The Nationalist Ferment

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CHAPTER 2

From Factions to Political Parties:
The Rise of Partisan Divisions over Foreign Policy Problems, 1789–1793

Few of the Federalist Papers were devoted to foreign policy, but the “nationals” of the Philadelphia Convention, according to Frederick W. Marks III, nevertheless cleverly used this topic as a unifying theme, one that would allow them to rally a majority of delegates. In Marks’s view, the delegates, who were divided over economic and regional questions, were able to forego their differences for a common cause, namely, how the United States could assert itself effectively as an independent nation and commercial power in relation to European countries. When one examines the history of the early republic’s political life, however, it seems that, from 1789 on, foreign policy had the opposite effect on the construction of the American nation: it appears to have gone from being a unifying force to a very powerful factor of division. This could be seen as surprising: in the eighteenth century, weren’t foreign policy problems restricted to discussion among experts, negotiations between professional diplomats, and, at most, parliamentary debates? Such a view overlooks the fact that 1789, which was the year the Constitution took effect, also marked the beginning of the French Revolution, and 1792 was the year the revolutionary wars began. In this light, the interest that the American public lent to foreign policy events is understandable.

As a revolutionary nation itself, the early American republic, moreover, could not help being especially fascinated by a revolution that shared the same revolutionary spirit. Nonetheless, far from being united in celebration of French revolutionary events, Americans (and first and foremost, the political elite) found in it a point of long-lasting contention. This was accompanied by the reincarnation of an institution that had hitherto existed under the pejorative label of factions: the party system. This paradoxical phenomenon appears to indicate that the political perspective that had dominated American debates up until the writing of the Constitution—that is, classical republicanism—was gradually
being displaced by a modern perspective, one emphasizing the democratic content of the American Revolution.

During the War of Independence, the American revolutionary leaders had to worry not only about establishing a republican regime in the United States, but also about making the republican spirit dominant in the society at large. The theory of republicanism, which was inherited from classical thought, had been rediscovered during the British Commonwealth by James Harrington and was used as the principal source of inspiration by British opposition theoreticians and pamphleteers after the Restoration. This theory not only advocated the abolition of the monarchy and the aristocracy; it also emphasized each citizen's civic virtue, which was supposed to make the fulfillment of the common good possible. The war years, however, and then the period of the Articles of Confederation, engendered real disenchantment among many of the political leaders of the Revolution. The republic, where each person was only supposed to care about the common good, became the battleground of interest groups. The legislative assemblies of the states, which were dominated by whatever group was in control at the moment, voted in laws that had the obvious goal of favoring the group in power and that would of course only last until a new “faction” took over. Civic virtue and the common good: these two concepts did not last long; as many revolutionaries feared when rejecting England, corruption had indeed emigrated to America. No matter what their region and interests were, the intellectuals of the Revolution sought therefore to save the republican ideal by overhauling the institutions; this is what James Madison showed in the famous Federalist paper no. 10. In this pamphlet Madison echoed those who were disenchanted with the Revolution: “Complaints are everywhere heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty, that our governments are too unstable, that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties, and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice and the rights of the minor party, but by the superior force of an interested and overbearing majority.” By “party” Madison meant “faction,” which for him was an interest group. These “factions,” which were based solely on interest, were thus not parties in the modern sense, that is, they were not organized and structured parties, but they were nonetheless effective. Since they could not be curbed without depriving the citizens of their freedom, it was necessary, in Madison’s view, simply to “control” their “effects” in order to “secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government.” In order to achieve such control of factions, it was not enough for the republic to be small and the citizens’ interests to be similar, as Montesquieu and later Rousseau had thought. The small size of a republic did not guarantee that the common good would be sought out more widely; Madison in fact claimed the
contrary: “Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”

Faced with the tyranny of the majority in the state legislatures, the “nationals” reacted by allowing the different selfish interests to balance themselves out in the various levels of representation that were provided for in the new constitution. Indeed, despite appearances, the Constitution was not inspired by the British theory of mixed government and the balance of social orders but was, rather, a true innovation in that it relied solely on popular sovereignty and representative democracy. Thus, the federal government, protected as it was by the size of the republic and the nature of the Constitution, supposedly could not fall prey to factions, which, it would seem, could only develop in the states. In *The Federalist* no. 10, James Madison expressed his certainty in this regard: “The influence of factious leaders may kindle a flame within the particular States, but will be unable to spread a general conflagration through the other States.”

If the factions were unable to develop beyond the state level, the citizens of the states, that is, the nation, were supposed to be united through the Constitution. Nevertheless, starting with George Washington’s first presidency, national union degenerated into national dissension, and it was precisely over topics of national interest, that is, topics of foreign policy, that oppositions arose. The scenario that Madison envisaged in *The Federalist* no. 10 predicted that once the political sphere assumed national proportions, local opposition groups would lose their impact on national political life. An unforeseen consequence, however, was that new topics of discord emerged. Foreign policy was one of the great common interests that Madison believed could not cause dissent, but in fact, from 1789 to 1793, it was the domain that polarized and even exacerbated the nation’s internal opposition the most. Just where the union was supposed to be cemented, disunion was born. This process did not simply result from the new institutions that the Constitution introduced, nor from the struggles for influence among rival politicians. Rather, it reflected real ideological struggles over the very meaning of the American Revolution and of the new nation.

The Rise of Conflicts in Congress and the Executive Branch

*Customs and Tonnage Duties; the Nootka Sound Affair*

When George Washington came to power, he wanted to limit the emergence of factions and the opposition between geographical sections as much as possible, in keeping with the “nationalist” spirit. For this reason he drew up a cabinet of men from different regions. Thomas Jefferson, the secretary of state,
and Edmund Randolph, the attorney general, were Virginians, as was the president himself, whereas the other cabinet members (i.e., Henry Knox, the secretary of war, and Alexander Hamilton, the secretary of the treasury) came from the state of New York, a middle state. The vice president, John Adams, was from Massachusetts and thus represented New England. At the highest level then, no region dominated the others. Moreover, the necessary conditions for smooth coordination between the executive branch and the legislative branch appeared to be met since James Madison, who was both a friend of Jefferson’s and coeditor of the *Federalist Papers* along with Alexander Hamilton and John Jay, presided over the House of Representatives. It therefore seemed equally impossible that any one of the branches of government would be monopolized by a group that was opposed to the other groups. Nevertheless, from the very first Congress, rifts appeared between the supporters of Hamilton’s financial program and its opponents. Foreign policy considerations were soon added to these disputes over domestic economic policy, and bit by bit foreign policy issues came to dominate the debate. This phenomenon is especially apparent in the discussions in the House of Representatives over the bills concerning customs and tonnage duties.

Insofar as most of the manufactured goods that were consumed by Americans were imported, customs and tonnage duties seemed the most likely candidates for producing sufficient revenue for the federal government. This economic calculation had significant consequences for the early republic’s foreign policy. Indeed, in view of the fact that Great Britain had remained the chief supplier of the United States after the Revolution, healthy finances thenceforth called for good relations with the former home country. As Joseph Charles has explained, friendly relations with England had become essential for the federal government’s credit since England was the major trading partner of the United States, and since a high level of imports was needed by the Treasury. Favoring Great Britain, however, made it seem that seven years of war were being swept under the carpet and that Great Britain’s refusal to negotiate a commercial treaty with John Adams during the period of the Articles of Confederation was being forgotten. Furthermore, it seemed that the aid given by France was being overlooked. In April 1789 James Madison therefore presented in the House of Representatives a bill on customs duties in which he proposed establishing a policy of discrimination against Great Britain, and favoring countries such as France that had concluded a commercial treaty with the United States. Alexander Hamilton, who was not yet secretary of the treasury (only in August 1789 did he take office), fought against such a plan. James Madison’s proposals, which were adopted by the House of Representatives, had their discriminatory clause removed by the Senate. Members of Congress had clashed over the choice of which country they preferred the United States to trade with: this was the first time that foreign policy—the preference for a particular country—was the
decisive factor in a domestic policy debate. But one could not yet say that these oppositions reflected serious ideological differences.

In the course of the year 1790, differences of opinion over foreign policy came to undermine the very unity of the cabinet, which George Washington had wanted to make a symbol of the unity of the entire nation. The conflict pitted Thomas Jefferson against Alexander Hamilton. Their first direct confrontation occurred over the Nootka Sound affair, which opposed Great Britain and Spain with regard to a site on the island of Vancouver used for wintering and trade with local Indians, and known as Nootka Sound. This site was claimed by both countries (see chapter 7). On August 27, George Washington, who was concerned about the tense situation between Spain and Great Britain, conferred with his cabinet on the issue of American neutrality. If the British asked to cross the western part of the United States in order to attack Spanish posts from Detroit, how should the United States respond? The president feared the worst from such an expedition.15 Thomas Jefferson gave his answer the very next day, on August 28. For Jefferson, there was a middle ground between refusing and accepting: avoid responding. He knew, as did Washington, that this would most likely not deter Lord Dorchester from moving forward. But then, the secretary of state maintained, the United States would be in a strong position for negotiating: “They will proceed notwithstanding, but to do this under our silence, will admit of palliation, and produce apologies.”16

This response, which emphasized above all the preservation of American neutrality, contrasted with Alexander Hamilton’s view. For the secretary of the treasury, it would be better to cultivate British friendship by giving in to their request, even if it meant clashing with Spain.17 Two different conceptions of U.S. foreign relations were thus emerging within the cabinet: on the one hand, Alexander Hamilton stressed friendly relations with Great Britain; on the other hand, Thomas Jefferson insisted that American neutrality be preserved. The cabinet was divided, or at least division was setting in, for the lines were not yet definitively laid out for each member. John Jay and John Adams had answered in the negative, whereas Henry Knox did not express a clear opinion.18 For the time being, only Alexander Hamilton systematically sided with the British. Until then, his positions reflected an economic choice rather than an ideological stance, but the question nonetheless arises whether Hamilton was not overly concerned with pleasing Great Britain. Did the young nation, which had just won its independence, need to put all its effort in that direction? Did the separation from the mother country only reflect a desire for independence, or was there an opposition between a pure, republican, and revolutionary America and a corrupt, tyrannical, and monarchical Great Britain? Hamilton’s political activity implicitly contained a new interpretation of the American Revolution, one that erased its democratic and revolutionary content.
Two-Headed Foreign Policy

The rivalry between Jefferson and Hamilton in matters of foreign policy became obvious at this point, although the secretary of the treasury had in fact already been carrying out a foreign policy that was different from that of the president and the secretary of state. In 1789, as soon as he became secretary of the treasury, Hamilton took it upon himself to shape the orientation of the foreign policy of the United States by undermining Jefferson's and Washington's initiatives; he was able to do this thanks to his privileged relationship with Colonel Beckwith. During his meetings with the British agent, Hamilton gave out parallel information, which he guaranteed to be more official than the official information itself.19

Hamilton's goal was to improve Anglo-American relations gradually, and to this end, he tried in 1790 to control the discussions that Gouverneur Morris had entered into with the British government in London. Before Jefferson became head of the State Department in charge of foreign affairs, George Washington had indeed instructed Morris to use his stay in Europe to try to reopen the negotiations concerning the unresolved points of the Anglo-American treaty of September 3, 1783.20 At first Hamilton was very much in favor of this endeavor, since it sought to strengthen the links between Great Britain and the United States, but he was afraid of the tone that the highly nationalist Gouverneur Morris might assume. In his conversations with Beckwith in October 1789, Hamilton assured the British agent that the American administration was well disposed to Great Britain, but he nevertheless encouraged the British to be conciliatory.21 For this reason, when Gouverneur Morris arrived in London, he found himself in a position not of negotiating, but of asking.22 To make matters worse, Hamilton took away Morris's other weapons for negotiation: he explained to Beckwith in April 1790 that the American military preparations in the Northwest were directed solely against the Indians and not against the British troops.23 These remarks were all the more detrimental to Morris's efforts since, as Jefferson would soon foresee, the Nootka Sound crisis forced the British to reconsider their attitude toward the United States and to adopt a more moderate tone in their dealings with them. At the very moment when the British were softening their discourse toward Washington's envoy so as not to offend the sensibilities of a country whose support they might need in case of conflict with Spain, they received assurances from Beckwith and Dorchester concerning the pro-British neutrality of the United States. It was thus not in their best interest to give up anything, and their position was thus strengthened. For the most part, then, the failure of Gouverneur Morris's mission in the spring of 1790 can be blamed on Hamilton's unofficial diplomacy, which undermined Morris's bargaining power.
The secretary of the treasury next turned to Thomas Jefferson’s decision to send secret memoranda to Great Britain and Spain. As we saw in the preceding chapter, the tension between Spain and Great Britain in the spring of 1790 gave Jefferson hope. For the secretary of state, the situation was a godsend, and he wanted to make the most of it. In exchange for settling the points of contention between each of the two countries and the United States, Jefferson sent them both assurances of American neutrality in case war actually broke out. This diplomatic bluff could only succeed, however, if hostilities began: Jefferson thus wrote dispatches giving Carmichael and Short instructions on how to act in case of war, and he entrusted them to David Humphreys, who was to assume the position of chargé d’affaires in Portugal, and whose job it was to protect these letters and to take them to their destination.24

Jefferson’s undertaking ran counter to Hamilton’s ideas: instead of courting Great Britain in order to win its favor, as the secretary of the treasury was doing through Beckwith’s intermediary, the secretary of state sought to make the most of the great power’s momentary weakness in order to gain advantages. He expected nothing from the former parent country and sought to act independently, as befitted the secretary of state of a young nation in the face of a great country that had long been considered to be the oppressor. This was the reason why Hamilton defused Jefferson’s explosive project as soon as he could. He first waited for the official representatives of American diplomacy (Jefferson and Washington) to leave Philadelphia, and then on August 31, 1790, he spoke to David Humphreys about the goal of his mission. Hamilton asked Humphreys to make sure, once he was in England, that Great Britain was favorably disposed toward the United States.25 He knew that Humphreys would thereby reveal the official nature of his questions and consequently of his mission, and this turned out to be the case.26 Even if the crisis between the United States and Great Britain had not been resolved soon thereafter, Humphreys’s mission could only have failed, for once the secret of his operation had been disclosed, the force of Jefferson’s strategy was broken.

The two-headed foreign policy of the cabinet reflected the fundamental difference of opinion between Jefferson and Hamilton. In 1789 and 1790 the activity of the secretary of the treasury remained mostly secret, but the opposition between the two men came out in the open during the congressional debates from December 1790 to 1791. During this last session of the first Congress, the conflict over foreign policy often appeared to turn to the advantage of the secretary of state, who was supported by the president. But Hamilton’s influence over the Senate majority was to prove decisive.

Thomas Jefferson’s Reports

Hostilities began with the president’s annual message to Congress (December 8, 1790).27 In a note dating from November 29, which was intended as preparation
for the president’s message, Jefferson expressed his concern over foreign trade and American fishermen, and he recommended that legislative measures be taken to protect them.28 This text was retained in the president’s message, and it allowed James Madison to reintroduce in the House of Representatives the issue of American trade protection. In the face of opposition from Hamilton’s supporters, Madison demanded that measures be taken regarding trade and navigation. A committee set about drafting a bill modeled after the British Navigation Acts, which had been efficiently protecting the British merchant marine since the seventeenth century.29 Thomas Jefferson added to this campaign by submitting three reports (on December 28, a report concerning trade in the Mediterranean and a report on the prisoners in Algeria; on February 1, 1791, a report on cod and whale fishing).30 The last report was an outright indictment of the British: Jefferson had no trouble showing that British sailors and fishermen were the chief rivals of Americans, and, in particular, that the British had a closed market, whereas the French market was much more open. Jefferson scored one last point on February 14, 1791, the day when the president’s message was passed on to Congress. The message had been put together by George Washington and his secretary of state, and it dealt with the outcome of Gouverneur Morris’s mission in London.31 The tone and content of the message were very clear: the friendly overtures made by the new republic had been haughtily rejected by powerful England. More than the preceding reports, this message had a powerful effect on members of Congress, who had not reacted strongly to the previous reports. Less than a week later (on February 21, 1791), James Madison’s navigation bill was approved by the committee in charge, which had hitherto only halfheartedly dealt with the issue.32 Nevertheless, after January 20, 1791, Hamilton and Beckwith gradually became less worried and more optimistic. It seemed that the British government was finally convinced that they should not neglect the United States and was on the verge of sending a minister to Philadelphia, thereby reaching out to the United States.33 Jefferson’s satisfaction was thus short-lived: the navigation bill was scrapped at the end of the session when it was announced that George Hammond had been nominated as the first British minister plenipotentiary in the United States. Still, this nomination meant that Jefferson’s strategy had been a success of sorts, since only the fear of trade reprisals had driven the British to make a decision. The fact remained, however, that the bill no longer existed, and by way of compensation, Jefferson was asked to present a report to Congress on the nature and extent of privileges and restrictions of U.S. foreign trade.34 Perhaps more seriously, the pro-British stance that marked all of Alexander Hamilton’s actions—his secret meetings with George Beckwith, his opposition to discriminating or reciprocal legislation, and his open conflict with Thomas Jefferson whenever the issue of making demands on Great Britain came up—began to bear fruit as well as to irrevocably affect the relations of the United


States with other countries. Indeed, France was indignant about being treated like Great Britain. Not only had France signed a trade treaty with the United States, but in 1787 it had granted specific privileges to the new republic without asking for anything in return. In December 1790 Louis-Guillaume Otto, the French chargé d'affaires in the United States, received an order from the minister of foreign affairs, Montmorin, to make an official protest to the American government. Jefferson passed on the French demands for reciprocity to Hamilton, who of course found a way to reject them even though the French were putting on more pressure and were threatening to retaliate at the beginning of January 1791. The secretary of state then submitted a report on French protests to George Washington, and on January 17, 1791, he presented it to the Senate, which was composed mostly of Hamilton supporters, and was therefore hostile. While considering all possible American reactions (favorable to France or not), this report suggested that only a friendly gesture toward France could head off the prospect of retaliation. This time, however, George Washington’s support and personal influence had no effect. The committee that dealt with the report in the Senate was close to Hamilton and did not follow the secretary of state’s proposal.

At the end of the last session of the first Congress, the cabinet’s division over foreign policy meant that Jefferson’s projects were systematically defeated in the Senate. Although the secretary of state was the official source of the new republic’s foreign policy, and although he was almost always supported by the president, in the Senate he ran up against a majority that was favorable to Alexander Hamilton. Within the cabinet, there was only a semblance of unity, and what unity there was could now be attributed entirely to George Washington’s personality; as Jefferson noted with concern: “The prudence of the President is an anchor of safety to us.” The passion that everyone showed in the beginning for building the new nation gave way to a bitter weariness on the part of the secretary of state: “I long for pursuits of this kind [natural history] instead of the detestable ones in which I am now labouring without pleasure to myself, or profit to others.”

It was not the feigned unity that really defined American political life at this time, but rather the highly visible divisions that separated Congress into two camps: those who supported Hamilton (the Senate majority) and those who supported Madison (the House majority). The political consensus on the national level that Madison had dreamed of in the Federalist Papers and that Washington had wanted in his cabinet was now just a thing of the past. Although in the composition of the Constitution every effort had been made to maintain a balance between the different interest groups and to prevent political parties from emerging, the debates of the first Congress crystallized the formation of two groups, one of which was consistently favorable to Hamilton’s ideas and the other unfavorable; these would soon be called “Federalists” and
“Republicans,” respectively. Abandoning the “nationalist” consensus, the ruling elite became divided and then formed distinct camps in the context of a new institution: the two-party system.

From its inception, the chief characteristic of this system was, paradoxically, its national dimension. Indeed, what originally brought about the division between the two parties, and what fueled it thereafter, was disagreement over foreign policy decisions more than economic differences or regional oppositions. In 1927 Charles Beard described the political opposition between Federalists and Republicans as a reflection of the economic and regional conflict between capitalists (concentrated in the North) and agrarians (led by the landed aristocracy of the South). The historian John R. Nelson Jr. has refuted this hypothesis by drawing upon studies of the two parties at the local level and using an analysis of the social background of the various members of Congress. As it turns out, some big merchants from northern and central states were indeed members of the Republican Party (e.g., James Nicholson of New York and Stephen Girard of Philadelphia), whereas farmers from Maryland and Delaware supported the Federalist Party. In New York State, “mechanics” (workers and craftsmen) were the chief supporters of the Republican Party while farmers were split between the two parties. Whether at the grassroots level or among those elected to Congress, the same socioeconomic groups were represented in each party, with one small exception: more merchants than planters supported the Federalist Party. This leads one to think that the opposition that arose in Congress and in the executive branch was ideological in nature and had to do more with differing conceptions of the new nation’s identity than with economic or regional differences.

The French Revolution as Bone of Contention between the Parties

In 1791 the meaning of the rift that divided Congress and the executive branch slowly came to light: while it was clear that Hamilton was on the side of cooperating with Great Britain, Jefferson little by little emerged as the upholder of French-American amity. The contrast between the two countries came to symbolize the opposition between two conceptions of the young nation. For Jefferson the United States was first and foremost the heir to the Revolution of 1776 and the sister of the French Revolution; for Hamilton the United States was the daughter—formerly rebellious but now faithful—of aristocratic Great Britain. In moving closer to Great Britain, Hamilton was not only clashing with Thomas Jefferson, he was also running counter to the people’s enthusiasm, which had warmly greeted the French Revolution.
From the very beginning, the entire nation was enthusiastic about the French Revolution. Newspapers all over the United States hailed the advent of the French Revolution as the victory of a freedom and liberation movement that had its roots in America. This was symbolized in the father-son type of relationship that existed between George Washington and Lafayette. On October 14, 1789, the Pennsylvania Gazette claimed that the political emancipation of French citizens must be credited to the Marquis de Lafayette, rather than to any other “patriotic” figure. The Gazette maintained that Lafayette learned everything about the rights of the governed versus the rulers from his correspondence with George Washington.

Despite assertions to the contrary on the part of the editors of The Federalist, Americans had been afraid that republics might be more fragile than monarchies, and therefore they viewed the French Revolution as an event that not only benefited the French, but themselves as well. Indeed, when France actually became a republic, they welcomed the birth of a regime that was similar to theirs and that was prepared to fight against all the European monarchies together. In the French political upheavals they saw the seeds of a fundamental transformation of U.S.–European relations. The United States was no longer alone, for they had a “sister republic” on the other side of the Atlantic. The precarious isolation that had characterized America up until then thus came to an end.

The French Revolution was not only proof of the durability of the American experience; it also confirmed its validity: for Americans, the French experience legitimized their own revolution. As David Brion Davis has explained, the fact that republican principles could be exported justified the illegal—some called it treacherous—cause that the Declaration of Independence had defended. In his preface to The Rights of Man, which was dedicated to George Washington, Thomas Paine glorified this feeling of solidarity and continuity: “I present you a small treatise in defense of those principles of freedom which your exemplary virtue has so eminently contributed to establish. That the rights of man may become as universal as your benevolence can wish, and that you may enjoy the happiness of seeing the New World regenerate the Old.” The fate of the French Revolution was seen as a test measuring the success of American revolutionary principles: if they spread in Europe, America would thereby be justified and rewarded. According to Philippe Raynaud, for Paine the French Revolution confirmed the interpretation he had given of the American Revolution in Common Sense, namely that the British constitution was not essential to the defense of freedom, but popular sovereignty was.
Thomas Jefferson had already been paying close attention to the events in France at the end of his stay in Paris, and he shared the enthusiasm of the American people when he heard about the proclamation of the republic in France. In a letter to John Francis Mercer dated December 19, 1792, he wrote: “[T]he republicans are rejoicing and taking to themselves the name of Jacobins which two months ago was affixed on them by way of stigma.”

Supporters of Jefferson and Madison were more and more referred to as Republicans: they advocated a republic that, through its identification with the French Revolution, asserted its revolutionary and democratic character. For Jefferson, the fate of both the French and American nations was inextricably linked in a common fight for republicanism and freedom. In expressing his enthusiasm in a letter to Gouverneur Morris, who was at that time the American minister plenipotentiary in Paris, Jefferson went so far as to propose an exchange of citizenship between the two countries: “Indeed we wish to omit no opportunity of convincing them how cordially we desire the closest union with them. Mutual good offices, mutual affection and similar principles of government seem to have destined the two people for the most intimate communion, and even for a complete exchange of citizenship among the individuals composing them.”

Jefferson’s optimism was nevertheless tempered by the lukewarm revolutionary attitude, if not altogether aristocratic prejudice, that he sensed on the part of a number of other American leaders. Thomas Paine’s work *The Rights of Man*, which was written in response to Edmund Burke’s *Reflexions on the French Revolution*, was published in the United States in May 1791, with a preface by Thomas Jefferson. The remarks made by the secretary of state included a very clear attack on Americans who opposed the French Revolution. As he subsequently explained to George Washington: “I added that I was glad to find it reprinted, that something would at length be publicly said against the political heresies which had lately sprung up among us, that I did not doubt our citizens would rally again round the standard of common sense.” In later years, Jefferson would always deny that he knew his text was going to be published. At the time, he apologized to the vice president for its publication, saying that he had not wanted to hurt him. Nevertheless, in expressing in the preface his delight at the prospect of the controversy that Paine’s book was sure to stir up in America, he made it clear that he hoped *The Rights of Man* would incite the opponents of John Adams’s pro-British ideas to make a counterattack. After all, the “heresies” that Jefferson spoke about did in fact refer to the “Discourses on Davila,” thirty-one essays by John Adams that had appeared in John Fenno’s *Gazette of the United States*, which was a Federalist paper. They were written in reaction to the Marquis de Condorcet’s *Four Letters from a New Haven Bourgeois*. In them, Adams defended the notion that there could be no freedom without a “scientifically determined” constitutional balance between passions and interests, that is, without a mixed constitution where “the few”
and “the many” would be represented by different houses. He concluded by saying that liberty had all but vanished from the surface of the earth, with the exception of one island and North America.52

In thus linking the political systems of America and England, Adams seemed to be putting them in the same category and implying that they shared the same political philosophy. For Jefferson, Adams’s ideas were a dangerous hodgepodge that tended to bring together the forms of the U.S. government and those of the British Constitution.53 Adams’s misinterpretation lay in his likening American institutions to British institutions based on the common denominator of a balance of power. In Jefferson’s view, Adams was not alone in making this error, for other high-ranking figures also sought to undermine the genuine foundations of the American republic by substituting England’s hybrid regime (“a half-way house”), that is, neither monarchic nor republican, for a regime founded on the sovereignty of the people.54

Adams and Hamilton were not the only American leaders to be wary of the path that events in France were taking from 1791 on. The king’s imprisonment and the September massacres sowed the seeds of doubt in the minds of those who called themselves republicans but who feared the excesses of democracy. Was France not slipping into anarchy or moving toward tyranny of the majority?55 In a letter to Lafayette on June 10, 1792, George Washington insisted that, in avoiding despotism, it was important that license not take the place of freedom, nor confusion that of order.56 The cabinet members who were close to Hamilton, namely John Jay and Henry Knox, shared his concern over the issue. After Lafayette fled to Austria (August 1792), Washington became even more skeptical about the French Revolution, an attitude that was reinforced by the critical dispatches that Gouverneur Morris sent him from Paris. On February 14, 1793, Morris, who was minister plenipotentiary in Paris, wrote to Washington: “You will find that events have blackened more and more in this country. Her present prospects are dreadful. It is not so much, perhaps, the external force; great as that may be, for there are always means of defence in so vast a nation. The exhausted state of resources might also be borne with, if not remedied; but the disorganized state of the government seems irremediable. The venality is such that if there be no traitor, it is because the enemy has no common-sense.”57

The Conflict Takes on a National Dimension: The Beginnings of a Partisan Press and Debates over Official Relations with France

As we have seen, there was an ideological confrontation between those who supported the French Revolution, considering it to be the heir to American freedom, and those who refused to recognize the American political heritage in the direction that French politics were taking. With the conflict between
John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, this ideological confrontation was to exceed the limited context of Congress and the meetings of the executive committee members. The vice president took Jefferson's criticism as an unpardonable offense. In June 1791 the pamphleteer Publicola (the author was none other than John Quincy Adams, John Adams’s own son) came to the defense of the vice president in the Boston Columbian Centinel. But he was not the first to launch a public debate. Already on May 8, 1791, Jefferson had written: “Paine’s answer to Burke’s pamphlet begins to produce some squibs in the public papers. In Fenno’s paper they are Burkites, in the others, Painites.”

Set off by the reactions to Paine’s pamphlet and Jefferson’s preface, pamphlet war was declared. This war would rage on in the press until 1800. The division even took hold of the dailies and gave rise to a partisan press, that is, papers specializing in political commentary. This new kind of press set out to rally the interest of the American public, either in support of the ideas put forth by Jefferson and his friends, or those put forth by Hamilton and his friends. The French Revolution, which was supposed to bring all Americans together in celebration of the values they had fought for, became a symbol that they had to take a stand on. During the summer of 1791, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison managed to convince the poet Philippe Fréneau to start a Republican daily newspaper in Philadelphia, a newspaper that was intended to oppose John Fenno’s Gazette of the United States. The first issue of the National Gazette came out on October 31, 1791.

Until the beginning of 1793, the debate that divided supporters and critics of the French Revolution remained strictly within the realm of professional politics and did not have an influence on the administration’s management of foreign affairs. In April, however, when Jefferson learned that Great Britain was at war with France, the situation became very touchy for the new republic’s administration. Would it have to make a choice between its best trading partner and greatest source of revenue, that is, Great Britain, and its only real ally, that is, France—in other words, between the former colonial power and the “sister republic”? An answer to this question would be all the more difficult for Washington’s cabinet members to find since their individual preferences for one country or the other were now known.

Without clearly taking sides, George Washington nevertheless opened the debate by submitting to his cabinet members a series of questions that dealt with U.S. foreign relations. The first had to do with the advisability of proclaiming neutrality. All the cabinet members were in favor of neutrality, but they certainly did not all agree on what neutrality meant. As was the case during the Nootka Sound affair, Jefferson wanted active neutrality, which would allow the United States to play upon European rivalries in order to reap the greatest benefits. For this purpose, the United States needed to play hard to get, maintain its power of negotiation, and not reveal its intentions. But Hamilton
opposed this view of neutrality. He wanted to reassure his British friends formally about the attitude that the United States would adopt during the hostilities, considering that the United States was allied to France and might therefore contribute to the French war effort. In this second outright clash with Jefferson over foreign relations, it was Hamilton who emerged victorious. By April 19, 1793—the questions had been put forth on the eighteenth—the decision was taken to issue a proclamation of neutrality. The proclamation itself was dated April 22.60

Another issue was resolved at the April 19 session: Edmond-Charles Genêt, who was the new French minister plenipotentiary, was to be received officially. With regard to this issue, it was Jefferson who won. In December 1792 he had shown that the French republic was a regime that the United States ought to recognize, “considering the Convention, or the government they shall have established as the lawful representatives of the Nation and authorized to act for them.”61 Siding with Jefferson, the American administration received Genêt and officially recognized the French republic as the only legitimate government in France, at a time when all of Europe joined together against the French republic in order to reinstate the ancien régime. Alexander Hamilton had wanted things to go differently,62 but he did not manage to convince George Washington. He did not admit defeat, however, and a few days later he attempted to counteract the administration’s decision, and thereby undermine Franco-American friendship, through lengthy argumentation in response to another question from the president (namely, were the treaties concluded with France in 1778 still valid?). In this text, Hamilton did not go so far as to say that the treaties concluded with France were no longer valid, but he maintained that they should be suspended. Indeed, they had been concluded between the United States and King Louis XVI, and not with the republic that had followed. According to Hamilton, the United States needed to wait for a stable regime to be established in France before deciding whether to renew relations with it.63

Following the line of reasoning put forth by the Swiss jurist Emer de Vattel, Jefferson countered by developing the principle that he had laid out in a letter to Gouverneur Morris dated December 30, 1792, and he declared that: “Upon the whole I conclude that the treaties are still binding, notwithstanding the change of government in France.”64 Although Hamilton did not share the concerns inspired by Vattel’s enlightenment philosophy, he knew Vattel’s work and was familiar with his opinion on alliances. Paradoxically, Hamilton also used an excerpt from Vattel’s work, where it was explained that an alliance between two countries could be broken if there had been a change of government in one of the two countries and “if that change of government made the alliance useless, dangerous or disagreeable” for the other country.65 Hamilton put forth the danger argument in order to justify suspending the treaties, but Jefferson rebelled: what danger could there be in recognizing the French republic? What would
be dangerous, he concluded, would be not to recognize it. That would give France a good reason to go to war with the United States.

What made Hamilton so reluctant to recognize the French republic was the fact that France was at war with Great Britain. He did not see a “sister republic” in the ally of 1778, but rather a great danger: what would happen if Genêt asked for American aid? It would dash in one fell swoop all the hopes for an understanding with Great Britain that Hamilton had been cultivating for the past four years. As Jefferson observed, Hamilton’s line of reasoning was more clever than it was consistent. George Washington and the other cabinet members did not follow the secretary of the treasury’s lead on this issue: the treaties were maintained.66

Even though Jefferson’s ideas won out, Hamilton’s conservatism and his promonarchy and antidemocracy stance caused the secretary of state to worry about the fate of American democracy. Didn’t a refusal to recognize the French republic amount to repudiating the American republic itself? The promonarchy leanings that he also suspected in John Adams and many other Federalists seemed to call into question the very existence of the American nation as both a republic and a democracy. Quarrels over foreign policy thus revealed the political differences between Jefferson’s and Madison’s supporters, on the one hand, and Hamilton’s, on the other. Indeed, Hamilton himself was no less concerned about the consequences on the American nation of Jefferson’s pro-French stance.

The secretary of state felt isolated in the cabinet, but he could be happy about one thing: like Jefferson, most Americans saw in the French republic a continuation of the American republic. As an example, consider this Address of the Citizens of Philadelphia:

We cannot hide our joy at the sight of a nation that, after establishing America’s freedom, has finally managed to establish its own with so much grandeur and glory. . . . There is another point of interest, that of liberty and equality, which further contributes to the strength of our affection, and which makes the French cause an interesting one for all republics and endears it to mankind. Rest assured that, as we rightly regard the spread of republican principles as the best means for ensuring that our government of the people will last, our greatest hopes lie with France and the course she takes at this critical moment.67

Citizen Genêt

The French minister plenipotentiary Edmond-Charles Genêt received a hero’s welcome,68 and Jefferson openly expressed his enthusiasm for the “revolutionary spirit” that it rekindled in the United States.69 The popularity of the French Revolution brought about a new awareness throughout the country: not only
were festivities planned in Genêt’s honor, but people got together in democratic-republican societies, the goal of which was to let all citizens actively take part in political life. The fact that these societies resembled similar societies in France and other places in Europe was no coincidence: their members, like their counterparts in Europe, felt that they were taking part in a freedom movement that transcended national borders and that was in the process of giving birth to a new world order. As historian Eugene Link explained, however, the societies in the United States were also expressions of a distinctly American political tradition: they were the descendants of the Sons of Freedom, that is, societies that were active during the American Revolution. After a decade devoted to strengthening national institutions and fearing their experiment would fail, most Americans finally grasped the revolutionary dimension of their own revolution thanks to the impact of the French Revolution. Indeed, they had been the first to break once and for all with a traditional society, one based on deference, in order to adopt a modern society and political regime. With the success of the French Revolution and the arrival of Citizen Genêt, Americans adopted a “radical” interpretation of the American Revolution as a revolution of the people. As a result, the secretary of state disapproved of the reserved manner in which the president and the other cabinet members received the French minister, who arrived in Charleston in April 1793. This reserve revealed an unfortunate rift between most American leaders and public opinion. Taking their cue from Alexander Hamilton, those in power distanced themselves from what was the true source of their mandate in Thomas Jefferson’s eyes: the will of the people. With Genêt’s arrival, Jefferson saw his fears confirmed, namely, a powerful executive branch in open opposition to the American people, that is, to the source of its constituency. For the secretary of state, it was only thanks to the president’s moderating influence that the executive branch was not entirely cut off from the rest of the nation.

Genêt’s intentions were, however, entirely peaceful, to the point that they could only reconcile the people and their leaders, as Jefferson explained to Madison when telling him about his first meeting with Genêt:

It is impossible for anything to be more affectionate, more magnanimous than the purport of his mission. “We know that under the present circumstances we have a right to call upon you for the guarantee of our islands. But we do not desire it. We wish you to do nothing but what is for your own good, and we will do all in our power to promote it. Cherish your own peace and prosperity. You have expressed a willingness to enter into a more liberal treaty of commerce with us; I bring full powers (and he produced them) to form such a treaty, and a preliminary decree of the National Convention to lay open our country and its colonies for every purpose of utility, without your participating [in] the burthens of maintaining and defending them. We see in you
the only person on earth who can love us sincerely and merit to be so loved."
In short he offers everything and asks nothing.  

Beyond the grandiloquent tone of the professions of friendship that the declaration contained, it was a great relief to all those (such as Jefferson) who were afraid that France would ask the United States to help them protect their possessions in the Caribbean, as provided for in the treaty of 1778, in case of attack by the British. While offering the United States significant trade advantages, the declaration left American neutrality intact.

Although Genêt’s words delighted the secretary of state, his actions clearly constituted a real danger for the neutrality of the United States. In April Jefferson had reviewed the risks that maintaining the alliance entailed—his goal being to show that there were no risks—and he had been careful to mention Article XXII of the Treaty of Amity and Commerce between France and the United States (1778): “Is the danger to be apprehended from the 22d Article of our treaty of commerce, which prohibits the enemies of France from fitting out privateers in our ports, or selling their prizes here?” For Jefferson the situation was clear: “But we are free to refuse the same thing to France, there being no stipulation to the contrary, and we ought to refuse it on principles of fair neutrality.”

Edmond-Charles Genêt, however, interpreted Article XXII in a very different way from Jefferson. When he arrived in Charleston on April 8, 1793, he received a warm welcome from South Carolina leaders, and this encouraged him to raise troops in the West in order to attack Spanish holdings. This was exactly what western speculators were hoping for: they wanted to chase out the Indians and Spaniards with the help of the French. Genêt then created a prize court so that the ships captured by the frigate that brought him over would be tried and sold. He then began to fit out other captured ships as privateers that would seize British ships off the American coast.

The British minister George Hammond immediately lodged a complaint. If the United States was going to accept such behavior, then American neutrality would be called into question. Jefferson realized that Genêt needed to be called to order, which he proceeded to do on June 5, 1793. Genêt, however, persisted in ignoring Jefferson’s warnings and his interpretation of Article XXII. During the month of June, the secretary of state and Genêt corresponded in vain over the captured ships. The situation took a sharp turn for the worse in early July over the Little Sarah affair. On July 6, the cabinet members found out that the French prize was being transformed into a privateer and was about to set sail. Genêt was ordered to cease operations, but he refused to do so. Whereas Jefferson suggested they wait and see, Hamilton and Henry Knox wanted to fire at the ship if it actually set sail, which would amount to war with France.

Although the threats were not carried out, Genêt was permanently discred-
ited in the eyes of the whole cabinet, including Jefferson. The policy of “fair
neutrality,” which Jefferson had managed to sustain until then in opposition to
Hamilton’s “English neutrality,” was likewise discredited. In fact, it was in order
to prevent his “party” from collapsing that Jefferson willingly supported the de-
cision to request Genêt’s recall: “We have decided unanimously to require the
recall of Genet. He will sink the republican interest if we do not abandon him”
(Jefferson was here referring to other Republicans). The secretary of state was
speaking here more as a party man than as an ideologue. Genêt had placed Jefferson
in a difficult position—both with regard to George Hammond and with regard
to the cabinet as a whole—in his insistence on his peculiar interpretation of
Article XXII of the Franco-American treaty, as well as through his clashes with
the other cabinet members. This had weakened Jefferson politically by dimin-
ishing the credibility of “fair neutrality.” Overnight the British minister
plenipotentiary went from being the accused to the victim, and the pro-British
members of the government became the true champions of national indepen-
dence. Indeed, Genêt, through his acrimonious remarks against George
Washington from July on, swung public opinion in favor of the president, whereas
it had been supporting Genêt in his capacity as representative of the “sister repub-
lic.” Jefferson had to dissociate himself publicly from the French minister plenipo-
tentiary in order not to lose support of the “Republican interest,” because this
“Republican interest,” albeit pro-French, was first and foremost American, and
it condemned “this interference on the part of a foreigner.” George
Washington was the icon of the republic and the symbol of a united nation,
and he was still so far above the nascent party politics that an attack on him
was tantamount to an attack on the new nation. Nevertheless, Jefferson’s mod-
erate and strategic attitude did not reflect the feelings of all the militant Republicans.
Indeed, the democratic-republican societies preferred ideological rigor over
the political gambling that was meant to ensure access to power, and they con-
tinued to support Genêt even after he had been dismissed.

Jefferson felt out of place in the administration, which he considered biased,
and he resigned from his position at the end of December 1793. Before resig-
ning, however, he had publicly relaunched the debate over the choice of France
or England as trading partner. On December 16, the secretary of state sub-
mitted to Congress the Report on the Privileges and Restrictions on the
Commerce of the United States in Foreign Countries, which had been requested
of him on February 23, 1791. Like the report on fishing of February 1, 1791,
this report made clear that France had good intentions in matters of trade, whereas
Great Britain had only bad intentions. Jefferson concluded by requesting that
a real navigation system be put in place. This report came at the right moment
to feed the disputes in Congress between those who favored maintaining good
relations with France and those who favored Great Britain; meanwhile, the in-
ternational situation was becoming more and more tense.
When the first administration came to power in 1789 under George Washington, everyone believed that the Constitution would guarantee stability and prevent “factions” and “parties” from forming. But by 1791 it was clear at the highest levels of political life that the national consensus was crumbling away. Opposing groups began to form in the cabinet and in Congress, and their antagonistic opinions filled the pages of the nascent partisan press. Initially, however, the American people remained united, and they rediscovered the democratic meaning of their own revolution through their fascination with the first years of the French Revolution. Foreign policy was clearly the catalyst for dissension among the political elite. The crucial choices that Americans had to make during this critical time divided the political leaders into pro-British and pro-French camps. This polarization reflected the emergence of an institutional structure that the Founding Fathers had not foreseen: the two-party system. And within this system an important ideological battle was to be played out, a battle that was to come out in the open after 1793 and inflame the whole nation.