

## America's Founders and the Principles of Foreign Policy: Sovereign Independence, National Interests, and the Cause of Liberty in the World

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**Abstract:** *America's Founders sought to define a national good that transcended local interests and prejudices. The national good included the common benefits of self-defense and prosperity that all Americans would realize by participating in a large, commercial nation able to hold its own in an often hostile world. But it was only with the constitutional rule of law that the higher purpose, or true national interest, of America could be realized. That purpose was to demonstrate to all mankind the feasibility of self-government and the suitability of justice as the proper and sustainable ground for relations among nations and peoples. The honor of striving for domestic and international justice would give moral purpose to the American character. The United States would support, defend, and advance the cause of freedom everywhere. It would be a refuge for the sober, industrious, and virtuous of the world, as well as for victims of persecution. By sympathy and appropriate action, Americans would show themselves to be true friends of humanity.*

Independence was the clarion call of the American Revolution. While we tend to think of independence mainly as an important historic event that marks our separation from Great Britain, the Founders and subsequent generations had a larger understanding of what was signified by the national independence they were celebrating.

Americans sought independence not only from Great Britain, after all, but also from military occupation, royal overseers, arbitrary laws, taxation without representation, and—as it says in the Declaration of Independence—everything that “evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism.” But in doing

so they also were declaring their unity—or interdependence—as a people, a compact of states, and a new nation. Independence implied at the same time *separation* as well as the creation of a new and independent country, living and governing by its own means and according to its own ways.

The concept of independence—that is, what we mean when we speak of American independence—has profound implications for how we understand and govern ourselves as a nation and how we justify and defend ourselves as an independent actor on the world stage. The American Founders were deeply divided over the appropriate policies in foreign affairs during

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the early years of the republic: Alexander Hamilton thought America should build a stronger military and side more with the British, for instance, while Thomas Jefferson preferred diplomacy and favored the French. Divisions on foreign policy were the catalyst that led to the establishment of the first political parties. Nevertheless, there was a core agreement about not only the nature of America and its sovereign independence, but also the cause of liberty in the world. Taking a broader view, it is possible to develop an underlying consensus view of the Founders' thinking about American foreign policy.

Contemporary thinking on foreign policy falls prey to a number of pernicious and false dichotomies—realism versus idealism, isolationism versus internationalism—that are modern creations and have no relationship to the Founders' approach to international politics. The Founders' view, encapsulated in the idea of strategic independence, offers a way out of these unsatisfying and ultimately problematic theories and instead defines a prudential framework consistent with America's core foundational principles. It is time to reconsider the Founders' approach and readopt it as the best guide to understanding America's unique role in the world.

## PRUDENCE AND FOREIGN AFFAIRS

Foreign affairs, that field of politics dealing with the outside world, is inherently different from domestic affairs. At home, we have our own laws and share a constitutional framework for deciding and enforcing the rules within a common legal framework. We are one people "among the powers of the earth." In the world, by contrast, there is no common political community and thus no international consent of the governed.

Throughout history, different groups of peoples have banded together to form political communities—states, confederations, commonwealths, nations—based on different historical and geographic conditions and interests, resulting in different opinions about man, government, and justice. It is because of

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the nature and requirements of government, of communities of people uniting as a nation for common purposes, that the measure of international affairs will always be sovereign countries and national interests as each nation conceives them. The interaction of nations can be peaceful but often leads to competition and conflict. Nations are never completely free from the demands of necessity—above all, national survival and self-preservation.

Foreign policy choices are often presented as alternatives between two abstract categories: "idealism," meaning that nations should be motivated by ideals to the exclusion of practical concerns and self-interest, and "realism," meaning that nations are motivated primarily by the desire for more military and economic power or security rather than by principles. The distinction is false and misleading. The concept of idealism rejects the practical reality of particular national interests in favor of a dogmatic moralism, while the concept of realism suggests a narrow, cynical view that completely excludes moral considerations in dealing with other nations.

These two approaches share the assumption that principle and power are opposites and contradictory and that a nation pursuing its interests is by definition selfish and immoral, while principle is inherently dogmatic and inflexible and can be followed only when absolutely separated from concern about interest and power. However, an allegiance to principle and a clear recognition of the requirements of international secu-

rity can be complementary. When rightly understood, they are inseparable—at least, this is what the American Founders thought. Neither idealism nor realism satisfies an integrated worldview that is consistent with a true understanding of the nature of international politics.

A better approach, understood by the Founders and consistent with the common sense of foreign affairs, relates principles and practice through the gauge of practical wisdom or prudence. Foreign affairs—dealing with friends and enemies in a constantly changing and often unstable world—is especially the realm of prudence. For one thing, it is impossible to predetermine the extent, priority, and immediacy of the nation’s security requirements, which shift with the balance of world forces and over which one nation has little, if any, control. Likewise, it is impossible to predetermine the challenges and opportunities for furthering principles and long-term objectives in the world. So it is impossible to know beforehand what prudence will dictate at any particular time and place.

A great example of the Founders’ prudence is their early foreign policy. It is often said that the American Founders were isolationists and that the principle of their foreign policy was to withdraw from the world in favor of focusing solely on the home front. This fails to distinguish between a particular policy conditioned on the times and the permanent principles that underlie the policy and inform changing circumstances.

At the time of its founding, the United States was a weak and fledgling nation, unique in claiming its republican institutions, extremely vulnerable to the great powers that dominated the world. Its objectives were to strengthen its constitutional government, build an adequate military capacity to defend itself, and, if possible, remove European influence from the North American continent. If America failed in this, Alexander Hamilton warned in *Federalist* 11, it would become “the instrument of European greatness.” But if it succeeded, it would be “superior to the control of all

transatlantic force or influence and be able to dictate the terms of the connection between the old and the new world.”<sup>1</sup>

The Founders had few choices. They were active in some areas of the world—especially concerning international trade, as well as some matters of national security—but generally constrained by the circumstances in which they found themselves. American weakness, in order to avoid getting caught up and destroyed in the competition of European powers, dictated a policy of neutrality in Europe’s wars. At the

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same time, the geopolitical situation that caused this policy also provided an advantage that offset American weakness—distance from Europe and the time to gain strength. It was in America’s interest to take advantage of the European balance of power, exploiting Old World rivalries to prevent any one power from dominating Europe and threatening American independence. A policy of “global noninvolvement” would be as prudent for a weak nation as it would be foolish for a strong one.

The Founders were neither utopian idealists—they strongly disagreed with the “visionary, or designing men, who stand ready to advocate the paradox of perpetual peace” and hoped to “soften the manners of men,” as Hamilton put it in *Federalist* 6—nor

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 11,” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet Classic, 2003), p. 86.

vulgar realists, relegating justice to the whims of the strongest.<sup>2</sup> Theirs was a worldview that was both principled *and* practical, where the preeminent virtue of statesmanship was prudence: the practical wisdom and ability to relate universal principles to particular circumstances.

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By implication, the Founders rejected modern approaches in American foreign policy represented in what today is called power politics, isolationism, and crusading internationalism. Instead, they designed a truly American foreign policy—fundamentally shaped by our principles but neither driven by nor ignorant of the place of necessity in international relations.

### A SEPARATE AND EQUAL STATION

What does it mean to be independent? Literally, the word means “not dependent,” which comes from the Latin for “hang down” or “suspended from”—as in a pendant hanging from a necklace. In practical terms, something that is dependent hangs on, or is reliant on, something else. A person who is dependent is less free. The American Founders deplored this idea, following Blackstone’s definition: “Dependence is very little else but an obligation to conform to the will or law of that superior person or state upon which the inferior depends.”<sup>3</sup>

To be independent, when it comes to men and nations, is to be not only physically detached, but also

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 6,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 50.

<sup>3</sup> William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England, in Four Books*, ed. William Draper Lewis (Philadelphia: Geo. T. Bisel Co., 1922), p. 89.

fundamentally self-governing. This dual meaning of independence—technical separation from another ruling nation as well as political self-government—can be seen in our own Declaration of Independence. Indeed, this deeper sense of independence explains why we celebrate Independence Day—not the dates of the end of the Revolutionary War or even the completion of the Constitution—as our nation’s birthday.

From its opening words, the Declaration of Independence expresses certain assumptions about independent nationhood. The document begins by presupposing a crucial aspect of nationhood: that the Americans are or are becoming “one people” and that it has become necessary for that one people to dissolve the political bands that had connected it to another people—the British. This people is entitled (has a right) to “assume among the powers of the earth” a “station,” or status that is “separate and equal” to that of other nations and peoples. This status is due to them not from their English charters or British constitutional law, but by virtue of “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God.”

To claim a separate and equal status among nations is to make a claim of “sovereignty” in the context of international law. A nation is sovereign if it is independent of rule by other nations, controlling its own affairs and dealing with other nations as coequals in rank. Nations are of course not equal in regard to their size, wealth, power, and traditions. Separateness and equality are the key characteristics of what it means to be a sovereign nation.<sup>4</sup>

The document concludes by declaring that “these Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States” that “have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Indepen-

<sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Rabkin, *The Case for Sovereignty: Why the World Should Welcome American Independence* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute Press, 2004), as well as his “The Meaning of Sovereignty: What Our Founding Fathers Could Tell Us About Current Events,” *Heritage Foundation First Principles Essay No. 10*, May 25, 2007.

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dent States may of right do.” Those same “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” imply that nations are independent, self-governing entities when it comes to the core functions of nationhood. So it was that at the same time the Continental Congress declared independence it also called for a plan of unity and confederation to confirm this equal status and create a new government to exercise sovereign powers.

The immediate purpose of the Declaration of Independence was to announce and defend before “the opinions of mankind” the American separation from Great Britain. The document was also intended to make the case to other nations that this separation justified America’s right to seek formal diplomatic relations and military alliances. In short, the Declaration proclaimed to the world that the united colonies—having become a people—were now separate, sovereign, and by international law equal to Great Britain and all other nations.

The Declaration of Independence also describes the enduring principles by which this nation claims a right to be an independent sovereign people. Certain foundational principles instruct not only our own political structure, but also our concept of legitimacy in the world. For example, the principle of consent—that government derives its just powers from the consent of the governed—also makes legitimate a particular claim to a separate and equal rank among nations. National sovereignty in the world, based on popular sovereignty at home, underscores the primary responsibility of the national government: to defend and provide for the freedom and well-being of the people who authorized this government. Republican government means a government that expresses and represents the consent of the governed and defends American society both at home and in the world.

Lastly, the Declaration commits this nation to universal ideas—human equality, natural rights, consent of the governed, the rule of law—that have profound consequences. The Declaration of Independence submits its facts to “a candid world,” but the decision to become independent is not left to the international community, which cannot have moral authority in this matter. Instead, the Declaration asserts independence by appealing “to the Supreme Judge of the World for the rectitude of our intentions.” That is, it appeals to a higher standard to which all other laws are answerable: a universal standard above all communities, against which all other nations should be measured as well. The document makes all-important distinctions, for instance, between “civilization” on the one hand and “barbarism” or “savagery” on the other. By that standard, the object of British rule was to establish an absolute tyranny over the colonies, and it was the Americans’ right and duty—after suffering a “long train of abuses”—to free themselves of that colonial rule: “A Prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

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America justified its independence on, and then formed a nation around, principles understood to be true not just for Americans, but for everyone everywhere. But the United States is also a *particular* nation with a particular history and a particular people. This combination of universal and particular helps to explain why our foreign policy, in the broadest sense, strives to relate these noble principles to the real-world challenges and requirements of international politics. That America’s particular policies, while not always perfect, are informed and shaped by principles

understood to be universally true explains why America is unique in the community of nations and why America's national self-interest in the international order is inseparable from the well-being of freedom everywhere.

### THE COMMAND OF OUR OWN FORTUNES

The classic statement of the Founders' understanding of the relationship between domestic and foreign policy is George Washington's Farewell Address of 1796. Its immediate purpose was to announce Washington's decision to retire from public life and not seek a third term as President, but the larger objective was to give advice and warnings about the long-term safety and happiness of the American people. It is all the more significant since Washington was assisted in its drafting by Alexander Hamilton and James Madison, who later became political enemies over foreign policy. Madison described Washington's essay as one of "the best guides to the distinctive principles" of American government.<sup>5</sup>

The Farewell Address presents Washington's advice concerning the Constitution and the rule of law, political parties, religion and morality, foreign influence in domestic affairs, international relations, and commercial policy. While it is often remembered for its recommendations concerning American involvement in international affairs and Washington's defense of his debated policy of neutrality in the wars of the French Revolution, the overarching argument of the Farewell Address transcends the requirements of the moment in favor of maintaining America's national independence.

Washington argues that the United States should take advantage of its peculiar geographic and political situation—a physical separation from Europe and the

<sup>5</sup> James Madison, "Letter to Thomas Jefferson, 8 February 1825," in *James Madison: Writings*, ed. Jack N. Rakove (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p. 809. On the Farewell Address, see Matthew Spalding and Patrick Garrity, *A Sacred Union of Citizens: George Washington's Farewell Address and the American Character* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996).

opportunity to remain aloof from its quarrels—to pursue a long-term strategy of defying external threats and choosing its own course as a nation. As described by Washington, early policy was designed "to gain time for our country to settle and mature its recent institutions, and to progress, without interruption, to that degree of strength and consistency, which is necessary to *give it, humanly speaking, command of its own fortunes.*"<sup>6</sup>

Samuel Flagg Bemis, the great 20th century diplomatic historian, interpreted this to mean "strategic independence," or freedom of action in international affairs.<sup>7</sup> A better way to understand fully what Washington meant is to recall the older term used to encompass the goal for a political community: self-sufficiency. Certainly, strategic independence requires taking care

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of the nation's security and material interests, but self-sufficiency is not exclusively or even primarily material. It comprehends a larger sense of moral purpose, well-being, and completeness that needs no outside support or guidance for its existence or perpetuation.

Self-sufficiency means sovereignty in the fullest sense—or, as the Declaration of Independence says, "to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of

<sup>6</sup> George Washington, "Farewell Address," in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W. B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1988), p. 527. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Much of the best work of Samuel Flagg Bemis on the founding era is collected in *American Foreign Policy and the Blessings of Liberty: and Other Essays* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962).

Nature's God entitle them" and obtain the full power to do the "Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do." Rather than a *permanent* condition of detachment from the world, the Founders advocated a *flexible* policy aimed at achieving and thereafter permanently maintaining the sovereign independence for Americans to determine their own fate.

A self-sufficient America could freely choose its own leaders, establish its own laws, and set up a government that ensured its own safety and happiness and could reach its full potential as a republican political community. In *Common Sense*, Thomas Paine wrote that independence "means no more than whether we shall make our own laws, or, whether the king, the greatest enemy this continent hath, or can have, shall tell us 'there shall be no laws but such as I like.'"<sup>8</sup> If a foreign power can tell America "what we shall do, and what we shall not do," Washington once told Hamilton, "we have Independence yet to seek, and have contended hitherto for very little."<sup>9</sup>

True independence, then, is not only the absence of physical restraint and control, but also the flourishing of an autonomous and free character. This requires freedom of action and independent thinking—an important theme of the Farewell Address. Americans must be free from hatreds and irrational attachments to foreign nations if they are to become partisans of their own. Preconceived positions restrict policy options and prevent the nation from responsibly choosing its own course. When these attachments dominate the public mind, they not only lead the nation away from its duty and interest, but also make the supposedly free nation "in some degree a slave" to the others. "Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence," Washington warned, "the jealousy of a free people ought to be *constantly* awake."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Paine, "Common Sense," in *Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), p. 30.

<sup>9</sup> George Washington, "Letter to Alexander Hamilton, 8 May 1796," *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 630.

<sup>10</sup> George Washington, "Farewell Address," *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 524. Emphasis in original.

As America's fate is necessarily tied to its principles, the key to American self-sufficiency was to find the political ground on which the requirements of independence could be reconciled with those principles at home and in our relations with other nations. How is this to be done? Here is Washington's answer:

If we remain one people, under an efficient government, the period is not far off when we may defy injury from external annoyance; when we may take such an attitude as will cause the neutrality we may at any time resolve upon to be scrupulously respected; when belligerent nations, under the impossibility of making acquisitions upon us, will not lightly hazard the giving us provocation; when we may choose peace or war, as *our interest guided by justice shall Counsel*.<sup>11</sup>

While appreciating the difficulties, prejudices, and self-interested character of politics, the Founders sought to elevate American foreign policy by the guidance of higher and nobler principles. In order to command our own fortunes in the world, we must first provide for the nation's security and serve its interests, but our actions must always be enlightened by the fundamental and universal principles that are at the heart of our national identity.

## SAFETY AND HAPPINESS

Security, whether for an individual or for a nation, is the first requirement of self-sufficiency. "Security against foreign danger is one of the primitive objects of civil society," Madison observed in *Federalist* 41. "It is an avowed and essential object of the American Union."<sup>12</sup> Without providing for our own security, we could never hope to control our own destiny or command our own fortunes.

All political communities need to defend themselves and acquire those things they need to survive.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> James Madison, "Federalist No. 41," *The Federalist Papers*, p. 252.

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Governments are instituted among men to secure their rights, which are insecure without government, and that includes a general right to liberty free from violence (hence the rule of law) and external threats.

Collective defense against external threats is the primary reason why the colonies banded together in the first place. A key weakness of the Articles of Confederation was that it did not create sufficient capacity for security, and a central purpose of the Constitution is “to provide for the common defense.” Congress and the President are given the power to provide for defense, and the President, also commander in chief of the military forces, is constitutionally and morally obligated to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.”

The Founders often spoke of national security in terms of “safety.” In the Declaration of Independence, the right of the people to institute government was said to mean “laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their *Safety* and *Happiness* [emphasis added].” The pursuit of happiness is a natural right of liberty, but safety is the initial requirement of the pursuit. “Among the many objects to which a wise and free people find it necessary to direct their attention, that of providing for their safety seems to be first,” John Jay wrote in *Federalist* 3.<sup>13</sup> “Nations, as well as men, are taught by the law of nature, gracious in its precepts, to consider their happiness as the great end of their existence,” James Wilson wrote in his *Lectures on Law*. “But without existence there can be no happiness: the means, therefore, must be secured, in order to secure the end.”<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> John Jay, “Federalist No. 3,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 36.

<sup>14</sup> James Wilson, “Lectures on Law,” in *Collected Works of James Wilson*, ed. Kermit L. Hall and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), Vol. 1, p. 534.

In defending the new constitution against the Articles, Hamilton appealed in *Federalist* 43 “to the absolute necessity of the case; to the great principle of self-preservation; to the transcendent law of nature and of nature’s God, which declares that the safety and happiness of society are the objects at which all political institutions aim.”<sup>15</sup> That is, necessity and self-preservation, the most basic requirements of safety, must be given their due before the higher claims of the happiness of society can be attended to.

National security is challenging in an often competitive, and sometimes hostile, international environment. The most prominent instrument of national security is military power and the potential use of force against powers and persons who threaten America and its citizens, but there are many other instruments of national security as well, including diplomacy and foreign relations, commerce with and aid to other nations, participation in alliances, foreign intelligence, and the exchange of ambassadors.

The requirements of security are dictated by the challenges and threats we face in the world. “How could a readiness for war in time of peace be safely prohibited, unless we could prohibit, in like manner, the preparations and establishments of every hostile nation?” Madison asked in *Federalist* 41.

The means of security can only be regulated by the means and the danger of attack. They will, in fact, be ever determined by these rules, and by no others.... If one nation maintains constantly a disciplined army, ready for the service of ambition or revenge, it obliges the most pacific nations who may be within the reach of its enterprises to take corresponding precautions.<sup>16</sup>

The dangerous ambitions of power were to be found in the passions of human nature. “To judge from the history of mankind,” Hamilton wrote in *Federalist* 34,

<sup>15</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No. 43,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 276.

<sup>16</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No. 41,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 253.



we shall be compelled to conclude that the fiery and destructive passions of war reign in the human breast with much more powerful sway than the mild and beneficent sentiments of peace; and that to model our political systems upon speculations of lasting tranquility, is to calculate on the weaker springs of the human character.<sup>17</sup>

Necessity dictates that the United States must be ready to fight wars and use force to protect the nation and the American people. Washington often liked to use the old Roman maxim: “To be prepared for war is one of the most effectual means of promoting peace.”<sup>18</sup> At the time, such preparations included the creation of a well-organized militia; development of a naval force sufficient to vindicate American commerce from insult or aggression; the promotion of a manufacturing base that would render the United States independent of others for essential military supplies; the provision of military stores, arsenals, and dockyards; and the establishment of a military academy.

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There was disagreement over the particulars necessary for national defense, but the policy objective was broadly supported. Washington was anxious that the country, as he once described it in an Annual Message to Congress, “leave nothing to the uncertainty of procuring a warlike apparatus at the moment of public danger.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, it is imprudent to wait until it is too late.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 34,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 204.

<sup>18</sup> George Washington, “First Annual Message,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 468.

<sup>19</sup> George Washington, “Fifth Annual Message,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 488.

The right of a sovereign nation to preserve itself is not merely passive or defensive. Sovereignty also entails a proactive right to eliminate threats. “When a nation has a right, and is under an obligation to preserve itself and its members; it has, by a necessary consequence, a right to do every thing, which, without injuring others, it can do, in order to accomplish and secure those objects,” wrote Wilson in his *Lectures on Law*.

The same principles, which evince the right of a nation to do every thing, which it may lawfully do, for the preservation of itself and its members, evince its right, also, to *avoid and prevent*, as much as it lawfully may, every thing which would load it with injuries, or threaten it with danger.<sup>20</sup>

The American Revolution, after all, was a preemptive military action. Over the course of “a long train of abuses,” the Americans had become convinced that British policy amounted to the establishment of a tyranny over the American colonies, and they acted to prevent this outcome.

National security is a challenge for all nations, but particularly for democratic political systems dedicated to the limitation of power. “Safety from external danger is the most powerful director of national conduct,” Hamilton noted in *Federalist* 8. “Even the ardent love of liberty will, after a time, give way to its dictates.”<sup>21</sup> Those dictates can rub up against liberty, as many actions necessary for security employ the use of force and proceed in ways that are often secretive and less open than democracy prefers. Likewise, national security sometimes requires restrictions and sacrifices that would be inimical to personal liberty were it not for significant threats to the nation.

<sup>20</sup> James Wilson, “Lectures on Law,” *Collected Works of James Wilson*, Vol. 1, p. 536. Emphasis added.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 8,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 61.

The solution to this dilemma is not to deny the use of force or to make it so onerous as to be ineffective. Rather, it is to establish a well-constructed constitution that focuses powers on legitimate purposes and then divides that power so that it does not go unchecked, preserving liberty while providing for a nation that can—and will—defend its liberty.

Nevertheless, the nature of international affairs demands different processes and institutional arrangements for dealing with foreign challenges, which is why the Constitution grants the national government rather than the states extensive powers in the realm of national security and foreign affairs. This is especially the case when it comes to the President's power as commander in chief of the armed forces. Consider this from *Federalist 23*:

The authorities essential to the common defense are these: to raise armies; to build and equip fleets; to prescribe rules for the government of both; to direct their operations; to provide for their support. These powers ought to exist without limitation, because it is impossible to foresee or define the extent and variety of national exigencies, and the correspondent extent and variety of the means which may be necessary to satisfy them. The circumstances that endanger the safety of nations are infinite, and for this reason no constitutional shackles can wisely be imposed on the power to which the care of it is committed.<sup>22</sup>

The extent of this authority, then and now, has always been a point of contention. Alexander Hamilton and James Madison debated executive authority in a famous series of essays called the Pacificus–Helvidius debates. Hamilton (Pacificus) argued that the executive had broad constitutional power in foreign affairs, while Madison (Helvidius) argued in favor of

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 23,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 149.

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strong legislative authority over foreign affairs in all areas except those specifically granted to the executive in the Constitution.

Obviously, not every action we take in the world involves threats to national security. Nevertheless, whatever the United States does in the international arena must be guided by the duty of a constitutional government based on consent to guarantee the nation's security and safety.

#### NATIONAL INTERESTS GUIDED BY JUSTICE

Independence, to have substantive meaning, must remain first and foremost an internal concern about how we govern ourselves within the confines of our own nation. For the United States to exist as a cohesive, self-governing political community—in command of its own fortunes—it must begin with a fundamental, and entirely proper, distinction between this nation and its national interests on the one hand and other nations and their interests on the other. All political communities need to defend themselves and to acquire what they need to survive and prosper, and this means that nations have distinct interests in the context of world politics. Foreign policy must protect the nation's security, interests, and goals in a world where different nations with different national interests—not bound by the laws of our political system—may be competitive, threatening, or hostile.

The concept of national interest follows from the primary obligation to the community that constitutes the nation in the first place. “Under every form of government rulers are only trustees for the happiness and interest of their nation,” Hamilton wrote in the Pacificus essays, “and cannot, consistently with their trust, follow the suggestions of kindness or humanity

toward others, to the prejudice of their constituents.”<sup>23</sup> This is especially the case in a representative democracy in which the elected leaders have an obligation to act in the best interests of the people they represent and on whose behalf they exercise power. The first obligation of government is to the particular community it governs.

Independence means that it is always in our interest to prevent the United States from becoming subservient to the interests of another nation. “Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none; or a very remote relation,” Washington warned. “[I]t must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves, by artificial ties, in the ordinary vicissitudes of *her* politics, or the ordinary combinations and collisions of *her* friendships or enmities.”<sup>24</sup> We have our own interests to protect, and we must not leave our destiny to be determined “in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor or caprice.”<sup>25</sup>

National interest is a matter of the greatest prudence. Some interests are immediate and others long-term. Some are absolutely vital, some important, others minor and marginal. And in general, interests change according to changing circumstances—other nations’ actions, new threats, technological advances—in the world. While America had, for instance, an immediate interest at the time of the founding in preventing entanglement in Europe’s wars and has a permanent interest in not becoming embroiled in other nations’ political quarrels, the country has always had a paramount interest in preventing (and a willingness to ally with other nations to prevent) a hostile power from dominating the European continent, since such a power would potentially threaten the freedom

and very existence of the United States as an independent nation—as when Nazi Germany was conquering Europe or Soviet Russia threatened to do so.

The Constitution and the union were the vehicles by which the national interest with respect to foreign powers, as well as the interests of individuals and sections, could best be realized. The American people would achieve the material requirements necessary to command their own fortunes by remaining united rather than divided. The greater strength and greater resources provided by the Constitution were essential for security against external danger. Combining resources and enterprises would bring great prosperity to the nation, which in turn would provide important advantages in foreign commerce.

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*Interest, properly understood, represents an entirely legitimate feature of moral principle in foreign affairs.*

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Interest, properly understood, represents an entirely legitimate feature of moral principle in foreign affairs. The Founders never wavered from the view, expressed in Washington’s Farewell Address, that it was “the universal experience of mankind, that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest; and no prudent statesman or politician will venture to depart from it.”<sup>26</sup> Washington insisted that “there can be no greater error than to expect, or calculate upon real favours from Nations.” A nation relying on the altruism of others would “pay with a portion of its Independence” for that conceit.<sup>27</sup>

This recognition of interest does not diminish the importance of justice in American foreign policy. The Founders argued that it was in the true interest of Amer-

<sup>23</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Pacificus No. IV,” in *The Pacificus–Helvidius Debates of 1793–1794: Toward the Completion of the American Founding*, ed. Morton J. Frisch (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2007), p. 33.

<sup>24</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 524. Emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.

<sup>26</sup> George Washington, “Letter to Henry Laurens,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 115.

<sup>27</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.

ica to act with justice toward other peoples. Jefferson put it this way in his Second Inaugural: “We are firmly convinced, and we act on that conviction, that with nations, as with individuals, our interests, soundly calculated, will ever be found inseparable from our moral duties.”<sup>28</sup>

### COMMERCE, NOT CONQUEST

We can begin to understand this clearly in the Founders’ emphasis on the development of international commerce. An important argument for ratifying the Constitution was that it would create a commercial republic appropriate for the entrepreneurial character of the American people. America’s “unequaled spirit of enterprise” makes for “an inexhaustible mine of national wealth,” Hamilton argued in *Federalist* 11. He worried that if the states failed to unite under the Constitution, commerce “would be stifled and lost, and poverty and disgrace would overspread a country which, with wisdom, might make herself the admiration and envy of the world.”<sup>29</sup>

In the Farewell Address, Washington warned the United States against entering into binding political agreements with other countries or into permanent alliances that would not account for changing national interests. But while he opposed *political* connections and *permanent* alliances, recognizing the need for temporary alliances for extraordinary emergencies such as fighting a war or defending against a mutual threat, he recommended that the United States pursue commercial relations with other countries and supported commercial agreements with willing nations. In general, Washington favored harmony and liberal intercourse with all nations as recommended by “policy, humanity and interest.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Jefferson, “Second Inaugural Address,” in *Jefferson: Autobiography, Notes On the State of Virginia, Public and Private Papers, Addresses, Letters*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), p. 518.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 11,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 83.

<sup>30</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 525.

A foreign policy of interest guided by justice implies that commerce, not military conquest or intimidation, should be the primary method of acquiring and trading goods, the preferred means of securing the necessities for national life that the United States did not possess within its territory and the general means of dealing with the other nations of the world.

It was in the commercial realm that depends so completely on contracts and negotiations—and where America had an interest in prosperity—that justice could most clearly be defined, rendered, and exacted. To foster peaceful commercial relations with other nations—and to create an interest in living in peace and friendship—American commercial policy, accord-

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*A foreign policy of interest guided by justice implies that commerce, not military conquest or intimidation, should be the primary method of acquiring and trading goods and the general means of dealing with the other nations of the world.*

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ing to the Farewell Address, “should hold an equal and impartial hand, neither seeking nor granting exclusive favours or preferences; consulting the natural course of things; diffusing and diversifying by gentle means the streams of Commerce, but forcing nothing.”<sup>31</sup>

The Founders appreciated the importance of foreign commerce to the long-term interests of the United States. Placed in the proper channels, the American genius for commerce could be an enormous boon: “A people...who are possessed of the spirit of commerce, who see, and who will pursue their advantage, may achieve almost anything,” Washington wrote in 1784.<sup>32</sup> They also subscribed, though with reserva-

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> George Washington, “Letter to Governor Benjamin Harrison,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 288.

tions, to the view that the development of international commerce was one of the best policies available to ameliorate conflict among nations. They were not so naïve as to suppose that the spread of commerce and republican government would abolish conflict between nations. It was, noted Hamilton in *Federalist 6*, “time to awake from the deceitful dream of a golden age, and to adopt as a practical maxim for the direction of our political conduct that we, as well as the other inhabitants of the globe, are yet remote from the happy empire of perfect wisdom and perfect virtue.”<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the possibility of transforming international relations by encouraging peaceful commercial relations and the proper and necessary role that the United States should play in that transformation remained an inseparable part of the Founders’ thinking. The American character in the world was to be defined generally by commercial pursuits, and the Founders expressed hope, within limits, that commerce might temper international relations.

## JUSTICE AND BENEVOLENCE

Washington began his Farewell Address by asserting that the success of the American experiment—to bring about the happiness of the American people under the auspices of liberty—would give the United States the glory of recommending the American model “to the applause, the affection, and the adoption of every nation which is yet a stranger to it.”<sup>34</sup> The transcendent theme of the founding, elevating it beyond the action of merely one country, was for Americans to demonstrate the viability of self-government not only for themselves, but also for the imitation of mankind everywhere.

The process of calmly deliberating, creating, ratifying, and implementing a self-governing constitu-

tion through democratic means—demonstrating that reflection and choice, not accident and force, could govern men—was the example that would give America moral authority in the world. As James Wilson had remarked:

The United States now exhibit to the world, the first instance, as far as we can learn, of a nation, unattacked by external force, unconvulsed by domestic insurrections, assembling voluntarily, deliberating fully, and deciding calmly, concerning that system of government, under which they would wish that they and their posterity should live.<sup>35</sup>

The Farewell Address introduced a matching American ambition in foreign policy: “It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great Nation, to give mankind the too novel example of a People always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.”<sup>36</sup> Independence would allow the United States to follow a more enlightened approach to the world and give America the freedom to choose a course in accord with a larger sense of justice and commitment to universal principles of liberty. “Religion and morality enjoin this conduct,” Washington wrote, “and can it be that good policy does not equally enjoin it?”<sup>37</sup> This standard of morality should characterize America abroad as well as at home.

This was the higher aim that ultimately defined the American purpose in the world. “Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its virtue?” Washington asked in the Farewell Address. “The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles

<sup>33</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 6,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 53.

<sup>34</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 514.

<sup>35</sup> James Wilson, “Remarks of James Wilson in the Pennsylvania Convention to Ratify the Constitution of the United States, 1787,” *Collected Works of James Wilson*, p. 182.

<sup>36</sup> George Washington, “Farewell Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 522.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

human nature. Alas! is it rendered impossible by its vices?"<sup>38</sup>

What does it mean to be "guided by an exalted justice and benevolence" in foreign affairs?

*First*, it means respecting other nations. Our claim to a separate and equal status implies that others, too, have a rightful claim to that same status. Each people have a sovereign right to determine the government that seems to them to serve their own safety and happiness.

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***Our claim to a separate and equal status implies that others, too, have a rightful claim to that same status. This does not mean that the United States must recognize or treat repugnant regimes as legitimate nation-states, but it does mean that we have a general obligation to respect other nations' sovereignty and not intervene in their affairs when our security or vital interests are not involved.***

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This does not mean that the United States must recognize or treat repugnant regimes as legitimate nation-states, but it does mean that we have a general obligation to respect other nations' sovereignty and not intervene in their affairs when our security or vital interests are not involved. "A nation has a right to manage its own concerns as it thinks fit," Hamilton wrote, and it "ought to have a right to provide for its own happiness."<sup>39</sup> The "self-evident right" of a nation to determine its own affairs, Madison wrote, "can be denied to no independent nation."<sup>40</sup>

*Second*, it means observing good faith and jus-

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Alexander Hamilton, "Letter to George Washington, April 1793," in *The Works of Alexander Hamilton*, ed. Henry Cabot Lodge (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1904), Vol. 4, p. 366.

<sup>40</sup> James Madison, "Political Observations, 20 April 1795," in *Madison: Works* (New York: R. Worthington, 1884), Vol. 4, p. 489.

tice toward other nations. Having recognized other nations' right to manage their own affairs, this country should approach and treat other nations as befits separate and equal sovereign nations. In general, the United States should act honestly and fairly in dealing with other countries, fulfill its contractual obligations, and keep its word. Relations among nations should be matter-of-fact and openly diplomatic rather than based on cynicism or an assumption of disinterested friendship.

It is "the universal experience of mankind, that no nation is to be trusted farther than it is bound by its interest; and no prudent statesman or politician will venture to depart from it," Washington observed.<sup>41</sup> Because all nations are limited by their own interests, the best way to make and keep obligations is through agreements that define the obligations of each party. Despite the Founders' aversion to permanent political alliances, our security and our respect for the sovereignty of other nations suggest that alliances are the appropriate ways of securing relationships with nations that have common economic or security interests.

*Third*, it means cultivating peaceful relations with other nations. The guidelines of usage and right reason, represented by the law of nature and nations, determine the boundaries of justice in foreign affairs. To be sure, the specific requirements of the law of nations are often controversial and ill-defined, but it indicates principles and practices that conform to natural justice. The Farewell Address identified the foremost of these principles as "the obligation which justice and humanity impose on every Nation, in cases in which it is free to act, to maintain inviolate the relations of Peace and amity toward other nations."<sup>42</sup>

The important qualification "in cases in which it is free to act" represented a positive injunction not

<sup>41</sup> George Washington, "Letter to Henry Laurens," *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> George Washington, "Farewell Address," *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 526.

merely to avoid unnecessary war, but also to prevent being forced into war through our own weakness or the actions of others. As Hamilton wrote in *Federalist* 11, “The rights of neutrality will only be respected when they are defended by adequate power. A nation, despicable by its weakness, forfeits even the privilege of being neutral.”<sup>43</sup> John Jay added that the American people ought to support steps that would “put and keep them in *such a situation* as, instead of *inviting* war, will tend to repress and discourage it.”<sup>44</sup>

By establishing a well-administered union that observed justice and good faith in international relations, the United States might create an international environment in which other nations would lack the incentive or opportunity to become America’s enemy. The interests of the United States and other nations

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***Other nations have the same sovereign right as we do to choose governments they believe will best serve their safety and happiness, but that has never meant that the United States is indifferent to the choice between liberty and tyranny.***

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were not static or immutable; America, within the limits of what is humanly possible, could help shape in a positive fashion a world where a general amity among nations—or at least between the United States and the rest of the world—could be sustained. We should hold other nations, as the Declaration of Independence says of Great Britain, “Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.”

*Lastly*, it means not only defending but promoting the cause of liberty in the world. Other nations have the same sovereign right as we do to choose governments they believe will best serve their safety and

<sup>43</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 11,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 82.

<sup>44</sup> John Jay, “Federalist No. 4,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 41. Emphasis in original.

happiness, but that has never meant that the United States is indifferent to the choice between liberty and tyranny. America’s principles compel this country to advocate freedom in the world.

### THE CAUSE OF LIBERTY IN THE WORLD

The Declaration of Independence holds that all men—not just Americans—are endowed with a right to liberty. That liberty is an aspect of human nature everywhere is central to understanding America’s first principles. This is why the promotion of freedom in the world has been and should always be a predominant theme of American foreign policy. Washington put it this way in his First Inaugural Address: “The preservation of the sacred fire of liberty and the destiny of the republican model of government are justly considered as *deeply*, perhaps as *finally*, staked on the experiment entrusted to the hands of the American people.”<sup>45</sup>

The question, then, is not *whether* but *how* to advance liberty, and this is a preeminent question of prudence and statecraft, relating principles and practice. The Founders framed the question with three important caveats.

*First*, they understood that America, though dedicated to a universal principle, is a particular nation. The United States must always keep in mind its own sovereign obligations and be careful not to risk its capacity to perform the vital task of defending itself, its people, and its interests.

*Second*, the Founders understood that America acted within the possibilities of the real world, and in a world of limited resources, the nation must not forget its limits. Moreover, no matter how passionate we are to expand free government, it is not in our hands to dictate the final outcome. Making the right to liberty into an enduring principle of a nation’s political order can be fully accomplished only by the people of that nation.

<sup>45</sup> George Washington, “First Inaugural Address,” *George Washington: A Collection*, p. 462. Emphasis in original.

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*No matter how passionate we are to expand free government, it is not in our hands to dictate the final outcome. Making the right to liberty into an enduring principle of a nation's political order can be fully accomplished only by the people of that nation.*

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*Third*—and most important—the Founders were acutely aware of the difficulties involved in advancing the cause of liberty. They based their hopes, as James Madison wrote in *Federalist 39*, on “that honorable determination which animates every votary of freedom to rest all our political experiments on the capacity of mankind for self-government.”<sup>46</sup> Liberty is not just about holding an election now and again; it is also about establishing stable constitutional government and the rule of law, upholding majority rule, and securing civil and religious liberty.

There is a great distance between the natural *right* to liberty and the *capacity* of particular peoples and nations for self-government. Although every human being has a desire to be free, by no means are all willing to fight (and perhaps die) for it or to acknowledge the political forms necessary to establish and preserve it for themselves or for others. The Founders’ own experience—breaking with a sovereign power, fighting a war for independence, creating constitutional forms and institutions, building on extensive experience in self-government and deep constitutional traditions inherited from their mother country—proves the case.

This is not to say that the Founders thought establishing republican government was unlikely or impossible—or that they were opposed in all cases to intervention on behalf of liberty and the republican cause. That would make a mockery of their own call for foreign support in the Declaration of Independence.

The French Revolution is an instructive example.

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<sup>46</sup> James Madison, “Federalist No. 39,” *The Federalist Papers*, p. 236.

Americans were optimistic about the influence that their principles would have on the cause of liberty elsewhere and initially welcomed the possibility of an American-inspired revolution in France that would replace its monarchy with a constitutional republic like their own. But as events developed, they were increasingly concerned about the disorder and violence that seemed to stem from deliberate policies of the revolutionary French leadership.

Although there was great debate over how to interpret these events—Hamilton saw violent social upheaval where Jefferson saw the chaotic advance of liberty—the Washington Administration (which included Hamilton and Jefferson) ultimately concluded that the French Revolution threatened to spread violence throughout Europe, drawing other nations—perhaps including America—into a worldwide war. While there was disagreement about implementing the policy, there was wide agreement that the United States should stay out of the conflict.

Alexander Hamilton made an important distinction between a nation that had “come to a resolution to throw off a yoke, under which it may have groaned” and “is in the act of liberating itself” on the one hand and, on the other, the policy of the French Revolution,

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*This is not to say that the Founders thought establishing republican government was unlikely or impossible—or that they were opposed in all cases to intervention on behalf of liberty and the republican cause.*

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which held out “a general invitation to insurrection and revolution” in all countries and had declared that it would “treat as enemies the people who, refusing or renouncing liberty and equality, are desirous of preserving their prince and privileged castes.” In the former case, it would be “justifiable and meritorious” for another nation to offer assistance (as France had supported the American cause), but the latter situation



amounted to a declaration of war against all opponents and all nations.<sup>47</sup>

Likewise, Washington made important distinctions when it came to the French Revolution. He stirringly proclaimed to the French minister in 1796 that “my anxious recollections, my sympathetic feelings, and my best wishes are irresistibly excited, whensoever in any country, I see an oppressed nation unfurl the banners of Freedom.” But in praising the cause of freedom in France, Washington made explicit the grounds on which Americans would evaluate the true merits of the French Revolution:

I rejoice that liberty...now finds an asylum in the bosom of a *regularly organized government*; a government, which, being formed to secure the happiness of the French people, corresponds with the ardent wishes of my heart, while it gratifies the pride of every citizen of the United States, *by its resemblance to their own*.<sup>48</sup>

It is one thing to unfurl the banners of freedom but quite another to actually establish constitutional government.

The Founders fervently welcomed opportunities to promote liberty in the world, but they judged those opportunities in light of America’s legitimate national interests and obligations and recognized that the success of liberty ultimately required stable institutions of constitutional government—what today we often refer to broadly as liberal democracy. Likewise, while it is important to understand the universal and even revolutionary implications of our principles, as a nation with sovereign responsibilities, it is not our objective—or our responsibility—to intervene in every case when

our principles are invoked or to impose liberal democratic forms on the rest of the world.

When opportunities for advancing liberty arise, the United States is entitled (even obligated) to make prudent distinctions about commitments (such as cost,

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*The Founders sought to advance liberty not directly by imperial expansion or by using force to change other nations, but indirectly—even secondarily to our primary obligations and interests as a nation.*

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time, and manpower) relative to our interests and sovereign responsibilities, including the larger cause of liberal democracy. The principal duty this nation has toward the world is to remain strong and independent so that the United States can maintain the freedom to advance and, when necessary, defend freedom in the world.

The Founders sought to advance liberty not *directly* by imperial expansion or by using force to change other nations, but *indirectly*—even secondarily to our primary obligations and interests as a nation. America should promote and assist democracies and even prevent others from intervening with or imposing non-democratic governments (implied in the Monroe Doctrine when the United States agreed not to intervene in Europe in exchange for Europe’s not establishing European-backed monarchical regimes in South America). Otherwise—with strong encouragement and general support for the spread of liberal democracy—it should let particular peoples determine their own fate. This approach reflects our historical understanding of how best to uphold and vindicate the universal principle of human liberty.

This is the meaning of John Quincy Adams’s famous speech delivered to Congress on July 4, 1821. The son of President John Adams, he was at the time Secretary of State (and would help author the Monroe Doctrine) and would be President of the United

<sup>47</sup> Alexander Hamilton, “Pacificus No. II,” *The Pacificus–Helvidius Debates of 1793–1794*, pp. 22–23.

<sup>48</sup> George Washington, “Reply to the French Minister, 1 January 1796,” in *The Writings of George Washington from the Original Manuscript Sources, 1745–1799*, ed. John C. Fitzpatrick (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1931–1944), Vol. 34, pp. 413–414. Emphasis added.

States in less than four years. The address is a wonderful statement of American principles and history, focusing on America and the world. Consider this key passage:

Wherever the standard of freedom and independence has been or shall be unfurled, there will her heart, her benedictions and her prayers be. But she goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own. She will recommend the general cause by the countenance of her voice, and the benignant sympathy of her example. She well knows that by once enlisting under other banners than her own, were they even the banners of foreign independence, she would involve herself, beyond the power of extrication, in all the wars of interest and intrigue, of individual avarice, envy, and ambition, which assume the colors and usurp the standard of freedom. The fundamental maxims of her policy would insensibly change from liberty to force.<sup>49</sup>

America's "glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*," Adams concludes. "Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is *Freedom, Independence, Peace*. This has been her declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice."<sup>50</sup> America is an empire, but not of servitude or mastery. As Jefferson once said, it is "an empire of liberty."<sup>51</sup>

<sup>49</sup> John Quincy Adams, *An Address, Delivered at the Request of the Committee of Arrangements for Celebrating the Anniversary of Independence, at the City of Washington on the Fourth of July 1821, upon the occasion of reading the Declaration of Independence* (Cambridge: University Press, 1821), p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34. Emphasis in original.

<sup>51</sup> Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to George Rogers Clark, 25 December 1780," in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd *et al.* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1950), Vol. 4, pp. 237–238.

The Founders believed that whatever temporary advantages might be lost by following a foreign policy of interest guided by justice would be richly repaid over the course of time. The practices of other nations, following America's example in foreign as well as domestic affairs, would lead to a structure of international relations that might achieve America's interests in security and prosperity more surely than one in which nations act unjustly in an international system marked by the pursuit of narrow self-interest. America could provide for its security and realize its interests—in short, command its own fortunes—better in a peaceful and prosperous world than in a world torn by constant avarice and strife.

To be sure, the Founders did not think that a peaceful and prosperous world was around the corner any more than they believed that self-government would soon become the norm. America would do its part in leading by example in both foreign and domestic affairs. The great American experiment would further ennoble the American character, giving moral content to American interests in relation to other nations and peoples.

## INDEPENDENCE FOREVER

The Founders sought to create an independent, self-sufficient American political community, in the form of a large commercial republic, able to control its destiny through a foreign policy that pursued American interests guided by justice. Both the American political community and the national character depended on establishing in the mind of the people the proper relationship—and distinction—between America and other nations and peoples.

Above all, the American character was to be republican. America would be founded and sustained not merely for narrow interests of a particular people in a particular place, but for the sake of that people's commitment to achieving civil and religious liberty for all under the rule of law.

America's Founders sought to define a national good that transcended local interests and prejudices. The national good included the common benefits of

self-defense and prosperity that all Americans would realize by participating in a large commercial nation able to hold its own in an often hostile world. But it was only with the constitutional rule of law that the higher purpose, or true national interest, of America could be realized. That purpose was to demonstrate to all mankind the feasibility of self-government and the suitability of justice as the proper and sustainable ground for relations among nations and peoples.

The honor of striving for domestic and international justice would give moral purpose to the American character. The United States would support, defend,

and advance the cause of freedom everywhere. It would be a refuge for the sober, industrious, and virtuous of the world, as well as for victims of persecution. By sympathy and appropriate action, Americans would show themselves to be true friends of humanity.

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