pursuit of its interests and in accordance with its principles:

'Tis our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world; so far, I mean, as we are now at liberty to do it; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements. I hold the maxim no less applicable to public than to private affairs, that honesty is always the best policy. I repeat it, therefore, let those engagements be observed in their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.¹⁰

Preserving independence is, of course, not inherently incompatible with forming alliances, and there is an important distinction to be made between temporary and permanent alliances. As Washington argued, “Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.”¹¹ No one could deny that America's military alliance with France helped to secure America's independence from Great Britain.

Also, during Thomas Jefferson's Administration, the United States joined forces with Sweden and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies during the Tripolitan War against the Barbary Pirates. Such foreign military cooperation was essential in defeating the Muslim privateers, loosely associated with the Ottoman Empire,

¹⁰ Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

who were attacking American ships of commerce in the Mediterranean Sea. This was America's first foreign war, fought just 13 years after the Constitution was ratified.

But alliances were no substitute for military preparation. From the beginning, the primary purpose of U.S. foreign policy has been to defend the American constitutional system and the common interests of the American people. The U.S. has thus been committed to providing for its common defense, protecting the freedom of its commerce, and seeking peaceful relations with other nations. The most important goal of American foreign policy continues to be defending the independence of the United States so that America can govern itself according to its principles and pursue its national interests.

At the same time, the Founders were keenly aware of the universal significance of America's principles and of America's unique responsibility for upholding and advancing these principles. As Thomas Paine reminded patriots everywhere during the trying times of America's struggle for independence, "The cause of America is in a great measure the cause of all mankind."¹² The Founders believed that the idea of human liberty and, therefore, the inherent right to self-government were applicable not only to Americans, but to all people everywhere.

The Declaration of Independence states that all mankind is endowed with the same unalienable rights and that, to secure those rights, "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed." The American Founders spoke universal truths and created a powerful model of liberty for the whole world, but they understood that America's commitment to its principles—in both domestic and foreign policy—has profound consequences for the cause of liberty everywhere. This did not imply a duty to spread the ideas of liberty through force, but it did highlight America's unique role in the cause of liberty

¹² Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 5.

in the world. As Washington observed, "the preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as *deeply*, perhaps as *finally*, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people."¹³

Rather than the state propping up business, many of the Founders expected that private enterprise and the trade of the American people would be the key to America's prosperity and national success.

Unlike the great powers of Europe, U.S. foreign policy was not manipulated by a grand strategist who controlled the levers of statecraft. Instead, American statecraft consisted of a multifarious and vibrant set of actors reflecting the self-governing nature and enterprising spirit of the American people. Nowhere was this more evident than in trade and commerce, a central element of America's foreign relations.

Instead of military alliances, the U.S. sought to secure treaties of "Peace and Friendship" with foreign countries as a means of facilitating peaceful commerce. While European countries sponsored trading companies, conquered foreign territory, and sought to enforce mercantilism, the activity of American craftsmen, farmers, merchants, and traders far outpaced the scope or control of the U.S. government. Rather than the state propping up business, many of the Founders expected that private enterprise and the trade of the American people would be the key to America's prosperity and national success. America's "unequaled spirit of enterprise" makes for "an inexhaustible mine of national wealth," Hamilton argued. Such enterprise was likely to make the United States "the admiration and envy of the world."¹⁴

¹³ George Washington, "First Inaugural Address," April 30, 1789, in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 462.

¹⁴ Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, eds. George W. Carey and James McClellan (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2001), p. 52 (emphasis in original).

The Founders favored political independence, diplomatic harmony, and liberal international trade. According to Washington, this approach was “recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.”¹⁵ Jefferson summed it up in his First Inaugural Address as “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none.”¹⁶

AMERICAN NEUTRALITY AND THE FRENCH REVOLUTIONARY WARS

Very early in America’s history, the implications of its political ideas in the realm of foreign policy were put to the test. In 1789, the French Revolution replaced the absolute French monarchy with a nation founded on the principles of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*. The new French Republic soon found itself fighting a war with Great Britain and a civil war at home. The French revolutionaries appealed to the United States to support their cause.

An imprudent war would, however, jeopardize the very existence of the young and militarily unprepared American Republic. According to Washington, the blessings of liberty could be achieved only by maintaining the independence of the U.S. in world affairs; in the circumstances of 1793, this was best accomplished by pursuing a policy of neutrality, defined as non-participation in an armed conflict or war. The national debate that ensued over Washington’s 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality was carried on by nascent political factions that would eventually become America’s first political parties. The episode displayed the perils of foreign intrigue in American politics and the need to protect American independence.

The policy of neutrality during the French revolutionary wars, however, was not inspired by isolationist tendencies as is often thought to be the case. Nor did it establish non-interventionism as a principle of Ameri-

¹⁵ Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.

¹⁶ Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VIII, Part 2, ed. Henry Augustine Washington (Washington: Taylor & Maury, 1854), p. 4.

can foreign policy.

Among the French officials who sought American assistance was none other than the Marquis de Lafayette, who had been George Washington’s aide-de-camp during the American Revolution and who had become a close personal friend.¹⁷ There was a popular sentiment among the American people that the United States owed more to France than to any other nation, for without French military aid, American independence might not have been won. Furthermore, the purported ideas of the French Revolution appeared to spring from the same intellectual sources that inspired America’s own fight for independence.

As a memento of the French Revolution, Lafayette sent Washington a key to the Bastille, which the French revolutionaries had torn down stone by stone, symbolizing the total destruction of the despotic *ancien régime*. Washington returned the kindness by sending Lafayette a pair of brass shoe buckles that had recently been manufactured by an American craftsman. Washington had sent a clear message: The key to a successful nation lies not merely in gaining freedom, but in securing the liberties of the people so that commerce and happiness may flourish.

Washington expressed the “purest wishes” of the American people that the French, “our magnanimous allies, may soon enjoy in peace that liberty which they have purchased at so great a price, and all the happiness which liberty can bestow.” Washington advised that the ideas of the French Revolution should find “an asylum in the bosom of a regularly organized Government.” Such an outcome would gratify “the pride of every citizen of the United States.” Washington also hoped that “the friendship of the two Republics” would be “commensurate with their existence.”¹⁸

¹⁷ Lafayette even named his son Georges Washington Lafayette.

¹⁸ George Washington, Reply, as President of the United States, January 1, 1796, to the address of the Minister Plenipotentiary of the French Republic, on his presenting the colors of France to the United States, in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. X, ed. James D. Richardson (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1899), p. 19.

Before long, however, France declared that it would “treat as enemies any people who, refusing or renouncing liberty and equality, were desirous of preserving, recalling, or entering into accommodation with their prince and privileged castes.”¹⁹ This was an overly ambitious and expansionist foreign policy that offered “a general invitation to insurrection and revolution”²⁰ in foreign lands. In effect, France was declaring war on every country on Earth except the United States and the Dutch Republic of the United Provinces (although France soon occupied the Dutch Low Countries).

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In April 1793, Washington learned that war had broken out between France and Great Britain. He hastened to the capital in Philadelphia to meet with his Cabinet and sent ahead questions that would have to be answered by his Administration in the coming months, the foremost among these being: Should the United States issue a proclamation of neutrality? Washington chose not to call a special session of Congress, thereby excluding Congress from taking part in the decision to issue such a proclamation. Washington relied instead on his Cabinet to help him assess the situation and contemplate how best to preserve the peace.

That very month, the newly appointed French Minister to the United States, Edmond-Charles Genêt, landed in America. Instead of arriving in Philadelphia to present his credentials to President Washington, Genêt landed in Charleston, South Carolina, and then

proceeded slowly up the coast to Philadelphia. All along the way, Genêt was met by enthusiastic crowds expressing support for France. Genêt worked to stir up support for the French and found political allies among Jefferson’s Republicans who were critical of Washington’s Administration and favored closer alignment with France. Emboldened by popular support, Minister Genêt handed out French military commissions to American citizens in an effort to incite an invasion of Spanish Florida, which would plunge America into war on the side of France.²¹

Partisan strife was dividing the country, and tensions were high in Philadelphia. John Adams referred to the pro-French demonstrations as the “terrorism excited by Genêt in 1793, when ten thousand people in the streets of Philadelphia, day after day, threatened to drag Washington out of his house and effect a revolution in the government, or compel it to declare war in favor of the French Revolution and against England.”²² Adams and his Federalist faction viewed pro-French sentiment as a dire threat to U.S. security and described Genêt as a “feather-headed Frenchman” and “petulant stripling.”²³

Significantly, however, neither side in the debate called for greater isolationism—the two factions were essentially arguing for closer alignment with either France or Great Britain. Washington’s views differed from those of both factions; he believed that it was

¹⁹ Revolutionary Convention of France, December 15, 1792, quoted in Alexander Hamilton, *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. V, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1885), p. 404.

²⁰ Alexander Hamilton, Pacificus No. 2, in *The Federalist on the New Constitution written in 1788*, p. 413.

²¹ Genêt’s blatant attempts to subvert Washington’s Administration turned even the Francophile Thomas Jefferson against him. “Never in my opinion,” wrote Jefferson, “was so calamitous an appointment made, as that of the present minister of [France] here. Hotheaded, all imagination, no judgment, passionate, disrespectful & even indecent towards the [President] in his written as well as verbal communications...” Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, July 7, 1793, in *The Papers of James Madison*, Vol. XV, ed. Thomas A. Mason, Robert A. Rutland, and Jeanne K. Sisson (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1985), p. 43.

²² John Adams, letter to Thomas Jefferson, June 30, 1813, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VI, Part 2, p. 155.

²³ Attributed to George Cabot and John Quincy Adams, respectively. Quoted in Alexander DeConde, *Entangling Alliance* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1958), p. 185.

essential “to maintain a strict neutrality” in order to prevent “embroiling” the U.S. in war between France and Great Britain.²⁴ Furthermore, a policy of neutrality would serve to limit the influence of both foreign powers in American politics, thereby further protecting America’s political independence.

Within Washington’s Cabinet, the debate continued. Thomas Jefferson, Washington’s Secretary of State, favored closer alliance with France. Alexander Hamilton, the Secretary of the Treasury, wished to move toward alignment with England as a means of avoiding war and preventing a disruption of trade. As Revolutionary France entangled herself in wars with a growing list of European nations (Austria, Prussia, Sardinia, Great Britain, and the United Netherlands), the threat to American independence posed by alignment with France became ever clearer. Supporting France would likely drag America into a disastrous war against her will.

The proclamation declaring America’s neutrality was signed by President Washington on April 22, 1793, and although the word “neutrality” does not appear in the document, the policy prescription was clear.²⁵ The United States would with “sincerity and good faith adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers.”²⁶ Thus, in its first major foreign policy decision, the United States chose to remain neutral.

But American neutrality required more than a proclamation. French privateers were using American neutrality to their advantage by using American ports along the Atlantic coast as safe havens from which to attack British ships. If the United States continued to allow such actions, it would set the U.S. on a collision course with England.

²⁴ George Washington, letter to Thomas Jefferson, April 12, 1793, in *The Writings of George Washington*, Vol. X, Part 4, ed. Jared Sparks (Boston: Russell, Shattuck, and Williams, 1836), p. 336.

²⁵ In the end, the policy was supported unanimously among Washington’s Cabinet members.

²⁶ George Washington, “Proclamation of Neutrality,” April 22, 1793, in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 585.

Washington’s Cabinet met and determined that French privateers were indeed violating the neutrality policy and endangering American safety. American officials were therefore ordered to enforce the neutrality policy vigorously. Historian Alexander DeConde has noted that Washington’s administration “acted as they did because they believed that American independence depended on a strong assertion of sovereignty; their stand [to enforce neutrality by prohibiting French privateers in American ports] was not predicated on any obligation under international law.”²⁷

Faced with the circumstances at hand, prudence had guided the United States to safeguard its independence by avoiding war, a near certain outcome of pursuing any other policy than neutrality. The U.S. remained neutral throughout most of the Napoleonic

A policy of neutrality between Great Britain and France would serve to limit the influence of both foreign powers in American politics, thereby further protecting America’s political independence.

Wars, but neutrality was not the goal of American foreign policy; it was only one of several means to preserve the country’s independence. Other countries that wished to remain permanently neutral participated in defensive armed neutrality alliances. In 1812, Sweden declared its neutrality in the Napoleonic Wars of Europe and invited other nations to join in an alliance of armed neutrality. The United States refused to join the Scandinavian alliance because it realized that it might soon have to declare war in order to defend American commercial freedom.

As the raging war between France and her enemies extended to the high seas, the belligerent powers of France and Britain began to violate American sovereignty by impressing American sailors, obstructing sea trade, and imperiling the lives of American citi-

²⁷ DeConde, *Entangling Alliance*, pp. 208–209.

zens. American diplomacy was successful in reaching an agreement with France, but when negotiations with Britain failed, the United States resolutely declared war on the militarily dominant British Empire in 1812 in order to pursue the overarching goal of American foreign policy: continued independence.

In short, neutrality or non-intervention can be a very useful *policy* that allows the time and space to gather intelligence, take diplomatic efforts, and make prudent decisions about war and peace. Historically, however, when the vital interests or ideals of the United States are threatened, the neutrality policy is replaced by a particular foreign policy that best serves the principles of American diplomacy. It would therefore be a mistake to think of the Proclamation of Neutrality as establishing a principle of non-interventionism. It was a prudential policy, not a guiding principle of American statecraft.

THE MONROE DOCTRINE AND THE RECOGNITION OF LIBERTY IN LATIN AMERICA

Invariably, European conflicts continued to extend beyond the European arena, threatening American national security, impeding freedom of commerce, or endangering the tender sprouts of liberty somewhere in the world. As the peoples of Latin America began to throw off the yoke of Spanish imperial rule, they appealed to the United States to support their cause. The United States supported the new republics diplomatically, and that support eventually culminated in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, which maintained American independence and sought to protect the principles of liberty in the Americas. Although the geographical scope of the Monroe Doctrine addressed the policy questions of 1823 and thus was limited to the Western Hemisphere, its guiding principles were universal.

Independence in Latin America

As revolutions sprang up in Spain's Latin American colonies, most lovers of liberty in Europe and the United States celebrated. James Madison described

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the developments as part of "the great struggle of the Epoch between liberty and despotism." He believed that America should "sustain the former in this hemisphere at least."²⁸

The independence movements in Latin America presented President James Monroe and the people of the United States with an opportunity to support the cause of liberty nearby. Practically speaking, the scenario presented a basic question to the U.S. government: "Has the executive power to acknowledge the independence of the new states whose independence is not recognized by the parent country and between which parties war exists?" President Monroe also considered whether or not it was "expedient for the United States to recognize Buenos Aires or other revolted provinces?"²⁹ In order to provide further information on the situation in Latin America, Monroe sent a diplomatic fact-finding mission to Latin America in 1818.

Upon Monroe's request to Congress to fund this mission, Henry Clay, an ardent supporter of the independence movement in Latin America, took the opportunity to press for American recognition of these new nations and presented an amendment to fund a U.S. ambassador to Buenos Aires, the government of the newly formed United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata. "At the present moment," he declared in Congress,

²⁸ James Madison to Thomas Jefferson, Montpelier, November 1, 1823, in *Selected Writings of James Madison*, ed. Ralph Ketcham (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006), p. 328.

²⁹ John Quincy Adams's questions paraphrased in Charles Carroll Griffin, *The United States and the Disruption of the Spanish Empire, 1810–1822* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), p. 40.

“the patriots of the South are fighting for liberty and independence—for precisely what we fought for.” Clay continued: “I ask him [pointing to a Revolutionary War veteran sitting in Congress], the patriot of ’76, how the heart rebounded with joy, on the information that France had recognized us! The moral influence of such a recognition, on the patriots of the South, will be irresistible.”³⁰ But Congress voted down Clay’s appropriation for a new ambassador, wary of recognizing Latin American independence too quickly.

Even before the Monroe Doctrine was penned, the U.S. was putting teeth into its policy of limiting European imperial influence in the Americas.

At the same time, however, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams was working diplomatically behind the scenes for the recognition of the new republics. By 1818, long before Britain signaled any intention of recognizing the independence of the rebelling Spanish colonies, Adams had instructed U.S. Minister to London Richard Rush that the United States intended to recognize Buenos Aires officially, “should no event occur which will justify a further postponement of that intention.”³¹ At every opportunity, Adams pressed Britain to recognize their independence also in order to make it clear to Spain that any efforts of their Holy Alliance to reassert Spanish rule in Latin America would be futile as the British ruled the seas.

Britain, however, attempted to stall U.S. recognition of the new nations. At the same time, the British sought to thwart any efforts by France, Spain, and the other European powers to re-establish their empires in the Western Hemisphere. To this end, British For-

eign Minister George Canning presented a plan to the U.S. whereby an Anglo–American accord would limit, but not abolish, further European colonization in North and South America. The accord would have strengthened American–British relations and ensured the protection of U.S. ships on the high seas by the powerful British navy.

Adams understood the practical merits of cooperating with the British, but he believed that formally accepting British imperial authority in North America was an affront to the principle of self-government on which the country rested. According to Adams, “The whole system of modern colonization” is an abuse of government, and “it was time that it should come to an end.”³² Instead of accepting the British proposal, Adams advocated a unilateral restriction of *all* European colonization (including British) in the Americas. The policy that would become the Monroe Doctrine was a bold step for the young and militarily inferior United States.

Even before the Monroe Doctrine was penned, the U.S. was putting teeth into its policy of limiting European imperial influence in the Americas. Following the King of Spain’s refusal to ratify the Transcontinental Treaty, which, among other provisions, ceded the Floridas to the United States, Adams recommended to President Monroe forcible occupation of and the removal of Spanish troops from those territories: “Should the opinion of Congress concur with that of the President, possession will be taken of Florida, without any views of hostility to Spain, but holding her responsible for the expenses which may be occasioned by the measure.”³³ In his annual address to Congress on December 7, 1819, President Monroe requested the discretionary authority to occupy Florida.

³⁰ Henry Clay, Speech to Congress, March 28, 1818, in *The Life and Speeches of the Hon. Henry Clay, Vol. I*, ed. Daniel Mallory (New York: Robert P. Bixby & Co., 1843), p. 358.

³¹ William R. Manning, *Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States Concerning Independence of the Latin-American Nations*, Vol. I (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1925), p. 87.

³² John Quincy Adams, November 26, 1822, in *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams, Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795–1848*, Vol. VI, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), p. 104.

³³ John Quincy Adams to William Lowndes, August 23, 1819, in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. VI, ed. Worthington Chauncey Ford (New York: MacMillan Co., 1916), p. 559.

The next spring, the House of Representatives exercised the strongest constitutional action available to it in order to push for U.S. recognition of the Latin American nations' independence from Spain. By a vote of 80 to 75, the House approved funds for a new U.S. ambassador to the new Latin American republics. In the debate over the resolution, Henry Clay's voice challenged the President: "Let us become real and true Americans, and place ourselves at the head of the American System."³⁴

Adams agreed with the idea of the U.S. leading the American system, but he rejected the idea, spread by some liberals, that the United States should join in an international alliance to spread the ideas of liberty through force, as Revolutionary France had attempted to do already. Adams fervently argued that America had no inherent responsibility to intervene abroad:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause, by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example.³⁵

In this same Independence Day speech, however, Adams challenged all of humanity to follow the American example and enact the principles of liberty on their own soil:

My countrymen, fellow-citizens, and friends; could that Spirit, which dictated the Declaration we have this day read, that Spirit, which

"prefers before all temples the upright heart and pure," at this moment descend from his habitation in the skies, and within this hall, in language audible to mortal ears, address each one of us, here assembled, our beloved country, Britannia ruler of the waves, and every individual among the sceptred lords of humankind; his words would be, "Go thou and do likewise!"

This injunction to go and enact the godly principles of liberty was a direct challenge to the doctrine of divine right. By explicating the universal struggle between liberty and despotism, Adams's speech had shocked the European diplomats residing in Washington, D.C.

It was becoming clear to the powers of Europe that American foreign policy was principled and persistent.

The Russian and British ambassadors were incensed that Adams was attempting to incite foreign citizens to overthrow their monarchical governments. The Russian minister in D.C., Pierre de Poletica, protested that Adams was appealing "to the nations of Europe to rise against their Governments."³⁶ Poletica sent a copy of Adams's speech back to the Russian Czar with hand-written notes in the margins. Where Adams had summarized the principles of self-government and independence contained in the Declaration of Independence, Poletica wrote: "This passage is worth noting because it is the epitome of American policy."³⁷ It was becoming clear to the powers of Europe that American foreign policy was principled and persistent.

In the face of American determination and because of domestic troubles in Spain, the Spanish King finally

³⁴ Henry Clay, speech to Congress, May 10, 1820, in *The Life and Speeches of the Hon. Henry Clay*, Vol. I, p. 430.

³⁵ John Quincy Adams, Address to Congress, July 4, 1821, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 20, ed. Hezekiah Niles (Baltimore, 1821), p. 331.

³⁶ Quoted in Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), pp. 357–358.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

capitulated and signed the Transcontinental Treaty on October 24, 1820, allowing the annexation of Florida to the United States. At the same time, ratification of the Treaty removed the last major issue in international politics that obstructed the U.S. from formally recognizing the Latin American republics. It had also become clear that Britain would not oppose American recognition of the Latin American nations, even if Britain refused to offer recognition itself.

After ensuring that the government in Buenos Aires would put an end to privateering and respect American ships of commerce, the way was clear for U.S. recognition. In a special message to Congress on March 8, 1822, President Monroe officially recognized the independence of Argentina, Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico. The United States was the first established nation to welcome these new republics into the community of nations. Far from being isolated or diplomatically unconcerned, these actions represented America's leading role in supporting the cause of liberty abroad at that time.

The Monroe Doctrine

By 1823, it had become clear to Richard Rush, the American Minister to London, that Britain was more interested in its "schemes of counteraction" than in respecting America's principles of liberty.³⁸ Since the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, France and Spain had been attempting to regain and expand their imperial holdings in the Americas, to which the British navy and popular revolts had done much damage. Britain would not let this happen. The British renewed their offer to America. In pondering British Minister Canning's proposal (an Anglo-American pact to limit further colonization in the Americas), the United States confronted a question regarding the structure of the international order and its ramifications for America's security, prosperity, and political principles.

³⁸ Richard Rush to John Quincy Adams, October 10, 1823, in Worthington Chauncey Ford, *John Quincy Adams and The Monroe Doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass: John Wilson and Son, 1902), p. 57.

Instead of accepting the British proposal, or even silently enjoying British naval protection of American shores as an isolationist policy would have done, America chose to proclaim to the world the principles of its foreign policy: freedom, independence, and peace. John Quincy Adams, the principal author of the Monroe Doctrine, argued that it would be "more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our prin-

The most remarkable aspect of the Monroe Doctrine was how consistent it was with the character of American diplomacy and foreign policy, anchored as it was in the principles of liberty and independence.

inciples explicitly" rather than appear to "come in as a cockboat in the wake of the British man-of-war."³⁹ Although the U.S. had calculated that it could depend on British support for the time being, America's strategic goals were different from Britain's, and it could not tie itself to the British Empire. The United States stood for "civil, political, commercial, and religious liberty,"⁴⁰ whereas Great Britain did not. America must provide for its immediate security, but in a manner consistent with its principles and ensuring future independence.

President Monroe agreed with Adams's recommendations, and after conferring with former Presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison and Secretary of War John C. Calhoun, Monroe declared to the world:

[T]he occasion has been judged proper for asserting, as a principle in which the rights and interests of the United States are involved, that the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed

³⁹ Quoted in Bemis, *John Quincy Adams*, p. 385.

⁴⁰ John Quincy Adams to Richard C. Anderson, May 27, 1823, in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. VII, p. 466.

and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.⁴¹

Although substantively different from any other U.S. foreign policy until that time, the most remarkable aspect of the Monroe Doctrine was how consistent it was with the character of American diplomacy and foreign policy until that time, anchored as it was in the principles of liberty and independence.

The Monroe Doctrine is often misinterpreted as a statement of isolationism because of President Monroe's statement of hopeful neutrality: "It is still the true policy of the United States to leave the parties to themselves, in the hope that other powers will pursue the same course."⁴² But the Monroe Doctrine as a whole actually stands out as an assertive unilateral act in the history of American foreign policy. Although the United States would tacitly depend on the British navy to keep other European powers out of the Americas, the Monroe Doctrine enabled the future independence of American diplomacy. With the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. attempted to ban imperial ambition from one-third of the globe's surface, thereby delegitimizing the accepted system of imperialism and attempting to fundamentally alter the international order—hardly an isolationist policy.

The essence of the Doctrine had been anticipated long before 1823. Alexander Hamilton recognized that America's unity would provide the strength necessary for an independent and principled foreign policy: "By a steady adherence to the Union we may hope, ere long, to become the arbiter of Europe in America, and to be able to incline the balance of European competitions in this part of the world as our interest may dictate."⁴³

The Monroe Doctrine was a statement of America's moral opposition to the ideas of colonialism and empire. The idea of human liberty and its political corollary—the principle of self-government—were universal principles that the United States would respect in both foreign and domestic policies. President Monroe noted that "[t]he political system of the allied [European] powers is essentially different in this respect from that of America."⁴⁴ The universal ideals of America's Founding, to which "this whole nation is devoted,"⁴⁵ would not allow the U.S. to permit imperial forms of government to reassert themselves in the Americas and threaten America's independence and liberty.

Beyond the restrictions of the Monroe Doctrine, the perceptive John Quincy Adams understood that the principles of American foreign policy and the Monroe Doctrine would thrust a measure of responsibility on the

Far from being a statement of isolationism, the Monroe Doctrine helped to shift the global order toward our modern global system of nation-states in which self-government is a respected principle.

United States. The U.S. would have to take a "conspicuous and leading part" in respect to the "countless millions of our fellow creatures," for it was crucial that America's "southern neighbors" have the freedom to govern themselves without coercion from European powers. America could not be isolated or unconcerned about manifestations of liberty around the world. The foundations of the new nations, he believed, should be "laid in principles of politics and of morals new and distasteful to the thrones and dominations of the elder world." It was a theme with which Adams was familiar; in 1796, he had termed these principles of foreign policy "the American system."⁴⁶

⁴¹ James Monroe, Seventh annual message to Congress, December 2, 1823, in *The Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. VI, ed. Stanislaus Murray Hamilton (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1902), p. 328.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 341.

⁴³ Hamilton, *Federalist*, No. 11, *The Federalist Papers*, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Monroe, Seventh annual message to Congress, *Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. VI, p. 339.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 340.

⁴⁶ John Quincy Adams to Timothy Pickering, December 22, 1795,

The American system prudentially applied the political principles of the American Founding to the practice of foreign policy. Far from being a statement of isolationism, the Monroe Doctrine was a bold and assertive interpretation of world affairs and helped to shift the global order away from a system of empires and toward our modern global system of nation-states in which self-government is a respected principle.

STOKING THE SACRED FIRE OF LIBERTY IN EUROPE

On numerous occasions in its history, America's statecraft shielded the liberties of foreign peoples from the hostile winds of despotism and oppression. Although it may look unimpressive by today's standards, the actions of American officials and the foreign policies of the United States were more supportive of liberty than any other country's at the time. This was true when the United States was the first established nation to recognize the independence of Argentina, Peru, Chile, Colombia, and Mexico in 1822, as well as when America diplomatically supported the Greeks and Hungarians in their wars for independence. When compared to the actions of other nations, and considering the high price of taking such positions, America's tradition of standing for freedom is a powerful example of its commitment to the cause of liberty. Indeed, the ideas of isolationism or strict non-interventionism are actually contrary to America's foreign policy traditions.

The Declaration of Independence asserts that popular sovereignty is the preeminent principle of government. It calls for Americans to "assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them." The principles of liberty give self-governing people a right to behave as independent nations. Upon securing their independence, Americans established a constitution in order to "form a more perfect Union,"

in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. I, p. 465.

The Founders understood that the U.S. could not predetermine where liberty would spring forth, but when the efficacious desire for republican self-government does emerge, the cause of liberty should be supported.

to "provide for the common defense," and to "secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity." Just as the American colonists had acted to secure their right of republican self-government, so too did other peoples recognize the suppressions of their liberty.

After observing the popular revolutions in Latin America, Thomas Jefferson remarked that "[t]he flames kindled on the 4th of July 1776, have spread over too much of the globe to be extinguished by the feeble engines of despotism; on the contrary, they will consume these engines and all who work them."⁴⁷ As the United States watched peoples around the world attempt to assert their freedom against tyrannical rulers, there was an understandable impulse to offer aid in the cause of liberty.

The Founders understood that the U.S. could not predetermine where liberty would spring forth, but when the efficacious desire for republican self-government does emerge, the cause of liberty should be supported. The early security of the United States itself had depended on French military assistance and foreign financial credit. These benefactors, however, could not have imposed self-government upon the Americans; they could merely support the American experiment. There is sometimes a great gap between a people's natural right to liberty and their capacity for self-government. American foreign policy, however, has contended that when this distance is overcome organically by a people yearning for freedom, it should be acknowledged and even supported.

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, September 12, 1821, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VII, Part 2, p. 218.

The debate over the appropriate means will always depend on the circumstances and should be guided by prudence. The Founders clearly favored a foreign policy that advanced the ideas of liberty through example, public opinion, and vigorous diplomacy. From the historical record, it is clear that America's early statesmen understood diplomacy not merely as a means of negotiating interests, but as a tool for advancing the ideas of liberty. Significantly, this does not *necessitate* military intervention.

The Founders did not believe that America had a duty to spread the ideas of liberty by waging wars that might be detrimental to America's interests and security, but they welcomed opportunities to support the principles and practice of liberty prudently around the world. This distinction between duty and opportunity is most clearly visible in the American reaction to Revolutionary France's foreign policy. Alexander Hamilton noted that the French Revolution presented a scenario that was both dangerous and very different from the American way of supporting liberty:

[France] gave a general and very serious cause of alarm and umbrage by the decree of the 19th of November, 1792, whereby the convention, in the name of the French nation, declare, that they will grant fraternity and assistance to *every people* who wish to recover their liberty; and charge the executive power to send the necessary orders to the generals to give assistance to such people, and to defend those citizens who have been, or who may be vexed for the cause of liberty; which decree was ordered to be printed in all languages.... When a nation has actually come to a resolution to throw off a yoke, under which it may have groaned, and to assert its liberties, it is justifiable and meritorious in another, to afford assistance to the one which has been oppressed, and is in the act of liberating itself; but it is not warrantable for any nation beforehand, to hold

out a general invitation to insurrection and revolution, by promising to assist every people who may wish to recover their liberty, and to defend those citizens, of every country....⁴⁸

It would be imprudent and reckless to hurl the safety of American liberty into the maelstrom of war based on a foreign policy of ideology.

In contrast to Revolutionary France, the Greek and Hungarian revolutions attempted to provide for their

The Founders did not believe that America had a duty to spread the ideas of liberty by waging wars that might be detrimental to America's interests and security, but they welcomed opportunities to support the principles and practice of liberty prudently around the world.

countries' own independence rather than expand their system through military force. Americans recognized the cause of liberty in their attempts at self-government. The Greek and Hungarian revolutions were, however, threatened by the complex European network of despotic alliances that America had determined to avoid but that seemed destined to snuff out the flickering light of liberty on the European continent. These circumstances presented the young American Republic with another solemn opportunity to intervene on behalf of liberty.

American Support for Greek Independence

In 1824, one month after the Monroe Doctrine was announced, Representative Daniel Webster stood before Congress calling for U.S. support of the Greeks who had revolted against the Ottoman Empire in 1821. They look to "the great Republic of the earth—and they ask us by our common faith, whether we can

⁴⁸ Hamilton, Pacificus No. 2, *The Federalist on the New Constitution* written in 1788, p. 413 (emphasis in original).

forget that they are struggling, as we once struggled, for what we now so happily enjoy?"⁴⁹ Congressman John Randolph, however, cautioned the Congress not to embark on "Projects of ambition" that would "surpass those of Bonaparte himself."⁵⁰ What could America do to support the Greeks, then, without declaring war? Webster recognized that before the enlightened politics of self-government, "there was no making an impression on a nation but by bayonets and subsidies, by fleets and armies: but the age has undergone a change; there is a force in public opinion, which, in the long run, will outweigh all the physical force that can be brought to oppose it."⁵¹ With this understanding, the United States supported Greece diplomatically but not militarily.

It is important to remember that President Monroe addressed the question of Greek independence in the Monroe Doctrine address. Connecting Greek independence to the revolutions in Latin America, Monroe declared the United States' official support of Greek independence:

A strong hope has been long entertained, founded on the heroic struggle of the Greeks, that they would succeed in their contest and resume their equal station among the nations of the earth.... From the facts which have come to our knowledge there is good cause to believe that their enemy has lost forever all dominion over them; that Greece will become again an independent nation. That she may obtain that rank is the object of our most ardent wishes.⁵²

⁴⁹ Daniel Webster, speech delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, January 19, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, ed. Hezekiah Niles (Baltimore, 1824), p. 348.

⁵⁰ Representative John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, speech to Congress, January 24, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 365.

⁵¹ Daniel Webster, speech delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, January 19, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 346.

⁵² Monroe, Seventh annual message to Congress, *Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. VI, p. 339.

Many Americans, animated by their commitment to the cause of liberty and emboldened by American diplomatic support for the Greeks, donated funds and supplies to aid the Greeks' fight for independence. Even John Adams sent a donation and a letter to the Greek Committee in New York expressing that his heart "beat in unison" with their cause.⁵³

Even when the U.S. government does not intervene officially, the support of the American people for those who seek liberty is a valuable aid to their cause. The "greatest enemy of tyranny" is this republican spirit of self-government.

In contrast to the strict neutrality imposed on American citizens during the French Revolutionary Wars, the U.S. government signaled approval of its citizens' material support for Greek independence. This enabled a number of Americans to enlist in arms for the Greek cause. One such American was Samuel Gridley Howe, a physician from Boston, who set sail for the Peloponnese in 1824 and soon became the chief surgeon of the Greek navy. He later wrote about his experiences there and the importance of American aid to Greek independence:

It has been said that the resources of Greece were almost completely exhausted, and that her hope was only from a like exhaustion on the part of her enemy; and in the exertions which the friends of liberty...were making in every part of the world, to sustain her.... Committees were formed in every part of [America] to raise contributions of provisions and clothing.

Howe recorded the reaction among the Greeks upon receiving this aid from the United States: "Thou-

⁵³ John Adams to the Greek Committee in New York, December 29, 1823, quoted in Edward Mead Earle, "American Interest in the Greek Cause, 1821-1827," *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (1927), p. 49.

sands put up their prayers to God for their benefactors, and the children learned first to lisp the name of America, with a blessing.”⁵⁴ During and after the revolution, Howe and other private citizens raised funds and worked to establish schools, hospitals, and towns for Greek refugees.

Observing these manifestations of public support for the Greeks, Webster asked, “What is the soul, the informing spirit of our own institutions, of our entire system of government?” His answer: “Public opinion. While this acts with intensity and moves in the right direction the country must ever be safe—let us direct the force, the vast moral force, of this engine to the aid of others.” Even when the U.S. government does not intervene officially, the support of the American people for those who seek liberty is a valuable aid to their cause. The “greatest enemy of tyranny” is this republican spirit of self-government.⁵⁵

By 1827, the Greek War for Independence had turned into an intercontinental conflict involving Britain, Russia, France, the Ottoman Empire, and Egypt. In the end, the Greeks gained their independence but were coerced into establishing a monarchy by their military allies—the British, Russian, and French empires. American military aid might have been tactically helpful, but it would not have been politically decisive.

American Support for Hungarian Independence

Americans unmistakably recognized the cause of liberty in the Hungarian fight for independence against the Austrian Empire. The intensity of American support for the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849 prompted a diplomatic confrontation and sparked a heated exchange between the Austrian Ambassador

Hülsemann and U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster in 1850–1852. The United States’ support for the universal principles of liberty during this episode served to illuminate the enduring idea of America’s role in advancing liberty.

In 1848, Hungarian revolutionaries erupted in open conflict against the Austrian Empire in order to reclaim a Hungarian state. According to Hungarian Revolutionary President Lajos Kossuth, the Hungarian people “merely wished to establish political freedom.”⁵⁶ Amidst Hungary’s attempts to establish a government, President Zachary Taylor and many other U.S. officials publicly supported Hungarian independence, while many private individuals supported the Hungarians financially and some enlisted in arms.

The attacks of the Austrian forces and their Russian allies on the Hungarian revolutionaries prompted outrage in America. Michigan Senator Lewis Cass referred to Austria’s actions as “despotism, by which human liberty and life have been sacrificed under circumstances of audacious contempt for the rights of mankind and the sentiments of the civilized world.”⁵⁷ The Hungarian Revolution was quickly suppressed by Austrian and Russian forces, making the question of American recognition of Hungary irrelevant, but the United States took the opportunity to announce to the world that America stood for liberty everywhere.

In his annual message to Congress in 1849, President Taylor said that he “deeply sympathized with the Magyar patriots” and publicly lamented that “the powerful intervention of Russia in the contest extinguished the hopes of the struggling Magyars [Hungarians].”⁵⁸ The defeated Hungarian leader

⁵⁴ Samuel Gridley Howe, *An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution* (New York: White, Gallaher, & White, 1828), pp. 446–447.

⁵⁵ Daniel Webster, speech delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, January 19, 1824, in *Niles’ Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 346.

⁵⁶ Lajos Kossuth, *Select Speeches of Kossuth*, ed. Francis W. Newman (London: Trübner & Co., 1853), p. 6.

⁵⁷ Senator Lewis Cass, speech to the U.S. Senate, January 4, 1850, *The Congressional Globe*, Vol. XXII, Part 1 (Washington: John C. Rives, 1850), p. 55.

⁵⁸ Zachary Taylor, first annual message to Congress, December 4, 1849, in *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, Vol. V, ed. James D. Richardson (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1902), p. 12.

Lajos Kossuth escaped to the Ottoman Empire, where he was arrested by Ottoman officials. American diplomats fought Kossuth's extradition to Austria, where he faced certain execution. American efforts were not successful until the U.S. Navy forcibly freed him from the Ottomans. Upon being rescued, Kossuth toured America and noted: "Your generous part in my liberation is taken by the world for the revelation of the fact, that the United States are resolved not to allow the despots of the world to trample on oppressed humanity."⁵⁹ The American Navy in the Mediterranean Sea also rescued other Hungarian refugees from capture.⁶⁰

The actions of the United States greatly strained diplomatic relations and trade with both the Austrian and Russian Empires—of no small significance to the security and economic well-being of America. When the Austrian government contended that America's support for the Hungarians had violated American neutrality, Webster presented America's guiding foreign policy principles. Liberty, he declared, does not emanate from the largess of monarchs; it exists within the hearts and minds of every human being:

[America] was established in consequence of a change which did not proceed from thrones, or the permission of crowned heads. But the government of the United States heard these denunciations of its fundamental principles without remonstrance, or the disturbance of its equanimity.... [Americans] cannot, however, fail to cherish, always, a lively interest in the fortunes of Nations, struggling for institutions like their own.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Kossuth, *Select Speeches of Kossuth*, p. 24.

⁶⁰ For example, in 1853 Captain David Ingraham of the *USS St. Louis* rescued Hungarian refugee Martin Koszta by threatening to open fire on an Austrian vessel near Smyrna.

⁶¹ Webster explained that even a policy of neutrality could not restrict America from making moral or political statements about newly liberated states: "It is the right of every independent state to enter into friendly relations with every other independent state. Of course, questions of prudence naturally arise in reference to new states, brought

For Webster, when America saw foreign people moving spontaneously and without interference toward liberty, the United States could not "remain wholly indifferent spectators."⁶²

When Austria threatened open hostility against America for interfering and refusing to apologize, Webster replied that despite "any possible acts of retaliation which Austria might conceivably undertake against the United States," nothing "will deter either the government or the people of the United States from exercising, at their own discretion, the rights belonging to them as an independent nation, and of forming and expressing their own opinions, freely and at all times, upon the great political events which may transpire among the civilized nations of the earth." Webster went on to say that America's institutions are based on universal and fundamental laws of civil liberty that are "eminently favorable" to the happiness and prosperity of nations.⁶³

A young Abraham Lincoln, at that time an emerging public figure, also spoke in support of Hungarian independence. He stated that the Hungarian uprising "presents an occasion upon which we, the American people, cannot remain silent, without justifying an inference against our continued devotion to the principles of our free institutions." Indeed, Lincoln believed it would be "meritorious" to intervene militarily in order to defend Hungarian independence from foreign suppression.⁶⁴

by successful revolutions into the family of nations; but it is not to be required of neutral powers that they should await the recognition of the new government by the parent state." Daniel Webster, diplomatic correspondence to Mr. Hülsemann, chargé d'affaires of the Emperor of Austria, December 21, 1850, in *The Works of Daniel Webster*, Vol. 6, ed. Edward Everett, Vol. 6 (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1853), pp. 495–498.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 491–504.

⁶⁴ Abraham Lincoln, "Resolutions in Behalf of Hungarian Freedom," January 9, 1852, in *The Language of Liberty: The Political Speeches and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Joseph R. Fornieri (Washington: Regnery, 2003), pp. 127–128.

CHANGING POLICIES, PERMANENT PRINCIPLES

American statecraft has been morally and philosophically grounded in the principles of human liberty and in America's sense of justice. This means that the true consistency of American foreign policy is to be found not in its policies, which prudently change and adapt, but in its guiding principles, which are unchanging and permanent. Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793 enabled the young nation to avoid the war raging between France and England. The U.S. was militarily weak, and fighting a war would have endangered the very existence of the American experiment. The Monroe Doctrine of 1823 protected America's interests while presenting to the world the principles of self-

It would be historically inaccurate and a dangerous misunderstanding to reduce the Founders' principled foreign policy to a simplistic rule of non-interventionism.

government and political liberty. In keeping with the Founders' examples, American statesmen in the 19th century spoke up for those around the world who were attempting to gain their political liberty and establish a government based on the consent of the people.

America is a defender of liberty at home. Abroad, the U.S. prudently maintains its independence and pursues its interests while standing for the idea of political freedom across the globe.⁶⁵ The American people are not *required* to risk their blood and treasure in defense of the liberty of others, but the United States cannot have a foreign policy that fails to reflect the political truths that define it. Because America stands for the principles of liberty, independence, and self-government, its interests are defined and shaped by those principles.

⁶⁵ The second part of this essay will look at the nature and extent of U.S. military engagement abroad during the early years of American foreign policy.

The American people rightly place great importance on the permanence of their political principles, and it is crucial to understand the Founders' approach to foreign policy, not only because the early years of American foreign policy were so successful, but also because their foreign policy decisions were self-consciously based on the ideals of the Founding. It would be historically inaccurate and a dangerous misunderstanding to reduce the Founders' principled foreign policy to a simplistic rule of non-interventionism.

Coming out of the Cold War, a time when U.S. foreign policy options were being considered anew, such misconceptions of America's early foreign policy became popular. Ronald Reagan attempted to correct this perilous perspective: "These new isolationists claim that the American people don't care about how or why we prevailed in the great defining struggle of our age—the victory of liberty over our adversaries. They insist that our triumph is yesterday's news, part of a past that holds no lessons for the future."⁶⁶ Yet the political principles upon which this nation was founded were worth advancing then and are still worth advancing now.

The ideal role for the United States as articulated by the Founders gives American diplomacy a perpetual purpose. In the 21st century, the necessity of American independence and leadership is not diminished. From Bunker Hill to the Berlin Wall, the American love of liberty has inspired a commitment to see the cause of liberty triumph abroad, and U.S. foreign policy has reflected this reality.

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⁶⁶ Ronald Reagan, Speech to the Republican National Convention, Houston, Texas, August 17, 1992, in *The Greatest Speeches of Ronald Reagan* (West Palm Beach, Fla.: Newsmax, 2002), p. 274.