3 The Founders’ Era consensus
‘A Hercules in the cradle’\footnote{1}

Quinn, Adam. US Foreign Policy in Context: National Ideology from the Founders to the Bush Doctrine (Routledge, 2010). Ch. 3, pp. 31-60.

Introduction

The American states became independent in 1776 or 1783, depending on whether one adopts the American or the British perspective. They did so in substantial part due to international factors. First, the push by the colonies’ residents for independence was spurred by tax disputes stemming from the funding of wars to secure and expand the British colonial position in North America, the most proximate being the Seven Years’ War (1756–63). Though keen on the idea of expanding their holdings on the continent at the expense of the French and their Indian allies, and willing to contribute directly to the fighting itself, the colonists bridled at ‘taxation without representation’ and the wider issue of British control over American destiny symbolized by it. There was thus a causal line of sorts between the Franco-British wars in North America and Britain’s split with its colonies.\footnote{2}

A second international factor, arising after the outbreak of armed conflict, was France’s support for the American fight for independence. Spurred by its broader agenda of rivalry with Britain in the European and global arenas, France signed a treaty of alliance with the Americans in February 1778, after the colonists’ victory at Saratoga had signalled the military viability of their independence struggle. This broadened the Revolutionary War into an international conflict, providing the Americans with crucial French military support while simultaneously diverting British resources to other theatres where the hostility of France, and its ally Spain, might pose a threat. It is therefore fair to conclude that American independence owed a great deal to the operation of the European balance of power.\footnote{3}

This chapter begins its analysis immediately after the attainment of independence, when the newly free American states had to define their relationships with each other, and their collective relationship with the world. The former question was ultimately resolved with the creation of the Union, a project justified in significant part by arguments pointing to international considerations. The US then faced a series of challenges in its relationship with the international system, most especially: (1) how to manage diplomacy with its embittered former colonial master, Britain, (2) how to react to revolutionary turmoil in France, which stirred a colossal wave of war that swept across Europe and beyond, and (3) how, once it had been decided to attempt
to do so, to maintain US neutrality in the midst of a global war centred on titanic Franco-British enmity. Having survived this period of international instability, the United States then laid the basis for its policy through the remainder of the nineteenth century with the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine in December 1823.

The chapter argues that the founding leaders of the United States made decisions that in the end reflected a reasonable interpretation of the national interest, given the national and international context. What emerged was, first, the Union between the American states, and then – after some heated debate – a bipartisan policy of detached non-entanglement with regard to European rivalries and ultimately a spheres-of-influence demarcation of global authority in the form of Monroe’s pronouncement. Given that the overarching argument of this book points to a habitual American aversion to the realist mindset, it should be made clear that the argument of this chapter is not that the Founders’ Era represented a period of policy entirely at odds with a realist reading of foreign policy. What it does argue is that the national and international circumstances of the early United States invited its leaders to resolve their founding policy choices not by conscious and explicit engagement with the global balance of power but by mentally withdrawing from it into a local theatre in which the US itself was increasingly unrivalled. Within North America, the United States resolved the problem of potential power rivalries through Union, thus abolishing the independent coexistence of sovereign entities that might have necessitated the armed rivalry of interests in an anarchical setting – in essence, a ‘balance of power’ as international relations traditionally understands the term. In relation to the rest of the world, the Americans’ agreed resolution was exclusion of Europeans from the Americas and a strict taboo against American involvement in European alliances.

The chapter suggests that while these solutions were indeed realistic responses to the circumstances faced by the United States in this period, they were justified ideologically in a way that intellectually ‘removed’ the United States from the global theatre. In the process they obviated the need for America to conceptualize its international role as one of operation within a competitive system of states pursuing rival interests or, in shorthand, the global/European ‘balance of power’. The language used to justify US policy served instead to instil the idea that American interests, and the values underpinning them, were not so much in competition with those of the European states that made up the core of the international system, as essentially separate from them. Thus, the Founders’ Era, while on one level generating ostensibly realistic policy, also laid the ideological foundations for an American approach to foreign policy that would last a good deal longer and that would militate against subsequent American engagement with the world on balance-of-power terms.

The chapter assembles this argument in the following sequential steps. First, it establishes the national and international context in which the Founders operated. Second, it shows that the Union itself was the product of
aversion to looking to 'the balance of power' as a sound basis for international order. Third, it analyses in some detail the early foreign policy problems faced by the United States, largely a result of spillover from the bellicose rivalries of Europe. Fourth, it then shows how what it calls the 'Founders' Era consensus' on foreign policy emerged, settling earlier disputes between rival political leaders through agreement around the principles of separation and non-entanglement. Finally, it highlights the Monroe Doctrine's role in establishing the principles of this consensus on a hemispheric scale, setting a course for US foreign policy for decades to come. All told, these sections combine to show that avoiding participation in the balance-of-power system of global order, an objective aided by geography, was central to the foundational foreign policy of the United States.

National and international context

The United States was born large but not strong. Americans had won independence not by equalling the British in wealth or military capability — though they did achieve notable battlefield successes at Saratoga and Yorktown — but through a mixture of attrition, foreign support and superior staying power. Once independent, the states were not, strategically speaking, in a position of any great strength; though there was little likelihood they could ever be re-subjugated, they remained vulnerable to military and economic pressure from more powerful European states. Britain retained a presence in North America through its ownership of Canada, and through a series of military outposts within what was, on paper, US territory, de facto possession of which it retained for some years after American independence. To the west, Spain's ownership of the Louisiana territory, though less daunting than the British presence, nevertheless presented a further potential source of vulnerability.

The international system of the 1780s was dominated by European powers. Indeed, through their development of the modern 'state' itself, these European nations were the creators of much that constitutes the 'international system' as subsequent thinkers have understood it. The most significant powers were Britain and France, with a weakening Spain also a significant force. In the east, Russia had steadily risen in power and prominence, attaining the status of great power within the European system. Between France and Russia lay Austria, as well as several lesser powers including the Netherlands and the precursors of the unified German state.

All the greatest powers of Europe were monarchies of one form or another, though with some variation in what that meant in practice, ranging from the British king's relative accountability to elected institutions to the autocratic tsarism of Russia. These states competed with one another for power — meaning a mixture of territory, treasure and control — through frequent wars. Their wars took place in Europe itself and also on other continents, the fighting sometimes done by colonists and other proxies, as in the conflicts
between Britain and France in North America. To the inhabitants of the newly independent America, therefore, European politics was associated chiefly with two things, monarchy and war – a perception that was not altogether unfair. The European balance of power was viewed as an amoral – perhaps even immoral – mechanism through which kings and tyrants fought bloody conflicts of self-interest.

American independence was based upon a strident assault on monarchical legitimacy, asserting an extensive programme of rights possessed by individuals even in their dealings with a king. This was, of course, a challenge to one of the pillars of the European order, one of the reasons why the British were keen to resist it. The monarchical basis of that order was disturbed again, more grievously, in 1789 with the commencement of the French Revolution, which brought with it a long and vicious cycle of wars throughout the European continent itself. The story of US foreign policy in the Founders' Era is an account of how it dealt with the old, established European order, the putative new order announced by the French Revolution, and war between the proponents of each to gain the upper hand. It is thus, in short, the story of how Americans sought to manage their relationship to the European balance of power.

Prior to the question of how the United States might relate to Europe, however, was that of how the states should relate to one another. From independence until 1788–89 they operated under the Articles of Confederacy. The central authority established under the Articles, the Congress, struggled to offer coherent government, due to a shortage of powers. Specifically, it could not legislate directly for individuals, levy direct taxes or regulate trade. For funds it relied on requisitions from state governments. The thirteen states each possessed a single vote, with nine required for approval of important matters such as treaties, and amendments to the Articles themselves requiring unanimity. Such constraints reflected the intention at the time of the Articles' formulation that the states should retain their 'sovereignty, freedom and independence'. The arrangement was, in effect, as one of the Articles' drafters described it, more 'a firm league of friendship' than a true union.\(^5\)

Such an arrangement produced predictable weakness of central authority. Demands for money from state governments often went unheeded. Preoccupied with local affairs, the states neglected to appoint representatives to Congress promptly, and as a result it met irregularly and unproductively. The nation's weightier political figures gravitated to state governments, where real power lay. In the absence of revenue, the debts of the recent war went unpaid, and America's overseas credit rating sank. Worse, it became clear that the national authority was not competent to quell civil disorder, relying instead on the loosely coordinated efforts of state militias. Shays' Rebellion, a revolt against debt collection by farmers in Massachusetts in 1786–87, led many to fear a breakdown of basic order. These fears were intertwined with a sense of vulnerability to threats from abroad. In retaining its fortified posts within the north-western border of the US, Britain cited as justification America's failure
to enforce payment of debts owed by Americans to British subjects. London also imposed severe restrictions on American trade with the British Empire, aiming to impart a retrospective lesson on the benefits of imperial inclusion. The central government’s inability to enforce the payment of the debts even if it chose to, or to retaliate economically against Britain’s slights, reinforced the perception of impotence.

It was in this context that the movement for a new constitution arose. Two of the most significant actors were Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, whose backgrounds could scarcely have been more different. Hamilton was an outsider and upstart: an illegitimate boy from the West Indies who had propelled himself upward into the American elite through service as George Washington’s wartime aide-de-camp and a good marriage into New York society. Notable for administrative flair, bountiful mental energy and an argumentative streak, by the mid-1780s he was making a reputation for himself in Congress and the New York Assembly. Madison, by contrast, was the scion of a line of Virginia planters needing nothing on the scale of Hamilton’s luck and self-promotion to get ahead. Still, he too had ‘found himself’ during the Revolution, having been drifting unenthusiastically towards the law before it. He spent it not on the battlefield but as an elected representative, becoming acquainted in the process with Thomas Jefferson, who was a few years older and became a mentor of sorts. Madison shared with Hamilton a gift for the written word, a mastery of detail and a formidable work ethic. But while the adoptive New Yorker was a natural executive, the Virginian’s talents were those of a parliamentarian. No great orator, Madison nevertheless built a reputation as a quiet but relentlessly logical debater who could extract results from assemblies.

Both men played indispensable roles in bringing about the new constitution. First, their efforts were instrumental in engineering a full-scale constitutional convention at Philadelphia in 1787 on the basis of a loose mandate to revise the Articles. Madison’s ‘Virginia plan’ then served as the starting point for designing a federal government with the powers to levy direct taxes, regulate trade and raise armed forces. Finally, each then put in a heroic performance at the special assemblies elected in their respective home states to consider the Constitution, ultimately turning around hostile majorities led by powerful local figures to deliver ratification. In the course of this battle for a ‘yes’ vote, the pair collaborated on The Federalist Papers, a series of pseudonymous pamphlets published first in New York and then more widely, setting out the catechism of arguments in favour of the Constitution. The judiciary and others have since used arguments contained therein as one of the clearest windows available into the Founders’ intentions. In no small part, the rationale presented in the arguments of The Federalist Papers was founded in ideological propositions concerning foreign policy and the international system. More specifically, the Union’s architects argued for it as a means of avoiding the replication of Europe’s balance-of-power system in America.
The Union as a means of excluding the balance-of-power system

Whether rightly or wrongly, the Founders considered the wars that had afflicted North America prior to independence to be something inflicted upon them by British rule: the tie to Britain, they argued, had dragged them into the grinding machine of European power rivalry, contrary to Americans’ own interests.\(^8\) Independence was a chance to be free of this kind of warfare, but attaining that objective would require keeping the states together. If the dysfunctional order provided by the Articles faltered, the states might fragment into regional confederacies. Hamilton, Madison and their fellow ‘federalist’ campaigners held up the spectre of this outcome as the likely consequence of rejecting their proposed new Union. Coexistence of separate confederacies, they argued, would inevitably generate conflict. Just as in Europe, rivalries over commerce and power would sow discord, which opportunistic politicians might then inflame into war. Further, a divided America could be manipulated by outside powers, worsening instability. Thus, the failure of the Union would result in the replication, in even more unstable form, of the European balance of power.

Jefferson missed the Philadelphia convention due to a diplomatic posting in Paris, but in later reflection he provided a neat summary of the case for Union. The Articles, he said, had been ‘found insufficient, as treaties of alliance generally are, to enforce compliance’. But if the wartime bond were to expire and ‘each state to become sovereign and independent in all things’, he argued, ‘it could not but occur to everyone that these separate independencies, like the petty States of Greece, would be eternally at war with each other, & would become at length the mere partisans and satellites of the leading powers of Europe’.\(^9\)

This retrospective analysis of Jefferson’s matched what Hamilton had been arguing even before independence was won. In 1781, still only in his mid-20s, Hamilton was warning in newspapers of the prospect of internecine strife in the absence of strong union. ‘Political societies, in close neighbourhood, must either be strongly united under one government, or there will infallibly exist emulations and quarrels,’ he argued, a fact which flowed from ‘human nature’. As some American states grew ‘populous, rich and powerful’, he noted, this would ‘inspire ambition and nourish ideas of separation and independence’. Though it would be ‘their true interest to preserve the union’, they would likely be led by ‘vanity and self-importance’ to ‘place themselves at the head of particular confederacies independent of the general one’:

A schism once introduced, competitions of boundary and rivalships of commerce will easily afford pretexts for war. European powers may have inducements for fomenting these divisions and playing us off against each other ... The particular confederacies, leaguing themselves with rival nations, will naturally be involved in their disputes; into which they will
be the more readily tempted by the hope of making acquisitions upon each other, and upon the colonies of the powers with whom they are respectively at enmity.\textsuperscript{10}

Madison expressed such anxieties similarly early. Without a sufficiently empowered central government, he told the Continental Congress in 1783, relations between the states would be poisonous. Minutes record his ominous prediction of how events would then unfold:

The consequence would be a rupture of the Confederacy. The Eastern States would at sea be powerful & rapacious, the South opulent and weak ... Reprisals would be instituted. Foreign aid would be called in first by the weaker, then by the stronger side; & finally both made subservient to the wars & politics of Europe.\textsuperscript{11}

Both Hamilton and Madison hoped for a time that the existing Congress might successfully be exhorted to show the requisite energy, but soon concluded that the structural barriers to strong central action were insurmountable so long as the Articles remained in force. '[T]he present system neither has nor deserves advocates,' Madison concluded, 'and if some very strong props are not applied will quickly tumble to the ground.' Unless something was done soon, he warned: 'The bulk of the people will probably prefer ... a partition of the Union into three more practicable and energetic Governments.' Though 'a lesser evil' than monarchy, he wrote, such fragmentation would be:

so great a one that I hope the danger of it will rouse all the real friends of the Revolution to exert themselves in favour of such an organisation of the Confederacy, as will perpetuate the Union, and redeem the honor of the Republican name.\textsuperscript{12}

At Philadelphia, he touched again on the theme of inevitable destructive rivalry between the states if disunited. Seeking to convince the representatives of smaller states that their interests would be safer under a strong union, he warned that under an anarchical order they would likely be caught in the crossfire of big-state rivalries:

Among individuals of superior eminence & weight in Society, rivalships [are] much more frequent than coalitions. Among independent nations, pre-eminent over their neighbours, the same remark [is] verified. Carthage and Rome tore one another to pieces instead of uniting their forces to devour the weaker nations of the earth. The Houses of Austria & France were hostile as long as they remained the greatest powers of Europe. England & France have succeeded to the pre-eminence & to the enmity. To this principle we perhaps owe our liberty ... \textsuperscript{13}
These arguments reveal essentially realist assumptions on the part of both Madison and Hamilton regarding international behaviour. Both were sceptical as to the possibility of peaceful cooperation between nations in the absence of some higher authority. Only through Union could America’s states coexist peacefully. The alternative was a balance of power analogous to Europe’s, and that, history taught, meant regular war.

In the campaign for ratification, Hamilton used several of the earlier Federalist Papers to make this realist case for the Union. Striking a pessimistic moral tone, he attributed the inevitability of a clash between separate states to the fundamental drives of men and nations, which rendered them incapable of living peacefully side by side without a higher power to maintain order. A man would have to be ‘far gone in Utopian speculations’, he noted, to doubt that a disunited America in ‘partial confederacies’ would see ‘frequent and violent contests’:

To presume a want of motives for such contests as an argument against their existence would be to forget that men are ambitious, vindictive, and rapacious. To look for a continuation of harmony between a number of independent unconnected sovereignties, situated in the same neighbourhood, would be to disregard the uniform course of human events, and to set at defiance the accumulated experience of ages.

‘The causes of hostility among nations are innumerable,’ he argued, including ‘the love of power or the desire of pre-eminence and dominion – the jealousy of power, or the desire of equality and safety’ as well as ‘the rivalships and competitions of commerce between commercial nations’ and ‘others ... which take their origin entirely in private passions; in the attachments, enmities, interests, hopes and fears of leading individuals of the communities of which they are members’. Thus, the ‘inducements’ for American states to make war would be ‘precisely the same inducements which have, at different times, deluged in blood all the nations of the world’.

Thus, Hamilton’s case to the voting public was that relying on reason and goodwill to guarantee peace was dangerous. His darker vision did not suggest that nations, or indeed people, were necessarily inherently malevolent, but that they were jealous guards of their power and would seek opportunities to expand it. While there was ‘nothing absurd or impracticable in the idea of a league or alliance between independent nations’, such ties were ‘subject to the usual vicissitudes of war, of observance and non-observance, as the interests or passions of the contracting powers dictate’. Though such arrangements had periodically sprung up in Europe, the ‘fondly hoped for benefits ... were never realized’. Despite the complex multiple alliances Europeans formed with ‘a view to establishing the equilibrium of power and the peace of that part of the world’, he observed, ‘they were scarcely formed before they were broken, giving an instructive lesson to mankind about how little dependence is to be placed on treaties which have no other sanction than the obligations
of good faith; and which oppose general considerations of peace and justice to the impulse of any immediate interest and passion.\textsuperscript{18}

One could also point, he noted, to America’s own experience with the Articles of Confederacy. Optimists had predicted that there would be compliance with federal authority because ‘a sense of common interest would preside over the conduct of the respective members’. Yet the Articles’ ineffectuality in practice had shown that such optimism ‘betrayed an ignorance of the true springs by which human conduct is actuated’. The reason domestic government was necessary was that ‘the passions of men will not conform to the dictates of reason and justice, without constraint’. ‘Has it been found that bodies of men act with more rectitude or greater disinterestedness than individuals? ... The contrary of this has been inferred by all accurate observers of the conduct of mankind.’

There is in the nature of sovereign power an impatience of control, that disposes those who are invested with the exercise of it, to look with an evil eye upon all external attempts to restrain or direct its operations. ... [I]n every political association which is formed upon the principle of uniting in a common interest a number of lesser sovereignties, there will be found a kind of excentric [sic] tendency ... Power controlled or abridged is almost always the rival and enemy of that power by which it is controlled and abridged.\textsuperscript{19}

Such ruminations on the nature of men and states offered ample basis for pessimism by themselves. But the clinching factor was the strategic influence of Europe. Its potent and hostile states stood ready to foster discord between the Americans as a means of advancing their own interests. ‘America, if not connected at all, or only by the feeble tie of a simple league offensive and defensive,’ Hamilton argued, ‘would by the operation of ... opposite and jarring alliances be gradually entangled in all the pernicious labyrinths of European politics and wars ... \textit{Divide et impera} must be the motto of every nation that either hates, or fears us.’\textsuperscript{20}

Thus, disunion would bring ruin to America’s interests. Secure union, on the other hand, offered America unique opportunities, given its geographical advantages. ‘If we are wise enough to preserve the Union,’ he predicted,

... we may for ages enjoy an advantage similar to that of an insulated situation. Europe is at a great distance from us. Her colonies in our vicinity are too much disproportioned in strength, to be able to give us any dangerous annoyance. Extensive military establishments cannot, in this position, be necessary to our security.\textsuperscript{21}

Madison echoed this thought when he argued in Federalist 41 that the United States, distant from ‘the powerful nations of the world’, could enjoy the same ‘happy security’ Britain had from Europe by virtue of its being an island.
Without union, however, it would suffer ‘the miseries springing from her internal jealousies’, while simultaneously ‘plentiful addition of evils would have their source in that relation in which Europe stands to this quarter of the earth, and which no other quarter of the earth bears to Europe’.  

Madison and Hamilton were both nationalists, and as such there was a strong strain of concern for national dignity in their writings. They feared that, without union, the disorganized confederacy of states risked contempt in the eyes of foreigners. In 1778, Hamilton wrote a letter of remarkable self-confidence – he was in his early 20s and a mere lieutenant colonel in the Continental Army – to Governor George Clinton of New York, lambasting him and his fellow governors for damaging America’s reputation abroad through disregard for the orders of Congress. ‘Realize to yourself,’ he implored acridly, ‘the consequences of having a Congress despised at home and abroad,’

... How can we hope for success in our European negotiations, if the nations of Europe have no confidence in the wisdom and vigor, of the great Continental Government? This is the object on which their eyes are fixed, hence it is America will derive importance or insignificance, in their estimation.

In his pamphleteering later, after leaving active service, he revisited the theme more publicly. ‘There is something noble and magnificent in the perspective of a great Federal Republic, closely linked in the pursuit of a common interest, tranquil and prosperous at home, respectable abroad,’ he observed, ‘but there is something proportionally diminutive and contemptible in the prospect of a number of petty states, with only the appearance of union, jarring, jealous and perverse, without any determined direction, fluctuating and unhappy at home, weak and insignificant by their dissentions, in the eyes of other nations.’

Like many Americans of the time, Hamilton resented the perceived attitude of Europeans towards his adopted homeland, and he aspired in the long run to force reconsideration on their part:

The superiority [Europe] has long maintained, has tempted her to plume herself as the Mistress of the World ... It belongs to us to vindicate the honor of the human race, and to teach that assuming brother moderation ... Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness! Let the thirteen States, bound together in a strict and indissoluble union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all trans-Atlantic force or influence, and be able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world.

There are two central points of significance to register from this section, with an eye on the overarching thesis of the book. First, the foundation of the
Union was based to a significant extent upon a realistic approach to international politics. Presupposing states to be motivated by power and interest, it was concluded that war between Americans would be inevitable if a European-style balance of power between separate confederacies were allowed to take shape. It would also prove impossible under such circumstances to force Europeans to respect America, a source of concern to nationalist sentiment. Second, the solution derived from this analysis was that a firm Union was necessary. No other means was believed capable of overcoming the problems of international anarchy and producing peace. Thus, the foundation of the United States was brought about in part as a result of Americans' conscious rejection of the balance of power as a desirable system of international order.

**Trapped between titans: a divided America's vulnerability to European power politics**

Once the Union had been established, the leaders of the nation had to decide how the newly cohesive entity they had created would relate to the international system. There were three key, interconnected issues to be addressed, each of which generated intense disagreement at the highest political level. The first was the relationship with Britain, proprietor of the empire from which Americans had just broken away. The second was how to respond to the French Revolution. The third was navigating a course through the global war between Britain and France that would dominate the quarter century beginning from 1789.

As had been universally assumed during the Constitution's drafting and ratification, the unifying figure George Washington was unanimously elected as the first president, taking office in 1789. Hamilton, who had carefully cultivated his relationship with his former commander since leaving the army, was appointed Secretary of the Treasury, with a brief to repair the national finances and erect a new economic architecture. Madison, also close to the new president, went to the House of Representatives, where he began to push for the Bill of Rights, having conceded the necessity of one during the ratification debate. Jefferson returned from France in 1789 to discover that he had been nominated to serve as Secretary of State, a position he accepted only with a certain unease. Tensions between Jefferson and Hamilton would come to define the first Washington term. The term would end with Madison and Hamilton thoroughly alienated from one another and the former in partnership with Jefferson in constructing, with increasing openness, a party of opposition to Washington's administration.

Jefferson was a figure of some political weight before he took the Secretary of State's office, famous as the man who had drafted the Declaration of Independence. He had previously been governor of Virginia, generally admired for a legacy of liberal legislation, in spite of question marks over his leadership during wartime crises. Like Washington and Madison, he was born to a Virginian inheritance of land and slaves. Possessed of a range of cultural
and scientific interests, he cultivated the aura of Renaissance man, gifted and
learned across the board. Critical of the aristocratic extravagances of Euro-
pean elites, his dismissive attitude to formality revealed in its own way a
sense of easy entitlement to his place in the upper tier of American society. 28

Even before they differed on policy, it was easy to predict that Jefferson's
persona might rub Hamilton's the wrong way. His chosen profile was that of
the effortlessly cultured yet humble face of inherited privilege. Having beaten
grim odds to become a self-made success, the insecure dandy Hamilton was
psychologically primed to find the image of a wine-loving, slave-owning
landed gent turned populist hero less sincere and more irritating than the
straightforward aristocratic bearing of someone like Washington. As they
fell out over policy, he duly came to view 'the Sage of Monticello' as a
dangerously ambitious visionary and hypocrite.

British antagonism

First among the pressing issues facing the new government was that of com-
mercial relations with the former motherland. After a brief flirtation with
conciliation, the British government under Pitt the Younger had taken to
squeezing US shipping, refusing to permit it freedoms it had previously
enjoyed in trading with British territories. American production was oriented
towards agriculture and natural resources, and dependent on British manu-
factured goods paid for with export revenues. This meant that salvaging this
commercial relationship was an obvious priority.

Adding further to the importance of British trade, immediately upon taking
office Hamilton persuaded Congress to use the national government's new
powers to levy a tariff on imports. This revenue stream was used to fund
the national debt, which had been assumed from the individual states by the
federal government and refinanced with fresh loans from abroad. This mea-
sure, combined with the controversial establishment of a national bank,
served to increase the liquidity of the US economy and restore the credi-
ability of American credit, but also made the continuity of revenue from
imports essential to the nation's economic health. 29 At this stage Madison
shared Hamilton's conviction that trade was economically essential, and also
his anticipation that, in the longer term, a move might be made to assist
industrialization by means of government tariffs and subsidies. 30

Jefferson, however, was not so convinced of the merits of mercantilism. If it
were possible, he wished in principle that the US might 'practise neither
commerce nor navigation, but to stand with respect to Europe precisely on
the footing of China. We should thus avoid wars ...'. But he accepted that this
was 'theory only', because public opinion's 'decided taste for navigation and
commerce' made government action to curtail trade politically impossible. 31
Hence, though ideologically out of sympathy with the commercial imperative,
Jefferson accepted indirectly the need to fight for America's commercial rights
and interests. Though in an ideal world, 'we might indulge ourselves in
speculating whether commerce contributes to the happiness of mankind', he wrote in a 1784 letter to Washington, in the real world America was obliged to 'endeavour to share as large a portion as we can of this modern source of wealth & power'.

The task before the first national government was thus somehow to pressure the British to grant more rights to American commerce without provoking a ruinous trade war. Part of the original purpose of empowering the new federal government had been to open up the possibility of forcing such concessions from Britain. Yet the US depended sufficiently on British trade that if the confrontation escalated, then the damage to the emergent American economy could be catastrophic. Hamilton, as architect of the import-dependent financial system, was especially sensitive to this risk, and tried to steer the administration away from commercial retaliation. Jefferson, less concerned about the threat to Hamilton's fiscal and monetary house of cards, and with Madison as an ally in Congress, pushed for tough retaliatory tariffs, which he rather optimistically argued would make Britain climb down. One of the final acts of his troubled tenure as Secretary of State was to submit a report to Congress openly advocating commercial tit-for-tat. In it he argued that:

Free commerce and navigation are not to be given in exchange for restrictions and vexations ... It is not to the moderation and justice of others we are to trust for fair and equal access to the market with our productions ... but to our own means of independence, and the firm will to use them.

This was one of a number of major splits in the administration in a period in which the Secretaries of State and the Treasury took to denouncing one another through newspaper proxies. The row over British commerce was symbolic of broader disagreement over America's social direction and, therefore, the merits of Hamilton's financial system. This period also saw a final break between Hamilton and Madison, their earlier quarrels over the Bank and the federal assumption of war debts hardening into fundamental opposition on Madison's part to the central thrust of Hamiltonian policy.

Though successful in assembling the nucleus of an opposition movement, Jefferson and Madison were thwarted on anti-British tariffs by Hamilton's powerful influence over Congress and the weight of Washington's reputation. Further, Hamilton undermined Jefferson's authority as Secretary of State by establishing his own back-channel relations with George Beckwith, an unofficial representative of Britain in America, in order to ensure the avoidance of a breach. Reassuring the British through this channel that talk of sanctions would come to nothing, Hamilton minimized the risk of a diplomatic crisis, though of course he also undercut any prospect of the British caving in to the threat. By Beckwith's account, Hamilton explained to him that Madison, the public driver of a confrontational policy, was 'very little acquainted with
the world ... [H]e has the same end in view that I have, and so have those gentlemen who act with him, but their mode of attaining it is very different.\textsuperscript{38}

The first major point of disagreement between America's early leaders was thus on whether to approach the relationship with Britain chiefly through confrontation or appeasement. Hamilton favoured the latter course, and in the 1790s was largely victorious.

\textbf{The French Revolution}

Friction with Britain was a foreseeable consequence of American independence. Less predictable was the cataclysmic international context created by the fallout from the French Revolution. This had begun to unfold in 1789, while Jefferson was still in Paris to see it. By the time the Washington administration was up and running it had gathered pace, and it entered its radical republican phase in 1792. The following year King Louis was executed by the revolutionary government and war broke out between France and most of the other states of Europe, including Britain. France's turmoil presented difficult choices to America's new leaders. Of most immediate significance was the fact that the United States still had a treaty obligation left over from the War of Independence, calling for wartime support of France. Was this still binding even though 'France' was no longer the same political entity with which the Americans had agreed the alliance? Even more profound, there was the strategic, ideological and moral question of whether France's republican cause, now pitched in existential combat against hostile monarchies, represented an international extension of the Americans' own fight for liberty.

These questions divided the cabinet. Hamilton, rather sceptical of the Revolution itself, sought to convince the president that the treaty alliance had been rendered void by the change of regime. Jefferson, more sympathetic to the revolutionaries' cause, argued that both the 'tribunal of our consciences' and 'the opinion of the world' obliged America to consider the alliance still binding.\textsuperscript{39} He sought to play down the material consequences of such a position, suggesting that America's only obligation might be assisting in the defence of France's West Indian colonies, and that it was not clear that the French were asking even for that.

Present in France at the first outbreak of Revolution, Jefferson had a declared sympathy with its aims. Before his departure for home, he was optimistic regarding the events unfolding before him:

\begin{quote}
I have so much confidence [in] the good sense of man, and his qualifications for self-government, that I am never afraid of the issue where reason is left free to exert her force; and I will agree to be stoned as a false prophet if all does not end well in this country. Nor will it end with this country. Hers is but the first chapter of the history of European liberty.\textsuperscript{40}
\end{quote}
Equating the revolutionary cause with that of liberty, and seeing historical forces at work that would lead to a wave of liberation in Europe, Jefferson saw America’s interests as entwined with this cause, and therefore with France’s. Taking up his position as Secretary of State, he wrote to a French friend that among ‘the circumstances which reconcile me to my new position ... the most powerful is the opportunities it will give me of cementing the friendship between our two nations’.

As a result of his deep sympathy for the underlying principles of the Revolution, at least as he perceived them, he was prone to intemperate statements of support even as the political atmosphere in France shifted from reformism to radicalism and finally to bloody ferment. As war was breaking out across Europe, he wrote to an associate to defend the Revolution in spite of the trend towards demagogy and political execution that ultimately culminated in the Reign of Terror. ‘The liberty of the whole earth’, he wrote, was ‘depending on the issue of the contest’:

... and was ever such a prize won with so little innocent blood? My own affections have been deeply wounded by some martyrs to this cause, but rather than it should have failed, I would have seen half the earth desolated. Were there but an Adam & an Eve left in every country, & left free, it would be better than as it is now.

This was not a momentary aberration on Jefferson’s part. Late in his life, though by that stage well aware of what had followed for France in the form of terror, coup and empire, he stood by his early support for the Revolution. In his Autobiography, he excused the misjudgements of the revolutionaries, or at least those who had launched the first wave of revolution: ‘They were unconscious of (for who could foresee?) the melancholy sequel of their well-meant perseverance.’ Still he identified the early Revolution’s cause with America’s, stating that it represented an ‘appeal to the rights of man, which had been made in the U.S. [and] was taken up by France, first of the European nations’. He stood by his prediction that the cause of liberty was ‘irresistible’ and that ‘the condition of man thro’ the civilized world will be finally and greatly ameliorated by its spread.’

In 1823, as in 1793, he appeared at ease with the human cost of liberty’s progress. Writing to the sceptically conservative John Adams, he told him that in his view, ‘rivers of blood must yet flow, and years of desolation pass over. Yet the object is worth rivers of blood, and years of desolation for what inheritance so valuable can man leave to his posterity?’

Hamilton, as well as others within the administration at the time of the Revolution, differed from this view, to put it mildly. Contrary to what Jefferson implied, they early on sensed potential for tragedy in France’s political upheaval, and expressed that fear aloud. In 1789, Hamilton wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette, alongside whom he had served in the War of Independence, that he viewed events in France ‘with a mixture of pleasure and apprehension’. 
As a friend to mankind and liberty I rejoice in the efforts which you are making to establish it, while I fear much for the final success of the attempts ... I dread the vehement character of your people, whom I fear you may find it more easy to bring on than to keep within proper bounds, once you have put them in motion; I dread the interested refractoriness of your nobles, who cannot all be gratified and who may be unwilling to submit to the requisite sacrifices. And I dread the reveries of your philosophic politicians ... who being mere speculatists may aim at more refinement than suits either with human nature or the composition of your Nation.46

This divergence in levels of enthusiasm for the Revolution made Hamilton and his supporters suspicious of Jefferson's enthusiasm for the French cause. By inference from his views on that topic, they feared that the Secretary of State might steer America into the war in Europe out of ideological sympathy with France — go to war, as he would see it, to advance the cause of global 'liberty'. As the unpleasant reality of the Terror unfolded, the Hamiltonians, increasingly known by the factional label 'Federalists', were unnerved by the solidarity shown by a sizeable body of Americans for the French cause. Numerous 'Democratic' clubs and societies sprang up throughout the country in the 1790s and looked to Jefferson to represent pro-French sentiment in public life. These societies overlapped with the informal machinery of the 'Republican' party of opposition being assembled steadily by Madison, acting as Jefferson's right hand.

Already resentful after clashes over the domestic agenda, Hamilton became convinced that Jefferson's faction represented a dangerously pro-French fifth column in the foreign policy debate. Their views on foreign policy, he wrote excitably, were 'unsound & dangerous. They have a womanish attachment to France and a womanish resentment against Great Britain.' If 'left to pursue their own course', he proclaimed, the pair would produce 'in less than six months an open War between the U States and Great Britain.' Insisting that he himself had 'a due sense' of America's debt to the French nation for its previous aid, he argued that there was nevertheless 'a wide difference between this and implicating ourselves in all her politics; between bearing good will to her, & hating and wrangling with all those whom she hates'. Jefferson, he alleged, had come into the Cabinet 'electrified ... with attachment to France and with the project of knitting the two countries in the closest political bands'.47

In a 1794 memo, Hamilton complained that 'the effect of Experience' had been 'much less than could reasonably have been expected' with regard to popular views of France. The 'predilection' for the Revolution, he lamented, was still 'extensive and ardent', and continued to attract those in a position to know better. 'The error entertained is not on a mere speculative question,' he warned. 'The French Revolution is a political convulsion that in a great or less degree shakes the whole civilized world and it is of real consequence to
the principles and of course to the happiness of a Nation to estimate it rightly.\textsuperscript{48} He had earlier argued, in favour of a policy of neutrality, that ‘gratitude’ for assistance in the War of Independence offered no better a basis for signing up to France’s wars than ideological sympathy. France, he noted with realist cold blood, ‘in assisting us was and ought to have been influenced by considerations relative to its own interest’.\textsuperscript{49}

Though Washington accepted Jefferson’s argument that the treaty of alliance was still binding in spite of the change of regime in Paris, Hamilton did convince him, after heated debate with Jefferson in cabinet, to issue a ‘Proclamation of Neutrality’\textsuperscript{50} As well as declaring neutrality on the part of the government itself, the proclamation threatened prosecution for any Americans who independently sought to involve themselves in the conflict on either side. Jefferson and Madison opposed the measure, arguing that the pronouncement overstepped the president’s constitutional limits, usurping Congressional authority to declare any state of war or, by implication, peace.\textsuperscript{51} The administration’s policy enraged pro-French forces in the country at large, who regarded the official line as the product of elitist, pro-British sentiment.

In analysing this period, it is important not to overreach as one sets up the dichotomy of positions within the cabinet. Jefferson served as Secretary of State in the very administrations his incipient party criticized, and never committed himself to US entry into the war in support of France.\textsuperscript{52} Warier than some of his supporters of the consequences of an actual war, the farthest he went was advocacy of the much vaguer notion of somehow tilting neutrality so as to make it favourable to the French, perhaps through sympathetic access to US ports.\textsuperscript{53} Meanwhile, neither administration policy nor even Hamilton personally was quite as pro-British as portrayed in Republican propaganda. While Hamilton certainly doubted the French Revolution’s virtues, his aversion to clashing with Britain was chiefly pragmatic in motive rather than the product of deep Anglophilia.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, while each leader had evident biases towards cultivating good relations with his favoured power, both were sufficiently pragmatic to see the limits imposed on either strategy by the brute fact that war would entail gross military, economic and political costs. As such, a course deliberately targeted at war was in truth the policy of neither Hamilton nor Jefferson, even if some of their supporters were less restrained.

Nevertheless, the second challenge facing the nation was clear: to decide whether the French Revolution, and the wars that flowed from it, presented a sound reason for the United States to take sides in European conflict. In short, did the American national interest encompass the cause of France, its friend during the War of Independence and now its brother in ‘liberty’?

\textit{Neutral rights in wartime}

The fact that the international system was on a war footing made it especially difficult to tread a middle course between Britain and France. The US parties’
rival desires to tilt towards either the commercially important monarchy or the ideologically sympathetic republic led to controversy over how firmly to assert America’s commercial rights as a neutral in the midst of a global war. US policy was thus poised precariously at the centre point of a see-saw of rival antagonisms, a posture that pleased neither of the belligerent great powers. The British navy being pre-eminent upon the oceans, the French were unable to transport goods freely under their own flag. As a result, they sought to use US shipping to keep supply lines open, by granting Americans the right to ship goods between France and its colonies. The British, unimpressed by such efforts to circumvent their squeeze of the enemy through embargo, began to waylay American ships plying this new trade and seize their cargoes. Predictably, such seizures prompted vocal outrage among pro-French Republicans in the United States. Invoking the principle of ‘free ships, free goods’, they insisted that America had an inviolable right as a neutral to trade with whomever it saw fit.

Jefferson and Madison, the leaders of the incipient Republican faction, had foreseen the likelihood of just such a scenario some years before the actual European war broke out. When American ships began to be interfered with, public anger at British behaviour put wind in the sails of their movement for commercial sanctions against Britain. Temperamentally averse to war, Jefferson had fostered the theory that economic sanctions could serve as an alternative. This war, in the 1790s, he told Madison, could be a test case, furnishing ‘a happy opportunity of setting another example to the world, by showing that nations may be brought to do justice by appeals to their interests as well as by appeals to arms’. The use of economic sanctions, he anticipated, ‘would work well in many ways, safely in all, & introduce between nations another umpire than arms. It would relieve us too from the risks & the horrors of cutting throats’.

Hamilton, by contrast, thought this prediction delusional. Britain, he was convinced, would never back down as Jefferson assumed. Worse, the imposition of economic sanctions in wartime – in effect a declaration of economic war – would in all likelihood provoke a hot war too, for which America was ill prepared. Faced with rising war fever in the country, Hamilton therefore sought to steer the president away from the Republicans’ preferred course. War, he warned Washington, was in danger of breaking out as a result of ‘angry and perverse passions’ rather than of ‘cool calculations of Interest’. He believed that the Republican faction was looking to manipulate the situation in order to engineer ‘a more complete and permanent alienation from Great Britain and a more close approximation to France’. Even if their leaders, such as Jefferson, didn’t support war outright, Hamilton argued, they considered it ‘a less evil than a thorough and sincere accommodation with Great Britain’.

The theory that Britain would simply agree to American demands if faced with sanctions was a ‘folly ... too great to be seriously entertained by the discerning part of those who affect to believe the position’.
She cannot do it without renouncing her pride and her dignity, without losing her consequence and weight in the scale of Nations – and consequently it is morally certain that she will not do it. A proper estimate of the operation of human passions must satisfy us that she would be less disposed to receive the law from us than from any other nation – a people recently become a nation, not long since one of her dependencies, and as yet, if a Hercules – a Hercules in the cradle.58

Americans needed to be honest with themselves – as the Republicans were not being, Hamilton thought – and accept that their position was defined by weakness, not strength. That being the case, sound policy was to avoid conflict, even if that meant enduring shoddy treatment. ‘Tis our error to overrate ourselves and underrate Great Britain,’ he warned. ‘We forget how little we can annoy and how much we may be annoyed … To precipitate a great conflict of any sort is utterly unsuited to our condition, to our strength and to our resources.’59 Hamilton was more easily reconciled to such a position because he in any case lacked the underlying sympathy for the French war effort that added fuel to the Republican argument.

While the Federalists still held sway in the 1790s, this Hamiltonian position won the day. He convinced Washington, in the face of popular opposition, to despatch John Jay to London, where he negotiated a soft treaty laying the ground rules for peace with Britain. Though Jay’s 1794 treaty obtained some limited but worthwhile concessions, there was no acceptance of the principle of American neutral shipping rights. This, combined with various concessions made to the British, caused fury in the country when the treaty became public. Motivated by the logic that almost anything was better than war, however, Washington and Hamilton rammed ratification through the Senate at speed, achieving victory by a single vote. But the country was left profoundly divided by the deal. Washington’s administration was increasingly viewed as a creature of a pro-British Federalist faction, while the Republican opposition mobilized irritation in the country at large into a solid base of support.60

The Farewell Address and the emergence of the non-alignment consensus

It was in the context of these acrimonious political divisions that Washington, already making history with his decision to relinquish power voluntarily at the end of his second term, further deepened his presidency’s historical impact with the publication of his ‘Farewell Address’. Despite the title, the ‘address’ was published via newspapers rather than delivered as a speech. Its purpose was twofold. Its first aim was to defend the Federalist/Hamiltonian policies of the administration. Its second was to craft a potentially partisan message in such a way as to avoid the appearance of partisanship. When first contemplating the address, the president was disposed to include some defensive
passages with a rather bitter and divisive quality. But, in collaboration with Hamilton, he ultimately produced instead a document that adopted a tone of unity-seeking centrism while still defending the essentials of Federalist policy. In adopting this moderated approach, America’s ruling class took the first major step towards creating the ideological framework for the consensus on foreign policy that was the ultimate product of the Founders’ Era.

The Address’s first substantive passage attacked the ‘spirit of party’, a message that served simultaneously as a veiled stab at Jefferson’s faction and also as an entreaty to Americans to consider the prevalence of political division unhealthy. The residual strength of Washington’s popular reputation aided the plausibility of striking this pose of non-partisan patriotism. The Address then turned to its primary topic: foreign policy. First, it underlined the foundational Federalist argument, dating from the push for the Constitution, that the great benefit of Union and unity at home was the exclusion of balance-of-power politics from America. That being the case, the US should regard it as imperative to avoid subjecting itself to the evils of that system via embroilment in European conflicts. Regardless of the ideological appeal of France or the commercial imperative for good relations with Britain, aligning with either politically would be disastrous. Unlike other nations, the Address noted, a united America was gifted with geographical advantages that made non-alignment genuinely viable.

The Address sought to portray its position as founded on cool reason and a sound grasp of the national interest. Neither ‘permanent, inveterate antipathies’ nor ‘passionate attachments’ for other states, it said, could form the basis of sensible policy. ‘The nation which indulges towards another an habitual hatred or an habitual fondness is in some degree a slave,’ it warned, with either ‘sufficient to lead it astray from its duty and its interest’. It was, it emphasized, important to know that it was not only grudges against others that could harm the national interest. Favouritism also risked it:

Sympathy for the favorite nation, facilitating the illusion of an imaginary common interest in cases where no real common interest exists, and infusing into one the enmities of the other, betrays the former into a participation in the quarrels and wars of the latter without adequate inducement or justification ...

This was a clear if not explicitly targeted warning of the danger presented by the Republican faction’s fondness for France. Such ‘attachment of a small or weak, towards a great and powerful nation,’ Washington warned, ‘dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter’. Thus basing its case on the need for autonomous pursuit of the US interest, the Address set forth a doctrine of strict non-alignment in dealings with the European powers. The United States, it argued, should seek to ‘extend’ its ‘commercial relations’, but its ‘great rule’ should be that in doing so it must ‘have with them as little political connection as possible’.
In justifying this maxim, the Address argued that the interests of European nations were neither identical with those of America, nor necessarily opposed to them. Rather, they were essentially separate, concerned with fundamentally different issues, in a geographically distant place:

Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities. Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course.

The United States, the address argued, was on a trajectory of growth in its power. So long as the Union held, the time was ‘not far off’ when it might be strong enough to shrug off ‘external annoyance’, compel others to respect its neutrality and ultimately ‘choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, shall counsel’. To risk war now, as some wished, would be to ‘forgo the advantages’ of America’s ‘peculiar … situation’ and ‘entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor or caprice’. This was not a position of ideologically rigid resistance to any cooperation with European states. The Address explicitly referred to the permissibility of ‘temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies’. But its central principle was that the United States’ ‘true policy’ was to ‘steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world’.

Assuredly, the address was on one level a party political document: in its advocacy of neutrality it implied that its opponents were straining to enlist as belligerent France’s ally. Jefferson and his supporters no doubt thought that analysis disingenuous, feeling the Hamiltonians had tilted towards Britain. That fact notwithstanding, the address was notable for its effort to reach out through moderate language rather than deepen division. It was neither a sharp-edged intellectual tract like The Federalist Papers, nor shrill propaganda of the sort the rival parties had exchanged in the press. Rather, it was a document aimed at mass opinion, making an explicit ideological pitch aimed at generating consensus around the central principle of non-alignment, and thus reaching out beyond the Federalist base. Absent was any detailed defence of the more controversial elements of the Federalist programme: this was an effort at mobilization of public opinion through the formulation of a new foundation for strategic consensus.

The argument made by the address was on one level pragmatic and interest-oriented, based on national and international circumstances. Yet it was also ideologically significant. It focused on the idea that European nations had ‘primary interests’ that were separate from the United States’, and with which, advantaged by geography, the US need not concern itself. This analysis implicitly dismissed alternative readings of the American interest that could
with equal plausibility have been constructed. For one, it rejected the idea, embraced by some at the time, that France was fighting a war in defence of liberty and that the US must support such a conflict as a moral duty. Transnational ideological causes that might justify war were thus ‘defined out’ of the US national interest. Likewise, it was restrained and long term in its projections. Even setting aside the question of shared ideology, short-term calculation might have led policy makers to think it worthwhile to side with one of the major European powers against the other in the hope of some territorial or other strategic gain at the loser’s expense. Instead, the Address took the view that the potential gains of any such strategy were outweighed by the risks, and that the long-term trend of growth in US power in the absence of war made a policy of neutrality and avoidance of conflict the wisest course. This was not an inevitable choice. It was based on a particular reading of America’s circumstances and how best to seek national advantage within them.

The Address was intended to be a strategic guide based on the prevailing national and international context. Though meant to be of lasting value, it was not intended as a proclamation of eternal verities. Nevertheless, the manner in which it expressed itself – in the pursuit of a wide base of political support – lent to its being read as an ideological formula of lasting resonance. Rather than locating the United States within the international balance of power and mapping a path of maximal advantage within that context, it justified American non-alignment by emphasizing America’s ‘detached’ situation, and the essentially separate character of its interests from those pursued within the rest of the European-dominated international system. Such choices in terminology and ideological tone would ultimately matter a lot.

Though spawned thanks to the operation of the balance of power, and in practice obliged by circumstance to work within it, the United States developed in the Farewell Address the basis for a tradition of thought that located the US intellectually ‘outside’ the balance-of-power system. Europeans might pursue their interests in that system – self-destructively as Americans saw it – but geographical circumstance, in Washington’s phrase, ‘invited and enabled’ the United States to think of itself as separate, in terms of both its strategic interests and its moral code.

Consensus emerges: Jefferson’s embrace of Washington’s doctrine

Hopes for the consensual spirit of the Farewell Address’s text seemed precarious during the grimly confrontational one-term Adams presidency that followed Washington. As the Federalists had foreseen quite clearly, Jay’s Treaty had moved the pro-French section of the country to outrage.63 And it was not only American Republicans who were enraged by the treaty: in the zero-sum mindset of the French Revolutionary Wars, France regarded the treaty as an American realignment behind Britain, jettisoning the Franco-American alliance. This perception was worsened by the presence of James Monroe, a Republican ultra, as the US representative in Paris, where he
fanned the flames of France’s perceived grievance instead of fighting them. Thus, the price of Hamilton’s peace with Britain was perilous breakdown in relations with France. This reached its nadir under Adams, when an undeclared naval ‘quasi-war’ erupted between the two nations. These hostilities, worsened by a botched attempt at negotiation that spawned charges of dishonour and corruption, held the US on the precipice of full war for an extended period.

The president even went so far as to authorize raising an army – under Washington’s command on paper and Hamilton’s in practice – to stand ready for the threat of invasion. These final four years of Federalist administration also witnessed the passage of draconian sedition laws – at least by American standards – targeted at the Republican opposition. Jefferson and Madison, meanwhile, reacted to being squeezed by federal authoritarianism by inciting state legislatures to threaten nullification of federal laws. The end of the crisis with France, however – thanks to Adams’s decision to break with Hamiltonian hardliners and seek a deal with Paris – brought on the implosion of the Federalist party in an orgy of internal rancour. This, as well as the superior grassroots machine assembled by Madison over the preceding decade, allowed the Republicans to triumph in the election of 1800, and Jefferson to accede to the presidency in 1801.

This ‘revolution’, as Jefferson termed it, gave the Republicans control of foreign policy for the first time, generating suspense in the country, given their history of pro-French advocacy. By the turn of the century, however, external circumstances had moved on from the debates of the Washington era. The wars of the French Revolution had elevated an autocratic general to dictatorial power in Paris: Napoleon Bonaparte was now ‘First Consul’ of France under a constitution of his own design. Within a few years he would declare himself emperor for life. The imagined fraternal bond of political values between the American and French Revolutions, central to the Democratic Societies’ activism in the 1790s, had thus been severed. Jefferson himself had moved on somewhat, too, perhaps chastened by the looming responsibilities of government as well as by events in Paris. The steady degeneration of France’s republicanism, which culminated in Bonaparte’s coup of 1799, was already apparent by the time of the Farewell Address. During Jefferson’s term as an antagonistic absentee Vice President in the Adams administration, he had already begun to edge away from his prior identification with the French cause and to advocate an even-handed neutrality rather than one tilted towards France. ‘Better to keep together as we are,’ he wrote to one associate, ‘hawl off from Europe as soon as we can, & from any attachments to any portions of it. And if we feel their power just sufficiently to hoop us together, it will be the happiest situation in which we can exist.’ During the crisis over the XYZ affair, not long before Bonaparte’s coup, Jefferson wrote to a friend insisting that he now favoured complete detachment from European wars. Foreshadowing the words of his first inaugural address, he wrote that ‘[c]ommerce with all nations, alliance with none, should be our motto’.
In that first address as president, in March 1801, he sought to cloak himself in the spirit of the Farewell Address, minimizing partisanship. Now in power, he wanted to heal the political divisions he had helped foster in the 1790s, and calm fears that he would implement a recklessly anti-British policy. To that end, he used phraseology so closely emulating Washington's strategic proposition that one of the key phrases – 'entangling alliances' – is often misattributed to the Farewell Address itself. America, Jefferson declared, was a 'rising nation'. Retreading Washington's steps, he noted that it was 'kindly separated by nature and a wide ocean from the exterminating havoc of one quarter of the globe', 'too high minded to endure the degradations of others'. It was in many ways 'a chosen country'. The correct policy was thus clear: to seize on these advantages by pursuing 'peace, commerce and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none'.

Omitting reference to his own pro-French disposition in the decade gone by, President Jefferson was soon celebrating the wisdom of America's having refused to entangle itself in the war across the ocean. '[L]et us bow with gratitude,' he said in his third annual message, 'to that kind Providence which ... guarded us from hastily entering into the sanguinary contest, and left us only to look on and pity its ravages.' Happily, America was 'separated by a wide ocean from the nations of Europe, and from the political interests which entangle them together'. '[I]t is our duty,' he told Americans, 'to look on the bloody arena spread before us with commiseration indeed, but with no other wish than to see it closed ...' It did not matter to America who beat whom in European wars, only that the United States should stay out of them.

This beginning of the Jefferson presidency was, more so than the Farewell Address itself, the key to embedding the principle of 'detachment' from Europe in US foreign policy thought. Washington had crafted a potentially unifying ideological text preaching the separateness of American and European interests and the basis in rational interest of a policy of strict non-alignment. But it was Jefferson's decision to echo these tenets that signalled the moment at which the Founders reached a fundamental intellectual consensus on America's world role.

The emergence of consensus was aided by circumstances, not least the changed nature of the European scene, where conflict was now transparently between rival empires rather than rival ideals. It was also aided – though of course no one would have said so out loud – by the sudden death of Washington in 1799, which allowed his posthumous re-establishment as a non-partisan figurehead and facilitated the invocation of his ideas as transcendent principles rather than party political positions. After a decade of heated disagreement over the fundamentals of America's strategy in foreign affairs, the entwined, mutually supportive pronouncements of the departing Washington and the 'arriving' Jefferson crafted consensus around a version of the American national interest and how to pursue it that would serve to guide the nation throughout the nineteenth century.
'Our hemisphere ... of freedom': the Monroe Doctrine as a logical extension of the Founders' Era consensus

However well issues of principle might have been settled, in the messy world of practice there was still turbulence in foreign affairs under the governments of Jefferson and Madison that opened the nineteenth century. This included a tense stand-off with France, ended only by the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, which finally terminated French territorial influence in North America. There was also Jefferson's economically and politically ruinous imposition of an embargo on the entirety of US-European trade in reaction to an exchange of blockade and counter-blockade between Britain and France as their long war dragged on into the new century. 'Jefferson's Embargo' (1807–9) was a strategic failure, and also the beginning of a chain of events that led to an ill-planned and ultimately stalled military clash with Britain in 1812. Nevertheless, through all this instability, the core essence of American strategy remained that which had been encapsulated in the Washington-Jefferson consensus: remain rigorously neutral between the European powers, shore up the Union at home, and seek to minimize foreign influence in America.

By 1815, the autonomy and viability of the United States had been firmly established, as had its unwillingness to play a role in the European balance-of-power system. Much as US leaders might wish otherwise, however, the Old World remained intimately involved in the affairs of the New by virtue of its territorial holdings there, particularly the vast colonies of South America. This presence undermined the reality of the United States' desired exclusion of the balance of power from America and its ability to refrain from dealings with Europe beyond the commercial.

The cardiac arrest of Spanish imperial power in the early decades of the nineteenth century was a tipping point in resolving this tension between America's hemispheric ambitions and reality. By the 1820s, long-smouldering independence struggles throughout the region appeared destined for success. The vanquishing of Napoleon's empire at Waterloo in 1815, however, had extinguished one threat to American security, only to potentially spawn another. By the 1820s, the 'Holy Alliance' of European monarchies - Russia, Austria and Prussia - in league with a rehabilitated France, was threatening to reimpose European power on Latin America. This was the grave international worry with which James Monroe, the last president of the founding generation, contended.74 In collaboration with his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, he ultimately crafted in response the doctrine that later came to bear his name.75

The Monroe Doctrine came in the form of a proclamation by the president before Congress on 2 December 1823. Its more important audience, however, consisted of foreign governments rather than American legislators. Having planned the statement in collaboration with Adams, Monroe set out a series of interlocking principles designed to obstruct any re-subjugation of the Americas to European power, and to form the spine of American policy into
the foreseeable future. They were: (1) no new European colonization in the Americas would be permissible; (2) no existing colonies in the Americas should transfer between the hands of European nations; (3) finally, and more generally, Europeans should refrain from interference in the affairs of American nations outside the confines of their own vestigial colonial holdings. Any violation of these principles would be considered a trespass against vital US interests.

The message took as its starting point the consensus within the United States on non-intervention in Europe: the US, it made clear, had explicitly set aside any thought of a global push to spread any particular form of government. American policy towards Europe, Monroe asserted, was 'not to interfere in the internal concerns of any of its powers; to consider the government de facto as the legitimate government for us'. In reciprocity for this blanket disengagement from casting political judgement, he explained, the US expected Europeans to refrain from interfering with the politics of American nations. In the Americas, circumstances were 'eminently and conspicuously different' from elsewhere in the world, he said. It was 'impossible' that the European monarchies 'should extend their political system to any portion of either continent without endangering our peace and happiness; nor can anyone believe that our southern brethren, if left to themselves, would adopt it of their own accord'.

Adams, as Bemis characterizes his view, thought that there were 'two separate systems, two spheres' in operation. The purpose of Monroe's message, he felt, should be to assert American principles, and

while disclaiming all intention of attempting to propagate them by force, and all interference with the political affairs of Europe, to declare an expectation and hope that the European powers will equally abstain from the attempt to spread their principles in the American hemisphere ...

Compared with the hegemonic charter that the Monroe Doctrine would become later in the nineteenth century, the pronouncement itself was mild. It was accompanied by no military mobilization of the sort necessary to enforce the sweeping prohibitions it purported to declare. In another of the ironies hovering around America's intellectual aversion to the European balance of power, Monroe's aspiration in fact depended for implementation on a coincidence of interests with Britain: it was Britain's control of the seas, and its ability to apply pressure in Europe, that gave practical effect to America's 'hands off' proclamation. Even so, the Monroe Doctrine was still a significant ideological pronouncement. Later, it would provide the political basis for a raft of regional police actions. More immediately, it rounded out intellectually the logic of the Washington-Jefferson consensus on foreign policy.

The Monroe Doctrine announced a spheres-of-influence arrangement of sorts with Europe - a realistic attempt to maximize benefits to the United States, given its capabilities and the international context. However, like
Washington’s and Jefferson’s pronouncements, it formulated that strategy in such a way as to intellectually ‘remove’ the United States from the broader international system and the European balance of power. The US portrayed itself as different from the European nations, who fought for their interests in an inescapable and competitive system of rival states. Instead, it extended Washington’s formulation of ‘separateness’ to imply that in the Americas a new system of states was coming into existence, and that the members of that system had interests that were not so much in conflict with those of European nations as, in some abstract sense, separate or detached from them.

As one of Washington’s ministers abroad, John Quincy Adams had concluded that ‘it is our duty to remain the peaceful and silent, though sorrowful, spectators of the European scene’. This agreement with the emerging dominant philosophy of detachment stayed with him as he rose higher on the political ladder, and was captured for the ages in his epigrammatic contribution to US strategic thought that ‘America is the well wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.’ In line with the prevailing consensus, he took the view that the ‘political system of the United States is ... extra-European ... [F]or the repose of Europe, as well as of America, the European and American political systems should be kept as separate and distinct from each other as possible.’

The Adams–Monroe expansion of the US sphere was a development of national strategy based on changing national circumstances. The economic strength, geographical size and geopolitical weight of the US were all increasing, while the ability of the Europeans to project power in Latin America was constrained by internal division. The Monroe Doctrine was thus part of the process of the United States raising its ideological horizons to the hemispheric level, as classical realism would predict in such circumstances, while retaining and reinforcing the parallel ideological dimension of separation. In 1825, Adams, now president, explained how he conceived of the strategy as a steady evolution from Washington’s Farewell:

> [T]he period which he predicted as then not far off has arrived ... America has a set of primary interests which have none or a remote relation to Europe, ... [and] the interference of Europe, therefore, in those concerns should be spontaneously withheld by her upon the same principles that we have never interfered with hers ... [I]f she should interfere ... we might be called ... to take an attitude which would cause our own neutrality to be respected, and choose peace or war, as our interest, guided by justice, should counsel.

Interestingly, as they looked ahead to a future in which the Americas would be populated by a multiplicity of newly independent states, US leaders did not reprise the arguments of their own constitutional debate in the 1780s to infer that an American balance-of-power system, and therefore insecurity, might loom as a result. Instead, the overwhelming preponderance of power enjoyed
by the US within the Western Hemisphere served to convince them that a benign and cooperative ‘American system’ would emerge, distinct in character from that of Europe. Exclusion of Europeans was required in order to prevent the emergence of countervailing power centres that could threaten this assumption of benign US hegemony and corrupt the system with the values of European power politics. The assertion of unchallengeable US primacy in its own environs, implicit even in the first arguments in favour of Union, had now emerged as an entirely explicit feature of the ideological consensus. Both Adams and his Secretary of State Henry Clay used the phrase ‘American System’ to describe the interrelation of states in the Western Hemisphere. This was intended to communicate the idea of a separate sphere of international relations operating on somehow distinctively ‘American’ principles, i.e. without the compulsive war of the European balance of power.

The aged Jefferson approved thoroughly of this new hemispheric scope for US policy. In retirement in 1813, he wrote of his doubts concerning how well democracy might flower in Latin American nations, but nevertheless felt that their proximity to US influence and the exclusion of European interference would maintain the separation between American and European affairs:

In whatever governments they end, they will be American governments, no longer to be involved in the never-ceasing broils of Europe. The European nations constitute a separate division of the globe; their localities make them part of a distinct system; they have a set of interests of their own in which it is our business never to engage ourselves. America has a hemisphere to itself. It must have its separate system of interests, which must not be subordinated to those of Europe. The insulated state in which nature has placed the American continent, should so far avail it that no spark of war kindled in the other quarters of the globe should be wafted across the wide oceans which separate us from them. And it will be so.84

In a letter to his former acolyte Monroe, towards the end of his life, Jefferson endorsed the principles of the doctrine the president would shortly be proclaiming to the world:

Our first and fundamental maxim should be, never to entangle ourselves in the broils of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to intermeddle with cis-Atlantic affairs. America, North and South, has a set of interests distinct from those of Europe, and peculiarly her own, separate and apart from that of Europe. While the last is labouring to become the domicile of despotism, our endeavour should be, to make our hemisphere that of freedom.85

The intellectual and political journey made by Jefferson and his party is illustrated by his easy acceptance by this period of the British role in enforcing the Monroe Doctrine. By 1823 the former devotee of the French Revolution
could observe with pleasure that Britain was a highly useful ally in preserving America's separateness, and was a nation with which America 'should most sedulously cherish a cordial friendship'. If Hamilton had lived, he might just have appreciated the irony.

Conclusion

This account of what American leaders thought and said during the emergence of the Founders' Era consensus tells us that American strategy in this period had, on the whole, a realistic character. The creation of the Union itself was the conscious product of realist philosophical assumptions about international order, and was an effort to avoid the replication of the European balance of power in America. Showing sound awareness of America's capabilities after Union, and seizing on the unique advantages conferred upon the US by geography, the Founders ultimately judged that the new nation's interests would best be served by the pursuit of a strict policy of non-interference in European affairs in order to avoid war. As the nation grew stronger, they built on this foundational consensus by seeking to exclude powerful outsiders from the Western Hemisphere and to establish a hegemonic role for the US in the region. These were not inevitable choices: the rejection of the 1787 Constitution, or US entry into Europe's wars in the hope of either ideological gratification or material gain, were serious alternatives to the choices actually made by America's early leaders. Their decision to act as they did can be explained as the pursuit of a particular vision of the national interest.

The strategy pursued in this period, however, also had ideological consequences for the longer term. Entering the Founders' Era, Americans faced two issues: relations between the American states themselves and also relations between the states collectively and Europe. The former issue was resolved not by a scheme for the coexistence of sovereign equals in a competitive balance of power, but by a Union that averted the prospect of such a system emerging in America. The latter issue was resolved not by the acceptance of a role for the United States competing in the global balance of power with Europeans, but again by rejection of the 'balance-of-power' system: Washington, Jefferson and their successors argued that geography and political circumstance afforded the US the opportunity to separate and insulate itself from global balance-of-power politics. The language with which America's leaders crafted their consensus did not facilitate thinking of America's national interest in terms of a competitive global balance of power. Instead, it encouraged the belief that the balance of power was a European system from which the United States could and should remain detached. The United States did not have interests in competition with Europeans; rather, its interests existed in a conceptually separate geopolitical space. The US refused to engage with political and military issues in Europe, and sought to exclude Europeans – the dominant powers in the global system – from the affairs of
the Western Hemisphere. The 'American system' was to be a separate domain, one of cooperation, dominated by the United States.

It cannot be denied that in reality the destiny of the US was much affected by the international balance of power. Americans achieved independence through the operation of the European balance of power, and pursued Union because they were aware of the nature of that system. In their pursuit of neutrality and their management of relations with Europe during its extended wars, America's leaders displayed a good deal of realism and intelligence in their efforts to seek national advantage in a challenging international environment shaped by brutal competition for power. Ultimately, the strategy that they pursued successfully achieved a spheres-of-influence division of the world. Crucially, however, amid all of this realist practice, they did not lay the intellectual ground for America to conceive of itself as operating within a balance-of-power system, pursuing its national interests in competition with others. Instead, their discourse of separateness encouraged a perception of American detachment, of existence in a sphere of interests unconnected with the European/global system. This ideological legacy of the Founders' Era provided the basis of the foreign policy perspective often simplified analytically by the label 'isolationism'.

When national and international circumstances changed – when growing American power and events in the international system called for increased American involvement beyond the Western Hemisphere – US leaders thus had to contend with an established ideological consensus that conceived of the United States not as an interested participant in the global balance-of-power system, but as a morally superior outsider. This would have significant consequences for the nature of American internationalism.