Shaping the Revolution in Foreign Policy: Parliament and the Press, 1689-1730

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Between the Glorious Revolution and the final years of King George I’s monarchy, two generations of English political leaders grappled with dramatic shifts in their nation’s international position. From 1688 to 1714 the first generation transformed a Restoration legacy of suspicion of the French and war with the Dutch into a sustained struggle to reduce the power and influence of France’s Louis XIV. By contrast the second generation pursued policies and diplomatic strategies no longer focused upon events directly across the English Channel, but ranging instead from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and even the Caribbean. These changed circumstances forced a reformation of government arguments on behalf of an activist and interventionist foreign policy. The first generation had demanded military and diplomatic strategies designed to defeat the pretensions of a ‘universal monarchy’. The second generation moved toward developing a grand strategy based upon a ‘blue water policy’ whose objects emphasized commercial and colonial concerns, catering to a parliamentary opinion favouring policies founded on well-defined national interests.1

The terms under which England first entered into war against France significantly strained relations between crown and parliament. Not only was England a principal in William III’s Grand Alliance, the king himself led a costly war of attrition against French armies in France. Parliamentary reluctance to embrace these diplomatic and military measures is well known. In 1689 parliament rejected a draft of a declaration of war detailing the aggressive acts of Louis in favour of a mild assertion of a willingness to defend the revolution settlement against the return of James II.2 In 1699 a furor raged over the signing of the Partition Treaties, leading to the attempted impeachment of the whig lords. In 1701 parliament refused to sign onto William III’s Grand Alliance until Louis XIV recognized James II’s son as England’s rightful king. The ensuing struggle over the Spanish succession duplicated these circumstances and results. In 1713 the government of Robert Harley and Henry St John promoted war weariness into making peace at the earliest possible moment.

The combination of an enduring financial burden and the apparent inability to achieve a decisive result on the battlefield confirmed the government’s need to provide parliament with persuasive arguments. These arguments took the form of information concerning treaty obligations, appreciations of battlefield and maritime

2 C.J., X, 94–95. Published as An Address Agreed Upon at the Committee for the French War and Read in the House of Commons: 19 April 1689.
conditions and a press campaign detailing the interests and conduct of the allies and warnings against the threats posed by French power and ambitions. As early as 1692, in fact, William III found it necessary to deliver to parliament his treaty of Grand Alliance, a treaty itself having no provision for funding and containing only statements of war aims and terms of alliance.3 Aided by the lapse of the laws licensing the press (1695), the revolution in foreign policy initiated a steady and prolonged period of pamphleteering designed to influence parliamentary opinion on grand strategy.

The materials analysed include pamphlets, news periodicals, parliamentary diaries and journals. Much has been written about the complex interplay among England’s domestic policies, diplomacy, commerce and military strategy. In contrast the conceptual framework within which the case for English diplomacy played itself out has received scant attention.4 One reason for this lack may be the difficulties in evaluating the purpose and influence pamphleteering sought over political debates. In part this difficulty stems from the pamphleteers’ willingness to promote a traditional consensus couched in moralizing generalities about ‘Popery and Slavery’, or the rectitude of particular rulers. Often writers assumed an identity of interest between England and its various allies that was intended to mask secret negotiations and to cover over those uncertainties and differences of opinion, which commonly characterized diplomatic manoeuvrings. It follows that the substance of public writing was often less relevant than its subtexts.

Moralizing rhetoric occupied, however, only one shelf in the pamphleteers’ arsenal. Public writers accepted that their texts had to address some recognizable and plausible set of circumstances. No pamphleteer could hope to concoct from thin air a conspiracy, an invasion scare, or a substantive threat to commerce with much hope of success. Moreover, those writings in defence of government policy gained legitimacy from the expectation that the government should mount a public defence of its decisions, first in order to meet the claims of its opposition, both foreign and domestic, and secondly because not doing so would arouse suspicions and charges of secret machinations and the conspiracies of a cabal – the natural enemies of liberty. In

these ways the press supplied both substance and interpretative commentary to the arena of parliamentary debate.

The process by which crown and parliament shaped foreign policy and grand strategy opened the door to extensive press activity. The process relied on procedures of consultation and review. Typically a session would open with a statement from the monarch outlining the current state of affairs and requesting the supplies deemed necessary. This opening provided an opportunity to debate policy and fund it according to certain preferences. The margin of parliamentary support was also important; ministers worried that narrowly won endorsements of policy would give the appearance of weakness to foreign observers.\(^5\) In turn, the execution of policy fell under parliamentary review. Parliament insisted on its right to investigate alleged incompetence in the administration and implementation of policy. The expectation was that the government would formulate its plans, communicate them to parliament, often with the monarch either taking the lead or clearly standing behind the arguments of the ministers, and then allow records and witnesses to come forward should a subsequent investigation be sought. This process required the crown and its ministers to maintain the initiative, utilizing a combination of cogent arguments and timely interventions to redress grievances over the execution of policies.

The press could and did intervene in this process at a number of points. Pamphlets and newsheets discussed the war’s conduct, evaluated the contributions of the allies, rehearsed diplomatic developments and provided commentaries on parliamentary business. Despite efforts to maintain their privileges, members found that speeches and journal entries were often printed, including even protests that had been expunged from the official record.\(^6\) Commonly military figures whose conduct was under scrutiny would go into print to defend themselves. Foreign governments would publish their versions of military and diplomatic proceedings. Often the government of the day would sponsor a press campaign designed either to support or cloak its diplomatic deliberations. Partisan rivals would raise issues and concerns that told in their favour. It was necessary to conduct debate on foreign affairs and formulate grand strategy amid the glare of public comment.

Given these circumstances the conduct of foreign policy and grand strategy flowed through an elaborate communications network, involving the monarch, the ministers, parliamentarians, commanders in the field and the diplomatic corps.

Occasionally the requirements of diplomacy would intrude upon issues of domestic politics, notably when William III promoted a ‘politique’ policy of religious toleration as a support to his relations with his catholic allies.\(^7\) More often, however, parliament’s role in debates on foreign affairs centred upon joining governmental goals, established

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opinions and immediate circumstances. In this arena battles testing political will, a major ingredient in grand strategy, took place.

These engagements gave the press its principal role. Throughout this period writers and debaters could appeal to a common stock of key ideas. The foremost of these concerned the character and conduct of princes. It is easy to see why this would be so. Between 1660 and 1760 early modern statecraft was rife with dynastic issues. The English succession, the Spanish succession, the French succession, the Austrian succession and a myriad of similar issues in Italy, Germany and Poland, saturated press reports. One central theme of later Stuart diplomacy was the aim of France’s Louis XIV to achieve a universal monarchy. Pamphleteers constructed an ideology promoting the liberties of princes and opposing Louis’s ambitions to a European hegemony. They fashioned images of the Sun King’s rule as cruel, perfidious, ambitious, luxurious and deceitful. Their portrayals of Louis as a universal monarch depicted arbitrary government, a standing army, ruinous taxation and the subjection of the populace under ignorance and poverty. To counter this spectre of domestic tyranny and international domination pamphleteers erected the balance of power, a policy designed to check personal interest and promote liberty, prosperity and prudent behaviour. They commonly appraised the courage, justice and wisdom of England’s monarchs according to their adherence to the balance of power. Henry VIII, Elizabeth and William III were the brave and wise supporters of balance. James I, Oliver Cromwell, Charles II and James II were either dupes of Spanish, French and jesuitical schemers (the Stuart monarchs) or were addicted to their own personal interests (Cromwell’s desire for war against Spain rather than France). The threat of universal monarchy had a wide currency, appealing alike to country party politicians, traditional and latitudinarian anglicans, and factions within the constellation of whig politicians.

To counter the threat of universal monarchy the Williamite revolution in foreign policy offered a grand strategy based upon alliance, encirclement and attrition. Using a combination of diplomacy, subsidies, troops and naval power, Britain would isolate her foe. These measures would then allow the countervailing resources of the Grand Alliance (comprised of England, the Dutch Republic, Habsburg Austria and Spain, and a number of German princely states) to force a settlement reducing French power. Williamite pamphleteers equated the unity of the Grand Alliance with promotion of the balance of power. They took pains to analyse the interest of each ally against France and to proclaim allied unity against the common enemy. In so doing, they equated the balance of power with high principles of international politics: courage, prudence and self-protection. And they pictured the alliance as a series of

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9 Charles I was often omitted from this roster, though he did come up in another important context. Charles’s unwillingness to work with parliament cost him the financial resources needed to play the role of Europe’s balancer, a problem later ascribed to the problem of a large public debt.
mutual dependencies, a row of ‘nine pins’ as Daniel Defoe put it, whose disruption for any reason meant ultimate disaster for all.12

The Williamite version of grand strategy inspired vigorous and determined opposition. In particular it struck at the well-established notion that the balance of power guaranteed England a free hand, holding the balance between France and the Empire. Contrary to the commitments of William’s Grand Alliance, both pamphleteers and politicians demanded attention to England’s clear and immediate interests, asserting that its dominant aim was security for the Revolution Settlement against the return of James II. They envisioned a defensive strategy based upon sea power, arguing that England was not a principal partner in the Grand Alliance.13 This emphasis on an independence of action provided a basis upon which to support the war while seeking a reduction in its massive expenditures.14

By the end of William III’s reign the struggle between these rival conceptions of grand strategy had become cemented in partisan rivalry.15 In general, tories aligned with the country party critics of the Grand Alliance, supporting the limited commitments of blue water warfare. Fundamental to this outlook was the belief that an independent foreign policy cohered with security for established institutions. Independence from continental commitments also implied the maintenance of guarantees of liberty at home. Thus tory/country party opinion equated universal monarchy with the activist Williamite strategy, threatening the imposition of burdens including standing armies, ruinous taxation, and the control of opinion at home. This opposition also promoted a concern for the prudent and courageous conduct of ‘open’ government, in contrast to the conspiracies of jacobites and the ‘monied men’ who funded William’s war through the whig Bank of England.16 In 1711 their arguments received

12 The True Interests of the Princes of Europe in the Present State of Affairs: or, Reflections upon a pamphlet in French, entitled, A Letter from Monsieur, to Monsieur concerning the Transactions of the Time (1689); A view of the True Interest of the Several States of Europe since the accession of their present Majesties (1689); The Happy Union of England and Holland: or, the Advantageous Consequences of the Alliance of the Crown of Great Britain with the States General of the United Provinces (1689); [Daniel Defoe], The Englishman’s Choice and true Interest: In a Vigorous prosecution of the War against France; and serving K. William and Q. Mary and Acknowledging Their Right, (1684); M. Sheehan, ‘The Development of British Theory and Practice of the Balance of Power before 1714’, History, LXXIII (1988), 24–37.

13 Anchitell Grey, Debates of the House of Commons from the Year 1667 to the Year 1694 (10 vols, 1763), IX, 230–3 [Sir Edward Littleton], The Management of the Present War against France Consider’d in a Letter to a Noble Lord (1690); [Littleton], The Project of a Descent upon France, (1691).


a powerful summary in Jonathan Swift's *The Conduct of the Allies*, a tract prepared at
the instigation of the Harley ministry to begin the process of forging a separate peace.
Swift attacked the ministry of Godolphin and Marlborough for prolonging Queen
Anne's war unnecessarily in order to enrich themselves and remain in power. More
particularly the extended conflict had enriched the 'monied men' who funded the
war. Also the ministry's war policy had failed. Instead of devoting resources to the
navy, it had chosen to fund an expensive land war in which the allies did less than
their share. They did this because Britain's alliances created interlocking commitments
such that the weaker partners could gain most from the strongest (the reverse effect of
the Williamite domino theory). Swift's prescriptions for a sound policy were equally
familiar. Interests should be well defined and clearly under threat. Resources should
be applied with a realistic prospect of success. These resources include assessments of
the political and popular support for their employment.  

The success these opinions enjoyed showed the fragility of Williamite strategies.
On the domestic front the tories thwarted the whig drive to brand their opponents as
jacobites by passing a Treason Trials Bill designed to protect their reservations about
William III's royal title. They defied the whig desire to continue the censorship of
the press, leading to the lapse in 1695 of the press licensing law. In 1701, when Louis
XIV's acceptance of the Spanish crown for his second grandson, Philip', duke of
Anjou, made war inevitable, parliament refused to renew William's Grand Alliance.
Only Louis's recognition of James II's son and heir as rightful king of England
gained parliamentary assent to the alliance. This delay testified to abiding support
for the tory preference for a foreign policy emphasizing home defence, and limited
diplomatic commitments. It also foreshadowed the desertion of the Grand Alliance
by the ministry of Harley and St John. 

The whigs accepted the ends and means of William III's foreign policy. In so doing,
they endorsed the Grand Alliance as the best protection of both the Revolution
Settlement and the protestant succession. Whig zeal to achieve these goals extended
support for the revolution in foreign policy and the balance of power beyond appeals
to courage, prudence, state interest and opposition to universal monarchy. Their
concern for loyalty to the monarchy of William, Mary and Anne generated a polemical
onslaught branding tories, country party politicians and non-jurors as jacobite traitors.
It led the whigs to dramatize the dangers of plots, invasion scares and conspiracies.

These whig apprehensions were by no means cynical. They reflected a main
theme of renaissance political writing: the danger of secrecy and faction. They drew
support from a rehearsal of notable moments in the past, ranging from the Mary

16 *(continued)* This tract contains the telling sentences: 'In short necessary services are starved to enrich
an overgrown family [the Churchills]. Spain is sacrifice’d to their ambition & avarice, our fleet made so
unwieldy & expensive in order to make an army necessary, & ships cannot be built without some of the
family having a footing in it . . .' 

17 'The Conduct of the Allies, & c.', in *Jonathan Swift. Political Tracts, 1711–1713*, ed. Herbert Davis

18 For the regulation of trials of treason see S. Resneck, 'The Statute of 1696: A Pioneer Measure in
the Reform of Judicial Procedure in England', *Journal of Modern History*, II (1930), 5–27. On efforts to
continue the regulation of the press see the pamphlet *Reasons for Reviving the Act of Regulating the Press
and Printing* [1695?]: Bodl., MS Tanner 25, ff. 362–3: Hattendorf, 'Alliance, Encirclement, and Attrition',
Stuart plots against Queen Elizabeth to Fenwick’s conspiracy to assassinate William III (1696). They dovetailed as well with foreign support for James II and the Pretender, first from Louis XIV and later from any continental adversary capable of supplying ships and troops to support the jacobite cause. Infatuation with loyalty and security led the whigs into a variety of extreme positions. The revelations of Fenwick’s plot and a succession of invasion scares provided opportunities to prosecute the disaffected, impose loyalty oaths and reanimate the consensus against French and jacobite popery and slavery. During the War of the Spanish Succession the whigs supported the equation of security with victory, resolving not to seek peace before driving the Bourbon claimant off the Spanish throne. The vain pursuit of victory brought the whigs political defeat in 1710.

This mingling of domestic concerns with international high politics insured that the revolution in foreign policy would be more than a diplomatic revolution, a changing of sides. The Williamite revolution called forth rival conceptions of grand strategy; each of them grounded in well-established ideas of powerful persuasive force. The accession of George I and the ultimate triumph of the whigs in 1714 appeared to seal the doom of the tory version of grand strategy. The need to secure the protestant succession against the international threat of jacobitism appeared to discount the importance of tory ideals of freedom of action and policies based upon a clear and immediate necessity. Such was not the case. The next generation of political leaders had to accommodate all aspects of this Janus-faced programme to the circumstances of a post-war world.

The key to the revolution in foreign policy had been parliament’s willingness to mandate interventions in continental affairs. Now the international landscape had changed. George I’s reign saw the spectre of French popery and slavery give way to an Anglo-French alliance. The focus on the continent expanded to include interests in the Mediterranean, the Baltic and the Caribbean. Nor was there any long, sustained struggle against universal monarchy; maintaining ‘the tranquility of Europe’ became the watchwords of the reign. Instead crises arose testing the government’s resolve to uphold the Utrecht settlement. Except for the jacobite rising of 1715, the crises themselves lacked the clear and present dangers of the previous wars. The formation of the Quadruple Alliance of 1718–19 aimed to force Spain to restore control over Sicily to the emperor. The Alliance of Hanover, 1725–9, addressed a variety of issues. In these circumstances commitments to military interventions, and particularly to interventions in concert with allies, required the fashioning of appeals calibrated to appease as well as command parliamentary opinion.

The publication of the earl of Clarendon’s History of the Rebellion in 1702 with its renaissance-styled account of the outbreak of the civil wars and its emphasis on a conspiracy against Charles I’s monarchy is perhaps the best example of the hardiness of this approach to political writing. The law courts also followed these interests in protecting the public from immoral (as opposed to illegal) behaviour and to broaden the definition of a conspiracy. After Queen Anne’s death the common law began to add to its definition of a conspiracy ‘all confederacies whatsoever, wrongfully to prejudice a third person’. Francis B. Sayre, ‘Criminal Conspiracy’, Legal Concepts of Conspiracy. A Law Review Trilogy (New York, 1972), p. 402. Here the common law courts were following the example of the court of star chamber, which held that any combination partook of an unlawful intention. A plot against William III’s life in 1692 had a similar effect. Stephen B. Baxter, William III and the Defense of European Liberty, 1650–1702 (New York, 1966), p. 301. The whig loyalty campaign had a variety of outpourings. The Spirit of Jacobitism (1695) is a particularly virulent example.
Appeasement was needed because a number of the attributes characterizing universal monarchy now were turned against the government of the day. One such point of attack was the menace of a standing army. Pamphlets and news accounts kept up a steady drumbeat supporting the equation of liberty and public virtue, and inveighing ‘against all standing armies, as threatening and pernicious, and the ready instruments of certain ruin’. Their arguments peppered parliamentary debates. George I’s ministers acknowledged their persuasive force. In April of 1717 the king’s ministers sought additional revenue to support alliances against Sweden. With anti-army feelings running high, proponents of the government’s case even tried to turn these sentiments to their advantage. One member drew approval for supporting the request because he preferred paying for foreign troops and war abroad to a standing force maintained at home. One month later, when the requested funds had narrowly passed the house of commons, George I made a similar connexion. The king reported that keeping a British fleet in the Baltic to protect against the mounting of a jacobite invasion allowed the reduction of two companies from the home defence force. At the end of the session, the government’s critics launched protests against the Mutiny Bill, claiming that it set up courts whose powers amounted to the establishment of arbitrary government within the realm.20 These exchanges were early illustrations of a circular process. The king’s ministers would counter appeals against a standing army with the claim that their requests were only temporary. And later, when reductions, however small, could be carried out, they would take pride in their achievement.21

Laments over the national debt proved equally strident and enduring. As with discussions of the perils of a standing army, everyone acknowledged a need to clear the debt. The burden of debt played into criticisms of the cost of land and sea forces and demands to investigate the mismanagement of military expenditures. It also fed a broader concern that an indebted nation could not fulfil its international obligations.22 In 1720 news of John Law’s scheme to fund France’s debt out of profits to be realized from his Mississippi Company gave this belief a particular focus. English opinion held that the burden of debt had forced France to make peace in 1713. Law’s scheme threatened British interests twice over. Freeing France from debt augured for the revival of French continental power and the establishment of a

20 Lois Schowerer, ‘No Standing Armies!’ The Anti Army ideology in Seventeenth Century England (Baltimore, 1974), pp. 188–210. John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, Cato’s Letters, or Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, and Other Important Subjects, ed. Ronald Hamowy (2 vols, Indianapolis, 1995), II, 690 (Letter No. 96, September 1722; also No. 125, April 1723; No. 129, May 1723; No. 4, November 1723). A. Boyer, Political State of Great Brittain (60 vols, 1711–40), XIII, 475 (speech in parliament of 8 Apr. 1717; XIV, 485 (report that army to be reduced by two companies, (December 1717); 588 (George I’s speech to end session); 584–5 (Walpole, December 1717); XV, 288–311 (various speeches against standing army); XIX, 9 (pamphlet Character of Two Independent Whigs); XX, 395 (on vote to maintain land forces, 1721); XXIII, 181–2 (Lords’ dissent over keeping land force in time of peace, 1722); XXIV, 378 (Cato’s Letter of October 1722); The Parliamentary Diary of Sir Edward Knatchbull, 1722–1730, ed. A. N. Newman, (Camden Soc., 3rd ser. XCIV, 1963), pp. 25–6 (complaints about the standing army, 1724); ibid., pp. 60–61 (against additions to the army, 1727). Cobbett, Parl. Hist., VII, 546.

21 H.M.C., Egmont Diary, I, 2 (George II promises to reduce the size of the army); ibid., I, 24 (D. Pulteney’s opposition to standing army).

22 Boyer, Political State, XIX, 26; XX, 517, 535; XXIII, 117 (that the burdens of debt imperil a successful foreign policy). It was generally argued that France pursued a policy of peace because of its burden of debt. The True Interest of the Hanover Treaty Considered (1727), pp. 30–39. Boyer, Political State, XIII, 6.
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north American outpost blocking the expansion of Britain’s north American colonies. Although commentators predicted that Law’s scheme would prove ‘chimerical’, the lure of debt retirement led to the government’s own parallel adventure with the South Sea Company. The subsequent bursting of both Law’s Mississippi Bubble and Britain’s South Sea Bubble only inspired a fresh round of lamentations. As late as 1727 the pamphlet Reasons against a War painted a picture of military adventuring in the interest of putative allies, of navies provisioned abroad, and of armies spending money in foreign economies. The pamphlet echoed The Conduct of the Allies, playing into established fears of a ‘monied interest’ controlling national finances and national policy and hence destroying the public influence of the landed interest. An aggressive foreign policy was akin to a protracted lawsuit, bleeding all parties into bankruptcy.  

The final shade of universal monarchy, the suppression of liberty, also drew upon opposition to a standing army. In 1717–18 the government expended a great effort to pass the annual Mutiny Act against opposition arguments that provision for courts martial at home robbed British subjects of the protections of the common law, permitted the quartering of troops in private homes and generally added unjustified expenses to existing tax burdens. These attacks had a parliamentary dimension, including attempts to stifle debate on supplies, voting down requests for information from the executive, efforts to censor the press, and plans to reduce parliament to the control of a whig oligarchy. In making their case, the critics drew upon the well-established argument that the crown’s co-operation with a free parliament would check ministerial abuses of power and beget a strong national policy. They provided the foundation of a negative consensus criticizing government policy and limiting ministerial efforts to fund military forces in time of peace.  

Taken together they demanded that ministers predicate their policies upon an extraordinary threat to English interests.  

Making and sustaining such a case required George I’s ministers first to shape their arguments around interpretations of events that told in their favour, and then to back these up with a combination of royal authority and parliamentary tactics. In other words, the process of consultation and review would go forward, but it would be focused upon the case the government wished to make. Central to this

23 Boyer, Political State, XII, 274–5 (June 1716 speech to assembly of New York on the French presence in Mississippi and at Cape Breton); XIX, 25, 28–51, 55–7, 359–82, 463–87. Commentators thought Law’s scheme might prove ‘chimerical’, but also thought it might give France a momentary advantage. Concern with the French presence on the Mississippi continued throughout the period. H.M.C., Egmont Diary, I, 35 (debate of 10 Feb. 1730); Boyer, Political State, XX, 1–36, 517, 535. The bulk of volume XXI (1721) is taken up with news of the South Sea Bubble’s collapse. Reasons against a War. In a letter to a Member of Parliament. By an Old Whig (1727). Debt relief and a pacific foreign policy were keys to Robert Walpole’s formula for success.

24 The bill passed the Commons in a committee of the whole 247 to 229. Its final reading passed 186 to 105. Cobbett, Parl. Hist., VII, 536–7. In the Lords the opposition gathered 77 votes in favour of amendments against the government’s tallies ranging between 88 and 91. On the final vote the Lords passed the bill 88 to 61. Ibid., 538–48.

25 As per the writings of Halifax and Davenant. See note 14.

strategy was an emphasis on the government’s reliance on diplomacy and mediation to settle disputes. Throughout his reign, George I received accolades as a man of prudence and moderation. Whereas William III had been portrayed as a warrior hero, George I’s chief virtues were those of a peacekeeper. George I received addresses from his parliaments and from various local communities extolling his virtues as the architect and maintainer of both the balance of power and the ‘tranquility of Europe’.

In turn, the king’s speeches to parliament emphasized the need to maintain those ideals. In these presentations prudent judgment took two forms. First, it denied any aggressive or ambitious British intentions. News reports of British diplomacy regularly stressed that George I’s ministers were playing the role of mediators and that Britain was seeking only limited objectives, such as the protection and further definition of trading agreements. Secondly, George I’s ministers stressed the precarious nature of the Anglo-French alliance and the corresponding need for Britain to show its good faith as an ally.27

Press reports also emphasized British diplomatic efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement of outstanding grievances. During the crisis of 1718 the news of British efforts to accommodate Spanish claims in Italy included not only details of how Britain had kept the Spanish government aware of existing treaty commitments but also had offered its leaders a defensive alliance.28 Stanhope’s journey to Paris, where he continued to negotiate the Quadruple Alliance, and his subsequent move to Madrid to dissuade that crown from its claims to Parma and Tuscany, received sympathetic coverage.29 The emphasis was to contrast allied desire for negotiation with Spanish aggression. The publication, a joint Anglo-French offer to allow the Spanish three months to consider joining their alliance, helped to put the Spanish government’s invasion of Sicily, which began in July 1718, in the worst possible light. By the end of August the publication of the terms and mutual obligations of Britain, France and

27 Arthur S. Williams, ‘Panegyric Decorum in the Reigns of William III and Anne’, Journal of British Studies, XXI (1981), 56–68. Boyer, Political State, XXI, 200–5 (memorial to king of Sweden, 1716); XIII, 224 (parliament of 1717); XIII, 505–7 (pamphlet on desirability of keeping the war our of Mecklenburg, 1717); XIII, 621–2 (address from the county of Surrey); XV, 327–8 (George I to parliament of 1710); XVI, 1–24 (pamphlet, 1718); XVI, 130–2 (Stanhope’s memorial of 1718 to Spain cited as example of moderation and resort to mediation rather than to war); XVI, 437–45 (pamphlet supporting Quadruple Alliance); XVI, 459–64 (George I’s speech and parliament response, 1718); XIX, 168–9 (Stanhope’s reply to the czar affirming desire to mediate peace in Baltic, 1720); XX, 48–50 (Carteret’s mediation between Denmark and Sweden, 1720); XX, 386 (parliament of 1721); XX, 386 (parliament of 1721); XXX, 611, 618; and XVI, 49 (British participation in Peace of Passarowitz). Knatchbull’s Diary, ed. Newman, pp. 31–2 (account of British mediation at Congress of Cambrai). Cobbett, Parl. Hist., VIII, 509 (parliament of 1726).

A Short Review of the Principal Transactions in Europe Since the Peace of Utrecht (1729). This characterization of George also included a familiar rehearsal of England’s relations with Europe. In this account Henry VIII, Elizabeth, William III and Anne were the heroic protectors of the balance of power with James I, Cromwell, Charles II and James II cast as weak-minded dupes of foreign interests. The State Anatomy of Great Britain [1717], pp. 53–61. A Memorial on the Present State of the British Nation (1722), pp. 4–7. On the possibility that France was an ‘uncertain’ ally to gain supplies for the military, see Secret Memoirs of the New Treaty of Alliance with France; Knatchbull’s Diary, ed. Newman, p. 59 (January 1727). This argument was also used against seeking a war. Reason against a War. In a letter to a Member of Parliament. By an Old Whig, pp. 12–14. George I’s biographer also emphasizes his predilection for mediation and negotiation: Ragnhild Hatton, George I. Elector and King (1978), pp. 213–14.

28 Boyer, Political State XVI, 56, 63–4, 150–7.
the Empire showed that Stanhope had created the diplomatic web needed to achieve
the goals of the alliance.30

It was also necessary to colour events in order to interpret them in the best
possible light. This was particularly true of Admiral Sir George Byng’s defeat of the
Spanish force guarding the Sicilian invasion (11 August 1718). Spanish diplomacy
seized the chance to paint the action as an unprovoked attack. Memorials to this
effect circulated in London and Amsterdam, the latter to dissuade the Dutch from
joining the Quadruple Alliance. A report also circulated that the Spanish ambassador
at London had met with representatives of the South Sea Company, telling them to
suspend their Caribbean trade.31 It also appeared that the government had sanctioned
an act of war without parliamentary support. The government response emphasized
that Byng had acted to protect imperial claims in Italy to prevent Spanish aggression
and support the ongoing efforts at mediation. Byng himself published an account of
his actions, claiming that he had twice warned the Spanish to desist and had acted only
against their defiance.32 The government published its own representations to the
Spanish, instancing a variety of commercial grievances and charging the Spanish court
with caballing against established treaties and undermining the peace of Europe.33
This latter charge even contained the claim that the Spanish court was intriguing with
the Pretender.

The stage was thus set to proclaim Byng a hero and to smear the Spanish as
opportunistic conspirators. At the centre of both efforts stood George I. The king
awarded Byng £1,000 and toasted his victory. In his closing speech to parliament, he
characterized Spanish policy as the ‘desperate and extravagant projects of one ambitious
man’ (the Spanish crown’s advisor Julius Alberoni) and referred to ‘conspiracies and
seditious practices’ such as Spanish support of the Pretender.34 In his opening speech
he also warned of the dangers of factions and besought ‘unanimity’ and ‘vigor’ to
derscribe the Quadruple Alliance. The king’s opening speech summed up the case his
ministers had presented in the press. Its goal was to focus subsequent debate on issues
supporting the government’s case: the king’s efforts at mediation, Spanish aggression,
including attacks on British commerce; the importance of Byng’s expedition as a
check on Spanish naval power and co-operation between Britain and France. In
this way, the ministers kept attention on issues of diplomacy and international law,
presenting the relevant treaties and basing their case on the vote of thanks to the king.
Opposition attempts to investigate Byng’s conduct, a move threatening a lengthy
process of review, only led to a rehearsal of previous statements and a successful effort
to vote down a call to review his orders.35 By the year’s end parliament had voted its
support for the Quadruple Alliance.

31 Boyer, Political State, XVI, 57 (reports meeting of 21 July), 181, 305–15.
32 Ibid., pp. 171–7, 212–13. Byng’s account of his conduct is printed in An Account of the Expedition of
the British Fleet to Sicily in the years 1718, 1719 and 1720 under the command of Sir G. Byng, (1739).
33 Boyer, Political State, XVI, 213–17. B.L., Stowe MS 247, ff. 140–2: Craggs to Monteleon, 4 Sept.
1718. Printed in Boyer Political State, XVI, 212.
In the press war the government had successfully parried Spanish threats against British commerce with its own charges. None the less the protection of commerce was itself a difficult issue to manage. It was all very well to levy charges and provide evidence about foreign violation of trade agreements and foreign sponsorship of piratical ‘depredations’ against British merchants. It was quite another thing to determine an appropriate response. The formation of the Quadruple Alliance to support Austrian claims against Spain in Italy provoked arguments that the alliance amounted to a declaration of war against Spain, a step threatening the security of England’s commercial treaties with Spain and her colonies. Unless the security of trade could be matched to some specific clear and present danger, such as Spain’s siege of Gibraltar in 1727, rousing parliament to accept a declaration of war proved extremely difficult. Between 1718 and 1722 proposals for boycotts of Swedish trade inspired a variety of complaints. Some voices decried having to buy Swedish iron from the Dutch. Others thought supplies of Swedish timber, vital to the navy, should be protected against an enlarged, and potentially unfriendly, Russian presence in the Baltic. Although the government proposed that the north American colonies could supply naval stores, M.P.s still worried that the government’s actions against Sweden would endanger adequate provision for the fleet. At parliament’s request George I lifted the ban on Swedish iron. As a cause for intervention commercial issues underlined the need to appease parliament’s pacific disposition.

The massaging of issues and events to appeal to parliamentary opinion had focused British policy on mediation and moderation, with intervention a real prospect only under conditions of a clear and direct threat to British interests. This approach shaped the politics of the final crisis of George I’s reign, the affair of the Ostend Company and the Alliance of Hanover. The crisis began with the apparent disruption of the Quadruple Alliance. Spain and Austria initiated the crisis by the Alliance of Vienna. The alliance raised a variety of issues. Not only did the alliance settle their rival claims in Italy, but it also proposed a marriage of the emperor’s heir, Maria Theresa, to Don Carlos, who stood second in line to the Spanish throne. The dynastic alliance extended to the French monarchy where Don Carlos might assert a claim from his Bourbon ancestry. Spain in turn granted trading concessions to the imperial Ostend Company, followed by a Spanish threat to terminate British trading concessions at Porto Bello. There were rumours that the alliance was threatening to support the Pretender. And there were concerns that the alliance would embolden the emperor to harass German protestant communities. This alliance pre-empted British efforts to mediate Austro-Spanish disputes over Italy. It led to George I’s formation of a counterbalancing Alliance of Hanover among Britain, France, the United Provinces, Sweden, Denmark and, initially, Prussia. The temperature of the confrontation rose in 1726 when a British fleet blockaded Porto Bello. The Spanish replied in 1727.
with a siege of Gibraltar. Parliament responded with grants to the army and navy and addresses of thanks to George I for his defence of the balance of power.  

It appeared that parliament had sanctioned action within a rudimentary arrangement of collective security, a victory for a policy of intervention. How Walpole’s ministry reached this point is another and less triumphant story. Although the ministers most feared the consequences of the Austro-Spanish marriage alliance, they proposed to emphasize to parliament the trading threat of the Ostend Company, reasoning that it posed the clearest danger to British interests. They also intended that the formation of a broadly based alliance would persuade the emperor to back away from the Spanish alliance. In other words, war was not contemplated. Thus Walpole rejected the advice of his secretary of state for the northern department, Lord Townshend, to craft George I’s speech from the throne to emphasize the threat of an invasion to restore the Pretender. Walpole calculated that parliamentary opinion would be unwilling to accept this threat as a call to arms; he preferred to stick to issues of trade and religion, as these would not raise the prospect of armed intervention. In fact the most the ministers hoped to gain from parliament was a vote of thanks for the king’s speech and a resolution to support the Treaty of Hanover.

These decisions were also in line with the government’s diplomatic and military goals. In July of 1725 George I set out the diplomatic outline for a defensive alliance based on the maintenance of the status quo and entangled by neither secret articles nor collateral arrangements. In August an exchange between Townshend and Walpole’s brother Horace, the resident ambassador in Paris, set the course of mediation and moderation. Townshend argued for the partition of the Low Countries among Britain, Holland and an undefined French presence. Backed by an alliance strong enough to ‘terrify’ the emperor this solution would provide the lasting security Britain needed. The scheme would require a peacetime British garrison of between 8,000 and 10,000 troops, to be financed out of customs revenues.

Townshend’s bellicosity inspired a lengthy and determined rebuttal. Horace Walpole set out the hazards and obstacles to the plan, including the French government’s unwillingness to seek war, Parliament’s corresponding unwillingness to sanction maintaining 10,000 soldiers so close to England and Dutch fears that a change in England’s government might leave them unprotected. Nor did the emperor’s actions justify such extreme measures. Instead Walpole urged that the ‘firm resolve’ of the alliance would prevail. Operations in the Caribbean received a similar treatment. According to the press British policy concerning trade with Spain was to declare British interests while stopping short of provoking open hostilities.

39 Ibid., p. 410.
40 Ibid., p. 416.
41 James Frederick Chance, The Alliance of Hanover. A Study of British Foreign Policy in the Last Years of George I (1923), pp. 62–5.
44 Observations of the Conduct of Great-Britain with regard to the Negotiations and other Transactions Abroad (1729).
'Firm resolve', it appeared, was an eighteenth century version of 'all measures short of war'.

The prospective influence of a 'monied interest' also weighed against an aggressive policy. In January of 1726 news that the Spanish had captured Port Mahon caused South Sea bonds to fall to par. Next month Walpole was defending himself against charges that he was selling stocks to drive down the price, claiming that he foresaw no immediate chance of war breaking out.45

This minimal goal became clear as various segments of political opinion were canvassed before the opening session. French observers commented that the nation did not want war. A reliable observer of merchant opinion commented in December 1725: 'We must lose our trade or engage in a war. Many think we shall choose the former.'46 Similar concerns came up in the wake of George I's address to parliament, 31 January 1726. The speech emphasized the issues of trade and religion, noted that the Treaty of Hanover was defensive and made a generalized warning that instability in continental affairs might encourage the Pretender to attempt an invasion. Although the speech won approval, opposition lords entered protests demanding assurances that English foreign policy would not become subservient to Hanoverian interests, and seeking more concrete assurances about the threat from the Pretender before parliament would grant requested funds.47 The ministers also stressed that his majesty would not seek funds to increase the army, thereby signalling determination to avoid a row over the dangers of a standing army.48 Walpole was also at pains to assure the Commons that Hanover was more likely to be drawn into a war on behalf of British interests than the other way around.49

Outside of parliament press support for the government’s case emphasized prudence and moderation. The pamphleteers’ treatment of the crisis was specific and limited. The particular interests of the European states were reviewed. The diplomatic factors leading Spain and Austria to ally were assessed. Throughout the crisis, the focus of comment remained on immediate needs: defending Gibraltar, raiding Spain’s colonial possessions, relying on sea power to protect the balance of power, and scrambling for additional allies to increase the alliance’s credibility. Military action, particularly the use of the navy, was deliberately managed to avoid confrontation and conflict.50 The defence of the government’s conduct of foreign policy emphasized both its firmness and its restraint.51

45 H.M.C., Portland, VII, 415, 420.
48 Protests against re-enactments of the Militia Bill had become standard opposition procedure, citing threats to liberty from presence of a standing army on English soil. Ibid., I, 356.
51 The True Interest of the Hanover Treaty considered (1727) specifies the particular interests of the principal allies. Great Britain’s Speediest Sinking Fund is a powerful Maritime War, Rightly Manag’d and especially in the West Indies (1727). An Enquiry into the Reasons of the Conduct of Great Britains with Relation to the Present State of Affairs in Europe (1727), pp. 93–101. Remarks on three Passages of the Letters of Spanish Ministers ... Which relate to the Hostilities committed by Spanish Guarda-Costas in the West Indies since the Treaty of Utrecht (1727).
When the crisis ended in the settlement of outstanding issues at the Treaty of Seville (1729), it appeared that alliance diplomacy had again proven its worth. It was also apparent that, lacking an overwhelming threat to immediate interests, parliament would not endorse interventionist policies. And it is clear that behind this reluctance stood a variety of anti-interventionist policies. The desire to maintain a free hand in foreign affairs militated against entangling alliances and the tendency to treat any disruption in the continental balance as a major cause for military action. Struggles against the ambitions of universal monarchies nourished antipathy toward militarism in the form of a standing army, the corruption brought on by an increased national debt, the expansion and the protection of trade by armed force. By the end of George I's reign, Britain's status as a great power had come to rest upon a blue-water policy fashioned as much out of parliamentary predilections as its genesis had come from the demands of a soldier-king.

51 (continued) The Evident Advantages to Great Britain and its Allies from the Approaching War: Especially in Matters of Trade (1727). A Short Review of the Principal Transactions in Europe Since the Peace of Utrecht (1729) describes the scramble for allies.