The Heritage Foundation

FIRST PRINCIPLES

FOUNDATIONAL CONCEPTS TO GUIDE POLITICS AND POLICY

NO. 57 | SEPTEMBER 15, 2015

Alexander Hamilton and American Foreign Policy

Carson Holloway, PhD

Abstract

As one of the most penetrating and wide-ranging of America's political thinkers, Alexander Hamilton thought seriously about foreign policy, examining it in light of both the fundamental principles of the American regime and the unchanging truths of human nature. The government's first duty, he argued, is to safeguard the national interest, which includes the nation's independence, power, and prosperity—but also its reputation or honor. Nonetheless, Hamilton recognized that the national interest had to be limited and guided by a respect for the principles of justice. Moreover, under the right circumstances, he believed that a nation could act benevolently by seeking the good of another nation and that it might even seek to advance the cause of freedom by assisting others in their effort to throw off the yoke of despotism.

Contemporary American debates over the character of our foreign policy can be frustrating because of the partiality or one-sidedness of the clashing views. At the extremes, we find realists, who elevate national interest and downplay the role of morality in foreign policy, arguing with idealists, who talk as if a truly moral foreign policy must be altruistic and not rooted in the country's concern for its own well-being. In the public arena, we find the proponents of American intervention in the politics of other nations criticized by noninterventionists or isolationists.

We sense that each of these perspectives has something to be said for it, that each latches on to a part of the truth but is nevertheless incomplete in itself. Surely, we think, a sensible foreign policy will be guided both by attention to the national interest and by a decent respect for the universal truths proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence and that, rather than make an absolute principle of intervention or nonintervention, the nation will instead conduct its foreign policy by prudently weighing all of the relevant considerations.

By turning to the thought of Alexander Hamilton, we can transcend these partial perspectives and find a richer account of the principles of foreign policy. Hamilton gives due consideration both to America's national interest and to its moral obligations. Yet he also affirms that it can be just and praiseworthy to intervene in another country's affairs while at the same time establishing wise limits on such intervention.

That Hamilton has something to teach us about foreign policy might come as a surprise to many people. While Hamilton is widely acknowledged to

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at **http://report.heritage.org/fp57**

The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002
(202) 546-4400 | heritage.org

Nothing written here is to be construed as necessarily reflecting the views of The Heritage Foundation or as an attempt to aid or hinder the passage of any bill before Congress.

be one of the most penetrating and wide-ranging political thinkers among the American Founders, his reputation rests largely on his writings about the Constitution and domestic policy, especially his contributions to the *Federalist* and the magisterial state papers—such as his *Report on the Public Credit* and *Report on Manufactures*—that he penned as America's first Secretary of the Treasury.

Nevertheless, as the most trusted and influential member of President George Washington's Cabinet, Hamilton was also deeply involved in the Administration's internal foreign policy deliberations. Moreover, Hamilton made foreign policy a prominent theme of one of his most famous efforts: the *Pacificus* essays of 1793. Hamilton thought seriously about foreign policy, examining it—as he had done in his writings on the Constitution and domestic policy—in light of the fundamental principles of the American regime and the unchanging truths of human nature.

Like most of the American Founders, Hamilton had a keen sense of the role that self-interest plays in motivating human action, and hence of its importance in political life. Accordingly, national self-interest played a key role in his thinking about foreign policy. For him, the first duty of a government is to safeguard the national interest, understood not only as the nation's independence, power, and prosperity, but also as its reputation or honor.

For Hamilton, the first duty of a government is to safeguard the national interest, understood not only as the nation's independence, power, and prosperity, but also as its reputation or honor.

While national interest was the beginning of Hamilton's account of foreign policy, however, it was not the whole of it. He also recognized that a nation's pursuit of its interests had to be limited and guided by a respect for decent principles of justice, and he saw that national interest—even a national interest limited by respect for the claims of justice—was not the exclusive aim of foreign policy. In the right circumstances, a nation could act benevolently, seeking the good of another nation, and might even seek to advance the cause of freedom by assisting another country in its effort to throw off the yoke of despotism.

By giving all of these considerations their due, Hamilton provided an account of foreign policy that is still relevant to us today.

National Interest and National Pride

For Alexander Hamilton, the primary aim of a government's management of its foreign affairs is to safeguard the national interest, understood not only as the country's security and prosperity, but also as its self-respect or pride. Hamilton emphasized this point to the public in the context of the young republic's first serious foreign policy challenge: the outbreak of war between Great Britain and revolutionary France in the spring of 1793. In response to that development, President Washington, with the support of his entire Cabinet, had issued his famous Neutrality Proclamation, which was intended to keep America from being drawn into the European conflict. When some Americans criticized the proclamation, Hamilton took to the public prints in its defense, authoring his celebrated *Pacificus* essays, published in the *Gazette of the United States*.

Hamilton's *Pacificus* series is perhaps best remembered for its expansive interpretation of presidential power, especially in relation to foreign policy. Hamilton's arguments on this score provoked a spirited response from James Madison, then a Congressman from Virginia. Urged on by Hamilton's Cabinet rival Thomas Jefferson, Madison took to the public newspapers to condemn Hamilton's account of the executive power as a betrayal of the constitutional principle of separation of powers. The resulting clash between Hamilton's *Pacificus* and Madison's *Helvidius* is justly celebrated as one of the most impressive public debates between two of the greatest Founders over the meaning of the Constitution.

In the *Pacificus* papers, however, Hamilton did not confine himself to constitutional issues, because the critics of the Neutrality Proclamation had not confined themselves to constitutional objections. They also complained that American policy should be more solicitous of France because France had assisted America in its own revolution. Such arguments, Hamilton believed, revealed a spirit that was foolishly inclined to sacrifice American interests to the needs of another country.

Accordingly, Hamilton included in his *Pacificus* essays a statement of what he took to be the

primary aim of foreign policy: A course of international behavior "regulated by" the country's "own interest, as far as justice and good faith permit, is and ought to be the prevailing" policy. As Hamilton's choice of words indicates, he did not hold that national interest is the only relevant consideration in foreign policy. That policy must also be guided by respect for "justice and good faith." Nevertheless, to postulate some aim of foreign policy other than national interest—to hold that nations do and should act in some "self-denying and self-sacrificing" way for the sake of other countries' interests—is, Hamilton warned, "to misconceive or mistake what usually are and ought to be the springs of national conduct."[1]

Hamilton offered no systematic definition of what constitutes the national interest, but his meaning is tolerably clear insofar as he used the term much as we would today. When we think of national self-interest, we often think of a country's concern for its own independence—its ability to maintain itself as a free state, not subject to foreign domination—as well as for its power and prosperity. Hamilton certainly had these considerations in mind. He feared an American alliance with revolutionary France and supported a policy of neutrality because he believed that American involvement in the European war might leave our relatively young and weak country subordinate to one of the great powers and would at least disrupt the foreign trade on which the new government's revenues depended.

Such considerations had similarly informed Hamilton's earlier statesmanship and the domestic political achievements for which he is so famous. As Secretary of the Treasury, he developed a plan to pay the nation's debts, led the way in creating a national bank, and argued for the development of a flourishing manufacturing sector because he believed such policies were both needed to promote the country's economic prosperity and essential to the government's ability to wage war and defend the nation's independence against foreign aggression. It is not surprising that these same concerns animated his thinking about foreign policy.

Hamilton's conception of the national interest, however, was not exhausted by such considerations as security and prosperity. Hamilton, again, understood that individuals are powerfully moved by their self-interest, including their interest in their own safety and comfort. On this view, a nation's concern with its own security and prosperity can be understood as a manifestation of the collective self-interest of its members. Hamilton, however, was a more penetrating political psychologist than those modern thinkers who offer a reductive account of man as nothing more than economic man or as driven only by considerations of survival and self-interest. He also saw that human beings are powerfully motivated by a concern for their reputation or by the longing for distinction and honor.

Hamilton was a more penetrating political psychologist than those modern thinkers who offer a reductive account of man as driven only by considerations of survival and self-interest. He also saw that human beings are powerfully motivated by a concern for their reputation or by the longing for distinction and honor.

Hamilton's thought indicates that even man's economic behavior cannot be understood solely in light of his efforts to fulfill his bodily desires. Hamilton's *Report on Manufactures*—one of his greatest state papers and the one that is most revealing of his economic thought—acknowledges the role played in the economy by the individual's desire for distinction.

Hamilton's report advocated a program of government support for manufacturing. According to his argument, one of the advantages of such a program was that it would encourage the immigration of European manufacturing workers to America, which would increase American productivity. Notably, however, Hamilton did not contend that these workers would be drawn to America only by the chance for economic gain: They also would be attracted by America's political institutions, especially its republican government and religious liberty. As a consequence of these institutions, he noted, those who came to America could expect a "greater personal independence and consequence" here than

1. *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, 27 vols., ed. Harold C. Syrett (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961–1987), Vol. 15, p. 86.

they could have enjoyed in Europe.[2] In other words, they would be drawn to America not only by their desire for wealth, but also by a desire to win a higher social standing than they could have enjoyed in the countries of their birth.

Similarly, Hamilton recommended later in his report that the government encourage the development of manufacturing by bestowing premiums to reward those manufacturers who had displayed some "particular excellence or superiority" or who had undertaken some "extraordinary exertion" or shown some unusual "skill." Such premiums, he noted, were "both honorary and lucrative" and therefore addressed themselves "to different passions, touching the chords as well of emulation as of interest."[3] For Hamilton, a full understanding of the political behavior even of ordinary people requires an awareness that they are moved not only by a desire for material comfort, but also by a desire for honor or recognition.

Accordingly, a full understanding of international politics requires the same awareness: Nations pursue their own interests, and this means that they act not only for the sake of their security and prosperity, but also for the sake of their national pride. Hamilton made this clear in *Federalist* No. 6. "The causes of hostility among nations are innumerable," he claimed, and some of them "have a general and almost constant operation upon the collective bodies of society." First among these he named "the love of power or the desire of preeminence and dominion—the jealously of power, or the desire of equality and safety."[4]

Human beings want to elevate themselves to a position of honor in their communities. If that is not possible, they at least want to enjoy a moderately respectable position. Similarly, they want their nation to enjoy a position of honor, prestige, or preeminence in the world, and if that is not possible, then they at least want to avoid subordination to other nations so that their own may be safely equal to others in its independence.

Hamilton's other contributions to the *Federalist* provide further insight into why governments may be expected to act in pursuit of national glory. Writing about the presidency in *Federalist* No. 72, Hamilton famously stated that "the love of fame" is "the ruling passion of the noblest minds."[5] Statesmen seek personal glory by doing good for the public. As the young Abraham Lincoln admitted as he embarked on his own political career, his "ambition" was to "be truly esteemed by my fellow men, by making myself worthy of their esteem."[6]

Hamilton also saw a connection between national pride and national security. Simply put, nations that failed to protect their reputation also invited threats to their security.

National political leaders know that their constituents want the country to be glorious or at least not to be insignificant. Such leaders accordingly seek fame by conducting government policy with a view to protecting and advancing national pride. But there are even more direct causes that spur statesmen to promote the national glory. They are themselves citizens, so they take a natural pride in their country's own preeminence. Besides, national preeminence is flattering to the statesman's own desire for personal glory: One cannot be an important figure on the world stage if one is the leader of an insignificant nation.

Writing as *Pacificus*, Hamilton observed that French policy in support of American independence, for example, had been prompted by France's desire to restore its national honor. France, Hamilton noted, had long been Great Britain's political "rival." Britain's victory in the Seven Years' War had laid upon France "the severest losses and the most mortifying defeats." The war handed to Britain a place of

2. Alexander Hamilton, *Writings*, ed. Joanne B. Freeman (New York: Library of America, 2001), pp. 662–663.
3. Ibid., p. 703.
4. Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay, *The Federalist*, ed. Jacob E. Cooke (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), p. 28.
5. Ibid., p. 488. Whether this love is truly characteristic of the noblest minds is, of course, open to dispute. Philosophers or saints, for example, might claim that the noblest minds love wisdom or God more than fame.
6. Abraham Lincoln, *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, ed. Roy P. Basler (New York: Da Capo Press, 1946), p. 57.

preeminence in Europe "too decided to be endured without extreme impatience" by the French, who felt an "eager desire" to "destroy" Britain's ascendant position and thus "repair the breach which had been made" in France's "national glory." "The animosity of wounded pride," he wrote, "conspired with calculations of the interest of the State to give a keen edge to that impatience and to that desire."[7]

Finally, although Hamilton treated national pride as an independent factor in international politics—because nations, like individuals, desire self-respect as a thing that is good in itself—it is worth noting that he also saw a connection between national pride and national security. Simply put, nations that failed to protect their reputation also invited threats to their security.

Hamilton was keenly aware that a government's ability to secure the obedience and support of its own citizens—both with a view to domestic governance and with a view to the exertions necessary in foreign policy—depended to a considerable extent on the people's belief in the government's power and energy.

This thinking had informed Hamilton's advice to Washington in an earlier foreign policy crisis. The late summer of 1790 saw a dispute between Britain and Spain over possession of Nootka Sound, a trading hub on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island. Washington feared that if the conflict escalated to a full-blown war, the British would move forces from Detroit—where British troops were still stationed—through American territory to attack Spanish posts on the Mississippi River.

Confronted with this possibility and the dangers that it posed to the United States, Washington called for the advice of his Cabinet secretaries. Specifically, he wanted their opinions on how the government should respond if Britain were to ask permission to march troops through American territory for such purposes or if Britain were to take this step on its own without even asking American permission.

According to Hamilton, it was important for America to conduct itself in such a way as to avoid being insulted by Great Britain, because it is dangerous for nations to suffer insults without retaliating. If asked, Hamilton said, America should give the British permission to pass through American territory. It was likely, after all, that the British would do so even in the face of an American refusal, which would constitute the insult that Hamilton hoped to avoid.

It would be impossible to avoid "disgrace," Hamilton reasoned, if American territory was "violated with impunity" after the government had given a "formal and deliberate prohibition of passage." If America refused permission for British passage, the world would presume that the government of the United States had "estimated the consequences, calculated the means," and was "prepared to assert and uphold its rights." And if, contrary to these expectations, America should submit to the passage after refusing to give permission for it, it would "bring itself into contempt for inviting insult which it was unable to repel, and manifesting ill will toward a power whom it durst not resist." Just as there could be no "greater outrage" than for one nation to violate another's territory in the face of an explicit refusal, there could be no "greater humiliation than to submit to it."[8]

It is "a sound maxim," Hamilton counselled Washington, "that a state had better hazard any calamity than submit tamely to absolute disgrace."[9] For Hamilton, it was very important for the young and comparatively weak American republic to avoid war. Nevertheless, he still held that an "unqualified humiliation" is almost always "a greater evil than war."[10]

Why would Hamilton think this? His advice makes sense only on the understanding that national disgrace is not only embarrassing, but also dangerous, and this understanding depends on Hamilton's view that governments act in international

7. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. 15, p. 90.
8. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. 7, pp. 47–48.
9. Ibid., p. 49.
10. Ibid., p. 56.

politics primarily with a view to advancing their own nations' interests. Hamilton's advice, in other words, is based on the assumption that international politics is a realm in which states are animated to a significant extent by a desire for power, that they note every sign of weakness and interpret such weakness as an opening to advance their own interests—often at the expense of others.

Moreover, Hamilton was keenly aware that a government's ability to secure the obedience and support of its own citizens—both with a view to domestic governance and with a view to the exertions necessary in foreign policy—depended to a considerable extent on the people's belief in the government's power and energy, a belief that could be shattered by humiliation at the hands of a foreign power. For Hamilton, submission to disgrace in foreign policy was dangerous because it made the government contemptible in the eyes both of its own people and of other nations.

Morality and Foreign Policy

Most Americans like to think that American foreign policy has an important moral component and is informed by considerations besides national self-interest. Many might therefore be somewhat troubled by Hamilton's argument up to this point, which seems to suggest that foreign policy is guided only by such concerns as national interest and national honor. It is worth observing that Hamilton in fact did see an important role for morality in the conduct of foreign policy. He was not simply a Machiavellian who thought that nations may advance their interests by any effectual means, unrestrained by any regard for the well-being of other nations.

It is worth remembering that when a government acts to protect the nation's security and to promote its prosperity, it is not doing something immoral. An individual's actions are not necessarily wrong for being in his self-interest; nor are the actions of nations. On Hamilton's view—and on any sensible view—individuals and nations have not only an inclination to take care of themselves, but a duty to do so. Moreover, when a government conducts its foreign policy, it is acting for the well-being of the citizens of the nation that the government represents.

Accordingly, statesmen who seek to win what is good for their own nation are seeking not only and not primarily what is good for themselves personally, but what is good for their fellow citizens. It is no more ignoble for statesmen to care for the interests of their fellow citizens than it is for a father to earn money to support his own family rather than some other family. On the contrary, both are meritorious activities.

For Hamilton, justice and good faith establish a moral minimum that nations should observe in the conduct of their foreign policy. It did not follow for him, however, that the morality of foreign policy was exhausted by such minimal considerations.

In addition, Hamilton understood that the means a government chooses to employ in its pursuit of the nation's interest must be qualified and guided by certain moral considerations. In the *Pacificus* essays, he was careful to note that emphasis on national interest was not intended to "recommend a policy absolutely selfish or interested in nations." Instead, he meant to suggest only "that a policy regulated by their own interest, *as far as justice and good faith permit,* is, and ought to be, their prevailing one."[11] For Hamilton, there is a morality proper to foreign policy, one governed not so much by altruism as by "faith and justice." In pursuing their own interests, nations should generally keep their promises, or fulfill their treaty obligations, and treat each other according to the law of nations: that is, according to the long-established customary rules that are widely acknowledged as regulating politics among nations.

Hamilton was so far from advocating an amoral foreign policy that he insisted that the virtues of "faith and justice" are "sacred and unequivocal" and "cannot be too strongly inculcated nor too highly respected." "Their obligations," he said, "are absolute" and "their utility unquestionable; they relate to objects which with probity and sincerity generally admit of being brought within clear and intelligible rules."[12] Whereas the duties of gratitude were difficult to discern in foreign policy because nations

11. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. 15, p. 86 (emphasis added).

12. Ibid., p. 84.

could rarely be said to have acted in a way that called for gratitude, it is quite possible to think and argue about justice among nations with clarity and intelligibility. Nations can reliably know the basis and extent of their obligations in justice. They simply need to consult their existing treaties and the traditional law of nations.

For Hamilton, then, justice and good faith establish a moral minimum that nations should observe in the conduct of their foreign policy. It did not follow for him, however, that the morality of foreign policy was exhausted by such minimal considerations. On the contrary, Hamilton saw that nations sometimes held themselves to an even higher standard, and he admitted that it was laudable for them to do so—so long as such lofty conduct was not contrary to their interests.

Hamilton did admit that there is room for benevolence in foreign policy, but he insisted that its role was strictly limited and that those limits must be clearly understood and scrupulously respected by statesmen and citizens, lest they fail in their primary obligation to protect the nation's interests.

French policy toward America during the Revolution provided an apt illustration of the principles that should inform national policy. Although France had been motivated primarily by her own interests in aiding American independence, she had treated America well. France had made no effort to take undue "advantage of" America's weak situation in order to "extort" any "humiliating or injurious concessions." Given America's desperate need for foreign assistance, France might have tried to drive a hard bargain, and it was to her credit that she had not done so. Thus, Hamilton said, while French conduct was "certainly dictated by policy"—meaning expediency and not generosity—"it was an honorable and magnanimous policy." To this extent, French policy toward America deserved the "approbation and esteem of mankind" as well as "the friendship and acknowledgment of" America.[13]

According to Hamilton, while nations do not act with a self-sacrificing generosity, they do sometimes act with a certain honorable moderation or restraint in the pursuit of their own interests, a restraint that permits them to leave unclaimed some advantages that they might have been able to win. Human beings, moreover, can recognize this self-restraint as praiseworthy, which is why it recommends itself to the "esteem of mankind."

Beyond National Interest: Benevolence and Gratitude in Foreign Policy

Hamilton believed that securing the national interest was the primary aim of foreign policy, but he also acknowledged that a nation's pursuit of that aim should be governed by respect for moral principle. Here again, however, contemporary Americans might ask whether this vision somehow falls short of what we expect from our foreign policy. Most of us, after all, like to think of our country not only as respecting the rights of other nations, but also as doing positive acts of benevolence, at least when it can safely do so.

Does Hamilton's vision include a place for such benevolence in the conduct of a nation's foreign affairs? Hamilton did admit that there is room for such benevolence in foreign policy, but he insisted that its role was strictly limited and that those limits must be clearly understood and scrupulously respected by statesmen and citizens, lest they fail in their primary obligation to protect the nation's interests.

This, too, was a key theme of his *Pacificus* essays in defense of the Neutrality Proclamation. Critics of the Administration had included among their arguments the complaint that the proclamation was "inconsistent with the gratitude due to France for the services rendered" to America in its own "revolution." Hamilton quickly disposed of this complaint by means of a rather practical argument that did not invoke any general principles but simply appealed to the facts of the present case.

Even the critics of the proclamation, Hamilton observed, admitted that they did not want to see America drawn into the war. They complained, however, that the proclamation seemed to put France on an absolutely "*equal* footing with her enemies" in relation to America. This was improper, they

13. Ibid., p. 92.

suggested, because America was both the beneficiary of French aid in its own revolution and a party to treaties of alliance and commerce with France. On this view, America was not obliged to enter the war, but it was obliged—both by its treaties and by its debt of gratitude to France—to show a certain partiality for the French cause.

Hamilton did not deny this. He observed, however, that this limited "partiality" was perfectly compatible with the Neutrality Proclamation, which left undisturbed all of America's treaty obligations to France that did not pertain to war and therefore left to the United States a sufficient discretion to perform some "kind offices" for France that it need not perform for others—again, so long as these services did not relate to war.[14] Hamilton replied to this criticism not by denying the obligation of treaties—which would have been inconsistent with his insistence that nations must observe justice and good faith in pursuing their interests—or by absolutely denying gratitude any place in our foreign policy thinking, but instead by contending that the proclamation did not violate any such obligations.

This practical argument, Hamilton suggested, gave an adequate response to the complaint that the proclamation was inconsistent with American gratitude to France. Even supposing an obligation of gratitude, nothing in the proclamation was inconsistent with such an obligation.

Nevertheless, Hamilton pressed the argument further, taking up the more general question of the proper role of gratitude in foreign policy. Since his immediate political purpose did not require this step, Hamilton evidently took it because he thought it important that the American public, from which America's future leaders would be drawn, should understand the proper place of gratitude in foreign policy and thus understand the fundamental principles of a government's conduct in relation to other nations.

According to Hamilton, the critics of the proclamation had gravely misunderstood the role of gratitude in foreign policy, and their position betrayed a wrongheaded sentimentality that has no place in international politics. Their arguments tended to elevate a supposed duty of gratitude to France into a kind of "shrine" at which they encouraged their fellow citizens "to sacrifice the true interests of the country." This, Hamilton sarcastically suggested, was to argue "as if *'All for love, and the world well lost,'* were a fundamental maxim in politics."[15]

Like most of the American Founders, Hamilton was well aware of—and in his writings often emphasized—the prominent role that self-interest plays in politics. Here he admonished his readers that this insight, so important to the founding generation's thinking about domestic politics, could hardly be jettisoned when trying to think realistically about international politics.

In order to clarify the role of gratitude in foreign policy, Hamilton had to give some account of what exactly gratitude is. His argument thus far implied that it is a sense of obligation that might go so far as to require one to "sacrifice" one's own "interest" for the sake of the person or group toward whom this sense of gratitude is felt. What, then, is the origin of such a sense of obligation? We might at first answer that gratitude arises in response to a good deed done for us by another. This understanding is not so much wrong as too imprecise. It is imprecise, however, in such a way as would defeat the purpose of Hamilton's argument. After all, France *had* done good deeds for America during the War of Independence; so on this understanding, there would be, contrary to Hamilton's argument, an American debt of gratitude to France.

Accordingly, Hamilton put forward a more accurate account of gratitude and its basis. The ground of gratitude, he argued, "is a benefit received or intended, which there was no right to claim, originating in a regard to the interest or advantage of the party on whom the benefit is or is meant to be conferred." Gratitude is not owed for just any benefit we receive, but only for one that comes from a free act of benevolence. We feel no gratitude for goods that we are owed as a matter of justice as, for example, when someone repays borrowed money. Moreover, Hamilton took into account not only the character of the good received—whether it was owed or not—but also the intention of the giver. Gratitude is a response to a good that is bestowed on us that is not owed to us in justice and that the giver provided primarily for our own sake. In sum, gratitude arises in response to our experience of the generosity or selflessness of others.[16]

14. Ibid., p. 83.
15. Ibid., p. 84. Here Hamilton was quoting the title of John Dryden's 1677 play about the tragic love of Antony and Cleopatra.
16. Ibid., pp. 84–85.

Conversely, where this selfless spirit is absent, gratitude cannot emerge. It often happens that others do good to us that is not required by justice but also not prompted by a concern for our own well-being. In such cases, the benefactor acts for the sake of his own interests, seeing and pursuing some mutual advantage for himself and for us.

According to Hamilton, the correct response in such cases is not gratitude but instead a kind of goodwill, a disposition to perform in one's own turn a "good office" that is likewise prompted by "mutual interest and reciprocal advantage." If your country is threatened with invasion and a neighboring country that is itself in no danger sends troops to help repel the invasion, it is appropriate to feel gratitude. But if the neighboring country sends troops because it knows the common enemy will invade it next, then the correct response is not gratitude but a willingness to perform some similar mutually beneficial service. To go further and bestow gratitude on such an act, Hamilton contended, is unreasonable because it involves an "effect" that is "disproportioned to the cause."[17]

Thus, rightly understood, gratitude aims to establish a kind of reasonable equality between persons or nations: We wish to perform a selfless service for another because he has performed some selfless service for us. Accordingly, it would be disproportionate to offer it in return for a good deed done by someone who was acting out of self-interest.

On the basis of these principles, Hamilton argued, America could not be said to owe France the kind of gratitude that would require a sacrifice of American interests. American gratitude to France, he argued, had to be proportional to the benevolence that France had shown in aiding the American struggle for independence. French aid, however, had not been motivated primarily by benevolence—by a disinterested solicitude for American liberty—but instead by France's national interests. France had undoubtedly been an essential American ally, but in setting itself up as an ally, it had acted on the basis of the self-regard that usually animates the foreign policy of nations.

This became clear, Hamilton argued, if one carefully considered the circumstances surrounding French aid to America. Before America issued its Declaration of Independence, French assistance to the colonies had been "marked neither with liberality nor with vigor." It appeared to spring from "a desire to keep alive disturbances which would embarrass" England rather than from "a serious design to assist a revolution or a serious expectation that it could be effected." Later victories of American arms, however, convinced the French that America might succeed in securing its independence—that is, that it would succeed in depriving the British of part of their empire.

America and France had been allies because the alliance served their common interests. Benevolence had nothing to do with it, so there was no cause for gratitude.

These American military victories won France's "confidence" in America's ability to prevail, and this in turn led to the "treaties of alliance and commerce" between France and America. In light of this train of events, Hamilton held that it was "impossible" to view French policy as "anything more" than the conduct of a self-interested rival of Great Britain taking hold of "a most promising opportunity to repress the pride and diminish the dangerous power" of Britain by supporting "a successful resistance to its authority, and by lopping off a valuable portion of its dominions." Depriving Britain of its American colonies was "an obvious and very important" French "interest,. and as that interest had doubtless been the "determining motive" for French aid to America, success in securing it would be "adequate compensation."[18]

In other words, America and France had been allies because the alliance served their common interests. Benevolence had nothing to do with it, so there was no cause for gratitude.

Indeed, Hamilton went on, sober-minded American political leaders during the revolution had understood that the hoped-for French aid would proceed not from the disinterested kindness of France but from a harmony of French and American interests. The revolutionary leaders' expectations of both

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., pp. 90–91.

French and Spanish help had rested on "the known competition between those powers" and Britain and on "their evident interest to reduce her power and circumscribe her empire."

These expectations had not been based on the idea that the governments of France and Spain—both absolute monarchies and as such not principled supporters of the rights of man and popular self-government—would bestow help out of a selfless "regard" for or "attachment" to America and American freedom. According to Hamilton, anyone who had put forward such altruistic motives as the basis on which to expect French and Spanish aid "would have been justly considered as a visionary or a deceiver," and anyone who, from the vantage point of 1793, tried to read such motives back into French and Spanish conduct "would not deserve to be viewed in a better light."[19]

The foreign policy that had helped secure American liberty, Hamilton suggested, had been guided not by a naïve romanticism but by a hard-headed calculation of national interests. This was the kind of foreign policy on which we would have to rely to preserve American interests.

The foreign policy that had helped secure American liberty, Hamilton suggested, had been guided not by a naïve romanticism but by a hard-headed calculation of national interests. This was the kind of foreign policy on which we would have to rely to preserve American interests.

On Hamilton's understanding, gratitude plays only a limited role in politics among nations because the actions that can reasonably prompt a sense of gratitude occur only rarely, if ever, among nations. According to Hamilton, gratitude is common among "individuals" because cause for it is "not unfrequently given." Among individuals, we can easily find daily examples of people "conferring benefits from kind and benevolent dispositions or feelings toward the person benefitted, without any other interest on the part of" the giver "than the pleasure of doing a good action." Most of the time, however, nations do not provide benefits out of pure benevolence without expecting anything in return other than the consciousness of having performed a good action. It is rather, Hamilton contended, a "general principle that the predominant motive of good offices from one nation to another is the interest or advantage" of the nation that "performs them."[20] Nations, in other words, are usually thinking primarily of themselves even when they do good to others.

This important difference between individuals and nations, Hamilton went on, concerns not only how they *do* act, but also how they *should* act. The "rule of morality" governing the doing of good deeds "is not exactly the same between nations as between individuals." It is not only the case that nations ordinarily do not act out of disinterested benevolence; it is also the case that they ordinarily *should* not act on such motives. Countries and individuals alike, Hamilton argued, have a "duty" to act with a view to their "own welfare." Nevertheless, this duty is more imperative for nations than for individuals, for two reasons.

First, Hamilton noted, the happiness of a nation is of much "greater magnitude and importance" than that of any individual, and the consequences of a nation's actions are much more lasting than those of any individual. The interests of millions now living, as well as those of generations yet unborn, depend on "the present measures of a government." By contrast, the effects of "the private actions of an individual" most often end "with himself or are circumscribed within a narrow compass." As a result, "an individual may" often "meritoriously indulge the emotions of generosity and benevolence; not only without an eye to, but even at the expense of, his own interest."

On the other hand, because a nation's conduct has implications for the interests of so many, it can "rarely be justified in pursuing" a selfless course, and when it does, it is obliged to "confine itself within much stricter bounds." The proper limit to a nation's generosity, Hamilton indicated, is established by its obligation not to make a sacrifice of its own interests. This principle still permits nations to perform

19. Ibid., p. 91.

20. Ibid., p. 85.

generous acts that do not necessarily aim at their own advantage, but they must take care to ensure that such acts do not result in a substantial sacrifice of their own interests.

Nations do not have to be selfish on Hamilton's view, but neither may they properly be selfless. That is, they should not seek to advance their interests at the expense of the rights of other nations, but they also do not ordinarily place themselves and their well-being at the service of other nations. Accordingly, Hamilton held that the "limits of national generosity or benevolence" should be understood to be set by good deeds that are "indifferent to the interests" of the "nation performing them" or that, if they did involve a sacrifice of present national interests, were "compensated by the existence or expectation of some reasonable equivalent."[21]

In a footnote to his main argument, Hamilton also put forward a second consideration that militated against any national benevolence that made a sacrifice of the national interest. In "every form of government," he observed, the "rulers are only trustees for the happiness and interest of their nation." As a result, in contrast to private individuals, rulers could not, "consistently with their trust, follow the suggestions of kindness or humanity towards others, to the prejudice" of their constituents' interests.[22]

Here Hamilton linked the role of legitimate self-interest in domestic politics to its role in foreign policy in a way that showed his commitment to the American understanding of the purposes of government. Although Hamilton was committed to the success of the American experiment in republican self-rule, it is nonetheless true that he admitted to believing that a constitutional monarchy on the British model was the best form of government. This belief led some of his political rivals to label him an aristocrat.

As his remarks here suggest, however, while Hamilton may have approved of a form of government that incorporated certain forms of political inequality, he believed that even such a form of government must be in the service of a deeper equality. Even a monarchy does not exist for the sake of the monarch, and therefore, no monarch may properly treat his subjects as if they are merely tools to be used for whatever purposes he thinks good—even if those purposes really are good. Rather, every form of government, even a monarchy, should have as its aim the well-being of the people it governs.

This idea presupposes the importance of a legitimate self-interest in motivating people to erect or submit to a government, whatever form it may take. For Hamilton as for the rest of the Founders, governments enjoyed no inherent or natural powers over the governed. Instead, governments were creations of the people, and their powers were bestowed upon them by the people. Why would the people give up their power and vest it in a government? Not for the sake of the good in a general sense, or for the good of the whole world, but for themselves and their own good: to protect their own rights and interests. The powers that governments possess are given to them on the understanding that they will be used for this purpose, and they cannot rightly be used in opposition to it, even in pursuit of something that is good on some other grounds.

For Hamilton, it is not merely foolish or imprudent for a government to pursue a line of self-sacrificing benevolence; it is in fact an act of infidelity and wrong—a wrong done to the people for whose benefit the government exists.

An analogy may be helpful. Governments are entrusted with power in order to protect their own people, just as a lawyer may be entrusted with an investment to hold on behalf of a client. Both are given something in trust: that is, to be used for specified purposes on behalf of specified parties. Therefore, a government may no more sacrifice its own constituents' interests in order to aid others than such a lawyer may spend his client's money in order to benefit someone else, however worthy the cause might be. Thus, we see that for Hamilton, it is not merely foolish or imprudent for a government to pursue a line of self-sacrificing benevolence; it is in fact an act of infidelity and wrong—a wrong done to the people for whose benefit the government exists.

21. Ibid., pp. 85–86.

22. Ibid., p. 85.

Foreign Policy and the Cause of Freedom: Support for Revolutions Abroad

This brings us to another question that is important to contemporary Americans: To what extent should American foreign policy seek to advance American principles of government abroad? In certain cases, should America assist those who are trying to overthrow governments that do not live up to American principles of natural rights, thus freeing oppressed peoples from their own oppressive governments? For many Americans on both the left and the right, a properly moral foreign policy requires the government of the United States to use its influence, and sometimes even its power, to assist the victory of freedom in foreign countries. What do Hamilton's principles have to say about such foreign policy aims?

A preliminary sketch of Hamilton's position on these questions can be offered on the basis of the considerations already discussed. It is clear, for example, that Hamilton would not favor efforts to promote regime change in other nations when those efforts are contrary to America's interests.

Again, the protection of the nation's interests is the first duty of any government. Therefore, the government of the United States would err if it sought to achieve good ends for other countries if doing so came at the expense of the security and well-being of its own citizens. Some governments might be organized internally in a manner that is inconsistent with American principles but at the same time might be trusted American allies or have a record of moderate and responsible international behavior. On Hamilton's account, America would have no obligation to help overthrow such regimes because it would be inconsistent with American interests to do so.

Nevertheless, it is certainly not the case that such efforts would always come at the expense of American interests. In some cases, American interests might be advanced by aiding a change in government in another country. In other cases, assisting in such a change might be neither helpful nor harmful to American interests, such that the government of the United States could play a role without betraying its obligations to the people of America. What considerations should guide our policy when these opportunities arise?

Hamilton's answer to this question, once again, can be gleaned from an examination of his arguments as *Pacificus*, particularly from his critique of the foreign policy of the revolutionary French government. Hamilton's argument suggests that the promotion of rights and freedom abroad, while good ends in themselves, must be mediated by prudence. While it can be laudable to assist a people in securing their freedom, governments must take care not to intervene gratuitously in the affairs of foreign nations with a view to changing their regimes.

Hamilton's thinking on this question is consistent with the fundamental statement of American political principles, the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration urges us to act in defense of natural rights, which it teaches are universally binding on all governments, but at the same time cautions us not to try to overthrow a government whose people are willing to submit to it, since the decision about whether to seek a revolution belongs to the people living under a given government and not to foreigners, however benevolent their intentions may be.

In his *Pacificus* essays, Hamilton condemned French attempts to undermine the existing governments of other European nations. In its decree of November 19, 1792, France announced that it would "grant fraternity and assistance to every people who wish to recover their liberty"—a reckless policy that ultimately had France at war with all the nations of Europe.[23] Such a decree amounted to an act of injustice in two ways, Hamilton suggested.

First, by making such a declaration, France was exempting itself from standards of conduct that it insisted other nations should obey. After all, revolutionary France had complained of the efforts of other European nations to meddle in her own internal affairs to support the monarchy.

Second, the decree was unjust insofar as it violated the "liberty" and "independence of nations" as they were understood in the traditional law of nations. Drawing on the work of the Swiss legal philosopher Emerich de Vattel, Hamilton stated the "consequence" of this commonly recognized principle: "That it does not belong to any foreign power to take cognizance of the administration of the sovereign of another country, to set himself up as a judge of his conduct or to oblige him to alter it." Hamilton reminded his readers that this traditional

23. Ibid., pp. 59–60.

principle deserved respect because it tended to preserve peace among nations. Thus, he noted that the French decree "had a natural tendency to disturb the tranquility of nations" and "to excite fermentation and revolt everywhere."[24]

This line of argument involves a certain difficulty for those who believe in the principles of the Declaration of Independence. Hamilton here invoked the traditional "liberty" of nations, understood as their freedom from outside interference in their own government. The American Revolution, however, highlighted the importance of other kinds of liberty as well: the liberty of a people to have political institutions that protect their natural rights. Why should we consider this modern liberty, which France sought to vindicate all over Europe, as subordinate to the traditional liberty of nations that Hamilton had invoked—a "liberty" that might protect the position of governments that denied the natural rights of their own subjects?

There is an important difference, Hamilton contended, between aiding a revolution where the people have decided to fight for their rights and inciting a revolution where the people are living peaceably under their existing government. The former is defensible, while the latter is blameworthy.

Hamilton's argument emphasized the sensible view that non-interference with the internal affairs of other countries tends to preserve peace among nations. Nevertheless, America's founding principles seem to point to a higher kind of justice than that which merely preserves peace, a higher justice that asks whether peoples are governed in accordance with their rights. France's aid to America during the War of Independence might be seen as a violation of the traditional law of nations, an improper interference with Britain's internal concerns, but most Americans, including Hamilton, welcomed that aid and certainly did not condemn it as a violation of the law of nations or as an unjust attempt to disturb the peace.

Hamilton understood these difficulties and sought in his subsequent argument to harmonize respect for the traditional law of nations with a foreign policy in support of an oppressed people's fight for liberty. There is an important difference, he contended, between aiding a revolution where the people have decided to fight for their rights and inciting a revolution where the people are living peaceably under their existing government. The former, he indicated, is defensible, while the latter is blameworthy.

"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," Hamilton argued, it is "justifiable" for another country to give "assistance to the one which has been oppressed and is in the act of liberating itself." Hamilton even went so far as gently to encourage such intervention by calling it not only defensible, but even "meritorious." This thinking was consistent with his—and the whole founding generation's—belief in the universal truth of the principles of the American Revolution and their desire to see them prevail elsewhere in the world.

On the other hand, however, he also insisted that it is not "warrantable" for a nation "beforehand," in the absence of an active revolutionary movement, "to hold out a general invitation to insurrection and revolution by promising to assist every people who may wish to recover their liberty."[25] France had done the former in aiding the American cause and had been justified. It was now doing the latter in relation to the rest of Europe, and this was indefensible. For Hamilton, governments may intervene in support of liberty where they find a revolution in pursuit of liberty and perhaps even should do so when they can without prejudicing their own interests, but they

24. Ibid., p. 60.

25. Ibid. Nathan Tarcov observes that Henry Clay later made the same distinction that Hamilton made here. Clay held that he "would not 'disturb the repose of a detestable despotism,' but he would aid an oppressed people who 'will their freedom' and seek to establish or have established it." See Nathan Tarcov, "The Spirit of Liberty and Early American Foreign Policy," in *Understanding the Political Spirit: Philosophical Investigations from Socrates to Nietzsche*, ed. Catherine Zuckert (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 148.

may not foment revolution, even for the sake of liberty, where they find public peace and order.[26]

Revolutionary France, however, had gone even further than to foment revolution in defense of natural rights: It had gone so far as to demand revolution in favor of republican self-government. Thus, in another of its public decrees, it had announced that the government of France would "treat as enemies the people who, refusing or renouncing liberty and equality, are desirous of preserving their prince and privileged castes—or of entering into an accommodation with them." This was, as Hamilton noted, "little short of a declaration of war against all nations having princes and privileged classes"—which was to say a declaration of war against almost all of Europe.[27]

According to Hamilton's thinking, France's revolutionary foreign policy was inconsistent with both older, more conservative conceptions of international justice and newer, more modern notions expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

Again, Hamilton condemned this aggressively revolutionary foreign policy even though America was committed to republican government. Americans would understandably feel a certain "partiality" for "the general object of the French Revolution," Hamilton suggested. At the same time, however, any "well-informed or sober-minded man" would be compelled to "condemn" France's policy toward its neighbors as "repugnant to the general rights of nations, to the true principles of liberty," and to "the freedom of opinion of mankind."[28]

According to Hamilton's thinking, France's revolutionary foreign policy was inconsistent with both older, more conservative conceptions of international justice and newer, more modern notions expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Hamilton's critique began from an appeal to the traditional law of nations, a law that had developed gradually from the practices of nations ruled by aristocratic and monarchical governments. Even though these traditional principles were not grounded in the modern doctrine of natural rights, Hamilton defended them as benevolent in their effects: They tended to preserve peace, after all. This older sense of international justice comes to mind when Hamilton condemns French policy as "repugnant to the rights of nations"—in other words, as repugnant to the age-old rights of sovereigns to rule their subjects without outside interference.

At the same time, reference to "the rights of nations" just as easily may call to mind the principles of the Declaration of Independence, to which Hamilton also evidently intended to appeal. Hence his contention that French policy was inconsistent with "the true principles of liberty" and the "freedom of opinion of mankind." Hamilton did not spell out his thinking here, but we can bring to light the principles informing his judgment by reflecting on the political teaching of the Declaration of Independence.

The Declaration famously teaches the people's right to revolution, or their right to change their government when they find that it has become hostile to their rights. It also teaches, less famously but no less importantly, that the exercise of this right must be governed and guided by "prudence." According to the Declaration, revolution is justified not just by any passing violations of rights, but only by a "long train of abuses and usurpations." Thus, a people may legitimately choose to continue under a regime that does not perfectly protect their rights, accepting the government to which they are "accustomed" and thereby treating the "evils" of "their condition" as "sufferable" rather than intolerable.

Such a choice is legitimate because of the evils and uncertainties that accompany any revolution. On the one hand, it is almost inevitable that a revolution will result in death and destruction of

26. For a more extensive discussion of how these principles informed the conduct of American foreign policy in its opening stages, interested readers should consult Marion Smith, *The Myth of American Isolationism: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Military Affairs in the Early Republic*, Heritage Foundation *Special Report* No. 134, September 9, 2013, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2013/09/the-myth-of-american-isolationism-commerce-diplomacy-and-military-affairs-in-the-early-republic.

27. *Papers of Alexander Hamilton*, Vol. 15, p. 60.

28. Ibid., p. 62.

property—things that the people ordinarily will want to avoid. On the other hand, the people cannot be certain that a revolution will succeed. It may not succeed in changing the government, and if it does succeed in changing the government, the people cannot be certain that the new government will protect their rights any better than the old one did. This is why the Declaration justifies American independence on no slighter ground than the British government's effort to "reduce" America to a state of "absolute despotism."[29]

Hamilton, like the rest of the Founders, believed that the natural rights doctrine of the Declaration of Independence was universally true and binding on governments at all times and in all places. This is why he acknowledged that it could be "meritorious" for the United States to assist a foreign people in their effort to throw off despotism and establish just government.

On American principles, then, the decision as to whether a revolution is justifiable, whether it is worth the inevitable risks accompanying it, belongs to the people of a nation to make according to their best judgment of their own interests, uninfluenced by the goading or threats of foreign governments. Because France had engaged in such goading and threatening, Hamilton thought, it had interfered with the "liberty" and "freedom of opinion" of other nations. France had done this not only by insisting on revolution within neighboring states, but also by insisting that they adopt a republican form of government. The Declaration implicitly recognizes the right of a people to consent to a non-republican form if they think it adequately secures their rights. France, however, had imperiously demanded that its neighbors throw off their princes and aristocracies even if those nations believed that such institutions were compatible with the security of their rights.

Contemporary Americans of all political persuasions sense that the promotion of just government in countries that lack it is a legitimate element of American foreign policy. Nothing in Hamilton's thinking contradicts this conviction. In fact, there is much in his thinking to support it. After all, Hamilton, like the rest of the Founders, believed that the natural rights doctrine of the Declaration of Independence was universally true and binding on governments at all times and in all places. This is why he acknowledged that it could be not only justifiable, but even "meritorious" for the government of the United States to assist a foreign people in their effort to throw off despotism and establish just government.

At the same time, however, Hamilton urges us to remember that such efforts are not required of us and must always be regulated by a prudent regard for our own interests as well as a just respect for the freedom of other nations to determine their own political institutions. The government of the United States need not and should not promote the liberty of other nations at the expense of American interests, nor should it demand that other nations change their governments when their own people are not yet prepared to do so.

Hamilton and the Farewell Address

The basic elements of Hamilton's understanding of foreign policy were summed up in his contribution to one of the most famous American political speeches and one of the most important statements of American purpose: George Washington's 1796 Farewell Address.[30] Hamilton had left the Washington Administration early in 1795, but he remained one of the President's most trusted informal advisers.

As he prepared to lay down the presidency, Washington wished to leave a Farewell Address as a formal statement of his political counsel for his fellow countrymen. He asked Hamilton to prepare a draft, and Washington's final text tracks closely with the version that Hamilton supplied.

29. For further discussion of the right of revolution, see "The Declaration of Independence," Heritage Foundation *Back to First Principles: Primary Sources*, website, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/the-declaration,-of-independence.

30. Hamilton's *Federalist Papers* collaborator, James Madison, also had a hand in drafting this significant speech. See "Washington's Farewell Address," Heritage Foundation *Back to First Principles: Primary Sources*, website, http://www.heritage.org/initiatives/first-principles/primary-sources/washingtons-farewell-address.

In the draft, Hamilton once again emphasized that in foreign policy, nations ordinarily do and should act to secure their own interests. It is, he suggested, "folly" for "one nation to expect disinterested favors in another." Indeed, there "can be no greater error in national policy than to desire, expect, or calculate upon real favors. Tis an illusion that experience must cure, that a just pride ought to discard." This did not, of course, mean that nations do not cooperate, but it did mean that their cooperation ordinarily depends on a common interest that they can pursue.

For Hamilton, while nations aim to secure their own interests through their foreign policy, they are not free to do so by just any means convenient to the purpose. They must instead choose means that are consistent with the principles of justice and that do not violate promises they have made to other nations.

The language of Hamilton's draft also seemed to reflect his earlier arguments that nations are obliged to look after their own interests first. Thus, he warned against passionate attachments to and animosities against particular foreign countries on the grounds that such feelings could "lead" the nation "astray from its duty and interest."

Once again, however, Hamilton also emphasized that the primacy of national self-interest did not mean that there is no place for morality in foreign policy. On the contrary, his words for Washington urged America to "cherish good faith and justice towards, and peace and harmony with, all nations." Later, he summed up his whole approach to foreign policy by indicating that America should seek to secure for itself a position in which it would be free to "choose peace or war as our interest guided by justice shall dictate."

For Hamilton, while nations aim to secure their own interests through their foreign policy, they are not free to do so by just any means convenient to the purpose. They must instead choose means that are consistent with the principles of justice and that do not violate promises they have made to other nations. Accordingly, while Hamilton's draft advised America to minimize its political connections with Europe, he also emphasized that this did not mean ignoring or jettisoning its existing treaties. On the contrary, he insisted that "already formed engagements" should be "fulfilled—with circumspection indeed but with perfect good faith."

Here it is worth noting and correcting a common misconception about the Farewell Address. It is true that Hamilton's draft—as well as Washington's final version—advised America to have as little political connection with foreign nations as possible, thus enjoying the advantages of America's "detached and distant situation." Some Americans have read these passages as advocating a foreign policy of isolationism or non-interventionism. This is a mistake.

In the first place, Hamilton and Washington advised the new nation to minimize *political* connections with other countries in the sense of treaties and especially *permanent* alliances. This advice was based on the factual judgment that in the then-prevailing state of things, Europe's "primary interests" had no relation, or only a "very remote relation," to the interests of the United States. Obviously, on this line of thinking, if the two continents' interests were to become more closely connected, a closer political relationship would be justified.

In the second place, Hamilton and Washington made it clear that they expected the United States to engage in active relations with other nations, especially in the form of commerce with them. Thus the Address urged America to seek "liberal intercourse and commerce with all nations." In sum, isolationism was not a foreign policy principle for either Hamilton or Washington. The principle rather was attention to American interests and obligations, which would require or forbid specific kinds of interactions with foreign countries as circumstances indicated.[31]

Conclusion

Alexander Hamilton's thinking does justice to the complexities of foreign policy by giving due attention to the claims of both prudence and principle. By

31. For a more complete account of how the idea of isolationism mischaracterizes the conduct of American foreign policy after the founding, see Smith, *The Myth of American Isolationism: Commerce, Diplomacy, and Military Affairs in the Early Republic*.

acknowledging the role of national interest in foreign policy, it manifests a realism that understands that politics, both domestic and international, will always be influenced by the self-regard of political actors. By defending the traditional law of nations, it shows a sensible appreciation for a customary body of principles that had developed over a long period of time and served our civilization well by helping to protect peace and justice among nations. And by affirming both the legitimacy of revolutions against oppressive governments and the legitimacy of assisting such revolutions, it shows respect for the natural rights teaching of the Declaration of Independence.

By giving each of these considerations its proper due, Hamilton's account of foreign policy avoids the pitfalls of the narrower, more partial approaches that often inform—or rather impoverish—our contemporary discourse.

- Hamiltonian foreign policy is realistic insofar as it acknowledges the importance of national self-interest, but it is not an amoral realism that refuses to see the importance of morality in foreign policy.

- Hamiltonian foreign policy has a place for high ideals, but it is not a foolish idealism that believes foreign policy cannot be moral unless it is animated primarily by altruism.

- Hamilton's approach is neither "interventionist" nor "non-interventionist." It respects the right of every people to determine for itself its own form of government but recognizes that under the right circumstances, America may properly intervene in the politics of other nations in order to promote the cause of liberty and justice.

In sum, Hamilton's approach can do justice to both American principles and American interests. It can accommodate both our aspiration to stand for universal standards of right and our need to defend our own security and well-being. It is therefore an account of foreign policy that contemporary Americans can confidently embrace as their own.

*—**Carson Holloway, PhD** is an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, and chairs the B. Kenneth Simon Center for Principles and Politics' Council of Academic Advisors at The Heritage Foundation.*