The Nationalist Ferment
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Conclusion

1789–1812: A Period of Transition and Transformation of the American Nation and American Nationalism

In 1790, when George Washington received the Native American chief Complanter, the president was cautious to avoid using a tone of superiority or aggressiveness. Instead, he resorted to very diplomatic language; as a veteran soldier, who had had many chances to witness Native American bravery on the battlefield, he paid them the respect due formidable adversaries. Since the beginning of his term, he had in fact tried above all to prevent a generalized breakout of hostilities. It would take him a full four years and several true disasters before the victory of Wayne in 1794 to redress the situation on the frontier. In contrast, when Jefferson talked to Handsome Lake in 1802 to advise him to give up hunting and take up farming, his self-assured tone betrayed paternalism: the American president did not for a moment doubt that he was right. In offering Native Americans the means to attain “civilization,” he believed that he was leading them on the way to progress and Enlightenment and did not envision the possibility that his interlocutors might have valid reasons for turning him down.

The two presidents did, however, share the same optimistic vision of their country’s future, and the same belief in the disappearance of the Native American way of life, but they could not use the same language, for they were faced with different realities. In 1790 the new republic was a fragile one, and its borders, far from being impenetrable, were threatened. In 1802 in contrast, the United States was a prosperous country, which was openly trying to expand by purchasing West Florida and the New Orleans island. From 1789 to 1803 there was a shift in mentality that followed the country’s evolution. Driven by a faith in their nation’s future, Americans saw their dream gradually come true. Jefferson’s dominating triumphalism succeeded Washington’s justifiable anxiety. As he was faced with Native American and foreign threats, as well as local secessionist attempts and partisan divisions, Washington could not have displayed the kind
of serenity that characterized Jefferson. Jefferson was the great unifier of a nation that was now rich and virtually free from foreign and domestic dangers, and whose diplomatic endeavors were soon to be rewarded by the Louisiana Purchase.

In 1812, when Madison and Congress declared war on Great Britain despite the former parent country’s unquestioned supremacy on the seas, they gave new evidence of American confidence in the country’s strength. Donald R. Hickey has called that conflict a “forgotten war,” and its causes “obscure,” for in 1812 the United States was no more driven into war with Great Britain than it might have been in 1807—hence Hickey’s irritation, which echoes that of Henry Adams: the war could have been avoided and it brought nothing. But these conventional judgments about the outbreak and consequences of an unconventional war tend to mask the real issue. The War of 1812 occurred at a time when national feeling reached maturity, that is, when it acquired its “secondary” dimension: the army and navy of a country that was now organized were entrusted with the heavy responsibility of defending national honor. The congressmen from the West and South who advocated an uncompromising attitude toward Great Britain in 1811 had been born during or after the War of Independence, and unlike the revolutionary generation that was still in office, never had had to break ties with the former parent country. They naturally placed their trust in a government and nation with which they fully identified. They no longer tried, as the revolutionary generation had done, to build the nation around its institutions; they believed in their nation’s greatness, without any doubts or second thoughts.

In this connection, it is perhaps in order to go back over the definition of eighteenth-century American nationalism that was given in the beginning of this book. There nationalism was presented not only as an overriding commitment “to preserving independence, maintaining full sovereignty” or to “extolling national feeling,” but also as a specific attempt at elaborating a national character and building up patriotic feeling. By 1812 American nationalism was undergoing a change in its very nature. Starting with the Jefferson presidency, the American leaders no longer complained, as George Washington once had, about the absence of an “American character”; the nation’s patriotic feeling no longer had to be stirred up by deft political maneuvers, as in the time of John Adams; it spontaneously expressed itself on the street and in the newspapers when national pride was threatened by attacks from abroad. The point was no longer to create but merely to consolidate national feeling. The War of 1812 was the endpoint of this nationalist process; its goal was to uphold full American sovereignty over the seas and in the West, and it resulted in uplifting American national feeling for years to come.

The same period also witnessed the formation process of a national culture, which was destined to give American nationalism a historical and cultural dimension that had theretofore been little developed. Knowing that the United States
did not possess a specific cultural background except that of its former parent country, the revolutionary generation had wanted to elaborate nationalism first on the basis of the institutions that had been chosen by the representatives of the states at the Philadelphia convention. By the turn of the century, that peculiarity of American nationalism, that is, its lack of grounding in a common past and heritage, was beginning to fade.

Historical works such as David Ramsay’s History of the American Revolution (1789) and Mercy Otis Warren’s History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution (1805) fabricated the official memory of a nation that, according to these authors, had been chosen by Providence. Ramsay also wrote a Life of George Washington, published in 1809, which contributed to creating a pantheon of the nation’s great men. A pioneer in his field, the patriotic schoolteacher Noah Webster published in 1787 his American Spelling Book with a view to teaching school children the American language and its peculiar spelling; this book was to enjoy great success until the mid-nineteenth century. With Charles Brockden Brown, the republic found its first truly American professional man of letters, who published his six major novels between 1797 and 1801, before going on to a commercial career. This was only a beginning, though, for painters especially could not yet find in America the kind of market and patronage that existed in an organized fashion in Europe; the first half of the nineteenth century would witness the real blossoming of American nationalism in painting (with the Hudson River School) and in literature (with James Fenimore Cooper).

The Nationalist Ferment: A Test of the Interactions between Foreign and Domestic Policies

From 1789 to 1812 foreign policy fostered the growth of American nationalism. The wars of the Revolution, and then of the Empire, translated into opportunities that the United States managed to make the most of: owing to generalized war in Europe after 1793, the early republic was able to build up a prosperous economy on the basis of the phenomenal growth of its foreign trade; in addition, the renewal of hostilities in 1803 compelled Napoleon to sell Louisiana, which Americans had counted on making their own, without hoping to obtain it quite so easily. These events brought Americans together around two goals that were to serve as common denominators at least until the end of the nineteenth century: economic expansion and territorial expansion.

While U.S. foreign policy thus facilitated the growth of American nationalism as a defining and unifying factor, it also brought to light the modes of exclusion that were practiced by the nation within itself. Indeed, the agonies Republican leaders experienced about the right attitude to take toward Haiti
underscored the growing commitment of southerners to the institution of slavery and the uneasiness of American society as a whole in confronting that issue. Similarly, the rather contemptuous way in which the Louisiana Creoles were treated by their new American authorities from 1803 on clearly indicates that the American expansionist drive went hand in hand with a feeling of superiority, excluding from democracy all those that were not deemed worthy of it because they did not quite conform to the national mold. The American citizen was to be white, English-speaking, and Protestant.

This triumphant nationalism, which extolled national values, influenced foreign policy in turn: thus, Madison’s annexation of West Florida clearly derived from a lack of respect on the part of the United States for certain foreign nations, perhaps because they were weak, but also because they belonged to another culture. Analyzing American nationalism from 1789 to 1812 through the lens of foreign policy leads one to highlight its unifying power, which enabled a community of men and women to define and unite itself within the modern framework of the nation-state. This analysis also highlights its capacity for exclusion, which proved cruel to those, whether inside or outside, who did not bend to the chosen criteria for union, or who opposed the citizens’ common objectives.

One of the intentions of this study was to avoid neglecting those groups that are too often forgotten by the history of international relations of this period, namely, Native Americans and black slaves. Hopefully, the voices of these outcasts of the political and social system of the time have been made audible, while the dual face of nationalism—union and exclusion—was constantly kept in view. The term “exclusion,” however, calls for qualification as far as the Native Americans are concerned. In the United States of today, the descendants of the first dwellers of the American continent lead for the most part precarious and miserable lives on reservations that are riddled with poverty, alcoholism, and crime, and thus fully justify the notions of “outcasts” and “exclusion,” as also do the blacks of the inner-city ghettos; such was not the case, however, in 1812.

At the time, Native Americans, like the black slaves, were kept out of the political and social life of the nation by the very text of the Constitution, which did not regard them as citizens. But unlike the slaves, who were excluded against their will, Native Americans demanded autonomous sovereignty on their lands, and the Supreme Court had not yet ruled, as it would in 1831, that they were “domestic, dependent nations.” Those who led a free life, such as Tecumseh and his people, as well as the tribes of the West, did not seek integration into the world of whites, but instead tried at all costs to preserve their independence.

Indeed, Native Americans were oppressed and excluded whenever the numerical predominance of the whites in their area forced them to accept the life of the reservation and the ensuing procession of painful or impossible adjustments.
Between 1789 and 1812, such was the case especially with the Iroquois, who were defeated during the War of Independence, and had to try to adjust to the life of the reservation during the first decades of the early republic. But as long as they could resist the inroads of pioneers, Native Americans remained above all members of independent, proud nations, whose struggle should be acknowledged in its dignity. After Tecumseh’s death, armed resistance became an impossibility east of the Mississippi, but it was to continue in the West throughout the century. American popular expansionism always had to reckon with the fierce resistance of the native nations; this democratic expansionism could only develop with the help of violence and colonialism, thus perhaps laying the foundations of future characteristic features of American foreign policy.

The Origins and Foundations of American Foreign Policy

Although any investigation into the origins is by necessity grounded in a reflection on the present, this study of the origins of American foreign policy has constantly tried to fend off the temptations of presentism and anachronism, which would lead one to read the past as a mere source of the mistakes or the successes of the present. This accounts for the special importance that has been given here to the weakness of the American government at the beginning of the period under review, or to the succession of military defeats in the West up to 1794, or again to the surprise of the Louisiana Purchase, until then a mere dream of American leaders. Still, this study would not be complete if it did not highlight the foundations that the American republic’s first quarter century laid for future policies.

As we saw, foreign policy allowed Americans to gather around common objectives. The popular expansionism that Jefferson formulated in countless letters and official papers, and that his successor Madison enacted in Florida, or again, the doctrine of isolation that was elaborated by Washington and Jefferson may rightly be considered as the main principles underlying all the doctrines and practices of American foreign policy down to the end of the nineteenth century. These two principles anticipated, and then in the mid-nineteenth century, informed the doctrine of “manifest destiny,” whereby the feeling of a democratic superiority took shape, to serve as justification for every violation of international law and the rights of peoples, and to bar interference from other great powers.

Away from such haughty and boastful proclamations, the hesitating way in which the recognition of Haiti was refused in 1806 foreshadowed the U.S. withdrawal out of an expansion zone that had nonetheless been considered, but a few years before, a “natural” one: in the opinion of the American leaders, the social organization of the United States would have been threatened had American
diplomacy ventured the least official action toward that other new republic. Once the Civil War was over, and the slavery question settled, the United States was soon to become interested again in its close Caribbean neighbors, under the guidance of President Andrew Johnson's secretary of state, William H. Seward.

In 1812 white American men were enjoying the blessings of a unity that was based on prosperity, but social, racial, and economic tensions could rise up again and tear apart the national fabric. It would be a long time, however, before those tensions actually broke off the impulse that the Louisiana Purchase gave to the conquest of the continent. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, American nationalism definitely found its real meaning, as well as its apotheosis, in the conquest of American space, which was acted out in the name of progress and the moral superiority of the United States, and in the accompanying economic expansion. Before embarking on that great westward expansion, American citizens were ready to stand the ultimate test of recognition—war—which was to prove to the world, as well as to themselves, that the United States was a great power, able to compete with France and Great Britain.