The Nationalist Ferment
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CHAPTER 4

Commercial and Territorial Expansion

Foreign policy was a realm where national feeling and nationalism were both very prominent, and from 1789 to 1800 it was at the center of especially heated political debate, to the point of impairing the precarious unity of the new republic. Through their conflicting positions, the Republican and Federalist parties actually endorsed one particular view of the American republic. In contrast to the elitist and socially conservative republic of the Federalists, the Republicans favored a democratic republic, faithful to the revolutionary spirit of 1776, which the French Revolution had rekindled. Moreover, in lieu of the traditional concept of deference, which had governed social relations until then, the Republicans preferred the modern value of equality. Although there was real political opposition between the two parties, the fact remains, as historian Joyce Appleby has noted, that both parties were led by men committed to economic change.¹ In spite of their political divisions, the governing elite of the American republic had the same economic goals for the new nation; indeed, they agreed that the best way to ensure unity and strength for the American nation was to push commercial as well as territorial expansion. Although debates over foreign policy raised a good deal of bitterness between Republicans and Federalists, they also set the stage for defining common foreign policy goals. These common goals contributed in a crucial way to the shaping of the nation’s identity, even though the two parties did not always agree upon ways to put those goals into effect.

The Growth of Foreign Trade and Commercial Expansion

1776–1789

The obstacles set by British mercantilist policy against American foreign trade had been a major factor in the onset of rebellion in the colonies before 1776. Indeed, the colonies had virtually no domestic market, nor manufacturing, and
for them prosperity was highly dependent on foreign trade. Only by funneling their agricultural production into other markets could Americans procure manufactured goods and give a boost to farming. Even prior to the political act of the Declaration of Independence, the colonists had broken free from the economic subjugation that bound them to their former mother country, subjugation that was embodied in the Navigation Acts: in April 1776 they had opened up their ports to ships of all nations, with the exclusion of British ships. The message was clear: without economic independence there could be no political independence. However, in a century that had watched large mercantilist empires emerge and compete, a new nation was likely to experience trouble trying to assert itself on the international scene. Still, the American rebels’ economic aspirations were nurtured by the free trade ideas of Adam Smith (whose *Wealth of Nations* appeared in 1776), as well as the exhortations of Thomas Paine. In *Common Sense*, Paine had stated: “Our plan is commerce and that, well attended to, will secure us the peace and friendship of all Europe; because, it is the interest of all Europe to have America a free port.” Such language encouraged the rebels to think that their products would be welcome on European markets.

Given that American products were necessities, the designers of the 1776 treaty plan had a firm belief in American economic strength, and thus they envisioned only treaties of friendship and commerce, but no military alliances. The war and its consequences, however, were to teach Americans that although they had obtained political independence, this did not enable them to assert their views of economic exchanges, nor even change their status as a “British colony” in economic terms. As a matter of fact, commercial links between Great Britain and the United States were quite naturally restored after the war, to the great satisfaction of the British government, which was in a position to follow Lord Sheffield’s advice in his 1783 book *Observations on the Commerce of the United States*: to exploit American dependence on British products, merchants, and bankers, in order to avoid making any commercial concessions to them. As early as July 1783, an Order in Council barred American ships from the British Caribbean islands. The principle of free trade, on which Americans had hoped to build a new international economic order after the war, also did not appeal to allied or neutral nations. The Netherlands and Denmark opened up their colonies in the Caribbean to American trade, but France, and above all Spain, took longer to offer the United States commercial advantages.

In order to achieve its independence, the new nation had therefore to design a new commercial policy, one that was more dynamic and better adjusted to the reality of a world where mercantilism still reigned. Since the Continental Congress did not seem up to the task, the “nationalists” saw the formation of a federal government as a means to implement a forceful commercial policy,
based on reciprocity. This new commercial spirit is perfectly summarized in the following statement from *The Federalist* no. 11, in which Alexander Hamilton advocated adopting protectionist tariffs:

> By prohibitory regulations, extending, at the same time, throughout the States, we may oblige foreign countries to bid against each other, for the privileges of our markets. . . . Suppose, for instance, we had a government in America, capable of excluding Great Britain (with whom we have at present no treaty of commerce) from all our ports; what would be the probable operation of this step upon her politics? Would it not enable us to negotiate, with the fairest prospect of success, for commercial privileges of the most valuable and extensive kind, in the dominions of that kingdom?

Far removed in spirit from the confident free trade outlook of 1776, these propositions stemmed from a wish to exert retaliation and discrimination against Great Britain, as the only means to force it to negotiate the opening of its colonies; furthermore, they were aimed at making economic expansion and prosperity possible for Americans, in the face of European nations that, according to Hamilton, had every intention of standing in their way. *The Federalist* no. 11 was the expression of an inflammatory nationalism, pitting the young promising America against great and jealous mercantilist nations. Hamilton added: “Under a vigorous national government, the natural strength and resources of the country, directed to a common interest, would baffle all the combinations of European jealousy to restrain our growth.”

### Madison and Jefferson: Discrimination Laws and the Diversification of Markets

Once the new institutions were in place, this ambitious program could be implemented. It was thus quite natural for James Madison, on the occasion of congressional debates upon tonnage and customs duties in April 1789, to ask for a navigation system to be created in the United States that would favor American ships (through tonnage duties) and goods imported into the United States on American ships, as opposed to the same goods when carried by foreign ships (through customs duties). As we saw in chapter 2, Madison, in introducing these measures, included the idea of discrimination, with a view to imposing heavier taxes on countries that had not signed a treaty with the United States. His nationalistic argumentation perfectly echoed what Hamilton had written in *The Federalist* no. 11: “I wish to teach those nations who have declined to enter into commercial treaties with us, that we have the power to extend or to withhold advantages as their conduct shall deserve.” Economic discrimination as well as commercial retaliation against Great Britain were, in Madison’s view,
a show of national pride and the essential step toward achieving an autonomous national identity, one that would constitute a total break from the past colonial identity. In depicting the drafting of the Constitution and the establishment of federal institutions as a “revolution,” he clearly signaled that the key to the success of this national undertaking lay in an aggressive commercial policy: “We have now the power to avail ourselves of our natural superiority, and I am for beginning with some manifestation of that ability, that foreign nations may or might be taught to pay us that respect which they have neglected on account of our former imbecility. This language and these sentiments are the language and the sentiments of our Constituents. The great political revolution now brought about by the organization of the new government, has its foundation in these sentiments.” Madison added that the states had separately tried to counter the nefarious influence of Great Britain, but these attempts were in vain. Now they had decided to act together, in order to obtain the reciprocity that justice required. In order to force the former colonial power to respect the new independence and identity of the United States, Madison went so far as to declare that the United States was ready to wage an “economic war” on Great Britain.

In addition to being nationalistic, the commercial policy that Madison propounded was also eminently national in character, for it ignored the specific interests of the various regions and economic groups and instead considered only those of the Union as a whole. In fact, Madison knew quite well that many southern planters would oppose his propositions; their goods were still being transported to Europe on British ships, and the prospect of a shortage of inexpensive freight, or of an increase in their transportation costs, made those planters fear that their goods might no longer be exportable to Europe or might sell poorly on account of higher prices. Did Madison mean to destroy the farming economy of the southern states for the benefit of shipowners of the northeastern states, as Thomas Tudor Tucker of South Carolina and James Jackson of Georgia wondered? Or did he mean to destroy American farming as a whole for the benefit of trade, as Theodorick Bland of Virginia and John Lawrence of New York speculated? Madison responded that neither was the case and stated that he was only interested in the good of the nation. For Madison, farming and commercial interests were “compatible and consistent with each other,” as were the interests of southern and northern states. Indeed, he claimed that his proposal to set up an American merchant marine was not only geared at securing revenue for the government and stimulating a sector of the national economy, but also it was aimed in the end at ensuring the security of the nation and at enabling it to counter military threats from other countries. He explained: “[M]y great object is to provide a maritime defence against a maritime danger. . . . The United States can have no commerce without a navy. Whenever a war shall break out, what a situation will this country be in?”
When Thomas Jefferson became secretary of state in April 1790, he was ready to second Madison's efforts at setting American trade free from the colonial chains that bound it to Great Britain. As soon as he took office, he made a special effort at improving commercial relations between the United States and France, Great Britain's major economic competitor. In so doing, Jefferson was not merely following his own personal and political inclinations; he was, above all, seeking to boost American trade by diversifying its markets. He knew it would be no easy task, for Americans were used to credit and to British manufactured goods, and most European countries followed very strict protectionist policies; but in the course of his five-year term in Paris as minister plenipotentiary (from May 1784 to October 1789), he had become aware that the French government was willing to favor Franco-American trade.

In the wake of the war, French merchants had tried to force their way into the American market, although they did not know much about what its needs were or the way it operated. Having failed in this attempt, the French trade world had lost much of its interest in America. In fact, many French merchants had tried to curb the expansion of trade between the United States and French colonies in the Caribbean. An edict issued in August 1784, which was intended to open up more trade opportunities for Americans in the French Caribbean, had occasioned a storm of protest in Bordeaux, Nantes, and La Rochelle. With the help of Vergennes and Lafayette, however, Jefferson had managed to obtain numerous concessions from the French government. The monopoly on the tobacco trade, which had bound Robert Morris to the Farmers-General, had not been renewed in 1787, although some sales did go through the Farm Administration after that date; furthermore, in December 1787 the French government issued a decree that included several concessions in favor of U.S. trade and navigation.

With regard to the specific issue of opening up Franco-American trade, the revolutionary events of 1789 inspired the new secretary of state with renewed optimism: not only did he know and appreciate the new men in power, but also, and most importantly, he was convinced, as was his former secretary William Short, now the U.S. chargé d'affaires in Paris, that the abolition of privileges in France should logically be followed by a similar end to mercantilist barriers. Thus, the United States would no longer be alone in trying to apply modern free trade ideas; in concert with France, it could make a breach in the mercantilist system and strengthen its position. In Jefferson's mind, the first consequence of this change of mood in France should be the liberation of its colonies' trade. Nothing could have been more in keeping with the laws of free trade than to let the French colonies in the Caribbean get their supplies from their neighbors, instead of importing the same products from France at the highest possible price: "The French colonies will doubtless claim in their new constitution, a right to receive the necessaries of life from whomever will deliver
them cheapest; to wit, grain, flour, live stock, salted fish and other salted provisions. Thomas Jefferson and William Short did, however, realize that such a change would go against the interests of the merchants of the great harbors on the Atlantic Coast, who had built their wealth upon trade with the colonies, and who were a prominent group in the Constituent Assembly. In order to quell their protests, Jefferson advised Short to encourage the colonies’ deputies to take a forceful stance. Jefferson and Short also expected the French Revolution to result in a liberalization of the tobacco trade. They could hardly conceive that such an ancien régime institution as the Farmers-General might be preserved; thus Short, as a true lobbyist before lobbies existed, extolled to the French deputies the advantages of the free sale of tobacco.

Very soon, however, the American representative in Paris understood that there was no way that the French Caribbean would be opened to American trade, given the influence of merchants in the Constituent Assembly. Caught between free trade principles on the one hand, and political and economic realities on the other, the Assembly chose to be pragmatic: “The Assembly were forced here to deviate from their known principles from an apprehension of the large trading towns and the provinces adjoining them.” Furthermore, adhering to a strict interpretation of the consular convention between France and the United States, the French minister for foreign affairs, Montmorin, opposed granting exequatur to American consuls for Martinique, Guadeloupe, and Saint-Domingue. While the French Commerce Committee was debating new customs duties, Montmorin learned that the American discrimination clause had been rejected by the Senate in 1789 and again in 1790. This discrimination clause had been aimed essentially at Great Britain, and Madison had included it in the bill on tonnage. France, a former ally of the United States, was thus not being treated any better than Great Britain, the former colonial power. Such developments could not but reinforce the French merchants’ misgivings about Americans, whom they viewed as still too bound up with British trade.

In February 1791 the new French General Customs Tariff struck a terrible blow to the type of commercial relations that had been established between France and the United States by the decrees of 1787. Although rights on whale oil remained low, the transportation of American tobacco on U.S. ships was heavily taxed in order to favor the French merchant marine. Indeed, foreign tobacco imports, no matter what the means of transportation, were subject to heavy taxation. Contrary to Jefferson’s long-standing hopes, the end of the tobacco monopoly, which occurred at the same time, was not followed by free trade measures or by a ban on tobacco growing in France. Owing to pressure from Alsatian deputies, tobacco growing was in fact encouraged in France, and the new tariff on imported tobacco was the result of this protectionist step. Gouverneur Morris’s protests only resulted in an additional clause to the tariff, stipulating that only tobacco from North America could be imported into France. Such
a mediocre compensation, however, was not enough to prevent the irreversible decline of tobacco growing in the Chesapeake Bay area, a decline that was clearly linked to the end of purchase orders from the Farmers-General. Jefferson confided his disappointment to Madison in the following terms: “The French proceedings against our tobacco and ships are very eccentric and unwise.” In 1793 Genêt arrived with orders to negotiate a new trade treaty, which briefly rekindled Jefferson’s hopes; as we have seen, however, the French minister’s unwelcome activities were to shatter the secretary of state’s dreams.

In his commitment to developing foreign trade, Jefferson took an interest in all areas of the United States and sought means to help New England fishermen as well as tobacco growers in Virginia. Although clearly national, his economic policy was more subtly nationalistic than that of James Madison. Whereas Madison was ready to put a halt to all trade between the United States and Great Britain as a means of defending the new republic’s honor and independence, Jefferson promoted a less flamboyant brand of economic nationalism, albeit no less resolute. From May 1790 to December 1793, Jefferson waged a ceaseless campaign in favor of diversifying and opening up markets. After the General Customs Tariff was decreed in 1791, Jefferson, although a friend of France, became so bitter as to threaten to retaliate against the former ally, France. As he explained to William Short and Gouverneur Morris in January 1792, the most important duty for a diplomat was “the patronage of our commerce, and the extension of its privileges.” Like Madison, Jefferson could not conceive of real independence without a prosperous foreign trade, but for the secretary of state, that goal was to be achieved less through confrontation than through timely and realistic use of the international situation. At the time of the Nootka Sound affair, Jefferson declared: “If the war between Spain and England takes place, I think France will inevitably be involved in it. In that case I hope the new world will fatten on the follies of the old. If we can but establish the principles of the armed neutrality for ourselves, we must become the carriers for all parties as far as we can raise vessels.”

(For details on the Nootka Sound affair, see chapter 7.) No better expression could be found for the priority given to one’s country’s prosperity, even and especially if such prosperity had to be achieved at the expense of other nations. In Jefferson’s writings, one senses his desire not only to assert the independence of the new nation in a hostile world that was dominated by the great mercantilist powers, but also to carve out a spot on the international scene for the United States as an essential partner. Jefferson and Madison did not simply try to assert the new nation’s identity in opposition to Great Britain’s; their agendas reflected great national pride that was rooted in their faith in the future of the United States.
Alexander Hamilton and James Madison's Opponents

When Madison introduced a discriminatory clause into the tonnage bill, he probably did not foresee so much hostility, especially coming from the author of *The Federalist* no. 11, Alexander Hamilton himself, who was then secretary of the treasury. The Senate was, however, under Hamilton’s influence, and Madison’s discriminatory measure was rejected both in 1789 and in 1790. In 1794, when Madison once again attempted to introduce his plan, he was again unsuccessful. As in 1789 and 1790, Hamilton managed to counter Madison’s offensive, this time by channeling congressmen’s anger into other forms of action. What is one to make of Hamilton’s about-face? So soon after the war, so soon after *The Federalist*, how did he come to accept the economic domination of Great Britain? How is it that so many members of Congress came to follow his lead?

Because they failed to rebel against ships being captured by the British navy, historian John R. Nelson Jr. has accused Hamilton and his followers of abdicating national independence and pursuing a neocolonial policy, thus supposedly even hurting the American economy by forestalling the development of manufacturing. William Appleman Williams, while considering the drafters of the Constitution to be the heirs to British mercantilism, differs in the analysis of the economic policies at work and does not consider Hamilton’s policies to have been a major hindrance to the rise of economic liberalism in the United States. Like Nelson, however, Williams regards the secretary of the treasury’s nationalism as lukewarm and as subordinate to his desire to maintain privileged economic relations with Great Britain. But then if such was the case, that is, if Hamilton’s ideas were indeed so weakly nationalistic, why did they win over Congress and defeat the ideas of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison?

The first debate on tonnage duties, which was preceded by a closely related debate on import duties, took place in April and May 1789, at a time when the future ideological cleavage between Republicans and Federalists was not yet clearly established. Already at this time, however, the arguments set forth by Madison’s opponents formed a coherent whole. Many representatives agreed with Madison in theory, but they recommended caution and moderation. Thomas Fitzsimmons of Pennsylvania doubted whether “it would be politic, at this moment, to adopt a severe remedy for the evil” and suggested making “only a small discrimination for the present.” James Jackson of Georgia and Roger Sherman of Connecticut shared this view. For these congressmen, resorting to an aggressive commercial policy would only be justified once caution and negotiation proved vain. John Lawrence of New York also counseled moderation as the “advice of prudence,” adding that if this failed, then other measures could be applied.

Whereas Madison was not afraid of the possibility of British retaliation, his opponents appeared persuaded that a conflict between the two countries would
be in Great Britain’s favor.44 They did not hide the fact that in this matter they were concerned about the nation. Like Roger Sherman, John Lawrence made this point clear: “I am actuated only by the purest motives for my country’s good, in opposing what I consider as prejudicial to her interest.”45 It was James Jackson, however, who most thoroughly expounded on the “national” reasons behind his opposition to Madison’s discriminatory clause. The Georgia representative felt the Union was still weak, as some states had not yet even ratified the Constitution. The union of the new republic needed to be cemented, and the new institutions needed to produce a united nation; to this purpose, the federal government had to gain—but not force—acceptance and avoid becoming a symbol of economic turmoil. Or as Jackson put it himself: “The question before the committee appears to me to be, whether we shall draw in, by tender means, the States that are not of the Union, or deter them from joining us, by holding out the iron hand of tyranny and oppression.”46 Jackson’s main concern was the durability of the new system and the unity of the new nation. As John Lawrence explained, if the federal government took steps that led toward an economic crisis, it would lose its credibility and destroy the nation’s soul, that is, the people’s industry; Lawrence thus clearly showed that economic prosperity was one of the foundations of American national feeling.47

By 1794 opposition had become more open and positions more marked. Still, if one examines the statements made by Madison’s opponents, it is clear that they merely expanded upon the same arguments that had already been used in 1790. In a speech originally inspired and outlined by Hamilton,48 William Loughton Smith of South Carolina spoke in turn for moderation: “[W]e ought with great caution to attempt any thing at a future day, till we have acquired a maturity which will enable us to act with greater effect, and to brave the consequences, even if they should amount to war. . . . Wisdom admonishes us to be patient, ‘to make haste slowly.’”49 For the time being, Smith added, an aggressive policy toward Great Britain could only lead to war. And who, in a time of full prosperity, would want to start a war?50 Even in the event of a mere trade war, Uriah Forrest of Maryland said, citing figures, that the United States did not stand a chance: “Who will suffer most? She, by the interruption of one-sixth [of her trade], with the means of getting most of the articles we supply, on as good terms, from other nations, . . . or we, with an interruption of one-half our trade and commerce?”51 Like William Loughton Smith, other congressmen, such as Richard Bland Lee of Virginia, William Vans Murray of Maryland, and Abiel Foster of New Hampshire, evoked the general prosperity of the United States in trade and agriculture, only to end up speculating on the meaning of measures that were bound to undermine it.52 The cautious attitude adopted by Hamilton’s followers regarding Madison’s propositions led them to downplay the hindrance to the development of American trade caused by the British. This, however, did not result from a lack of national feeling or a sudden renunciation of the principles
for which these men had fought in 1776 and had changed the Constitution in 1787: indeed, they did not take to Hamilton’s ideas out of cowardice, but rather because those ideas seemed better suited to guarantee the existing prosperity, without which it seemed impossible to them to build a strong American nation.

Prosperity and Nationalism

In fact, between 1789 and 1794 the American economy emerged from the period of instability that had set in immediately after the war. Merchants and shipowners in particular had seen their businesses prosper since 1793. Although France and Great Britain closed off their colonies to American trade after the war, the merchants of the early republic managed to get through by resorting to fake documents and changing their ships’ names or ports of registry. When he was fighting for French colonies to be officially opened, Jefferson observed: “The revolution in France goes on with a slow and steady step. Their West Indian islands are all in combustion. There is no government in them, consequently their trade is entirely open to us.” Whereas Europe was being reluctant, the East was opening up to American ships. During the debate of 1789, John Lawrence informed his colleagues that no fewer than forty-seven ships were at that moment sailing toward countries beyond the Cape of Good Hope.

As a result of the onset of revolutionary wars, American shipowners and traders suddenly came into a controlling position over trade with the European colonies; indeed, thanks to the neutral status of the United States, they were able to keep up transatlantic trade. Having been driven off the seas by Britain’s naval power, France opened up its colonies to American ships in February 1793. As for Spain, from the moment it entered the war against Britain in 1796, it also lost its freedom on the seas and, much to its dismay, was forced to open the ports of its Atlantic colonies to American trade by a decree in 1797. As early as January 1794, Great Britain, which until then had been reluctant, allowed the practice of “broken voyage,” which meant that Americans could buy goods from the colonies of enemies of England and transport them to the parent country. England posed only one restriction: goods had to be unloaded on U.S. soil before being reshipped. Thus, the American merchant marine gradually came to replace the merchant marines of the warring countries, which England’s naval power prevented from trading with their colonies. Britain’s willingness to accept the “broken voyage” subterfuge amounted to fostering a new role for the American merchant marine on the basis of its own need for American help. William Vans Murray could rightfully declare: “Our ships visit every part of the world; . . . there is no place to which American enterprises does [sic] not convey our various products; . . . so far is our commerce confined, that the most distant ports and oceans in Russia and China, and the Pacific, are its only boundaries.”
nary commercial growth stirred up enthusiasm not only on the part of Vans Murray, but also on the part of many other Americans. In 1789, when such a prospect was not yet in view, Madison's appeal to republican civic spirit and disinterested patriotic feeling could still be heard. But soon after that it became clear, through reports about debates on foreign policy, that Madison's opponents wanted first and foremost to preserve the restored prosperity. They would support no economic policy that appeared to hamper the country's commercial development. Like Hamilton, Madison wanted to ensure the nation's prosperity, but his economic policy implied real sacrifices from his fellow citizens, since it was likely to lead to war if Great Britain opposed American actions. From 1789 to 1794 it seemed impossible for any American economic policy geared at national independence to privilege the common welfare over private gain. Giving priority to the common good was no longer an option: the American elite felt that the nation's economic development and the growth of private wealth should now go hand in hand.

Hamilton's about-face and his new, pro-British economic policy therefore caved in to the spirit of the times, in which "interest" was given precedence over "virtue." In supporting Hamilton's economic policy, members of Congress betrayed the growing influence on the American elite of free trade ideology, a new credo that merged public and private interests. In fact, in the early 1790s, the way to ensure the quickest growth of U.S. wealth was an entente with Great Britain, the coun-
try’s first trading partner, whereas a confrontation would only have resulted in delaying such growth, and might not have been any better guarantee of the nation’s independence. Whether or not this argument is valid for the period up to 1793, it undoubtedly applies to the situation after that date, in which the revolutionary wars enabled England to impose once again its hegemony over the seas. Indeed, had Great Britain not been well disposed toward its former colony, the United States could not have become the carrier of all of Europe’s colonial goods. True national independence, grounded in national prosperity, required some degree of compromise with Great Britain. It is therefore difficult to agree with historian John R. Nelson Jr.’s criticism of Alexander Hamilton. Even though Hamilton’s economic policy was less explicitly nationalistic than Jefferson’s and Madison’s, it cannot be reduced to a short-sighted program, one geared solely at preserving the secretary of the treasury’s tax bill. It is also difficult to agree with Nelson when he claims that Hamilton “abandon[ed] an independent merchant marine and foreign trade.” Hamilton only sought to use Great Britain’s economic support in order to foster American development.

It is equally impossible, however, to say that Hamilton’s policy was the only suitable way of ensuring true national independence and prosperity. Great Britain would certainly not have allowed American trade to grow if the onset of the revolutionary wars had not made an entente with the United States seem more appealing. Hamilton’s ideas won the day because, given the international context, they were the most conducive to quick prosperity and thus, in the long term, to the economic independence that was indispensable to true national independence. In point of fact, in order to explain the success of the secretary of the treasury’s ideas, one has to invoke external circumstances, along with an American desire for individual wealth. Through the debates on U.S. foreign trade relations, it becomes clear that commercial expansion was a common foreign policy goal; moreover, one can discern a free trade bias in this expansionist agenda, which, although seemingly frustrating the hopes of statesmen such as Jefferson and Madison for immediate economic independence, in fact anchored such independence in a deep-seated desire for personal prosperity.

Territorial Expansion

*U.S. Commercial Influence Extended to the Caribbean, South America, and the Far East*

For the great mercantilist empires of the eighteenth century, commerce and conquest went hand in hand. The very idea of the “exclusive” reflected a desire to achieve total control over trade with another part of the world and, by extension, to try to conquer that part of the world. The mercantilist system was insep-
arable from the rise of rival empires. Although Americans began professing free trade ideas in 1776 and sought to break out of the mercantilist mold, they were aware of the ambiguities involved in any desire for commercial expansion in a mercantilist world. In 1791, as he was trying to secure the opening up of all the French Caribbean islands to American trade, Jefferson explained to William Short that commercial expansion did not, in the American mind, rhyme with conquest: “Whenever jealousies are expressed as to any supposed views of ours on the dominion of the West Indies, you cannot go farther than the truth in asserting we have none. If there be one principle more deeply than any other in the mind of every American, it is that we should have nothing to do with conquest. As to commerce indeed we have strong sensations.”

The diplomatic campaign Jefferson waged with the French authorities was, in his own words, grounded in the “natural right” to “have commerce and intercourse with our neighbours.” In appealing to natural right and casting off every notion of conquest, Jefferson clearly proved his allegiance to Enlightenment philosophers such as Rousseau, Vattel, and d’Holbach. These philosophers had indeed objected to dynastic and colonial wars as well as to the consequences of them, such as extensions of territory that violated the will of individual peoples and their natural right to self-determination, and they had condemned conquest and expansion, which they compared to the law of the jungle. It should be noted, however, that in order to assert this natural right, Jefferson declared himself ready to use force—an unlikely association, and one that had little to do with the peaceful spirit that supposedly was to accompany the rejection of conquest and the desire for free trade: “To suppress this neighborly intercourse is an exercise of force, which we shall have a just right to remove when [we are] the superior force.”

Jefferson was in fact not the only one to justify such claims by appealing to both natural right and the right of the strongest. Edward Rutledge, an influential politician from South Carolina, resorted to the same reasoning: “The West Indies are naturally connected with this Country, that they must forever depend upon Us; Her Separation appears to have been effected by a convulsion of nature. . . . With the Means of a Navy in our Hands, and with the Prospect of a Navy in the Eye of Europe, we may dictate a treaty.”

In the minds of the Enlightenment philosophers, a given people’s natural right extended to their territory; for Americans, it also extended to adjoining territories. Natural right thus came to justify aims of an expansionist nature. When Americans actually spelled out this particular interpretation of natural right, they justified it in terms of security, evoking the fear of being encircled by great neighboring powers. In 1790, however, their appeal to natural right was strong enough for them to simply assert their right without explaining its exact source. The recourse to natural right was indeed a definitive argument, one that was not up for negotiation nor discussion. In fact, being even less moderate in actions than in words,
Jefferson challenged the views of French authorities by stubbornly insisting upon posting American consuls in the French colonies.67 American citizens exploited the political and administrative turmoil at Saint-Domingue from 1789 on and established a lucrative business there. According to historian John H. Coatsworth, by 1790 the value of American exports to Saint-Domingue exceeded that of exports to all other Caribbean islands.68 Once the French islands were officially opened to American trade, the same trend prevailed until 1797.

As is apparent in the example of Saint-Domingue, the aggressive stance of American foreign trade in the Caribbean after 1789 more closely resembles a commercial offensive than the enactment of peaceful ideals. In the name of free trade, Americans wanted to gain control of markets and take part in the competition between nations. As Richard Van Alstyne wrote in 1949: “The years from 1783 to 1860 were the years when the United States created its empire. We are prone to forget that the paths of empire led seaward as well as landward, and we fail commonly to correlate the maritime phase of American expansion with the continental.”69

The term “empire” had long been part of the American vocabulary. Proud subjects of the British Empire until 1776 (like Benjamin Franklin), Americans had redirected their pride onto the American Empire, which they saw as the heir to the British Empire.70 For them empire meant not only power and sovereignty, but also the prospect of expansion over land and sea.71 Once the revolutionary wars had dismantled the mercantilist yoke, Americans logically exploited the new situation by gaining control over the Caribbean trade (which amounted to about one-third of their exports).72 First it was Saint-Domingue, the richest of all the European colonies, which bought between 39 and 44 percent of all American exports to the Caribbean and South America. Then, at the height of political, diplomatic, and military collaboration between Great Britain and the United States (1798–1801), the British islands took in over 35 percent of American exports to that area.73 This was sweet revenge on the 1784 Order in Council that had officially closed off those islands from American trade. Likewise, in Spanish America the rise of U.S. trade was spectacular.74 Timothy Pickering posted consuls there, and American merchants and sailors began to discover the ports of Latin America, which they had previously had almost no commercial links with because the Spanish Empire had been so forbearing. Even in Chile, where in theory Americans were not wanted, the number of U.S. ships that touched land multiplied almost tenfold between 1797 and 1809.75 Given the fact that smuggling was a national passion with American sailors, the official statistics should be taken with a grain of salt: even before Spain opened all those territories to American trade, American trade had come to them.76

Americans did not limit their ambitions to the Caribbean and Europe. By 1789 prospecting for commercial avenues had taken them also to the Pacific
Coast and toward the Far East. As Captain Cook's third journey had shown in 1778, the Northwestern Coast of the American continent was rich in furs that would find a ready market in China. Whoever among the Russians, the Spanish, the British, and the Americans would first claim sovereignty over the Pacific Coast would hold the key to that trade: thus, the extension of the commercial domain and territorial expansion were tightly connected.77

The Republicans' Grassroots Territorial Expansionism

Jefferson's correspondence during his term as secretary of state shows that he had two main concerns: foreign trade, but also Spain's opening of the Mississippi to U.S. navigation and international trade. This foreign policy concern was even dearer to Jefferson's heart than getting Spain to respect the southwestern border, and it sheds light on the nature and strength of the young nation's expansionist ambition over territories located beyond its borders.

After the Revolution, neither France nor Spain cared to strengthen the U.S. position on the North American continent.78 For both countries, the aim of their involvement in the conflict had essentially been to strike a blow at the triumphant British Empire and thus restore a balance of forces in Europe. Spain's latent hostility toward the United States became overt in 1783 with the closing of the Mississippi to American navigation. At a time when there was not yet a network of roads and canals linking the agricultural West to the markets of the East Coast, the Mississippi was the vital artery for the economic development of the new states and the only way for them to get their goods to market. The western states had already toyed with the idea of seceding before the Constitution was ratified, and it was thus possible that they might start thinking again about leaving the Union if the federal government did not obtain for them the same privilege that the British had enjoyed from 1763 to 1778. Speaking on behalf of the Democratic Society of Kentucky in 1793, John Breckinridge expressed the anger of westerners when he explained that, in an age that had proclaimed the triumph of the rights of man, it ought to be obvious that the free navigation of the Mississippi was the natural right of the people who lived in its basin.79

In order to further the interests of western states, but also to demonstrate to skeptics the power and efficiency of the federal government, Jefferson wholeheartedly embraced the cause in August 1790. In a memorandum he sent to William Carmichael, he expounded upon the arguments to be used to open negotiations with Spain, flatly declaring: "We have a right to the navigation of the Mississippi, 1. by Nature; 2. by Treaty."80 In order to support his demand for opening the Mississippi to navigation, Jefferson preferred to appeal to natural right rather than treaties and international law, which, according to historian Albert K. Weinberg, would not have supported his claims.81 Thus, because
of its definitive and nonnegotiable character, the natural right argument proved especially useful in this specific case. As with the opening of the Caribbean to American trade, the secretary of state voiced his desire for peace when he declared “conquest not in our principles; inconsistent with our government.” To this philosophical discourse, however, he added very pragmatic warnings that seem much more directly inspired by what could be called “realpolitik” than by the spirit of the Enlightenment. With regard to the western population, Jefferson noted that “forty thousand [westerners] bear arms” and added that the federal government would support them “whenever they shall say ‘we cannot, we will not, be longer shut up.’” If Spain would not give in on the navigation of the Mississippi in the name of the very philosophical concept of natural right, western pioneers would sweep into Spanish possessions to redress a wrong that existed only in the eyes of the secretary of state. Far from comprehending the unjust and insolent nature of his demands, Jefferson even sketched out the various stages of a military campaign: New Orleans, once taken, could be retaken by the Spaniards, but then: “We can recover it by a counter-expedition, and so as often as the case shall happen. Their expedition will be slow, expensive, and lead to catastrophes. Ours sudden, economical. . . . We should associate the country to our Union. The inhabitants wish this.”

Although the spirit of conquest was not one of the explicit principles of the new nation, it surely was part of the American imagination. The only difference between the wars of conquest fought by France and Great Britain on behalf of their empires and the war Jefferson threatened Spain with was that pioneers and citizens started the latter, whereas the former were dictated by the highest spheres of the state. Indeed, Jefferson’s expansionism had a grassroots and democratic base, and it derived its ultimate rationale from the will and actions of the citizens; in fact, if one is to believe the secretary of state, the federal government would almost have no choice but to follow the lead of the westerners. Indeed, his point is supported by the facts: the population of Kentucky had doubled between 1783 and 1790, and kept on growing rapidly, doubling once again between 1790 and 1800 to reach 220,000; and Kentuckians made their will known. Before conflicts ended between the Indian nations and the federal government, pioneers also poured into Tennessee, the population reaching 77,000 in 1796. It is thus logical that the justification of expansion by the will of the people should recur as a leitmotiv throughout Jefferson’s correspondence on Mississippi navigation. In March 1791 he wrote: “Should any spark kindle these dispositions of our borderers into a flame, we are involved beyond recall by the eternal principles of justice to our citizens, which we will never abandon.”

The “eternal principle of justice” invoked by Jefferson was not an ideal criterion for judging human actions; it was a political bond that, in the Jeffersonian conception of American democracy, inseparably tied statesmen to
citizens, and bound the former to observe the latter’s will. Just as justice legitimized conquest, so the doctrine of natural right enabled Jefferson to voice ever increasing territorial claims. In 1790 he explained that if there was to be any negotiation between the United States and Spain, it could not possibly focus upon Mississippi navigation (for that was a natural, nonnegotiable right), but rather it could only address the issue of obtaining a port for depositing goods at the mouth (i.e., New Orleans): “It may be asked, what need of a negotiation, if the navigation is to be ceded at all events? You know that the navigation cannot be practised without a port. . . . The fixing on a proper port, and the degree of freedom it is to enjoy in its operations, will require negotiation.”

One week later, the demand for a port was presented in turn as a “natural” necessity with which the Spaniards would eventually have to comply, no matter if they negotiated now or not: “Nature has decided what shall be the geography of that in the end . . . by cutting off from the adjacent countries of Florida and Louisiana, and enclosing between two of its channels, a long and narrow slip of land, called the Island of New Orleans.”

Already by August 1790, Jefferson was even thinking that Spain had better give the Floridas over to the United States, in exchange for the new nation’s commitment to safeguarding Spanish possessions west of the Mississippi. Between drafting a peace treaty and making an unjustified claim on foreign territory, there was but a thin line that Jefferson could easily cross. Finally, in his report on the negotiations with Spain, dated March 18, 1792, Jefferson came up with another element of natural right to justify American demands: the right for boats going downstream to use the river banks.

Such an aggressive attitude from the secretary of state is worth noting, especially at a time when the United States was far from controlling the territory granted to it by the treaty of 1783, and when Spain and Great Britain thought so little of the new nation that they did not condescend to opening official talks with it before 1791. Jefferson’s confidence exceeded the usual limits of diplomatic coolheadedness and, bluff aside, reflected his certainty of being in the right. In addition, his firmness of language and ever increasing claims reveal his optimism and vision, which reflected his trust in the country’s future as well as in the pioneers’ undertakings.

In 1793 the arrival of the French minister Genêt strengthened Jefferson’s ideas and encouraged his expansionist views. “[W]hile waiting for the American government to join [France’s] cause,” Genêt was instructed “to take all the necessary steps within his capacity to instill principles of liberty and independence in Louisiana and the other American provinces neighboring the United States.” Indeed, France had just entered into a war against Spain (on March 7, 1793) and wanted to destabilize it in its colonies. The French knew that the United States would not openly side with them. While they respected such neutrality, they were not unaware of the situation: since Kentuckians had
been “long burning with a legitimate desire to enjoy free navigation on the Mississippi,” they would probably support France’s undertaking. Genêt was thus authorized to act: “to maintain agents in Kentucky, to dispatch some to Louisiana as well, and to spend whatever money he deems appropriate to further the execution of this plan.”

As Genêt knew, many pioneers in the West would welcome French aid first and foremost as a chance to launch expeditions that they had long been plotting. Indeed, General George Rogers Clark, who had conquered the Northwest for the United States during the War of Independence, volunteered his services to the French envoy:

General Clark has informed me of a plan he has long been nurturing, to seize first Upper Louisiana and shortly thereafter the banks of the Mississippi down to the sea. . . . Since the advent of peace his sole preoccupation has been to ascertain the means of the Spanish government in Louisiana and Mexico, the number of men employed in their defence, the situation of ports, the various means of communication, above all the inclination of the people, which he believes in our favor. . . . He thinks that with 400 men he could easily drive Spanish agents out of Upper Louisiana, and with 800 perform the same operation for New Orleans. . . . In the way of naval forces he is only requesting 2 or 3 frigates to support him from the sea.

Such a plan was a perfect match for Jefferson’s expansionist projects and did not fail to rouse his interest. Faced with the prospect of a French sea attack on Spanish colonies, Jefferson withdrew his previous offer to safeguard them. He wrote American negotiators Short and Carmichael, who were then trying to settle the Spanish-American dispute: “[Y]ou should not, by any clause of treaty, bind us to guarantee any of the Spanish colonies against their own independence.” Jefferson already envisioned an American takeover of the Floridas, for in his mind France would “not object to the receiving those on the East side [of the Mississippi] into our confederation.” In contrast, he said nothing about the fate of Louisiana: did he think that once it was “liberated” by French and Kentuckian forces, it should fall into American hands, or should it be reunited with French possessions? The latter option seemed implausible enough, since the Clark-Genêt expedition was to be composed mainly of Americans, and Jefferson was showing restraint in his relations with France, as he had explained to William Short back in 1790: “It is proper to apprize you of a circumstance which may show the expediency of being in some degree on your guard, even in your communications to the court of France.”

Although the fate of Louisiana did not seem to be a top priority for the secretary of state in this particular case, his response to botanist André Michaux’s journey reveals that, in fact, anything that pertained to the North American
continent meant something to him. Already back in 1785, during his stay in Paris, Jefferson had been worried about the true motivations behind the French navigator Jean-François de La Pérouse’s journey: were the French not seeking to colonize the Northwestern Coast of North America? At the same time, John Ledyard, an American sailor who had taken part in Cook’s voyages, had described to him the value of the Chinese market for American furs. In order not to let the United States fall behind Canadian explorers, Jefferson entrusted Michaux with a scientific mission that came on top of his function as political agitator in the Spanish territories, a function Jefferson was aware of. Anticipating that the great European empires were ready to divide among themselves this last unexplored area of the American continent, Jefferson wanted the United States to play an active role in the battle between the mercantilist empires. To this end he entrusted Michaux with orders “to explore the country along the Missouri, and thence westwardly to the Pacific Ocean.” The goal was geopolitical and strategic: “[T]he chief object of your journey is to find the shortest and most convenient route of communication between the United States and the Pacific Ocean,” although Michaux, as a devoted naturalist, was also supposed to make an account of all “interesting circumstances” he would happen upon.

Contrary to historian L. S. Kaplan’s opinion, Jefferson’s aid to Michaux did not reflect naiveté or blindness on his part in the face of French imperial ventures in the American West. Although a report by the Compte de de Moustier, a French diplomat posted in the United States after the American Revolution, had once again brought to light the considerable advantages Louisiana presented for colonization, the French Convention was sincerely trying to liberate Spanish colonies, or at least to destabilize them, but not to conquer them. Jefferson was always suspicious of the designs of other powers on the North American continent, and he was thus able to use Michaux as a scout for American expansion. As a matter of fact, Michaux’s orders were to serve as a blueprint for those that Jefferson drafted for Lewis and Clark in 1803.

**Rufus King and Alexander Hamilton: The Other Expansionist Dream**

In the course of his negotiations with Gardoqui in 1786, John Jay had suggested that Congress temporarily give up on the Mississippi navigation in return for an advantageous commerce treaty with Spain. Since that time there had been a great deal of mistrust among the southern and western states toward the East, which they suspected of being willing to sacrifice continental expansion in favor of developing the interests of New York and Boston merchants. This feeling was not dispelled after Jefferson became secretary of state; and it was even strengthened when the Federalists (many of them from southeastern states) came to power, especially after the Whiskey Rebellion of 1794.
increased tensions between East and West. Like Hamilton, however, some Federalist leaders believed that the American nation could only answer its calling and prosper by affirming direct or indirect control over both, North and South America. After consolidating federal power over the territories acquired in 1783 and the foreign nations occupying them (1790–96), they now expected to use the revolutionary wars to replace the declining empires in the New World. Even before he had such strong influence in American politics, Hamilton had made no secret of his ambition to see the United States dominate the American continent. In *The Federalist* no. 11 he wrote: “I shall briefly observe, that our situation invites and our interests prompt us to aim at an ascendant in the system of American affairs. . . . Let Americans disdain to be the instruments of European greatness! Let the thirteen States, bound together in a strict and indissoluble Union, concur in erecting one great American system, superior to the control of all transatlantic force or influence, and able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world!!”

In 1798, as part of the military preparations brought on by the quasi war with France, Hamilton was thrown into a commanding position in the American army, second only to George Washington. At the same time, in London, the British government was finally lending a willing ear to the propositions of the Venezuelan adventurer Francisco de Miranda. In his drive to free Latin America from Spanish rule, Miranda had suggested that the British help him set up a liberation operation. The British no longer needed to humor Spain, which was now France’s ally, and did not care to let the vast Spanish colonial domain fall into the sphere of revolutionary France, which would have put the resources of those colonies at the disposal of the French. As the American minister in London, Rufus King, learned: “If England engages in this plan, she will propose to the United States to cooperate in its execution.” The excellent relations between the United States and Great Britain at that time made such a plan seem appealing; as he was convinced that the United States could play an outstanding role on the American continent, Rufus King advised Secretary of State Timothy Pickering to accept such a proposal: “The President may therefore expect the overture of England and will I am persuaded act upon it under the influence of the wise and comprehensive policy which looking forward to the destinies of the new world shall in the beginning by great and generous deeds lay deep and firm the foundations of lasting concord between its rising empires.”

Miranda, growing tired of London’s procrastination, decided to go directly to President John Adams and ask him to lend some four to five thousand troops to the Anglo-American expedition. In Rufus King’s mind, the nature of the undertaking gradually took shape; he wrote Hamilton that the United States should assume the leading role in this liberation war for it could not miss such an opportunity. For Rufus King “opportunity” clearly meant a chance for
the United States to stand out and to further its ideas on the American continent; he may have also had in mind a commercial opportunity. As a matter of fact, opening up the trade of all of Spanish America to U.S. merchants and producers would give them an opportunity they had not hoped for. Hamilton had received several letters from Miranda, whom he had known for a long time, and he was enthralled by the projected expedition. Like Rufus King, he thought that the United States ought to play the leading role and not be a mere partner or ally of Great Britain. As the actual commander of the U.S. Army, he already saw himself as the head of the expedition.110

Hamilton not only wanted to liberate the Spanish colonies, he also wanted to make sure that future governments would share the political views of the American government. He thus betrayed imperialist designs that aimed at imposing upon the countries that were to be freed conditions that would favor trade with the United States. Once under the protection of the United States and England, the former Spanish colonies in Latin America would thus form a sphere of American influence. Following independence, “moderate” governments would be formed, and these would grant commercial privileges to the countries that had worked together for their liberation.111

Neither John Adams nor Timothy Pickering answered Rufus King’s dispatches on the subject. In 1799, the end of the near-war situation put an end to the near alliance with Great Britain, bringing about the dismantling of the American army and, by consequence, the crushing of Hamilton’s military ambitions. Miranda’s plan had met with so much enthusiasm from Hamilton and Rufus King for a specific reason: because it allowed them to combine an ideological justification (liberation) with the goal of real political and commercial supremacy over the whole American continent. In that sense, it was reminiscent of Genêt’s planned operations with respect to Louisiana and the Floridas. Thus, what distinguished the expansionism of Rufus King and Hamilton from that of Jefferson was not the geographical goal, but the method. Whereas Jefferson counted upon the unruly drive of the pioneers, Hamilton thought primarily in terms of centralized operations, designed and carried out by the federal government.

Although Miranda’s plan had no real follow-up, Rufus King nevertheless soon had a chance, once again from London, to try to further American interests in an area that Americans thought of as “naturally” bound to them, the Caribbean. In September 1793, capitalizing on the opposition between Jacobins and Royalists, British troops had landed in Saint-Domingue in a drive to conquer the island and try to restore slavery there before the example set by the blacks of Saint-Domingue spread to the British islands. Those troops had been decimated by the combined effects of yellow fever and rough handling by Toussaint-Louverture’s soldiers.112 In the summer of 1798 their commanding officer, General Maitland, had to seek out an agreement with Toussaint; a convention was signed on August 31, 1798, by which the Saint-Domingue rebels
pledged not to attack Jamaica, while the British committed themselves to providing it with supplies. When Rufus King found out about this convention, in early December 1798, he instantly understood that it threatened a major goal of U.S. foreign policy, that is, the opening of Saint-Domingue to American trade. The dispatch in which he confided his concerns to Henry Dundas, the British secretary of war, was unambiguous: “I am aware that jealousies may be felt among our Merchants from the exclusive commerce secured to Great Britain under this Convention.” By the same token, King suggested opening the Saint-Domingue trade to the Americans. Henry Dundas, who at the time saw the United States as a precious friend for Great Britain, could not turn down this proposal; thus, joint action was settled upon with Lord Grenville. The British then decided to negotiate a new convention with Toussaint, this time acknowledging American participation.

Meanwhile, in Saint-Domingue, Toussaint-Louverture, as a good strategist, was keeping several irons in the fire: far from relying solely on the British, he attempted after Maitland’s departure to obtain from the American government the reopening of trade between the United States and Saint-Domingue. By then Toussaint’s allegiance to French authorities was more and more tenuous; without even waiting for the official termination of the quasi war between France and the United States, he pledged to the American government that the Saint-Domingue–based pirate raids would end. As the American Congress was anxious to resume a lucrative trade and to restore U.S. commercial and political leadership in the area, in 1799 it passed an act enabling the president to reopen commercial relations with French possessions as soon as spoliation ended. As historian Rayford W. Logan has explained, although the law theoretically encompassed all French possessions, in the end it was only applied to Saint-Domingue. The United States posted a consul general in Saint-Domingue, Edward Stevens. Thus, Rufus King and John Adams helped Jefferson’s dream come true: protectionist mercantilism, whether British or French, had clearly lost the battle in Saint-Domingue. In order to avoid losing the support of the British fleet, which was helping it in the fight against French privateers, the American government decided not to push its advantage. When Maitland arrived in Philadelphia on April 20, 1799, a cooperation agreement was signed between the United States and Great Britain. Toussaint was initially prepared to admit only American ships, but despite his opposition, Maitland managed to secure the ratification of the final convention, albeit without Stevens’s signature. That convention formulated a principle of noninterference (in the sense that it called for continued armistice and provided British and American ships protection from French privateers); above all, it granted rights of trade with Saint-Domingue to British and American ships only. Thanks to Rufus King’s watchfulness as well as Timothy Pickering’s and John Adams’s speed of action, the United States was thus able to maintain its leadership in the area.
Although their methods were different, the main goals of Republicans and Federalists in foreign policy were similar. Both parties sought to found national independence upon commercial and territorial expansion. As to the general direction of foreign trade, Jefferson’s and Madison’s ideas were less successful than Hamilton’s, which were better suited to the economic situation and to the citizens’ demands for free trade. In fact, the national feeling appears to have been inseparable from a desire for personal gain that followed two paths: the one over sea (thanks to foreign trade) and the other over the American continent (by way of an explicit expansionist impulse). “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists,” Thomas Jefferson rightly said in his 1801 inaugural address. In the eyes of all those who took part in the economic growth of the late eighteenth century, the two parties uttered the same convictions and set out with the same faith on the road to prosperity. This consensus cannot, however, mask the fact that prosperity bypassed many people, although congressmen and members of government did not pay them much attention: among those, black slaves (20 percent of the population), whites without land or property, small indebted farmers, and widows of private soldiers who had died during the War of Independence (they would only start receiving pensions in 1832)—none of these groups experienced improvement during this period of national growth.