



The Myth of American Isolationism: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Military Affairs in the Early Republic

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*The Myth of American Isolationism:
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Affairs in the Early Republic*

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The cover illustration by John James Barralet (c. 1815) is titled "America Guided by Wisdom: An Allegorical representation of the United States, denoting their Independence and Prosperity." Indicative of how Americans viewed their young nation in the years following the War of 1812, the classical imagery represents American industry, agriculture, commerce, maritime trade, architecture, and military victory. Photo colorization by Joe Rusenko.

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The Myth of American Isolationism: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Military Affairs in the Early Republic

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Abstract

America's founding principles do not call for an isolationist grand strategy, and early U.S. statesmen did not adhere to a non-interventionist foreign policy as they sought to secure the nation's interests. Regrettably, such misconceptions of America's early statecraft have gained credence in a time of war-weariness and monumental federal budget constraints.

In an effort to set the record straight, this report focuses on the areas of diplomacy, trade, and military affairs in the early republic (1776–1860) to better understand the foundations of U.S. statecraft. America's Founders and early statesmen believed and acted upon the idea that prosperity at home comes through active trade abroad and that peace is best secured through military strength and foreign respect for U.S. sovereignty.

American statecraft was grounded, both morally and practically, in the principles of equality and liberty articulated in the Declaration of Independence. Thus, early U.S. foreign policy sought to maintain independence and pursue American interests while standing for political, economic, and religious freedom across the globe. America's early statesmen occasionally sanctioned limited military and political intervention abroad as constitutional and sometimes prudent. They were also determined that America should become and remain a respectable military power in order to secure the blessings of liberty for the American people.

Foreword

It's not exactly "Come home, America" all over again, but more Americans are asking legitimate questions about the nature and extent of our country's activities around the world. Whether motivated by justifiable concerns about an overly ambitious neoconservative foreign policy or the excesses of a new liberal internationalism, such questions deserve answers.

When it comes to dealing with the rest of the world, however, certainty and clarity are all but unattainable. At home, we have our own laws and share a constitutional framework for deciding and enforcing the rules within a common legal framework. In the world, by contrast, there is no common political community and thus no international consent of the governed.

Foreign affairs—dealing with friends and enemies in a constantly changing and often unstable world—requires prudence. No leader can know ahead of time where trouble will flare up. Likewise, it is impossible to predetermine where we will find opportunities to further our country's principles and long-term objectives.

So how do we proceed?

Unfortunately, much of the foreign policy debate today is caught up in rigid categories and abstract theories. Most often, that debate is seen as a choice between "idealism" and "realism." Idealists assert that nations should be motivated by ideals to the exclusion of practical concerns and self-interest, while realists argue that nations are motivated primarily (if not exclusively) by the desire for greater military and economic power.

This distinction is false and misleading. Idealism rejects the practical reality of particular national interests in favor of a dogmatic moralism, while realism embraces a narrow, cynical view that completely excludes moral considerations in dealing with other nations.

The current popular version of this debate, especially within conservatism, is between the isolationists and "noninterventionists" on the one side and the interventionist neoconservatives and liberals on the other. Although each of these positions is a serious attempt to get around the idealism–realism debate by balancing global engagement (low or high) and national purpose (inward or outward focused), there is little here that provides useful

guidance. Other than providing a straw man for the other camp's talking points, these polar extremes are unhelpful and mostly misleading.

The Founders would have rejected these modern approaches to American foreign policy—whether power politics, isolationism, or crusading internationalism. They especially disagreed with the "visionary, or designing men, who stand ready to advocate the paradox of perpetual peace," as Alexander Hamilton put it in *Federalist* No. 6.

Instead, the Founders designed a uniquely American approach to foreign policy that was fundamentally shaped by our principles yet still cognizant of the place of necessity in international relations. This approach relates principles and practice through the gauge of practical wisdom or prudence.¹

It is often said that the American Founders were isolationists and that the principle of their foreign policy was to withdraw from the world in favor of focusing solely on the home front, but this fails to distinguish between a particular policy conditioned on the times and the permanent principles that underlie the policy and inform changing circumstances. The Founders were active in some areas of the world—especially concerning international trade as well as some matters of national security—but were generally constrained by the circumstances in which they found themselves. Nevertheless, their objective, as George Washington put it in his 1796 Farewell Address (sometimes wrongly read as isolationist dogma), was "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 fortunes."²

Yes, Washington rightly warns us against "the insidious wiles of foreign influence," and yes, Washington correctly states that in extending *commercial* relations, we should have as little *political* connection with those nations as possible. But that is not isolationism; it is common sense. Indeed, as Washington also writes:

If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality

we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as *our interest guided by justice shall Counsel*.

Rather than trap themselves either in a rigid doctrine of non-intervention in the world or in an endless series of open-ended interventions, the Founders advocated a prudent and flexible policy aimed at achieving and thereafter permanently maintaining the sovereign independence for Americans to determine their own fate. Without providing for our own security and serving our own interests, how can we hope to control our own destiny or command our own fortunes, let alone advance the cause of liberty and justice?

But while the thought of the Founders is important, so too are their actions.

As is usually the case, the best way to understand the political ideas of statesmen is to see them carried out in action. It is always possible to pull a stray quote here and there to make one's point, but it is hard to argue with the actual historical record.

Marion Smith's report, *The Myth of American Isolationism: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Military Affairs in the Early Republic*, looks at the Founders' actions by focusing on the actual practice of U.S. statecraft between the establishment of the United States and 1860 in the areas of diplomacy, trade, and military affairs. And here, as with the cumulative body of their writings and statements, the evidence not only does not support the popular myth that America's Founders were isolationists, but also strongly suggests that they were defenders of American independence and sovereignty as well as the larger cause of liberty abroad. During that time:

- U.S. diplomacy was remarkably active, seeking to strengthen U.S. sovereignty (e.g., the 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality and the 1823 Monroe Doctrine) and prudently advance the cause of liberty around the world, from Latin America to Europe.
- The U.S. Navy actively protected America's foreign trade (e.g., the Franco-American War) and U.S. statesmen learned from experience the dangers of choosing to withdraw American commerce

(e.g., the 1807 Embargo Act) instead of defending and advancing it.

- The Founders sanctioned limited military and political intervention abroad as constitutional and sometimes prudent (e.g., the Tripolitan War) and were determined that America should become and remain a respectable military power (e.g., the War of 1812 and the 1815 Algerine War) in order to secure the blessings of liberty for the American people.

The overall picture that emerges from this study illustrates the Founders' foreign policy principles in action. Despite early partisan debates and experimental presidential policies, Smith argues, by 1815—very early in our nation's history—one could speak of a consensus approach of peace and prosperity backed by military strength that was endorsed by both parties in both the executive and legislative branches. This consensus approach reflected an understanding that the common defense of the nation's vital interests encompassed much more than merely territorial security and rejected the ideas of commercial isolationism as well as military and diplomatic non-interventionism.

Of late, leading public policy and political voices have begun looking—as should more often be the case—to the American Founders for advice on foreign policy. Senator Rand Paul, for instance, juxtaposing the polar extremes of a neoconservative foreign policy that is “everywhere all the time” and an isolationist approach that is “nowhere any of the time,” has called for “a foreign policy of moderation” that is somewhere in the middle, informed by the American Founders' sense of national defense and limited constitutionalism. What a refreshing proposal: to wipe away the academic dogmas and stale assumptions and rediscover the thoughts and actions of America's Founders in the area of foreign affairs.

We welcome this discussion of the Founders' ideas, statecraft, and statesmanship. We have written about their ideas at great length and will continue to do so.³ One thing we can say without doubt—both in theory and (with this report) in practice—is that the Founders were neither doctrinaire isolationists nor crusading interventionists. They were principled, thoughtful, and inherently prudent and practical.

**THE MYTH OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM:
COMMERCE, DIPLOMACY, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC**

And with that, let the conversation begin.

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Introduction

Nearly 25 years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and more than a decade after 9/11, many are unsatisfied with U.S. foreign policy and have called for a reappraisal of America's actions, interests, and objectives in the world. Concerned about recent trends in world affairs, a diverse array of foreign policy observers—from international relations scholar Walter Russell Mead to Senator Rand Paul (R-KY) and Progressive pundit Rachel Maddow—have argued for a new paradigm in modern American foreign policy that seeks inspiration, guidance, and moderation from America's Founders.⁴

There are, however, many misconceptions about America's early statecraft. Of these, perhaps none is as widespread and persistent as the belief that the Founding Fathers of the United States were "isolationists" who advocated and held to a foreign policy doctrine of non-interventionism. According to one foreign policy historian a "non-interventionist/neo-isolationist approach to US grand strategy" best reflects the "still sound roots of the founding fathers' principles that served the United States well for so long."⁵ Unfortunately, this misunderstanding has slowly crept into mainstream thought and has begun to shape popular foreign policy discourse, with some calling for a new foreign policy of isolation or non-interventionism said to stem from America's Founding ideas.⁶ Put another way, many who advocate a doctrine of non-interventionism that limits diplomatic activity and proscribes all military action except for clear and immediate defense do so in the name of America's Founders.

In an effort to set the record straight, this report argues that:

- Isolationism is contrary to the Founders' foreign policy *in principle*;
- By and large, early American foreign policy was not isolationist; and
- Brief flirtations with non-interventionism *in practice* led to ruinous results.

Early U.S. foreign policy indeed was guided by America's founding principles and focused on the prudent application of those principles in particular circumstances. But rather than being guided

by some sort of isolationist or non-interventionist doctrine, America's Founders actually advocated and acted upon the idea that prosperity at home comes through active trade abroad and that peace is best secured through military strength and foreign respect of U.S. sovereignty and the principles of liberty.

Neither Isolationist nor Non-Interventionist

Isolationism, as a complete and coherent grand strategy, is composed of *economic isolation or protectionism, military and diplomatic non-intervention, and cultural seclusion*. By this definition, the best examples of truly isolationist nations are 17th century China, 18th century Japan, 19th century Korea, or 20th century North Korea.

Considering America's historically vibrant commercial engagement and interconnectedness to markets abroad, its early diplomatic interaction with foreign powers, and its long-standing cultural affinity with Europe, the United States' foreign policy traditions cannot accurately be called "isolationist" if the word is to have substantive meaning. Nevertheless, isolationist ideas have influenced American foreign policy in the past—most notably in the late 1930s, and with disastrous consequences.

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."⁷ The idea itself came to be understood as the antithesis of the trendy (then as well as now) concept of global governance.

Some of the very first uses of "isolationism" in a foreign policy context appear in *New York Times* articles in 1920 and 1921 opposing Woodrow Wilson's League of Nations and reporting on Warren Harding's inaugural address.⁸ President Calvin Coolidge recognized that America's traditional grand strategy, established by the Founding Fathers, was at risk of being lost in this debate and addressed the increasingly unhelpful paradigms of U.S. foreign policy in his 1925 Inaugural Address: "It will be well not to be too much disturbed by the thought of either isolation or entanglement of pacifists and militarists."⁹ Associated with the America First movement,

of which Charles Lindbergh was the most prominent spokesman, isolationism was at its strongest in the late 1930s when many argued that the United States should isolate itself from and remain neutral concerning the rise of fascist powers in Western Europe, focus on a strong national defense at home and not become involved in what became World War II. It was during this time that the doctrines of isolationism and non-interventionism became falsely associated with the ideas and policies of the American Founders.

In light of this episode, Americans are now somewhat instinctively averse to isolationism *per se*, and few embrace the term. Those who continue to be guided by isolationist ideas in diplomacy and military affairs have therefore recast their ideas as “non-interventionism” in an effort to distinguish their approach from the historically bagged term “isolationism.” Like their predecessors, they also claim that “non-interventionism” is the foreign policy doctrine of the Founders.

In contrast to a particular *policy* of non-intervention or neutrality, which is sometimes appropriate, this *doctrine* of non-interventionism dangerously and unnecessarily limits the options of American statecraft.

While the mixing of these two terms has created some confusion, at root, non-interventionists are isolationists, though they seek to advance only isolationism’s diplomatic and military aspects. Their doctrine of non-interventionism recommends *a foreign policy of political and military non-involvement in foreign relations or in other countries’ internal affairs*.

Both isolationists and self-described non-interventionists categorically rule out the *possibility* of military intervention—except when the country’s security is immediately threatened—and seek to disengage America strategically from commitments and interests abroad. Moreover, non-interventionism, if followed, leads to other isolationist policies.¹⁰ This is true because cultural engagement and international commerce lead sooner or later to clashes of interests and values, as evidenced throughout early U.S. history and, indeed, most of human

history generally. These clashes force decisions upon America: either defend and thereby advance U.S. interests at some spot on the globe or withdraw and isolate American interests from foreign threats. In contrast to a particular *policy* of non-intervention or neutrality, which may be appropriate in some circumstances, a *doctrine* of non-interventionism dangerously and unnecessarily limits the options of American statecraft.

In this report, the term “isolationism” is used to describe the general strategic approach and manner of thinking about fundamental questions related to war, peace, and America’s place in the world. The term “non-interventionism” is used to describe isolationist policy-oriented prescriptions in the domains of diplomacy and military affairs. In contrast, “neutrality” is used as the Founders meant the term to describe a policy of not intervening in a particular international conflict, the specifics of which are essential to and inseparable from the merits of the policy itself (*i.e.*, neutral in regard to what?). Neutrality is not an “ism” and—as opposed to “non-interventionism”—is a policy that may or may not be appropriate under a prudential approach to international affairs.

The Record of America’s Early Statecraft

By the end of the 20th century, liberal historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr. could describe America’s early foreign policy as isolationist in principle and practice. For progressives, this conveniently helped to explain America’s reaction against Woodrow Wilson’s attempts to create global peacekeeping institutions; continuing efforts to protect the integrity of America’s national sovereignty were a reactionary return to the “womb” of “familiar and soothing isolationism.”¹¹ This tactic of equating opposition to global governance and the defense of national sovereignty with isolationism has stuck to the extent that both proponents and opponents of global governance and sovereignty have generally accepted an isolationist/non-interventionist narrative of early U.S. foreign policy. As a result, this view has become widespread and the Founders’ ideas of engagement, military strength and strategic independence have largely been absent from the national conversation.

This myth of isolationism stands in marked contrast to the record of America’s early statecraft. Despite sometimes bitter disagreement over particular policies, the Founders overwhelmingly agreed

on three guiding principles of American grand strategy:¹²

- *Maintaining independence* so that America could not be coerced by foreign powers.
- *Securing national interests* such as commercial navigation, trade agreements, and advantageous treaties.
- *Promoting the cause of liberty* in light of America's understanding of national interest and justice.

American statecraft differed in several key respects from the prevailing practices of the imperial, statist, and mercantilist nations of Europe. In contrast to these nations, the United States:

- Adopted a national interest perspective that took into account America's exceptional political principles and the internal nature of foreign regimes as opposed to a purely *realpolitik* approach;
- Pursued commercial and diplomatic relations with foreign nations instead of treaties that would bind the U.S. politically;
- Favored freer international trade instead of European-style mercantilism; and
- Sought to protect American interests and trade, as well as garner respect, through military force but rejected foreign military conquest and forced colonization as a legitimate aim of statecraft.

This report looks at the Founders' foreign policy principles by focusing on the actual practice of U.S. statecraft in the areas of diplomacy, trade, and military affairs. The time span covered extends from the founding of the Republic to 1860, by which time

America's foreign policy traditions had been firmly established. During that time:

- U.S. diplomacy was remarkably active, seeking to strengthen U.S. sovereignty (*e.g.*, the Proclamation of Neutrality and Monroe Doctrine) as well as to prudently advance the cause of liberty around the world, from Latin America to Europe.
- The U.S. Navy actively protected America's foreign trade (*e.g.*, the Franco-American War) and U.S. statesmen learned from experience the dangers of choosing to withdraw American commerce (*e.g.*, the Embargo Act) instead of defending and advancing it.
- The Founders sanctioned limited military and political intervention abroad as constitutional and sometimes prudent (*e.g.*, the Tripolitan War) and were determined that America should become and remain a respectable military power (*e.g.*, the War of 1812 and the Algerine War) in order to secure the blessings of liberty for the American people.

The overall picture that emerges from this study illustrates the Founders' foreign policy principles in action. Despite early partisan debates and experimental presidential policies, by 1815—very early in our nation's history—one could speak of a consensus approach of peace and prosperity backed by military strength that was endorsed by both parties in both the executive and legislative branches. This consensus approach reflected an understanding that the common defense of the nation's vital interests encompassed much more than merely territorial security and rejected the ideas of commercial isolationism as well as military and diplomatic non-interventionism.

Section I: Diplomacy

Modern day non-interventionists who recommend a less engaged (or less “meddlesome”) diplomacy often back up their arguments with quotes from the Founding Fathers and purported examples from America’s early history. Two such often cited examples are Washington’s 1793 Proclamation of Neutrality in the war between France and Great Britain and the 1823 Monroe Doctrine.

Properly understood, however, these early foreign policies were not animated by isolationist impulses. They were prudential policies guided by the Founders’ commitment to republican self-government and desire to preserve the country’s sovereign independence, both of which were necessary preconditions for the increasingly important role that America soon played in supporting the cause of freedom around the world. Far from allowing its interests to be isolated or ignoring foreign developments, the United States, once secure in its independence, used its material and moral influence to carefully promote the cause of liberty abroad.

Far from allowing its interests to be isolated or ignoring foreign developments, the United States, once secure in its independence, used its material and moral influence to promote the cause of liberty abroad.

When George Washington noted America’s “detached and distant position,”¹³ he was acknowledging a geographical reality, not defining a foreign policy principle. Upon gaining independence from Great Britain, the United States tried to remain outside of the torrential affairs of the old and bloody European continent. In Washington’s words, the U.S. 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 fortunes.”¹⁴

In addition to preserving independence, the goals of U.S. diplomacy were to promote liberty and facilitate foreign commerce, and achieving these

aims sometimes required a policy of neutrality, as with Washington’s Proclamation of Neutrality during the French Revolutionary Wars. More often, however, successful diplomacy required more assertive and partial policies abroad, such as the Monroe Doctrine and efforts to promote liberty in Latin America, Greece, and Hungary. Far from attempting to isolate American interests or feign indifference to events abroad, America’s diplomats understood that U.S. statecraft could use America’s freedom of action and resources to shift—however little or much—the structure of international politics in a way more favorable to America’s liberty, even at the risk of its short-term material interests.

U.S. Diplomacy in Action

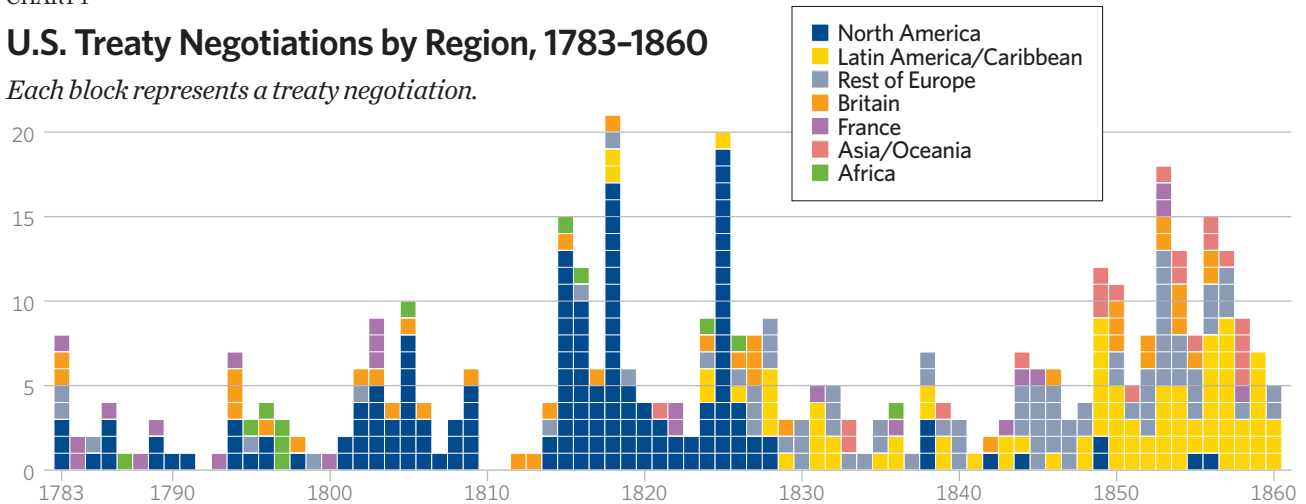
The activities of U.S. statesmen and diplomats between 1789 and 1860 demonstrate America’s engaged efforts abroad to strengthen its strategic independence, secure its commerce, and promote the cause of liberty. Following the establishment of the State Department in 1789, the U.S. quickly extended its diplomatic intercourse from Europe to North America,¹⁵ Africa, Latin and South America, and Asia. (See Chart 1.) The number of American diplomats overseas grew from 20 in 1790 to 281 by 1860 in order to staff the rapidly increasing number of U.S. diplomatic and consular posts around the world. (See Tables 1 and 2.) America’s young diplomatic corps worked vigorously on every continent to defend American interests and make the U.S. respectable in the eyes of other nations.

American diplomats and ministers concluded consular agreements to facilitate commerce and assist U.S. citizens abroad (*e.g.*, with France in 1790) and negotiated peace treaties to end military conflicts and exchange foreign prisoners (*e.g.*, the 1795 Treaty of Greenville, which ended the Northwest Indian War, and the 1814 Treaty of Ghent with Britain). They also negotiated agreements that formally recognized foreign revolutions (*e.g.*, the 1799 agreement with Saint Domingue, which was revolting against Spain); extended commercial relations with foreign countries by agreeing to freer trade or reciprocal trade arrangements; secured advantageous navigation rights (*e.g.*, fisheries and maritime navigation with Britain in 1818);¹⁶ and secured indemnity payments to compensate American

CHART 1

U.S. Treaty Negotiations by Region, 1783-1860

Each block represents a treaty negotiation.



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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citizens for property damaged by a foreign country (*e.g.*, with Venezuela in 1852).

The State Department sought to conclude treaties that gave American citizens abroad a greater degree of economic freedom or extended the privilege of certain legal protections consistent with the Constitution. Examples include claims settlements (with France in 1803); extradition agreements (with the Hanseatic Republics in 1828); property rights transfers (with Switzerland in 1835); postal conventions (with British Canada in 1851); and international copyright protections (with Britain and France in 1853). In the years following Congress's outlawing of the foreign importation of slaves in 1808, America cooperated primarily with Britain in order to combat the maritime slave trade.

The U.S. also attempted to resolve ongoing border disputes with other nations diplomatically (*e.g.*, with British Canada) and extend U.S. territory (*e.g.*, the 1803 Louisiana Purchase from France) in order to expand U.S. power and maintain a more stable and peaceful surround. (And when diplomacy failed, military conflict followed.) Otherwise, European empires would take up the slack, thereby posing a threat to U.S. security and the hoped-for dominance of America's political ideas in the Western Hemisphere.

American diplomats overseas also served an important intelligence role. It was the U.S. consul in Tunis, William Eaton, who gathered the

necessary intelligence to justify the successful invasion of Tripoli's territory in 1804 during the Second Barbary War.

The United States also cooperated with a host of other international partners for a variety of reasons, including an arms control agreement with Britain in 1817, which placed a cap on naval armaments on North America's Great Lakes; America's first multilateral agreement in 1826 to build a cemetery enclosure in Algiers for American and European dead; an Arctic expedition to help Britain locate a lost explorer in 1850; and participation in an international dispute arbitration involving Chile and Belgium in 1858.

The extent of America's diplomatic and commercial presence around the world sometimes increased the chances for conflict,¹⁷ but America's efforts abroad were an indispensable service to the American people and their liberties. The State Department sought to secure American interests and maintain peace, and U.S. diplomats worked to shift the international balance of power in favor of freedom. Far from viewing them as contradictory aims, our early statesmen understood America's material interests and political principles to be complementary—certainly in the long run and often even in the short term.

Preserving Independence. The Founders were wary of permanent political alliances, foreign intrigue at home, and coercive foreign powers, all of which could limit America's strategic independence

TABLE 1

Diplomatic and Consular Posts, 1790–1860

FOR U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE

| Year | Diplomatic Posts | Consular Posts |
|------|------------------|----------------|
| 1790 | 2 | 10 |
| 1800 | 6 | 52 |
| 1810 | 4 | 60 |
| 1820 | 7 | 83 |
| 1830 | 15 | 141 |
| 1840 | 20 | 152 |
| 1850 | 27 | 197 |
| 1860 | 33 | 282 |

Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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and undermine U.S. interests. Washington captured Americans’ fear of foreign coercion when he said, “if we are to be told by a foreign power ... what we shall do, and what we shall not do, we have Independence yet to seek, and have contended hitherto for very little.”¹⁸ Early diplomatic efforts were therefore dedicated to maintaining America’s strategic independence at all costs and were aimed at concluding treaties that strengthened U.S. sovereignty.

Because of the importance placed on freedom of action abroad—a luxury enjoyed by sovereign and respected states—the Founders remained cautious about becoming too politically involved in the “ordinary vicissitudes” of foreign powers. Washington, in his Farewell Address,¹⁹ cautioned against permanent military alliances that could restrict 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

TABLE 2

State Department Personnel

| Year | Domestic | Overseas |
|------|----------|----------|
| 1790 | 8 | 20 |
| 1800 | 10 | 62 |
| 1810 | 9 | 56 |
| 1820 | 16 | 96 |
| 1830 | 23 | 153 |
| 1840 | 38 | 170 |
| 1850 | 22 | 218 |
| 1860 | 42 | 281 |

Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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their genuine sense. But, in my opinion, it is unnecessary and would be unwise to extend them.²⁰

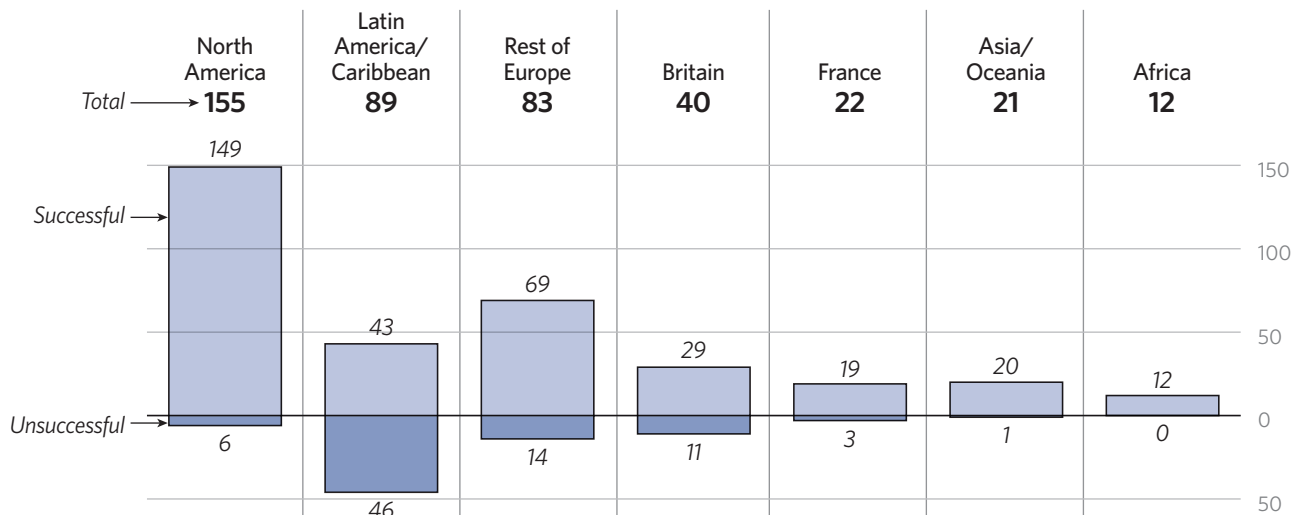
Preserving independence is, of course, not inherently incompatible with forming alliances, and there is an important distinction to be made between temporary and permanent alliances. As Washington argued, “Taking care always to keep ourselves, by suitable establishments, on a respectable defensive posture, we may safely trust to temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies.”²¹

This early experience proved to be an exemplary lesson in geopolitics for America’s first statesmen: Even the most useful alliances could entangle America in purely foreign matters and risk the independence of the United States.

No one could deny, for example, that America’s 1778 military alliance with France helped to secure independence, but foreign allies were no substitute for military preparation, as early experience proved. Although it was a treaty of necessity, the alliance with France nevertheless placed American interests in jeopardy. During the 1782–1783 peace negotiations in Paris, which officially ended the

CHART 2

Treaties Entered into Force and Failed Treaties, 1783-1860



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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Revolutionary War, the American delegates had to act independently of their French allies in order to secure peace before France could negotiate away America's hard-won independence in the great game of European diplomacy.

This early experience proved to be an exemplary lesson in geopolitics for America's first statesmen: Even the most useful alliances could entangle America in purely foreign matters and risk the independence of the United States. The U.S. would have to guard vigilantly against any encroachments upon its sovereignty—even by allies. Alexander Hamilton gleaned a useful lesson from observing European diplomacy:

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.²²

In contrast with the lesson gleaned by isolationists, however, the point was not to withdraw

diplomatically but to conclude good treaties in keeping with American interests. For this reason, not all treaties negotiated and signed by U.S. diplomats entered into force. (See Chart 2.) Some were ignored by the President, rejected by the Senate (exercising its advice and consent power), or modified by the Senate and then rejected by the foreign signatory.

Many more potential agreements were never even drafted because they posed a risk to U.S. sovereignty. For example, the U.S. refused to support an 1821 British-proposed International Slave Trade Tribunal to enforce abolition of the maritime slave trade, despite independent American anti-slave trade measures, because it included extraconstitutional judicial proceedings. Vigilance, not withdrawal or isolation, was the key to safeguarding American independence.

American Neutrality in the French Revolutionary Wars. Foreign influence and coercion were to be avoided at all costs in order to maintain the overarching strategic goal of preserving America's sovereignty. At times, especially when militarily weak, this meant remaining uninvolved in events abroad. The policy of neutrality during the French Revolutionary Wars, however, was not inspired by isolationist principles as is often thought to be the case. Nor did it establish

non-interventionism as a principle of American foreign policy as modern non-interventionists claim. It was simply a particular policy and was described as such at the time.

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.

The policy of neutrality during the French Revolutionary Wars was not inspired by isolationist principles. Nor did it establish non-interventionism as a principle of American foreign policy as modern non-interventionists claim. It was simply a particular policy and was described as such at the time.

Many Americans were eager to support France diplomatically and militarily because they viewed the French Revolution as similar to America's own, but the United States was weak militarily and had only recently established its own institutions of government. President Washington recognized that a war could jeopardize the very existence of the young American Republic and that liberty could be achieved only by maintaining the independence of the U.S. in world affairs. In these circumstances, Washington believed this was best accomplished by pursuing a policy of neutrality, defined as non-participation in the ongoing European 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 highlighted both the "mischiefs of foreign intrigues" in American politics and the need to protect American independence first and foremost.²³

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."²⁴

Before long, France, taken over by more radical revolutionaries, 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."²⁵ This was an overly ambitious and expansionist foreign policy that offered "a general invitation to insurrection and revolution" in foreign lands.²⁶ 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).

In April 1793, Washington learned that war had broken out between France and Great Britain. Washington chose not to call a special session of Congress, thereby excluding Congress from taking part in the decision to issue a proclamation. He relied instead on his Cabinet to help him assess the situation and contemplate how best to preserve the peace.

Partisan strife was dividing the country, and tensions were high in Philadelphia. Significantly, however, neither side in the debate called for 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 essential "to maintain a strict neutrality" in order to prevent "embroiling" the U.S. in war between the two great powers.²⁷ A policy of neutrality would also serve to limit the influence of both England and France 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 in order to avoid war and prevent the disruption of trade. As Revolutionary France went to war 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 worldwide conflict.

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 (so controversial was the idea), the policy prescription was clear.²⁸ The United States would with "sincerity and good faith adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers."²⁹ Thus, in its first major foreign policy decision, the United States chose to remain neutral not because its principles demand that it be neutral, but rather because Washington concluded that neutrality was the best way to preserve independence at that time.

The U.S. attempted to remain neutral throughout most of the Napoleonic Wars, but neutrality was not the goal of American foreign policy; it was only one of several means by which to preserve the country's independence.

But American neutrality required more than a proclamation: It demanded the exercise of force. Thus came about the Quasi-War with France. French privateers were violating American neutrality by using American ports along the Atlantic coast as safe havens from which to attack British ships. Many pro-French U.S. citizens were actively assisting this effort. If the United States continued to allow such actions, it would set itself on a collision course with England.

Washington's Cabinet determined that French privateers were indeed violating the neutrality policy and endangering American safety. U.S. officials and the military were therefore ordered to enforce the neutrality policy vigorously, which included fining American citizens and attacking French ships. 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."³⁰ American independence and respectability were at stake, and even neutrality required action.

The U.S. attempted to remain neutral throughout most of the Napoleonic Wars, but neutrality was not the goal of American foreign policy; it was only one of several means by which 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 a formal alliance of armed neutrality. The U.S. refused to join the Scandinavian alliance because it realized that future war might be required and it might not be universally recognized as purely defensive. Indeed, the United States fought a naval war with France five years later after diplomacy failed to achieve the safety of American ships at sea.

A correct understanding of this historical episode makes clear that neutrality or non-involvement can be a very useful *policy* that preserves independence or grants the time needed to gather intelligence, pursue additional diplomatic efforts, and make further strategic decisions. 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 nation's interests. Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality was a prudential policy (that itself required military enforcement), not the cornerstone of an isolationist grand strategy or doctrine of non-interventionism.

American Leadership and the Cause of Liberty

While maintaining U.S. national sovereignty protected Americans as a people, increased security and independence also allowed U.S. diplomacy to assert American political and economic ideas abroad more confidently. The Declaration of Independence grounds government in the consent of the governed. It boldly proclaims that *all* men are created equal and possess the same inalienable rights.

The Founders were keenly aware of the universal significance of this statement and of America's unique responsibility for upholding and prudently advancing the principles of political, economic, and religious freedom. 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.”³¹

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. 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.”³² By the time Washington left office, he was pleased that the United States was in a stronger position to recommend America’s principles to “the applause, the affection, and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.”³³

By the time Washington left office, he was pleased that the United States was in a stronger position to recommend America’s principles to “the applause, the affection, and adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.”

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.”³⁴ Although this recognition did not imply a *duty* to spread the ideas of liberty by waging wars that could be detrimental to America’s interests and security, American statesmen did welcome 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 form of diplomacy:

[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.³⁵

France took upon itself the ultimately disastrous responsibility and duty of saving the world by refusing to distinguish between the safety and liberty of its own people and those of other countries. The American alternative was not isolation, indifference, or neutrality. It was prudence in supporting the cause of liberty abroad, as Hamilton advised:

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.³⁶

In other words, it would be both imprudent and reckless to jeopardize American liberty based on an unrealistic and even utopian ideology of universal liberty.

In contrast to Revolutionary France, Americans recognized the struggles for liberty in Latin America (beginning in 1811), Greece (1821), and Hungary (1848). Both the Greek and Hungarian revolutions, however, were threatened by the complex European network of alliances that America had determined to avoid and 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.

Independence in Latin America. When revolutions sprang up in Spain’s Latin American colonies beginning in 1811, most advocates of liberty in Europe and the United States celebrated. James Madison described these developments as part

of “the great struggle of the Epoch between liberty and despotism.” He believed that the United States should “sustain the former in this hemisphere at least.”³⁷ The goodwill expressed by most Americans at the manifest desire for republican self-government and the express intent of the United States to support it informed American diplomacy around the world, and the U.S. brought the various elements of its limited statecraft to bear on the question of Latin American freedom.

The independence movements in Spanish imperial territory presented President James Monroe and the people of the United States with an opportunity to support the cause of liberty nearby, but doing so posed diplomatic difficulties and risked conflict with Spain. Practically speaking, Monroe’s Cabinet was forced to address a crucial question: “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?”³⁸

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. minister (or ambassador) to the government of the newly formed United Provinces of the Rio de la Plata, located in Buenos Aires.

“At the present moment,” Clay declared in Congress, “the patriots of the South are fighting for liberty and independence—for precisely what we fought for.” He continued, pointing to a Revolutionary War veteran sitting in Congress: “I ask him, 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.”³⁹ But Congress voted down Clay’s appropriation for a new minister, wary of recognizing Latin American independence too quickly and wishing to let President Monroe take the diplomatic lead.

At the same time, Monroe’s Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, and his diplomats in Europe

were working behind the scenes to prepare the way for recognition of the new republics. By 1818, long before Britain signaled any intention to recognize the independence of the rebelling Spanish colonies, Adams had instructed U.S. Minister to London Richard Rush that the United States planned to recognize Buenos Aires officially, “should no event occur which will justify a further postponement of that intention.”⁴⁰ Since Britain ruled the seas, Adams pressed Britain also to recognize their independence 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.

Britain, however, attempted to stall U.S. recognition of the new nations while also trying 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 Foreign 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 secured America’s immediate goals by strengthening American–British relations and ensuring the protection of U.S. ships on the high seas by the powerful British Royal Navy.

Balancing American leadership on behalf of liberty while maintaining independence and nevertheless acquiring foreign support was refined through years of negotiations and would become known as the Monroe Doctrine.

Adams understood the practical merits of cooperating with Britain, but he believed that formally accepting British imperial authority in North America was an affront to the principle of self-government on which U.S. statecraft rested. According to Adams, “The whole system of modern colonization” was an abuse of government, and “it was time that it should come to an end.”⁴¹

Instead of accepting the British proposal, Adams advocated a unilateral restriction of *all* European colonization (including British) in the Americas. Adams’s diplomatic “red-lines” were in keeping with

the fundamental prerequisite of strategic independence. Even though the U.S. at the time lacked the military force to enforce them, Adams and his fellow diplomats in Europe calculated that Britain's interests would align with America's on this question even without a formal accord.

Balancing American leadership on behalf of liberty while maintaining independence and nevertheless acquiring foreign support was refined through years of negotiations and would become known as the Monroe Doctrine. Adams and Monroe sought to influence the future of the Latin American republics decisively but refused to relinquish any bit of future diplomatic independence, even to please a friendly nation. It was a bold strategy for the young and militarily inferior United States.

Even before the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. was putting teeth into its policy of limiting European imperial influence in the Americas, especially by attempting to push Spain out of Florida. Successive U.S. military attacks into Spanish Florida beginning in 1810 were intended to prevent cross-border attacks emanating from Spain's territory, but they also served to test the strength of Spain's control over that territory.

In the spring of 1820, 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. By a vote of 80 to 75, the House approved funds for a new U.S. minister to the new Latin American republics. After waiting more than two years since Monroe's fact-finding mission, Congress had grown impatient with Monroe's reluctance to recognize the new republics. Members were perhaps not fully aware of the global diplomatic campaign that Adams was leading to ensure that Spain could not retaliate when recognition was granted.

In the debate over the resolution, Henry Clay challenged the President: "Let us become real and true Americans, and place ourselves at the head of the American System."⁴² Far from an isolationist period, as is commonly claimed today, this was the first real opportunity for American leadership abroad, and American political leaders seized it.

Adams wholeheartedly believed that the U.S. should lead the American system, but he rejected the idea, spread by some, 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. Adams fervently argued that America had no obligation 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.⁴³

Americans, in other words, have no moral duty to topple every dictatorship in the world and, as the Progressive Woodrow Wilson would later say, "make the world safe for democracy." One should not, however, be misled by Adams's statement, for it does not signal, as many non-interventionists claim, that Adams is advocating neutrality in what Madison had called the epic struggle "between liberty and despotism." In that struggle, America was on the side of liberty.

In this same Independence Day speech, Adams exhorted foreign peoples to follow the American example and enact the principles of liberty on their own soil. His statement was highly undiplomatic and anything but neutral:

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!"

By affirming the universal struggle between liberty and despotism, Adams's speech had shocked the European diplomats present for his speech. Significantly, Adams singled out Great Britain for conspicuous concern. This was considered unnecessary and highly offensive, not least because Britain was America's largest trading partner at the time and held the overwhelming majority of America's foreign debt.

The British and Russian ambassadors were outraged that Adams was attempting to incite foreign citizens to overthrow their monarchical rulers. The Russian minister in Washington, D.C., Pierre de Poletica, protested that Adams was appealing “to the nations of Europe to rise against their Governments.”⁴⁴ 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.”⁴⁵ It was becoming clear to the powers of Europe that American foreign policy was independent, principled, and determined.

The boldness and persistence of American diplomacy paid off. 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 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.”⁴⁶

In his annual address to Congress on December 7, 1819, President Monroe requested the discretionary authority to occupy Florida. In light of numerous American attacks into Spanish Florida, this was no idle threat. In the face of American fortitude and because of domestic troubles in Spain, the Spanish King finally capitulated and signed the Transcontinental Treaty on October 24, 1820, allowing the annexation of Florida by 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 this move, even though Britain refused to offer recognition itself.

After ensuring that the governments in Buenos Aires and Bogota 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. Formal treaties of amity and commerce followed.

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 Americans that Britain was more interested in its “schemes of counteraction” than in respecting America’s principles of liberty.⁴⁷ As the British minister to the U.S. pressed for an Anglo–American pact to limit further French or Spanish 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.

Instead of accepting the British proposal, or silently enjoying British naval protection of American shores as an isolationist policy would recommend, America chose to proclaim to the world the principles of its foreign policy: freedom, independence, and peace.

Instead of accepting the British proposal, or silently enjoying British naval protection of American shores as an isolationist policy would recommend, America chose to proclaim to the world the principles of its foreign policy: freedom, independence, and peace. John Quincy Adams, the principal architect of early American diplomacy, argued that it would be “more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our principles explicitly” rather than cower in the face of British power.⁴⁸ Although the U.S. had calculated that it could depend on British support for the time being, its long-term goals were different from Britain’s, and America would not tie itself to the British Empire and restrict its future independence. The United States stood for “civil, political, commercial, and religious liberty,”⁴⁹ whereas Great Britain at the time did not. America had to provide for its immediate security in a manner that was consistent with its principles and with a view to ensuring future freedom of action.

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 and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers.⁵⁰

Although substantively different from any other previous U.S. foreign policy, the most remarkable aspect of the Monroe Doctrine was how consistent it was with the character of American diplomacy up to that time.

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."⁵¹ But the Monroe Doctrine as a whole actually stands out as an assertive unilateral act in the history of American foreign policy.⁵² With the Monroe Doctrine, the U.S. attempted to ban colonialism from one-third of the globe's surface, thereby condemning the accepted system of imperialism and attempting to fundamentally alter the international order—hardly an isolationist policy.

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The essence of the Doctrine had been anticipated long before 1823. Alexander Hamilton recognized in 1787 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."⁵³

The Monroe Doctrine was a statement of America's moral opposition to the ideas of colonialism and empire. Human liberty and its political corollary—self-government—were universal principles informing United States 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."⁵⁴ The universal ideals of America's Founding, to which "this whole nation is devoted," 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.⁵⁵

Beyond the restrictions of the Monroe Doctrine, Adams understood that the principles of American foreign policy and the Monroe Doctrine would thrust a new degree of responsibility on the United States. The U.S. would have to take a "conspicuous and leading part" with 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.

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 forget that they are struggling, as we once struggled, for what we now so happily enjoy?"⁵⁶ Congressman John Randolph, however, cautioned the Congress not to embark on "Projects of ambition" that would "surpass those of Bonaparte himself."⁵⁷

What could America do to support the Greeks, then, without declaring war? Webster recognized that prior to 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."⁵⁸ With this understanding, the United States supported Greece diplomatically but not militarily.

In the address presenting the doctrine that bears his name, President Monroe declared America's moral and diplomatic support for Greek independence. In so doing, he signaled American diplomatic intervention instead of neutrality:

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.⁵⁹

In contrast to the strict neutrality during the French Revolutionary Wars, the U.S. government signaled approval of its citizens' material support for Greek independence. 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 former President 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.⁶⁰

Even when the U.S. government does not intervene militarily, the support of the American people for those who seek liberty is a valuable aid to their cause.

A number of Americans also enlisted to fight in the Greek War of Independence. 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 recorded the reaction of Greeks upon receiving diplomatic and unofficial military aid from the United States: "Thousands put up their prayers to God for their benefactors, and the children learned first to lisp the name of America, with a blessing."⁶¹ During and after the revolution, Howe and other private American citizens raised funds and worked to

establish schools and hospitals and to rebuild towns for Greek refugees.

Observing these expressions of public support for Greek independence, 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 militarily, 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.⁶²

By 1827, the Greek War of 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. The intensity of American support for the Hungarian Revolution of 1848–1849 prompted a diplomatic confrontation and sparked a heated exchange between Austrian Ambassador Johann Georg Hülsemann and U.S. Secretary of State Daniel Webster in 1850–1852. American actions during this episode served to illuminate the enduring idea of America's role in advancing liberty and revealed how the American Navy, built to protect U.S. interests, could advance the cause of freedom abroad. Significantly, the U.S. continued to encourage Hungarian freedom even at the risk of undermining American diplomatic and commercial interests in the short term.

In 1848, Hungarian revolutionaries erupted in open conflict against the Austrian Empire in order to "establish political freedom."⁶³ Amidst Hungary's attempts to establish an independent government, President Zachary Taylor and many other U.S. officials publicly supported Hungarian independence, while many private individuals supported the Hungarians financially and some even enlisted in arms.

The Hungarian Revolution was quickly suppressed by Austrian and Russian forces, making

the question of American recognition of Hungary irrelevant, but the United States rescued Hungarian refugees,⁶⁴ including Hungarian Revolutionary leader Lajos Kossuth, and took the opportunity to announce to the world that America stood for liberty everywhere. Upon arriving in the United States and being welcomed by an outpouring of public goodwill, Kossuth proclaimed: “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.”⁶⁵ In his annual message to Congress in 1849, President Taylor said that he “deeply sympathized with the Magyar [Hungarian] patriots” and publicly lamented that “the powerful intervention of Russia in the contest extinguished the hopes of the struggling Magyars.”⁶⁶

American diplomacy, in whatever form, could not be wholly divorced from the state of the U.S. military. The interrelated aspects of American statecraft advanced the goals of American diplomacy and fundamentally differed from the modern foreign policy approach called non-interventionism.

America’s moral support for Magyar independence and material aid to Hungarian political refugees even after the failed revolution was ended greatly strained diplomatic relations and trade with both the Austrian and Russian empires. This was hardly trivial for the security and economic well-being of the United States. When the Austrian government contended that America’s support for the Hungarians had violated American neutrality, Secretary of State Webster presented America’s guiding foreign policy principles and noted that Americans cannot “fail to cherish, always, a lively interest in the fortunes of Nations, struggling for institutions like their own.”⁶⁷ In such cases, Webster noted, the United States could not “remain wholly indifferent spectators.”⁶⁸

When Austria threatened armed retribution 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 foreign nations. Webster went on to explain that America’s institutions are based on universal and fundamental laws of liberty that are “eminently favorable” to the happiness and prosperity of nations.⁶⁹

The American people—not just U.S. diplomats—were committed to advancing liberty abroad. One vital and truly exceptional element of American diplomacy was the activity of private U.S. citizens abroad. The U.S. government was often able either to facilitate or to build upon the private endeavors of American citizens who were engaged in religious, charitable, commercial, or political activities around the world. These unofficial ambassadors of American society played an important role in extending the reach of American ideas and interests to the far corners of the globe.

Even these purely private endeavors, however, required a certain level of military preparedness to deter retaliation by foreign powers. American diplomacy, in whatever form, could not be wholly divorced from the state of the U.S. military. The interrelated aspects of American statecraft advanced the goals of American diplomacy and fundamentally differed from the modern foreign policy approach called non-interventionism.

Encouraging and Sustaining Freedom

The most important goal of diplomacy remained defending the independence of the United States so that America could govern itself according to its principles and pursue its national interests, which prominently included efforts to encourage and extend respect for the basic tenets of economic, political, and religious freedom abroad. The United States sought to do so peacefully in order to maintain a stable climate conducive to international commerce and to expand friendly trade relations with nations around the world but it did not shy away from exercising force.⁷⁰ On numerous occasions in its early history, America’s statecraft endeavored to shield the flickering liberties of

foreign people from the hostile winds of despotism and oppression.

Although it may seem unimpressive by today's standards, the actions of American officials and the policies of the U.S. were very supportive of liberty 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 diplomacy was a powerful example of its commitment to the cause of liberty and makes clear that the Founders' diplomatic approach was resolutely

neither isolationist in character nor non-interventionist in practice.

The Founders understood that the U.S. could not predetermine where liberty would spring forth, but when the demonstrated desire for republican self-government does emerge, the cause of liberty should be supported. The debate over the appropriate means depended on the circumstances and was guided by prudence. American statesmen never lost sight of the fact that there is sometimes a great gap between a people's natural right to liberty and their capacity for self-government. The Founders contended, however, and their foreign policy demonstrated that when this problem could be overcome, the United States should acknowledge, encourage, and sometimes sustain freedom.

Section II: Trade

By the 1780s, European empires were beginning to view the United States as a rival power. Alexander Hamilton noted that “the adventurous spirit, which distinguishes the commercial character of America, has already excited uneasy sensations in several of the maritime powers of Europe.”⁷¹ Foreign powers were challenging America’s fragile standing abroad and endangering its commerce. As a result, the Founders recognized that America’s growing maritime trade, not just its territory, would have to be defended.

Peaceful and Free Commerce the World Over

The Founders hoped that the Constitution and newly established government would not only restore foreign commerce, which had been disrupted by the War for Independence, but also unleash the spirit of enterprise to bring Americans greater prosperity. There was wide agreement in the Founding era on basic economic principles, such as the need for strong private property rights, free markets, and stable money.⁷² Yet America’s first two political parties often disagreed over what type of economic system to promote at home: The mostly southern, and later western, agrarian Republicans favored a rural and agriculturally based economy, while the Federalists along the East Coast favored a more industrial system.

Both visions ultimately depended heavily on foreign trade. Consequently, there was wide recognition among the Founders that promoting commerce was a central goal of American statecraft.

In the vein of David Hume’s and Adam Smith’s understanding of economics, the Founders emphasized the merits of free and open international trade. For his part, Alexander Hamilton was convinced that Americans were particularly suited to commercial success: America’s “inexhaustible mine of national wealth,” he believed, stemmed from “that unequaled spirit of enterprise” and “the genius of the American merchants and navigators.”⁷³ Peaceful and free commerce, not imperialism or protectionism, was to be America’s path to national success. According to George Washington, this approach was “recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.”⁷⁴

While there was broad agreement among the Founders on the value of promoting commerce,

some at first disputed *how* to promote it. Particularly challenging was the question of how to protect America’s rapidly growing trade. The productivity of American craftsmen and farmers at home, as well as the expanding range of merchants and traders abroad, far outpaced the growth of an American navy—which was then nonexistent, thereby making U.S. maritime commerce a defenseless and wealthy target of plunder. Since American commerce could yield fruit only if U.S. citizens were able to travel and trade safely on the high seas, this vulnerability forced America to confront the nature of its national interests and how to best protect them. America’s future prosperity was a possibility, not a foregone conclusion.

Peaceful and free commerce, not imperialism or protectionism, was to be America’s path to national success. According to George Washington, this approach was “recommended by policy, humanity, and interest.”

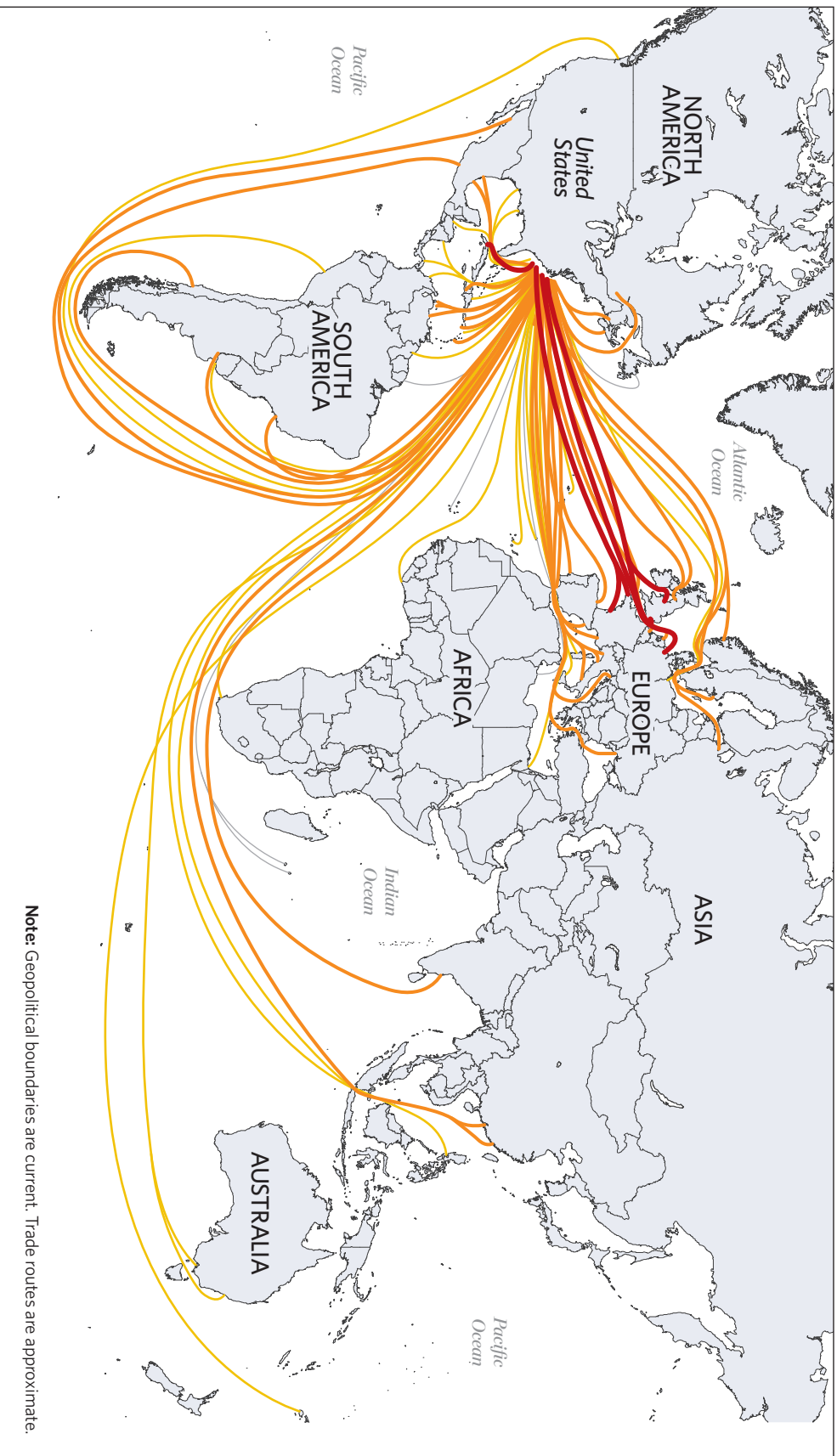
From the beginning, both Washington and Hamilton agreed that the U.S. must be prepared to use military force to protect commerce. Hamilton specifically feared that if the U.S. lacked a navy capable of resisting foreign coercion, America’s commerce “would be stifled and lost, and poverty and disgrace would overspread a country which, with wisdom, might make herself the admiration and envy of the world.”⁷⁵ Likewise, Washington believed that offensive naval power was vital to American statecraft because it helped ensure stable commerce, which in turn “assures us of a further increase of the national respectability and credit.”⁷⁶

In contrast to Washington and Hamilton, Jefferson at first wondered whether, in the interest of avoiding war, “it might be better for us to abandon the ocean altogether.” But despite his personal preference for a self-contained yeoman republic and his aversion to war, Jefferson understood the centrality of trade even to agriculture, commerce being “the only means of disposing of its produce.”⁷⁷ Jefferson came to recognize that an isolationist alternative

**THE MYTH OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM:
COMMERCE, DIPLOMACY, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC**

MAP 1
U.S. Trade Partners, 1783-1860

From the beginning, America was a commercial republic and foreign trade, both of agricultural and industrial goods, was a primary interest of U.S. statecraft. Much of early diplomacy and military strategy was concerned with protecting existing trade routes and opening new markets where possible through formal trade treaties.



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

TABLE 3

First Instance of Commercial Treaty with the U.S., 1778-1860

| | |
|------|---|
| 1778 | France (along with a treaty of military alliance) |
| 1782 | Republic of the United Netherlands |
| 1783 | Sweden |
| 1785 | Prussia |
| 1795 | England (Jay's Treaty) |
| 1798 | Tunis |
| 1816 | Sweden and Norway |
| 1818 | Argentina |
| 1824 | Colombia |
| 1825 | Central American Federation (Guatemala) |
| 1826 | Denmark, Mexico, Hawaiian Islands |
| 1827 | Free Hanseatic Republics |
| 1828 | Brazil |
| 1829 | Austria-Hungary |
| 1830 | Ottoman Empire |
| 1832 | Chile, Russia |
| 1833 | Belgium, Siam (Thailand), Muscat (Oman) |
| 1836 | Venezuela, Morocco, Peru-Bolivia |
| 1837 | Greece (shortly after Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire) |
| 1838 | Sardinia |
| 1839 | Ecuador, Samoa |
| 1840 | Portugal |
| 1842 | Texas |
| 1844 | China, New Granada |
| 1849 | Honduras, Nicaragua |
| 1850 | Salvador, Borneo, Switzerland |
| 1851 | Iran, Costa Rica |
| 1852 | Uruguay |
| 1853 | Argentine Republic |
| 1854 | Japan, Lew Chew (Pacific Islands), Dominican Republic |
| 1859 | Paraguay |

Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

was impractical, for it would isolate American foreign policy “precisely on the footing of China.” Commercial isolationism and its attendant diminished risk of international conflict “is theory only, and a theory which the servants of America are not at liberty to follow.”⁷⁸

Rather than isolate itself, Jefferson recommended, the U.S. should assure prosperity by throwing “open all the doors of commerce and knocking off its shackles.”⁷⁹ Indeed, as President, Jefferson would go to war with the Barbary States to stop their corsairs from attacking and impeding the trade of American merchants. In one important episode, however, Jefferson’s commitment to trade was weighed against his desire to prevent war in an ill-fated policy of economic withdrawal. With the failure of the 1807 Embargo, he soundly rejected his own isolationist experiment.

Thus, through both general principle and particular experience, the Founders came to agree that America’s system of trade should generally favor freer international commerce and must be protected from foreign interference.⁸⁰ This would require both a strong navy capable of defending American trade abroad and diplomatic efforts to extend free trade agreements with foreign countries in an effort to open foreign markets.

American Commerce Abroad

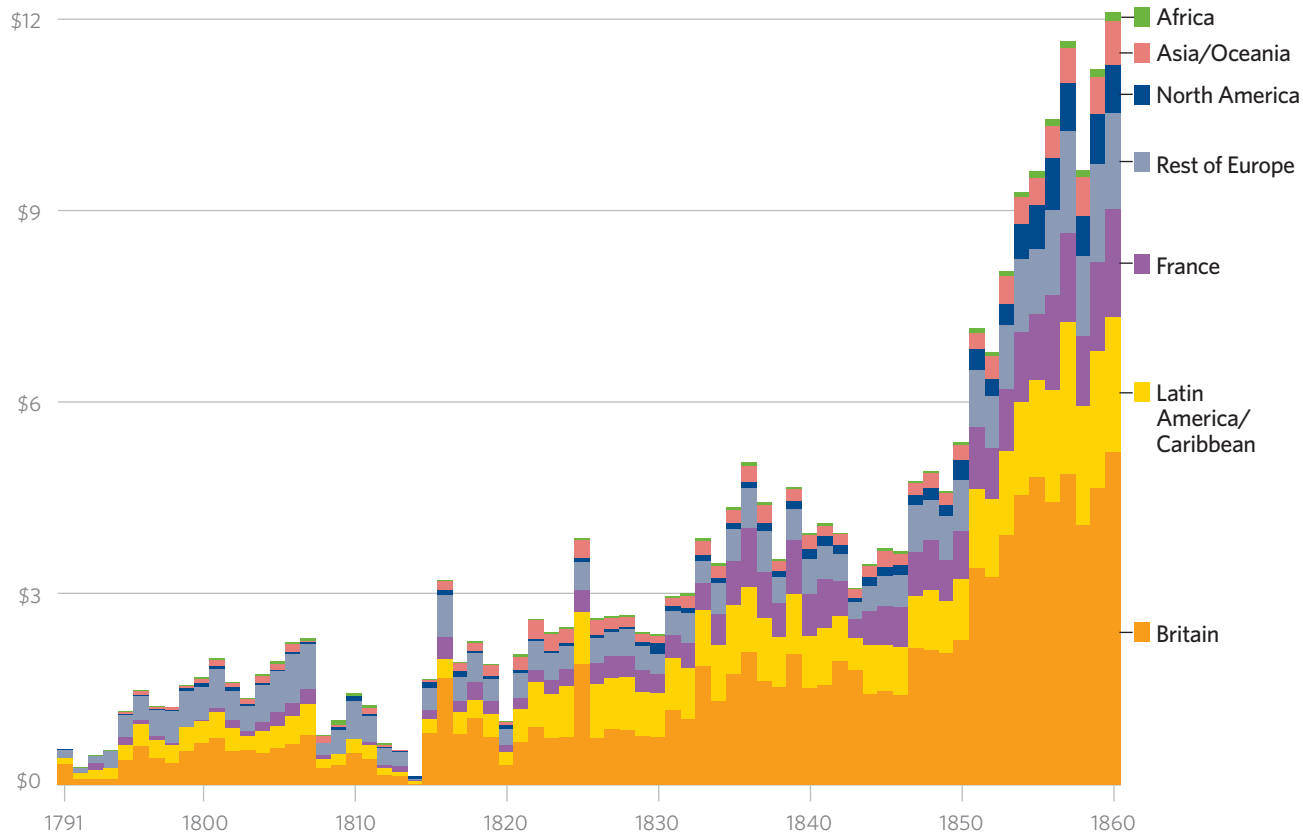
The United States was a commercial republic from the beginning. The extent and growth of America’s foreign trade, the flows of foreign capital, and the movement of people make it clear that the American economy was, as a matter of fact, never isolated despite its geographical distance from Europe. As Alexis de Tocqueville remarked, America’s commerce made neighbors of all of its trading partners, though they were an ocean away. The private trade of U.S. citizens quickly extended the reach of American ideas and interests to the far corners of the globe (see Map 1) and was an integral part of the economy. American diplomatic efforts sought to expand commerce through treaties that reduced preferential trade policies, creating a freer and more competitive international economy.

As soon as the U.S. gained independence, American merchants resumed trade with England, France, and many other Northern European and Caribbean ports. During Washington’s Administration, American merchants absorbed

CHART 4

Total U.S. Trade, 1791-1860

TOTAL IMPORTS AND EXPORTS IN BILLIONS OF 2005 DOLLARS, BY REGION



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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almost all of the Caribbean “carrying trade” (transporting foreign goods on U.S. ships to foreign ports) with England, France, and the Dutch Low Countries. America’s burgeoning merchant fleets quickly extended European trade routes to new ports in the eastern Mediterranean and the Black Sea.

By 1796, American ships had arrived in China (Amoy and Canton), the Philippines (Manila), Indonesia, and numerous island ports in the South Pacific to establish trade routes that would gradually grow over time. By 1800, American ships had reached the Asian subcontinent, and by 1805, the volume of American trade with India was greater than that of any European nation’s trade with India. By 1806, foreign trade accounted for one-fourth of U.S. GDP.

From 1790 through 1860, U.S. merchandise trade—the most transportation-intensive, geographically expansive, and vulnerable element of American commerce—grew steadily, except when

interrupted by diplomatic conflict, trade restrictions, or war. (See Chart 4.) American cotton, tobacco, flour, rice, and furs comprised more than 60 percent of U.S. exports. Among the most popular imports were finished and manufactured goods from Europe, exotic foods and raw materials, wine and spirits, spices, tea, and silk.⁸¹

Trade was also the primary source of revenue for the national government in the form of tariffs, but rather than raising tariffs, U.S. trade policies aimed to foster growth in trade and thereby expand the revenue base. Generally low tariffs and very few trade restrictions early on made maritime commerce a very rewarding business, although regional and partisan politics occasionally gave rise to waves of higher tariffs, which peaked in the 1820s and began to diminish steadily in the 1830s.⁸²

It was not only U.S. trade policy that generally encouraged foreign trade. American diplomacy

played an important role in opening up foreign markets and promoting commercial freedom. Unlike the great powers of Europe, however, which sponsored trading companies, conquered foreign territory, and sought to enforce mercantilism, American diplomats sought only to secure treaties that legally extended commercial freedoms and equal protections. Jefferson summed up the approach in his often misunderstood “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations—entangling alliances with none.”⁸³

While wishing to avoid the permanent political alliances that divided Europe, the United States pushed vigorously for free and open markets everywhere by negotiating treaties, commonly called *Treaties of Amity and Commerce*. These foreign agreements normally included provisions such as removing discriminatory restrictions and exclusive preferences while establishing mutual protection of navigation rights, protection of ships in port, legal protections for citizens, and rights to station consuls, trade agents, and commissaries in foreign port cities. The first such treaty was with France in 1778, and the State Department negotiated many similar treaties with other nations in following years (see Table 1), although not all negotiations became legally binding treaties due to rejection by the U.S. President or Senate or by the foreign party.

Many early foreign policy debates centered on America’s dependence on Britain, which—despite decades of tense diplomatic relations, border disputes with British Canada, and the three-year-long War of 1812—remained America’s largest trading partner throughout early U.S. history. (See Chart 2.) Britain also held the largest amount of U.S. debt, and Americans were heavily dependent on British capital. Most new enterprises in the U.S. relied on British banks and financiers throughout the 19th century. Nevertheless, the United States, though it often chose to act under the protection of the British Royal Navy, did not lie low or follow the example of other countries of similar size that often chose to hide behind powerful allies.

American diplomats tirelessly harassed Great Britain, the world’s most powerful nation at the time, to abandon its mercantilist preferences, which, for example, restricted the U.S. from trading with many colonies of the expanding British Empire. American diplomats also sought to extend trade to less open countries, convincing Russia, for example, to sign

its first free trade and mutual commerce agreement in 1832. Contact by traders usually preceded official diplomatic trade relations, but such treaties served to facilitate freer trade conditions and legally protect U.S. citizens and property abroad.

Technological developments also served to make the world relatively smaller and spurred international commerce even more. The American-designed “Clipper,” a fast topsail schooner, gave merchants an edge for time-sensitive or seasonal goods in the early 1800s. By 1817, American merchant companies such as the New York-based Black Ball Line began to run “packet ships,” which operated on a regular shipping schedule especially suited for passengers and mail. Such developments helped to accelerate and regularize international trade, travel, and communication.

Alexis de Tocqueville arrived to America in 1831 aboard one such packet ship and had occasion to observe the American spirit (“enterprising, adventurous, above all an innovator”). He concluded that it was “this same spirit applied to maritime commerce that makes the American sail more quickly and more cheaply than all the merchants of the world.” Because of their competitive edge as well as their “political laws,” Tocqueville predicted, “one day they will become the premier maritime power of the globe.”⁸⁴

With the arrival of steamships in the 1840s, the regularity of maritime transportation was further improved. Not only were Americans trading in every ocean of the globe, but they were taking advantage of easier transatlantic travel; there were more U.S. tourists abroad throughout the 1850s than foreign visitors in America.⁸⁵ Far from isolated, the American people and economy were inextricably and nearly everywhere linked to foreign markets and, therefore, international politics.

By 1860, the annual value of American foreign trade was \$12 billion in 2005 dollars—more than 20 times that of 1790. (See Chart 4.) Due to expanding trade as well as immigration and domestic industrial and agricultural growth, the United States became the world’s largest economy only 30 years later. Yet, as Hamilton noted in 1787, American prosperity was not inevitable.⁸⁶ Americans were indeed particularly suited to commerce, but the institutions of U.S. foreign policy would have to facilitate and protect foreign trade. During the country’s first 70 years, U.S. diplomacy expanded and secured better trade opportunities, and the U.S. Navy protected them.

The Franco–American War (1798–1800): A Strong Navy as a Prerequisite for Prosperity

America's commerce could yield fruit only if American citizens were able to travel and trade safely abroad. The Law of Nations concept known as the Freedom of the Seas (the right of neutral ships to engage in maritime commerce and navigation unmolested by warring parties) was thus fundamental to the future success of American statecraft.

When U.S. sovereignty was violated by French attacks on American commercial interests and diplomacy failed to resolve the matter, President John Adams called for a naval war against France to restore American respectability and protect trade. The Franco–American war of 1798–1800, also known as the Quasi-War, demonstrates that active threats to America's sovereign independence and vital interest in commerce could justify war even in the absence of a direct military threat to the American homeland.

When Adams was elected President in 1796, the U.S. had only three frigates, and these were out of service—a consequence of congressional funding cuts in President Washington's naval program.⁸⁷ Despite reaching a peace settlement with Algiers (one of the Barbary States) in 1796, Washington had implored Congress to continue the naval program in order to provide security against future threats and not risk "derangement in the whole system."⁸⁸ But Congress cut the naval program by more than half, influenced by partisan politics and unconvinced that the expense of maintaining a peacetime naval program was worth the cost. As Washington had predicted, Congress's refusal to provide a navy for the common defense allowed America to become weak and to be exploited by foreign powers.

In the wake of increasingly tense relations and as the French Revolution continued its radical and violent course, the Revolutionary French Directory issued a decree in early 1797 directing its warships to target American vessels. France argued that America had violated its treaty obligations by signing a separate peace treaty with England in 1794 and by continuing its policy of neutrality in France's war against England.⁸⁹ The Senate had ratified Jay's Treaty, which among other provisions facilitated freer trade between the U.S. and Britain, in order to maintain both U.S. creditworthiness and

stable trade with America's largest trading partner, but French Minister of Foreign Affairs Talleyrand hoped that France could coerce America to abandon its neutrality policy and join the ongoing war in Europe on the side of her former ally.

The Franco–American war of 1798– 1800, also known as the Quasi-War, demonstrates that active threats to America's sovereign independence and vital interest in commerce could justify war even in the absence of a direct military threat to the American homeland.

Just as reports of French attacks on American merchants began arriving in Philadelphia, President Adams learned that France also had refused to receive America's new minister to France, Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. Not only was the United States unprepared to fight a naval war, but it now could not even conduct the basic elements of successful diplomacy. Naval weakness had made America contemptible.

As French attacks continued, maritime insurance rates skyrocketed, and America's foreign trade plummeted. (See Chart 4.) Because Americans could not consent "to be the miserable instruments of foreign influence," President Adams called for "vigorous preparations for war."⁹⁰ Secretary of War James McHenry specified new ships of the line and other naval ships, more cannon, and more coastal forts. Without them, McHenry believed, America would exhibit to the world "a sad spectacle of national degradation and imbecility."⁹¹

Some Republican Congressmen allied with Jefferson were acrimoniously intent on opposing anything the Federalist Adams proposed. Politics did not stop at the water's edge. Others were moved by the words of Republican Congressman Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania, who argued that "commerce can be protected without a navy, whilst a nation preserves its neutrality," seemingly oblivious to the possibility that a navy might be necessary to uphold American neutrality.⁹² Moved by partisanship and naïve miscalculations, Congress refused to build more ships and voted merely to equip and

man Washington's three existing frigates, which had remained docked and inactive.

The British ambassador reported back to London that "every measure of warlike preparation or internal defence has been adopted with an excess of caution, and provided for with a niggardly hand."⁹³ This perception of naval weakness fueled French hopes of intimidating America. Some in Congress recommended relying first on diplomacy and then on Letters of Marque and Reprisal (official licenses granting private merchants the ability to arm themselves and attack enemy ships), but such policies proved wholly inadequate. Congress would learn the hard way that America needed a stronger navy.

With no other alternative, Adams sent another delegation to France. The American diplomats—Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, John Marshall, and Elbridge Gerry—found political conditions erratic and corrupt in Paris. The French government once again refused to negotiate with the Americans, and Talleyrand's anonymous agents (Messieurs X, Y, and Z) demanded loans, bribes, and a presidential apology from America in return for respecting U.S. neutrality. Insulted and without recourse, the Americans sailed home. Despite America's stated commitment to an honorable and just diplomacy, a weak U.S. had no other options.

When President Adams released to Congress the so-called XYZ dispatches, thereby making public France's efforts at intimidation and coercion, the popular response from Georgia to New Hampshire was clear: "Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute."⁹⁴ Most Americans were eager to defend America's honor when faced with a choice of withdraw or fight.

In the new atmosphere of national alarm and indignation, Congress approved a robust naval program that included provisions for harbor and coastal fortifications, troops, and more warships. (See Chart 5.) It also created the Department of the Navy. From 1798–1799, Congress authorized the construction or purchase of 46 warships, including the construction of six 74-gun ships of the line (the best warships of the day). In July 1798, Congress passed "An Act for the establishing and organizing a Marine Corps," thereby making possible amphibious military deployments—a requirement for projecting American force to foreign shores.

The expanded navy needed adequate manpower, but unlike the British navy, which relied on

impressment, America's would be an all-volunteer force.⁹⁵ The volunteer sailors of the new U.S. Navy fought well against French ships and forts in the foreign waters of the French Caribbean, where most of the fighting took place. The French soon found it difficult to protect their colonies and trade against attacks by both American and British ships. By 1800, the government of Napoleon Bonaparte, realizing that France had gained nothing by making an enemy of America, a vigorous nation with growing military strength, promptly sued for peace.⁹⁶

After several misguided policies, Americans were compelled by the realities of international affairs to build up the Navy. Trade, a necessary engine of American prosperity, could not protect itself.

Failed Embargo: Foreign Trade and the Limits of Peaceful Coercion

In contrast to Adams's approach during the (1798–1800) crisis with France, which was resolved by war and had a minimal effect on overall American trade, President Jefferson's response to a similar crisis with Britain (1806–1809) had a disastrous effect on U.S. trade. (See Chart 2.) The 1807 Embargo, which nearly cut off all commerce, produced high inflation, precipitated the nation's first depression, and made war with England all but inevitable. The Embargo and its attendant policies revealed the imprudence of a policy that had America isolate itself from the world rather than defend its national interests.

Most Republicans, most of the time, were just as committed as Federalists to the notion of free and open international trade and recognized its beneficial effects for Americans, but the Federalist emphasis on naval power as the means to protect commerce was by no means universally accepted. Powerful forces were against expanding the Navy, which was viewed as a pet project of the Federalists. Also, many in the Republican Party still held to a belief in the possibility of avoiding war and sustaining peace without the aid of military strength and feared that a strong navy would encourage foreign conquest. These factors combined once again to cut U.S. military spending following peace with France.

Succeeding Adams as President in 1801, Jefferson saw defense spending fall to an all-time low, despite his requests for increasing the Navy. Ironically, this was the same period in which Jefferson launched a

four-year war against the Barbary States of North Africa to end their piratical raids on U.S. shipping.⁹⁷ In dealing with the “more enlightened” European nations, by contrast, Jefferson believed that he could peacefully coerce “the interested nations of Europe to treat us with justice” by threatening to withdraw U.S. commerce.⁹⁸

By the beginning of Jefferson’s second term in 1805, Britain had intensified its practice of seizing neutral ships and impressing American sailors at sea. Britain, as part of its overall strategy in the Napoleonic Wars that had broken out in 1803, was seizing American commerce and violating the rights of American citizens by impressing U.S. sailors to serve in the Royal Navy, even in U.S. waters. “We cannot be respected,” said Jefferson, “if we do not take effectual measures to support, at every risk, our authority in our own harbors.”⁹⁹

In response to Britain’s actions, Jefferson and Secretary of State James Madison chose to curtail American commerce in order to punish Britain and protect American ships. In Jefferson’s words, it was a “candid and liberal experiment” in “peaceful coercion.” Madison thought it was “the most likely means of obtaining our objects without war,”¹⁰⁰ since the British would “feel the want of necessities” and change their policy.¹⁰¹ The entire strategy, however, rested on the erroneous assumption that foreign commerce could be wholly separated from military affairs. Jefferson hoped that economic pressure and trade incentives could take the place of military force abroad and thereby achieve targeted foreign policy results without violence.

The anticipated costs of diminished trade were acceptable to most Republicans at the time because they believed it would be a very short-lived policy. Thus, the Republican-dominated Congress passed a series of acts restricting American trade.¹⁰² The most significant of these, the 1807 Embargo Act, prohibited all American exports to England and France and restricted American ships from leaving U.S. ports; foreign ships were allowed to deliver only certain imports. Cumulatively, the acts cut off all American exports and nearly all imports. (See Chart 4.) As intended, the Embargo primarily affected trade with England. (See Chart 3.)

Though Congress was acting on its constitutional power to “regulate commerce with foreign nations,”¹⁰³ the Embargo Act was antithetical to the republican ideals of free and open trade, a point

not lost on Jefferson or his Cabinet. Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin cautioned fidelity to economic freedom: “governmental prohibitions do always more mischief than had been calculated; and it is not without much hesitation that a statesman should hazard to regulate the concerns of individuals as if he could do it better than themselves.”¹⁰⁴

The Embargo Act was passed despite Federalist and some Republican opposition. The policy impetus stemmed from arguments of economy, ideology, or prudence, but especially an adamant aversion to war. It was also true, however, that America was weak militarily due to Congress’s refusal to replenish and expand the Navy. By 1807, war with Britain was an especially unsatisfactory choice. Jefferson was largely compelled to choose a policy of withdrawal in the form of Embargo, “war, Embargo, or nothing” being the only three options available. The congressional Republicans’ refusal to maintain the Navy and their erroneous assumption that their military choices would not negatively affect commerce defined America’s options in the face of public danger.

Despite the philosophical justifications or anticipated results, the immediate effect was commercial isolation.¹⁰⁵ “The great objects of the embargo are to keep our ships and seamen out of harm’s way,” said Jefferson.¹⁰⁶ Congressman John Randolph of Virginia aptly described the “liberal experiment” as a tortoise retreating into his shell, “withdrawing from every contest, quitting the arena, flying the pit.”¹⁰⁷ He rejected the reasoning of the Embargo as an alternative to war.

Although Jefferson for the moment was steadfast in his preference for the Embargo as a means of averting war, he was certainly no pacifist or committed isolationist. He intended to act aggressively if war proved unavoidable by taking the Floridas from Britain’s new ally Spain, invading British Canada, and perhaps even annexing Cuba.¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Jefferson had already begun to worry, along with Madison, that the Republicans’ aversion to the cost and bloodshed of war was fostering a perception in Europe that would jeopardize the future safety of the country:

The love of peace which we sincerely feel and profess, has begun to produce an opinion in Europe that our government is entirely in Quaker principles, and will turn the left cheek when the right

has been smitten. This opinion must be corrected when just occasion arises, or we shall become the plunder of all nations. The moral duties make no part of the political system of those governments of Europe which are habitually belligerent.¹⁰⁹

Even as his Administration enforced the Embargo Act, Jefferson was preparing for a defensive war. He signaled a shift in his defense policy and attempted to convince the Republican-dominated Congress of the need for greater military spending. He requested funds for coastal fortifications, defensive gunboats, and offensive ships of the line.

While Jefferson believed that “our interests soundly calculated, will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties,” the U.S. would only be “taken on its word, when recourse is had to armaments and wars to bridle others.”

Despite his attempts to “cultivate the friendship of all nations,” conflict had become unavoidable. While Jefferson believed that “our interests soundly calculated, will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties,” the U.S. would only be “taken on its word, when recourse is had to armaments and wars to bridle others.”¹¹⁰ Even while maintaining his ill-fated “liberal experiment,” Jefferson was leading the country in war preparations as federal defense spending doubled during his second term. (See Chart 5.)

By 1809, the Embargo Act, having effectively cut off America’s foreign trade, was widely denounced as a failed policy, and the country was in an uproar. Many thousands of sailors and dockyard workers were without jobs. The people of Massachusetts, a Federalist stronghold, declared they would “not willingly become the victims of fruitless experiment.”¹¹¹ Similarly, people in the Republican stronghold of the Mississippi Territory complained to Congress that they deplored the “severe and destructive effects of the embargo,” which left their agricultural produce “unsold and unsaleable in our Barns.”¹¹²

Congress repealed the Embargo Act in March 1809. “I feel extreme regret that an effort, made on motives which all mankind must approve, has failed in an object so much desired. I spared nothing to

promote it,”¹¹³ Jefferson wrote. U.S. Senator Wilson Cary Nicholas of Virginia summed up the situation vis-à-vis Britain: “We have exhausted every means in our power to preserve peace. We have tried negotiations until it is disgraceful to think of renewing it, and commercial restrictions have operated to our own injury. War or submission alone remain.”¹¹⁴

Three years after the Embargo ended, the United States, with a Republican Congress and a Republican President (James Madison) in the White House, declared war on Great Britain. The “liberal experiment” had failed; a misguided policy consistent with isolationism had harmed the country. Madison directed the war against Britain and another war against Algiers. At the conclusion of these wars in 1815, Madison proclaimed a newly agreed-upon “settled policy” for the United States: “as peace is better than war, so war is better than tribute.”¹¹⁵

Madison’s policy finally signaled a consensus between Republicans and Federalists regarding the necessity of military preparedness in preserving peace. The lesson, learned the hard way, was that commerce was to be protected, not brandished in the place of military power. In the decades that followed, not only did average defense spending remain significantly higher, but the volume of U.S. trade also grew dramatically. (See Charts 4 and 5.)

Protecting Trade and Commerce

By the time he arrived in the United States in 1831, Tocqueville was able to observe America’s general commitment to protecting its commerce:

Reason shows and experience proves that no commercial greatness is lasting if it cannot be combined as needed with military power. This truth is as well understood in the United States as anywhere else. The Americans are already in the position of making their flag respected; soon they will be able to make it feared.¹¹⁶

American tradesmen, merchants, and farmers alike depended on international trade in order to gain from commerce. American prosperity (agriculture, industry, and trade) was recognized, even by Jefferson, to be a matter of the nation’s safety: “as necessary to our independence as to our comfort.”¹¹⁷ Foreign attacks on America’s trade routes forced Adams and then Jefferson to decide the best means by which to protect vital U.S. interests abroad.

**THE MYTH OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM:
COMMERCE, DIPLOMACY, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC**

With the Franco–American war, U.S. commerce and sovereignty were successfully protected through military force. In contrast, the Embargo Act and the insufficient military preparedness that attended its false hopes represent the single biggest foreign policy blunder in the first 70 years of the Republic. This experiment proved early in our history that commerce must be protected, if necessary, by

force. This short-lived and failed isolationist policy proved the rule and established the Founders' consensus foreign policy approach in both principle and practice. It also demonstrated how easily an aversion to the use of military force and an attendant reticence to maintain a strong navy can lead not only to unintended commercial isolationism, but also to unnecessary military conflict.

Section III: Military Affairs

The claim that the Founders were non-interventionists stands at odds with the guiding principles and experience of early U.S. foreign policy. In contrast to an isolationist military strategy that seeks to preserve peace through disinterest, withdrawal, and a purely defensive military force, the Founders arrived at a settled policy that emphasized military preparedness in order to preserve peace and protect commerce and sometimes even included foreign military interventions.

Although the Founders agreed in principle about the necessity of military strength as an indispensable element of U.S. statecraft, there was early partisan opposition to these policies in Congress. By 1815, however, experience had produced a consensus opinion that America must not only defend U.S. territory from foreign attacks, but also work to shift the balance of power in international affairs—however great or small—in favor of freedom, beginning in the Western Hemisphere. This “settled policy,” as Madison called it, necessitated a rejection of potentially isolationist or strictly non-interventionist foreign policies and emphasized the interrelated nature of America’s military, economic, and diplomatic policies.

As the Founders anticipated, the growing strength and respectability of U.S. statecraft proved beneficial both for America’s material interests and for the cause of liberty around the world.

Military Strength: The Prerequisite for Peace and Prosperity

Drawing from classical history and contemporary episodes in international affairs, the Founders understood that the preservation of America’s sovereign independence and national interests would require a policy of peace through strength. Their goal for America’s military was not only to protect America in the actual event of an attack, but also to win foreign respect. This meant that America’s military forces would have to be capable of force projection abroad, not just territorial defense. Before discussing specific examples, however, we must first recover the Founders’ constitutional understanding of the “common defense” and national interests at the core of U.S. statecraft.

The primary purpose of America’s military is to defend the country’s sovereign independence and

the common interests of the American people. The Declaration of Independence—America’s first statement of foreign policy—proclaimed to the world America’s resolute intention 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.” Maintaining and strengthening that independent “station” in the face of foreign coercion was a fundamental purpose of the national government established by the Constitution. According to James Madison, “Security against foreign danger is...an avowed and essential object of the American Union.”¹¹⁸ Madison asserted a “great principle of self-preservation” that rested on “the transcendent law of nature and of nature’s God.”¹¹⁹ Beyond this basic goal of survival, the Founders also employed the military to support more broadly conceived elements of the “common defense” and the national interest.

The Founders approached foreign policy with a realistic assessment of human nature and the nature of international relations. Madison highlighted the obvious problem with those few arguments against a peacetime army and navy in the early days of the Republic: “How could a readiness for war in time of peace be safely prohibited, unless we could prohibit, in like manner, the preparations and establishments of every hostile nation?”¹²⁰ Without an adequate degree of military strength, America could not remain secure or maintain the independence necessary to conduct its own foreign policy.

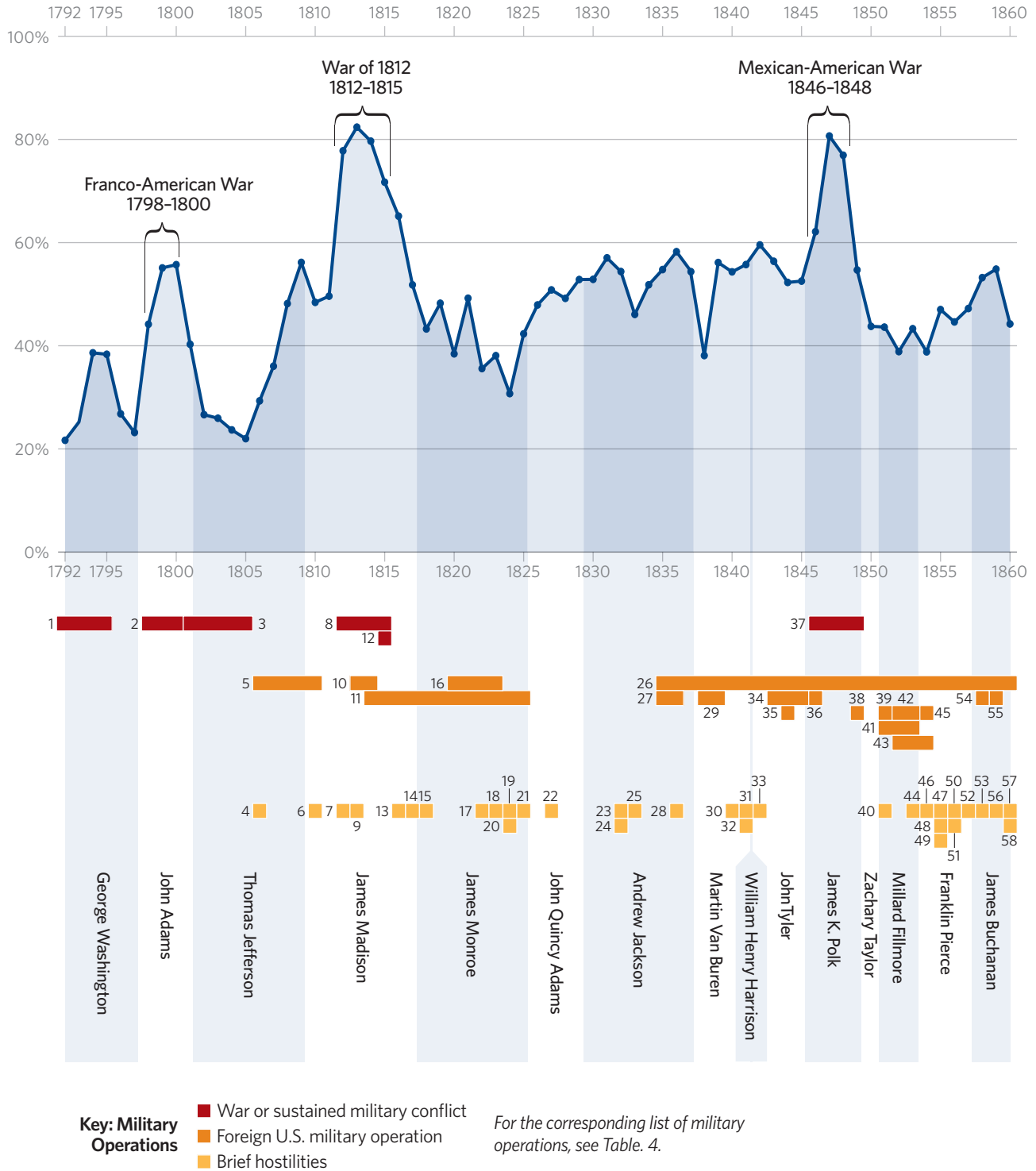
The Founders approached foreign policy with a realistic assessment of human nature and the nature of international relations. Without an adequate degree of military strength, America could not remain secure or maintain the independence necessary to conduct its own foreign policy.

Although the Founders of America’s constitutional order agreed in principle about the broader understanding of the common defense and the necessity of peace through strength, there were dissenting minority views in the form of pacifist

**THE MYTH OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM:
COMMERCE, DIPLOMACY, AND MILITARY AFFAIRS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC**

CHART 5

Defense Spending as a Percentage of Total Federal Budget, 1792-1860



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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and isolationist thought. In 1776, for example, the Society of Friends (Quakers) in Philadelphia banned members from holding government offices related to the war.¹²¹

That same year, Thomas Paine, himself raised a Quaker, challenged religious pacifism in his widely read and extremely influential pamphlet “Common Sense.” He advised America’s religious pacifists to defend their liberty or risk losing it.¹²² Many patriotic Quakers did precisely that. Nathaniel Greene who decided to be a “fighting Quaker” at the beginning of the Revolutionary War, for example, became a brilliant military strategist and one of Washington’s most trusted commanders. It was also the Quaker shipmaster, Joshua Humphreys, who designed and built the U.S. Navy’s first warships beginning in 1794.

Pacifist sentiment of a different but ultimately more influential sort emanated from the radical ideas of the European Enlightenment, which held that it was possible to abolish international conflict and, with intentional effort, establish perpetual peace in the world. These ideas were expounded not only by philosophers. In December 1815, the Reverend Noah Worcester founded the Massachusetts Peace Society to promote international arbitration of conflict and a “confederacy of nations” to prevent wars from occurring. The society counted among its members the Massachusetts governor and lieutenant governor, two judges, and Harvard’s president and faculty members.¹²³

The Founders knew better. Alexander Hamilton described those who held these views as “visionary or designing men, who stand ready to advocate the paradox of perpetual peace.” To base the country’s future security on their unrealistic notions would be to “calculate on the weaker springs of human character.”¹²⁴ Nevertheless, civic groups were formed throughout the United States based on these utopian ideas. And their continued influence prompted James Madison to note gravely: “A universal peace, it is to be feared, is in the catalogue of events, which will never exist but in the imaginations of visionary philosophers, or in the breasts of benevolent enthusiasts.”¹²⁵

With the exception of a few pacifists, Americans were committed to the defense of their liberties through force if necessary. Their recognition that the use of force could accomplish noble ends was demonstrated by personal contributions of blood and treasure in the war of independence and by the

constitutional republic made possible by victory in that struggle. Despite this fact, however, there was disagreement about the appropriate role of a military in a self-governing republic, especially in peacetime.

There were those who, while not pacifists, exhibited a narrow view of American interests. Mostly Anti-Federalists, these individuals were against a standing army and navy and objected to the diplomatic and war-making powers given to the President in the Constitution. The temptation to think the country could be safe without a ready military was alluring. Revolutionary firebrand and later governor of Virginia Patrick Henry represented this point of view eloquently. Henry claimed that the Federalists were attempting to “terrify” Americans into establishing an army and navy. “Happily for us,” he said, “there is no real danger from Europe.” Severely miscalculating the number and nature of threats that would engage America in the coming years, Henry declared: “You may sleep in safety forever from them.” And if there were attacks? “I would recur to the American spirit to defend us.”¹²⁶

The Framers believed that they had provided an adequate military structure that reflected America’s republican principles and was capable of building itself into a respectable military power, not only to ensure the Republic’s material survival, but also to strengthen overall U.S. statecraft by enhancing America’s standing abroad.

The Anti-Federalists lost the debate, and the Constitution was ratified. The common defense of the nation became a shared responsibility of the elected branches of the government. The Constitution gave Congress the power to “declare War, grant Letters of Marque and Reprisal, and make Rules concerning Captures on Land and Water...To raise and support Armies...To provide and maintain a Navy...[and] To make Rules for the Government and Regulation of the land and naval Forces.” The civilian President was to direct the military as “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States, and of

the Militia of the several States, when called into the actual Service of the United States.”

Since the military would be commanded under civil authority, subject to the limits of constitutional government, Hamilton noted that an “army under such circumstances may usefully aid the magistrate to suppress a small faction, or an occasional mob, or insurrection; but it will be unable to enforce encroachments against the united efforts of the great body of the people.”¹²⁷

According to the Preamble, a primary purpose of the Constitution is to “provide for the common defense.” The Framers believed that they had provided an adequate military structure that reflected America’s republican principles and was capable of building itself into a respectable military power, not only to ensure the Republic’s material survival, but also to strengthen overall U.S. statecraft by enhancing America’s standing abroad.

In defending the Constitution, Madison argued that it was impossible to separate the liberty and safety of the American people from respect abroad. A military strong enough to inspire respect for American sovereignty was the prerequisite for peace and, in time, prosperity. “If we be free and happy at home,” Madison firmly stated, “we shall be respectable abroad.”¹²⁸ When the Founders spoke of being “respectable abroad,” they meant, in the parlance of the day, an American policy backed by enough strength to make it respectable. Even the “rights of neutrality will only be respected when they are defended by an adequate power,” Hamilton said. “A nation, despicable by its weakness, forfeits even the privilege of being neutral.”¹²⁹

Thus, a key element of defending America’s independent statecraft was deterrence resulting from military power. As Jefferson noted, “it should ever be held in mind that insult and war are the consequences of a want of respectability in the national character.”¹³⁰ George Washington likewise firmly believed that perceived weakness would invite attacks:

There is a rank due to the United States among nations which will be withheld, if not absolutely lost, by the reputation of weakness. If we desire to avoid insult, we must be able to repel it; if we desire to secure peace, one of the most powerful instruments of our rising prosperity, it must be known that we are at all times ready for war.¹³¹

Military strength consequently backed up America’s diplomatic efforts and helped to ensure the protection of U.S. commerce. As commander in chief, Washington immediately provided leadership to shore up America’s defenses. In his first annual address to Congress in 1790, he cautioned the people’s representatives in an early formulation of the modern policy of “peace through strength”:

Among the many interesting objects which will engage your attention, that of providing for the common defence will merit particular regard. *To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of preserving peace.* A free people ought not only to be armed but disciplined; to which end a uniform and well digested plan is requisite.¹³²

Both Republican and Federalist Founders agreed with this understanding in principle, but implementing it as policy required careful statesmanship in order to counteract Congress’s early tendency to treat the “common defense” as a partisan issue. Although Congress at first funded military buildups and demanded drawdowns as foreign threats waxed and waned, it was the War of 1812 that affected a sea change on the issue of military spending. By 1815, Washington’s prudential “peace through strength” strategy of 1790 had become the generally accepted policy of the United States.

American Military Power Abroad

In stark contrast to what a rigid military policy of non-interventionism would permit, the early U.S. military invaded or intervened in foreign countries with a clear goal of addressing a threat to America’s vital national interests. The U.S. Navy was often deployed to protect American maritime commerce or the lives and property of U.S. citizens in foreign countries, usually in the wake of insurrections or public violence in a foreign land. The military similarly intervened when opportunities arose to advance respect for religious, political, and economic freedom overseas. Despite much international cooperation, including coordinated military operations, the Founders refused to surrender even a modicum of U.S. national sovereignty and participated only in temporary military alliances that were directly related to the defense of America’s national interests.

U.S. military actions abroad between 1789 and 1860 fall into three functional categories: wars,

ongoing military operations, and brief hostilities. (See Maps 2–5.) In the country’s first 70 years, the U.S. fought six wars, only two of which were actually declared by Congress. (See Chart 5.) These wars were fought to protect or extend U.S. territory or American commerce abroad, were limited in scope, and were deemed to be directly related to the country’s vital national interests.

In terms of ongoing military operations, which often occasioned small-scale hostilities, the U.S. Navy operated Anti-Slave Trade Patrols in foreign waters in order to enforce Congress’s interpretation of the Law of Nations, which, according to the Constitution, it has the power to define and enforce.¹³³ In 1807, Congress voted to outlaw the importation of slaves into the United States. In the following decades, the U.S. military sought to enforce U.S. restrictions on the slave trade, increasingly understood to be an immoral feature of the international system, although it did not threaten the country’s immediate security or commercial interests. The U.S. Navy, in cooperation with Britain, which had already abolished the slave trade, conducted operations in the Caribbean to enforce the abolition upon pirates and slave traders (1814–1825); with the Navy’s African Slave Trade Patrol in the waters of West Africa, the Caribbean, and South America (1820–1823); and Commodore Matthew Perry’s patrol off the Ivory Coast (1843–1845).

Despite its foreign policy objective of restricting the slave trade, the United States refused to surrender its sovereignty. The United States would safeguard its political independence and accomplish its goals through autonomous military force, cooperating with foreign countries when useful.

Despite its foreign policy objective of restricting the slave trade, the United States refused to surrender its sovereignty. The United States, for example, declined to join an 1821 British proposal to establish an International Slave Trade Tribunal to eradicate the slave trade because the tribunal would

have made U.S. citizens potentially subject to extra-constitutional judicial proceedings. John Quincy Adams, Secretary of State at the time and a staunch abolitionist, believed the proposal to be “irresponsible to the supreme authorities of the United States”—the U.S. Constitution and the American people.¹³⁴ Instead, the United States would safeguard its political independence and accomplish its goals through autonomous military force, cooperating with foreign countries when useful.

In addition to wars and ongoing military operations to accomplish a specific goal, America’s military engaged in dozens of brief hostilities and foreign landings abroad. (See Chart 5 and Maps 2–5.) These short-term actions were often ordered by the President or directed by a military officer at the moment of decision at sea or in the field. They included retaliatory or preemptive attacks (understood to deter future aggression); temporary troop landings in foreign territory to maintain order (and protect U.S. citizens or property during an insurrection or public violence in a foreign country); and efforts to promote America’s understanding of the Law of Nations (*e.g.*, rescuing foreign political refugees).

Retaliatory or preemptive attacks for territorial defense purposes were intended to neutralize or deter the root of a manifest threat. These actions were most common after 1815 and reflected a decided American preference for fighting on enemy ground rather than within American territory—for example, when the United States sent troops into Spanish Mexican territory in 1806 and Spanish Florida beginning in 1810 to stop cross-border attacks into the United States proper. Due to border disputes and continued cross-border attacks from Mexico (an independent country since 1821), the U.S. launched several brief forays into Mexico’s territory. As U.S.–Mexico diplomacy continued to falter, these attacks increased: in 1836, in defense of the Texans who were U.S. citizens; in 1842 when the Navy briefly occupied Monterrey; and finally a full U.S. invasion and capture of Mexico City as part of the Mexican–American War (1846–1848).

At sea, the U.S. Navy carried out more broadly conceived defensive actions to protect the freedom and safety of America’s foreign commerce. In keeping with the example set by the Tripolitan War (1801–1805), dozens of similar operations were carried out in the following decades by the U.S. Navy against pirates and foreign countries that attacked

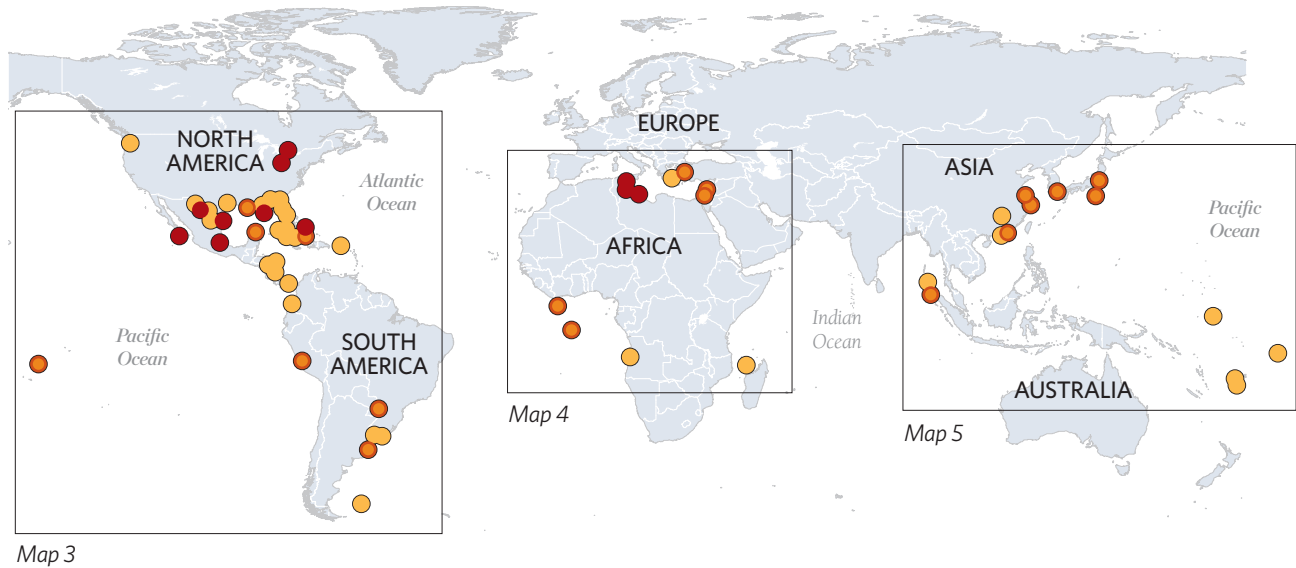
MAP 2

U.S. Military Engagements Abroad, 1789–1860

Key: Military Operations

Each dot represents a U.S. military engagement from 1789 to 1860. See Table 4 for descriptions.

- War or sustained military conflict
- Foreign U.S. military operation
- Brief hostilities



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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American trade. Such operations were often retaliatory and meant to deter future aggression while enhancing the general respectability of the United States abroad. This was true for a series of naval operations, which included sea battles, bombardments, and brief landing attacks, against French and Spanish privateers in the Gulf of Mexico (1806–1810); against pirates in the waters surrounding Cuba (1822–1825); against pirate stations among Greek islands in the Aegean Sea (1827); in the Falkland Islands (1832); in Sumatra (1838–1839) and Fiji (1840); in Madagascar (1851); in Nicaragua (1853); and against Chinese pirates (1855).

In none of these instances was U.S. territorial security in danger. These actions were meant to prevent attacks on American commerce in Europe, Asia, Africa, and the Americas so that U.S. merchants could trade safely and American prosperity would not be subject to the whims of foreign attacks, coercion, and demands for tribute.

In addition to maritime trade, the U.S. Navy sought to protect the rights of American citizens

abroad. For example, the ships of the Mediterranean Squadron (established by President Jefferson in 1801 and indefinitely stationed in the Mediterranean by President Madison in 1815) sailed to the Holy Land in 1858 to ensure justice for Walter Dickson and his family, who were American missionaries in the Ottoman-held city of Jaffa. Amidst tense relations with certain local Muslims, Dickson and his family had been brutally attacked. The incident took on an unmistakably anti-American, anti-Christian dimension when the Ottoman authorities revealed their intent to be lenient on the Dicksons' attackers.¹³⁵ In response, the commanding officer of the U.S. Mediterranean Squadron entered the port of Jaffa, hoping that American force would have a "salutary effect" on the Ottoman officials. As anticipated, local officials then carried out an appropriate punishment on the Dicksons' attackers, signaling that American citizens would not be helpless victims of lawlessness in that city.

Often, the Navy went further and actually landed troops in foreign territory where American

MAP 3

U.S. Military Engagements in the Americas, 1789-1860

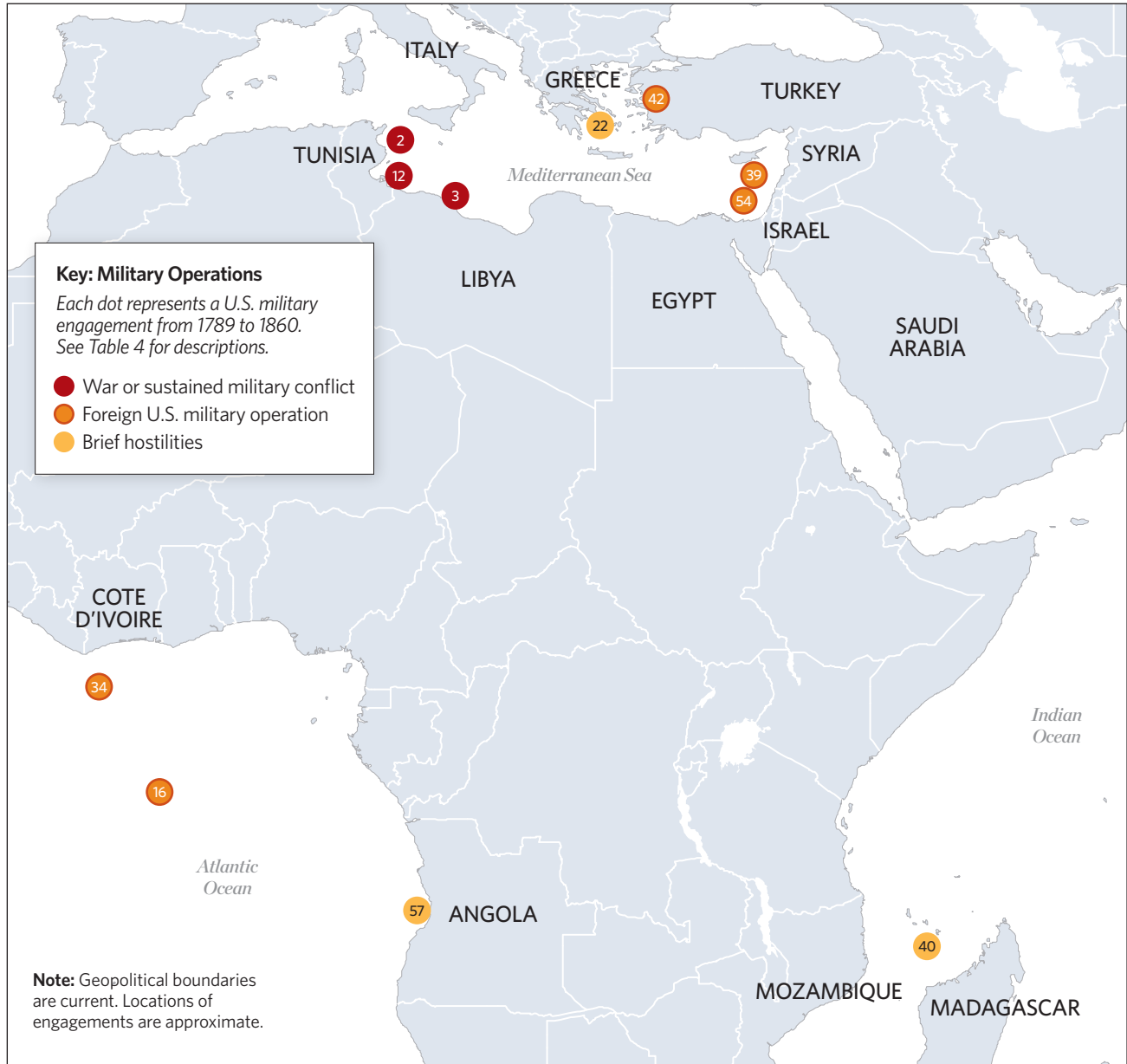


Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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MAP 4

U.S. Military Engagements in Africa and the Mediterranean, 1789–1860



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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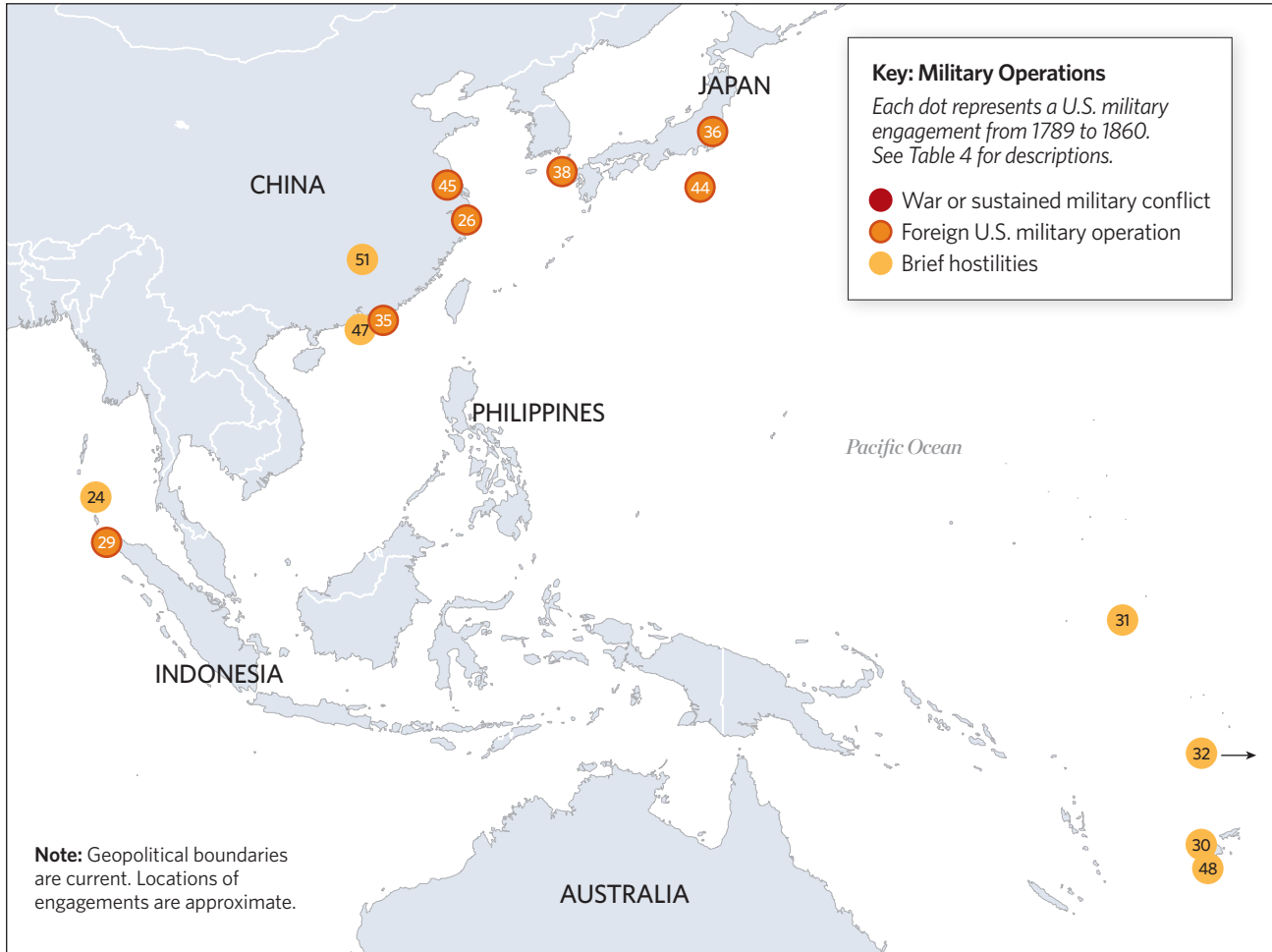
property or U.S. citizens were threatened by intimidation, public violence, or an open revolt. Such was the case in British-held Oregon territory (1818); in Buenos Aires (1833); in several Chinese ports (1835–1860), in Peru (1835–1836); in Ottoman territory in what is modern-day Israel (1851); again in Buenos Aires (1852–1853); in Nicaragua (1853); along China’s Yangtze river (1854); in Uruguay (1855); in Panama

following an 1856 insurrection; again in Uruguay (1858); in Colombia in response to an 1860 insurrection; and in Angola to protect American property in 1860. The majority of these small-scale landings were in Central and South America and the islands of the Caribbean.

America’s respectability (*i.e.*, global reputation) enhanced U.S. statecraft and made U.S. foreign

MAP 5

U.S. Military Engagements in East Asia, 1789–1860



Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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interests more secure. In light of such coordinated military actions in defense of America’s commerce, diplomacy, and citizens, it is little wonder that American commerce and the private activities of Americans abroad increased rapidly. Foreign—including potentially hostile—governments understood that America would not suffer its citizens to be harmed. While the U.S. military was not constitutionally obligated to protect American citizens and property abroad, the Founders and early U.S. statesmen understood that doing so was desirable and benefitted overall U.S. foreign policy.

There was also another role for the military in keeping with America’s objective of advancing the cause of liberty. While it was primarily through

diplomacy that the U.S. sought to extend respect for political, economic, and religious freedoms abroad, there was a keenly felt awareness that America’s military success was not a matter of national interest alone. Writing from Paris during the American Revolution, Benjamin Franklin had noted that due to America’s military struggle for independence and establishment of a free nation, European monarchs might “relax and allow more liberty to their people.” Hence, Franklin observed, “it is 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.”¹³⁶ This sentiment was in keeping with the idea of America as a model that provides an example of liberty to other peoples around the world.

Even though the United States' assertive policy toward Spain in the 1810s served a direct U.S. interest, it also played an important role in strengthening the relative position of the rebelling Latin American countries. American military incursions into Spanish imperial territory and demands that Spain cede territory to the U.S. directly constrained Spain's military and political options in the Western Hemisphere. This angle was certainly not lost on American statesmen as they worked diplomatically to secure Latin American independence. The confluence of Spain's political dissimilarity and material threat to America was a compound cause for U.S. resolve, a point regularly emphasized by John Quincy Adams in his diplomatic communications.

In another important episode, the military played a more direct role in advancing the cause of liberty overseas. Following Hungary's failed 1848 revolution against the Austrian Empire, the U.S. Navy rescued dozens of Hungarian political refugees in the Mediterranean. In 1853, for example, the USS *St. Louis* (part of the U.S. Mediterranean Squadron) threatened to open fire on an Austrian ship in order to rescue Hungarian refugee Martin Koszta, who had announced his intention to become an American citizen. America's defense of its vital national interests abroad occasioned opportunities to take particular actions that advanced liberty.

Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison well understood that U.S. independence and successful statecraft were directly related to America's ability to project military force abroad in order to protect U.S. interests and advance America's strategic objectives.

Despite disagreements over specific foreign policies between Federalists and Republicans early on, there was unity on the philosophical approach to war and peace and the overarching principles that should guide American foreign policy. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison all agreed that the "common defense" encompassed much more than territorial defense in the face of immediate dangers. They well understood that U.S. independence and successful statecraft were directly related to

America's ability to project military force abroad in order to protect U.S. interests (*e.g.*, commerce or American citizens) and advance America's strategic objectives (*e.g.*, restrictions on and the eventual abolition of the slave trade).

The above actions fit into a broader understanding of the national interest: namely, that the spread of free markets and growing respect for the principles of liberty abroad enhance America's security and are in keeping with the aims of American government. Agreed upon in principle and refined in practice, this prudential grand strategy of peace through strength was based on the Founders' realization of the necessity for military preparedness even in peacetime, the preeminence of strategic independence, the appropriateness of limited military intervention, and a rejection of isolationism in all its forms. Two early foreign policy crises in particular shaped America's settled foreign policy tradition.

To the Shores of Tripoli: America's First Intervention

Although the Founders understood the importance of a navy for protecting U.S. commerce, Congress in 1801 was locked in the throes of partisan wrangling. After multiple attempts at failed diplomacy with the Barbary States of Morocco, Tunis, Algiers, and Tripoli (semi-autonomous protectorates of the Ottoman Empire in present-day Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, and Libya) and in the face of continued attacks, it became clear that stronger action was required.¹³⁷ President Jefferson sent a small but effective naval force to Tripoli, the most intransigent of the Barbary States along the North African coast, which had been attacking American ships and demanding tribute for peace. Through the experience of the Tripolitan War of 1801–1805 (also called the First Barbary War), the Founders learned that America's interests and principles were better protected by expanding America's area of military operations than they were by diminishing its commercial activity overseas or acquiescing to foreign demands.

American merchants were trading in every corner of the globe by 1801, but the U.S. Navy remained close to America's shores in a purely territorially defensive posture. At the end of the Franco-American war in 1800, despite President John Adams's appeals, Congress had halted progress on many of the naval vessels under construction.

America's inability to protect its trade in the Mediterranean Sea predictably inspired renewed attacks on American commerce.

The reality of America's new vulnerability struck home when Barbary corsairs began to attack American merchant ships sailing for ports in the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Previously, British tribute and agreements with the Barbary States had protected the American colonists' ships sailing under the British flag. After 1776, American ships flying their new national colors were an easy target for pirate sailors from the Barbary States. It was understood that Tripoli's demands for tribute, long tolerated by European powers and even by America under the Articles of Confederation, not only materially threatened U.S. commerce in the Mediterranean, but also violated American sovereignty and threatened America's standing with other nations. Protecting the United States required a much broader "vindication of the national honor," as Madison put it.¹³⁸

In 1801, America faced hard choices: give up the Mediterranean trade and isolate itself economically; pay tribute, as had been done when America lacked a capable navy; or exert military force. From a short-term fiscal perspective, the benefits of tribute appeared obvious. Secretary of the Treasury Albert Gallatin considered the issue a mere "calculation whether the purchase of peace is not cheaper than the expense of a war."¹³⁹ Because of similar concerns in Congress, Jefferson was uncertain whether he could convince his party in Congress to declare war on Tripoli, which was now demanding a payment of \$225,000 to halt its attacks on American ships.¹⁴⁰

On this occasion Jefferson's Administration refused to pay the tribute and also rejected the idea of withdrawing U.S. trade in order to protect it: *i.e.*, the prospect of isolationism. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and others had all condemned the offensive acts of the Barbary States on moral grounds; adopting a policy of "tribute for peace" would discredit America's commitment to its own principles. Jefferson, himself heavily influenced by an earlier encounter with Barbary diplomats in 1785, decided on military force, hoping that Tripoli's military defeat would set an example and deter the other Barbary States from further violence.

Ignoring Tripoli's deadline for payment, and consistent with his understanding of constitutional authority,¹⁴¹ Jefferson dispatched a naval squadron to

the Mediterranean without consulting Congress—a calculated move that avoided the possibility of congressional opposition. Jefferson explained his decision to Congress later that year: "The style of [Tripoli's] demand admitted but one answer. I sent a small squadron of frigates into the Mediterranean, with assurances to that power of our sincere desire to remain in peace, but with orders to protect our commerce against the threatened attack."¹⁴²

Angered by Jefferson's refusal to pay but confident that America would soon acquiesce to his demands, the Pasha of Tripoli, Yusuf Karamanli, declared war on the United States. Shortly thereafter, Morocco also declared war, and Tunis belligerently increased its demands for tribute. After several indecisive naval battles in Tripoli's waters, Congress authorized funds for the prosecution of the Tripolitan War (but did not formally declare war). The next year, Congress decided to give the President "a free hand" in prosecuting the war instead of specifically authorizing funds for every ship or each military expense, which had been standard practice until that time.¹⁴³

American policy depended on the ability of the U.S. to defeat the Barbary States and neutralize the threat to U.S. commerce. After several failed naval attacks on Tripoli, it was clear to the U.S. Consul in Tunis, William Eaton, that unless America attacked the source of the problem, it would fight a long, losing war. He advised Jefferson and then Secretary of State James Madison that it was possible to intervene in Tripoli's internal politics in order to end the conflict. Eaton proposed to overthrow the Pasha through an American-led land invasion and afterward allow Yusuf Karamanli's brother Hamid to assume power with his assurances of respect for U.S. sovereignty.

In considering Eaton's plan for such an intervention, Madison balanced America's respect for the sovereignty of other nations with its long-term strategic goals:

Although it does not accord with the general sentiments or views of the United States to intermeddle in the domestic contests of other countries, it cannot be unfair, in the prosecution of a just war, or the accomplishment of a reasonable peace, to turn to their advantage, the enmity and pretensions of others against a common foe.¹⁴⁴

**THE MYTH OF AMERICAN ISOLATIONISM:
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TABLE 4

List of U.S. Military Engagements Abroad, 1789–1860

Engagment numbers in this list correspond to numbers shown on Maps 3–5.

| | W—War or sustained military conflict | O—Foreign U.S. military operation | H—Brief hostilities |
|----|--------------------------------------|---|---------------------|
| 1 | W | Northwest Indian War, 1785–1795 | |
| 2 | W | Franco-American War, 1798–1800 | |
| 3 | W | Tripolitan War (First Barbary War), 1801–1805 | |
| 4 | H | Captain Zebulon Pike invades Mexico at the Rio Grande, 1806 | |
| 5 | O | Naval operations against French and Spanish privateers in the Gulf of Mexico, 1806–1810 | |
| 6 | H | Governor of Orleans Territory William Claiborne, occupies Spanish West Florida on orders of James Madison, 1810 | |
| 7 | H | General George Matthews occupies Amelia Island and east Florida, 1812 | |
| 8 | W | War of 1812 against Britain, 1812–1815 | |
| 9 | H | General James Wilkinson seizes Mobile Bay with 600 soldiers, 1813 | |
| 10 | O | Captain David Porter establishes fort and occupies Nuku Hiva island in Pacific, 1813–1814 | |
| 11 | O | Anti-piracy naval operations in the Caribbean, 1814–1825 | |
| 12 | W | Algerine War (Second Barbary War), 1815 | |
| 13 | H | General Edmund Pendleton Gaines attacks Fort Nicholls in Spanish Florida, 1816 | |
| 14 | H | Naval attack on Amelia Island, anti-piracy, 1817 | |
| 15 | H | Navy takes possession of Oregon, 1818 | |
| 16 | O | Navy’s African Slave Trade Patrol, in waters of West Africa, Caribbean, and South America, 1820–1823 | |
| 17 | H | Navy landing on Cuba, anti-piracy, 1822 | |
| 18 | H | Simultaneous Navy landings around Cuba, 1823 | |
| 19 | H | Navy landing in Matanzas (Cuba), 1824 | |
| 20 | H | Commodore David Porter lands with 200 men and attacks Fajardo (Puerto Rico), 1824 | |
| 21 | H | U.S.-British joint capture of pirates at Sagua la Grande (Cuba), 1825 | |
| 22 | H | Navy attacks pirate stations in Greece, 1827. | |
| 23 | H | Navy destroys Port Louis in the Falkland Islands, 1832 | |
| 24 | H | Navy attack in Sumatra, 1832 | |
| 25 | H | Navy landing in Buenos Aires, 1833 | |
| 26 | O | U.S. Navy’s East India Squadron patrol in Chinese and Japanese waters, 1835–1860 | |
| 27 | O | Marine presence in Peru following revolution to protect U.S. interests, 1835–1836 | |
| 28 | H | General Edmund Pendleton Gaines occupies Texas in support of the Texan Independence from Mexico, 1836 | |
| 29 | O | Second Sumatran Expedition, retaliatory, 1838–1839 | |
| 30 | H | Navy landing on Fiji, 1840 | |
| 31 | H | Navy landing on Drummond Island (modern-day Tabiteuea), 1841 | |
| 32 | H | Navy landing on Samoa, 1841 | |
| 33 | H | Commodore Thomas Jones invades, occupies Monterrey, Mexico, 1842 | |
| 34 | O | Additional anti-piracy squadron led by Commodore Matthew C. Perry off the Ivory Coast, 1843–1845 | |
| 35 | O | Navy diplomatic escort, show of force to China, 1844 | |
| 36 | O | Navy diplomatic escort, show of force to Japan, 1846 | |
| 37 | W | Mexican-American War, 1846–1848 | |
| 38 | O | Navy diplomatic escort, show of force to Japan, 1849 | |
| 39 | O | Naval show of force in Ottoman waters in reaction to violence against Americans, 1851 | |
| 40 | H | Naval attack on Johanna Island (Madagascar), 1851 | |
| 41 | O | Marine operation to protect U.S. interests in Buenos Aires, 1852–1853 | |
| 42 | O | Naval rescues of Hungarian refugees in Mediterranean Sea, 1851–1853 | |
| 43 | H | Navy landing in Nicaragua, 1853 | |
| 44 | O | Commodore Matthew C. Perry’s naval expedition to Japan, 1852–1854 | |
| 45 | O | U.S. naval patrols on China’s Yangtze River, 1854 | |
| 46 | H | Navy attack on Greytown, Nicaragua, 1854 | |
| 47 | H | U.S.-British attack on Chinese pirates, 1855 | |
| 48 | H | Navy landing and attack in Fiji, 1855 | |
| 49 | H | Naval landing in Uruguay, 1855 | |
| 50 | H | U.S. occupation of Panama after insurrection, 1856 | |
| 51 | H | Naval attack on Chinese forts near Canton, 1856 | |
| 52 | H | Naval intervention in Nicaragua against U.S. expat, 1857 | |
| 53 | H | Naval landing in Uruguay, 1858 | |
| 54 | O | Second naval show of force in Ottoman waters in reaction to violence against Americans, 1858 | |
| 55 | O | 19-ship squadron to Paraguay, 1859 | |
| 56 | H | So-called First Cortina War in the Rio Grande Valley along the U.S.-Mexican border, 1859 | |
| 57 | H | Naval landing in modern day Angola, 1860 | |
| 58 | H | Naval landing in Colombia in wake of insurrection, 1860 | |

Source: Heritage Foundation research. See Appendix for details.

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In communicating Jefferson's endorsement of the plan to Eaton, Madison clearly stated that in the event of a peace treaty, the interests of Hamid Karamanli were to be favorably negotiated by American diplomats along with U.S. interests. Madison thought it important to honor commitments to America's friends in order to give the U.S. a reputation as a desirable ally.

With presidential—though not congressional—authorization, Eaton landed in Egypt with a detachment of seven marines and began to recruit an army. Outnumbered but supported by American frigates, Eaton conquered the city of Derna, Tripoli's other important port city. When Eaton's force entered Derna, the American flag was hoisted over territory outside North America for the first time.

Upon learning of Derna's capture, Pasha Yusuf Karamanli sued for peace. As Jefferson himself recognized, Eaton's invasion—a bold show of strength and determination—made peace possible on American terms. In June 1805, Tripoli agreed to the immediate release of American captives and an absolute end to tribute. American diplomats sailed to Tunis and negotiated a similar agreement in sight of American guns anchored offshore. The decision of Jefferson and Madison to wage a foreign war, though small by modern standards, and attempt to depose a foreign leader in order to protect U.S. commerce make it abundantly clear that they were not guided by a doctrine of non-interventionism when it came to American interests and security.

With the intervention in Tripoli, America's material interests and political principles aligned, and Jefferson's Administration seized the moment to exercise American leadership.

With the intervention in Tripoli, America's material interests and political principles aligned, and Jefferson's Administration seized the moment to exercise American leadership. The United States was primarily protecting its commerce and its respectable standing abroad, but at the same time, it was providing international leadership and punishing violations against the Law of Nations (*i.e.*,

freedom of the seas). It would not be the first time that America's commitment to protect its national interests also served to advance respect for principles of freedom and justice abroad.

The Tripolitan War is an example of a policy of foreign military intervention for purposes other than preventing an imminent territorial attack on the United States. It is important to note, however, that this approach did not lead to colonization. Years later, North Africa would be invaded and divided up by European powers eager to expand their empires. Jefferson and Madison, by contrast, understood that America's interests and principles were served by safeguarding U.S. independence and peaceful commerce, not by embracing European forms of imperialism in violation of American principles.

The War of 1812

Shortly after the First Barbary War, the United States confronted another form of foreign coercion as Britain intensified its policy of impressment, the practice of compelling Americans to serve in the Royal Navy against their will. The Royal Navy had begun seizing American ships of commerce and impressing U.S. sailors during Jefferson's Administration as part of its wartime policy against France. From the British perspective, impressment was necessary in order to keep the undermanned Royal Navy afloat during the Napoleonic Wars. In England and throughout Britain's colonies, the Royal Navy dispatched "press gangs" to round up likely sailors. At sea, British ships would come alongside American vessels and seize whomever they deemed to be subjects of the crown.

America viewed Britain's continued policy of impressment as a violation of the rights of its citizens and a threat to U.S. sovereignty. Many British citizens who came to the United States after the Revolution became American citizens and were welcomed as such. British sailors, who abandoned their ships in American ports and struck off for the frontier, were no different. According to the British Empire, however, his majesty's subjects had no right to abandon their obligation to king and country. Impressment was England's way of reclaiming former British subjects—especially former British sailors and citizens sailing on American ships—and obliging them to serve as sailors in the Royal Navy.

The British also maintained the right to restrict American trade with the European continent as part

of Britain's efforts to weaken France and accelerate Napoleon's defeat in the ongoing wars against the French Empire. The Royal Navy detained dozens of U.S. ships and seized thousands of dollars' worth of American commerce. One British journalist aptly characterized the British position of dominance: "Our power upon the waves enables us to dictate the terms, upon which ships of all nations shall navigate.... Not a sail should be hoisted, except by stealth, without paying a tribute."¹⁴⁵ As with the payments demanded by the Barbary States, tribute was synonymous with submission and so threatened America's sovereign independence.

With this more powerful and—many hoped—more enlightened nation, Jefferson first attempted diplomacy and then curtailed its trade. As a result of years of pitiful defense spending, failed diplomacy, and a disastrous embargo, however, America had few options. President Madison's Secretary of State, James Monroe, summed up the situation: "We have been so long dealing in the small way of embargoes, non-intercourse, and non-importation, with menaces of war, &c., that the British government has not believed us. We must actually get to war before the intention to make [war] will be credited either here or abroad."¹⁴⁶

After several explosive incidents between British and American ships in the spring of 1812 in which U.S. citizens were killed or captured aboard American ships in U.S. waters, Congress formally declared war. The words "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" emblazoned on banners fluttered above American ships, but the decision to declare war did not rectify America's sorry state of unpreparedness. Years of inadequate defense spending had left the United States ill-prepared to fight a full-fledged war. By 1812, the U.S. Navy was composed of 16 vessels. The Royal Navy consisted of over 600 ships.

During the first two years, Americans fought Britain to a stalemate, but when U.S. troops invaded Canada, they were quickly repulsed, revealing that U.S. land forces were insufficient as well. As Britain began to win the contest against Napoleon in Europe, it shifted its forces to North America. In August 1814, a British army landed on the shores of Maryland, eager to conquer the American capital. The purely defensive American gunboats and undisciplined militia provided by Congress under Jefferson's Administration provided no defense at all, and within 11 days, the British had captured the

nation's capital. Peace through means other than strength was proving to be very expensive indeed.

After burning Congress, the White House, and the Library of Congress, the British withdrew to their ships and attempted to capture Baltimore. Blocking the Royal Navy's path into Baltimore harbor was Fort McHenry, one of the peacetime defensive coastal fortifications authorized by Congress under Washington's Administration 20 years earlier. The Royal Navy attacked, but the defenders of Fort McHenry stood firm for over 24 hours (Francis Scott Key wrote the "Star Spangled Banner" in the midst of the bombardment). This victory and several key American naval victories against the British were directly attributable to earlier congressional appropriations for forts, frigates, and officer training.

The War of 1812 gave the young nation a lasting appreciation for the role of military strength in preserving the liberty of America's citizens and the safety of its commerce.

Though Great Britain and America soon negotiated a peace, the ultimate cost of the war was much more expensive than earlier military preparations would have been. Despite hopes to the contrary, the military disasters of this war made it clear that the U.S. could rely neither on its geography nor on strictly defensive armaments and military units; America would have to maintain an increased standing army and construct an ocean-going navy capable of both offensive and defensive action on a large scale. The issue of impressment was not resolved by the peace treaty, but with the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the British largely ceased the practice as acquiring sailors was no longer a necessity. Nevertheless, Americans had maintained their independence and enhanced their respectability abroad.

On the high seas, earlier investments in the Navy also paid off. The few frigates that existed were able to carry the war to the enemy. U.S. ships had defeated several British ships in sea combat. American ships sailed the Caribbean, the Atlantic sea lanes, and even along the coast of Ireland to impede British trade. These offensive naval actions were the most effective defense America possessed during the war, and

the British *Naval Chronicle* acknowledged America's naval prowess: "It must be allowed the Americans have fought us bravely at sea, they have almost in every instance been successful; and there cannot be a doubt they will speedily become a respectable, and ere long, truly formidable naval power."¹⁴⁷

In an attempt to prevent Congress from dismantling its military as it had done following past wars, President Madison highlighted "important considerations which forbid a sudden and general revocation of the measures that have been produced by the war." Indeed, Madison requested that Congress authorize long-term defense programs, noting that "a certain degree of preparation for war is not only indispensable to avert disasters in the onset, but affords also security for the continuance of the peace."¹⁴⁸ Peace depended on respect, which ultimately depended on the ability of the United States military to fight and win wars, if necessary, on enemy territory.

The War of 1812 gave the young nation a lasting appreciation for the role of military strength in preserving the liberty of America's citizens and the safety of its commerce. This conclusion was in keeping with the Founders' understanding that Americans would prefer to fight their wars on enemy territory rather than their own. Americans recognized this fact and committed themselves to a stronger military.

America's "Settled Policy"

In 1795, around the time that he voted in Congress against Washington's naval frigates, James Madison summed up the feelings of most Americans on the subject of war: "Of all the enemies to public liberty war is, perhaps, the most to be dreaded, because it comprises and develops the germ" of more war, debts, taxes, fraud, and the degeneracy of manners and morals. Because of this, Madison considered it a "truth" that "no nation could preserve its freedom in the midst of continual warfare."¹⁴⁹ This aversion to war had influenced Madison and Jefferson to test the limits of peaceful coercion. As Secretary of State and then as President, however, Madison renewed in practice his principled commitment to military strength in order to ensure peace and prosperity.

In March 1815, soon after the War of 1812 ended, Congress authorized and President Madison directed a naval force to attack Algiers, which had taken advantage of America's preoccupation with Britain and was again attacking U.S. commerce, demanding

renewed tribute. At the same time, Madison proclaimed a policy that reflected the new consensus of American statecraft: "The United States while they wish for war with no nation, will buy peace with none, it being a principle incorporated into the settled policy of America, that as peace is better than war, so war is better than tribute."¹⁵⁰ Madison backed up this statement by directing the U.S. Navy, because of continued Barbary intransigence, to maintain a permanent squadron off the North African coast. Madison's "settled policy" and permanent overseas military force followed Washington's timeless counsel to preserve America's independence so that America could have "command of its own fortunes."¹⁵¹

American statecraft as practiced by the Founders involved the strengthening of coordinated diplomatic, economic, and military efforts around the world both to protect American interests and to advance, when possible, America's dearly held political principles.

Madison was guided by several principles, but non-interventionism was not among them. As with the Tripolitan War during the Jefferson Administration, the Founders believed it sometimes was prudent to intervene in a country's domestic politics in order to defend American interests and principles in the long run. Certainly, there was no doctrine of non-interventionism that precluded this policy when circumstances demanded it. Even though the Founders preferred peaceful relations with other countries, this was not a rule that negated either strategic necessities or the dictates of prudence.

The ability to choose war or peace as prudence counseled required an ample level of military preparedness. As the United States could be threatened by events next door or on the other side of the world, the "common defense" implied not only defensive armaments, but also the use of offensive force and sometimes military interventions abroad.

It is often said today—and it was true in the 18th and 19th centuries as well—that nations go to war with the army they have. Presidents then, as now, depended largely on the military preparedness

of their predecessors. Adams largely fought the Franco-American war with ships procured under Washington's Administration. Jefferson went to war against Tripoli with the Navy that Washington and Adams had built. Just so, the War of 1812 proves the wisdom of Washington's and Adams's military procurements, but it also reveals the insufficient spending by Congress during Jefferson's first Administration and an imprudent reliance on purely defensive gunboats and militia forces.

American statecraft as practiced by the Founders involved the strengthening of coordinated

diplomatic, economic, and military efforts around the world, the goal of which was both to protect American interests and to advance, when possible, America's dearly held political principles. In contrast to European imperialism, John Quincy Adams called this strategic view the "American system." America's military strength was a key tool in bolstering the effectiveness of America's diplomacy, protecting its commerce, and protecting its higher interest in promoting liberty in the world.

Conclusion: Changing Policies, Permanent Principles

It would be both historically inaccurate and a potentially dangerous mistake to reduce the Founders' principled foreign policy to a simplistic doctrine of non-interventionism, let alone a grand strategy of isolationism. Unambiguously, the Founders and America's early statesmen made clear to the world that the United States was an independent nation committed to the cause of freedom. When attacked, the U.S. vigorously defended its territory *and* its interests, wherever they existed. Moreover, the U.S. did not shy away from the opportunity when possible to advance liberty abroad—even at times by using its military power as leverage, always careful not to jeopardize America's security.

The common defense, U.S. commercial interests, and the American understanding of the Law of Nations were intertwined in the wars against France, England, and the Barbary States of Tripoli and Algiers. Likewise, as a result of championing republican ideas in Latin America, the Monroe Doctrine of 1823 also protected America's strategic interests while presenting to the world the principles of constitutional self-government.

In the 1800s, as the British Royal Navy became less prevalent in the Caribbean and less interested in providing security for the region, America found itself responsible for regional stability. American ships and troops hunted down pirates, policed foreign port towns, and restored order after riots or insurrections numerous times throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. America's increased capabilities and responsibility in the region prompted President James Monroe and Secretary of State John Quincy Adams to proclaim to the world, as a formal doctrine, the emerging practice of early U.S. foreign policy: that America's commercial interests and political principles were vital national interests and that the United States would not allow hostile powers or political systems to replace American influence where the U.S. could maintain or encourage a balance of power in favor of freedom.

In keeping with the Founders' examples, American statesmen throughout the 19th century also spoke up for those around the world who were attempting to gain their political liberty and establish governments based on the consent of the governed. The American people are not *required* to risk

their blood and treasure in defense of other peoples' liberty. Nevertheless, because America is defined by the principles of liberty, independence, and self-government, its interests must be defined and shaped by those ideas.

America's constitutional principles do not demand isolationism, and the Founders did not practice a non-interventionist foreign policy. Regrettably, however, such misconceptions of America's early statecraft have become popular at a time when many Americans are rethinking and even beginning to lose confidence in America's role in the world. The idea of American withdrawal and the likelihood of prosperity and peace without military preparedness have gained credence in the midst of understandable war-weariness and monumental federal budget constraints.

In a similar moment at the end of the Cold War, 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.¹⁵²

Americans today must not embrace an isolationist grand strategy or seek to apply the unworkable doctrine of non-interventionism. Such an imprudent commitment to remaining disengaged threatens America's security and weakens America's ability to exercise its power in defense of U.S. commerce and in support of a remarkably free and stable international system—an "American system" that has been hard won with the sacrifices of many generations of Americans. To reject the Founders' "settled policy" of peace through strength in a world that remains uncertain and dangerous would not only be imprudent, but would clearly stand at odds with both the principles and practice of early U.S. statecraft.

The idea of America as pronounced by the Founders gives the United States a perpetual purpose. The story of early U.S. foreign policy reminds us that the American love of liberty has inspired a commitment to protect it at all costs at home and a desire to see it flourish throughout the world.

Appendix: Sources for Charts, Tables, and Maps

Charts 1–2 and Tables 1–3

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Charts 3–4 and Map 1

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50. 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.
51. Ibid., p. 341.

52. Although the United States would tacitly depend on the British Royal Navy to keep other European powers out of the Americas, the Monroe Doctrine enabled the future independence of American diplomacy.
53. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 51.
54. Monroe, Seventh Annual Message to Congress, in *Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. VI, p. 339.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 340.
56. 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.
57. Representative John Randolph of Roanoke, Virginia, Speech to Congress, January 24, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 365.
58. Daniel Webster, Speech Delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, January 19, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 346.
59. Monroe, Seventh Annual Message to Congress, in *Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. VI, p. 339.
60. 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.
61. Samuel Gridley Howe, *An Historical Sketch of the Greek Revolution* (New York: White, Gallaher, & White, 1828), pp. 446-447.
62. Daniel Webster, Speech Delivered to the U.S. House of Representatives, January 19, 1824, in *Niles' Weekly Register*, Vol. 25, p. 346.
63. Lajos Kossuth, *Select Speeches of Kossuth*, ed. Francis W. Newman (London: Trübner & Co., 1853), p. 6.
64. 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.
65. Lajos Kossuth. *Select Speeches of Kossuth*, p. 24.
66. 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.
67. Webster explained that even a policy of neutrality could not restrict America from making moral or political choices 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 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. Hülsenmann, Chargé d'Affaires of the Emperor of Austria, December 21, 1850, in *The Works of Daniel Webster*, Vol. 6, ed. Edward Everett (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1853), pp. 495-498.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 497.
69. *Ibid.*, pp. 491-504.
70. Discussed below.
71. Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 49.
72. For a more detailed discussion of economic principles in the Founding era, see Thomas West, "The Economic Principles of America's Founders: Property Rights, Free Markets, and Sound Money," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series Report* No. 32, August 30, 2010, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/08/the-economic-principles-of-america-s-founders-property-rights-free-markets-and-sound-money>.
73. Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 52.
74. Washington, "Farewell Address," *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.
75. Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 52.
76. George Washington, Second Annual Address to Congress, December 8, 1790, in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 471.
77. Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia, 1781, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. XIII, p. 413.
78. Thomas Jefferson, letter to G. K. van Hogendorp, October 13 1785, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. I (1853), p. 465.
79. *Ibid.*
80. Occasional waves of protectionist trade policies in the 1800s deviated from the Founders' economic understanding and generally failed in their goal of protecting nascent U.S. industries. For further discussion, see various works by economic historian Douglas A. Irwin, including "Historical Aspects of U.S. Trade Policy," National Bureau of Economic Research *Reporter*, Summer 2006.
81. African slaves were also brought to America until 1808, when the importation of slaves was abolished by Congress and after which time the U.S. Navy operated patrols to enforce restrictions on, and eventual abolition of, the terrible slave trade.
82. See Douglas A. Irwin, "Antebellum Tariff Politics: Regional Coalitions and Shifting Economic Interests," *Journal of Law and Economics*, Vol. 51 (November 2008), pp. 715-742.
83. Thomas Jefferson, First Inaugural Address, March 4, 1801, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VIII, Part 2, p. 4.
84. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, ed. Eduardo Nolla, trans. James T. Schleifer (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010), Vol. 2.

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85. Douglas North, "The United States Balance of Payments, 1790-1860," in *Trends in the American Economy in the Nineteenth Century*, National Bureau of Economic Research *Studies in Income and Wealth* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1960), p. 583.
86. Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*.
87. In the wake of Barbary attacks on American merchants in the Mediterranean, Congress had heeded Washington's words. An Act to Provide a Naval Armament, passed on March 27, 1794, by a vote of 50 to 39, authorized four 44-gun frigates and two 36-gun frigates at a cost of \$688,888. This was small compared to the naval powers of Europe, but it was the first step in building the U.S. Navy.
88. George Washington, Special Address to Congress, March 15, 1796, in James D. Richardson, *George Washington: A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents* (Kessinger Publishing: 2004), p. 239.
89. For a comprehensive account of the Jay Treaty, see Samuel Flagg Bemis, *Jay's Treaty: A Study in Commerce and Diplomacy* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1962).
90. John Adams, Special Message to Congress, May 16, 1797, and Second Annual Message to Congress, December 8, 1798, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Works of John Adams Second President of the United States*, Vol. IX (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), p. 114.
91. James McHenry, Report to House of Representatives, April 9, 1798, in *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry* (Cleveland, Oh.: Burrows Brothers, 1907), pp. 304-305.
92. Albert Gallatin, quoted in Raymond Walter, Jr., *Albert Gallatin: Jeffersonian Financier and Diplomat* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1957), p. 109.
93. Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966).
94. U.S. Representative from South Carolina Robert Goodloe Harper, remarks on June 18, 1798, quoted in *The American Journal of Numismatics*, Vol. XL, No. 1 (August 1905), p. 26. Harper was Chairman of the Committee on Ways and Means and a Federalist leader in the House.
95. Moreover, Secretary Stoddert prohibited even soft forms of coercion: "It being important that those who enlist should feel an Inclination for the service, no indirect means are to be used in inveigling them, and therefore no Individual must be enlisted while in a state of intoxication, nor must he be sworn until 24 hours after signing the enlistment." See Benjamin Stoddert, "Recruiting Instructions from the Secretary of the Navy," September 11, 1798, in *Naval Documents Relating to the Quasi-War Between the United States and France*, Vol. I, Part 2 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1935), pp. 388-389.
96. Napoleon's government signed the Treaty of Mortefontaine on September 30, 1800, thereby ending the Franco-American war and restoring diplomatic relations.
97. The First Barbary War effectively ended the corsair attacks emanating from Tripoli and was fought to protect U.S. trade in the Mediterranean after years of failed diplomacy.
98. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Thomas Pinckney, May 29, 1797, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. IV (1884), p. 177.
99. Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, August 15, 1804, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. IV, p. 558.
100. James Madison, "Political Observations," April 20, 1795, in *The Letters and Other Writings of James Madison*, Vol. IV (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1865), p. 492.
101. James Madison, quoted in Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term, 1805-1809* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Company, 1974), pp. 488-490.
102. The 1806 Non-importation Act, which prohibited certain types of British imports; the 1807 Embargo Act, which prohibited all American exports, restricted American ships from leaving U.S. ports, and allowed foreign ships to deliver only certain imports; the 1809 Non-Intercourse Act; and Macon's Bill No. 2 of 1810.
103. U.S. Constitution, Art. I, sec. 8.
104. Albert Gallatin, letter to Thomas Jefferson, December 18, 1807, in *The Writings of Albert Gallatin, Vol. I*, ed. Henry Adams (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1879), p. 368.
105. In contrast to a Navigation Act, which was favored by Hamilton and other Federalists in previous decades and would merely have restricted British ships from entering U.S. ports, the embargo restricted all American ships from departing while allowing foreign ships into the United States.
106. Thomas Jefferson, letter to William Cabell, March 13, 1808, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. V (1884), p. 259.
107. John Randolph, Speech in Congress, April 4, 1808, quoted in Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term, 1805-1809*, p. 517.
108. Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, August 16, 1807, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. V (1853), p. 164.
109. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Judge Thomas Cooper, February 18, 1806, quoted in Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America During the Second Administration of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. III (Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 111.
110. Thomas Jefferson, Second Inaugural, March 4, 1805, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. VIII, p. 40.
111. They were, however, ready to "rally round the national constitution" in the event of war with England. Massachusetts Senate Record, February 3, 1808, cited in *The American Register, or General Repository of History, Politics and Science*, Vol. V, Part I (Philadelphia: G.&A. Conrad & Co., 1809), p. 195.

112. Mississippi Territory Representatives, September 19, 1808, in *Encyclopedia of Mississippi History, Vol. II*, ed. Dunbar Rowland (Madison, Wisc.: Selwyn A. Brant, 1907), p. 48.
113. Thomas Jefferson, letter to St. George Tucker, December 25, 1808, quoted in Malone, *Jefferson the President: Second Term, 1805-1809*, p. 657.
114. Wilson Cary Nicholas, letter to Thomas Jefferson, February 4, 1810, in *Papers of Jefferson: Retirement Series, Vol. 2* (Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 195.
115. James Madison, quoted in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. I (Richmond: T. W. White, 1834), p. 722.
116. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America: Historical-Critical Edition of De la démocratie en Amérique*, Vol. 2, Part 2, chapter 10, p. 647.
117. Thomas Jefferson, letter to Benjamin Austin, January 9, 1816, in Edward Stanwood, *American Tariff Controversies in the Nineteenth Century*, Vol. I (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1903), p. 133.
118. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 41, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 191.
119. James Madison, *Federalist* No. 43, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 210
120. Madison, *Federalist* No. 41, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 191.
121. Quoted in Peter Brock, *Pacifism in the United States* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 231.
122. Thomas Paine, "Common Sense."
123. Brock, *Pacifism in the United States*, pp. 470-472.
124. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 34, January 4, 1788, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 152.
125. James Madison, *The Writings of James Madison, comprising his Public Papers and his Private Correspondence, including his numerous letters and documents now for the first time printed*, ed. Gaillard Hunt (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1900), Vol. 6, "Universal Peace."
126. Patrick Henry, Speech at the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 5, 1788, in Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Complete Anti-Federalist, Vol. I* (University of Chicago Press, 2008), p. 215.
127. Alexander Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 8, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 37.
128. James Madison, speech at the Virginia Ratifying Convention, June 7, 1788, in Jonathan Elliot, ed., *The Debates in the Several Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution, Second edition, Vol. III* (Washington, DC: 1836), p. 149 (emphasis added).
129. Hamilton, *Federalist* No. 11, in *The Federalist Papers*, p. 51.
130. Thomas Jefferson, letter to James Madison, February 8, 1786 in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Vol. I, p. 531.
131. George Washington, Fifth Annual Address to Congress, December 3, 1793, in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 488.
132. George Washington, First Annual Address to Congress, January 8, 1790 (emphasis added) in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 468.
133. U.S. Constitution, Art. I, sec. 8, cl. 10.
134. John Quincy Adams, in *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Vol. 7, p. 172.
135. Report of John Warren Gorham, American Consul in Jerusalem, January 17 and February 8, 1858, National Archives of the U.S.
136. Benjamin Franklin, letter to Samuel Cooper, May 1, 1777, in *Memoirs of Benjamin Franklin*, Vol. I (Philadelphia: McCarty & Davis, 1840), p. 308.
137. The United States, under the Articles of Confederation, had set a poor precedent by paying tribute to the Barbary States. The Continental Congress had no other option since the U.S. Navy did not yet exist.
138. James Madison, letter to Richard O'Brien, May 20, 1801, quoted in Gardner Weld Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (Cambridge: Riverside Press, 1905), p. 87.
139. Albert Gallatin, letter to Thomas Jefferson, August 16, 1802, in *The Writings of Albert Gallatin*, Vol. I, p. 88.
140. Approximately \$3.4 million in 2005 dollars. See Richard Sutch, Table Ca13-Index1996 =100, in *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, ed. Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006.) Year 1801 Price deflator is extrapolated from Sutch's 1800 and 1810 data and adjusted from his estimate in 1996 dollars to 2005 dollars using the BEA implicit Price Deflator. One 1996 dollar is \$1.203 (rounded) in 2005 dollars.
141. See John Yoo and James C. Ho, "The Sword and the Purse (Part 2): The President as Commander in Chief," Heritage Foundation *First Principles Series, Constitutional Guidance for Lawmakers* No. 13, June 20, 2011, <http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2011/06/the-sword-and-the-purse-part-2-the-president-as-commander-in-chief>.
142. Thomas Jefferson, First Annual Address to Congress, December 8, 1801, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, Vol. VIII*, p. 7.
143. On February 6, 1802, Congress passed "An Act for the protection of the Commerce" authorizing the President to exercise his own judgment to "equip, officer, man, and employ" whatever vessels he deemed necessary.
144. James Madison, letter to William Eaton, August 22, 1802, in Walter Lowrie and Walter Franklin, eds., *American State Papers: Documents Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States, March 4, 1789-March 3, 1823* (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1834), p. 331.
145. William Cobbett, September 19, 1807, reprinted in *Cobbett's Weekly Political Register* (London: Cox and Baylis, 1807), p. 420.
146. James Monroe, letter to John Taylor, June 13, 1812, in *The Writings of James Monroe*, Vol. V, p. 206.

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147. *The Naval Chronicle*, February 6, 1815, in *The Naval Chronicle*, Vol. 33 (Cambridge Press, 2010), p. 222.
148. James Madison, Address to Congress, February 18, 1815, in *American State Papers: Documents of the Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States*, Vol. III (Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1832), p. 731.
149. Madison, "Political Observations," April 20, 1795.
150. James Madison, quoted in *The Southern Literary Messenger*, Vol. I, p. 722.
151. Washington, "Farewell Address," in *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 524.
152. 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.



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