CHAPTER 5

National Greatness, War, and Peace: The Ambiguities of Isolationism

The portrait of Americans that Moreau de Saint-Méry sketched in his *American Journey* of 1793–98 was a rather unflattering one. Though he acknowledged their generosity, especially toward the French émigrés in Saint-Domingue, he was surprised at what, according to him, was the leading passion of Americans, that is, the lust for wealth. That lust evidently seemed to him incompatible with the virtues one should observe in the citizens of a “great nation”: “When their trickiness and their commercialism have been replaced by the virtues that citizens of a great nation should have, the country should enjoy perfect tranquillity.” The word “virtue” refers to the ideal way the citizen was portrayed by classical republicanism: as a man devoted first and foremost to the community, and placing his own interests second to those of his country. As we saw with the debates on Madison’s proposed commercial discrimination bills, it was pointless to encourage a spirit of sacrifice in citizens without offering them prospects for quick prosperity; for Americans, private interests were inseparable from the love of one’s country. But then, should the nation, as Madison feared, suffer in silence the humiliations that more powerful nations would gladly inflict upon it? Would the materialistic concerns of Americans prevent their mobilization when it came to a matter of national honor?

Neither George Washington nor Gouverneur Morris, two determined nationalists, thought so. Both men shared their fellow citizens’ aims for personal prosperity, and yet they felt that such a quest could be reconciled with more patriotic values. Committed to the wealth as well as to the greatness of the nation, they wanted to instill in their fellow citizens a spirit of love and worship of one’s country, a spirit that they thought was the only means to forge a true American identity and to guarantee the nation’s independence. Knowing as they did that those who could get rich preferred to do so more than they cared to defend their country’s honor, and seeing that foreign policy crises were breaking the nation up rather than bringing it together, they
sought to strengthen the bonds between all Americans. To this end, they wanted patriotism and the worship of national honor to be given priority once again. For, as Gouverneur Morris explained, such was indeed “the true Source and Principle of national Greatness. It is the national Spirit. It is in that high, haughty, generous and noble Spirit which prizes Glory more than wealth and holds Honor dearer than Life.” Once American citizens shared in that spirit, “Foreign Powers [would] then know that to withhold a due Respect and Deference is dangerous.” Thus Morris anticipated “the Day when to command Respect in the remotest Regions it will be sufficient to say I am an American.”

Still, to invoke national spirit in the abstract would not do to bring the nation together. As Gouverneur Morris suggested, American identity and independence had to be attained in opposition to Europe: exploiting foreign crises would contribute to defining national character as well as to bringing out spontaneous American pride, a new patriotism that would rebel against the humiliations inflicted upon the country. Morris’s mission in London in 1790 thus gave him—as well as George Washington—the opportunity to display the new nation’s independence and dignity. Later, the European wars and the quarrel with Pierre-Auguste Adet enabled George Washington to develop and extol, in his Farewell Address of 1796, the idea of a special destiny for America that would not hinder prosperity: far from Europe, America needed to grow and prosper in neutrality.

Even more credit is due to John Adams, however, than to Gouverneur Morris and George Washington, for the first great upsurge in patriotism after the war, the one that truly brought the nation together. Skillfully exploiting the XYZ dispatches that recounted the misfortunes of American envoys to France in dealing with Talleyrand’s dishonest maneuvers, Adams indeed managed to enlist the majority of Americans in a great patriotic movement of self-righteous opposition to France. By the same token, he reinforced the feeling Americans had of their moral superiority over Europe, without ever seeming to lead the country on the road to a war with dire economic consequences. The national spirit was wrought out of these crises, which gave free rein to Americans’ patriotic anger, an anger that was thus both an outward expression and cement for national identity.

Nevertheless, while American patriotism rose during the Federalist era by extolling military neutrality and moral superiority over Europe, this development cannot be separated from the more aggressive policy pursued by the country toward non-European nations. Whereas Americans stood on the purity of their principles and practice in order to assert their desire for peace and their rejection of Europe, its wars and its diplomatic methods, they at the same time displayed belligerence and diplomatic maneuvering on those fronts that concerned them more immediately. Arming the nation was not only meant as a way of fending off potential European invasions. The creation of an American
Foreign Policy Goals Shared by the Entire Nation

army was primarily aimed at fighting the Indians; that of a navy, at getting the better of Barbary Coast pirates. Thus, Americans did not define their identity merely in opposition to Europe; they also forged it through the active (and most often violent) relations they maintained with nations that belonged to other civilizations.

Making the United States Respected Abroad: Gouverneur Morris and George Washington

Gouverneur Morris in Great Britain

At the time when John Adams was the minister plenipotentiary in London, after the revolution, his mission was to establish a treaty of commerce with Great Britain; but that plan never materialized. Surmising that the icy welcome given to the diplomat had probably had its cause in the mediocre image of the Confederation, George Washington decided to take up the fight again in October 1789. He wrote Gouverneur Morris to entrust him with an unofficial diplomatic mission. In January 1790 he sent him his credentials, stating that Morris was to “discover the sentiments” of the British government on the following topics:

1. Their detention of the Western posts contrary to the treaty of peace.
2. Indemnification for the negroes carried off against the stipulations of the same treaty.
3. A Treaty for the regulation of commerce between the two countries.
4. The exchange of a minister.³

The order of priorities was perfectly clear: six years after the peace treaty had been signed, the United States had to secure first and foremost the surrender of northwestern posts and a compensation for stolen slaves. At stake was the honor of the new government, “our national honor.”⁴ Indeed, Morris saw and carried out his mission under the light of nationalism. On March 29, 1790, he met for the first time with the Duke of Leeds, then secretary for foreign affairs, in which position the duke was to be replaced the following year by Lord Grenville. As soon as the western posts and the compensation for stolen slaves were mentioned, the Duke of Leeds tried to dodge the issue; but Morris was not intimidated: “He changed the conversation, which I bring back, and which he changes again.”⁵ In late April George Washington’s envoy managed to get another interview, this time with Pitt and the Duke of Leeds, during which he discussed the western posts. Far from accepting their evasive answers, Morris did not hesitate to drive the British ministers into a corner.
As he explained to George Washington, Morris “thought it best to heap coals of fire in their heads, and thereby either bring them into our views or put them most eminently in the wrong.”

In the end Morris understood that the only reason the British kept up a dialogue with him during the spring and summer of 1790 was that they did not want to add to the number of their enemies in the event of a war with Spain over the Nootka Sound affair (see chapter 7). For Morris, these negotiations ought to be a lesson in national independence, even if they failed. Only by maintaining a tough attitude and a strong government could the United States achieve respectability abroad. Nothing less than an education of his fellow citizens in civic values was in order, for while foreign countries did not respect America because they “[did] not yet know America,” the fact remained that “perhaps America [did] not yet know herself.” In the language of the time, this meant that the American national character—American identity—was not yet sufficiently defined, either in reference to other nations or for American citizens themselves. Thus, Morris’s adventures in Great Britain led him to reflect upon American identity: if it was poorly perceived abroad, perhaps that was because it had not yet taken shape within the nation itself.

Washington and Jefferson took Morris at his word. In two messages to Congress on February 14, 1791, they vented their indignation at seeing that U.S. honor was being trampled upon by the former enemy, whose behavior they criticized: “they [the British] declare without scruple that they do not mean to fulfill what remains of the treaty of peace to be fulfilled on their part.” Such patriotic indignation, emanating from the highest realms of government, symbolized the official determination of the country’s leaders to have the United States respected.

At the time, however, Hamilton was more interested in seeking out Britain’s favor, and he clearly had a hand in the ensuing rumors that went around Philadelphia, according to which the failure of the negotiations with Britain had to be imputed to Morris’s toughness and lack of flexibility (i.e., lack of diplomacy, in Hamilton’s eyes). Thus, the secretary of the treasury’s attitude was tantamount to a disavowal of the firmness of Washington, Morris, and Jefferson. In the former special envoy’s opinion, Hamilton’s reasoning was odd, as can be gleaned from his ironic comments in a letter to his business partner, Robert Morris: “I will suppose it to be a very good reason to be given to America for not conferring a favor on her, that the man sent to ask it was disagreeable, no matter from what cause—but I trust that they will never avow to the British nation a disposition to make sacrifice of their interests to please a pleasant fellow.”

In fact, the reason why the British did not yield to Gouverneur Morris’s toughness was not that they thought it undiplomatic; rather, they knew there existed, within Washington’s administration, an “English party” with a decisive influence. Morris, otherwise a social and political conservative, was not won over to the ideas of Hamilton’s party on that score; he held that in order for America
to make itself respected and achieve its ends in its relations with the great powers, it had to rely on determination, and not on friendly behavior: "If you mean to make a good treaty with Britain, support your pretensions with spirit, and they will respect you for it."\(^{12}\)

**George Washington:**

*From the Proclamation of Neutrality to the Farewell Address*

In 1791, however, the nation was not yet caught up in the political disputes that were to pit supporters of France against supporters of Great Britain after 1793. Americans did not yet know who they were; but at the same time their political life did not yet revolve around a debate that seems to have been largely borrowed from Europe. With the spread of war on the European continent in 1793, however, the intellectual colonialism that seemed to take over the political life of the new republic could only reinforce the doubts of Morris and of those who shared his views. Where, in that debate, was American identity to be found? If one had to be either pro-French or pro-British, where was there room to be an American? It was the search for such a national feeling, as the only means of uniting the nation, that pushed George Washington to exclaim in irritation: "In a word, I want an American character . . . never forget that we are Americans."\(^{13}\)

For a national feeling to arise, there had to exist a national ideology distinguishing America from the Old Continent. George Washington went a long way toward building up such an ideology in both the proclamation of neutrality of April 1793 and his Farewell Address of September 19, 1796. The first elements of this nationalist doctrine were articulated on April 22, 1793, when the president proclaimed U.S. neutrality. All of Europe was ablaze, but in the president’s words, “the duty and interest of the United States require that they should with sincerity and good faith adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial towards the belligerent powers.”\(^{14}\) This declaration was somewhat hasty, as France had not asked her ally to enter the war. The chief goal of the declaration was to clearly set off American affairs from those of Europe, and thus to assert American identity as being different. That difference was not only geographical, but moral as well: in contrast to war-torn Europe, America symbolized peace and a desire for neutrality.

Washington’s declaration was criticized by many pro-French Republicans, and in response, he received in the ensuing months many messages of support, which he answered by stressing the peaceful character and moral superiority of the United States. Through these exchanges of addresses and responses, Washington was able to create the image of a president who was close to his fellow citizens and who kept up a dialogue with them—in short, the image of a “Father of the Nation.”

To the people of Salem he asserted: “In making this declaration, I was persuaded that I spoke the wishes of my countrymen.”\(^{15}\) By making a formal occasion out
of this foreign affairs decision, Washington came off as a figure who was more than a president: he was the symbol of the nation, which spoke through his mouth. He was not formulating a nationalist ideology; rather, the nation was speaking through him. Washington thus killed two birds with one stone: he articulated a foreign policy doctrine and also fashioned one of the earliest versions of a national political myth (i.e., America as neutral and peaceful, different from warlike Europe), the unifying function of which is obvious.

To be sure, defining the new nation in terms of an opposition to Europe was not an entirely novel gesture in America: indeed, this idea was a secularized transposition of the intellectual heritage of New England millenialist Puritans. In the seventeenth century, the Puritans could not have imagined that the colonies might one day resemble the Europe they had left because they wanted to build a better world. Even before the Declaration of Independence, the idea of American difference had become one of the essential ingredients of the early republic’s foreign policy, with Thomas Paine warning Americans against political relations with Europe. The first American diplomats to be sent to Europe after 1776 had quickly realized that America was a mere pawn on the diplomatic chessboard, and that Europeans, as masters of the game, intended to move it about according to their every whim. They had concluded that American independence would have to be defined in essentially negative terms, as an absence of political relations with Europe. In The Federalist no. 11, Alexander Hamilton himself had linked national greatness to a separation from Europe.

In that sense, Washington was not saying anything new, and yet it was the nation’s first president who, in his Farewell Address, gave—with Hamilton’s help—official and solemn expression to the doctrine of the necessary isolation of America. By linking isolation to the messianic calling of the United States, he exalted national feeling just as he was defining it. In his speech, after thanking his fellow citizens for their support through his two presidential terms, Washington could not refrain from voicing “some sentiments” at the thought of the “danger” awaiting them. Fearing that division might be sown among Americans, he exhorted his fellow citizens to strengthen their love for the union, that is to say, for both the country and the federal institutions. Ignoring “local discriminations,” Washington cautioned that: “The name of American . . . must exalt the just pride of patriotism, more than any appellation derived from local discriminations.”

Regionalism, however, did not constitute in the president’s eyes the chief obstacle to American national feeling and love for the Union. The real challenge to a feeling of unity was none other than “the spirit of party.” Party spirit, as George Washington perceived it from 1793 to 1796, was especially detrimental to the rise of national feeling, because it allowed foreign nations to influence American politics (of course, what Washington had in mind here was the alleged French influence on the Republican Party). The true patriot,
for Washington, was the American who understood that America and Europe belonged to two different spheres. The vocabulary he used underscored the difference, the distance or the peculiarity of America, whose identity became apparent through comparison with Europe: “Europe has a set of primary interests, which to us have none, or a very remote relation. . . . Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course. . . . Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation?” Washington did not merely posit the difference between New and Old Worlds; he enriched this opposition by recourse to a moral hierarchy between the two spheres. Since he characterized Europe by “Ambition, Rivalship, Interest, Humour or Caprice,” it could logically be inferred that the United States was destined to be the country of self-denial, equality, detachment, and stability. In that sense, Washington remained true to the ideas of the American Revolution, which pitted a pure, virtuous America against a corrupt, degenerate Europe.20

Going back to the theme of neutrality, Washington did not conceal that it was in the nature of Europe to be “engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns.”21 It followed that America, by its very nature, could not be as bellicose as Europe. Historian Gilbert Chinard has gone so far as to point out, in Washington’s Farewell Address, the “mystique of Americanism,”22 as an illustration of which he quotes the following passage: “It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.”23

Evidently, Washington’s Farewell Address laid the foundations of isolationism.24 The geographical isolation of America from Europe also implied a moral difference: because it was better than Europe, and although it was far away and isolated, America found itself paradoxically invested with a universal mission. By the example it set, the United States was supposed to contribute to the progress of humankind, though without meddling in European affairs. Insofar as the Farewell Address defined American national identity on the basis of the peculiarity of the United States, its moral superiority and universal mission, this document went beyond the exposition of a doctrine in foreign policy; it was also a nationalist credo, whose function was to make it possible for all Americans to commune in the patriotic worship of their nation, presented as being different, better, and exemplary. Even though the Farewell Address also read as a Federalist pamphlet that implied that Republicans were bad Americans, the nationalist dimension clearly set the tone. In fact, the last paragraph combined both aspects of nationalism. Washington here expressed his love for a land where after several generations had passed, the people had become rooted: “Actuated by that fervent love towards it [my country], which is so natural to a Man, who views in it the native soil of himself and his progenitors for several generations.” He also expressed, however, his attachment to the
country’s institutions and values, which, for its citizens, were all the more precious since they had recently fought to obtain them: “I anticipate with pleasing expectation that retreat, in which I promise myself to realize, without alloy, the sweet enjoyment of partaking, in the midst of my fellow citizens, the benign influence of good laws under a free government, the ever favourite object of my heart, and the happy reward, as I trust, of our mutual cares, labours and dangers.”25 To shape American national identity, Washington formulated foreign policy principles that presented America as different and better. Such an identity, however, could not truly exist until it found a way to assert itself on the international stage. It was John Adams who, during the XYZ crisis, obtained this recognition and who pushed citizens to approve the definition of the nation that was being set forth through the foreign policy of the federal government.

John Adams and the XYZ Affair

As late as September 1796, it was still possible, despite Federalist attacks, to display pro-French leanings. But Pierre-Auguste Adet’s blunders around the time of the 1796 elections played into the hands of the Federalist executive leaders. President Adams was then able to use the crisis between the United States and France to build up the nascent American patriotism, of for the benefit of both his party and himself. At the time of the inauguration, John Adams was already well aware that the poor relations between France and the United States were to be one of the hot issues on his administration’s agenda, and on March 7, 1797, that is, three days after the inauguration, he learned that the Directory had refused to receive Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, who had come to replace James Monroe. In addition to this, the disclosure of increased French depredations on the American merchant marine led the new president to convene an extraordinary session of Congress in May.26 He opened the session on May 16 with a message, the wording of which was designed to inflame his fellow citizens. After recounting Pinckney’s misfortunes, he subtly introduced the topic of American sovereignty being trampled upon: “The refusal on the part of France to receive our minister is then the denial of a right; but the refusal to receive him until we have acceded to their demands, without discussion and without investigation, is to treat us neither as allies, nor as friends, or as a sovereign state.” The dissent between France and the United States was not only a matter of politics or diplomacy. As Adams explained, everything about France’s attitude proved that it did not consider the United States to be a full-fledged nation. He made the following conclusions: “Such attempts ought to be repelled with a decision which shall convince France, and the world, that we are not a degraded people, humiliated under a colonial spirit of fear and sense of inferiority; fitted to be the miserable instruments of foremost influence; and regardless of national honor, character, and interest.”27
There was only a thin line separating the statements of Gouverneur Morris in 1790 from those of John Adams. Both were nationalists, and both thought that the United States still needed to prove itself on the international stage—in short, that the United States did not yet exist. In Adams’s view, the crisis with France was a test for the new nation. It was up to the United States to show, by a tough stance, that it could make itself respected, and Adams would be the one to guide the United States in this undertaking. Adams would thus become the symbol of national independence and restored unity, and by the same token he would establish his party as the protector of national independence and glory. The vividness of his wording reflected a desire to stir up his fellow citizens’ pride in order to rally them to his cause. Two words—“people” and “colonial”—were especially aimed at linking the Franco-American crisis to the revolutionary one, thus fusing the two causes and their issues, and reviving in 1797 the patriotism of 1776. France was another England; American citizens were called upon to unite against it as they had done before against England.

Nevertheless, although John Adams adopted an aggressive tone in this speech, he and the rest of his cabinet had already resolved to send a conciliatory mission to France, one that would be composed of John Marshall, Elbridge Gerry, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney. In the way of military measures, the special session of Congress merely planned a “slight improvement in land defenses,” reserved the necessary funds “to complete, equip, and man three frigates already under construction,” and authorized “the use of revenue cutters for naval purposes.” Instead of uniting the members of Congress around national measures, the debates of the extraordinary session actually had a divisive effect. The only tangible result of Adams’s management of the crisis was a rise in xenophobia, which made life more and more difficult for French residents in the United States. Adet did not realize the truth of his words when, speaking of the Republicans, he exclaimed on November 19, 1796, in Philadelphia: “Everyone senses that the Directory has thought over [the issue before refusing to receive Pinckney]; but not all are equally satisfied to see Americans spoken to the way that they would only like to speak to other peoples. There may be here, among certain patriots, love of liberty; but there is even more vanity.” Indeed, the French attitude had hurt American “vanity,” that is, American national feeling, even among the supposedly pro-French Republicans, and Adams had only needed to exploit and cultivate that reaction. That in the end was precisely what he had wanted, since his goal seems to have been first and foremost to muster up a flurry of national unity around his policies.

On March 4, 1798, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering received the XYZ dispatches from special envoys John Marshall, Elbridge Gerry, and Charles Cotesworth Pinckney, in which they related their Parisian misfortunes.
Unsure of congressional support, the president still did not request a declaration of war and merely ordered merchant ships to be armed. The Republicans rejected any war measures and supported an amendment by John Allen, who was a Federalist representative from Connecticut; this amendment required that the notorious dispatches be remitted to Congress. Adams was overjoyed: he knew that in obeying that injunction, he would unleash a hurricane of patriotism and xenophobia, the intensity of which would far surpass the first wave of 1797. Once made public, the dispatches were published in their entirety in the Federalist newspapers. In addition, Congressmen were given many copies that were published with an eye to feeding the Federalist nationalist propaganda. As a result of Talleyrand’s brash diplomacy, the account of the American trio’s adventures in Paris could only set all American hearts afame and turn any remaining reluctant citizens into fiery patriots. The bribe that the French minister for external relations had demanded was explicitly depicted as an insult to American sovereignty. Such was the import of John Marshall’s diary entry for November 4, which echoed Adams’s message of May 19, 1797: “It appears to me that for three envoys extraordinary to be kept in Paris thirty days without being received can only be designed to degrade and humiliate their country.”

The envoys’ firm attitude in the face of French corruption was summarized by Charles Cotesworth Pinckney’s exclamation of October 27: “No, no, not a sixpence.” Such toughness was admirable because it was truly courageous. Indeed, Pinckney’s “No!” did not in the least worry the banker Hottinguer, one of Talleyrand’s secret messengers, who was confident enough in the power of the Directory to answer with a threat of reprisals against the United States. According to Marshall, Hottinguer intimated that no one in Europe had been capable of resisting France: “He stated that Hamburg and other states of Europe were obliged to buy a peace and that it would be equally for our interest to do so.”

Corruption, then, was not exclusively French: it extended to all those countries that accepted French rule. The fact that the three envoys fell prey to French abuse, threats, and contempt was turned into a symbol of American virtue and served to restate the superiority and the peculiarity of the new nation. Marshall aptly summarized the meaning of his charge when he told Pinckney that upon coming home to America, he was happy to say farewell forever to Europe and its “crimes”—specifying that he only had in mind Europe’s “political crimes.” This rejection of Europe was a way of asserting American identity.

After the XYZ dispatches were published, Federalist papers started filling up with addresses in support of the president, followed by Adams’s answers, thus feeding patriotic enthusiasm. The general emphasis of these columns was the opposition between the “corrupt stratagems” of the French and the “firm and dignified resistance” advised by the president “for the preservation of our national honor and rights.” The words “independence,” “honor,” “sovereignty,”
“patriotism,” and “unanimity” recurred in most articles. Patriotic songs exalted the superiority of the new nation, the sole country capable of resisting French arrogance:

But tho’ Holland, Rome, Naples and Switzerland bend
Americans will their freedom defend.37

As the *Boston Columbian Centinel* of May 9, 1798, trumpeted, America was not only more prosperous than Europe; it was also more courageous. The two primary ingredients of American nationalism, namely, economic greatness and moral superiority, were thus tangibly linked. The partisan aim of this propaganda campaign was clear: Adams’s conservative supporters sought to use the patriotic fever as a means of silencing the Republicans. This is illustrated in the following excerpt from the Address by the Grand Jurors of the Country of Plymouth, where a link was established between the threat to national honor and the peril for social order: “In such a crisis, when all that is dear and valuable to Freemen, when liberty and independence, National honor, social order, and public safety appear to be in danger—a danger which union alone, under the blessing of heaven, can repel: we think it not improper . . . to express to you our grateful acknowledgements for the firmness and discretion with which you have encountered such new and peculiar difficulties.”38 Indeed, although Adams camouflaged his language, he did not hide the fact that he hoped the patriotic rallying of a large part of the population in support of his ideas would eliminate Republican opposition: “Providence may indeed intend us a favor above our wishes, and a blessing beyond our foresight, in the extinction of an influence, which might soon have become more fatal than war.”39

Clearly, through his answers to the addresses, Adams was preparing public opinion for the laws of June and July 1798.40 A large part of public opinion followed suit, and as a result, the *Aurora* and other Republican newspapers went through a difficult time.41 The majority in the House of Representatives switched from Republican to Federalist.42 The times called for *union sacrée* under the Federalist banner and the president’s patronage. Indeed, through his answers to the addresses, Adams embodied the nation, and thereby gained popular support; and he used this newly crafted persona of “Father of the Nation” to further the political agenda of the conservatives. In fact, the bravest among the Republicans were quick to grasp the president’s goal. Although Adams appealed to the “spirit of ’76” to rally all citizens around himself, not even the Federalist newspapers of Massachusetts could avoid mentioning the existence of a political opposition that refused to join in the patriotic fervor kindled by Adams and that sometimes went so far as to surreptitiously ridicule the president. On August 11, an indignant reader of the *Boston Columbian Centinel* reported: “The members from these towns [Cambridge, Roxbury, Dedham,
Dorchester, etc.] in the General Court, voted against the Address to the President . . . . We hear that on the road to Providence, there are several poles hoisted, stuck at the top with the American cockade, and tar and feathers below. The men (brutes rather) who could do this, were certainly born to be slaves, or to be hanged.” Nevertheless, this was a time of xenophobia, suppression of all opposition, and departure of French residents. In April 1798 a French dancing master named Dupont felt compelled to place an announcement in the Boston Columbian Centinel disavowing any intention to leave Boston—presumably his departure had been announced unbeknownst to him. Moreau de Saint-Méry opted to head to France with his entire family, and he wrote in his diary on July 14: “Antagonism against the French increased daily.” Yet, unlike members of his cabinet, who, in making Marshall and Pinckney national heroes, were only trying to smash the opposition, the president sincerely hoped to weld together a nation that until then had only made news in Europe through its internal dissents. Thus, from the summer of 1798 on, Adams embarked upon a clearly national policy from which the partisan aspects gradually vanished.

On June 18, 1798, John Marshall returned from France and confided to the president that he did not think the Directory wanted war. On October 1, Elbridge Gerry returned to the United States fully convinced that Talleyrand now wanted peace. As is evident from his correspondence with the French minister from March to July 1798, the publication of the XYZ dispatches in the American press and the ensuing patriotic hurricane had persuaded Talleyrand that he had gone too far. In his letters to Gerry, Talleyrand claimed he had acted in good faith in the XYZ affair, and insisted above all that he sought negotiation and rapprochement with the United States. Gerry had stayed behind in Paris after the other Americans had left, and once Talleyrand realized that Gerry refused to open official negotiations without formal orders to do so, he intimated that the American envoy could at least convey French intentions to the U.S. government. After Gerry arrived in the United States, he was granted a meeting with Adams, much to the surprise of hard-line Federalists such as Timothy Pickering, Oliver Wolcott, and Alexander Hamilton, who either regarded Gerry as a traitor or refused to take Talleyrand’s overtures seriously. Was it because they regarded these gestures simply as more tricks, as did William Vans Murray, the American minister in the Netherlands? Vans Murray indeed received, in July, the first diplomatic advances from Pichon, the secretary for American affairs whom Talleyrand had sent to The Hague with the special purpose of seeking a conference with the American minister. In the end, however, Vans Murray let himself be convinced by the French diplomat and decided to forward word of Talleyrand’s overtures. On July 31, 1798, the Directory annulled all commissions for Caribbean privateers and abrogated the rule of using the muster, which had served as a pretense for seizing American ships during the quasi war. In his correspondence with Vans Murray from Berlin,
John Quincy Adams foresaw his father’s future policy even before he learned of this news—the first tangible sign of a Franco-American rapprochement: “Everything possible to avoid a war. We shall always be ready, therefore, to negotiate, but God forbid that we should relax one particle of our defensive exertions while we treat.”

In the answers he had written to the addresses in the spring, John Adams did not recommend a declaration of war, but only a firm attitude in response to French insults. His answers echoed the tone of the addresses themselves, which were written more in support of the president than in support of war. By the fall of 1798 John Adams had received the dispatches from Talleyrand, Gerry, Vans Murray, and his son John Quincy Adams, and he was aware that the privateering war in the Caribbean was slowing down. It is likely that he then opted definitively for peace, even though he already knew that ultra-Federalists, including members of his own cabinet as well as Hamilton, would view this choice as the death blow to their dreams of political and military domination. Talleyrand then took a decisive step when he stated in a letter to Pichon that a new American envoy would be welcome in Paris, and this letter was transmitted to Vans Murray. Adams was thus comforted in his views and encouraged to make steps toward peace. Indeed, Talleyrand’s letter stated that any minister the United States would send would be treated with all the respect due to a representative of a free, independent, and powerful nation.

In late February 1799 Adams posted Vans Murray as special envoy to Paris, which the ultra-Federalists perceived as a coup by the president within the party. One senses, for example, the mounting anger in the letters of Fisher Ames, a conservative politician and pamphleteer from Massachusetts. Ames was unable to fathom the meaning of the measure. On February 27 he was still able to write that Adams’s patriotism was “undoubted,” but on March 12 he gave his anger free rein in a passage that deserves to be quoted, for it shows that what the ultra-Federalists meant by patriotism was “public fervor” for war. Such an agenda was incompatible with Adams’s intention to raise patriotic “virtue” among his countrymen without dragging them into a costly war. As Ames wrote:

But the thing was so totally contrary to his conduct, his speeches, and the expectations of all men, that reasons, though sought for, could not be found, and must therefore be imagined; and when that failed, they must be referred further on the mysteries of state locked up in his cabinet. That even that plea, so paramount to all others, fails in this instance, because negotiation can be vindicated only as the means to an end—peace with France; the end being a bad one, all means are unwise and indefensible. . . .  France is neither loved nor trusted. . . .  War is desired for its own sake, as it should be. . . .  We begin to feel a little patriotism, and the capture of the Insurgente cherishes it.
When he realized that American public opinion did not find his militarism palatable, Ames displayed contempt for the “Dutch taste” of his fellow citizens, who let their love of money dissuade them from “fighting for some years, building great ships and spending millions.” He bitterly concluded: “our citizens are rather democrats than republicans,” meaning that they lacked the manliness of the implied republican model, namely, the Roman citizen, that is, a soldier-citizen.56

Adams’s motivations in agreeing to negotiate with France reveal not only a good assessment of the diplomatic situation, but also a thorough knowledge of the national character that he was trying to strengthen through the Franco-American crisis. Americans did not care to go to war in the traditional European context, as was shown by their lukewarm response to Hamilton’s provisional army.57 Furthermore, their attraction to “virtue” was a far cry from the manly enthusiasm evoked by Ames, for it could not be separated from the irresistible appeal of personal gain. Yet they wanted to emerge victorious from the crisis and assert their moral superiority over corrupt Europe. To see France making entreaties to the United States flattered the nascent American national pride, while staying out of combat left American purses intact and brought calm to domestic politics. The measures that Adams took formed a national policy because they brought together most of the nation’s citizens and gave the entire country the impression that its honor was not only saved, but was made even greater through weathering the crisis. Adams thus left to his successor a country at peace, one that was prosperous, and above all, a “great country.” Such at least was the evaluation that Abigail Adams gave of her husband’s administration after he was defeated in the 1800 election: “Peace with France,—a revenue increased beyond any former years,—our prospects brightening upon every side.”58

Through his careful and pragmatic management of the Franco-American crisis, as well as his ability to withstand the pressures of party politics, Adams had therefore succeeded in showing Americans a way to merge wealth and glory through a policy of peace and firmness. Thenceforth Europe would know America because America knew itself. Through the XYZ crisis, the United States was able to assert its identity and to have it acknowledged by a great power (France), thanks to a wave of patriotism that bound the nation together. Although Adams lost to Jefferson in 1800, he seemed more popular then than he had been previously, as historian Stephen G. Kurtz observes in his detailed study of this election and the Adams presidency.59 According to Kurtz, the outgoing president’s popularity can be explained by the fact that voters were satisfied with his policies.60 Adams had managed to build national unity around the issue of defending U.S. sovereignty, thus paving the way for Jefferson’s famous 1801 inaugural speech quip, “We are all Republicans, we are all Federalists.”61 Indeed, Jefferson showed his approval of his predecessor’s policies by ratifying the Mortefontaine Convention, which Adams’s envoys had negotiated with France.62
On March 2, 1800, Oliver Ellsworth and William R. Davie had in fact come to Paris in order to conduct negotiations along with Vans Murray. As a result of these negotiations, a convention was signed on September 30, settling the points of contention that had arisen between the two countries after Jay’s Treaty and the quasi war. Among other things, the Mortefontaine Convention confirmed the end of the 1778 treaties between France and the United States (the Treaty of Amity and Commerce and the Treaty of Alliance). It was up to Jefferson to see the final ratifications through, and although one would have expected him to be unhappy with this part of the document, such was not the case. The new president’s conduct was directly inspired by the cardinal principle of foreign policy that he himself had formulated in his inaugural address: “peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none.” This principle ensured continuity between George Washington, John Adams, and himself. Political isolationism had been recommended by the first president and had been applied by the second, who had managed not to give in to French “colonialism” without trying to please the British; it was also in Jefferson’s credo. The same isolationism was now part and parcel of the ideological apparatus of all Americans, Republican and Federalist, and even of women, or at least those women in the social elite who, although unable to vote, were still moved by a love for their country. As an example, it is worth quoting the following statement of patriotism, which appeared in the last pages of Mercy Otis Warren’s History of the Rise, Progress, and Termination of the American Revolution, published in 1805:

It will be the wisdom, and probably the future effort of the American government, forever to maintain with unshaken magnanimity, the present neutral position of the United States. The hand of nature has displayed its magnificence in this quarter of the globe, in the astonishing rivers, lakes, and mountains, replete with the richest minerals. . . . America may with propriety be styled a land of promise. . . . The western wilds, which for ages have been little known, may arrive to that stage of improvement and perfection, beyond which the limits of human genius cannot reach.

In linking neutrality with westward expansion, Mercy Otis Warren revealed the true implications of the opposition between Europe and America. Americans defined themselves by turning their backs on Europe: America was virtuous while Europe was corrupt; Europe was old and America was the land of promise. This polarization, however, was not merely rhetorical; it coincided with reality. Americans needed to be neutral and to stay away from the diplomatic and military games of Europe; indeed, they could not fight on two fronts at once—in the East and in the West—and the stakes were much higher for them in the battle in the West.
In its relations with the Indians as well, the United States had to assert its specific identity, in other words its moral superiority, but in a different way. Or at least that was what Secretary of War Henry Knox thought when he summed up, on December 29, 1794, the official policy of George Washington’s administration with respect to the other nations living on American territory: “As we are more powerful, and more enlightened than they are, there is responsibility of national character, that we should treat them with kindness, and even liberality.” Knox explained that this “national character” had until then hardly shown such a disposition. Far from differing from other colonizing countries by humane treatment of the natives, the United States (and the thirteen colonies before it) had surpassed everyone in cruelty. Knox seemed to define his country more as a colonizing country than as a young decolonized nation, and he had no mercy for his predecessors. He mused: “[I]t is a melancholy reflection, that our modes of population have been more destructive to the Indian natives than the conduct of the conquerors of Mexico and Peru.” And he added: “A future historian may mark the causes of this destruction of the human race in sable colours.” Fortunately, he went on to explain, the Indian policy of George Washington’s administration had managed to reverse this disastrous trend, and its concern for justice would “reflect permanent honor upon the national character.”65 Even in its Indian policy, America was better than Europe had been, and its principles were different and more faithful to the generous spirit of the Enlightenment. Where one might have expected to find America’s disgrace, one found its superiority instead.

Underlying such noble principles, one finds an agenda of “peaceful expansion,”66 which was described in reports by Knox dated June 15 and July 7, 1789.67 The two directions of this program were peace and civilization, and they were linked. Knox’s basic premise was that as the progression of white settlement meant the depletion of game, the Indians would always be willing to sell their land. Once new borders were established, the process would be repeated: game would disappear, the Indians would no longer be able to hunt, they would have to sell, and so on. The goal, however, was not to exterminate the Indians, only to civilize them. This would reveal the superiority of American colonization, which would inspire the admiration of “every philosophic and humane mind.”68 The disappearance of native habitats and cultures that resulted from white settlement was thus presented as progress and evolution of human societies, and not destruction; it was therefore self-legitimizing.69 Thus George Washington could, in all sincerity, declare the specificity
and the superiority of the American plan for colonization in the following draft for a speech in Congress (April 1789): “We shou’d not, in imitation of some nations which have been celebrated for a false kind of patriotism, wish to aggrandize our own Republic at the expense of freedom and happiness of the rest of mankind.”

Was Washington officially renouncing here a policy of conquest? That is not likely; rather, he suggested that the way to American expansion was through peace and progress, thus differentiating it from other types of colonization. The American president did emphasize this topic when addressing Indian chiefs. To Cornplanter and the other chiefs of the Seneca nation, who, quite realistically, were wondering whether they would be allowed even to practice farming on the land left to them, the president optimistically responded: “The United States will be happy in affording you every assistance in the only business which will add to your numbers and happiness.” He added: “You may, when you return from this city to your own country, mention to your nation my desire to promote their prosperity, by teaching them the use of domestic animals, and the manner that the white people plough and raise so much corn.” What the administration wanted was to promote the well-being of the Indians: “Humanity and good policy must make it the wish of every good citizen of the United States, that Husbandry, and consequently civilization should be introduced among the Indians.”

The official policy of George Washington and Henry Knox toward the Indian nations clearly shows that their isolationist doctrine was exclusively directed toward Europe. The indigenous nations of the American continent lay outside of the scope of the rule that the first president spelled out in his Farewell Address: “The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements, let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.”

While it was seeking to sever its political connections with Europe, the United States, as a colonizing power on the American continent, was trying to increase such connections with the Indian nations. The Native Americans were informed that “the United States are desirous not only of a general peace with all the Indian tribes, but of being their friends and protectors.” From January 1, 1789, to December 17, 1801, the federal government signed no fewer than eighteen treaties with the Indian nations residing on its territory; half of these included provisions for establishing “perpetual peace,” which clearly indicates that the United States did not shrink from making long-term diplomatic commitments when it was in its best interest to do so.

It may seem out of place to use the word “diplomacy” here, since it applies by definition to relations between states. Yet, on the contrary, not to use it would amount to stripping the Indian nations of their dignity and commit them to
oblivion. We are indeed dealing with diplomacy, since negotiations were conducted and treaties were signed between the federal government and the Indian nations, as was the case with other foreign nations. But it would be naive to deny that such relations took place within a colonial framework, in which the United States always managed in the end to impose their demands, despite Indian resistance. Although Americans mistrusted European diplomacy and found their mistrust justified in 1798 by Talleyrand’s attitude during the XYZ affair, they nevertheless waged a broad diplomatic campaign during George Washington’s first presidency. That campaign was specifically directed at the Indian nations.

In his first report on the Indians, Knox explained that the United States would achieve through diplomacy better relations, and at lower cost, with the Indian nations than they would through war; moreover, he pointed out that the Indians could avail themselves of fourteen thousand warriors in the Southwest and five thousand in the Northwest. Knox knew that the new republic had no army to speak of, despite Jefferson’s oft-repeated claim that each pioneer was a potential soldier; he did not volunteer this information without considering that it was a decisive argument. George Washington agreed with his secretary of war: from 1790 to 1792 Philadelphia hosted many international summit meetings between the United States and the Indian nations. In the spring of 1790 the Creek chief Alexander McGillivray was invited to New York, and he went during the summer. Americans were not above the unethical methods of European diplomats, as is shown by the fact that they introduced secret clauses into the treaty they signed with McGillivray and promised to pay him a yearly sum of twelve hundred dollars in an attempt to lure him away from the Spanish. In December 1791 a group of Cherokees who were dissatisfied with the Treaty of Holston, which had been signed in July of that same year, came to Philadelphia and obtained additional advantages after a meeting with the administration. It is tempting to think, as historian Katharine C. Turner has suggested, that the true agenda of these summits was not so much the petty details of the transactions with tribes, as the necessity of impressing upon Native Americans the sheer power of the whites and the vanity of resisting them; but that would actually amount to misjudging their true diplomatic import. The real reason why George Washington so much wanted to befriend the tribes of the Southwest was that he feared more trouble in establishing peace in the Northwest and that he was trying to avoid a global conflict. In June 1791 the chiefs of the Six Nations of Iroquois were invited to Philadelphia because George Washington wanted to convince them to plead with the hostile nations of the Northwest (Miamis, Shawnees, and others). As it happened, fifty Iroquois chiefs arrived in Philadelphia on March 14 for a seven-week stay of uninterrupted festivities and discussions. After they left, the next to come to the negotiation table was Joseph Brant, the famous and powerful Mohawk chief.
Like the other chiefs, he agreed to plead the cause of peace with the hostile Indians. That these visits were important in George Washington’s eyes is illustrated by a letter he wrote to Gouverneur Morris on June 21, 1792, not long after Joseph Brant had left:

In the course of last winter I had some of the chiefs of the Cherokees in this City, and in the spring I obtained (with some difficulty indeed) a full representation of the Six Nations to come hither. I have sent all of them away well satisfied; and fully convinced of the justice and good dispositions of this government towards the Indian nations, generally. The latter, that is, the Six Nations, who before, appeared to be divided, and distracted in their Councils, have given strong assurance of their friendship; and have resolved to send a deputation of their tribes to the hostile Indians with an Account of all that has passed; . . . With difficulty still greater, I have brought the celebrated Captn. Joseph Brant to this City, with a view to impress him also with the equitable intentions of this government towards all the Nations of this colour.

The American government also tried to enlist the help of the peaceful tribes of the Southwest against the hostile tribes, and in February 1792 asked the Choctaws and the Chickasaws to join up with the American troops in their fight against the northwestern Indians; they would take part in General Wayne’s expedition. The U.S. government also invited the chiefs of these nations to come to Philadelphia after the next campaign for appropriate thanks and celebrations. Meanwhile, similar invitations were also sent to tribes that were generally hostile, such as the Chickamaugas, who represented the five lower cities of the Cherokees.

The Indian Wars and the Creation of the American Army

Nevertheless, as we saw in chapter 1, the frontier of the Federalist era was clearly not marked by “peaceful expansion”; from north to south, it was the stage for continuous westward movement, sporadic fighting, and massacres. About the situation in the South, Reginald Horsman rightly considers that, despite its noble principles, the federal government did not improve much on the Indian policy of the Confederation. In fact, the administration contradicted itself even more flagrantly in the Northwest, since in going to war against the hostile nations, it relinquished all pacifist pretenses and actually created the first American army. The “peaceful expansion” policy of George Washington and Henry Knox was doomed to failure, for it embodied solely the white point of view, without taking into account the Native American bond to their land and their culture. For Washington and Knox, the western frontier was destined
by definition to be ever shifting. The statesmen could not have imagined that
the Native Americans might not sell the greater part of their land or refuse to
“civilize.” Furthermore, neither Washington nor Knox was ready to do what
was necessary for the peace policy they advocated. When, for instance,
George Washington installed William Blount as governor of the territory south
of the Ohio River, the president must have known that he was committing
the future of U.S.–Indian relations in that area to a merciless speculator. He
was thereby annulling another official principle of his administration, accord-
ing to which “the Indians, being the prior occupants, possess the right of the
soil,” and such right “cannot be taken from them unless by their free consent,
or by the right of conquest in case of a just war.” In fact, George Washington
needed to secure for the new administration the support of great local figures
such as Blount, even at the risk of their openly trampling upon official poli-
cies. Indeed, Blount clearly did not expect “free consent” from the Indians (which
was unlikely); instead he used strong-arm tactics to achieve his ends, as is appar-
ent from the account given by chief Bloody Fellow, a Cherokee who had under-
stood from Blount that it was better to strike a deal with him than to leave
his people defenseless:

When I found Governor Blount wanted to purchase our lands, I told him that
I love my lands, and would not part with them; that I came there not to treat
of selling land, but on public business of friendship between the white and
red people. . . . We remained seven days at the place of treaty on this busi-
ness, and Governor Blount still urging us to sell our lands, the thoughts of
which made tears to come into my eyes daily.

On the seventh day, finding Governor Blount still urging the sale of
lands, I told him I was desirous of going to General Washington and
Congress, to see whether I could not obtain better satisfaction; to which
Governor Blount replied, that he was fully authorized for the purpose, there-
fore, it would be unnecessary for the Indians to go.

I however persevered in my wishes to go to Philadelphia; when
Governor Blount asked me whether I had money to defray the expenses of my
journey; this struck me forcibly, and reflecting that our people, young and old,
were in his power, I then told him that, if he would not demand so much land
of us, we would give him a small piece, without any consideration whatever,
if he would let us and our children return to our country in peace and safety.

Washington and Knox had to reckon not only with the corrupt representa-
tives they sent to the frontier, but also with the states and their elected officials,
as well as with pioneers, whose expansionism stood in the way of peace. George
Washington himself explained that the reason why his “peaceful expansion”
policy was failing, or could not be implemented, was that the pioneers were an
These pioneers, however, were also citizens of the United States. No matter how much or how often George Washington called for punishment of those who infringed on Native American lands (as per the Trade and Intercourse Acts of 1790, 1793, and 1796) or assured Native Americans that they would only have to deal with the federal government, he could not possibly have given preference to Native Americans over his own citizens without jeopardizing the Union itself. George Washington's line of reasoning was that if the peace policy of the federal government failed, even at the hands of the pioneers, war would break out and the Native Americans would be punished.

Thus, Washington and Knox decided to protect the frontier populations against the Native Americans, but without initially acknowledging that their retaliation operations (which they termed punitive “expeditions”) in fact constituted episodes of actual war. The distinction between war and the defense of law and order was indeed not very clear in the minds of the American leaders. In 1790, in his second inaugural address, George Washington referred to the hostile Native Americans of the area around the Wabash and Maumee Rivers as “certain banditti of Indians from the North West side of the Ohio.” Likewise, the Creeks who supported the Chickamaugas in their constant raids against land-hungry pioneers of the Cumberland area were described by Knox, in 1792, as “banditti.” For the Native Americans, this was clearly war, but the federal administration was hesitant. This hesitation reflected the ambiguous status of Native Americans: were they actual foreign nations or were they protectorates? George Washington put the question to the Senate in connection with the Treaty of Fort Harmar: were the treaties signed with Native Americans applicable without ratification by a two-thirds majority of the Senate? Were they essentially different from treaties concluded with European nations?

According to Charles Carroll, a senator from Maryland, the difference was clear: since the treaties with Native Americans, unlike those signed between “civilized” European nations, had never been formally ratified by either side, no official ratification of the treaty signed at Fort Harmar in 1789 between the United States and the Wyandot, Delaware, Ottawa, Chippewa, Pattiwatima, and Sac nations was advisable or necessary. Yet the Senate eventually decided to ratify this treaty in the same fashion as it did treaties binding the United States toward foreign nations; this precedent was never to be called into question throughout the era of Indian treaties, that is, until 1871. At the same time, however, the colonialist argument that allowed Charles Carroll to draw a line between two kinds of diplomatic partners, one “civilized” and the other (implicitly) “savage,” underlay the entire U.S. Indian policy from then on. The bottom line was that Indian nations were not recognized as equal nations. By casting doubt on the legitimacy of the treaties that embodied Native American resistance, Carroll meant to preserve at home and abroad the pacifist identity and moral superiority that the United States had claimed for itself.
Despite the fiction of an official peace policy and a refusal to call a war a war, the fact remains that from 1789 to 1794 the secretary of war was mainly busy with Indian affairs. Peaceful expansion, if it came to be, could only take place after Native American resistance had been forcefully brought down, or so Jefferson thought when he assessed the situation in 1791: “As to myself, I hope we shall give the Indians a thorough drubbing this summer, and I should think it better afterwards to take up the plan of liberal and repeated presents to them.”

After Saint-Clair’s bloody defeat in November 1791, the army was reorganized. Regular soldiers in good number (Congress approved five thousand men), less dependence on the state militias, and a new commander—everything was done to transform the unruly and disorderly Saint-Clair battalion into “the efficient military machine that eventually smashed the Indian confederacy in the Northwest.” After Wayne’s victory in August 1794, the army was essentially kept as a series of garrisons housed in forts along the frontier, thus symbolizing the true nature of U.S.–Native American relations, that is, a permanent state of war. “National character” was to develop through military—and therefore violent—confrontation with the “savage,” through conquest rather than through the generous donation of superior knowledge and technology. The elite were unanimous on this score, and Jefferson, who upheld the expansionist plans of the pioneers and local leaders, understood that in order to preserve the nation’s unity and to develop its own identity, it was necessary to support popular expansionism—that is, expansionism that was anything but peaceful.

Pirates in the Mediterranean and the Birth of the American Navy

The United States was also to show its military ability and its warlike spirit outside of North America. Winning its independence meant that the United States had lost the protection formerly afforded by the British navy against Barbary Coast pirates in the Mediterranean. Americans were now prevented from reaching Mediterranean markets, except at the risk of having their ships confiscated and their teams sold as slaves. In Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya, where the tutelage of the Ottoman Empire no longer carried much weight, leaders encouraged piracy, which was a reliable source of revenue and an excuse not to take care of their country’s economy or of its modernization and development. Through piracy, which they firmly controlled, the pashas collected ransom for prisoners, took in plunder, and signed treaties worth their while, whereby they pledged not to attack ships from a given power in exchange for large sums of money. Because they were richer, the great powers—such as France, England, and Spain—suffered less from Barbary Coast raiders than did other European countries.

The first American merchant ships were captured by Algerian pirates at the end of the War of Independence. During his embassy term in France, Jefferson
had tried to negotiate the release of the American captives in Algiers, but to no avail. The new secretary of state had learned his lesson, and upon his return home he changed strategies; he described his new doctrine in two reports to Congress on December 28, 1790. In the first, which was devoted to American commerce in the Mediterranean, the secretary of state considered three ways of settling the crisis. The first way was to pay ransom for the prisoners, but such an option, he explained, was at odds with the overriding goal of putting an end to all piracy. The second option was to “buy peace” by paying a large sum to the leaders of the countries involved, an idea that repelled Jefferson in that it would amount to aligning the United States with the corrupt methods of Europe: “For this we have the example of rich, powerful Nations, in this instance counting their Interest more than their Honor.” The third solution was the one Jefferson favored. Far from expressing a pacifist credo, his plan was based on the Mosaic “eye for an eye” (lex talionis): “to repel force by force” and, for once, an alliance with smaller European nations. In the second report, which dealt with the issue of captives, Jefferson took up the same ideas, suggesting that in the event of hostilities, Barbary Coast prisoners could be traded for American slaves, at a rate of five to one.

This tough option was not chosen by Congress, whose primary goal was to secure revenue for the new government before spending it, and who therefore opted to “buy peace” or to pay ransom. In the fall of 1793, however, even before negotiations had had a chance to start, Algiers signed a cease-fire with Portugal, opening the Atlantic to Algerian pirates, and more Americans were captured. Now even the Atlantic was unsafe for U.S. ships. Jefferson’s ideas came back to the fore, and on March 10, 1794, the Senate passed “An Act to Provide a Naval Armament,” which called for six frigates to be built; these were to be the embryo of an American navy. But before construction of the frigates had even begun, the dey of Algiers suddenly expressed a wish to open negotiations. A treaty was not signed until September 5, 1795, but the talks were followed by two other treaties, one with Tripoli and the other with Tunis. In spite of these treaties, George Washington insisted that the construction of three frigates be carried out, contrary to the pacifist stipulations of the 1794 act, which called for this construction to be interrupted if the conflict stopped. These frigates marked the beginning of the history of the American navy and naval power, even before the Department of the Navy was created in 1798, at the time of the XYZ crisis. By 1801, when hostilities broke out again with Algiers, the American navy had the experience of the quasi war years, during which U.S. ships, along with the powerful British navy, inspected French government privateers and frigates and escorted American merchant ships to their destinations. What is significant in the American reaction toward the North African countries is that military action was promptly considered and untempered by any pacifist undertones. When a riposte seemed feasible to the Americans, and
when it seemed justified by the defense of economic interests, they proved willing to wage war.

In the 1790s some Federalist leaders developed the idea of isolationism in order to build up a “national character,” which they found deficient. Having severed its political ties to Europe, the United States asserted its moral superiority by staying clear of the quarrels that seemed peculiar to the corrupt Old Continent. This isolationist theme was skillfully used by Adams in 1798, and it effectively marshaled a large portion of the country into a nationalist élan. Although the Republicans at first regarded this agenda as a mere partisan maneuver, they were eventually won over to this unifying ideological construction after 1801, when Jefferson took office. It should be noted that the isolationist idea only applied to Europe; and if one takes into account the economic dimension, it was far from being just. Indeed, the United States dealt at the same time with many other nations, which resided on territory over which the United States claimed sovereignty, although it acknowledged these nations’ property rights. These nations were unfortunately not “civilized” in American eyes. In relations with them, U.S. leaders also spoke of virtue, justice, and humanity. But the “superior” civilization they intended to bring to Native Americans amounted to continuous warfare as well as constant pressure and destruction. Virtue and neutrality applied to Europe, while corruption and belligerence were used with Native Americans and any “less civilized” people that might stand in the way. This formidable ambiguity was the cornerstone of American identity. It was only with one country that Jefferson’s America found itself at a loss over what stance to take, even though it had intended to expand relations with that country. Indeed, in dealing with Haiti, the United States came to choose silence over the assertion of its identity, whether by a display of neutrality or force.