When Right Makes Might

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In 1895 Henry Cabot Lodge declared that the United States had compiled “a record of conquest, colonization, and territorial expansion unequalled by any people in the 19th century.”¹ In the decades following its independence the United States, propelled by a potent mixture of security, economic, and ideological motives, relentlessly pushed westward, subjugating once sovereign Indian tribes and dismantling European empires on the North American continent. Stymied only for a moment by its brutal Civil War, by the 1870s Americans were settling a vast continental frontier. By 1898, with the frontier closed, the United States would turn its focus outward, claiming a global empire in the Pacific and Caribbean. And in the wake of two world wars, the American leviathan would emerge as a world power, constructing a global order that persists through the present day.

So remarkable was the pace and scope of American expansion that many suggest that the United States was destined to rule the continent, the hemisphere, and perhaps even the world.² But at the beginning of the nineteenth century, it was unclear that the United States would emerge as a regional power, much less a global hegemon. In the years following its independence the United States was a vulnerable state, a weak and divided republic effectively hemmed in west of the Mississippi by the British, Spanish, French, and Russian empires. Yet from 1815 to 1823, the United States rapidly overturned the territorial, economic, and political status quo, not only on the American continent but also in the Western Hemisphere as a whole. In the years between 1817 and 1823, the United States settled its most pressing conflicts with Britain: it negotiated an end to its serious border disputes
with the British and drove a wedge between that empire and its Native American allies. The United States wrested territory from Spain: in forcing the empire to accede to the Transcontinental Treaty, it claimed territory that stretched westward to the Pacific Ocean. Perhaps most famously, with the Monroe Doctrine in 1823, America announced that Western Hemisphere was no longer open to European colonization.\(^3\)

By the end of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States had not only expanded westward and settled much of its northern and southern boundary issues; it had laid the foundations for its regional hegemony, emerging as, as one historian writes, a “formidable actor in world affairs and nearly unassailable in the Western Hemisphere.”\(^4\) All of this was accomplished with only a limited use of force and without sparking a major conflict between America and the European great powers. Indeed, far from confronting or containing the expanding power, Britain—arguably the only power capable of unilaterally halting America’s rise—chose to accommodate U.S. demands.

Why did Britain choose to accommodate the rise of the United States? For some, Britain’s accommodation of the United States was inevitable, a strategy born less of choice than necessity. The United States was an ocean away, and Britain could not mobilize the military power or economic resources to contain or confront the rising challenger, especially when threats closer to home demanded more attention than those in the far-flung Atlantic. Yet at the beginning of the nineteenth century, containment and confrontation were not only real but likely options. For thirty years, Britain used Indian and European allies to hem in American power. It maintained a significant force in Canada and seemed poised to intervene on the side of Spain to buttress that power’s empire in the Western Hemisphere. The War of 1812 had done little to change Britain’s strategy of containment; indeed, in the years after the War of 1812, “fear, suspicion and recrimination hung over relations between Britain and the United States” and few believed that the countries were on the verge of permanent peace.\(^5\)

Yet, in the years between 1815 and 1823, British strategy underwent a fundamental transition, from one that stressed containment and outright confrontation in the face of American expansion, to one that accommodated and even encouraged U.S. ambitions in the Western Hemisphere. It did so because Britain came to see U.S. ambitions, not as revolutionary, but as limited, that far from acting as a disruptive power, an American power would bring order and stability to the Western Hemisphere. This chapter examines how it was that Britain became certain enough that the United States was a benign rising challenger, one whose aims could be incorporated within the international order, to risk an accommodation strategy. Neither the politics of harm nor the politics of interest can fully explain this choice. Far from reassuring the British that the United States had benign intentions, American behavior from 1817 to 1823 often seemed a costly signal of revolutionary
aims. Throughout its term, the Monroe administration worked relentlessly to expand its territory and influence at the expense of the faltering Spanish Empire. If the United States was a revolutionary power, the threat to Britain was significant: if the United States managed to expand into Spanish territory, it could close off the Western Hemisphere to British colonial rule and trade, threaten its interests in Canada, and disrupt Britain’s hard-won Atlantic order.

Key to accommodation, this chapter argues, was how the British government came to understand the meaning of American actions. In particular, as it expanded into Spanish territory, the United States framed its expansionist actions as legitimate, consistent with international principles, persuading the British government that there was no need to mobilize against American might. Justifying American expansion was no simple task. The Monroe administration understood that it needed to convince British leaders that American revisionism was legitimate, that each of its actions was justified by norms of sovereignty, noninterference, and self-defense. Only by doing so could the United States stave off British mobilization against its expansionist aims. At the same time, however, the Monroe administration could not afford to lose the support of revolutionary factions at home, who demanded the United States not only expand, but build a new order steeped in revolutionary, republican principles.

To solve this dilemma, American leaders appealed to both revolutionary and European principles, deploying a heady mix of republican and legal language to justify their increasingly aggressive aims. Ultimately, the Monroe administration’s legitimation strategies resonated with British politicians and its domestic public alike. In Britain, the rhetoric signaled constraint, the U.S. willingness to be bound by institutional rules, even as it pursued revisionist aims. Those skeptical of American intentions, moreover, found themselves silenced: as long as American elites appealed to existing rules and norms, opponents were stripped of reasons to confront U.S. power. And finally, the Monroe administration so effectively appealed to Britain’s identity that supporting the Spanish empire in North America came to be seen as anathema to Britain’s commitment to liberal principles. Through each of these mechanisms, the United States shaped its image as a rule-abiding “treaty worthy” nation, one that Britain could accept as a liberal partner in international politics.

**American Expansion, British Accommodation: Crisis and Cooperation, 1817–23**

Britain’s accommodation of the rising power of the United States, its willingness to cede global leadership to the emerging leviathan, is a longstanding puzzle of international relations scholarship. These studies tend to focus on Anglo-American relations in the late nineteenth to twentieth
centuries, when Britain concluded its “graceful decline,” and allowed the United States to eclipse its hegemonic power in world affairs. But what is often overlooked in these studies is that by the late nineteenth century, Britain had been practicing “appeasement” toward the United States for almost seventy-five years. Indeed it was not in 1898, but in the years between 1815 and 1823, that British strategy underwent a fundamental transition, from one that emphasized containment and outright confrontation in the face of American revisionist demands, to one that accommodated and even encouraged growing U.S. power in the Western Hemisphere.

The British decision to accommodate American expansion came as the United States, under the administration of President James Monroe, attempted to expand into Spanish territory. During this period, the United States was not only expansionist, but often aggressive and violent in its strategies. In December 1817, in the midst of negotiations with Spain over what would become the Transcontinental Treaty, the United States seized the Spanish Islands of Amelia and Galveston; Spain declared American actions an act of war. Along its southern border, U.S. aggression was escalating. In November 1817, U.S. forces attacked a Seminole settlement in Fowltown, burning it to the ground and forcing the Seminoles from the territory. The Indians retaliated against American settlements, prompting Secretary of War John Calhoun to order General Andrew Jackson to “adopt the necessary measures to terminate” the attacks. In January 1818, Jackson declared “the possession of the Floridas would be desirable . . . and in sixty days it will be accomplished.” In March, Jackson invaded Spanish Florida with a force of five thousand men, seizing St. Marks and Pensacola, capturing several Seminole leaders as well as two British citizens, Alexander Arbuthnot and Robert Ambrister, who were eventually court-martialed and executed. Throughout Jackson’s invasion, the Monroe administration made it clear that if Spain continued to resist in the Floridas, or failed to accept U.S. claims in the west, then the United States would have no choice but to take these territories by force. Under pressure and without allies, Spain folded. In 1819, it agreed to the Transcontinental Treaty, ceding Florida and western lands that stretched from the Mississippi to the Pacific Ocean.

At the same time that the United States dismantled Spain’s empire on the continent, it also worked to weaken its grip on South America. Beginning in 1808, opposition groups in South America had begun to challenge Spain’s imperial rule. By 1815, South America was engaged in a full-blown struggle for independence. Before 1817, the U.S. government adopted a cautious policy toward the rebelling colonies, refusing to recognize the governments as independent republics, for fear that this would provoke conflict, not only with Spain, but with Britain as well. At the same time, the Monroe administration insisted recognition of independence was inevitable, despite European resistance. In 1817, the United States sent a commission to South America, charged with gathering information about the rebellion
and determining whether recognition was appropriate. By 1820, Secretary of State John Quincy Adams warned the British foreign secretary Lord Castlereagh that U.S. recognition of the colonies was imminent and urged Britain to lend its support to U.S. policy. In 1822, Monroe announced his administration’s intent to recognize the Spanish colonies as independent nations. In 1823 the United States unilaterally declared the Western Hemisphere as off-limits to European colonization and interference.

From 1817 to 1823, then, the United States adopted a revisionist policy, pursuing some of its most ambitious efforts in its history. Historians rightly point to the period of 1817–23 as a critical moment in the growth of the United States. Strategically, U.S. expansion in the early nineteenth century made war with the rising power practically unthinkable. As Stagg argues, “By the 1830s . . . the rapid growth of the American republic . . . was such that it was almost impossible for Great Britain, even with its naval supremacy on the Atlantic Ocean, to contemplate the cost of a war with the United States.”

With Florida and the Mississippi in hand, the United States could deny the Europeans access through the Gulf of Mexico and threaten British outposts in the West Indies and interests in Cuba. With its expansion to the Pacific, the United States virtually nullified British and Russian claims to the U.S. Northwest. Economically, as Samuel Flagg Bemis argues, 1817–23 laid the foundations for the great wealth of the United States, as the “Republic came to possess the favored expanse of territory that makes possible its varied history, its wealth, its power in the world for human freedom.” It was America’s expansion westward that facilitated the immigration, settlement, and the population explosion that underpinned its rapid industrialization and growth in manufacturing and trade.

Moreover, British politicians understood this period as a significant strategic turning point in their relations with the United States. In the years following the end of the War of 1812, British policy took a purposeful turn from containment toward appeasement. In 1817, Castlereagh began to publicly articulate Britain’s policy of accommodation. As he wrote to Charles Bagot, the British envoy to the United States, Britain should seek “to smooth out all Asperities between the two nations, and to unite them in Sentiments of Good Will as well as of substantial Interest with each other.” To this end Britain would now seek the settlement of all outstanding territorial and economic disputes with the United States. Arguably, the Treaty of Ghent (1815), which ended the War of 1812, laid the basis for more cooperative practices between the two states, but this was only a start. After Ghent, Castlereagh proposed a far-reaching convention between the states to settle the most serious disputes over the Canadian boundary, and allow the United States fishing rights off the Atlantic coast.

To accommodate the United States, moreover, between 1817 and 1824, Britain abandoned two allies—the Indian tribes and Spain—that for decades had contained U.S. expansion in the west and south of North America.
As Elijah Gould details, Castlereagh’s accommodation strategy represented a sea change in Britain’s relations with their Indian allies. While at Ghent the British had officially disavowed giving any formal support to Native American tribes, they continued to receive chiefs in court and bestowed distinctions among the British citizens who persisted in their efforts to funnel goods, arms, and ammunition toward their former allies, allowing them to contain U.S. efforts to expand into Spanish territory. But shortly into Monroe’s term Castlereagh shifted course. He severed Britain’s ties with Native American tribes and proclaimed that any British citizen who continued to trade with or arm the Indians was acting contrary to British interests and international law.

Britain withdrew support from its European allies as well. Most notably, Britain stepped aside as the United States expanded at the expense of the Spanish empire, both formally on the North American continent, and informally through its recognition of the South American colonies. When Spain attempted to protest American incursions at Aix-la-Chapelle in November 1818, in hopes of building a European coalition in support of its empire, Castlereagh ensured that Spain’s request would go unanswered. When Spain’s more sympathetic friends in the Holy Alliance threatened intervention in South America, Britain made it clear that any European military action on Spain’s behalf was unacceptable. When Spain asked Britain to mediate negotiations with the United States over the western territories, Britain replied that it would stand aside. When Spain demanded that Britain respond to the United States invasion of Florida, it denied that it had any reason to intervene. And in 1823, when the United States recognized the independence of the South American colonies and declared the entirety of the Western Hemisphere closed to new colonization, Britain stood against its European allies and provided the United States tacit support.

From 1817 onward Britain, faced with American expansion, turned not toward confrontation but instead embraced a policy of accommodation of the rising American power. It held fast to this policy, even as the United States pursued significant territorial, economic, and political expansion, much of which came at the cost of British power. The United States may have still risen to great power status in the absence of British accommodation, but its rise would have likely been much more painful. With British accommodation, the United States could more easily pressure Spain and Indian tribes to cede land through treaty and not war. Once these actors realized that they would receive no aid from the British, they surrendered to the encroaching American power. Had British aid persisted, these foes to American expansion may have still conceded, but they would not have gone quietly.

Britain’s decision to accommodate the United States also removed flashpoints between the great power and the rising challenger. Accommodation did not quell all conflict. Throughout the nineteenth century, the
two powers would continue to contest territorial boundaries, especially in Maine and Oregon. Even as Britain adopted an accommodation strategy, it maintained the capacity to protect Canada from possible invasion.22 During the Civil War, British officials contemplated a return to a balancing strategy, debating whether they should recognize the Confederacy in order to break up the American republic.23 And as Sexton argues, “Far from ending great power rivalry in the New World, the diplomacy of 1823 kicked off what would be a near-century long struggle for hemispheric ascendancy.”24

But these conflicts were relatively minor. With the shift to accommodation, Britain ended its proxy wars with the United States. The Indian tribes, stripped of support, were now vulnerable to conquest. There was to be no major crisis over contested influence in South America. When crises did come, as they would in the late nineteenth century over Venezuela, they did not escalate. Britain guarded Canada, but contests over the United States’ northern boundary were largely settled and no longer a potential flashpoint that could lead to a broader war. It is no wonder then that both historians of the period and contemporary British observers saw the Monroe administration’s revisionist efforts as a critical turning point, that if the United States were allowed to expand, then it would lay the groundwork for its rise to great power status over the next decade—not just regionally, but globally. All of this raises the question: why would Britain adopt accommodation rather than contain or confront the rising power’s revisionist aims?

**Geography as Destiny: The Inevitable Rise of American Power**

One popular answer to the puzzle of British accommodation is that structural factors made mobilization against the United States not only unwise but impossible. The costs of containing, much less confronting, the United States were simply too high for the British to sustain. The United States has always been “famously favoured by geography.”25 Keeping the United States confined to boundaries east of the Mississippi or confronting its incursions into Florida would have required projecting military power across an ocean, a far too costly task for the European powers. Certainly Spain, Russia, or France had no means by which to confront American demands on their own, but with an ocean separating the British from North America, even a superpower could not afford to expend its economic or military power in a confrontation with the United States. Moreover, Britain faced threats closer to home. France had threatened British interests at sea and on the Continent; in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, Britain needed to focus on its interests there. In Europe, Britain faced the possibility of a revisionist Russia and its coalition of conservative states, the Holy Alliance. Why invest in costly and futile efforts to contain a weak rising power, especially if other adversaries were looming on the horizon?
In this view, British accommodation of the United States’ rise was inevitable. As seductive an argument this might be, it is deeply problematic. It is the case that by 1817, some British politicians began to think that projecting power to contain or confront the United States was an unwieldy and unnecessary burden. Yet while projecting power might be a costly strategy, it was a necessary one if the United States proved revolutionary and a threat to core British interests. If the United States would not respect its boundary in the north, then neither a drawdown in Canada nor a demilitarization of the Great Lakes was advisable. If the United States were to threaten British interests in the Caribbean, then it would be forced to confront the rising power.

Moreover the British believed themselves capable of containing the United States. For thirty years Britain had demonstrated that, when the United States threatened its core interests, they could use a policy of containment and confrontation to hem in the United States. From American independence in 1783 to 1815, Britain had significantly constrained U.S. territorial claims. It refused to abandon its forts on the U.S. northwest frontier, as the Treaty of Paris mandated, and colluded with Spain to deny U.S. navigation rights on the Mississippi. Economically, Britain maintained its exclusive colonial trade practices, which locked the United States out of free trade and shipping in places like the West Indies. It continued to deny fishing rights off the Atlantic coast, threatening the economy of the New England states. So significant was the conflict over fisheries that Adams had proclaimed the United States would “have to fight for this matter, in the end.”

The British believed they could mobilize resources to contain American ambitions. Part of the problem with structural approaches is that they assume that Britain would have to consistently project its own power to fight American battles, that British soldiers, sailors, and ships would pacify the Western Hemisphere. But Britain could limit the use of its own resources, provided it could rely on indigenous forces and European allies, a strategy of conquest that Britain used successfully throughout the nineteenth century. In North America, during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries Britain had relied heavily on Native American allies to contain American expansion, maintaining what “looked like an informal Native American empire in the territory” it had ostensibly ceded to United States and Spain. As Bourne argues, “British military power and diplomacy had tried between 1783 and 1814 . . . to contain American expansion and better protect Canada, first by pushing the frontier southward and then by the establishment of an Indian buffer state.” In the north, Britain funneled arms and ammunition to the Miami and Shawnee tribes, facilitating a constant state of war in the Northwest and Ohio territories. In the south, British maintained its alliances with the Creek Nation, whose numbers and organization made it a formidable bulwark against U.S. revisionist aims. As late as 1815, it seemed Britain would continue to rely on its Native American
allies. In the negotiations over the Treaty of Ghent in 1815, for example, Indian rights remained central to British demands, with the British demanding the United States recognize Indian territories as sovereign states. Britain could also use its European allies to contain the United States. Through the early nineteenth century Britain leaned toward an alliance with Spain, and as a result “at first the British government tried to discourage designs on Spanish territory.” Until 1817, the British considered mediating in both the Florida conflict and the dispute over the Transcontinental Treaty, in order to ensure a better deal for Spain and block U.S. expansion. Castlereagh and his successor Canning also considered placing liberal monarchs on the thrones of the rebelling colonies, in hopes that this would block the spread of republican governments in the Western Hemisphere.

And when containment failed to work, the British had proved willing to confront the American challenger through the use of force. Even during the Napoleonic Wars—when the British might have reasonably concluded that threats at home trumped those in North America—the British saw American expansion as a significant threat. As the Leeds Mercury reported in 1812, “The question of Peace or War with America takes precedence in public importance of all other foreign news. . . . The happiness and tranquility of this country are much more closely connected with this subject, than with the victories in Spain, or the movements of contending armies in Russia.” When the Madison administration seemed ready to claim Florida in 1812, the British warned the administration that it must support its Spanish ally, even at the risk of war. The British refused to back down from the Orders of Council, and its insistence that the United States could not trade with French belligerents, risked war as a result. As Castlereagh told his minister in the United States, if the United States would not yield on maritime conflict, “it will be your object to regulate the discussion in such a manner as to throw distinctly upon the United States the option of war.” It refused to cede ground on issues of impressment and stood ready to fight suspected incursions into Canada.

The War of 1812 did not disabuse Britain of the benefits of containment. True that, in the wake of 1812, Castlereagh bemoaned what he saw as London’s overly aggressive strategies, policies that he believed were a central cause of the war. But at Ghent, Britain appeared determined to maintain a strategy of containment: it demanded strategic control of the lakes bordering Canada, the coastal islands of Maine, and for their allies, an independent Indian state. Arguably, in 1815 Britain was in a far better position to project power than it had been earlier in the nineteenth century. With Napoleon’s defeat, Britain’s resources could be directed toward stifling U.S. growth, and some observers argued that this was precisely what Britain should do. Geography was thus not an insurmountable obstacle to containment. If the British thought it necessary to contain the United States, it would do so, just as it had for at thirty years. It was not then that the British could
not mobilize its power to confront U.S. ambitions; it is that British leaders decided that they should not. Accommodation was not a necessity; it was a choice. And that strategic decision turned on Britain’s growing certainty that the United States harbored only limited ambitions in the Western Hemisphere. How can we explain the turn to accommodation? As argued in chapter 1, many scholars see the politics of harm and interest as driving a great power’s choice to accommodate, contain, or confront a rising challenger. Both of these explanations have guided international relations scholars’ interpretation of Anglo-American relations in the nineteenth century. Taken together, they paint a picture of British accommodation as based on a rational assessment of American intentions: it was the limited American capacity to harm Britain, and a shared interest in building a political and economic relationship, that provided costly signals of benign aims.

As the sections below suggest, these explanations are right that both harm and interests made accommodation an attractive policy. But British leaders also believed accommodation was only possible if the United States was a reliable partner, one that would play by the “rules of the game” in the Western Hemisphere and not pose a threat to Britain’s security or interests. Neither U.S. military power nor other “objective” indicators of American interest were sufficient to resolve Britain’s uncertainty about U.S. intentions: while harm and interests made accommodation attractive, neither of these factors provided clear signals as to whether America was a benign power or revolutionary state.

THE FUTILITY OF CONFRONTATION: THE POLITICS OF HARM

As argued in chapter 1, leaders can look to a rising challenger’s military might—both the composition of its forces and its strategy—to determine whether it is a threat that must be confronted or contained. From this perspective, in the early nineteenth century, there was little in U.S. military power that threatened Britain’s security. Conventional measures suggest an embryonic American power unable to threaten the core interests of the European states. Excepting the period of the U.S. Civil War, from 1800 to 1898, U.S. military personnel hovered around 35,000 men, compared to European armies whose personnel numbered in the hundreds of thousands; from 1816 until 1830, the United States maintained a standing military composed of only about 11,000 personnel.40 While the U.S. Navy claimed some victories in the War of 1812, it would only challenge British naval supremacy at the end of the nineteenth century.41 Economically the United States fared better, but was still weak when compared to Britain’s economic might. Its GDP from 1815 to 1830 was only a third of the United Kingdom’s.42 Without the ability to project power and threaten core interests, it is hardly surprising that Britain would accommodate American demands.
But whatever the United States’ weakness, by 1815 British politicians were quite certain that the United States would eventually acquire the capacity to threaten British security. As Troy Bickham argues, many Britons recognized that the “sheer size” of the United States “would make it a global player—an awareness that stretched back well into the eighteenth century.”43 The United States was hardly the great power that it would become, but many in Britain believed that appeasing the United States in the present would allow it to grow into a great power in the future, and ultimately undermine Britain’s position in the international system.44 Arguments about a looming American threat appeared in major newspapers. “The Americans if they are not now humbled,” declared the Times, “will not only rival us in Agriculture, in Commerce in naval force, but also in Manufactures.”45 An editorial in the liberal Morning Chronicle—often sympathetic to the U.S. government—warned that “we are actually trying to rear the pillar of American greatness higher and faster than otherwise would have happened, by giving up to them the resources of American wilderness, by regulations more favourable to trade than ours, and more especially, by improvidently allowing them to connect themselves early with the revolted provinces of Spanish America.”46

It was not simply that the United States could potentially build up their military might at some time in the distant future; it was that there were increasing signs that the United States would pose a revolutionary threat to Britain’s security. The U.S. attempts to annex Florida, British cabinet members argued, were a dangerous sign that it intended to upend British power in the Western Hemisphere. The United States’ interest in Florida, for example, might be read as an indication that the challenger would block British power in the Caribbean, giving Britain’s adversary access to the Gulf and lines of shipping that could result in Britain’s ruin. As the Courier wrote, “If the United States occupy the Floridas, the whole navy of England, in the event of war, could not protect the trade of the Gulf stream.”47 The United States might also be tempted to expand its territory farther south, taking Cuba for its own.

The American interest in South America seemed even more telling of revolutionary intentions. As Lord Liverpool argued, “If we allow these new states to consolidate their system and their policy with the United States of America, it will in a very few years prove fatal to our greatness if not endanger our safety.”48 For this reason, in a series of memos, Canning declared his “apprehensions of the ambitions and ascendancy of the U.S. of Am.” He argued that America’s growth in power was already prodigious and would threaten Britain, not only in the Western Hemisphere, but around the globe: “The great and favourite object of the policy of this country, for more than four centuries, has been to foster and encourage our navigation, as the sure basis of our maritime power. In this branch of national industry the people of the United States are becoming more formidable
rivals to us than any other nation which has ever yet existed.”49 If the United States were allowed to expand its power in South America, it would be a grave threat: “I need not say how inconvenient such an ascendency may be in time of peace, and how formidable in case of war.”50 Given the possibility of revolutionary intentions, Britain needed to recognize that it faced a final “opportunity (but it may not last long) of opposing a powerful barrier to the influence of the United States.”51

The British were not alone in their beliefs that United States aggression signaled a revolutionary threat. In 1783, a Spanish diplomat argued that while “this federal republic is born a pigmy, a day will come when it will be a giant, even a colossus.”52 During the negotiations with the United States over the Transcontinental Treaty, the Spanish ambassador to the United States, Luis de Onís, warned his fellow European powers to recognize the United States as the dangerous nation that they were: “The Americans believe themselves superior to all the nations of Europe, and see their destiny to extend their dominion to the Isthmus Panama, and in the future to all the New World.”53 Likewise, as the U.S. pushed toward the Mississippi, the French declared the United States an “enemy to be feared.” The Russians were concerned as well, and “the tsarist government reacted with alarm to the rapid American penetration of the northwest coast in the years after 1815.”54

Overall, in the early nineteenth century America’s military might was hardly reassuring. Its revisionist behavior signaled to many aggressive, even revolutionary intentions, and an interest in ultimately undercutting Britain’s power and security in the Western Hemisphere. Despite these concerns, by 1823, there was growing certainty that the United States would not threaten British interests, that it in fact could be a reliable ally in staving off threats from other European powers.

THE PROMISE OF PARTNERSHIP? BRITISH ACCOMMODATION AND THE POLITICS OF INTEREST

There is perhaps no more plausible story about the roots of Britain’s accommodation than the politics of interest. Here the story is not that the United States could not harm British interests, but that it would not, as doing so would prove too costly to its own interest. To begin with, given its own economic ambitions, the United States would be foolish to threaten British interests. By the early nineteenth century, the United States and Britain had become each other’s largest trading partners.55 “No two nations in the world are so strongly bound together in interest,” claimed the Times, and “none are so identified in sound policy, as Great Britain and the North American Republic.”56 The American revolution had done little to undercut economic ties between Britain and the United States. The United States was Britain’s primary export market. Britain relied on the U.S. agricultural and
natural resources. It was American grain that “continued to feed African slaves in the Caribbean and American lumber was used for the casks that transported the sugar-based products the slaves produced.”57 The United States, too, relied on its trade relations with Britain. In the decade that followed the War of 1812, for instance, more than 40 percent of American agricultural exports went to Great Britain.58

By the early nineteenth century so intertwined were the Britain and American economies, so dependent was Britain on the United States for its trade, that confrontation seemed mutual suicide. As Bemis argues, “Hostilities with America had already become if not ‘unthinkable’ at least unwise, if only because the United States was one of Britain’s most valuable foreign customers at a time when she was making every effort to recover from the Napoleonic wars.”59 Even before the War of 1812 the architect of accommodation, Castlereagh, recognized that “the friendship of the United States was a major asset,” and that cooperation with the emerging power could bring much needed wealth to the war-exhausted country. Castlereagh too believed that the Americans would come to see cooperation with Britain as the only sensible policy.60 As he wrote to Bagot, it was imperative that Britain “cultivate a good understanding with the Government of the United States” and seek a “Convention between the two Countries which I trust will have the effect of setting at rest for a considerable time to come, whatever feelings of Rivalry in Trade may still be entertained in America.”61

Britain could also look to the U.S. democratic and liberal government as a reliable indicator of benign intentions. Britain could see in the United States a liberal partner, a state whose political and “cultural commonalities” provided a foundation for cooperation in world politics. As Charles Kupchan argues, “As Britain searched for adversaries that it could potentially convert into friends, it singled out the United States at least in part due to cultural commonality and the familiarity and comfort that it bred.” Likewise, Stephen Rock suggests that Britain pursued a partnership with the United States for “reasons of geography, race, and ideology.”62 American democracy made it possible for Britain to gauge its adversary’s interests as well: congressional debates, a free press, and presidential appeals made U.S. intentions to expand transparent to its friends and enemies.

Certainly economic interest made accommodation attractive, and as discussed extensively below, Britain did hope to find in rising American power a reliable partner in liberal international politics. But the possibility of shared interests did little to decrease Britain’s uncertainty about U.S. ambitions. In 1817, it was far from clear that the United States would play by the rules of liberal economic trade: that it would not restrict trade arbitrarily, that it would not construct a closed economic system in the Western Hemisphere, that it would not move aggressively against vital British trading outposts in the West Indies. There were plenty of costly signals that, despite its own economic interests, the United States would not hesitate
to play a revolutionary game. The United States had acted recklessly during the Napoleonic Wars, embargoeing trade even though it devastated both states’ economies. The United States could use its position in Florida to disrupt the Atlantic free trade system and cut off vital British trading in the Caribbean. If this United States were to expand westward into Spanish territory, this meant turning over control of the Mississippi to the United States, and putting at risk the Gulf of Mexico, both of which contemporaries argued could lead to the “destruction of trade.” And while Britain benefited greatly from trade with the United States, it also had a prosperous and growing exchange—if an illegal one—with the South American colonies. If the South American rebels established republican governments, the danger was particularly grave as the independent states could give “a decided preference in their ports to the people of the United States over ourselves,” and trade with “these extensive dominions will be lost to us, and it will, in great measure, be transferred to our rivals.” Loud factions in the U.S. Congress were calling for a “closed Western Hemisphere” of trade, severed from European commerce, thus made Britain uneasy about its adversary’s interests.

Likewise America’s republican democracy provided little comfort to observers. Throughout the early nineteenth century Britain remained uncertain as to whether the United States would behave as a “normal” power or else conduct itself as a “dangerous nation,” recklessly pursuing its republican principles and seeking to spread revolution beyond its borders. During the War of 1812, European governments argued that revolutionary urges drove the United States into expansionist projects that would “seem delirium to any rational person,” as a Spanish minister remarked in 1812, and into acts of aggression that Liverpool condemned as “the most immoral acts recorded in the history of any country.” After the war ended, such concerns only grew more acute as the Americans pressed their claims on Spain. Many worried that the American government was volatile, prone to support republican revolutionary movements abroad, and likely to bend to the will of its most extremist and expansionist elements. “What with unpunished murderers and territorial acquisition, the Americans are drunk with exultation,” the Star declared. “Of civilized nations, the Americans are unquestionably the most depraved in principles, and the duties of social relations, of any upon the face of the earth.”

In 1817, then, it was not at all clear that the United States would pursue its interests in a way that could be accommodated by the British power. If the United States could uphold liberal commerce, then, yes, accommodation was the preferred policy. But if the challenger pursued a revolutionary policy, it would strangle British trade, both on the North American continent and in South America. If the United States was not “treaty worthy,” and willing to respect Britain’s position in North America and the Atlantic world, then the British could not afford to step down their defenses along
the Great Lakes and Canadian border, or find a modus vivendi in the Pacific Northwest. If republican principles motivated the United States to seize Spanish territory, then the Americans could not be trusted to forgo conquest in the West Indies and Cuba, shut down trade in the Caribbean, and overturn Britain’s economic and political order.

Ultimately, the British did decide the United States was not revolutionary, that it indeed could act as a partner, preserving stability and order in the Western Hemisphere. While the politics of harm and the politics of interest might explain why Britain hoped to cooperate with the United States, neither can explain why or how the great power became certain enough of its challenger’s intentions to risk a policy of accommodation. To understand how it was that Britain came to see the United States as a “limited aims” revisionist, we need to examine the politics of legitimacy.

“Among the Great Powers” or “Dangerous Nation”? The Politics of Legitimacy

At the start of the Monroe administration, American intentions remained murky at best. President Monroe, the British ambassador reported, was reaching out to “violent democrats,” who sought domination of the western United States and to expand into Spanish territory in Florida and the west. He reported that the Monroe administration maintained ties with devoted American republicans with deep sympathies toward the rebellion in the South American states. Monroe’s appointment of John Calhoun, an ardent republican, to secretary of war seemed to signal pressures “that will endeavor to propel the government in the revolutionary direction.”

Adams, appointed the administration’s secretary of state, seemed inscrutable, equally likely to move in either a revolutionary or a conservative direction. Put simply, as Castlereagh remarked to Wellesley in 1817, having read “Mr. Adam’s language before he left England, my impression is that the Cabinet in Washington has not yet made up its mind to play a revolutionary game in South America.”

Yet from 1817 to 1823, both British politicians and the public alike began to speak of the United States, not as a revolutionary power, but as a power with limited aims, indeed a liberal partner whose ambitions could and should be accommodated. The change, as historians argue, was pronounced, with Anglo-American relations moving from what Adams called a “warfare of the mind”—relations mired in nationalist outcry and mutual suspicion—to sustained, relatively peaceful cooperation. Driving this change, I argue, were the Monroe administration’s legitimation strategies, the reasons it gave for its expansionist behavior. As noted above, Monroe and his cabinet entered office in 1817 with equally if not greater revisionist aims than its predecessors. The administration was committed to seizing Florida and securing their northern and southern boundaries against encroachment...
from the European empires. With South American in rebellion, they saw the potential to dominate the Western Hemisphere, and reap the economic and political benefits that would come from recognizing the Spanish colonies as independent states. And, ultimately, they aspired to expand westward to the Pacific, laying claim to their “natural dominion” over the entire “Continent of North America.”

What was new were not the aims themselves but the reasons the administration used to justify expansion. Previous administrations had adopted revolutionary rhetoric: since at least Jefferson’s presidency, officials had justified their expansion into Spanish territory through appeals to republican principles. In this narrative, the United States was expanding, not to reinforce a European order, but to overturn it and set in its place a fundamentally revolutionary, republican system, an “empire of liberty” that would stretch throughout the Western Hemisphere if not the globe. It was in the name of a republican empire that Jefferson called on Americans to look westward in his inaugural address, to expand their “chosen country” where there could be “room enough for our descendants to the thousandth and thousandth generation.” Likewise, it was in the name of republican principles that the United States would challenge the existing colonial economic order and look to impose a “vision of a new world order based on free trade.”

In contrast, from 1817 to 1823 the Monroe administration, while still claiming to uphold republican principles, legitimated their expansion into Spanish territory as necessary to uphold Britain’s vision of an international legal regime, taking particular care to invoke the norms of self-defense, treaty law, and nonintervention at the core of Britain’s nascent “Atlantic system.” In doing so U.S. leaders convinced British elites and their public that the United States was a rule-abiding nation: a revisionist power, to be sure, but one poised to uphold the institutional order of world politics. While these legitimation strategies dominated the Monroe administration’s defense of expansion into Spanish territory from 1817 to 1823, two particular moments of crisis are noteworthy: Jackson’s invasion of Florida in 1817 and 1818, and the U.S. decision to recognize the Spanish colonies as independent and declare the Western Hemisphere closed to colonization. Jackson’s invasion provoked a crisis. Regarding the invasion of Florida, the British government and public were furious over what it saw as flagrant violations of international law, not to mention the execution of its own citizens in a backwoods court-martial. No wonder that, as Adams wrote in his diary, to “justify the measures of this government . . . and as far as possible the proceedings of General Jackson” was a task “of the highest order: may I not be found inferior to it!” In South America, the Monroe administration sought to recognize the rebels as independent nations without provoking mobilization from Spain and its European allies. If Britain believed the United States intended a republican revolution in South American, containment and confrontation were likely.
Why did American rhetoric proved so effective? Why would “cheap talk” exert such influence on British grand strategy? Rationalists might suggest that rhetoric was a costly signal, one that accurately conveyed that the United States was a “limited aims” revisionist and not a revolutionary power. On the face of it, this is an good description of the effects of American rhetoric: Britain did interpret American rhetoric as a credible signal, as an indicator that the United States would pursue limited aims and accept the British order. But it remains unclear why rhetoric would have these effects. Rhetoric was not a costly constraint on American ambitions. As argued below, the Monroe administration carefully calibrated its language to use both legal and republican principles, purposefully keeping republican and other expansionist coalitions sated at home. If anything, American legitimation strategies should have induced significant uncertainty among British leaders and their publics, providing evidence that the United States had not yet decided to abandon its revolutionary game.

American leaders’ rhetoric was effective, not because of its cost, but because of its resonance. On the one hand, the United States leaders, especially Monroe and Adams, had the capacity for multivocal legitimation strategies: they had both the content and the position to frame their actions as legitimate to a diverse set of coalitions. On the other hand, British politicians were institutionally vulnerable, prone to listen to American claims, even if they were cheap and contradictory. It was this configuration of the characteristics of the speaker and audience, then, that gave American rhetoric its power, to tell the story of their expansion in terms that the British would understand, and ultimately accept as justified.

The analysis below uses primary and secondary documents to trace the development of the Monroe administration’s legitimation strategies and their effects on British mobilization. Each of these crises had key moments of legitimation. In the case of the Jackson invasion, it was the Erving letter, written by John Quincy Adams with the purpose of explaining why the United States supported Jackson’s invasion of Florida. In the case of the South American rebellions, Monroe’s key addresses as well as a series of articles written by Adams in the National Intelligencer explaining U.S. policy are key to understanding this process. To place each of these categories of statements in their larger context, I supplemented analysis of these specific communications with a content analysis of articles and editorials published by the National Intelligencer from 1817 to 1823 to establish the content of the Monroe administration’s legitimation strategies. The National Intelligencer was not only the dominant paper of Washington, DC, but was considered the official outlet of the Monroe administration. Contemporaries in the United States and Britain treated legitimations in this paper as official justifications of U.S. policy.

To analyze the effects of legitimation on collective mobilization, I relied on both media accounts and unpublished documents in Britain’s public
records office. For the former, I looked at newspapers ranging from those sympathetic to the United States and a policy of accommodation (the Morning Chronicle) and those outlets pushing for a policy of containment and confrontation (the Courier and, under some circumstances, the Times). Parliamentary debates are also included in the analysis. Archival research focused primarily on the papers of Castlereagh, who both asked for and received intelligence about American statements through Charles Bagot, the British ambassador in Washington, as well as through other trusted intermediaries.

THE PRAGMATIC REVOLUTIONARY: THE MONROE ADMINISTRATION AND MULTIVOCAL RHETORIC

In chapter 2, I argued that rising powers often face a significant dilemma, that legitimation strategies designed to appeal to a great power audience will likely appear illegitimate to their domestic audience, and vice versa. To successfully expand, then, a rising power needs to undercut international mobilization against its efforts while at the same time mobilizing its own domestic resources behind its revisionist policies. Such was the dilemma faced by the Monroe administration. To Britain, leaders needed to frame U.S. expansion into Spanish territory as consistent with international norms and principles. In particular, the United States needed to look as though it was working within the norms of the “Atlantic system”—the economic, political, and social order Britain was constructing in the Western Hemisphere. As in Europe, “Westphalian” principles provided the foundation of this system. States must recognize and respect norms of nonintervention, promising not to interfere in the domestic affairs of other states, to use violence, or pursue conquest without just cause. Trade was not “liberal” in the contemporary sense of the term—colonial and mercantilist practices continued to dominate—but it was governed through a set of rules that regulated shipping and protected against piracy. Much of the political order of the Atlantic remained colonial, with Britain claiming territories throughout the Caribbean. The British hoped to impose a normative order as well, particularly in its efforts to regulate and ultimately eliminate the slave trade.

To sate the British, the Americans had to frame their expansion in the terms of this Atlantic order. Yet appealing to only international principles was dangerous. If the Monroe administration hoped to justify its expansion to its domestic audience, it had to legitimate its actions as revolutionary, as driven by republican principles. Republican factions, led by Henry Clay, stood poised to condemn the Monroe administration if they appeared to kowtow to Britain and its Atlantic order. In concrete terms, Clay’s expansionist aims differed little from those of the administration: he and his factions argued that the United States should press westward, and recognize the rebellious Spanish colonies. In other words, all the same material aims
that Monroe’s government embraced. But Clay’s faction insisted that the United States pursue these aims in the name of revolutionary and republican principles, that the United States must create a unique American system. If expansion threatened to undercut Republican principles, then revisionist policies should be abandoned: expansion was not an end in and of itself.

To appeal across these audiences, the Monroe administration adopted a multivocal strategy, merging Atlantic world legal appeals with republican language to justify American ambitions. United States’ leaders, Monroe and Adams in particular, were well positioned to make multivocal claims: both at home and abroad, these leaders bridged revolutionary and conservative coalitions and held ties with key republican and European actors. Monroe had impeccable republican credentials. He was a founding father, the last of the Virginia dynasty that epitomized republican principles. He served as secretary of state under Madison, so could claim to have defended those principles against British incursions with force. At the same time, Monroe had positioned himself as defender of international law, an advocate of squaring republican rights within, not outside, the European system. In Jefferson’s administration, he served as the U.S. Minister to the Court of St. James, where his primary task was to negotiate an extension of the Jay Treaty and stabilize relations between the United States and Britain. While he succeeded in reaching an agreement, Jefferson refused to seek ratification of the treaty, believing it undermined core republican principles. From that point on, Monroe emerged as a vocal critic of radical, revolutionary elements in his party. Adams was perhaps even more of a Sphinx than Monroe. Here again, no one could doubt his revolutionary credentials: he was the son of the second president, and a defector from the Federalist to the Republican Party. But his republicanism was also “tempered by years of residence in Europe.” Adams had spent two years in London during the negotiations to end the War of 1812, where he negotiated consistently with Castlereagh over the terms of the treaty. As a result of Adams’s connections “he was never truly ‘at home’ anywhere. Ideologically Adams was neither democratic nor aristocrat. He never identified fully with any political party.”

These complex political positions gave Monroe and Adams the authority to appeal to multiple principles. In expanding into Spanish territory, leaders insisted that United States was acting both as a republican power and as a law-abiding “European” nation, its actions fully in line with existing norms in the international system. The use of multivocal appeals was both consistent and systematic. I used a qualitative content analysis program to look at articles in the National Intelligencer from 1817 to 1823 reporting U.S. policy in Spanish Florida and toward the South American colonies. I coded thirty-two articles published during the crisis, identifying sixty-nine “legitimating phrases” that offered reasons explaining U.S. actions in each of these territories. I classified these legitimating phrases into three categories: “law of
nations,” which included appeals to customary and treaty law; “self-defense”; and “republican principles.” Appeals to the “laws of nations” accounted for about 40 percent of the legitimating phrases. Claims of self-defense accounted for another 39 percent of legitimating claims. The rest of the legitimating phrases refer to republican principles as guiding U.S. policies toward Spanish territories and colonies.84

These patterns of legitimation are apparent in each episode of U.S. efforts to expand into the faltering Spanish empire. In the defense of Jackson’s invasion of Florida, Adams realized the necessity of a multivocal legitimation strategy. As he wrote in his memoirs, “The administration were [sic] placed in a dilemma from which it is impossible to escape censure by some, and factious crimination by many. If they avow and approve Jackson’s conduct, they incur the double responsibility of having commenced a war against Spain, and of warring in violation of the Constitution without the authority of Congress. If they disavow him they must give offence to all his friends.” To justify U.S. expansion, Adams crafted a multivocal legitimation that simultaneously proclaimed Jackson a republican patriot, but also insisted that his use of force—the brutal treatment of the Creeks, the occupation of Spanish territory, even the execution of British subjects—was justified both by treaty law and by norms of nonintervention. To a domestic audience, as Weeks argues, Adams cast Jackson as a hero in “the context of the mythic American struggle against the wiles of foreign intrigues and the ‘uncivilized’ natures of ‘inferior’ races.”85 Jackson’s motives, Adams insisted, were beyond reproach, “founded in the purest patriotism . . . as well as in the first law of nature—self defense.”86

To the British, Adams’ public campaign took the form of a series of formal and informal statements, beginning with diplomatic notes in the summer of 1818 and culminating, most famously, in the “Erving letter,” in November 1818, a letter circulated among all of the courts of Europe. His correspondence was published both in national papers, as well as in major British newspapers, such as the Times. In each of these cases, Adams insisted that far from violating international law the United States “identified the Union’s expansion with the need to uphold the treaty law upon which the peace of Europe and America ultimately depended.”87 His legitimation strategies used three consistent appeals: justification of conventional law, customary law, and the laws of nature. First, Adams justified the invasion with reference to conventional law, as within the boundaries of existing treaties. The Seminoles, Adams argued, had rejected the “legitimate” Treaty of Fort Jackson signed between Jackson and the Creeks in 1814. They had conducted brutal attacks against unarmed American villages. Jackson’s methods might be unsavory, but were they not, as Adams asked, “the dictate of common sense? Is it not the usage of legitimate warfare?”88

Second, Adams insisted that the United States was abiding by appropriate customary law, especially norms of nonintervention in its invasion of
Spanish territory. So long as Spain was truly sovereign in Florida, American intervention was unwarranted. Yet Spain, in failing to secure its territory, had failed both in its obligations as a sovereign state, and in its duties to uphold treaty law. Adams argued that Spain might have a right to nonintervention in theory, but it had abandoned its rights once it proved unable to enforce the peace. If Spain could not keep its territory free of “savages” and “pirates,” then the United States use of force was vindicated by “every page of the law of nations.”\(^{89}\) Unable to control its American possessions, Spain had allowed the proliferation of “all the pirates and all the traitors to their country” to “wage an exterminating war against the portion of the United States immediately bordering upon this neutral and thus violated territory of Spain.”\(^{90}\) Under such conditions, force—even brutality—was clearly justified.

Third, Adams invoked the laws of nature, especially self-defense and preservation, to justify its claims. Jackson entered Florida in pursuit of an enemy intent on waging “an exterminating war” against the United States.\(^{91}\) The Creeks and their allies, Adams argued, planned to seize Spanish forts in Florida as use them as base from which to attack the United States. In the face of this threat “by all the laws of neutrality and of war, as well as of prudence and of humanity, [Jackson] was warranted in anticipating his enemy . . . by the forcible occupation of the fort. There will need not citations from printed treatises on international law, to prove the correctness of this principle. It is engraved in adamant on the common sense of mankind: no writer upon the laws of nations ever pretended to contradict it; none of any reputation or authority ever omitted to assert it.”\(^{92}\)

This multivocal language pervaded the legitimation of U.S. policy toward South America as well. Here again, the Monroe administration faced cross-pressures from different audiences. Republicans demanded a new system to replace the European colonial order. “There could not be a doubt that Spanish America, once independent,” Clay argued, “would obey the laws of the system of the new world.”\(^{93}\) That the system would be led by the United States, and devoid of European influence, was inevitable: the rebels of South America were “brothers. They adopted our principles, copied our institutions, employed the very language and sentiments of our revolutionary papers.”\(^{94}\) The Monroe administration could not reject revolutionary rhetoric; when they did so, republicans pounced, chastising their government for its “fear of insulting his Britannic majesty.”\(^{95}\)

Here again the solution was a multivocal strategy: the Monroe administration claimed that it would support republican principles in South America, but in ways consistent with existing international law, especially norms of nonintervention and Westphalian sovereignty. Early recognition of the colonies, the Monroe administration argued, would be illegitimate in the eyes of international law. In 1817 the Monroe administration argued that the rebels had not yet met the “essential prerequisites for carrying out the
responsibilities and duties of a state under international law—the standard that Adams found it convenient to demand—did not yet exist in Latin America.” As argued an editorial in the National Intelligencer, “The liberties of South America is indeed a theme well-fitted for the declamations of the demagogues of the day, admirably suited to the display of the oratory of our would-be Demosthenes and Ciceros,” but in reality it was unclear whether the revolutionaries were yet capable of forming a free government. To recognize the South Americans was thus a profound violation of the Atlantic order, and the United States would not undercut “professed principles of non interference with foreign nations in questions of internal government.”

At the same time, the Monroe administration argued that its policy of nonrecognition was consistent with republican principles as well. Recognition without real self-determination, the administration argued, was tantamount to imposing rule on another people. As Adams wrote, “Among the most precious of the natural rights of man, is the right of the majority, in every political association, to decide for itself in adopting such form of government as it may deem most fitting to promote its happiness and prosperity. . . . To force the nations to be free, is beyond our power, as it is beyond our right.” If the United States were to disregard the laws of nations in pursuing revolutionary aims, then it would be behaving no better than Napoleon and he, as one writer intoned, was no “Friend of Liberty.” The United States must, as argued in the National Intelligencer, “let our pride, as republicans, induce us to show the world, by our practice, that the faith of treaties is no where more strictly observed than under the laws of our republic.”

As the Spanish threat waned, so too did the United States see the opportunity for expanding its influence in South America. And if in 1817 the laws of the Atlantic order and republican virtue justified restraint, from 1818 onward this multivocal language could now justify a revisionist foreign policy. Once the South Americans could demonstrate that they were de-facto Westphalian states, recognition was now clearly justified. As Adams argued in 1819, “Now that we are convinced that the power of Spain cannot be restored, we desire Europe to consider how important it is that the new states should be recognized and held in their responsibilities as independent bodies.” There was nothing “revolutionary” about this policy: recognition, Adams argued was “a mere acknowledgement of the fact of Independence.” Likewise recognition was, in Monroe’s words, in strict accord “with the law of nations, that it is just and right as to the parties, and that the United States owe it to their station and character in the word.”

Finally, these norms of nonintervention and sovereign order justified more than just recognition of the South American colonies; the United States claimed that they mandated Europe no longer interfere in the Western Hemisphere. As Monroe declared in the doctrine of 1823: “With the
existing Colonies or dependencies of any European power, we have not inter
ered, and shall not interfere.” Once again, Westphalian principles of non-
intervention guided American policy. But the United States would uphold
republican principles as well. “But with the Governments who have declared
their Independence, and maintained it, and whose Independence we have,
on great consideration, and on just principles acknowledged, we could not
view any interposition for the purpose of oppressing them, or controll-
ing [sic] in any other manner, their destiny, by any European power, in any
other light, than as the manifestation of an unfriendly disposition towards
the United States.”

Here, as Britain and other European powers immediately recognized,
was a significantly ambitious, revisionist proclamation: the United States
was declaring its dominance over the Western Hemisphere. But as Weeks
and others argue, the Monroe Doctrine relied on the same mix of legal and
republican rhetoric that it used to justify the Florida invasion, the Transcon-
tinental Treaty, and the recognition of the South American republics102 The
doctrine, Adams insisted, espoused republican principles in accordance
with international law: it did not disturb the peace; it did not interfere with
other nations; it respected sovereign rights.103 Indeed, Adams demanded
that any illegal, revolutionary language was struck from or at least watered
down before Monroe delivered his famous message.104

In sum, from 1817 to 1823, the Monroe administration consistently legiti-
mated American ambitions with a multivocal strategy. As argued in chap-
ter 2, however, a capacity for multivocal rhetoric is not enough to stave off
containment. Resonance lies not only in what the speaker says, but in what
the audience hears a sympathetic audience is also necessary.

A PARTNER FOR PEACE? INSTITUTIONAL VULNERABILITY
AND THE ATLANTIC ORDER

As the United States expanded into Spanish territory, the British proved
willing to listen to American claims, even if they understood them as multi-
vocal and ambiguous. Legitimations resonated because from 1817 to 1823,
Britain was an institutionally vulnerable power, one that was eager to see the
United States as a potential partner in building a liberal order in the West-
ern Hemisphere. International relations scholars have written extensively
on British institution building in the early nineteenth century, but have
focused largely on British efforts in Europe, particularly Castlereagh’s
efforts to bring Britain into the Congress system.105 But Britain’s efforts in
Europe to create institutions of liberal governance are only part of the story.
In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, Britain also made stren-
uous efforts to construct an “Atlantic Order,” attempting to pacify “zones
of violence” by exporting a liberal legal framework into the Western
Hemisphere.
Throughout the eighteenth century, the Atlantic world was a tumultuous institutional space. In certain places, such as North America, the laws of Europe—such as the Treaty of Utrecht—were argued to govern territorial disputes, commerce, and sovereign claims; in contrast, “zones of violence,” such as Indian lands, African polities, and the high seas, existed outside of European legal boundaries. During most of the eighteenth century, moreover, Spain continued to claim “all lands and waters not explicitly ceded to other European powers,” rejecting the application of international law to zones over which it perceived it held exclusive sovereignty. As the Spanish Empire collapsed, Britain saw an opportunity to strengthen what Castlereagh referred to as the emerging “liberal system” in the Atlantic world. As Onuf and Gould write, the British saw the possibility of governing the Atlantic “not as an inherently imperial space but as a region that could be organized as a system of independent states, an international regime defined by free trade and the rule of law.”

Britain was deeply invested in the success of these Atlantic institutions, believing that a stable Atlantic system was necessary for Britain’s economic, security, and even moral interests. Castlereagh argued that only through an institutionalized order in the Atlantic could Britain ensure peace and material prosperity. As a nation built on laws, leaders believed that a liberal legal system must follow the path of Britain’s expanding might. “Let an Englishman go where he will,” argued the legal counsel of the Admiralty, and “he carries as much of law and liberty with him, as the nature of things will bear.” So essential was the order to British interests that elites were willing to implement it through “persuasion, coercion, or interest”—that is to say, through moral suasion, by providing economic incentives and, if necessary through punishment or the use of force.

Britain thus was invested in building the institutional architecture of the Atlantic order. British leaders also perceived the order as extremely unsettled. It was, to begin with, a relatively new order, its norms deeply contested. As one historian argues, the revolutions of the Atlantic world—the American, Haitian, and now Spanish American rebellions—posed a “direct threat to the existing social order in the Caribbean.” In 1815, the British continued to view republicanism as an existential threat to its legal order, an expression of popular will with no respect for existing legal architecture. Britain was simultaneously threatened by a conservative, European threat to the legal order, as Russia, Austria, and Prussia—the Holy Alliance—were pressing against the legal norms of nonintervention that, to the British mind, formed the core of the Atlantic system, if not the international system as a whole. Far from eschewing intervention in sovereign states, the Holy Alliance—especially Russia’s Tsar Alexander—argued that the use of force to stem the rising tide of republican principles was both necessary and legitimate. In the Western Hemisphere, Britain’s conflict with the Holy Alliance over the norms of intervention was no abstract affair; the Spanish decline
in the Western Hemisphere following rebellions served as a crucible for this brewing conflict. From 1818 onward, Tsar Alexander pressed his European allies for military intervention wherever the forces of revolution were posed to unseat a legitimist government, and republican revolutionaries of the Western Hemisphere absorbed much of his attention. In the months leading up to the Congress of Aix-la-Chapelle, for example, Russian diplomats pressed to have Spain included among the great powers, so that the failing empire could plead its case for European intervention in South America. By 1823, the Holy Alliance was once again threatening to intervene in South America on Spain’s behalf, with or without British support.114

Britain believed the consequences of intervention would be substantial. Its leaders feared that its European allies, including Spain, would use intervention to undercut the emerging liberal trade system in the Atlantic. As Castlereagh wrote to Wellesley in March 1817, Spain and its European allies had not made “any distinct avowal of the basis of the system upon it is willing to act” or articulated any “general principles of its own.”115 Without a clear commitment to liberal principles, Britain feared that Spain would seek to reinstate its own colonial order in the Atlantic world. The British also feared the European powers posed a moral threat to the Atlantic order. Castlereagh and Canning, for example, railed against Spain’s refusal to abandon the slave trade in the Atlantic, fearing a Spanish victory would perpetuate the existence of “so odious a system as the Slave Trade” which “continued to disgrace the times in which we lived.”116

In short, throughout the early eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Britain was institutionally vulnerable. It was deeply invested in building a liberal international system in the Atlantic, a “region that could be organized as a system of independent states, an international regime defined by free trade and the rule of law,” yet worried that this system was under increasing threat. Under these conditions, it is not surprising that American appeals to legal and liberal principles resonated with the great power. Even if the United States appeared a revisionist power, it looked like one inclined to support the Atlantic order. For this reason, the Monroe administration’s rhetoric had powerful effects on British policy. Its multivocal appeals, with its promises to adhere to norms of noninterference, self-defense, and legal procedure, and yet not overturn republican principles, proved deeply resonant to the British audience.

**Legitimation and the Politics of Collective Mobilization: Restraint, Coercion, and Identity**

Between 1817 and 1823, the way in which the United States legitimated its ambitions proved strongly resonant: the U.S. capacity for multivocality, combined the British institutional vulnerability, proved a potent combination. By
portraying its revisionist actions as legitimate, the United States drove the British away from policies of confrontation and containment, and persuaded the great power to accommodate American expansion into Spanish territory. British leaders and their public came to believe the U.S. justifications signaled restraint, that the United States would not mobilize to overturn the Atlantic order. Critics of conciliation in Britain, moreover, were silenced: both British elites opposed to accommodation, and European powers demanding containment of U.S. ambitions, found themselves stripped of reasons to mobilize against the emerging power. And finally, the normative appeals of Monroe’s administration resonated with Britain’s identity as a liberal power, a resonance that forced Britain to act, not merely on the basis of interest, but on the foundations of principle as well.

**Signaling Restraint and Constraint**

It was not a given that the British would view U.S. expansion as consistent with international norms, and both the case of the Florida invasion and the recognition of the Spanish colonies demonstrate the importance of American rhetoric in signaling constraint. Jackson’s invasion, for example, sparked a fierce outcry, both within and outside of the British government. Britain and the European powers quickly condemned Jackson’s invasion as an act of war against Spain.\(^{118}\) The *Courier* seethed that “as the capture of Pensacola is no longer doubtful, we may now hope to know why it has been seized . . . the causes which reduced America to the necessity of seeking from war what she could not obtain by negotiation.”\(^{119}\) The *Caledonian Mercury*, a paper traditionally more sympathetic to the United States, condemned the “obscure Court-Martial of American officers, holding their sittings in the back woods of their half cultivated country. Who empowered them to constitute this new and capital offence in the law of nations?”\(^{120}\)

At best, some argued that Jackson’s invasion signaled a nation out of control, a weak state unable to contain its most extreme, violent, and expansionist elements. Indeed, British officials first assumed Jackson’s invasion was unauthorized, that Jackson had acted, as Bagot first reported to Castlereagh, “in open contempt of the Executive Authority of the Country.”\(^ {121}\) This interpretation was not comforting: it suggested a fragmented government incapable of fulfilling its duties under treaty and international law. At worst, Britain worried that “Jackson’s invasion of Florida and his execution of two Englishmen reflected impatient, self-confident American nationalism,” one that could not be contained within acceptable limits.\(^ {122}\) There was no guarantee that the United States would stop its territorial advance in Florida. Far from indicating that the United States had limited aims, the British “feared that the Florida triumph would lead to further American projects.”\(^ {123}\) Jackson’s invasion, in short, was seen as a costly signal of revolutionary revisionist ambitions.
The situation, as Bagot assessed, was of a “grave character.”124 Although Castlereagh preferred to continue his policy of appeasement, even counseling Bagot to avoid talking about the crisis with Adams for fear of “rupture,” the crisis placed serious pressure on the foreign minister’s policy. In the face of the invasion, British politicians and papers were calling for a full suspension of diplomatic relations. Lord Liverpool noted to Castlereagh that, in light of “General Jackson’s conduct” it is “difficult to draw the closer ties of friendship and connexion between the two countries, by concluding the treaties which are in progress.”125 Spain charged that the invasion was no less than an act of war and demanded a hearing at the upcoming European conference at Aix-la-Chappelle.

By the end of 1818 tensions between the United States and Britain were escalating. Castlereagh and Bagot argued that a suitable justification of the invasion was critical to defusing the crisis. “I look with considerable anxiety to the arrival of the next mail from America,” Castlereagh wrote, in hopes that he could assure the Prince Regent that “the conduct of [the American] government and its officers . . . would be found free of reproach.” Castlereagh stressed the importance of the Monroe administration providing an appropriate justification for its actions and pressed Bagot to ask for “Mr. Adams’ assistance in furnishing me with the means of removing a misconception on a subject which so much interests the public feeling.”126 British newspapers agreed that only a clear justification could signal restraint and diffuse the crisis. The Courier outlined the stakes most succinctly when it wrote that “there are so many advantages, political, commercial and territorial, which would accrue to America by her possession of the Floridas, that when we find her grasping at them, we are naturally suspicious about motives.”127 It was thus up to “the Washington Cabinet, to satisfy the world that it had not be actuated by unprincipled ambition.”128

What Adams gave to the British was not costly. True that the Monroe administration offered to pull Jackson’s troops out of Florida, but it had already demonstrated that the United States could invade Florida at will: demobilization, in short, was hardly credible. Rather it was Adams’s appeals to international law—both in his communications in the summer of 1818 and in his infamous Erving letter of November 1818—that “stayed the hand of the British government.”129 Upon reading Adams’s defense of Jackson, Castlereagh made no secret of his continued distaste for Jackson’s action, that the invasion, and especially the execution of British citizens, was “harsh and unwarrantable.”130 But he agreed that the United States had acted within the confines of international law, that it was Jackson’s targets that had engaged in “unauthorized practices” that “deprived them of any claim on their own Government for interference in their behalf.”131 Bemis argues that in “Europe the effect of Adams’s paper was electrical.”132 The once outraged press conceded that the invasion of Florida was within the boundaries international law. If, for example, Adams’s charges
against Ambrister and Arbuthnot were true, then the Courier conceded that “their fate was such as the law of nations warrants.” 133 Even more significantly, Adams’s justifications were read as a clear signal that the Americans could be bound to the European system, perhaps even more than the so-called “legitimist” states within Europe itself. As the Morning Chronicle proclaimed, the American republic, in appealing to international law, had shown itself constrained by institutions, because “if power alone were to regulate the issue, nothing could be more easy than for America, particularly in the present embarrassment of Spain, to retain possession of the territory which she has occupied. How different the conduct of this great Republic from the avaricious though purblind Legitimates of Europe!” 134 Through careful justification, Adams had portrayed Jackson’s act of war as bound by international law, and a signal that the republic would not mobilize to overturn the existing rules of the international order.

It is difficult to say what might have happened in the absence of Adams’s defense, what the counterfactual world would look like if Adams’s Erving letter had not appeared. Historians suggest that Castlereagh’s warning to Rush that, without Adams’s justification, war could have occurred if the ministry had “HELD UP A FINGER” was exaggerated, and neither the cabinet nor British public was eager for another war with the United States. But it is likely that, in the absence of the Erving letter and legal justification for expansion, accommodation would have been far less likely. The British public was clamoring for retribution against the execution of its citizens. The British media was calling for Britain to stand firm against American outrages. It was precisely these conditions that pressed Britain toward war in 1812. Adams’s signal of restraint was critical in showing the United States was not mobilizing for revolutionary action: it tamped down dangerous political dynamics and allowed for the pursuit accommodation. 135

The Monroe administration’s rhetoric signaled restraint and constraint in the crisis over South America as well. Exchanges between Castlereagh and his ministers—especially his minister to the United States, Charles Bagot, and minister to Spain, Wellesley—suggest significant uncertainty about whether the United States would uphold international law in South America, or if it would be compelled by its republican ideology to prematurely recognize the revolutionary states. Recognition on revolutionary grounds was deeply problematic. The invocation of republican principles threatened the fabric of the Atlantic order. Such rhetoric suggested the Americans would build in South America a system, as declared by Clay, “animated by an American feeling, and guided by an American policy. They would obey the laws of the system of the new world, of which they would compose a part, in contradistinction to that of Europe.” 136

As argued above, Monroe and Adams made it clear to Castlereagh that a policy of recognition was only matter of time, but promised that, when it came, it would be consistent with international law. The British govern-
ment took notice of the Americans’ deliberate language. Bagot wrote to Castlereagh about the “remarkable change that has taken place lately in the language held by the government newspapers,” noting specifically the rejection of revolutionary rhetoric in support of the revolting colonies. British observers argued that this language signaled restraint, that the United States was purposively not mobilizing its republican factions. As Castlereagh wrote to Wellesley, if the United States could be steered away from a revolutionary game then “it might be yet kept within the limits which ought in good sense and sound Principle to guide the Principal powers of Europe, in any intervention they might take in those concerns.” Central to these “sound principles,” Castlereagh (and Canning after him argued) was noninterference: to recognize and refrain from violating the rights of sovereign states to determine their own destiny, except when necessitated by self-defense. The principles would bind the United States, not only in the present, but in the future. If the United States could be bound to this principle, Castlereagh believed that “the United States might not only be prevented from breaking loose upon this question, but that the interest and influence of that State might be brought to operate powerfully in repressing order in that Quarter [the Western Hemisphere].”

Likewise when Monroe announced that the United States would recognize the Spanish colonies in 1822, it was a policy deemed not only legitimate, but a signal of continued restraint, a promise to be bound by international principles. Commenting on Monroe’s announcement, the Times noted that Monroe was right that “the fact of sovereignty is indeed the only general test of the right of sovereignty” and thus “the principle which has been adduced to justify [recognition] cannot, we apprehend, be fairly controverted with any regard to common sense, or to the law of nations.” Even the Monroe Doctrine that followed was viewed, not as a statement of revolution, but a profound exclamation of restraint. As Bemis argues, Monroe had promised that “while espousing the republican principle, it had not sought by the propagation of its own principles to disturb the peace or to intermeddle with the policy of any part of Europe.” It was, as Ernest May argues, both an expression of continental hegemony, and a clear rejection of ideological empire, a sign that the United States would limit its expansion within the boundaries of Britain’s Atlantic order.

Rhetorical Coercion: Silencing Calls for Confrontation

Not everyone believed the United States could be bound by legitimate principles. Both in Britain and in other European countries, there were those that believed the United States was a rapacious, revisionist power, one that could not be appeased but must be confronted, even at the risk of war. Spain, not surprisingly, protested United States expansion loudly. The United States,
Spain charged, was a danger to the European order, a state “always anxious to promote rebellion and perfidy.” Whatever gestures the administration might make to international law, it was clear, as Onís charged in 1817, the United States was a potential juggernaut, stealing land and encouraging settlement that would ultimately spell the doom of the European states. Europe must stand ready to thwart America’s plan “of extending the limits of this Republic toward the South, and then of realizing its great Project of reaching the Pacific Ocean. I confess to you that I cannot comprehend how the Powers of Europe fail to awaken from their lethargy on seeing the extraordinary steps of this Republic, and how they can fail to see that it will be too late when they wish to place limits on it, if they allow it to take the flight on which its political actions are rapidly leading it.” Within Britain there were fierce critics of appeasement who loudly protested Castlereagh’s policy. “I wish, sir, some person would show what quality it is in the disposition of the United States toward Great Britain that gives them a title to become the most favored government on this globe,” sniffed a prominent critic of conciliation. It was not merely that accommodation was undeserved; it was dangerous.

But the American government’s appeals to international law would, if not persuade their critics, then at least silence them: by invoking institutional norms, the Monroe administration effectively denied their opponents a legitimate basis from which to oppose expansion. As a result, as Gould argues, “the ability of Americans to turn the legal rights of peace to their advantage repeatedly served as a check on the ability of Britain and Europe’s other powers to intervene in the Union’s affairs.” The dynamics of rhetorical coercion are best seen in the Monroe administration’s defense of the invasion of Florida. Domestic critics of appeasement pounced at the chance, not only to condemn Jackson’s conduct, but to argue that the whole policy of conciliation was based on faulty assumptions of American restraint. In Britain, the Courier led the charge, claiming Jackson’s actions were consistent with the character of a republican government: “It has pleased the Republican Cabinet to abandon the old fashioned policy of legitimate Monarchies, and to model its proceedings upon the repulsive practice of NAPOLEON, who first invaded, and then condescended to explain.” In its invasion of Florida, the United States had violated “the established practices of civilised states with regards to the commencement of hostilities against other powers.” The Times spat that the United States had taken Florida in a “fit of aggression . . . without war or provocation.” Adams’s words did not impress them; he was engaged only in “political chicanery” to justify Jackson’s violence.

In the wake of the invasion, the British opposition demanded Castlereagh and the government defend their policy of appeasing the expanding American power. In the House of Lords, Lord Lansdowne proclaimed that he could not condone Jackson’s “departure from the law of nations, and the introduction into warfare of a barbarous practice, subversive of the principles
of humanity, by which civilized states were governed.” While he did not charge that the U.S. government had sanctioned Jackson’s cruel actions, especially the execution of British citizens, he argued that this clear evidence of unbridled expansion demanded a British response. American expansion, he argued, clearly undercut British interest; indeed “no colonial cession so materially affecting the interests of this country had ever before taken place. . . . How did it happen that ministers had been unable to prevent this cession? Why was such an event not guarded against by the treaties concluded at the peace?” By standing by while the United States wrenched Florida from Spain, moreover, it had acquiesced in an act “so violent and unjustifiable, and which tended to establish principles which, if admitted, would produce, a change in the law of nations most unfavourable to humanity.”

Adams’s rhetoric stripped such assaults of their bite. After hearing Adams’s justifications for the invasion, editors at the Morning Chronicle chided the Courier, noting that they had “told the Courier not to pass sentence of condemnation on America, merely because she had a Republican government, but to judge of her acts their own merit or demerit.” In light of Adams’s declarations, the Morning Chronicle declared, it was clear that the invasion of Florida was justified. The Courier’s charges were not only imprudent, risking an unnecessary conflict with the United States, they were hypocritical, supporting not the rule of law but “crimes of Europe,” the unjustified conquest practiced by the so-called “legitimate Monarchies.” Lansdowne, too, found himself silenced. His peer, the Earl of Bathurst, argued that Jackson had acted within “a principle admitted by the law of nations, and which in the policy of nations had been frequently adopted.” Could his colleague then make a case “which would justify involving the two countries [Britain and the United States] in war”? Spain too now lacked the rhetorical resources to mobilize a European alliance against U.S. expansion. In the years before the invasion, Spain’s ministers had charged the United States with “perverting the clearest sense of treaties” in pursuing its expansion westward and into Florida. In demanding Spanish territory, America had engaged “in manifest violation of the law of nations, employed alternately artifice and violence, and an audacity scarcely comparable to that of Bonaparte during his violent usurpations.” Spain hoped to press its case for aid against the United States, galvanizing support both on the North American continent, and in its struggle to retain control over its South American colonies. A flurry of diplomatic correspondence followed the seizure of Pensacola and St. Marks. Jackson’s invasion, Pizarro proclaimed, was predicated on nothing but “aggrandizement.” In the face of unjustified expansion, Pizarro asked whether it was time for Britain “to interpose in this business in a more effectual manner,” either through direct mediation, or by allowing Spain to
present its case at Aix-la-Chapelle. Another Spanish representative noted that the Monroe administration was clearly attempting a “total separation affected by that Govt. from the principles which direct the general system of Europe . . . as it lays down a system of its own which begins to develop itself with sufficient rapidity.” If Britain did not act on behalf of Spain, it risked appeasing a United States which “in its future extent and projects aims perhaps not only at the humiliation of Spain but at the ruin of the whole system of Europe.”

Castlereagh ultimately dismissed Spanish charges against the United States, arguing that Britain had no treaty obligation to come to Spain’s aid, and that Aix-la-Chapelle had no reason to take up the issue of Florida or the Spanish colonies. It may be tempting to reduce Castlereagh’s response to the pressures of interest. As noted above, Britain had no interest in risking conflict with the United States in the service of Spain. Yet accommodation was hardly assured. Castlereagh had suggested in the past that Britain might want to keep Spain in Florida as a check on growing American power. As he wrote, “Were Great Britain to look to its own interest alone . . . we have an obvious motive for desiring that the Spanish continue to be our neighbours in East Florida, rather than our West Indian possessions be so closely approached by the territory of the United States.” Britain might be able to assure this outcome if it insisted on mediating the Spanish-American dispute. Moreover, although Britain sought cooperation with the United States, Castlereagh feared a rupture with Spain or, perhaps more importantly, with the Holy Alliance states more sympathetic to Spain’s plight in South America.

As long as the United States was acting legitimately, there was no need for Britain to mobilize against American aggression. Indeed Adams’s defense made Castlereagh’s ability to mobilize support for accommodation, if not an easy, then a far simpler task. Spain, in the wake of Adams’s claims “could not use the situation to gain easy advantage in the court of public opinion.” As Bemis argues, “Adams’s paper had mollified a hostile reaction of the European government to which Spain had protested the enormity of Jackson’s invasion. In England, it had an especially healthy result.” And if the U.S. invasion was justified, then Onís and Pizarro had no legitimate grounds on which to ask for European aid—the charge that Spain’s rights as a sovereign nation had been violated was its only sound case for European intervention. If Spain could not show that its sovereign rights had been violated, then it had no other reason to ask for support. Indeed, Castlereagh had long castigated Spain for failing to provide sound principles on which to argue for European intervention, either in North or South America. He noted that when Spain had provided cause for intervention—such as when Portugal violated Spain’s rights in South America—Europe had been quick to respond. But without a case for intervention, Britain—and the rest of Europe—would stand aside in the conflict.
THE TIES THAT BIND? LIBERAL RHETORIC AND THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY

As argued earlier, scholars suggest that Britain’s policy of conciliation stemmed from forces far deeper than those of material power and interest, and was ultimately embedded in a sense of shared identity. But at the start of the nineteenth century, this sense of shared identity was thin. British and Americans believed that their two states shared a common kinship and cultural heritage, but these had been eclipsed by the differences in their nations’ social and political systems. The United States, as an article in the Quarterly Review declared, was embarked on an “experiment, to see, with how little government, with how few institutions, and at how cheap a rate men may be kept together in a society. Is this a safe experiment? Can it possibly be a successful one?” Travelers’ accounts published in the journal described Americans as “civilized barbarians,” as a country populated by “swarms of emigrants, renegadoes, and refugees,” a nation not “worthy of their parentage.” Nor did Americans feel a kinship with their English brethren. Rush declared that England was “no more republican than Turkey” and that its elites were entirely “hostile to republican ideas.” Adams, writing to his father from London, warned that “the Royalists everywhere detest and despise us as Republicans. . . . Emperors, kings, princes, priests, all the privileged orders, all the establishments, all the votaries of legitimacy eye us with the most rancourous hatred.”

This conflict of identity was not limited to abstract arguments over liberal principles or outburst of nationalist rhetoric; it manifested consistently and clearly in clashes over foreign policy. For example, America’s republican identity, Bukovansky argues, pressed the United States into conflict with Britain over the issue of neutral rights, particularly the right of neutral nations to trade with belligerents during wartime. And in the question over the status of the Spanish colonies, questions of identity and principle, at first, seemed to drive the United States and Britain into irreconcilable positions. Britain and the United States shared a commitment to creating a liberal system of trade with the South American colonies, a significant confluence of interest Castlereagh stressed in his negotiations with the United States. But Britain would not—indeed, it could not—support the creation of revolutionary republics. Britain’s ideological opposition to republicanism left little room for negotiation with the United States. Reporting on a conversation with Castlereagh about the South American colonies, Rush reported that there was a “fundamental point of difference” rooted in the fact that, for the United States, the policy toward the Spanish American independence must be founded in the “cause of human liberty in the new hemisphere.”

At the start of Monroe’s administration, this ideological clash meant that containment remained a sound policy. As Castlereagh wrote to Wellesley,
Britain “had the greatest possible interest in faithfully executing the
Engagements which bind us to uphold the integrity of the Spanish Mon-
archy.”169 On the one hand, Castlereagh worked to persuade Spain and the
rest of the Concert powers to create a European solution to the rebellion,
arguing that Spain’s best option was the creation of liberal constitutional
monarchies in South America that would remain bound to the Spanish
empire. As one historian argues, if this plan “were adopted, South America
would be united with the old world rather than with the United States, and
a tory government would not have to submit to the painful necessity of rec-
ognizing republicanism.”170 At the same time, Castlereagh hoped to “pre-
vent the United States from recognizing a group of new republican nations,
so incompatible with the world of restored legitimist monarchies.”171

The Monroe administration’s rhetoric struck hard at Britain’s liberal
identity: not only should Britain abandon containment, it should embrace
recognition as the only policy consistent with Britain’s own principles.172
From 1818 onward, Adams made multiple approaches to Castlereagh
to see if Britain not only would accept U.S. recognition, but if it would
work in concert to recognize and uphold the independence of the South
American rebels. In his appeals to the foreign minister, Adams argued
that Britain must allow the recognition of South America, not merely as a
matter of interest, but as a matter of right. The colonies, Adams argued,
had achieved de facto independence. They had earned the right of rec-
ognition, and any denial of this amounted to unlawful intervention and
subjugation.173

Perhaps most boldly, Adams suggested that Britain’s refusal to recognize
the colonies left them in league with the Holy Alliance, the conservative,
dynastic alliance of Russia, Austria, and Prussia. Europe, as Adams told
Stratford Canning in 1820, was in the midst of a great ideological strug-
gle. “The scepters of all the European continental monarchs were turning
to ashes in their hands. . . . Would it be possible for England to witness
this in all its consequences and remain quiescent? And how could it act
in cases where the struggle, as it now appears, is for free and liberal insti-
tutions against absolute power?”174 This flagrant violation of principles of
nonintervention and suppression of liberty, Adams argued, stood contrary
to Britain’s most valued principles:

Britain has separated herself from the councils and measures of the alliance.
She avows the principles which are emphatically those of the United States,
and she disapproves the principles of the alliance which this country abhors.
This coincidence of principles, connected with the great changes in affairs of
the world, passing before us, seems to me a suitable occasion for the United
States and great Britain to compare their ideas and purposes together, with
a view to the accommodation of great interests upon which they have hith-
erto differed.175
The more the battle for South America appeared a conflict between “autocracy and parliamentary government,” the more the British saw the United States as a liberal partner in the Western Hemisphere. The British domestic audience placed immense pressure on British to support the United States, not merely out of interest, but because it was consistent with Britain’s liberal identity. As the *Morning Chronicle* argued, Britain had both interests and principles at stake in South America and while “we have hitherto appealed only to mere profit and loss . . . we say nothing of the infamy of forwarding the plans of the grand confederacy for the destruction of liberty throughout Europe . . . But surely England is not so low in the moral scale, as to be indifferent to all but mere profit and loss.”176 Rather “the British government, as head of the civilized world, ought to assist rather than oppose the nations who endeavour to render themselves free. . . . In Europe there is at present a conspiracy against the expansion of the human mind, and against the liberties of the human race. By opposing this spirit, England will render her own freedom more secure, and her character illustrious.”177 The more conservative *Times* agreed. The Holy Alliance, they argued, pressured Britain to withhold recognition, yet “to us the struggle of the South Americans has been that of common sense and manifest necessity against blind arrogance and the unteachable spirit of oppression. For England . . . her duties are in accordance with her clearest interests.”178

Indeed the papers, as the *Morning Chronicle* noted, were almost united in their opinion that recognition was the only policy in line with British principles and interests (“the chief Newspaper warfare is not between Ministerial and Opposition Journals, but between the Ministerial Journals of London and Paris,” the editors remarked).179 Once engaged in a “warfare of the mind,” papers now expressed almost universal admiration of the United States, and the Monroe administration’s growing willingness to recognize the South American states, and stressed the natural unity between the United States and British causes. The *Morning Chronicle* praised the “example of America, which is fortunately beyond the reach of the Holy Alliance, and with which our connexion is necessarily so intimate, will always remain as a warning and instruction to us.” The *Times* exhorted the government to unite with the “confederacy of free states beyond the ocean; and to frustrate those projects which aim at the destruction of a great first principle common to the institutions both of America and England.”180 The Monroe administration’s appeals resonated among elites’ sense of identity as well. Stratford Canning wrote to his cousin of Adams’s appeals, of his insistence that the United States and Britain could move along “parallel lines,” champions of constitutionalism and international law in their respective hemispheres.181

Even in the wake of the Monroe Doctrine, the British public approved of the liberal principles that underpinned Monroe’s proclamation. As the *Times* noted, the British public had anxiously awaited a statement of U.S. policy: “The foreign relations of the United States are at this moment so
deeply involved with those of Europe, of South America, and of England, that we turned impatiently to that division of the Message, and it well repaid us.” On Monroe’s policy, the paper declared that it was “plain speaking, and it is just thinking.” Europe had no cause for interference on Spain’s behalf, and no cause to disrupt the independence of the colonies. The Chronicle likewise declared Monroe’s rhetoric “worthy of the occasion and of the people, who seem destined to occupy so large a space in the future history of the world.” Britain was not entirely happy with the outcome. They would have preferred to have taken the lead in South America, to work with the United States to show that “the force of blood again prevails, and the daughter and the mother stand together against the world.”

Still, in framing their contest with Spain not as a fight for revolution but as a stand against illiberal practices in the Western Hemisphere, the United States had appealed to principles at the core of British identity. It was a language that resonated strongly with the British public and set the stage, if not for partnership, then at least a march along Adams’s “parallel lines” in the nineteenth century. The United States might have expanded, but it had done so legitimately. For that reason, Britain could accommodate the emerging power.

On the eve of World War II a journalist and confidant of Roosevelt, Forrest Davis, called on the United States to defend the Atlantic system. “Unlike the Axis blueprints for a New World Order,” he wrote “the Atlantic System is old, rational, and pragmatic. Growing organically out of strategic and political realities in a congenially free climate, its roots run deep and strong into the American tradition.” The foundations of this system, he argued, rested in shared democracy, and “it was not lost on the Presidents of the Virginia succession, and on Adams, Bolivar, and Canning, that modern democracy was flourishing best in the states of the Atlantic seaboard—in both Europe and America.” Laboring together, Britain and the United States built a liberal international regime, “a community believed to be ordinarily at peace, animated by mutually beneficial trade and shared respect for the rule of law, and governed by treaties between states that recognized each other’s legitimacy.” In partnering to oust the European powers from the Western Hemisphere, the Anglo-American condominium had, as Canning boasted, “called the New World into being to redress the balance of the Old.” As Davis wrote, “History, as everyone knows, simulates itself. Substitute Hitler for Czar Alexander, the Nazi New Order for the Holy Alliance, and you have a continental Europe again ‘laboring to become the domicile[e] of despotism.’ . . . As in Napoleon’s time, as in 1823, and also as in 1898, when she balked attempts to revive the Holy Alliance—this time against the United States—England again has placed herself outside a despotic Continental System.”

This chapter demonstrates that from 1817 to 1823, Britain would come to see the United States as a vital partner in world politics, a rising power.
capable of shoring up a liberal system in the Western Hemisphere. British leaders came to see the United States as a partner, despite understanding that American economic growth and territorial expansion could threaten its vital interests in the Caribbean, in Canada, and eventually around the globe. Whatever might the United States could wield, British leaders believed it would be used in the name of what was right. For this reason, it separated itself from its traditional allies, and accommodated, even aided, the rise of American power.

But the story in this chapter rejects the argument that Britain’s accommodation was inevitable. Surely social, political, and economic forces were drawing the United States and Britain closer; they had been since the years before the Revolution. But these structural forces were not enough, in and of themselves, to diminish the outright suspicion and hostility that pervaded relations between these two countries in the early nineteenth century. Many in the United States and Britain might have seen each other as family, but family feuds are often the most persistent and bitter of conflicts. Britain still could not trust its revolutionary kin across the Atlantic and, for this reason, even after the War of 1812, Britain remained poised to contain the emerging power. The politics of harm and the politics of interest may have set the stage for accommodation, but for the strategy to move forward required a certainty that the United States would act as a partner, not a revolutionary rival.

And while the chapter here reinforces the narrative of a shared Anglo-American identity, it challenges those who portray that identity as fixed, given, and essential. As demonstrated throughout this chapter, Britain was as likely to see America as a republican, revolutionary upstart as it was to see it as kin. It was only through rhetorical politics, the careful framing of a shared identity, that the “special relationship” took shape. The language of legitimacy proved vital in shaping Anglo-American relations, setting the stage for a condominium that would last for centuries.