The Nationalist Ferment

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Introduction

Nationalism: French Nationalism versus American Nationalism

In the wake of the wars of the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, a large part of European public opinion has come to view nationalism as an evil. In post–World War II Eastern Europe, however, intellectuals kept trying to define and legitimize one or another national claim, but this went largely unnoticed. As a result, the independence movements that took hold of former Eastern bloc countries starting in the late eighties were originally rejected by commentators as being reincarnations of a monster that was thought to have disappeared forever. The Yugoslav conflict in the early nineties was labeled “archaic,” and an alarm was sounded over the rise of nationalist trends. The question was raised whether nationalism did not actually “constitute in itself a regressive utopia,” with the implication that in fact it did.

There were, however, journalists and critics who tried to avoid automatically applying ready-made interpretations of past nationalism to the current situation. In view of its highly negative connotations, they did not dare use the term “nationalism”; rather, they made a distinction between “national democratic movements in Czechoslovakia, Armenia or Slovenia, and the strictly nationalist agendas that inspire[d] the leaders of Serbia and Georgia.” This distinction was suggested by Gérard Malkassian, a critic of Armenian descent, who has styled himself as the advocate of the national aspirations of small nations. In his view, the rise of nationalism is no obstacle to universal cosmopolitanism; it is merely a necessary spiritual and cultural stage. In his view, nation does not automatically entail state, power, or denial of diversity; rather, a nation can also recognize itself in “its minority status, or in its essential fragility.”

In contrast, the legacy of French nationalism makes it difficult to promote this type of analysis, or, for that matter, any dispassionate study of the question. According to Pierre-André Taguieff, the reason why “the scholarly literature on
these issues, with few exceptions, has remained very close to the level of newspaper controversy, [is] notably because ideology and polemics are so pervasive.” One reason why nationalism is so controversial in France, even—and indeed especially—in scholarly discourse, is that “the history of French nationalism has been written sometimes by nationalists and sometimes by antinationalists.” Hence, there is a great theoretical opposition between antinationalist definitions of nationalism, which hold it to be a xenophobic phenomenon or a device for social exclusion and ultimately for war (cf., the equation “nationalism = racism”), and nationalist definitions (as a “normative theory of identity as self-defense”).

In analyzing the way American nationalism was established through the early republic’s (1789–1812) foreign policy, either school of thought could be invoked. On the one hand, as a xenophobic phenomenon leading to war, American nationalism was indeed linked, during this period, to five years of Indian wars, three years of undeclared war against France, and lastly to a declaration of war against Great Britain in 1812. On the other hand, as a phenomenon of collective identity defense, American nationalism allowed the early republic, small in population and fragile in its unity, to defend its sovereignty against attacks by the great powers of the period—powers whose colonial possessions surrounded the early republic’s poorly controlled territory. Such an ideological reading of the concept of “nationalism” is relatively fruitless, however, and probably reflects the ambiguities of the national form and the false clarity of nationalism. A number of concepts that play a role in this controversy will be retained in the present study, as they are essential for understanding the phenomenon of nationalism (concepts such as sovereignty, xenophobia, patriotism, national feeling, and national identity). Yet in order to avoid polemics, the problem will be situated in its own peculiar context, that is, that of the North American continent at the end of the eighteenth century. In the wake of recent events that have put the issue of nation in the spotlight, this study of American nationalism from 1789 to 1812 is intended as a way of putting things into perspective, or as a dose of “culture shock.”

Unlike French nationalism, American nationalism has not been widely studied. Moreover, instead of the end of the eighteenth century, the second half of the nineteenth century is generally considered to be the crucial period of the history of nationalism. The term “nationalism” did, however, appear in France at the time of the French Revolution, and the idea of nationalism cannot be separated from the rise of great modern nations at the end of the eighteenth century. Meanwhile, in the United States, the term “nation” was rarely used after the American Revolution. “People” was preferred (as in the opening words of the Constitution [1787]: “We, the people”), or “the Union,” in order to spare the rights-conscious states the centralizing connotations of the word “nation.” Supporters of strong federal institutions and a powerful nation
nevertheless adopted the name “nationalists” from 1781 to 1787, during the period of the Confederation, although they abandoned it once the new institutions were in place. This first meaning of the term “nationalism,” limited as it was to the cause of a stronger central government, is not, however, broad enough to cover the topics that will be examined here. In order to define American nationalism at the end of the eighteenth century, it is necessary to start from a wider, less restrictive definition of nationalism, such as that outlined in John Breuilly’s set of three basic assertions of nationalist discourse:

a) There exists a nation with an explicit and peculiar character.  
b) The interests and values of this nation take priority over all other interests and values.  
c) The nation must be as independent as possible. This usually requires at least the attainment of political sovereignty.

Similarly, one can also draw upon the following definition of nationalism given by the specialist Raoul Girardet: “On the political level, and within the context of a nation-state that has already been established historically, nationalism can also be defined as the priority given to preserving independence, maintaining full sovereignty, and asserting the greatness of that nation-state. On the moral and ideological level, it may seem merely to amount to extolling national feeling.” This last definition is useful in that it distinguishes nationalism from national feeling and shows the dynamic relation between these two concepts, which are often confused.

The Distinctiveness of American Nationalism at the End of the Eighteenth Century

These definitions clearly pose a problem for the study of American nationalism. In 1776, at the time of the creation of the American nation, one cannot say that “there existed” in the United States a nation endowed with an explicit, specific character; the United States did not constitute a “nation-state already established historically.” American historians are divided over the issue of how much diversity and cultural specificity there was among the different British colonies of North America. Nevertheless, it is certain that at the time of the War of Independence, cultural homogeneity had not been firmly established from Vermont to Georgia, but it was emerging. And after the war, such homogeneity could by no means be founded upon a colonial past that the recent fighting had repudiated.

It is this peculiarity of American nationalism—namely, an original perspective on the founding of a nation—that has been analyzed by French historian
Elise Marienstras in two pioneering works, *Les Mythes fondateurs de la nation américaine. Essai sur le discours idéologique des États-Unis à l’époque de l’Indépendance (1763–1800)* [The founding myths of the American nation. An essay on the ideological discourse of the United States at the time of independence (1763–1800), 1776] and *Nous, le peuple. Les origines du nationalisme américain* [We, the people. The origins of American nationalism, 1988]. Marienstras defines the political and the ideological as the principal forces behind American nationalism, as distinguished from its French counterpart. Indeed, in her view, the identity of the French nation was at that time anchored in geographical, historical, and cultural features that the abstract definition of revolutionary nationalism could not have replaced;17 the same was not true for the United States, however, where the national geography, history, and culture were in the midst of being created. In order to assert its identity, the young American nation could only count on the new institutions that it had just endowed itself with, unlike revolutionary France:18 “Since the justification [for nationalism] could not be found in the usual factors of other nations—that is, in the past, culture, history, or its own territory—it found a home in ideology. Nationalism, which emerged at the very moment when the state and the nation were being born, sought to make up for the lack of tangible and historical components by substituting an institutional and ideological characterization.”19

From 1789 to 1812 nationalism in the United States could not therefore be restricted to “preserving independence, maintaining full sovereignty,” or “extolling national feeling.” It also had to bring out the national character, stir up patriotic feeling, and create a core to be elaborated and preserved. By the establishment of nationalism in the United States, I will thus mean here the construction and affirmation of the nation, in the sense of a community linked by “a common destiny and a common character.”20 Once the Constitution of 1787 was passed and ratified, Americans found themselves endowed with national institutions around which the forms of a civic religion were to be organized. This civic religion was intended to enlist the citizens in the cult of the nation.21

Owing to the key positions that they occupied in society, the elite played a major role in this spread of nationalism. They were the ones who provided the impetus for the Philadelphia Convention that was to lead to the drafting of the Constitution; in fact, only a minority of Americans took part in the vote on the ratification of the Constitution.22 Nevertheless, the ideological work of the elite would have been pointless without the consent of the citizens.23 In this regard, Ernst Gellner’s model of the emergence of nations and of nationalism can be usefully applied to the United States. For Gellner, the key to this phenomenon is a revolution in communication systems, a sort of “cultural revolution” that necessarily accompanies the transition to the industrial era. He believes that, in traditional societies, numerous factors contribute to great cultural diversity between regions and social groups, whereas as soon as
a given society begins to evolve toward industrial capitalism, communication between groups increases, and there is bound to be a shift toward cultural homogenization. For example, citizens who refused to give in to the demands of a national educational system would quickly find themselves excluded from society, since society needs citizens who are mobile and adaptable to the demands of an evolving employment market, and who therefore have a common cultural background.24

In the period examined in this book, American society indeed started to adopt the structures of free-market capitalism;25 one can also observe the beginnings of an information revolution, which was to assume its full magnitude in the decades that followed. Already a proportionally greater number of U.S. citizens were literate than in European countries.26 In addition, at the turn of the nineteenth century, nearly all big American cities had one or several daily newspapers. Although the circulation remained low, information began to circulate quite well as newspapers changed hands in taverns and in city reading rooms, while favorable postal rates enabled publishers to send the news from one end of the country to the other.27 Thus there existed an informed public opinion in the United States, which the elite could reach by the press, and which could express itself through voting or by writing in the newspapers.28 According to Benedict Anderson, the development of the press gave a sense of belonging to an “imagined community.”29 At the end of the eighteenth century, American society thus lent itself readily to the spread of a nationalist ideology, which aimed at transforming regions that were still diverse into one indivisible nation.

Nationalism and Foreign Policy

According to Breuilly’s third condition for nationalism given above, “[t]he nation must be as independent as possible,” which “usually requires at least the attainment of political sovereignty.” As Elise Marienstras observes, “in order to assert itself, every nation must distinguish itself from other nations.”30 After achieving its independence, the American nation, in order to truly exist, had to be recognized by the international community, and it also had to assert itself as a nation distinct from other nations. The present book investigates this dimension of American nationalism, a vital dimension in the period that began in 1789, when the federal institutions created by the Constitution of 1787 were put into place, and ended with a highly symbolic war against the former homeland, the War of 1812, often called the “second War of Independence.” This study is thus essentially devoted to the expansion of a “secondary” patriotism, that is, one formulated “in terms of general interest, diplomacy, conflicts, and glory that are proper to state powers.” This contrasts with “primary” patriotism, which is characterized by attachment to one’s roots and by family and community memory.31
The members of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 wanted to create a nation out of former British colonies, which the War of Independence had not managed to unite in a stable manner. The establishment of a civic religion and reverence for the institutions were not enough: as long as the outside world did not perceive the specific identity of the new nation, the elite could not force the unity and consistency of such an identity on its own inhabitants. Moreover, as a former settlement colony, the American nation could not assert itself on the international scene by invoking a glorious past or a preexisting identity that was clearly distinct from that of the homeland. In order for the undertaking of the writers of the Constitution to succeed, their country had to deal with other countries in a sufficiently firm and distinctive manner, so that foreign countries would contribute to the construction of America’s national character through a mirror effect, that is, by reflecting back to Americans the image of themselves as a people bound through unity and solidarity. In 1789 the issue was thus the following: if the federal government could assert its altogether new authority and new sovereignty over the states, over its own citizens, and with regard to other nations, then America would be recognized and accepted by other powers; these powers would in turn reflect back to America the image of a mature nation.

It is hard for a nation to exist on the international scene if it is not endowed with a government that is represented abroad by a single authority (i.e., embassy or consulate), one that is recognized by other countries. When exactly the American nation truly came into being is thus debatable (in 1776, 1783, 1787, 1798, or 1812), as is the moment when the American national feeling finally reached maturity. The date when the American nation truly began to belong to the international community is, however, difficult to challenge. Of course, as historians L. S. Kaplan and J. T. Lowe explain, already in the prerevolutionary period, the thirteen colonies maintained some sort of diplomatic relations with one another, as well as with Great Britain and the Indian nations; they did not, however, form an independent nation that was recognized as such by the great European powers.

During the American Revolution, the American envoys in Paris represented the thirteen colonies and made decisions binding the entire nation. After the war, however, despite the presence of plenipotentiaries in London (John Adams) and in Paris (Thomas Jefferson), America did not present a unified front abroad, since the different states reserved the right to make decisions (for example, on tariffs) that were only binding for themselves; for several years Vermont even had its own diplomatic relations with London. The United States of America could thus not be perceived abroad as a single entity or as a stable partner. Although the new nation was officially recognized, it had not yet achieved true international recognition as one indivisible nation. This essential element for the formation of its identity was still lacking.
From 1787 on, the new institutions engendered by the Philadelphia Convention provided the early republic with the means for assuming its place among the nations of the world. The ambassadors no longer depended on the Continental Congress, but on a president, the head of the executive branch, who could be rightly expected to make firmer and quicker decisions. The president was, moreover, in charge of treaties as well as in command of the army, the navy, and the state militias. Since foreign trade was the responsibility of the federal Congress, interference between the jurisdiction of the states and that of the federal government in matters of foreign relations no longer seemed possible. The birth of the young nation as a full-fledged member of the international community, on equal footing with other nations, could finally take place.

Far from being a matter of indifference to citizens, and of interest only to diplomats and those in power, this process was to occur at the height of a period of popular enthusiasm for foreign events. To read American newspapers between 1789 and 1812, no matter which political party they supported, was to learn first and foremost about the state of the world and foreign relations. Even if domestic policy was of major interest to Americans, it could not compete with the stories of revolutionary battles, and later Napoleonic battles, that filled the bulk of the newspapers. Domestic policy often seemed even subordinate to foreign policy debates, which had considerable influence on its very discourse and on the issues at stake. This infatuation with foreign events and the role of their country in the world could be viewed as a mere relic of the colonial heritage of the citizens of the early republic. Such a view would imply that Americans were fascinated by foreign policy out of a lack of interest in anything that concerned only their country. In fact, such was not the case. In the American passion for foreign policy, one must discern a manifestation of the nationalist process rather than a colonial remnant. Owing to the new status of the United States in the international community, as well as to the impetus of the French Revolution and its consequences on the early republic—in terms of memory, political life, economy, social structure, and collective imagination—Americans were placed in the midst of international events; these events were to give a central role to foreign policy in defining the national identity. In a world context that was radically transformed from 1789 on, the American nation was to define and identify itself in the eyes of the world through the foreign policy objectives it would be able to set forth and implement.

**Toward a Cultural History of International Relations**

In order to study how American nationalism was put into effect in the early republic’s foreign policy, it is important to study diplomatic history sources of the period. As the Comte de Garden wrote in 1833, “[d]iplomacy is the
science of external relations or foreign affairs of states: in a more specific sense, it is the science or the art of negotiation. It comprises the entire system of interests arising out of established relations between nations, the goal being their respective security, tranquility, and dignity.”

Many American diplomatic historians, the most famous of which is Samuel Flagg Bemis, examined these sources closely during the first half of the twentieth century. It thus seems unnecessary to go back over the exact same ground that has been so adeptly explored by other scholars, especially considering that methodological advances in the history of international relations have now made traditional diplomatic history obsolete. This means that it is no longer possible to rely solely on the work of diplomats and political leaders for the study of relations between nations. In the United States, traditional diplomatic history methods were notably called into question by the historian William Appleman Williams in his book *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (1959), which assessed the formulation of foreign policy on the basis of economic interests, and not only in terms of the role of the elite. In 1965, in the introduction to his book *Empire and Independence: The International History of the American Revolution*, historian Richard W. Van Alstyne clearly distinguished his work from that of diplomatic historians: “International history . . . is not diplomatic history. I have not in this book confined myself to diplomacy, much less to foreign policy. I have searched for deeper currents in my effort to understand basic attitudes and motivations that come to light only after long study and detached thought. Hence I have not hesitated, whenever occasion demanded, to stray from the well-worn path of diplomatic history and venture into fields commonly labeled domestic or internal history.” The methodological innovations described by Van Alstyne (bringing domestic history into the analysis of a country’s foreign policy; searching for “deeper currents” that allow one to understand “basic attitudes and motivations”) met with little success. Indeed, in 1980 an American historiographic assessment deplored that the history of international relations, be it the history of American or foreign diplomacy, could not be counted among the innovative currents in the field in the 1970s.

Since the early 1980s, however, American historians have been renewing this area of historical research by paying more attention to nonpolitical aspects of the past, such as culture, bureaucracy, and gender relations. Interest in the classic problems of American diplomatic history, such as isolationism or the opposition between realism and idealism, has been on the wane. As a result, perhaps the name of the discipline is no longer clear-cut: “diplomatic history” is still used, “international history” is favored by historians who no longer want to focus their study on the United States, and “history of foreign relations” appears to reflect the aspirations of historians who wish to extend the study of foreign affairs to nonpolitical forces (e.g., businessmen, missionaries, and travelers) while focusing their work on the United States.
The present study of how nationalism was enacted through the foreign policy of the early American republic relies somewhat traditionally on the discourse and actions of American leaders, and on the work of diplomats. It does not, however, consider these leaders and diplomats separately from the political, social, economic, and cultural forces of their nation—as cold strategists, advancing the pawns of the interests of their country on the international chessboard. As French historian Lucien Febvre suggested in 1931, foreign policy is motivated not by mood, psychology, or the interplay of competing diplomatic strategies; rather, it is motivated by geographical, economic, social, and intellectual factors. Accordingly, a guiding principle of this study is that foreign and domestic policy cannot be analyzed independently from each other.

To this end, one must first and foremost be familiar with the views of American leaders and with the political stakes at the time, so as to see to what extent partisan disputes influenced foreign policy orientations. The correspondence and personal papers of politicians between 1789 and 1812 provide an abundant and passionate source of information about the development and management of foreign policy. By reading the papers of opposition leaders, who took a critical view of the work of men in power, one can bring to light the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the policies. Next, it is important to ascertain the range of public opinion and the views and reactions of citizens. Instead of attempting to analyze countless personal journals of men and women of all “sections,” of all ages, and of all social classes, I have undertaken an exhaustive reading of several representative newspapers that were published in different regions. These papers (such as the Boston Columbian Centinel or the Richmond Enquirer) reflect the views of one party or another and therefore display contrasting opinions. In addition to reports of European wars and polemical editorials, one can in fact find in these papers correspondents’ letters, political tracts, toasts made on the occasion of national holidays, such as the Fourth of July, the texts of Citizens’ Addresses and Resolutions sent to the president of the United States during exceptional crises (neutrality in 1793, the XYZ Crisis in 1798, the bombing of the Chesapeake in 1807), and sometimes patriotic songs that testify to the important place that foreign policy occupied at that time in popular culture and in the minds of Americans. Other documents, such as the sermons of New England ministers, and journals or correspondence of observers who were not directly linked to the higher spheres of politics, make it possible to know the views of individuals, influential or not, who expressed their opinion far from the realms of power.

In addition to individual agents, that is, American citizens who could express themselves through the press or various public events, one should not fail to consider the huge mass of silent agents who, although present on the
American scene at the time, have never been given their just due in the classical historiography of international relations. I am referring above all to the black slaves, that is, 20 percent of the American population at the turn of the century. Whether or not they had access to newspapers, they could always hear the news when they went into town, listen to conversations when serving their master at table, and transmit this information to the slaves who worked the land. The means of communication were numerous: although they may have been silent, the slaves were nonetheless active. Indeed, the increase in the number of slave insurrections in the southern United States must be attributed to the example of the successful insurrection of the slaves of Santo Domingo, which was to lead to Haiti’s independence in 1804. In this particular case, only a knowledge of the social contradictions of an early republic that was both democratic and slaveholding can explain the ambiguous attitude of American leaders toward Haiti. The silence of classical diplomatic historians on the subject points clearly to the degree to which this question hinges on interpretation.

The slaves are not the only neglected foreign policy agents of the United States; the same is also true of the indigenous nations of the North American continent, who are generally not included among the international partners of the United States in the period under consideration. When diplomatic history studies deal with U.S.–Native American relations, they present the North American Indian nations as (manipulated) intermediaries of those European powers established on the North American continent, such as Great Britain in Canada or Spain in Florida. Indeed, generally speaking, when historians examine the foreign policy of the early republic, they do so from a very Eurocentric point of view: they assume that the early republic’s foreign policy was limited to its relations with European countries. Not only do they overlook the regular relations that it had with the indigenous peoples of North America, but they likewise make very little of U.S. relations with non-European powers, such as the Barbary Coast. Nevertheless, the intensity of diplomatic relations between Native Americans and settlers is well documented. The first interactions between settlers and an Indian nation were always followed by the drafting of treaties that were necessary for land acquisition and for arrangements between the two groups. These treaties were not concluded verbally by smoking the peace pipe but were always written up. As long as the Native Americans were powerful enough to be respected as independent nations, negotiations were conducted very formally, often according to the wishes and the protocol of the Native Americans, as in the case of the Catawbas. Thus, the fact that documents relating to U.S.–Native American relations have traditionally fallen under the domain of Indian Affairs, and not of foreign policy, does not mean that one must accept a distinction that was not justified before the War of 1812. Until that date, the American Indian nations constituted a real threat for the early republic.

This book not only seeks to analyze a particular dimension of American
nationalism, and to introduce new agents in the field of foreign policy at the end of the eighteenth century and at the beginning of the nineteenth; it is also an attempt at writing a chapter of the cultural history of the international relations of the United States. Nationalism is defined in this work as an ideology that aims to create a lasting nation: in this regard, the study of nationalism belongs to the study of culture, which is conceived here as "the sharing and transmission of memory, ideology, emotions, life-styles, scholarly and artistic works, and other symbols." More specifically, a cultural approach to international relations, in the words of Akira Iriye, "explores the ideological or intellectual underpinnings of a nation's behavior toward other nations." Thus presented, the cultural history of international relations encompasses the history of foreign policy ideologies, construed as a "set of beliefs and values, sometimes very poorly and partially articulated, that make international relations intelligible and decision making possible." Such an approach allows one to understand and interpret types of discourse and attitudes that inform the foreign policy decisions in light of the society's evolution.

Putting American Nationalism into Effect: The Different Stages

The Nation Divided over Foreign Policy

In 1789 the American nation had just endowed itself with a state, that is, strong federal institutions that were to allow it to anchor its citizens' national feeling in a civic religion. The nation as artefact was to cure the shortcomings of the "organic" nation. It was a gamble that the Founding Fathers made, the success of which strictly depended upon the reaction of other countries. This ambitious but abstract program appears to have overlooked the fact that the American nation was already an organic one. More than twenty years of national history had forged the outlines of a national character, which was to be quickly defined and shaped through foreign conflicts. If one is to follow Pierre Nora's definition of memory as something "permanently at stake" ("enjeu toujours disponible"), and as a "set of strategies," then the American national memory was above all the Revolution, which was the source of national identity and the political legitimacy thereof. Then, from 1789 on, the French Revolution came along to wake up American revolutionary memories by posing an essential question, one to which the end of the fighting had not provided an answer: assuming that the American Revolution was the source of American identity, what exactly did it signify? Was the French Revolution the daughter of the American Revolution, and did Americans define themselves as democrats—that is, as Jacobins? Or were there in fact few links between the two events, and was the American Revolution
merely an outburst of violence and radicalism necessary for the establishment of an elitist and conservative social system? Before this question could be answered, ten years of intense political conflict were to tear the nation apart. Partisan hatred was to sweep away hopes for recognition by other powers, which would have reinforced the image of a nation bound by unity and solidarity: until 1800 Americans were perceived everywhere as a divided nation, and they perceived themselves in the same light.

**Foreign Policy Objectives Common to the Entire Nation**

This perception is not false, but it obscures the fact that despite their conflicts and political hatreds, Americans were in the process of shaping the elements of their national identity. Owing to partisan struggles, bipartisanship was established in the United States from 1789 to 1800; this was an institutional system that had not been intended by the Founding Fathers. The system, along with Thomas Jefferson’s victory in the presidential election of 1800, marked the irreversible decline of an ideological model (i.e., classic republicanism) that had been pervasive in the political discourse of revolutionary America. These developments also marked the advent of a social and political perspective in which the citizen—far from privileging the common good and taking pride in republican virtues—placed above all else the defense of personal liberties and interests, and especially of property. In America the interest of the nation had to be preceded by each individual’s prosperity: government was at the service of the citizen, with whom it shared and anticipated foreign policy objectives. The end of the Federalist era thus marked the beginning of the era of economic liberalism in the United States.

These years of political conflict also witnessed the emergence of foreign policy objectives that were shared by all. Expansion was the nation’s first objective; this was furthered by the wars that were tearing Europe apart, and it manifested itself at sea (i.e., commercial expansion) as well as on land (i.e., territorial expansion). Indeed, American citizens—from those in power to pioneers on the frontier—came together in the same grandiose vision of their nation’s future, which guided and fed their nationalism. For them, the American “empire” was destined to expansion and to an unprecedented development. This national vision belonged to the collective imagination, at times without any direct connection to reality or the near future (for example, Thomas Jefferson readily pictured his people spreading out over both continents). This vision did, however, coincide with a real upsurge in expansionism. Tireless shipowners took advantage of Europe’s wars to develop a neutral American trade and to give their country the status of a great economic power. The pioneers moved toward the Mississippi, hoping to use the river to take their goods to port. Striving first and foremost to obtain navigation rights on the Mississippi, Thomas Jefferson
kept constant pressure on the Spanish diplomats; in 1795 the Americans finally achieved their goal thanks to Pinckney’s Treaty, which guaranteed outlets for the product of the new western territories.

Implementing Foreign Policy Objectives; Ambivalent Ambitions

Americans’ growing interest in the West went hand in hand with an increasing lack of interest in Europe’s quarrels: the more the American nation defined itself through its expansionist will, the less it wanted to see itself as linked to Europe. Far away and different, it perceived itself, moreover, as being better. Foreign crises, which certain leaders used to their advantage, exacerbated the nascent chauvinism of American citizens and led them to see their own country in an ever more idealized light and then to display their attachment to it. From this point of view, the various crises that pitted the United States against Europe between 1793 and 1814 constituted an essential element in the development of American nationalism. These crises also enabled the leaders to outline the doctrine of isolation. This notion was called for in the name of American superiority and pacifism; it did not, however, apply to Native Americans or to non-European nations: in their dealings with these groups, Americans did not shy away from aggressive behavior.

Bit by bit America had thus forged an identity that made it indeed different from European countries. Nothing indicates, however, that its particular character actually made it as free of ambivalence as it claimed. There remained a gap between the leaders’ discourse on the nation (which the white population supported without much opposition after 1800) and the actual situation. This gap was brought to light by certain foreign policy problems, and it contributed to the shift in the country’s foreign policy orientations after 1803. The proclamation of independence in Haiti in 1804 and the installation of a black government led Thomas Jefferson to break all relations with that country, even though American government circles (regardless of party affiliation), as well as business circles, coveted the riches of Santo Domingo. In order to avoid confronting the problem of slavery, the nation agreed to transfer its expansionist will to the West. Here as well, however, ambiguities persisted and multiplied: although they were carried out in the name of progress and the Enlightenment, the expeditions sent by President Jefferson encroached upon the geographic claims of other nations. The expeditions did not tolerate other Europeans unless they Americanized, and they sentenced Native Americans to “civilizing” themselves or to disappearing. Although the conquest of the West allowed Americans to define themselves as citizens of a continent, it was at the cost of the impending elimination of the indigenous tribes.

Between 1789 and 1812 the American nation thus forged a geographic, political, economic, and racial identity through foreign policy conflicts and events.
In 1812 the American citizen (i.e., the white male) was the citizen of a continent; for him, his country’s borders were not definitely set: he had seen them change, and he expected they would change again. His motherland was thus a vision or a promise as well as a reality; his patriotism did not manifest itself so much in a commitment to the current territory as in a belief in the coming expansion of his country. He did not like the fact that Florida belonged to Spain, and he already considered himself the quasi-legitimate owner of the Northwest Coast. To this end, he counted above all on himself (expansionism had popular support), but also, when necessary, on his government. His democratic and economically liberal views stipulated that the government respond to citizens’ expectations without directing them too much or ever neglecting their economic interests. He was proud of his country and ready to defend it (if a good argument was given); he did not much care about matters in Europe, a continent he deemed morally inferior. He was driven by a grandiose vision of his nation’s future, and thus he devoted himself completely to building it; this for the moment entailed conquering the North American continent and increasing everyone’s wealth. Nevertheless, one last obstacle remained: as long as Great Britain refused this new image of the United States, Americans would feel deprived, and their credibility would remain incomplete in their own eyes. Even if they preferred to push westward, for several years Americans would continue to look back eastward, in order to secure from their former colonizing power the recognition they needed for the full affirmation of their national identity.