

THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION AND REGIME CHANGE: EXPLORING THE INDIRECT APPROACH

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“It is a common observation here that our cause is the cause of all mankind, and that we are fighting for their liberty by defending our own.”¹ Benjamin Franklin’s statement, written from Paris in 1779, was indeed commonplace among the American Revolutionary leaders and among the progressive thinkers of Europe. But what precisely did this mean? How exactly did American liberty relate to that of other peoples? Did Americans have any responsibility to do more than defend their own liberties, to work or fight actively for the liberties others?

This Working Paper on American Foreign Policy and Regime Change considers the Founders’ view of how the United States might, and might not, properly promote the cause of liberty, and especially foster changes in foreign governments. The Paper begins with an assessment of the colonial background in which American thinking about regimes first developed, especially the colonists’ admiration for the British Constitution and for the cutting-edge thought of the European Enlightenment. After the French and Indian War, however, a significant number of Americans interpreted

London’s effort to rationalize the imperial structure as an immense conspiracy against their individual and corporate liberties – an effort by the political center to force regime change on the peripheries of the empire, as well as to destroy the liberties of the home country itself. Americans debated the best means to resist the presumed corruption of the British Constitution, both on their behalf and on that of the reformist political project of the Enlightenment. The most radical elements of the American resistance concluded that fundamental regime change – independence and republican government – was necessary to achieve these objectives. The American revolutionaries formulated far-reaching arguments about the nature of politics and the right to alter and abolish governments. These arguments were designed to persuade those who feared that the breakup of the British Empire would be a grave setback for human liberty and a boon to the forces of despotism.

The American revolutionaries did not seek to achieve their aims through world revolution. Nor did they claim the right to alter and abolish other governments. Indeed, they sought the aid and cooperation of former enemies such as France and Spain, which the colonists had once regarded as the essence of despotism. The Americans, however, sought to limit U.S. foreign relationships to the realm of commerce, avoiding “entangling” political-military alliances. They hoped that American entrance into the Euro-Atlantic state system would bring about a new configuration of international power, and rules of behavior, which would be conducive not only to American security

The author would like to thank Benjamin Kunkel and Joshua Distel for their assistance in preparing this Working Paper. To deal with the varied spelling and punctuation from documents of the period, I have used the original version wherever possible from the indicated published sources.

¹ Franklin to Samuel Cooper, 1 May 1777, Francis Wharton, ed., *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States*, 6 vols. (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1889), 2: 312-3. Hereafter referred to as *RDC*.

but also to domestic political reform in nations like France, and to the cause of liberty and republicanism more generally. They appealed to the national interest of the rulers but also to enlightened public opinion among the European nations.

The American revolutionaries assumed that France, which was the most powerful nation on the continent and the long-standing enemy of Britain, would be the linchpin of this strategy. The necessities of war caused American diplomats, led by Benjamin Franklin, and the American Congress to agree to a conditional political-military alliance with France and to defer increasingly to French leadership. John Adams, who represented a minority in Congress – and who was a minority of one in many respects – challenged this drift in American policy. He believed that the French had their own distinct interests in the conflict and that the United States was best served by multiplying its political-commercial contacts throughout Europe, especially with compatible regimes such as the Dutch Republic.

Adams' independent, activist approach – his so-called “militia diplomacy” – not only went around the French but also challenged, directly or indirectly, the rulers and entrenched interests in those nations being asked to align themselves with the United States. Adams, in order to obtain loans and to develop commercial ties with the Netherlands, developed a close relationship with the Patriot movement in that nation – a movement that opposed the pro-English House of Orange and that favored major domestic political changes. Adams insisted that he was not interfering in Dutch politics or supporting regime change there; but he acknowledged that his public arguments and private efforts on behalf of the American cause stimulated interest in popular participation in government and in political reform or regime change through-

out Europe, including a possible British Revolution.

For Franklin and his supporters in Congress, Adams' efforts represented a vast overreaching of limited American power that threatened to undermine the essential ties with France and perversely to encourage those in Britain and America would wanted to restore an Anglo-American Union. Militia diplomacy would unnecessarily alarm European political and strategic conservatives, who still held the upper hand in most nations. Franklin, of course, was no reactionary (some of his closest friends in France would be the leaders of the early stages of the French Revolution). He insisted that he had no intention of making the United States a French satellite or subservient to despotism. America should instead bide its time and wait for the natural increase of its power, rather than an overly-aggressive diplomacy, to improve the prospects for enlightened rule elsewhere.

This Working Paper is not a comprehensive review or assessment of the thinking of the American revolutionaries about regime change, but rather a selective introduction to the Founders' concepts, and disagreements, about their relationship to other peoples and governments. The Paper's line of argument is suggestive, designed to provoke thought and stimulate further research, and not to put forward a definitive analysis of this complicated topic.

The Colonial Background

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the British North American colonists, those who would come to think of themselves as Americans, possessed a multifaceted view of their way of life, history and place in the world. They, or their ancestors, had fled to the New World above all (so their story went) to obtain the liberties that had been suppressed in Europe by the tyranny of cannon and feudal law. The leading edge of the white colonists, especially in the North, had come from the British Isles to escape religious persecution and discrimination against non-English ethnic groups (and the poverty that went along with it). Some of the early colonists had hoped to use their outpost in the New World to bring about a change of religious regime in the Mother Country; others wanted to create a New Jerusalem apart from the fallen Old World; still others simply wanted to make their own way and their own fortunes. But whatever their motive, according to John Adams, the British North Americans believed that the existence of the colonies had marked “the opening of a grand scheme and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth.”²

As a practical matter, for reasons of security and economics, the colonists assumed that their liberties had to be achieved within the British Empire. France, Spain, and their native allies threatened the existence of British North America. The struggle for survival had an ideological as well as geopolitical dimension: the colonists

saw themselves as part of an Anglo-American Protestant bulwark of liberty against the aggressive designs of continental tyranny and Popery, which aimed to create a Universal Monarchy. Despite their historic differences with their governors in London, the colonists nevertheless believed that they were part of the world’s freest political regime. Historian Gordon Wood notes, it is impossible “to overestimate the degree to which eighteenth century Englishmen,” including those in British North America, “reveled in their worldwide reputation for freedom.” The French and Indian War was seen in British North America as a great victory for the global forces of liberty, and the colonists believed they had played the decisive role in that war. They assumed that the subsequent growth of power and territory by Anglo-America would also serve to spread liberty.³

The colonists also reveled in the defense of their particular form of government – that of the British Constitution. As historian Bernard Bailyn notes: “No one doubted that liberty, as the colonists knew it, rested on, had in fact been created by, the stable balancing of the three essential socio-constitutional orders, the monarchy, the nobility and the people at large, each with it appropriate organ of government.” The balance of contending forces needed to be so institutionalized “that no one contestant could monopolize the power of the state and rule without effective opposition.”⁴ There was to be sure, a distinction between savagery and barbarism on the one hand, and civilized societies on the other. Continental monarchies like France might be highly advanced in terms of the arts and

² See, for example, David Hackett Fischer, *Albion's Seed: Four British Folkways in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989); John Adams, A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law, Charles Francis Adams, ed., *The Writings of John Adams, 10 vols.* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1851), 3: 452. Hereafter referred to as *WJA*.

³ Eric Foner, *The Story of American Freedom* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994), pp. 4-7 (Wood quotation, p. 7).

⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Faces of Revolution: Personalities and Themes in the Struggle for American Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), p. 70.

sciences, literature, commerce, and refinement. But their luxury and inequality made them inferior to societies like that of England that were based on respect for equality and political virtue. Americans would stress the *British*, not merely *English*, Constitution, for its role in creating an empire of liberty that was grounded in both national interests and imperial concerns. In Benjamin Franklin's opinion, London had wisely granted autonomy to its provinces and thus solved the great imperial problem in which "great empires had crumbled first from their extremities" because the central government lacked the necessary information to reign in bad governors.⁵ The French and Indian War had demonstrated graphically to men like Franklin that the imperial core actually gained strength from the periphery. The colonists saw themselves playing an increasingly elaborate and vital role in the Anglo-American regime as time went on.⁶

British North Americans also saw themselves as part of larger Enlightenment project, with all the qualifications that term entails. In all realms of life – political, scientific, cultural – men were to be judged by merit and not birth. The Enlightenment was reformist in spirit, designed to work within existing institutional frameworks and to improve those institutions through a process of gradual and consensual change. The object was not to tear the social fabric apart but rather to achieve far-reaching effects over time as reforms accumulated and began to reinforce one another.⁷ The

New World had a distinctive role and path in the unfolding of the Enlightenment, as Bailyn notes:

British North America had long been the subject of intense scrutiny by European thinkers – partly out of interest in the effect of environment on human development, but mainly out of the need for proof of what a society of Europeans would look like if the burdens of European establishments were radically reformed or eliminated: if powerful established churches, with their priesthoods and wealth and inquisitions, were eliminated, if feudal landowning, which gave great wealth, leisure, and power to the few and guaranteed poverty for the masses, were abolished; and if oppressive economies, bound down by medieval restrictions and encumbrances, were rationalized and modernized. In America the enlightened reformers believed they had found the answers, and answers that gave lie to conservatives who argued that the powerful institutions of the *ancien regime* alone protected Europe from barbarism, that if the structure of civilization as it was known were eliminated the result would not be Elysium but savagery. America, the philosophes, especially Voltaire, said, was there to prove the opposite.⁸

The leading figures of the Enlightenment regarded themselves as members of a

⁵ Franklin's Narrative of Negotiations in London, 22 March 1775, *RDC*, 2: 12.

⁶ See, for example, Eliga H. Gould, *The Persistence of Empire: British Political Culture in the Age of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992).

⁷ See the Introduction in Darren Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson: The Politics of the Enlightenment*

and the American Founding (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); and also Peter Onuf & Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in the Age of Revolution, 1776-1814* (Madison, Wisconsin: Madison House, 1993).

⁸ Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew: The Genius and Ambiguities of the American Founders* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003), pp. 67-8.

transnational and transpolitical regime – the Republic of Letters. They sought to reinforce one another by transmitting ideas and the results of experiments, whether scientific or political, and by adopting the best practices of others. They advocated the “cause of humanity” and sought to create an enlightened public opinion among elites that would give authority and support to the reform process within particular political regimes of various types. Different individuals had different programs but as political scientist Ralph Lerner observes, this enlightened public opinion was united in pursuit of a “generic republicanism” that was “neutral, by and large, toward the office of kingship, but not toward a system of exemption and privileges based on hereditary orders. It would respect or at least making grudging allowance for national or historic differences, but focus its attention mainly on the shared qualities and aspirations of newly enlightened regimes. For such republicanism, legitimacy stems not from divine grant, not from time-honored prescription, but from the consent of citizens who have matured in their freedom. A people brought to an awareness of their interests and rights can be relied on to care for themselves and hold their trustees to account.”⁹

The Enlightened were interested in improving the general lot of humanity but also increasing the power of their particular states. They debated among themselves about what type of regime best served the dual role of engine of Enlightenment and of national greatness. Some, following one line of Montesquieu’s analysis, argued that regimes ought to be tailored to the national character, which was a byproduct of climate,

⁹ Ralph Lerner, “America’s Place in the Enlightenment,” in William Rusher and Ken Masugi, eds., *The Ambiguous Legacy of the Enlightenment* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America), p. 88.

topography, and history. The advocates of the English Constitution of King, Lords and Commons, following another line of Montesquieu, pointed to their regime’s success both as a liberal regime and as a powerful and wealthy state; and to the Glorious Revolution as a model for political reform. As political scientist Harvey Mansfield notes: “It established the English Constitution as the model constitution, in Locke, Montesquieu, Burke and others. The model constitution is the best, practical constitution made actual. Even if it is not a universal pattern that would work everywhere, it is a model for the best circumstances.”¹⁰

Advocates of reform on the continent, in contrast, tended to prefer enlightened despotism on the grounds that a strong central authority, in the form of a monarch devoted to modernization, was needed to overcome the entrenched aristocratic and clerical obstacles to progress. Enlightened advisers would provide the monarch with the necessary expertise (and prestige) to recast their state and society, the role that Voltaire aimed to assume in Prussia and Russia. More radical thinkers warned, however, that the monarchs’ own survival was so tied up with the *ancien regime* that they would inevitably come to oppose reform before it reached that critical threshold. Modernization therefore required political liberalization—republican government (however defined) should be the aim of the Enlightenment project. Rousseau offered an influential radical critique of the entire notion of political reform through gradual improvement the status quo.¹¹

¹⁰ Harvey Mansfield, “The Unfinished Revolution,” in Ralph C. Hancock and L. Gary Lambert, eds., *The Legacy of the French Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1996), pp. 28-29. See also the essay by Pierre Manent, “The French Revolution and French and English Liberalism,” in this volume.

¹¹ For review of these ideas, see Eric J. Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution, 1789-1848* (New York:

For most of the Enlightened, however, the *process* of reform was thought to be more important than the exact type of regime in which that reform was to be conducted. Reform would be top-down, not bottom-up (that is, mass violence would not drive it). It would occur nation by nation, as Enlightened leaders on the spot judged the proper pace and scope of change according to their particular circumstances.

There was an international as well as transnational dimension to the Enlightenment, a Republic of Nations as well as a Republic of Letters. The reformist spirit aimed to moderate the intensity of state-to-state conflict and thereby support the conditions for domestic reform. Enlightened leaders were expected to apply the “improved science of politics,” as well natural science, to strengthen their respective states, but they also believed that the pursuit of national interest should take place within structure that had rules of the road – the law of nature and nations – that would be increasingly liberalized over time. The law of nations included the principles of the equality of nations and non-interference in domestic affairs, and it made no distinction among types of regimes, only in their external behavior. There was an argument whether the balance of power was a progressive or regressive concept, but the most respected authorities of the law of nations, such as Vattel, conceived of Europe as a political system in which equilibrium was crucial to liberty as well as order. As political scientist Daniel George Lang notes: “As Hume would suggest, the balance of power system would help encourage the development of limited government within states because the denial of universal claims

New American Library, 1962), pp. 20-25. On Rousseau, see Charles Kesler, “The Different Enlightenments: Theory and Practice in the Enlightenment,” in Rusher and Masugi, eds., *The Ambiguous Legacy of the Enlightenment*, p. 111.

abroad would moderate absolutist claims at home.”¹²

According to the main current of Enlightenment thought, commerce played an important role in reducing state-to-state violence and arbitrary domestic rule. This was the case even if one did not fully embrace the notion, attributed to Montesquieu, that commerce softened the morals and manners of men. As historians Peter and Nicholas Onuf have written:

Diplomacy conducted in accordance with the principles of the balance of power promised to rationalize, even domesticate power. But its greatest contribution to the progress of European civilization was to promote peaceful, mutually beneficial exchanges across national boundaries. The enlightened self-interest of sovereigns converged with their subjects to serve the common good of humanity. The liberal equation of interest with prosperity, or rationality with a preference for maximal over relative gains, resolved all conflicts in an ultimate harmony of interests. Enlightened statecraft worked toward this revolution by dismantling artificial impediments to trade.¹³

To be sure, many of these Enlightenment ideals were often honored in the breach. Britain and the colonies often pursued their own specific interests as aggressively as any other power (as well as

¹² Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), p. 7; Daniel Lang, *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic: The Law of Nations and the Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), pp. 7-12. See also Onuf & Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World*.

¹³ Onuf & Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World*, p. 18.

against each other, on occasion). But at least in this highly stylized world, the colonists saw themselves as participants in the global geopolitical struggle between the opposing political systems, one representing ordered liberty and the other, despotism; and in the corresponding intellectual and moral struggle between enlightenment and non-enlightenment.

The immediate role of British North America in this struggle was to serve as the commercial and strategic anchor of the Empire. The colonists had their differences with England but these were thought to be manageable because of the prestige of the mother country, the protection she offered them, and the tacit willingness of London to allow colonial self-government. As Franklin noted, this was a very different relationship, in terms of liberty and prosperity, from that between England and Ireland. Over time, however, British North Americans expected that their subordinate role would change. Franklin's famous 1751 essay, "Observations concerning the Increase of Mankind," predicted that within a century the greatest number of Englishmen would be in North America. He foresaw a glorious future in which the seat of empire would transfer to the West, and the differences between the imperial core and periphery would adjust naturally on American terms and in an evolutionary fashion. Young, virtuous and vigorous America would strengthen the cause of liberty in aging Britain and provide the dynamic element in the continued and ordered expansion of that liberty. An ever-stronger Anglo-America meant the corresponding weakening of despotism, a power-political trend that would also open up opportunities for enlightenment and political reform among the states of Europe.¹⁴

¹⁴ On Franklin's views, see Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin*, pp. 100-102; Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), p. 234; John Ferling, *A*

The Crisis of the Imperial Regime

The breakdown of this stylized model of Anglo-American ordered liberty is a familiar story. After the French and Indian War, a majority of the colonists interpreted the policies of the British Ministry to rationalize the imperial structure as an immense conspiracy to assault their individual and corporate liberties – that is, an effort by the center to force regime change on the peripheries of the empire. Britain's hostility towards the colonies was not just the result of bad policies but also because of the corruption of the English Constitution. That regime had deteriorated to the point where Britain herself had become an agent of tyranny and a threat to the entire enlightenment project. American resistance, then, was conceived not just in terms of an intra-imperial dispute over specific legislation but as part of the global conflict between freedom and despotism, and the eternal domestic contest between liberty and power. For instance, the colonists had previously been willing to accept the British Navigation Acts because they saw them as being in the interests the Empire as a whole and not as an instrument of special privileges for Britain itself. The authorities in London and their delegates in the Western Hemisphere had traditionally signaled their acceptance of this understanding through lax enforcement of the Acts against American shipping, especially in the West Indies trade. Now, things had changed and colonists such as John Hancock were being brought up on charges of smuggling. When American juries and officials resisted complying with this change of policy, Britain threatened to

Leap in the Dark: The Struggle to Create the American Republic (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 22; H.W. Brands, *The First American: The Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), pp. 439-41.

remove the cases to an Admiralty Court outside of the colonies. A growing number of Americans came to consider British maritime policy as tyrannical and inimical to commercial freedom.¹⁵

The American response to the perceived threat of London-imposed regime change was resistance, ultimately in the form of the violence (real or threatened); but to a first order through commercial retaliation (real or threatened) that presumably put at risk Britain's prosperity and its financial trump card over the continental despotisms. They sought to restore the de facto autonomy that the colonial governments, especially their popular assemblies, had enjoyed (sometimes as much imagined as real); to insist on their rights as Englishmen (e.g., not to be taxed without their own consent); and to have their growing role in the Empire recognized. The Americans also warned their friends in England that their own liberties were at stake in the contest. "We call for & confide in the good offices of our fellow subjects beyond the Atlantic," Thomas Jefferson wrote. "Of their friendly dispositions we do not yet cease to hope; aware, as they must be, that they have nothing more to expect from the same common enemy than the humble favor of being last devoured."¹⁶

The American colonial agents in London, especially Benjamin Franklin, insisted that the colonists were acting in a constitutional fashion to resist the unconstitutional acts of Parliament and, as the argument played itself out, the King-in-Parliament. Their declared object was not

separation from the Empire but the defense of British regime, properly understood, and its restoration to former glory. "England must be saved in America," John Dickinson argued. Eventually, the mother country "will rejoice that we resisted – and thank us for having offended her." Joseph Warren expressed the hope that "Britain's liberty, as well as ours, will eventually be preserved by the virtue of America." John Adams believed that the direction of reform was clear: "The improvements to be made in the English Constitution lie entirely in the House of Commons." If there was a substantial measure of electoral reform, and if the popular arm of the legislature was thus strengthened, "it would be impossible to corrupt the people of England." It was up to those people to "take care of the balance, and especially their part of it."¹⁷ These appeals were made not only to the people of Britain but to other parts of the Empire, including Quebec, Jamaica, and Ireland.

As these political appeals went unanswered and as London responded by reasserting its authority through measures such as the Coercive Acts, American leaders, who characterized themselves as Whigs, began to fear that the British regime could not be reformed, at least from the outside, and certainly not on a time scale that would save American liberties. The British Ministers, for their part, insisted it was the colonists who were conspiring to bring about regime change in England by calling into question the constitutional settlement of 1688. Even the friends of America such as Burke, however much they might sympathize in practice with the colonists and urge conciliatory measures, disagreed with the evolving American inter-

¹⁵ For a thorough overview, see Robert Middlekauff, *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

¹⁶ Jefferson's Draft of the Declaration of the Causes and Necessities for Taking Up Arms, Julian P. Boyd and others, ed., *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950-), I: 203.

¹⁷ Quotations cited by H. Trevor Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience: Whig History and the Intellectual Origins of the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965), pp. 103, 114-5, 123, 187.

pretation of the nature of the imperial regime. From this lack of support for the American cause, John Adams and other American Whigs decided that the King, parliament, the administration, and the electorate “have been now many years trained and disciplined by Corruption” in their oppressive ways. The conclusion seemed clear that “the Cancer” is too deeply rooted, and too far spread to be cured by anything short of cutting it out entire.”¹⁸

The process of resisting British policies at the political-moral as well as practical level led American Whigs to rethink the entire nature of government and not merely the British-American constitutional relationship. The cutting edge of American opinion moved beyond an appeal to rights and liberties of Englishmen to an appeal to the rights of man, which (as these Americans now saw it) had once been the animating spirit of the British Constitution. The sovereignty of the people became the new or at least newly-asserted standard by which regimes should be judged, an argument in line with the larger Enlightenment project. A people had a right to determine their own form of government. They had a right to threaten, and even carry out, revolution to secure those rights when confronted by tyrannical rule. The most radical of the Americans began to argue openly that the colonists had to free themselves from the British Empire not only for their own self-preservation and liberty but also on behalf of the larger cause of humanity, a cause that the British had abandoned. Theirs would not be a purely selfish act but one designed to preserve and advance the cause of liberty writ large. America would assume the mantle of defender of Protestant and republican

liberty, through the creation of a “New Order of the Ages.” The American Revolution would be fought for the rights of mankind. America would bear the torch of human liberty and take the lead in promoting an enlightened constitutionalism. If America was to reach its full potential and play its full role as the Laboratory of Enlightenment, it would have to separate itself from the British Empire and become an American Empire.¹⁹

The Case Against American Regime Change

That was a hard argument to swallow for many colonists who not only retained their historic attachment to the Mother Country but who held a somewhat different view of government, liberty, and regime change. For years, even the most radical colonial leaders had insisted publicly that they were loyal to the crown and that they only wanted to bring about constitutional reform, not independence. Those who became Loyalists, and not a few moderate American Whigs, had warned from the beginning that independence was the logical outcome of resistance to England. The Loyalists argued that there could be no middle ground between a regime based on the principle of Parliamentary supremacy, and the complete separation of America from Britain. Given the disastrous consequences that the Loyalists believed would result from independence, they saw no alternative but to accept the former relationship. Massachusetts Governor Thomas Hutchinson acknowledged the premise of the Enlightenment: that this was indeed an age of liberty; and that the desire for liberty

¹⁸ Adams to Moses Gill, 10 June 1775, Robert J. Taylor and others, eds., *Papers of John Adams* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977-), 3:21. Hereafter referred to as *PJA*.

¹⁹ Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek: Loyalist Ideology in Colonial New York and Massachusetts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), pp. 170-1.

throughout the world had grown markedly since the Glorious Revolution. But truly free government required a balance between power and liberty. The peoples of continental Europe had begun tentatively to seek the restoration of their former liberties against despotic rule. In these circumstances, at least in principle, the expansion of liberty could have a positive outcome. But in already free societies, the excessive pursuit of liberty would degenerate into anarchy unless checked by power.²⁰ Religious minorities also needed protection from overbearing local majorities. “The destruction of Old England would hurt me,” lamented New York Dutch-French Huguenot John Jay. “I wish it well. It afforded my ancestors an asylum from persecution.”²¹

For the Loyalists, the British government provided the essential balancing element of power for the colonies. First, British North Americans need the protection of the mother country to defend their lengthy and exposed coastline, a vulnerable frontier on the interior, and their commerce. Second, because the individual colonies differed so widely in their interests, they needed an external force – Parliament – to impose order in their internal relationships and, through appointed governors and officers, to protect the rights of individual citizens from oppressive local majorities. According to Massachusetts loyalist Daniel Leonard, a friend and political opponent of John Adams, the colonial governments “have no principle of stability within themselves;” they would “become wholly monarchical, or wholly republican, were it not for the checks, controls, regulations, and supports of the supreme authority of the empire.” There could be no divided constitutional authority; “the supreme authority of Parliament to legislate for the empire was

the vital constitutional ligament in the imperial connection and the most basic symbol of the oneness of the Empire.”²²

Hutchinson argued that the only practical alternative to the existing imperial arrangement for the colonists was not a freer, independent America, but rule by another external power, “which would allow them less liberty than they are sure of always enjoying while they remain English subjects. ... I hope it will never be our misfortune to know by experience the difference between the liberties of an English colonist and those of the Spanish, French, or Dutch.”²³

Pennsylvania’s Joseph Galloway agreed. If America rejected the authority and protection of the mother country, “she must in all probability soon become the slave of an arbitrary power – of Popish bigotry and superstition.”²⁴ According to Galloway, the imperial relationship had served the colonies well. Their commerce had flourished, they enjoyed unprecedented freedoms, they could depend on imperial protection from foreign threats and they could look forward to a happy and prosperous future that included a rapid expansion across the continent. Galloway doubted that the colonists – with no army or navy to speak of and no military infrastructure could wage war successfully against Britain. America’s only hope of victory would be to ally itself with France and Spain, Roman Catholic countries with far more absolutist traditions than the mother country. Galloway and others doubted that the continental despotisms, which possessed their own empires and which had concerns about the stability their own domestic rule, would be eager to legitimize popular rebellion, even against their ancient enemy. That

²⁰ Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, especially pp. 80-2.

²¹ Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, p. 2.

²² Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, pp. 143-4.

²³ Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, pp. 80-82, 209.

²⁴ Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience*, p. 14.

said, if America, aided by France and Spain, actually defeated Britain, it would find itself at the mercy of foreign regimes far worse than that of King George and the British Parliament. What was more likely, however, the colonies would be defeated and ruled henceforth with an iron hand by London.²⁵

According to the Loyalists and the cautious Whigs, an Anglo-American civil war would also be devastating for the general cause of human freedom and the prospect for the evolution of enlightened regimes throughout Europe. America's alliance with despotic regimes like France and Spain would strengthen those particular despotisms and weaken the case for balanced constitutions and ordered liberty. The dynamic liberalizing factor and example of America would be lost, for Britain in particular and for enlightened opinion in general. "But I cannot please myself with contemplating the Ruin and destruction of Great Britain – Avert it Heaven! May she ever continue the Mistress of Nations – the grand support of *Liberty*, the Scourge of Oppression and Tyranny!" wrote one loyalist.²⁶

The best choice for Americans as the Loyalists saw it was to stay in the Empire and continue to fight the good fight for liberty, for themselves and for their brethren in England, as their ancestors had done. Franklin, for a long time, was of this persuasion. Even if the King and the Ministry were engaged in a malevolent conspiracy, time, in the form of geography, demography, and economic growth, was on the side of British North America. The colonists should not force the issue, especially as they had been incapable in the past of uniting for the common defense (as the failed Albany Plan had demonstrated). When Great Britain, burdened with debt,

next found itself at war, the colonies then would be in the best position to bargain and define the imperial regime properly. "Then is the time to say, redress our grievances," Franklin argued. "Cling fast to every right privilege and just claim, but avoid violence and open conflict. Keep in mind not only the inevitable growth of America and its destined domination of the English-speaking world, but the condition of Europe and England's fate in a university of warring nations. Remember that the Protestant country (our mother, though lately an unkind one) is worth preserving, and that her weight in the scale of Europe, and her safety in a great degree, may depend on our union with her."²⁷

The more moderate Whigs were not content with the constitutional or political status quo, however. They still sought a middle ground where the principle of Parliamentary supremacy could be reconciled with a practical division between imperial and local affairs. The colonists should be granted a responsibility for matters that did not concern the Empire as a whole. The moderates considered various reforms such as an imperial parliament, in which Americans would be directly represented. They supported a policy of resistance and commercial coercion but with the object of reconciliation, rather than separation, by compelling London to integrate the

²⁵ John Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark*, pp. 116-19.

²⁶ Quoted in Janice Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, p. 110-11.

²⁷ Bailyn, *The Ordeal of Thomas Hutchinson*, p.234. Or as Franklin wrote to a colleague from Massachusetts: "There seem to be among us some violent spirits who are for an immediate rupture. But I trust the general prudence of our countrymen will see that by our growing strength we advance fast to a situation in which our claims must be allowed; that by a premature struggle we may be crippled and kept down another age; that as between friends every affront is not worth a duel, between nations every injury is not worth a war; so between the governed and the governing every mistake in government, every encroachment on rights, is not worth a rebellion." Brands, *First American*, p. 458.

colonies more fully into the Empire and thus better secure their rights and liberties.²⁸

Even Loyalists like Galloway thought in terms of major constitutional reforms that would alter the internal government of the colonies as a means of adjusting the imperial relationship. Unlike the Whigs, however, he believed that republicanism was an enemy of liberty because it destroyed the necessary constitutional balance. He decried the growing “democratic” drift in American thinking about government. “An entire Democracy without the checks of Aristocracy and Monarchy would be dangerous to the State.” Galloway favored lessening the power of the popular assemblies and strengthening the non-elective branches, to make those colonial governments less responsive to public pressure. He favored creating an American nobility appointed by the King, perhaps in the form of councilors. According to Galloway, the colonists should get over the notion that there was a politically influential group in England that supported the radical American Whig understanding of the proper nature of the imperial regime. “However closely we may hug ourselves in the opinion, that parliament has no right to tax or legislative for us, the people of England hold the contrary opinion as firmly.” Daniel Leonard warned: “We hear, by every arrival from England, that it is no longer a ministerial (if it ever was) but a national cause.”²⁹

Benjamin Franklin, after being humiliated in front of the Privy Council for his arguments on behalf of the colonies, concluded reluctantly that the Loyalists were correct. There was no politically viable enlightened opinion in England to which the colonists could appeal. But rather than

surrender the larger issue, he and other American leaders soon decided to appeal to enlightened opinion elsewhere.³⁰

The Case for American Regime Change

The would-be American revolutionaries needed to make a persuasive case for regime change that would address the criticisms of Loyalists and bring the moderates into their camp. Regime change meant not only separation from the British Empire and assertion of American nationhood, but also, as it soon became clear, the adoption of a republican form of government. The revolutionary leadership had to demonstrate that such an independent America was viable internally and externally; that separation from the British Empire would advance and not damage the larger cause of human liberty, enlightenment, and political reform; and that the new nation would not be forced to align itself with despotism. Well before the Continental Congress officially declared independence, its representatives had begun sounding out foreign opinion and seeking military and economic assistance from abroad. They realized that outside aid, in some form and at some level, would be necessary to succeed in a conflict with the world’s leading military and economic power. John Adams, for instance, thought that while the United States could achieve independence on their own, the costs (broadly considered) would be so excessive as to make good government impossible after the war.³¹

²⁸ See the characterization of John Jay and others in Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004), p. 57.

²⁹ Information and quotations from Potter, *The Liberty We Seek*, pp. 134, 154, 172-3, 175fn.

³⁰ Colbourn, *The Lamp of Experience*, p. 188.

³¹ L. H. Butterfield, Leonard C. Faber, and Wendell D. Garrett, eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, 4 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1961), 4: 38-39 [hereafter referred to as *D&A*]; Adams to James Warren, 4 August 1778, *RDC* 2: 676.

The nascent Congressional government had considerable confidence, contrary to Galloway's warnings, that the geopolitical imperative among continental European powers to weaken Britain – aided, in France's case, by the desire for revenge from defeat in the Seven Years' War – would override potential allies' concern about American republicanism. As for the prospects of an alliance with France after over a century of conflict with the French in North America, American leaders noted that sudden reversals of alliance among European powers were hardly unknown. George Mason observed that the Dutch had been able to secure outside support in their revolt against Spain from Spain's traditional enemies, including those regimes that were hardly sympathetic to the religion or politics of the Dutch. "The same causes will generally produce the same effects . . . what has happened may happen again."³² The revolutionary leaders may also have calculated that their adoption of republican institutions was actually an advantage in soliciting an alliance with a proud monarchy like France. If anything, the French royalists "believed that the republican form of government was destined to keep the US so weak and powerless that Europe would not have to be afraid of it."³³

Nevertheless, the American revolutionaries were not prepared merely to rely on old-style European diplomacy or the calculations of despots. They appreciated the need to appeal to the politically influential enlightened classes of Europe – the lawyers, merchants, writers, and sympathetic government officials who constituted the Republic of Letters and who considered themselves the defenders of the rights of mankind. These appeals would

have to be made in terms other than crass individual or national self-interest. The Americans expected to draw upon, shape, and strengthen the cause of Enlightenment – call it liberalism or generic republicanism – throughout Europe. The Enlightened in turn would appreciate that the success of the American Revolution would improve the prospects for domestic reform and, in the long-term, for regime change, in Europe. In 1775, Franklin, on behalf of Congress' Secret Committee of Correspondence, wrote to ask C.W.F. Dumas, a Swiss-born authority on international law living at The Hague, whether there were "any disinterested powers acting on behalf of humanity." Dumas responded: "When I remarked, in my last letter to you, 'that all Europe wishes you the most happy issue in your defense of your liberty,' I meant the unprejudiced, equitable, humane European public; in a word, the citizens of universal society, men in general."³⁴ The French playwright Pierre Beaumarchais, who had friends in the French Court and among the literati of Paris, was a nice example of the audience that the Americans were trying to target. Beaumarchais was an Enlightenment enthusiast who founded a commercial enterprise, secretly supported by the French government, which supplied the Americans with weapons, clothes, and provisions. Indeed, Americans held out some hope for a time that individuals like Beaumarchais, with the tacit approval of their governments, would for reasons of glory (and profit) provide enough private aid that formal government-to-government alliances would not be necessary.

The American revolutionaries issued a number of documents, official and unofficial, designed to shape the domestic and international battlefield of ideas in their

³² Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, p. 151.

³³ Henry Blumenthal, *A Reappraisal of Franco-American Relations, 1830-1871* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p. 3.

³⁴ Franklin quotation, Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin*, pp.121-4; Dumas to Franklin, 30 April 1776, *RDC*, 2: 86.

favor. Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was a milestone in shifting American public opinion in favor of independence and republican government (although Adams groused that it contained nothing that had not been bandied about behind closed doors in the Continental Congress). The Declaration of Independence established what turned out to be the canonical arguments for opposing oppressive rule and justifying regime change. The Model Treaty set out the desired place of the United States in the Euro-Atlantic state system and the means by which the United States could influence that system – and the regimes that constituted the Republic of Nations – for the better. American representatives, publicists, and sympathizers abroad saw that these arguments were circulated throughout Europe, suitably tailored to the appropriate audiences.

The Declaration of Independence and the Model Treaty

The Declaration of Independence would have a privileged place in articulating the role of the United States in the world. Scholars have long debated the precise purpose and target audience of the Declaration, as well as the short-term impact of the document itself. Historians such as Pauline Maier argue that the Declaration was not remarkably original or important at the time, especially in contrast to the significance that later generations would assign to it as the foundational document of the American Republic.³⁵ But it is fair to say that the Declaration was, as Jefferson put it, “an expression of the American mind” at the time of the Revolution; and that the Declaration offered a template of advanced liberal thinking about the nature of regimes

and regime change. The Declaration was also part of the new nation's diplomatic campaign to attract the support of foreign allies. That campaign had to walk a fine line, one of influencing enlightened public opinion abroad without alienating the non-enlightened rulers and ministers who as a rule controlled the guns, loans, and troops on which the success of the Revolution would ultimately depend.³⁶

A New Standard for Regime Change

The Declaration of Independence was famously addressed “to a candid world,” by which the American revolutionaries meant especially the Enlightened (or those who thought themselves enlightened). It sought to demonstrate that the American cause was much more than mere rebellion; and that this particular revolution, and revolution rightly understood, was a legitimate means of affecting regime change. The Declaration invoked the rights of mankind and the sovereignty of the people as the ultimate standards of political justice and pushed the boundaries of legitimate regime change beyond that established by the Glorious Revolution. But at the same time, the Declaration was carefully qualified by terms, explicit or implicit, that did not threaten established rulers everywhere. The *right* that a sovereign people had to alter or abolish their government was not the same as a *categorical imperative* to do so.

First, any people contemplating regime change must suffer demonstrably from an oppression that went well beyond the ordinary difficulties between rulers and the ruled. Governments should not be overturned for “light and transient causes” – there must be a “long train of abuses” that clearly demonstrated a design to establish an

³⁵ Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

³⁶ Stourzh, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1970), p. 23.

absolute despotism. (At the same time, a sovereign people was entitled to draw the logical conclusion that a long train of abuses portends such a design – they are not condemned to wait to resist until an absolute despotism is established, because a successful revolution may then be impractical.) Second, the revolutionaries must demonstrate that they have exhausted all other avenues short of revolution to seek redress for their grievances. Third, the revolution must be practical. (“When a people find themselves cruelly oppressed by the parent state, they have an undoubted right to throw off the yoke, and to assert their liberty, if they find good reason to judge that they have sufficient power and strength to maintain their ground,” as the Boston cleric Samuel West argued.³⁷) Fourth, the revolution of any particular people must cause more good than harm for humanity as whole, and not merely be for the immediate benefit of those people.

Those generic standards established a rather high threshold for legitimate regime change. The Declaration – unlike *Common Sense* – did not condemn monarchy in general but rather the actions of a particular monarch. Indeed, the Declaration demonstrated an inherent respect for the decision of other peoples about their form of government, including their willingness to live under despotism.³⁸ The American revolutionaries did not call for world revolution or demand the independence of all colonies from their mother countries. The Declaration set the American Revolution and the claim of national independence in the context of the existing international system –

“to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them” (a point which would be emphasized in other policy documents and decisions, such as the Model Treaty). This followed the authority of Vattel – that all nations, like all men, were created equal and had equal rights. As historian David Armitage writes of the Declaration: “Its primary intention was to turn a civil war among Britons, and within the British Empire, into a legitimate war between states under the law of nations.” Paine, in the first edition of *Common Sense*, argued that the “custom of nations” demanded a declaration of American independence. Without a declaration, Paine concluded, “[t]he custom of all courts is against us, and will be so, until, by an independence, we take rank with other nations.”³⁹

The Declaration’s generalized appeal to foreign audiences and potential allies raised the question whether, under the law of nature and nations, it was legitimate for those seeking independence or regime change to ask for the assistance of outside powers; and whether, in light of the general doctrine of non-interference in the domestic affairs of others, it was legitimate for those outside powers to offer assistance. The American answer, of course, was yes, at least in terms of aiding a people establishing their independence from a repressive (and distant) government. The revolutionary regime, for its part, had to be sufficiently powerful to accept that assistance on equal terms rather than as a supplicant. Independence or regime change could not be justified if it resulted merely in exchanging one tyrant for another. Those outsiders who were considering whether to support in-

³⁷ Samuel West, *On the Right to Rebel Against Governors*, Election Day Sermon, 1776, at http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=2066&chapter=188670&layout=html&Itemid=27

³⁸ Nathan Tarcov, “Principle and Prudence in Foreign Policy,” *Public Interest*, no. 76 (Summer 1984): 47-50.

³⁹ See quotes and analysis in David Armitage, *The Declaration of Independence: A Global History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), pp. 36-40.

dependence or regime change, like the revolutionaries themselves, must take into account the probability of success and the effect of their actions on third parties. France and Spain, for instance, would be entitled to consider the impact of the American Revolution on their own colonies; and to insist upon reassurance from the United States that it did not intend to promote revolution in those colonies.

The New Standard for Regimes

The American revolutionaries laid claim to the Enlightenment standard of the best modern regime, one previously asserted for the British Constitution; and a new model of regime change, based on reflection and choice, not force and accident.⁴⁰ The American regime would be a New Order of the Ages. It would demonstrate to the world the feasibility of a wholly popular government (non-monarchical and non-aristocratic) on a continental scale. The United States would also be a (con)federal republic. The American revolutionaries believed that it was possible to arrange their federation so that no outside agent, like the British parliament, would be required to impose unity and order among the constituent members. Although the American Revolution was not formally anti-monarchical, its success would clearly point the way to identifying self-government with republican government, understood to be government without Kings and Lords.⁴¹

There was, to be sure, great deliberation among American leaders about the precise form of government that best suited

this new federal republic, both within the new states and for the central (confederation) government. They also debated the proper relationship between and among the states and the central authorities. Paine argued for a simple form of government based on a unicameral legislature; the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776 incorporated these ideas. Adams insisted that complexity, in terms of a constitutional balance among branches of government representing distinct socio-economic (but not hereditary) orders, was essential to maintain ordered liberty. Adams was the principal author of the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. The American political debate, of course, would carry on into the 1780s, the Constitutional Convention and ratification, and beyond. But in any case, the United States were a breathtaking and dynamic experiment in self-government, the lessons of which could be applied by wise leaders elsewhere to reform their own particular regimes according to their own particular circumstances.

At the heart of the justification for the American Revolution was the belief that this was an experiment in self-government that would favorably impact all mankind and the prospects for reform and regime change elsewhere. American leaders assumed that the mere fact of their Revolution would have good effects. Adams argued that any rebellion for freedom – as the English did against King John, the Dutch against the Spanish, the Swiss against the Austrians, and the Romans against the Tarquins – tended to promote the general cause of liberty in unexpected ways.⁴² The revolutionaries speculated that at the very least America would become an asylum for the oppressed of mankind, especially if the European regimes could not be reformed. The existence of this asylum by itself would

⁴⁰ Mansfield, “The Unfinished Revolution,” pp. 28-29.

⁴¹ For the argument that the Declaration of Independence did offer authoritative guidance about the preferred type of regime, see Harry V. Jaffa, *How to Think about the American Revolution* (Durham: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), pp. 49-140.

⁴² Colbourn, *Lamp of Experience*, p. 95, from Adams’ *Novangulus* essays.

increase the prospects for reform by bolstering the courage of the Enlightened who could now run greater risks, knowing that they had assurances of safety if things went badly. Despots would have to consider the losses to their own national power if their populations (especially the best and brightest) fled to the New World because of domestic repression.⁴³

A New International System and Standard for International Behavior

Finally, the Declaration of Independence put the United States forward as a sovereign and equal member of the existing international system. The American revolutionaries proposed however to join that system on their own terms not those set by the European great powers. They believed they could reform that system and fundamentally reconfigure international politics in a way that would promote the opportunities for enlightened domestic reform and, if a sovereign people so chose, for regime change. As Peter S. Onuf writes: “Visionary republican revolutionaries wanted to change the world: by extending the boundaries of the European system, by enhancing the system's capacity for progressive improvement through the practice of enlightened diplomacy, by perfecting a legal regime among their own state-republics that would eliminate the causes and pretexts of war.”⁴⁴

The Archimedean lever that would allow the United States to move the Euro-

Atlantic world so fundamentally was commerce. The American revolutionary leaders assumed that the lure of their commerce, once liberated from the British Empire, was so powerful that it would overcome the reluctance that the nations of Europe might have towards aiding the cause of independence. As noted above, there were other reasons to believe that the Europeans would be friendly; but the Americans assumed that the commercial imperative would convince all but the most regressive European regimes that that they could not afford to be left out of the economic bonanza. Put in these terms, the American cause would appeal to those among the Enlightened who advocated greater commercial freedom but who did not necessarily identify the cause of political freedom with that of republican government. The United States would offer its commerce on the open market, without preference to regime type, ideally on a reciprocal basis. Under these conditions, “all nations would join in protecting the common mart” and resist Britain’s efforts to reestablish her monopoly over this trade.⁴⁵ As Peter and Nicholas Onuf write: “By challenging Britain’s mercantilist regime, the Americans appeared not only to serve their own interests, but also those of prospective trading partners and of the trading world generally.”⁴⁶

At the outset of the Revolution, Americans assumed that they were in such a strong position that they would not have to enter into any binding political arrangements (“entangling alliances”) with the European powers, either during the Revolutionary War or thereafter. The political and geographical separation between the Old and New Worlds would protect American republicanism as

⁴³ See Bailyn, *The Faces of Revolution*, chapter on “1776.” The American revolutionaries’ promotion of emigration was qualified in important respects, however. For example, both Franklin and Jefferson were cautious about letting in aristocrats or peasants because their characters had been tainted, in different ways, by living under a monarchy. Brands, *First American*, pp. 633-4.

⁴⁴ Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), p. 60.

⁴⁵ James H. Hutson, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1980), p. 16

⁴⁶ Onuf & Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World*, p. 19.

well as American interests. The United States would deal with all nations strictly on a commercial basis and would promote a correspondingly enlightened understanding of the law of nations – especially the maritime law of nations, where England had long been at odds with the continental powers. American representatives promoted the law of nations as interpreted by authorities such as Vattel, who held that the natural state of nations was peace, not war, which further justified the American policy preference of avoiding the wars and entanglements of European diplomacy.⁴⁷ In *Common Sense*, Paine had famously written: "Any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint." Paine did so in part to refute the argument that American security required that the colonies remain under the protection of Britain. But in a larger sense, Paine believed that continued ties with England made unnatural enemies of those nations and peoples who would otherwise be friends – and that such friendship was the natural state of affairs in a commercially-focused international system, one not driven by classic military/naval/imperial considerations.⁴⁸

Toward the end of the war, Paine would argue that the progressive aim of the American Revolution was not to spread of

republican government but to foster the growth in international harmony between nations of different political systems and principles – the creation of world community based on compacts or treaties of commerce and peace between sovereign countries. The eighteenth century had demonstrated that wars were not profitable. The only barrier to political compacts of nations was the prejudice nations had developed towards each other during previous periods of history. "Forms of government have nothing to do with treaties," Paine wrote. "The former are the internal policy of the countries severally; the latter their external policy jointly; and so long as each performs its part, we have no more right or business to know how the one or the other conducts its domestic affairs, than we have to inquire into the private affairs of a family."⁴⁹

The Americans would also follow the authority of Vattel that all nations, like all men, were created equal and had equal rights; and that among these (with some important and well-defined exceptions) was the right of non-interference in their domestic affairs. Of course, nations, like men, varied in their size, character, wealth, and circumstances; and great powers claimed their prerogatives. But the law of nations, interpreted in an enlightened fashion, would check excessive claims by the great powers, including their right to interfere in the domestic affairs of others; and support the rights of peoples to choose their own form of government. To be sure, the balance of power still existed as a motive force in relations among the European powers and the United States could not ignore the balance in its prudential calculations. "That it never could be our Interest to unite with France, in the destruction of England, or in any measures

⁴⁷ Jesse S. Reeves, "The Influence of the Law of Nature Upon International law in the United States," *American Journal of International Law* 3 (July 1909): 554, 559.

⁴⁸ Thomas Paine, *Common Sense*, Michael Foot and Isaac Kramnick, eds., *The Thomas Paine Reader* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1987), p. 83. For an overview, see David M. Fitzsimons, "Tom Paine's New World Order: Idealistic Internationalism in the Ideology of Early American Foreign Relation," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Fall 1995): 569-82.

⁴⁹ For Paine's full analysis, see his Letter to the Abbé Raynal, *Thomas Paine Reader*, pp. 147-66.

to break her Spirit or reduce her to a situation in which she could not support her Independence,” John Adams concluded. “On the other hand it could never be our Duty to unite with Britain in too great a humiliation of France.”⁵⁰ The trick was to ensure that the balance of power operated in a progressive rather than regressive manner. An independent, non-aligned, and commercially powerful United States best promoted such a progressive balance.

The Continental Congress approved what became known as the Plan of 1776, or the Model Treaty, which codified the preferred American approach to foreign policy and international relations.⁵¹ The American approach to international commerce and the law of nations did not formally discriminate among regime types or promote domestic regime change; but the geo-economic revolution caused by American independence and by general access to American trade would, over time, effectively preference certain types of political rule. Commerce and liberty were twins, as Alexander Hamilton would later explain. “As commerce enlarged wealth and civilization increased,” slowly illuminating the darkness of mediaeval times. In time “the people began to feel their own weight and consequence...they grew tired of their oppressions” and joining forces with their monarchs, “threw off the yoke of aristocracy.” “Commerce did more than contribute to the strength of the nation: it ensured its liberties,” as political scientist Darren Staloff observes. “A steady stream of revenues from taxes on trade meant government no longer need plunder its people or threaten private property. Indeed, one of the central themes of Scottish social theory from

Smith and Ferguson to Hume and William Robertson had been the role of commerce in producing modern liberty. It was the rise of commerce that had destroyed the baronial despotism of the feudal epoch, redistributing property from the landed aristocracy to the urban tradesman and people at large.”⁵² Hume and Adam Smith argued in turn that the enhanced prosperity of one nation did not necessarily mean the ruin of another. Smith spoke of a great mercantile republic uniting all the merchants of all nations.⁵³ Even if the merchant class did not constitute “men of *no* nation,” they would represent a powerful constituency within non-republican regimes to which the American cause would appeal.

The American republicans believed that by promoting law-governed international commerce, they would promote moderate relations among nations; and strengthen the forces and interests of liberalism within regimes of all types.⁵⁴ The old warlike international system, by contrast, retarded the progress of mankind because it strengthened those interests and elements most inimical to liberty and reform. It led to the accumulation of power by the government at the expense of the people. Liberalized regimes, based on a fundamental respect for the rights of their citizens, were more likely to be respectful of

⁵⁰ Adams, *Autobiography*, *WJA*, 2: 505.

⁵¹ See the detailed discussion of the Model Treaty in Gregg L. Lint, “The Law of Nations and the American Revolution,” Lawrence S. Kaplan, ed., *The American Revolution and a Candid World* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1977).

⁵² Hamilton quote and discussion in Staloff, *Hamilton, Adams, Jefferson*, p. 80.

⁵³ Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin*, pp. 108-9.

⁵⁴ As Pierre Manent observes, Americans were not uncritical supporters of commerce. In the commercial system, members of society behave less passionately and more rationally, not because they become intrinsically wiser but because they are more aware of their own interests and that the system is conceived precisely for the satisfaction of their interests. They were also concerned with the threat to virtue caused by the luxury associated with certain types of commerce. Manent, *A World beyond Politics? A Defense of the Nation-State*, trans. Marc A. Lepain (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 88.

the rights of others; and hence less likely to threaten each other.⁵⁵ American independence would not lead to a full and instant reformation of international system but it would initiate this virtuous circle and create space for enlightened leaders to foster further improvement in their domestic regimes. “The progress of the law of nations, under the influence of science and humanity, is mitigating the evils of war, and diminishing the motives to it, by favoring the rights of those remaining at peace, rather than of those who enter into war,” James Madison would later argue. “Not only are the laws of war tempered between the parties at war, but much also in relation to those at peace.”⁵⁶

Standing in the way of the creation of this virtuous circle of commerce, peace, and domestic reform was a particular despotism: the maritime tyranny of Britain. Americans might debate among themselves whether monarchies or mixed regimes like that of Britain were inherently tyrannical or merely subject to corruption; but they hoped that the continental European governments could be brought to agree that London’s naval practices threatened to undermine the security and prosperity of all nations, irrespective of regime type. “The one fighting to oppress and enslave a free people,” Robert R. Livingston of New York characterized the conflict. “The other to establish their rights, the one attempting to Tiranize over the Ocean, and fetter the Commerce of the World, the other resisting

that Tyranny, and rendering Trade as free as nature made it.”⁵⁷ The Enlightened of Europe could take this argument one step further: the British maritime tyranny fostered zero-sum international environment that retarded domestic political reform. Franklin argued that Britain had followed the wrong path to commercial prosperity. She had displayed “a fondness for conquest as a warlike nation, her lust for ambition was an ambitious one, and her thirst for a gainful monopoly was a commercial one... the true and sure means of extending and securing commerce is the goodness and cheapness of commodities; and . . . the profit of no trade can ever be equal to the expenses of compelling it and holding it by fleets and armies.”⁵⁸ An independent America not only would demonstrate a better path to national prosperity, it would promote best domestic political practices among all nations and regime types.

The American leaders, then, did not rely upon a global war of peoples against kings, or revolutionary changes of regime elsewhere, to help bring about their own change of regime. They instead relied on appeals to the geopolitical and economic interests of existing European governments, and the common goals of the enlightened classes, to gain necessary assistance in their war for independence. But they also hoped that the American Revolution would be the catalyst for the emergence of a more moderate international system in which states, republican and non-republican, respected each other’s sovereignty. The cumulative effect, by strengthening liberal interests within nations and by removing the repressive pressures created by threats to national security, would improve the conditions of mankind and create openings

⁵⁵ On this general reformist tendency, see John C. Rainbolt, “American’s Initial View of Their Revolution’s Significance for Other Peoples, 1776-1788,” *Historian* 35 (May 1973): 418-33.

⁵⁶ James Madison, *Examination of the British Doctrine, Which Subjects to Capture a Neutral Trade, Not Open in Time of Peace* (Washington, DC, 1806), available at http://oll.libertyfund.org/?option=com_staticxt&staticfile=show.php%3Ftitle=1938&chapter=119003&layout=html&Itemid=27

⁵⁷ Robert R. Livingston to Adams, 9 January 1782, *PJA*, 12: 176.

⁵⁸ Franklin to Lord Howe, 20 July 1776, *RDC*, 2: 103-4.

for domestic political reform – and, if particular sovereign peoples so desired, for regime change. The successful American experiment in republican government would provide further incentive and guidance for reform and peaceful revolution throughout the civilized world.

Strategy and Diplomacy of the War

These concepts about regime change were all well and good to contemplate within in the theoretical confines of the Republic of Letters; but the principles of the American Revolution had to be made operational to meet the needs of wartime strategy and diplomacy. Under the pressure of events, Americans would come to disagree about the degree to which the letter and spirit of the “new diplomacy” – with its implications for foreign regime change – ought to guide their actions.

The American representatives abroad had the immediate task of announcing the formal existence of the new nation. They cited various actions and pronouncements of the Continental Congress and other American governmental bodies as evidence of American seriousness. Above all, they sought to reassure governmental officials and influential Europeans that the colonies would not reconcile with England. “Our Articles of Confederation being by our means translated and published here, have given an appearance of consistence and firmness to the American States and Government that begins to make them considerable,” Franklin wrote shortly after he arrived in France in late 1776 with a diplomatic commission from Congress. “The separate constitutions of the several States are also translating and publishing

here, which afford abundance of speculation to the politicians of Europe . . .”⁵⁹

Congress certainly did not to try to hide from foreign rulers the Declaration of Independence, despite its potentially revolutionary appeal. Quite the contrary. “The reasons of this act of independence are so strongly adduced in the declaration itself that further argument is unnecessary,” the President of Congress, John Hancock, informed William Lee, the representative-designate to the courts of Berlin and Vienna.⁶⁰ The Committee of Secret Correspondence instructed Silas Deane, their first informal representative to France: “With this you will receive the Declaration of the Congress for a final separation from Great Britain. It was the universal demand of the people, justly exasperated by the obstinate perseverance of the Crown in its tyrannical and destructive measures, and the Congress were very unanimous in complying with that demand. You will immediately communicate the piece to the Court of France, and send copies of it to the other Courts of Europe. It may be well also to procure a good translation of it into French, and get it published in the gazettes.”⁶¹ Deane later complained to Congress about the tardy arrival of the document. “I presented the Declaration of Independence to this court, after it had, indeed, become an old story in every part of Europe,” he reported in December 1776. He was happy to report, “it was well received...”⁶²

Franklin agreed with Deane’s assessment: “The good will of all Europe to our

⁵⁹ Franklin and Deane to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 12 March 1777, *RDC*, 2: 287-8.

⁶⁰ Hancock to William Lee, 1 July 1777, *RDC*, 2: 359.

⁶¹ Committee of Secret Correspondence to Silas Deane, 8 July 1776, Paul H. Smith, ed., *Letters of Delegates to Congress, 1774-1789* (Washington: Library of Congress, 1976-), 4: 405:

⁶² Deane to John Jay, 3 December 1776, *RDC*, 2: 213-14.

cause as being the cause of liberty, which is the cause of mankind, still continues, as does the universal wish to see the English pride humiliated and their power curtailed.”⁶³ Franklin did not foresee any immediate loosening of grip of despotism in Europe but he verified the earlier speculation that the American Revolution would have a positive effect on the cause of human liberty. “Tyranny is so generally established in the rest of the world, that the prospect of an asylum in America for those who love liberty, gives general joy, and our cause is esteemed the cause of all mankind. Slaves naturally become base, as well as wretched. We are fighting for the dignity and happiness of human nature.”⁶⁴

All Europe is on our side of the question, as far as applause and good wishes can carry them. Those who live under arbitrary power do nevertheless approve of liberty, and wish for it; they almost despair of recovering it in Europe; they read the translations of our separate colony constitutions with rapture, and there are such numbers everywhere who talk of removing the America with their families and fortunes as soon as peace and independence shall be established, that it is generally believed that we shall have a prodigious addition of strength, wealth, and arts, from the emigration of Europe; and it is thought that to less or prevent such emigrations the tyrannies established there must relax and allow more liberty to their people. Hence it is a common observation here that our cause is *the cause of all mankind*, and that we are

fighting for their liberty by defending our own.⁶⁵

American diplomats, over time, found the European view of republican America to be a bit more complicated. “The Courts of Europe...dread the Forms of Government in America,” Adams observed after spending several years on the continent. “They dread that high Sense and Spirit of Liberty, and those popular Principles, with which America is full. They are afraid of their Spreading in Europe and propagating like a Contagion, So as to produce Revolutions. But the People of Europe, and the Men of Letters ought for the opposite Reasons, to cherish America as their only remaining Barrier against Despotism. For if the Spirit of Liberty is Subdued in America there is now an end of it in the World.”⁶⁶ To help finesse the revolutionary implications of their mission for the *ancien regime*, American diplomats offered reassurances that the United States would respect the colonial possessions of the European powers. Adams used this line of argument:

Those Powers, which have as large Possessions as any beyond Seas, have already declared against England, apprehending no such Consequences. Indeed there is no Probability of any other Power of Europe following the Example of England, in attempting to change the whole System of the Government of Colonies, and reducing them by Oppression to the Necessity of governing themselves. And without such manifest Injustice and Cruelty on the Part of the Metropolis, there is no danger of Colonies attempting

⁶³ Franklin to Cooper, 27 October 1779, *RDC*, 3: 396.

⁶⁴ F and D to Committee of Secret Correspondence, 12 March 1777, *RDC*, 2: 287-8.

⁶⁵ Franklin to Samuel Cooper, 1 May 1777, *RDC*, 2: 312-3; Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin*, p. 234.

⁶⁶ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 27 February 1781, *PJA*, 11: 164-6.

Innovations. Established Governments are founded deeply in the Hearts, the Passions, the Imaginations and Understandings of the People, and without some violent Change from without to alter the Temper and Character of the whole People, it is not in human Nature to exchange Safety for Danger, and certain Happiness for very precarious Benefits.⁶⁷

Adams was well aware that the Spanish were particularly sensitive on this point. “But when they are led to consider the Difference between their Colonies and the English, that there is no Probability or Possibility of their ever undertaking as the English did, to subvert the fundamentals of an Established Government—and the Nature of their Governments which can suppress in an instant the first Symptom of discontent, they easily give it up.”⁶⁸ Spain, France and the other European colonial powers should realize that the real threat to their overseas possessions was not American-inspired revolt but the threat posed by a British Empire that had re-conquered its American colonies: “Put American again in dependance on England, and it would be in their joint Power in twenty years, to conquer all the Possessions of the Spaniards French Dutch and Portuguese in the East and West Indies in Spight of all that the rest of Mankind could do to prevent it.”⁶⁹

American representatives also relied heavily on appeals to honor. “His most Christian majesty in rendering himself a protector of the rights of mankind became entitled to the assistance from the friends of

man,” Samuel Huntington, then serving as President of Congress, wrote to the French Minister to the United States. “This title could not but be recognized by a monarch whose diadem is adorned with equity and truth.”⁷⁰ Arthur Lee appealed to “the magnanimity of a great and opulent prince,” his Most Catholic Majesty, King of Spain: “nor can anything give more lasting satisfaction to the royal mind than the reflection of having employed those means which God has put into his hands in assisting an oppressed people to vindicate those rights and liberties which have been violated by twice six years of incessant injuries and insulted supplications; those rights which God and nature, together with the convention of their ancestors and the constitution of their country, gave to the people of the States.”⁷¹

The War, the Regime Question, and Regime Change

American revolutionary leaders viewed war and its accoutrements, such as debts and standing armies, as engines of despotism, an inherent threat to liberty and to republican government. As Franklin famously said, “I have been apt to think that there has never been, nor will ever be, any such thing as a *good* war, or a *bad* peace.”⁷² By fighting for their independence, American republicans were aware that they might paradoxically be planting the seeds for their own future destruction. They believed however that specific wars, fought out of necessity, if waged properly and for the right ends, could actually strengthen the forces of liberalism and reform among the Republic

⁶⁷ A Memorial To their High Mightinesses, the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries, 19 April 1781, *PJA*, 11: 280.

⁶⁸ Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 11 December 1779, *PJA*, 8: 295.

⁶⁹ JA to Jean de Nefville & Fils, 24 March 1781, *PJA*, 11: 227

⁷⁰ President of Congress (Samuel Huntington) to Luzerne, 17 November 1779, *RDC*, 3: 410.

⁷¹ A. Lee to Florida Blanca, 17 March 1777, *RDC*, 2: 291.

⁷² Franklin to Jonathan Shipley, 10 June 1782, cited in Brands, *First American*, p. 620.

of Nations and within particular regimes. If Americans properly waged the present war of necessity, they would strengthen their union and self-government, and create or at least facilitate a favorable international configuration of power that would preserve American independence over the long run, as well as promote the general cause of human liberty.

To this end, Americans sought to internationalize the war and orient it towards the common goal of truncating or destroying the maritime tyranny of Britain. "It is a connection with America, which must in future decide the Balance of maritime Power, in Europe," Adams insisted.⁷³ If Britain retained control over America's expanding population and commerce, the European balance of power would be destroyed and "there would be an end of the liberty of all other nations upon the seas. All commerce and navigation of the world would be swallowed up in one frightful despotism." France's existence as a maritime and commercial power would be destroyed as would Spain and the Netherlands. Britain would realize the ancient dream of despots by becoming a universal monarchy.⁷⁴

To deal with this common threat of British maritime tyranny in the context of winning the current war, American strategists pressed their European allies or potential associates (specifically, France) to dispatch a strong naval force to American waters to combine with the armies of the United States. "We must have a superiour naval Force in the West Indies and on the Coast of this [American] Continent," Adams insisted. "England will never be brought to her senses untill this Plan is adopted. Get Convoys to Trade, and a superiour naval

Power in the American seas, and all will be easy, I think."⁷⁵ The American Commissioners in France (Franklin, Adams, and Lee) appealed to the French Foreign Minister, Vergennes: "It is obvious to all Europe that nothing less is at stake than the dominion of the sea, at least the superiority of naval power, and we can not expect Great Britain will ever give it up, without some decisive effort on the part of France. With such an exertion as that of sending a superior fleet to America we see nothing in the course of human affairs that can possibly prevent France from obtaining such a naval superiority without delay. Without it the war may languish for years, to the infinite distress of our country, to the exhausting both of France and England, and the question left to be decided by another war..."⁷⁶

At the outset of the conflict, American leaders did not expect that independence would be achieved by militarily conquering or forcing regime change on Britain. Having abandoned their claims of common citizenship and rights under the British Constitution, the American revolutionaries did not assume the moral authority they once possessed as fellow citizens to become involved in Britain's domestic affairs. The British people were now like any other people; enemies in war, friends in peace. Rebellion might well occur in the British Isles but this would be the byproduct rather than the aim of war. George Washington, for one, believed that the British would muddle through their governmental problems, as they had always done, and that Americans could not count on such a simple solution as the fall of the Monarchy to

⁷³ Adams to Patrick Henry, 9 July 1778, *D&A*, 4: 153-4

⁷⁴ Hutson, Adams, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, p. 10.

⁷⁵ Adams to Henry Marchant, 25 October 1779, *PJA*, 8: 228.

⁷⁶ Franklin, Lee and Adams to Vergennes, 1 January 1779, *RDC*, 3: 5-6.

absolve them of the need to fight and win a hard war.⁷⁷

The newly-constituted United States did not entirely neglect this dimension of the conflict, however. American forces invaded Canada even before independence was formally declared and had invited the accession of the Canadians to the North American Union. Franklin argued for raids by allied naval forces against the English coast (one of which was executed by John Paul Jones), but for the purpose of retaliation and strategic leverage, not to overthrow King George. “It is scarcely conceivable how great a panic, the success in any one of these projects, would occasion in England,” Jones argued. “It would convince the world that their coasts are vulnerable, and would, consequently, hurt their public credit.”⁷⁸ The French and Spanish planned an invasion of Britain but this plan, soon aborted, had limited resources and goals. William Lee suggested to Adams that it would be “good Policy in France to have a good stock of muskets and other Military Stores lodged at Dunkirk and other sea Ports ready to throw into England at a short warning if circumstances there should ever require such a measure.”⁷⁹ Paine suggested to Congress that he be smuggled into England and spread revolutionary propaganda but, like Lee’s proposal, nothing came of this idea.⁸⁰

Loyalist émigrés like Galloway took the threat of subversion seriously. They argued that a transatlantic cabal based in England, in collusion with Franklin and other American rebels, had created the

revolution. Their tactics, according Galloway, were domestic sedition in England and “conflagration of massacres” in America. The aim of the cabal was to create such discord as to bring about the collapse of the Ministry, the destruction of the monarchy, and the republicanization of British society and institutions. Franklin, from Paris, did stay in touch with such intellectual liberals in Britain as Richard Price, Joseph Priestly, David Hartley, Benjamin Vaughan, and William Hodgson. He did so not to encourage sedition, however, but rather to nurture moves towards peace talks and British acceptance of American independence.⁸¹

For most American leaders, Bourbon France, despite the differences in regime type, was the natural linchpin of their wartime strategy and the key to a new postwar configuration of international power conducive to American security and human liberty. Next to Britain it was the most powerful state in Europe, its leaders burned to revenge the humiliating defeat in the Seven Years’ War, and it could call on the family compact with Spain. To make the relationship work, both sides had to overcome long-standing prejudices. Franklin was an inspired choice to mediate between the two peoples, as he shrewdly played upon his image as a savant of the Enlightenment and a “natural American,” while flattering the French character. Adams also offered reassurances to his countrymen that the religion-based regime differences were no longer to be feared.

The spirit of crusading for religion is not in France.... The rage for making proselytes, which has existed in

⁷⁷ R. R. Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1959), p. 184.

⁷⁸ Jones to the Commissioners, 4-5 July? 1778, *PJA*, 6: 262.

⁷⁹ William Lee to Adams, 9 April 1780, *PJA*, 8: 119-20.

⁸⁰ Craig Nelson, *Thomas Paine: Enlightenment, Revolution, and the Birth of Modern Nations* (New York: Viking, 2006), p. 150.

⁸¹ Esmond Wright, *Franklin of Philadelphia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 322; John Ferling, *The Loyalist Mind: Joseph Galloway and the American Revolution* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977), p. 105.

former centuries, is no more. There is a spirit more liberal here in this respect than I expected to find. Where has been the danger to the religion of the Protestant cantons of Switzerland from an alliance with France, which has subsisted with entire harmony for one hundred and fifty years, or thereabouts? But this subject is fitter for ridicule than serious argument, as nothing can be clearer than that, in this enlightened tolerant age, at this vast distance, without a claim or color of authority, with an express acknowledgment and warranty of sovereignty, this, I had almost said tolerant nation, can never endanger our religion.⁸²

Monarchical and Catholic France, to be sure, was hardly an exemplar of a progressive regime or crusader on behalf of the rights of mankind. But France's acceptance in February 1778 of a liberal commercial relationship with the United States, in the form of a Treaty of Amity and Commerce, based on the Model Treaty, was a landmark event. As John Quincy Adams would reflect decades later:

The commercial treaties negotiated by other nations were almost always combinations for exclusive privileges or concessions of monopoly. But the spirit of the American revolution was emphatically the spirit of liberty and of equal rights. It was manifested not only in their internal institutions, but in the influence which they exercised from the first moment of their admission into the community of nations. It was proclaimed to the world, in a manner appropriate to its own excellence and to their dignity, in the first treaty that

they concluded with a European power that of 6th February, 1778, with France.... It may be a subject at once of honest exultation and of serious admonition to Americans of this day, that while their declaration of independence contained the first solemn recognition by a nation at the moment of its bursting into birth of the great and sacred principles of civil society, upon which alone rightful government can be founded, their first national compact, though concluded with an absolute monarchy, proclaimed in like manner the only just and magnanimous principles which ought to govern the intercourse of nations with each other.⁸³

The Foreign Policy Debate Emerges

The reality of the situation did not quite match the goals of idealized American diplomatic and military strategy, however – as Adams, father and son, well knew. Nations did not automatically flock to cultivate and protect American commerce. Franklin and his colleagues were unable to secure a commerce-only relationship with France. In order to entice the French openly into the war, the American Commissioners agreed to a second treaty that brought the United States into a conditional political-military alliance with France. Although Spain eventually joined the fighting, the Spanish Court refused American applications for loans or diplomatic recognition. The war dragged on. The Continental Congress became essentially bankrupt. Elements of the Continental Army mutinied.

⁸² Adams to Warren, 4 August 1778, *RDC* 2: 676.

⁸³ John Quincy Adams to George Washington Campbell, 28 June 1818, Worthington C. Ford, ed., *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, 7 vols. (New York; Macmillan, 1913-1917), VI: 367-8.

Non-belligerent European powers, such as Russia, proposed a mediation that might have sacrificed American interests and even its independence.

In 1779, in the midst of this emerging crisis, Congress engaged in the first major debates over foreign policy since the decision for independence. The debate was initially triggered by a request from the French Minister to the United States, Conrad Alexander Gerard, to determine its terms for peace and to appoint a minister plenipotentiary to conduct the negotiations. The ensuing Congressional deliberations revealed major sectional and factional disagreements about the way forward. To complicate matters Gerard schemed behind the scenes to ensure that Congress adopted limited war aims – terms acceptable to France and likely to lead to an early resolution of the war. He also pressed Congress to select a pliable diplomat.

Gerard was disappointed with the selection of personnel. New Englander Adams, who had already rubbed Vergennes the wrong way before returning to the United States on his own accord in 1779, was named as the U.S. Peace Commissioner. (As part of the compromise agreement over policy and personnel, John Jay of New York, then regarded as pro-French, was selected over Francophobe Arthur Lee of Virginia for the post in Madrid.) Gerard was much more successful in determining the content of Adams's instructions. Congress' initial terms fell short of the full American wish list. For instance, Adams was not required to obtain access to the fisheries of Newfoundland or to acquire all of Canada and Florida. By 1781 Congress, under the influence of a new French Minister, the Chevalier de la Luzerne, was even more accommodating to Versailles. Adams was subsumed into a five-member Peace Commission which now included presumed Francophiles Jay, Franklin, and

Thomas Jefferson. They were instructed to subordinate themselves in the peace negotiations to the French government: "You are...to undertake nothing...without their knowledge and concurrence; and ultimately to govern yourselves by their advice and opinion."⁸⁴

The underlying factional differences in Congress were extraordinarily complicated and cannot be divided simply into pro and anti-French parties. For our purposes, what appears to be extraordinary subservience to France can be explained by growing Congressional fears that the Revolution was about to founder militarily and politically without a rapid settlement; and particularly by the belief that substantial elements of American society secretly aimed to reintegrate the United States into the British Empire. Only the closest possible ties with France could keep America from falling back into the English orbit. Those opposing this position argued that independence made on French terms would leave the United States as an enfeebled satellite of France, having merely exchanged one European master for another (precisely as Galloway had predicted).⁸⁵ Some of those in the so-called anti-French camp might indeed be described as pro-English but for the most part their experience in the war had reinforced their views on the need for an independent American foreign policy and on the unique relationship of the United States to other regimes, including that of Britain. The most influential, if idiosyncratic, member of this camp was John Adams.

⁸⁴ Continental Congress, Instructions to American Peace Commissioners, 15 June 1781, Mary A. Guinta and J. Dane Hartgrove, eds., *Documents of the Emerging Nation: U.S. Foreign Relations, 1775-1789* (Washington, DC: National Historical Publication and Records Commission, 1998), 78-9.

⁸⁵ Ferling, *A Leap in the Dark*, p. 210-3; Bradford Perkins, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776-1865* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 32-6.

Adams, American Strategy and the French Alliance

Adams' diplomatic experience in Europe had persuaded him that the American Revolution – particularly the liberation of American commerce but also its republicanism – had wide-ranging effects beyond those appreciated by Congressional members preoccupied with the short-term problems of fighting the war. “Although my Mind has been full twenty Years preparing to expect great Scenes, yet I confess the Wonders of this Revelation exceed all that I ever foresaw or imagined. That our Country so young as it is, so humble as it is, thinking but lately, so meanly of itself should thus Interest the Passions, as well as employ the Reason of all Mankind in its favour, and effect in so short a Space of Time, not only thirteen Revolutions of Government at home, but so compleatly accomplish a Revolution in the system of Europe, and in the Sentiments of every Nation in it, is what no human Wisdom perhaps could foresee.”⁸⁶ America, Adams insisted, “is certainly the great Wheel in the political Machine of the World at present.”⁸⁷

Adams believed that the United States should exploit this opportunity to bring about significant changes in the emerging Euro-Atlantic state system (and, *inter alia*, encourage major reforms of Europe's domestic institutions). It was imperative, as a matter of national interest as well as the betterment of mankind, for the United States, and particularly its foreign representatives, to guide the process as far as possible through activist diplomacy. Adams assumed that this could be accomplished without violating the stricture against binding political connections with any of the

European powers. The war, to be sure, had to be fought and won, and peace negotiated, on its own terms. But Adams did not see a contradiction between the near-term demands of the conflict and America's longer term aims of bringing about a liberal trading order, supporting the rights of mankind, and strengthening enlightened and popular elements in foreign regimes.

Adams acknowledged that American wartime strategy, as a practical matter, rested on the French alliance. Although the conditional treaty of alliance with France violated Adams' warning against political connections with Europe, he recorded no immediate objection to Franklin's decision to make such an agreement. As noted above, Adams' first experience in Paris confirmed his pre-war judgment that the political, cultural, and religious differences between the American Republic and Monarchical Catholic France were not an obstacle to cooperation. “The longer I live in Europe and the more I consider our Affairs the more important our Alliance with France appears to me,” Adams wrote in August 1778. “It is a Rock upon which we may safely build, narrow and illiberal prejudices peculiar to John Bull with which I might perhaps have been in some degree infected when I was John Bull, have now no Influence with me.”⁸⁸ Because Britain was certain to be America's long-term enemy, France would remain America's natural ally. “As long as Great Britain shall have Canada Nova Scotia, and the Floridas, or any of them So long will Great Britain be the Enemy of the United States, let her disguise it as much as she will. It is not much to the Honour of human Nature, but the Fact is certain that neighbouring Nations are never Friends in Reality.... France and England as Neigh-

⁸⁶ Adams to the President of Congress, 28 April 1780, *PJA*, 9: 243-4.

⁸⁷ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 20 January 1781, *PJA*, 11: 62.

⁸⁸ Adams to James Warren, 4 August 1778, *PJA*, 6: 346-9. Adams added: “I never was however much of John Bull. I was John Yankee and such I shall live and die.”

bours and Rivals never have been and never will be Friends. The Hatred and Jealousy between the Nations is eternal and ineradicable.” Because France had no possessions on the North American continent, “We therefore, as on the one Hand we have the surest Ground to expect the Jealousy and Hatred of Great Britain, so on the other We have the Strongest Reasons to depend upon the Friendship and Alliance of France.” The connection with France, furthermore, “will forever secure a Respect for our states in Spain Portugal and Holland too, who will always chose to be upon friendly terms with Powers who have numerous Cruisers at sea, and indeed in all the rest of Europe.”⁸⁹

But as time went on, Adams came to believe that American and French interests – at least those pursued by Vergennes and much of the French Court – were substantially at odds. (Adams always retained a high opinion of Louis XVI.) His testy conversations and correspondence with Vergennes and other senior French officials, coupled with reports of the French-influenced shift in Congressional attitudes, persuaded Adams that France wanted to truncate America’s growth by limiting its territory, controlling its diplomacy, and particularly by influencing its domestic politics. “There is Danger to the Simplicity of our Manners and to the Principles of our Constitution, and there may be dangers that too much will be demanded of Us.... There is Danger, that French Councils and Emmissaries and Correspondents, may have too much Influence in our Deliberations,” he warned Roger Sherman, a Congressman from Connecticut.⁹⁰

Adams rejected the argument that the wartime emergency, coupled with the threat

of British subversive influence and the divisions among Americans states and regions, required Congress to accede to French diplomatic leadership and to limit American wartime aims. Adams believed that the American Revolution naturally created the leverage that wise statesmen could use to chart a truly independent course and to set a liberal tone for international relations. But for America to use that leverage, for its own advantage and for the cause of mankind, it had to establish itself, and be recognized, as a great power – a major planet – in the Euro-Atlantic state system, and not as a client state (satellite) of France.

N. America is a new primary Planet, which taking its Course in its own orbit, must have an Effect upon the orbit of every other, and shift the common Center of Gravity of the whole system of the European World. She is de facto, an independant Power, and must be so, de Jure.... She is mistress of her own fortune, knows that she is so, and will manage that Power which she feels herself possessd of, to establish her own System and change that of Europe.

For its own sake, Adams argued, the United States must occupy a unique position in the international “solar system” – that is, by being politically detached and able to exercise its “gravity” through commerce rather than through the traditional devices of war and the manipulation of political alliances. The existence of such a new planet – geographically distant, non-aligned, republican, pacific, and commercial – would also benefit the Europeans as well, if they understood (or could be made to understand) their interests properly. “The natural Effects of the Separation of them, and of the Independance of America, upon the

⁸⁹ Adams to Samuel Adams, 28 July 1778, *PJA*, 6: 325-7.

⁹⁰ Adams to Roger Sherman, 6 December 1778, *PJA*, 7: 254-5.

commercial and political state of Europe... may by Wisdom and Benevolence, [*be*] wrought into the greatest Blessing of Peace, Liberty and Happiness, which the World hath yet seen. ... America, will then become the arbitress of the commercial...and perhaps...the mediatrix of peace, and of the political business of the World.” This “political business” would include altering the domestic affairs of nations, at least indirectly.

If the Sovereigns of Europe, should find in the Example of England, that the System of Colonies in distant regions for the Purpose of Monopolies, is at an end, and turn their Attention, to give Exertion to their own internal powers like the police of China, cultivate their waste lands, improve Agriculture, encourage manufactures, abolish Corporations: as all the remnants of Barbarism, shall be removed, the powers of the Community will create those surpluses which will become the Source, and open the channells of commerce...they should see with pleasure, that the manners of mankind, softening by degrees have become more humanized; their Police more civilized: and altho many of the old oppressive Institutions of Government, as they respect Husbandmen, Manufacturers, Merchants, Marketts and Commerce, have not yet been formally abolished; yet that Practice, by various Accommodations, have abrogated their most mischeivious operations. That the Activity of Man finds every day, a freer Course: that there are a thousand Ways, which altho pride will not open, prudence will connive at, through which the intercourse of Marketts finds every year, a freer

vent: and that the active Spirit of commerce is like the Spirit of Life, diffusing itself through the whole Mass of Europe.⁹¹

In declaring the United States to be a new and independent primary planet, Adams, in his own mind, did not propose to turn against France. He proposed instead to develop America leverage over this unfolding revolution in the Euro-Atlantic state system, by stirring up British public opinion against the war and forcing Britain to the negotiating table; by multiplying diplomatic contacts and influential relationships elsewhere in Europe; and by persuading the established powers to recognize American independence and to accord it proper diplomatic status. Commerce was to be the wedge that opened the door. The American market and American goods would be available to all on equal footing; but Adams pointed out that those European merchants, bankers and nations that entered into a formal commercial relationship with the United States first would have a natural advantage over late-comers.

Adams wanted to complement economic self-interest by appealing to the currents of enlightenment among some segments of European society as a means of pressuring non-republican governments to recognize the United States. Public opinion, even among the Enlightened, always tended to lag behind events and needed to be shaped actively. The enlightened classes already appreciated the generic value of commerce, but it was the task of the American diplomat to demonstrate forcefully that the entry of the United States into the European state system represented a remarkable shift in the balance of power and that it served as the catalyst for commercial and political liberalization. In doing so

⁹¹ Adams to the President of Congress, 19 April 1780, *PJA*, 9: 176-7, 179-80, 188-9.

American representatives should not take no for an answer or defer to established opinion about proper etiquette. “Your Veterans in Diplomatics and in Affairs of State consider Us as a kind of Militia, and hold Us perhaps, as is natural, in some degree of Contempt,” Adams told Livingston, who had been appointed by Congress as Secretary of Foreign Affairs, “but wise Men know that Militia sometimes gain Victories over regular Troops, even by departing from the Rules.”⁹²

Franklin Objects

Franklin and his political allies, including Livingston, to the extent they understood Adams’ position, opposed it as a vast and presumptuous over-reaching on the part of the United States. Militia diplomacy would unnecessarily alarm European political and strategic conservatives, who still held the upper hand in most nations. “A virgin state should preserve the virgin character, and not go about suitoring for alliances, but wait with decent dignity for the application of others,” Franklin had observed shortly after arriving in Europe.⁹³ Livingston was of the view that Adams embarrassed the United States by insisting on his public character, which only revealed the weakness of the American diplomatic position absent French support.⁹⁴ Adams’ bull-in-the-China-shop approach threatened America’s essential connection with France and undermined Vergennes’ carefully calibrated diplomacy. “It is our firm connection with France that gives us weight with England, and respect throughout Europe,” Franklin maintained. “If we were to break our faith with this nation, on whatever

pretence, England would again trample upon us, and every other nation despise us.”⁹⁵ Franklin insisted that he had no intention of making the United States a French satellite; rather, American should for now occupy a close, parallel orbit, in which the French “gravity” would shield the United States from the dangerous “debris” of European interstate relations that would otherwise cross the “orbit” of the new Republic.

Franklin believed that Adams fundamentally misunderstood France’s motivation in supporting American independence. Frenchmen, whether of enlightened or traditional views, thought of themselves as magnanimous. As a people they were susceptible to emotional appeals made by the apparently weak and oppressed, but not to threats or to material inducements. American gratitude, not American commerce, would be the essential binding agent of the relationship for the immediate future. For the cold-eyed realists like Vergennes who actually implemented French policy, such gratitude also demonstrated America’s appreciation of the proper power-political relationship between France and the United States – Franklin knew his place, and that of his nation, whereas Adams did not.

He [Adams] thinks, as he tells me himself, that America has been too free in expressions of gratitude to France, for that she is more obliged to us than we to her, and that we should show spirit in our applications. I apprehend that he mistakes his ground, and that this court is to be treated with decency and delicacy. The king, a young and virtuous prince, has, I am persuaded, a pleasure in reflecting on the generous benevolence of the action in assisting an oppressed people, and

⁹² Adams to Livingston, 21 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 253-6

⁹³ Franklin to Arthur Lee, 21 March 1777, *RDC*, 2:298.

⁹⁴ Livingston to Adams, 20 November 1781, *PJA*, 12:72-6.

⁹⁵ Franklin to Samuel Cooper, 26 December 1782, in Brands, *First American*, p. 600.

proposes it as a part of the glory of his reign. I think it right to increase this pleasure by our thankful acknowledgments, and that such an expression of gratitude is not only our duty, but our interest. A different conduct seems to me what is not only improper and unbecoming, but what may be hurtful to us.⁹⁶

Time revealed that Franklin, no less than Adams, was a devoted advocate of American interests. Franklin believed that American's strength would manifest itself naturally over time.⁹⁷ For Adams, however, the time was now. He believed that Franklin favored an attitude of gratitude and deference to France as an end in itself, rather than as a means to an end. As Adams wrote to Francis Dana, a friend and diplomatic colleague:

Although I am convinced by every thing I see, and read and hear, that all the Powers of Europe, except perhaps the House of Austria, and I am not very clear in that Exception, rejoice in the American Revolution, and consider the Independence of America as for their Interest and Happiness, in many Points of View, both respecting Commerce and the Ballance of Europe, yet I have many Reasons to think that not one of them, not even Spain nor France, wishes to see America rise very fast to Power. We ought therefore to be cautious how we magnify our Ideas and exaggerate our Expressions of the Generosity and Maganimity of any of these Powers. Let us treat

them with Gratitude, but with Dignity. Let us remember what is due to ourselves and our Posterity, as well as to them. Let us above all things, avoid as much as possible, entangling ourselves with their Wars or Politicks. Our Business with them and theirs with Us, is Commerce, not Politicks, much less War. America has been the Sport of European Wars and Politicks long enough.

Adams was determined to carve out as much diplomatic room for maneuver as possible, certainly while the war was still in progress. "America, my dear Sir has been too long Silent in Europe. Her Cause is that of all Nations and all Men: and it needs nothing but to be explained to be approved," Adams insisted. "At least these are my Sentiments. ...The Effects of it may not appear in Sudden and brilliant Success: but the Time was exactly chosen and the happy fruits of it will appear in their Course."⁹⁸ Adams wanted the United States to seek foreign loans without the assistance of France by propagandizing and by seeking diplomatic recognition where the American presence was not (yet) welcome.

Franklin objected. "Our Credit and Weight in Europe depend more on what we do than on what we say: And I have long been humiliated with the Idea of our running about from Court to Court begging for Money and Friendship, which are the more withheld the more eagerly they are solicited, and would perhaps have been offer'd if they had not been asked," he warned Adams. "The supposed Necessity is our only Excuse. The Proverb says *God helps them that helps themselves*, and the World too in this Sense is very Godly."⁹⁹ In August 1780, Franklin reported to Congress with

⁹⁶ Franklin to President of Congress, 9 August 1780, *RDC*, 4: 22-3.

⁹⁷ For an explanation and defense of Franklin's position, see Bailyn, *To Begin the World Anew*, pp. 66-7.

⁹⁸ Adams to Dana, 18 April 1781, *PJA*, 11: 267-70.

⁹⁹ Franklin to Adams, 2 October 1780, *PJA*, 10: 194-5.

considerable alarm about Adams' aggressive, independent diplomacy.

M. de Vergennes, who appears much offended, told me yesterday that he would enter into no further discussions with Mr. Adams, nor answer any more of his letters. He is gone to Holland to try, as he told me, whether something might not be done to render us less dependent on France. He says the ideas of this court and those of the people of America are so totally different, that it is impossible for any minister to please both. He ought to know America better than I do, having been there lately, and he may choose to do what he thinks will best please the people of America. But when I consider the expressions of Congress in many of their public acts, and particularly in their letter to the Chevalier de la Luzerne, of the 24th of May last, I can not but imagine that he mistakes the sentiments of a few for a general opinion.

“It is my intention, while I stay here, to procure what advantages I can for our country by endeavoring to please this court,” Franklin added, “and I wish I could prevent anything being said by any of our countrymen here that may have a contrary effect and increase an opinion lately showing itself in Paris, that we seek a difference, and with a view of reconciling ourselves to England. Some of them have of late been very indiscreet in their conversations.”¹⁰⁰

Adams' arguments and actions unquestionably contributed to the French (and Congressional) concern that some Americans secretly planned to resume political ties

with the British regime and to terminate the alliance with France. Such accusations did not deter him from pressing on with an aggressive diplomatic campaign, however. He did not regard that campaign as begging but as demanding that the new American regime be given its due.

A British Revolution?

Adams thought that Britain, above all nations, would be impacted by the change in the Euro-Atlantic state system that was occurring because of the American Revolution. As he refined his diplomatic strategy, Adams revisited the question whether American independence and the destruction of Britain's maritime tyranny might require a change in the British regime.

Adams thought that Britain, or at least England, would survive the war: “the Annihilation of a Nation never takes place.” The more important question was “whether she shall sink down into the Rank of the middling powers of Europe or whether she shall maintain the second place in the Scale.”¹⁰¹ Adams believed that Britain could maintain second place only if it reestablished its commercial relationship with the former colonies and if it abandoned the exclusionism of the Navigation Acts. Adams argued that the first step in achieving these ends was to notify the British government officially of his powers to negotiate peace and establish a treaty of commerce. By doing so, “he would force the British government to clarify its position on negotiations, encourage those in Great Britain who wanted peace, dispel rumors that France enjoyed exclusive privileges under the Franco-American Treaty of Amity and Commerce, and take advantage of the

¹⁰⁰ Franklin to the President of Congress, 9 August 1780, *RDC*, 4: 22-3.

¹⁰¹ Adams to James Warren, 4 August 1778, *PJA*, 6: 346-9.

forces that were tearing at the fabric of British society.”¹⁰²

Vergennes, with Franklin’s support, angrily warned the American envoy against making his credentials public. By raising prematurely the prospect of peace negotiations, Adams, in Vergennes opinion, would sabotage France’s effort’s to bring Spain fully into the war and to coordinate the diplomatic machinery necessary to bring about American independence. Adams, frustrated by the opposition of Vergennes and Franklin, sought less formal channels to make his case to the British. He re-worked and published in French and English the arguments made in a pamphlet by Thomas Pownall, the former governor of Massachusetts. Pownall argued for the importance of American commerce to Britain and for adopting free trade principles suitable to promoting trade with the former colonies. Adams also prepared a response to a publication, *Cool Thoughts*, written by exiled loyalist Joseph Galloway, which had called on England to prosecute the war with more vigor. Adams sought to convince British leaders and opinion-makers that formal acknowledgement of American independence was the necessary first step towards peace, mutually profitable commerce, and the preservation of Britain’s great power status (even if that status would necessarily be reduced).¹⁰³ He wrote letters to those Englishmen whom he believed to be sympathetic to the American cause, both in the British Isles and on the continent. He hoped they would promote these arguments, and his anonymous writings, with their peers.

Adams hoped that the logic of his case would persuade rational Englishmen,

¹⁰² Editorial Note, *PJA*, 9: 517.

¹⁰³ Adams first sent a redacted version of the Pownall pamphlet to the President of Congress on 19 April 1780; the published versions appeared in Amsterdam (in French) later that year, and in London in 1781. Adams’ response to *Cool Thoughts* was not published until 1782.

particularly those in opposition to the North Ministry who might come to power in a change of government. But he also considered the possibility that the prospects for peace and the long-term development of a beneficial Anglo-American commercial relationship might be improved by full-scale regime change in Britain and not merely by a change in public or elite opinion over immediate policy issues. Adams believed that a British Revolution was certainly possible as consequence of the war. He thought that the King and his Ministers might relinquish their pretensions to rule in America only when they stood on the precipice of national bankruptcy and civil war, or had already plunged off those cliffs. “What their Pride will end in, God only knows,” he wrote Franklin. “For my own Part, I cannot See, a Probability, that they will ever make Peace, untill their Financies are ruined and such Distresses brought upon them as will work up their Parties into a civil War.”¹⁰⁴ As he put it to an English correspondent: “So far from expecting any serious, sensible proposals for Peace, I think the Parties in England will go to War with each other, and they must fight their Battle out, before we shall know, which has the national Power in its Hands to make peace with Us. They have a point to settle first, whether we shall make Peace with a British King or a British Congress.”¹⁰⁵ If events came to such a climax, Adams concluded, “a Revolution in her Government may possibly take place, but whether in Favor of Despotism or Republicanism is the Question.”¹⁰⁶

Adams had little doubt that the British Empire was doomed if London continued to prosecute the war; a fact which,

¹⁰⁴ Adams to Franklin, 13 June 1782, *PJA*, 13: 116-18.

¹⁰⁵ Adams to Edmund Jenings, 26 April 1780, *PJA*, 9: 235-7.

¹⁰⁶ Adams to James Warren, 4 August 1778, *PJA*, 6: 346-9.

at least in the early years of the war, inclined him to think that a British Revolution would lead to tyranny in the home islands. “The few Men in the Nation who think seriously of this Business See clearly in the long Train of Consequences of American Independance, the Loss of their West India Islands, a great Part, of their East India Trade, the total Loss of Canada, Nova Scotia, the Floridas, all the American Fisheries, a Diminution of their Naval Power, as well as national Bankruptcy and a Revolution in their Government in Favour of Arbitrary Power,” he wrote in 1778.¹⁰⁷

Two years later, however, it seemed to Adams as if republicanism rather than despotism was the more likely course. Adams was intrigued by the development of county associations in England and the volunteer and non-importation movements in Ireland, which he likened to their earlier American counterparts. “You will see by the public Papers, that your Committee of Correspondence is making greater progress in the World, and doing greater things in the political World than the Electrical Rod ever did in the Physical,” he wrote to Samuel Adams. “Ireland and England have adopted it, but mean Plagiaries as they are, they do not acknowledge who was the Inventor of it.” In the short term such movements could aid the American cause. Adams noted that “the Speakers of these Meetings go great Lengths, some of them openly justifying and applauding the Americans, and others even applauding France and Spain for stepping in to our Assistance.”¹⁰⁸

Looking beyond the war itself, Adams believed that America had demonstrated to the Enlightened of Europe the existence of popular mechanisms to bring about regime change. “Its Invention will

make an Epocha in the History of the Progress of Society, and of the human Understanding,” Adams wrote to an English correspondent.¹⁰⁹ “The Boston Committee of Correspondence, and the Military Associations which grew out of it, are likely to prove the greatest Engines for pulling down Tyranny, that were ever invented. The Electrical Rod, which deprives the Clouds of their Thunder, does it not so effectually, as these Committees wrest the Iron Rod out of the Hands of a Tyrant.” Ireland has already obtained, purely by the Use of this Machine, great Advantages, and as She has not yet laid it down, She will obtain more, or give England further Trouble.”¹¹⁰

Adams also hoped that America’s regime-building activities would become a positive model to guide a similar process in England (and elsewhere) – to demonstrate that reflection and choice could build up as well as tear down institutions of government. He had in mind the recently-ratified Constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, of which he was the principal author. “The Massachusetts are exhibiting a Phenominon in the political World, that is new and Singular. It is the first People, who have taken So much Time to deliberate upon Government—that have allowed such Universal Liberty to all the People to reflect upon the subject, and propose their objections and Amendments—and that have reserved to themselves at large, the right of finally accepting or rejecting the form. It forms a Kind of Epocha, in the History of the Progress of Society.”¹¹¹ He hoped that the report of the Massachusetts Constitution Convention (of which he too was principal author) would be circulated widely: “I wish this was printed

¹⁰⁷ Adams to the President of Congress, 8 December 1778, *PJA*, 7: 268-9.

¹⁰⁸ Adams to Samuel Adams, 23 February 1780, *PJA*, 8: 353-4.

¹⁰⁹ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 27 February 1780, *PJA*, 8: 369-71.

¹¹⁰ Adams to Elbridge Gerry, 23 February 1780, *PJA*, 8: 357.

¹¹¹ Adams to William Gordon, 26 May 1780, *PJA*, 9: 342-4.

in England. I think it would much assist their Committees and Associations. The Principles, of it, must be the Principles on which, those Committees must proceed or they will fail.”¹¹² “No Government was ever made so perfectly upon the Principle of the Peoples Right and Equality,” Adams argued. “It is Locke, Sydney and Rousseau and Mably reduced to Practice in the first Instance. I wish every step of their Progress printed and preserved. These Principles ought to be Spread in England at this time as much as possible.”¹¹³

Adams clearly hoped that his correspondents and others would effectively propagandize the British in this manner; but he did not propose to interject the United States directly into the process of fomenting regime change or major political reform in Britain. (He did note that John Paul Jones’ raids along the Irish coast had led to the formation of militia bodies for defense purposes, and that those bodies might later constitute a threat to British rule.) He was skeptical that reform in Britain that stopped short of revolution, including liberalization which might improve the lot of the British people, would actually benefit the United States. He feared that clever British leaders would channel the pressures away from political reform into economic reform, as a way to wage the war more effectively. “Will they be of any Use to Us, if the Persons who take the lead in these Correspondences Associations and Congress, should prevail and get into Power, will not their Aeconomical Projects rather injure than serve our Cause, by enabling them to command more Money, and make greater Exertions?” Adams wondered.¹¹⁴ He doubted that political reform of the existing

system was even possible at this late date -- “all Endeavours in parliament to reform, will be ineffectual. Reformation must be made in a Congress if any Way. Corruption has too many hereditary, and legal Supporters in Parliament. Whether it has or not out of parliament is the question. Whether there is enough of Unanimity and Firmness among the people, to struggle against this formidable phalanx? But one thing seems clear, that either the remaining Virtue in the Nation must overcome the Corruption, or the Corruption will wholly exterminate the remaining Virtue. I see but one Alternative and no middle Way. Either Absolute Monarchy, or a Republic and Congress.”¹¹⁵

Adams was even skeptical that a British Revolution, ending in a British (or English) Republic and Congress, would necessarily solve the problems between the two nations. English culture, high and low, was too deeply ingrained with a spirit of jealousy against rising America. “The permanent and lasting Friendship of the Dutch, may be easily obtained by the United States; that of England never,” Adams wrote to Franklin. “It is gone with the days before the Flood. If we ever enjoy the Smallest degree of Sincere Friendship again from England I am totally incapable of Seeing the Character of a Nation or the Connections of Things, which however may be the Case, for what I know.”¹¹⁶

There never was given by any Nation, more dreadful proofs of deadly Hate, than have been constantly given these five Years by the English to Americans. Lord Mansfield’s Words have been adopted in all their Actions. Kill them, kill them, right or wrong, by fas and

¹¹² Adams to Edmund Jennings, 7 June 1780, *PJA*, 9: 388-9.

¹¹³ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 20 June 1780, *PJA*, 9: 446-7.

¹¹⁴ Adams to Thomas Digges, 14 March 1780, *PJA*, 9: 45-6.

¹¹⁵ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 29 April 1780, *PJA*, 9: 250-2.

¹¹⁶ Adams to Franklin, 13 June 1782, *PJA*, 13: 116-18.

nefas, kill them or they will kill you. Do You know the deep political Motive for ringing the everlasting Knell of Rebel and Rebellion. Have you not considered that the Nation have habitually settled it in their minds and Hearts, that Rebels have no Rights, that every thing is lawful against them. They are Insects, they are Reptiles, they are Serpents, they are wild Boars and Tygers, they are Devils in the English Imagination. Have not Parliament, Gazettes, Pamphlets, Common Prayers, Sermons, and every thing for these six years, shot this Word down deep into the minds of the People of England and produced its Effect. The Government, the Church, the Nation itself means to establish an ineradicable Hatred and Animosity against us.¹¹⁷

As a result of this propagandizing, the common people in England (unlike those throughout the rest of Europe), as well as the hereditary orders, were hostile to America and to its cause. Adams believed that mobs would threaten any regime in Britain, monarchical or republican, that sought peace and reconciliation with the United States.

The Nation will stand by the King and Ministry through every loss, while they persevere: whereas both would sink into total Contempt and Ridicule, if they were to make Peace. While they persevere, they are Masters of the Purses and the Commerce too of the whole Nation: make Peace, and they lose a great part of this Influence. National Pride when it has become an habitual Passion by long Indulgence, is the most obstinate thing in the World;

¹¹⁷ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 11 June 1780, *PJA*, 9: 407-9

and this War has been made so completely though so artfully the national Act, as well as that of King and Ministers, that the Pride of the Nation was never committed more entirely to the support of any thing. It is not to be supposed that the present Ministry will Treat with America; and if there should be a Change, and the Leaders of Opposition should come in, They will not treat with America in any Character, that She can with Honor or Safety assume.¹¹⁸

Adams came to realize that neither political reform nor revolution was in the cards for Britain. The Gordon Riots in June 1781, the course of which Adams followed closely, were suppressed with massive military force. Parliamentary reform was essentially at an end. Some government prints, to taint all such activities as traitorous, alleged that the riots were the result of American or French agitators.¹¹⁹ The fall of the North Ministry in March 1782 in the aftermath of the defeat at Yorktown did not instantly lead to peace, either, because the new coalition government held out the seductive idea of an Anglo-American federal regime which would wage war against the old despotic enemies, France and Spain. Neither Adams nor Franklin would stand for this. The best that could be hoped for was a cold peace with England, based on mutual geopolitical and commercial interests. There could be neither political nor cultural reconciliation, much less a far-reaching alliance based on an understanding between two regimes, one republican, the other liberalizing.

¹¹⁸ Adams to the President of Congress, 15 October 1781, *PJA*, 11: 16-20

¹¹⁹ The Gordon Riots are described in *PJA*, 9: 398-9. See also Richard B. Morris, *The Peacemakers: The Great Powers and American Independence* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), pp.67-87.

The New International System

Rather than depending on regime change in Britain to win the war and to create favorable post-war international environment, Adams looked increasingly to develop non-binding ties with other nations and peoples, besides France, which shared similar interests, irrespective of the form of their regime. He felt that he could exploit the popular sentiment in favor of America, which Franklin and others had commented upon. “Indeed Sir, you would be flattered with the Attention that is shown to our States, and with the high Eulogiums, that are every where bestowed, by learned and ingenious Men, upon our Constitutions, our Laws, our Wisdom, Valour and Universal Virtue,” he wrote to Patrick Henry. “Partial as I am to my Country, and dearly as I love it, I cannot but say that I think they do Us, rather more honour than We deserve. But We are Combattants for Liberty, and it is a fashionable Saying in this Country, that every Man who combats for Liberty is adorable. There is more Liberality of Sentiment in every part of Europe, except England...than former Ages have known, and it will increase every day.”¹²⁰ Adams believed it imperative to demonstrate that “in general Usages, and in the Liberality of Sentiments in those momentous Points, the Freedom of Inquiry, the Right of private Judgment and the Liberty of Conscience, of so much Importance to be supported in the World, and imparted to all Mankind...at this Hour are in more danger from Great Britain, and that intolerant Spirit which is secretly fermenting there, than from any other Quarter...”¹²¹

¹²⁰ Adams to Patrick Henry, 9 July 1778, *D&A*, 4: 153-4.

¹²¹ A Memorial To their High Mightinesses, the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries, 19 April 1781, *PJA*, 11: 277.

Adams, harkening back to the logic of the Model Treaty, believed that the specific “liberty” on which all regime types and peoples, except the British, could unite was the liberty of the seas. When it came to commercial transactions, any similarity of laws, language, and religion were important but not decisive – the goodness and cheapness of goods was the overriding factor. “The two greatest Objects of the Negotiations and Wars of the present Age,” Adams claimed, were “American Independance and the rights of neutral Vessells.”¹²² The League of Armed Neutrality, promoted by Catherine the Great as a means of resisting British wartime naval practices against neutral shipping, was for Adams “one of the most brilliant Events, which has yet been produced by the American Revolution.”¹²³ Adams hoped to associate the United States with the principles of the League as a backdoor means of gaining diplomatic recognition during the Revolution – a plan which did not succeed – but he nevertheless celebrated the American-led shift toward a more liberal international system. The old balance of power system, promoted particularly by the British, had been aimed at preventing any nation from dominating the European continent. Adams argued, however, that “universal monarchy on land is chimera – impractical – but universal monarchy at sea” – that is, the British Empire – “is well nigh established.” The new international system, one necessarily including the United States, should be built to a first order on resisting naval tyranny, whether that of Britain (currently) or prospectively by a nation like France: “America herself will never suffer any power of Europe again that decided superiority over all commercial nations, which we have vainly boasted of,

¹²² Adams to Jean de Nefville & Fils, 21 March 1781, *PJA*, 11: 222

¹²³ Adams to the President of Congress, 1 February 1781, *RDC*, 4: 244-8.

and which the past tameness of mankind has permitted. And America, little as she is thought of, will, for ever have it in her power, by joining with a majority of maritime powers, to preserve their Freedom.”¹²⁴

To promote these ideas, and to develop loans, commercial ties and non-binding relationships with states other than France, Congress, in Adams’ opinion, should “send Ministers to every great Court in Europe, especially the Maritime Courts, to propose an Acknowledgment of the Independence of America, and Treaties of Amity and of Commerce is no more than becomes Us, and in my Opinion is our Duty to do: it is perfectly consistent with the genuine System of American Policy, and a piece of Respect due from new Nations to old ones.... It is necessary for America to have Agents in different parts of Europe, to give some Information concerning our affairs, and to refute the abominable Lies that the hired Emissaries of Great Britain circulate in every Corner of Europe, by which they keep up their own Credit and ruin ours.”¹²⁵

The Dutch Opinion

The Republic of the Seven United Netherlands, popularly known as the Dutch Republic or the United Provinces, had long been of particular interest to Adams as a potential partner of the United States outside of the orbit of France. “The Similitude of Manners, of Religion and in Some Respects of Constitution; the Analogy, between the Means, by which the two Republicks arrived at Independancy, but above all the Attractions of commercial Interests, will infallibly draw them together,” Adams pointed out to

Congress in 1779, after he returned from his first assignment in Europe. He predicted however: “This Connection will not probably shew itself, in a public Manner before a Peace, or a near Prospect of Peace. Too many Motives of Fear or Interest place the Hollanders in a Dependance on England, to suffer her to connect herself openly, with Us, at present.”¹²⁶ During his second mission to Europe, Adams’ falling out with Vergennes – and the deteriorating economic position of the United States – led him to consider a more assertive approach towards the Dutch Republic.

In July 1780, Adams finally obtained permission from Vergennes to travel northward and explore the possibility of obtaining loans from the Bankers of Amsterdam, even though he had no direct authority from the United States to execute such an assignment. He figured that a little informal spade-work could not hurt. “I cannot but lament however, that there is no Representation of Congress in this Republick, vested with Powers to borrow Money,” he wrote to the President of Congress shortly after arriving in the Netherlands. “This would be a double Advantage. We should avail ourselves of a Loan, and at the same Time lessen the Loan of England. A Loan once begun here, would rapidly increase so as to deprive the English of this Resource. This is the Method, in which Commerce may be extended between the two Republicks, and the political Sentiments and System of Holland changed.”¹²⁷

Congress did appoint Henry Laurens of South Carolina as its envoy to the Netherlands but his ship had been seized by a British frigate and Laurens taken to the Tower of London. Congress then placed Dutch affairs temporarily in Adams’ care and, in the winter of 1780-81, named him

¹²⁴ Adams, Letters from a Distinguished American, No. 3, ca 14-22 July 178, *PJA*, 9: 552.

¹²⁵ Adams to Franklin, 14 October 1780, *PJA*, 10: 267-8.

¹²⁶ Adams to President of Congress, 4 August 1779, *PJA*, 8: 112.

¹²⁷ Adams to the President of Congress, No. 3, 23 August 1780, *PJA*, 10: 85-7.

Commission of the United States to the United Provinces. Dutch officials, fearful of British reprisals, refused to meet with him. Anglo-Dutch relations had already deteriorated as Dutch shippers, claiming neutral rights (or simply acting as smugglers), traded with the French and the Americans. The States-General, the sovereign governing body, sought protection for its commerce under Catherine's proposed League of Armed Neutrality. The city of Amsterdam was particularly active in this campaign. In retaliation, the British declared war in December 1780. Britain cited as one pretext their discovery in Laurens' papers of a 1778 treaty of commerce secretly negotiated by the Amsterdam banker Jean de Neufville and William Lee, with the support of high-ranking Amsterdam officials. The treaty had no authority and no effect but it tainted the future prospects of a Dutch-American relationship. The collective Dutch heart was hardly in the war effort against its century-old ally, and the States-General had no intention of complicating matters by reprising the Neufville-Lee fiasco and engaging in talks with another American agent.

All this worked against Adams' plans. Adams initially hoped to obtain loans through private channels but, after one attempt failed miserably, he concluded that the political groundwork must be laid first. Bankers would not pay out money unless they had political cover. "The true Cause of the Obstruction of our Credit here is Fear, which can never be removed but by the States General acknowledging our Independence," Adams explained to Congress.

This Country is indeed in a melancholy Situation—sunk in Ease—devoted to the Pursuits of Gain—overshadowed on all sides by more powerful Neighbours—unanimated by a Love of military Glory, or any

aspiring Spirit; feeling little Enthusiasm for the Public; terrified at the loss of an old Friend, and equally terrified at the prospect of being obliged to form Connections with a new one: encumbered with a complicated and perplexed Constitution, divided among themselves in Interest and Sentiment, they seem afraid of every thing. Success on the Part of France, Spain and especially of America raises their Spirits, and advances the good Cause somewhat: but Reverses seem to sink them much more. The War has occasioned such a Stagnation of Business, and thrown such Numbers of People out of Employment, that I think it is impossible things should remain long in the present insipid State. One System or another will be pursued: one Party or another will prevail—much will depend on the Events of the War.¹²⁸

Adams meant to wean the Dutch away from their long-standing pro-English sentiments and fears by reviving the independent "Batavian spirit" of liberty and commercial enterprise that had been in decline over the previous century. To do so, Adams naturally gravitated to those individuals – known as the Patriots, or Republicans – who wanted to change, in some fashion, the government of the United Provinces.

The Dutch Republic was a complicated political regime. It was a confederation of seven provinces, the wealthiest and most important of which was Holland. The provinces had their own governing bodies (estates) and retained considerable independence from the federal government. The provinces in turn were controlled by towns

¹²⁸ Adams to the President of Congress, 16 May 1781, *PJA*, 11: 317-20.

and cities that were governed by councils typically dominated by well-established families and/or by leading merchants. Certain cities had particular privileges and weight in their respective provinces. Amsterdam, the commercial and banking center of Holland, practically conducted its own foreign policy. The federal government consisted of the States-General, in which the provincial estates were represented. There was a semi-royal executive, traditionally the Prince of Orange, who was appointed as the “stadtholder” in each of the provinces and also captain-general of the Union. The House of Orange had very close ties with the English monarchy: William II, William III, and William IV had all married daughters of English kings. The present Stadtholder, William V (who had married a Prussian princess) was regarded by his Dutch Patriot critics as genial but indecisive, a puppet of the English who would resist vigorous prosecution of the current Anglo-Dutch war.¹²⁹

The Patriot movement had many facets. There was a democratic, or popular, element, strongly influenced by the European Enlightenment and enthused by the American cause. Other Patriots partook of a tradition centuries-long resistance by the city and town oligarchs against the House of Orange and its dependency on British maritime and naval power. The practical political goal of the Patriots was to weaken or eliminate the office of the Stadtholder. They did not, in the end, agree on what sort of regime ought to emerge from this process, but for the time being, they were able to cooperate against William V. The English and the Stadtholder’s (Orange) party, by contrast, wanted to use the crisis to strengthen his position; and to undermine or eliminate their traditional opponents among

the entrenched elites, particularly the regents of cities like Amsterdam. As Adams judged the situation:

The ancient and intimate Connection between the Houses of orange, and Brunswick, the Family Alliances, and the vast Advantages which the Princes of orange have derived from them in creating, establishing and at last perpetuating the Stadhouderat against the Inclination of the Republican Party, and the Relyance which this Family Still has upon the Same Connection to support it, have attached the Executive Power of this Government in such a manner to England, that nothing but Necessity could cause a seperation. On the Contrary, the Republican Party, which has heretofore been conducted, by Barnevelt, Grotius, De Wit and other immortal Patriots, have ever leaned towards an Alliance with France, because she has ever favoured the Republican Form of Government in this Nation.... All Parties too, See, that it would be dangerous to the Commerce and even Independance of the united Provinces, to have America again under the Dominion of England: and the Republicans See, or think they see that a change in this Government and the Loss of their Liberties would be the Consequence of it too.

“Those Persons who are both able and willing to lend Us Money, are the Patriots, who are willing to risk British and Stadthouderian Resentment for the Sake of extending the Commerce, Strengthening the political Interests, and preserving the Liberties of their Country,” Adams concluded. “They think that lending Us Money, without forming a political Connection with

¹²⁹ For an overview of Dutch government and politics, see Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*, pp. 323-40.

Us will not answer these Ends. That Cause, Stands very insecurely which Stands upon the shoulders of Patriotism in any Part of Europe. And in such Case if Patriotism is left in a state of doubt whether they ought to sustain it, the Cause must fall to the Ground.”¹³⁰

Adams recognized that those calling themselves Patriots or Republicans were not united among themselves on the proper constitutional reforms. For the most part they were not advocates of purely popular rule. Many of them wanted to preserve or enhance the position of the aristocracy, or the ancient liberties of the provinces and cities, against what they regarded as the aggrandizing tendencies of the Orange Party and William V.¹³¹

¹³⁰ Adams to the President of Congress, 25 September 1780, *PJA*, 10: 176-79.

¹³¹ As Adams later recalled the Dutch political situation: “The sovereignty, by the constitution, is a pure aristocracy, residing in the regencies, which consist of about four thousand persons. The common sense, or rather the common feelings, of human nature, had instituted, or rather forced up by violence, an hereditary stadtholder, to protect the common people, or democracy, against the regencies, or aristocracy. But as the stadtholdership was always odious to the aristocracy, there had been frequent disputes between them, which must have terminated in the expulsion of the house of Orange, and the abolition of the stadtholdership, if it had not been for the interposition of the commons, the common people. These having no house of commons, no house of representatives to protect them, or even to petition, had no mode of interposing but by mobs and insurrections. This kind of democracy has always been dreadful, in all ages and countries. Accordingly Barneveldt had been sacrificed at one time, the De Witts at another, and in 1748, more sacrifices would have been made, if the aristocracy had not learned some wisdom by tragical experience, and given way in some degree to the popular enthusiasm.” Adams to the President of Congress, 25 December 1780, *PJA*, 10: 438fn, which reprints that part of the letter published in 1809 in the *Boston Patriot*.

The opposite, which is called the Republican Party, is suspected of Desires and Designs of introducing Innovations. Some are supposed to aim at the Demolition of the Stadtholdership—others of introducing the People to the Right of choosing the Regencies: but I think these are very few in Number, and very inconsiderable in Power, though some of them may have Wit and Genius. There is another Party, at the Head of which is Amsterdam, who thinks the Stadtholdership necessary, but wish to have some further Restraint or Check upon it. Hence the Proposition for a Committee to assist his Highness. But there is no appearance that the Project will succeed. All the Divisions of the Republican Party are thought to think well of America, and to wish a Connection with her and France.¹³²

Adams believed that the Patriots of whatever stripe were the natural political allies of the United States – and, at least indirectly, the allies of enlightened republicanism – and that Americans and Dutch Patriots had a common defensive interest in preventing regime change that effectively made the Stadtholder a pro-English despot. The connection between the Patriots and the American cause was not self-evident, however. Adams needed to cultivate the Patriots if they were to act successfully as a pressure group that favored American independence and commerce. He discovered that the Patriots had little knowledge of the United States and generally considered it to be the project of rebels. “Even in the City of Amsterdam, which is the most Attentive to our Affairs, and the best inclined towards Us there are few, who do not consider the

¹³² Adams to Livingston, 19 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 242.

American Resistance, as a desultory Rage of a few Enthusiasts, without order, Discipline, Law or Government.”¹³³

Adams therefore set about to educate the Patriots about the American cause and to stress the natural ties between them. For instance, he took the opportunity to reply to inquiries about the American Revolution made by Hendrik Calkoen, an Amsterdam lawyer and Patriot. Adams’ twenty-six letters, addressed to Calkoen but intended to be circulated informally to a much wider audience, compared the Revolution with the Dutch drive for liberty and against despotism in the seventeenth century. He sought to assure the Dutch that the Americans would not succumb to factionalism but were committed to the fight and were certain to prevail.¹³⁴

As Adams set about this process of cultivating Dutch opinion and arguing behind the scenes for formal recognition of the United States, he ran afoul of French foreign policy interests. Despite the protests of the French Ambassador to The Hague, Duke De La Vauguyon, Adams finally decided to go public with his case in an effort to get around the opposition of the States-General, as then composed, and of the Stadtholder’s party and its pro-English supporters. In his *Memorial To their High Mightinesses, the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries*, dated 19 April 1781, the anniversary of the battles of Lexington and Concord, Adams formally announced his presence as a diplomatic representative of the United States. He made the case for the stability of the American government, the surety of victory over the British, and the advantages which American commerce would provide to the Dutch Republic. He

cited the close ties of culture and “a Similitude of Religion, although it is not deemed so essential in this as it has been in former Ages to the Alliance of Nations, is still, as it ever will be thought a desirable Circumstance.” He explained in some detail the advantages of Dutch-American commerce. As to the regime question, Adams argued that “a natural Alliance may be formed between the two Republicks, if ever one existed among Nations.”

A Similarity in the Forms of Government is usually considered as another Circumstance, which renders Alliances natural: and although the Constitutions of the two Republicks are not perfectly alike, there is yet Analogy enough between them to make a Connection easy in this respect. In general Usages, and in the Liberality of Sentiments in those momentous Points, the Freedom of Inquiry, the Right of private Judgment and the Liberty of Conscience, of so much Importance to be supported in the World, and imparted to all Mankind, and which at this Hour are in more danger from Great Britain, and that intolerant Spirit which is secretly fermenting there, than from any other Quarter, the two Nations resemble each other more than any others. The Originals of the two Republicks are so much alike, that the History of one seems but a Transcript from that of the other: so that every Dutchman, instructed in the Subject, must pronounce the American Revolution just and necessary, or pass a Censure upon the greatest Actions of his immortal Ancestors; Actions which have been approved and applauded by Mankind, and justified by the Decision of Heaven.

¹³³ Adams to the President of Congress, 25 September 1780, *PJA*, 10: 176.

¹³⁴ Replies to Hendrick Calkoen, 4-27 October 1780, *PJA*, 10: 200-252.

Adams concluded his *Memorial* with an appeal to the enlightened instincts of the Dutch people and their leaders by reporting that Congress was “impressed with an high Sense of the Wisdom and Magnanimity of your High Mightinesses, and of your inviolable Attachment to the Rights and Liberties of Mankind, and...desirous of cultivating the Friendship of a Nation, eminent for its Wisdom, Justice and Moderation...”¹³⁵

Adams was well aware that the States General, as then constituted, would then not accept the *Memorial*, much less act favorably upon it; but he hoped that it would influence opinion over time in the various provincial governments, which could then instruct their representatives at The Hague to support recognition of American independence. (It was in this specific context that Adams made reference to “militia diplomacy.”) Adams and his Dutch Patriot allies saw that the *Memorial* received wide circulation by printing it in English, French, and Dutch versions, and by publishing it in various prominent European, British and American newspapers. Through Adams’ *Memorial*, many sympathetic individuals throughout Europe received their first serious exposure to the ideas behind the American Revolution.¹³⁶

Adams did not expect or obtain an immediate result from his *Memorial*: “The public Voice has not that Influence upon Government in any part of Europe, that it has in every part of America, and therefore I cannot expect that any immediate effect will be produced upon the States General,” he explained to Congress. That change would require further developments in diplomacy. “They will probably wait, until they can

sound the disposition of the Northern Powers, Russia particularly, and if they should not join in the War, their High Mightinesses will probably be willing to be admitted to accede to the Treaty of Alliance between France and America.”¹³⁷ Adams did not believe that the United States should remain passive in this area of European politics. In another example of militia diplomacy, Adams dispatched Dana to Russia to seek diplomatic recognition from Catherine and the accession of the United States to the principles of the League of Armed Neutrality. Adams did not however propose to apply his highly public approach in the Netherlands to all circumstances. “The Nature of the Government in an absolute Monarchy” like Spain or Russia “would render it improper to make any application or Memorial public. The Nature of this Government rendered it indispensibly necessary.”¹³⁸

The Amsterdam regents escalated the Dutch political crisis in June 1781, when they pressed for constitutional reforms, including the creation of a federal privy council, and for the removal of the Duke of Brunswick, the Stadtholder’s chief adviser. This challenge went to the heart of the Dutch political system. Adams believed that his *Memorial* had been the catalyst for this boldness: “Intelligence came to Amsterdam from all the Provinces and cities, that the memorial, so far from exciting resentment against Amsterdam or America, was generally approved, and the popular cry was ‘Health to Myn Heer Adams, and success to the brave Americans.’ A discovery that greatly raised the spirits of the people of

¹³⁵ A Memorial To their High Mightinesses, the States General of the United Provinces of the Low Countries, 19 April 1781, *PJA*, 11: 272-81.

¹³⁶ See the Introduction to *JQA*, 11: xv-xvi ; Adams to the Secretary for Foreign Affairs, 21 February 1782, *RDC*, 5:192-199.

¹³⁷ Adams to the President of Congress, 16 May 1781, *PJA*, 11: 316-7.

¹³⁸ Adams to Livingston, 19 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 245.

Amsterdam, and consequently emboldened the regency.”¹³⁹

Adams also kept up the pressure on the Dutch in the form of a second Memorial to the States-General, dated 9 January 1782, which categorically demanded a formal reply to his earlier missive for diplomatic recognition. Adams’ implicit threat was that the Dutch would lose out on American trade if they did not act soon. Vauguyon, presumably acting under Vergennes orders, strongly recommended a less confrontational approach. Adams, according to his later account, was initially agreeable to the French plan, but “I thought [it] however rather too tame and timid.

I was therefore determined to consult my own privy council of Dutch patriots, who had never deceived me; who had never concealed from me any danger or difficulty, but who had always communicated to me every information, without exaggeration, which could afford me encouragement or hope. These were unanimously in favor of my memorial and against the Comte De Vergennes’s project. I asked them whether I ought not to strike out the epithet ‘categorical.’ Oh! no. By no means; that is the best word in the whole memorial. Our nation likes such hints: They think them manly. That word will excite more attention than all the rest, and you are sure now of the current in your favor. But if it should do no good, it will certainly do you no harm. We think you have hit the taste of our people.—I took this advice and proceeded...¹⁴⁰

The *Memorial* and its follow-on (at least as Adams saw things) reverberated throughout Dutch politics and served to energize the Patriots as well as the cause of American independence and commerce. “If it had not been presented and printed, I am very sure I could not long have resided in the Republick, and what would have been the Consequence to the Friends of Liberty here I know not,” Adams later reflected. “They were so disheartened and intimidated, and the Anglomanes were so insolent, that no Man can say, that a sudden Phrenzy might not have been excited among the Soldiery and the People to demand a Junction with England, as there was in the Year 1748. Such a Revolution would have injured America and her Allies, have prolonged the War and have been the total Loss and Ruin of the [Dutch] Republick.”¹⁴¹

Several months after Adams published the *Memorial*, a Dutch Patriot, Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol, sent Adams a pamphlet that he had just published, *Aan het Volk van Nederland*. As the editors of the Adams Papers have noted: “The anonymously printed pamphlet was unique in Dutch political literature to that time because it appealed to the people of the Netherlands rather than to a province, city, or class. The pamphlet, which was clandestinely distributed across the Netherlands on the morning of 26 Sept. through the efforts of François Adriaan Van der Kemp, was an impassioned attack on the Orangist party and called for the Dutch people to rise in rebellion. It was immediately banned, copies were burned, and a reward offered for information regarding the identities of the pamphlet’s author and those involved in its printing and distribution. Nevertheless, it

¹³⁹ Adams to the President of Congress, 26 June 1781, *PJA*, 11: 395fn, with references to Adams’ subsequent correspondence in the Boston *Patriot*.

¹⁴⁰ Duc de La Vauguyon to Adams, 30 December 1781, *PJA*, 12: 168fn. Adams published this

letter, translated into English, in the Boston *Patriot* of 19 September. 1810.

¹⁴¹ Adams to Livingston, 21 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 253.

was soon translated into English, French, and German.”¹⁴²

Van der Capellen and Van der Kemp were more radical members of the circle of Dutch Patriots into whom John Adams had been drawn. “It is a shame that your Excellency does not understand Dutch,” Van der Capellen wrote to Adams, linking his own argument with the political controversies surrounding the American envoy. “It is a thunderclap, and I would not want to guarantee the author’s head if he is found out.... No one has ever written in this manner.” In the pamphlet, van der Capellen argued that the States-General’s refusal to recognize Adams as a representative from the United States was made in the same spirit as that body’s refusal to recognize Walter Strickland as ambassador from the English Commonwealth in 1650. In both cases the Orange Party rejected the natural alliance of fellow republicans.¹⁴³

When the Dutch authorities attempted to suppress Van der Capellen’s pamphlet, Adams predicted: “They will have, however, a contrary effect, and will make a pamphlet which otherwise perhaps would have been known in a small circles familiar to all Europe. The press can not be restrained; all attempts of that kind in France and Holland are every day found to be ineffectual.” Adams believed that the flap over Van der Capellen’s pamphlet and the recent disturbances in Geneva against the ruling oligarchy were an indication that the tide of public opinion throughout the continent was

becoming sympathetic to “democratical principles.”

When I say democratical principles, I do not mean that the world is about adopting simple democracies, for these are impracticable; but multitudes are convinced that the people should have a voice, a share, and be made an integral part; and that the government should be such a mixture, and such a combination of the powers of one, the few, and the many, as is best calculated to check and control each other, and oblige all to co-operate in this one democratical principle, that the end of all government is the happiness of the people; and in this other, that the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the point to be obtained. These principles are now so widely spread that despotisms, monarchies, and aristocracies must conform to them in some degree in practice, or hazard a total revolution in religion and government throughout all Europe.¹⁴⁴

“Who and what has given rise to the assuming pride of the people, as it is called in Europe?” Adams’ answer: “The American Revolution. The precepts, the reasonings, and example of the United States of America, disseminated by the press through every part of the world, have convinced the understanding and have touched the heart.” As to the matter of international relations, too, “the American Revolution is working its necessary Effects in Europe,” Adams reflected with satisfaction. “It has operated

¹⁴² Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol to Adams, 6 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 7fn.

¹⁴³ Joan Derk van der Capellen tot den Pol to Adams, 6 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 5-7. See also Simon Schama, *Patriots and Liberators: Revolution in the Netherlands, 1780-1813* (New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 64-67; I. Leonard Leeb, *The Ideological Origins of the Batavian Revolution: History and Politics in the Dutch Republic 1747-1800* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1973), p. 136-137, 155-160.

¹⁴⁴ Adams to President of Congress, 25 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 48. On the circumstances of Geneva, see Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*, pp. 127-129, 358-360.

So among the nations, it has set so many Wheels in Motion, that it has now forced the Dutch into a War.... it was necessary that the Affections should be alienated between the English and Dutch, in order to bring about the more certainly and compleatly, a great Change in the Affairs of Mankind.”¹⁴⁵

Adams believed that active American diplomacy – primarily his own – had been necessary to bring about these changes in the affairs of mankind. Further: “The longer the American war lasts, the more the spirit of American government will spread in Europe, because the attention of the world will be fixed there while the war lasts. I have often wondered that the sovereigns of Europe have not seen the danger to their authority which arises from a continuance of this war. It is their interest to get it finished, that their subjects may no longer be employed in speculating about the principles of government.”¹⁴⁶

Adams’ intervention in Dutch politics, although not directly aimed at regime change, pointed to a specific method by which American diplomacy could help crystallize foreign public opinion in a liberal direction. “The Constitution of this Country [the Netherlands] is such, that it is difficult to discover the general Sense,” Adams explained to Congress. “There have been all along Circumstances in which it might be discerned; but these were so feeble, and so susceptible of Contradiction and Disguise, that some extraordinary Exertions were necessary to strike out unquestionable proofs of the Temper and Opinion of the Nation.”

In these critical Circumstances, something uncommon was necessary to arouse the Nation, and bring forth

the public Voice. The first Step of this kind was the Proposition of the United States of America to their high Mightinesses, which being taken ad referendum became a subject of deliberation in every City of the Republick, and the publication of the Memorial of the nineteenth of April 1781, which made the American Cause the primary Object and main spring of the War, the Topick of Conversation in every private Circle, as well as in every public Assembly. This Memorial gave all Parties an Opportunity to know with Certainty the public opinion: and accordingly such a general and decided approbation was discovered every where, that the few who detested it in their hearts never dared to open their Mouths.

“When the public Councils of a Country have taken a wrong bias, the public Voice, pronounced with Energy, will sometimes correct the Error, without any violent Remedies,” Adams concluded.

Thus altho’ the Enemies of England in this Republick do not appear to have carried any particular point against the opposite Party, yet it appears that they have forced into Execution their System, by means of the national Voice, and against all the Measures of the Anglomanes. The national Spirit is now very high: so high that it will be dangerous to resist it. In time all things must give way to it.¹⁴⁷

“If I ever did any good since I was born,” Adams told Franklin, “it was in stirring up the pure Minds of the Dutchmen,

¹⁴⁵ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 3 January 1781, *PJA*, 11: 10-12.

¹⁴⁶ Adams to President of Congress, 25 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 48

¹⁴⁷ Adams to the President of Congress, 22 August 1781, *PJA*, 11: 461-4

and setting the old Batavian Spirit in motion, after having slept so long.”¹⁴⁸

Having contributed to putting this process of reviving the Dutch spirit into motion, Adams was anxious that it not get out of control, however. America must be seen as the spirit of enlightened reform, not rebellion, especially at this crucial moment in the war and the negotiations for peace. Although he remained friendly with Van der Capellen, he did not embrace his call for a popular revolution. Adams told a friend that “he might with the greatest ease in the World have thrown the whole [Dutch] States into commotion so great was their desire for the American Independence and their dislike to the Stateholder and Duke of Brunswick.”¹⁴⁹

Adams, in fact, did not believe that most of Europe was then (if ever) ready for wholly popular governments. He thought that a good monarch, properly balanced by the other elements of society, would probably be necessary for peoples who were not far removed from feudalism and religious despotism. When Lafayette, after returning to France from America, assured Adams that “the Court Air Has not So Much Altered My Republican Principles as to Make me Believe the Opinion of a King is Every thing,”¹⁵⁰ Adams replied with a warning: “Have a Care, however, how you profess Friendship for me: there may be more danger in it, than you are aware of.

I have the Honour, and the Consolation to be a Republican on Principle. That is to Say, I esteem that Form of Government, the best, of which human Nature is capable. Almost every Thing that is estimable in civil

Life, has originated under Such Governments. Two Republican Towns, Athens and Rome, have done more honour to our Species, than all the rest of it. A new Country, can be planted only by Such a Government. America would at this moment have been an howling Wilderness inhabited only by Bears and Savages, without Such forms of Government. And it would again become a Wilderness under any other. I am not however an enthusiast, who wishes to overturn Empires and Monarchies, for the Sake of introducing Republican Forms of Government. And therefore I am no King Killer, King Hater or King Despizer. There are Three Monarcks in Europe for whom I have as much Veneration as it is lawfull for one Man to have for another. The King of France, the Emperor of Germany and the King of Prussia, are constant objects of my Admiration, for Reasons of Humanity Wisdom and Beneficence which need not be enlarged on.¹⁵¹

With respect to the existing quasi-republican polity of the Netherlands, Adams believed that although sensible political reform could not be achieved without being driven by “the assuming pride of the people ...the people of the seven United Provinces appear to me of such a character that they would make wild steerage at the first admission to any share in government; and whether any intimation of a desire of change at this time will not divide and weaken the nation is a problem. I believe rather it will have a good effect, by convincing the government that they must exert themselves

¹⁴⁸ Adams to Benjamin Franklin, 25 August 1781, *PJA*, 11: 469.

¹⁴⁹ Matthew Ridley Journal, 20 May 1781, *PJA*, 13: 67fn.

¹⁵⁰ Lafayette to Adams, 7 May 1782, *PJA*, 13: 12-13.

¹⁵¹ Adams to Lafayette, 21 May 1782, *PJA*, 13: 65-6.

for the good of the people to prevent them from exerting themselves in innovations.”¹⁵²

Adams also feared that excessive enthusiasm for popular rule in the Netherlands (and throughout Europe generally) would create a backlash among moderate elements concerned about their property and safety, and thereby provide an opening for entrenched conservative and foreign influences to reassert their influence by fomenting class warfare. He believed that this very nearly happened in the Netherlands when Sir Joseph Yorke, the British Ambassador, with the support of the Stadtholder’s party, had threatened retaliation against those Patriots who supported the American cause by stirring up violence among those “lower class” elements of the population that had traditionally been pro-Orange and that were suspicious of the aristocracy and the merchant classes. Adams reflected:

This Plan was so daringly supported by Writers of the first Fame on the side of the Court, that Multitudes of Writings appeared attempting to shew that what Temmink and Van Berkel [men sympathetic to the Patriots] had done was high Treason. All this had such an Effect, that all the best Men seemed to shudder with Fear...You can have no Idea, Sir. No Man who was not upon the Spot, can have any Idea of the Gloom and Terror that was spread by this Event [the British capture of the Dutch West Indies island of St. Eustasia]. The Creatures of the Court openly rejoiced in this, and threatened in some of them in the most impudent Terms. I had certain Information that some of them talked high of their Expectations of popular Insurrections against the Burgomasters of

Amsterdam and Mr. Van Berkel, and did Mr. Adams the honor to mention him as one, that was to be hanged by the Mob in such Company.¹⁵³

Adams believed that the ultimate aim of mob action provoked by the Orangists, and the Orangist opposition to the war with England and to recognition of America, was the destruction of the Patriot cause and that of popular reform. “There are strong suspicions, that this whole Contest and War is excited, purposely to alter the Constitution of this Country,” in favor of the Stadtholder, Adams observed.¹⁵⁴ This recalled the events of 1748, when “the Populace arose in Amsterdam to demand, that the City should be for joining England and making an hereditary Stadholder.” Adams, citing his Patriot sources, suspected that “the Plan was concerted between the two Courts of London and the Hague.” Once again he claimed that his own actions, particularly the *Memorial*, had been important for the cause of the Patriots as well as the United States: “A Gentleman, of excellent Character, and profound Discretion as well as Learning told me, within this Week, ‘We were Saved by Miracle. If Sir Joseph had advised his Master to have declared War against Amsterdam alone, We should have been undone, past all Remedy. Your Memorial, contributed somewhat to our Salvation. It was a good Antedote to Yorks Poison.’”¹⁵⁵

In April 1782, Adams claimed victory. Some of the Dutch provinces, and finally the States-General, accorded diplomatic recognition to the United States. Adams soon finalized a loan with a consortium of Amsterdam Bankers. In October 1782, he completed a Treaty of Amity and

¹⁵² Adams to President of Congress, 25 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 48

¹⁵³ Adams to Livingston, 21 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 253-6.

¹⁵⁴ Adams to Edmund Jennings, 3 January 1781, *PJA*, 11: 10-12.

¹⁵⁵ Adams to James Lovell, 25 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 269.

Commerce with the Netherlands, which Congress ratified during the following year. According to Adams, America achieved these successes without resorting to the bullying tactics of England or the backstairs machinations of France – “availing itself only of the still small Voice of Reason, urging general Motives and national Interests, without Money, without Intrigue, without imposing Pomp, or more imposing Fame, it has prevailed against the utmost Efforts of Intrigue and Corruption, against the almost universal Inclination of Persons in Government, against a formidable Band of Capitalists, and the most powerful mercantile Houses in the Republick, interested in English Funds and too deeply leagued in English Affairs.”¹⁵⁶ Adams asked of Samuel Adams:

What Say you, to the alliance of the first Commercial Power in Europe, next to England a Republican and a Protestant Power? Is it an Event of any Importance or no? There are who dispute it. The two Houses of orange and Brunswick have heretofore acted Sublime Parts in favour of the Cause of Liberty. They have lately acted too much in Concert against it. That of orange must now return to its old System and Principles. I confess I felt a great Pleasure to be introduced to that Court, where William the first and William the third, accomplished Such great Things, in favour of the Protestant Religion and the Rights of Mankind, and to their hereditary successors.¹⁵⁷

Adams’ critics would point out that Dutch recognition of the United States came about only after the combined American-French force at Yorktown had forced Cornwallis’ surrender. They argued that facts on the ground, not profound political arguments, had brought about the change of Dutch policy (just as the American victory in the Battle of Saratoga had influenced the French decision to recognize the United States and join the war). The regime question in the Netherlands, according to Adams’ critics, was peripheral to the overriding geopolitical realities.

Livingston Takes Exception

Adams’ aggressive diplomatic approach in the Dutch Republic was opposed by Franklin, as noted above, and it earned him several rebukes from Livingston after he assumed the position as Congress’ Secretary of Foreign Affairs in late 1781. “We find from your letters as well as from other accounts of the United Provinces that they are divided into powerful parties, for and against the War, and we are sorry to see some of the most distinguished names among what are called the *Anglomans*,” Livingston wrote. He complained that Adams had not provided Congress with a detailed analysis of the “views and principles of each party.” But that aside: “It is so important to the due execution of your mission, to penetrate the views of all parties, *without seeming to be connected with either*, that I have no doubt you have insinuated yourself into the good graces and confidence of the leaders, and that you can furnish the information we require[.] [Y]ou may be persuaded, no ill use will be made of any you give, and it is expected from You.”¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁶ Adams to Livingston, 16 May 1782, *PJA*, 13: 48-9.

¹⁵⁷ Adams to Samuel Adams, 15 June 1782, *PJA*, 13: 125

¹⁵⁸ Livingston to Adams, 20 November 1781, *PJA*, 12: 74-6. Emphasis added.

Your first Object then, if I may Venture my Opinion, is to be well with the Government, your Second, to appear to be so, and to take no measures which may bring upon you a publick Affront; You will naturally treat the friends we have, with the politeness and attention that they justly merit, and even with that Cordiality, which your heart must feel for those who wish your Country well, but your prudence will suggest to you to avoid giving Offence to Government, by the appearance of intrigue.

In Livingston's opinion, Adams had lost sight of his mission and failed singularly in these basic tasks. By becoming embroiled in Dutch politics and by stirring up popular unrest, Adams had actually strengthened the pro-English faction and its effort to bring about an early and separate peace between Britain and the Netherlands – a peace that would be detrimental both to the Dutch and the American causes.

...the State you are in, divided by powerful Parties, and the bias that Every Man has to his own Country, naturally gives him a predilection for that which most favors its Interests. But this, tho' the Child of Virtue, is often the greatest Obstacle to successful Negotiations, it creates distrust and Jealousies, it Excites prejudices, which unfits us for conciliating the affections of those whose Assistance we require, and induces too fond a reliance upon the information of those who wish to serve us. Aristocratic Governmts. are of all others the most Jealous of popular Commotions, the rich and the powerful are Equally engaged to resist them, and nothing will, in my

Opinion, So soon contribute to a peace between Great Britain and the United provinces, as the commotions which now clog the Government of the latter.¹⁵⁹

Livingston clearly did not think that Adams had avoided the appearance, much less the reality, of political intrigue. As to Adams' decision "to declare your public character, before the States were disposed to acknowledge it," Livingston complained about "the humiliating light in which it places us."

I may form improper ideas of the government, interests and policy of the United Provinces, but I frankly confess that I have no hope that they will recognize us as an independent state and embarrass themselves in making their wished for peace with our affairs. What inducements can we hold out to them? They know that our own interest will lead us to trade with them, and we do not propose to purchase their alliance by giving them any exclusive advantage in commerce. Your business, then, I should think lies in a narrow compass. It is to "conciliate the affections of the people, to place our cause in the most advantageous light, to remove the prejudices that Great Britain may endeavour to excite, to discover the views of the different Parties, to watch every motion that leads to peace between England and the United provinces, and to get the secret aid of government in procuring a loan, which is almost the only thing wanting to render our affairs respectable at home and abroad."

¹⁵⁹ Livingston to Adams, 23 October 1781, *PJA*, 12: 40-44.

“As our objects in Holland must be very similar to those of France,” Livingston concluded pointedly, “I should suppose it would be prudent for you to keep up the closest Connexion with her minister to advise with him on great leading objects, and to counteract his opinion only upon the most mature deliberation.”¹⁶⁰

Adams was stung by Livingston’s accusation that he had meddled in Dutch politics. He insisted that he had not favored any particular Patriot faction or supported any particular form of regime change. He had merely aided, indirectly, the arguments of those who had prevented a pro-English revolution in Dutch politics and foreign policy. Adams thought that he had redefined the grounds of those politics in a way that ultimately would stand the United States in good stead with all native parties in the Netherlands. Adams, for instance, believed that the various political factions in the Netherlands (except for a few highly influential individuals who represented an extreme pro-English viewpoint) were all agreed upon the need for peace with Britain. Adams believed he could persuade Dutch opinion across the political spectrum that such a peace could not be achieved without American independence. “It is the United States of America, which must save this Republick from Ruin. It is the only Power that is externally respected by all Parties, altho’ no Party dares as yet declare openly for her. One half the Republick nearly declares every day very indecently against France—the other against England: but neither one nor the other declares against America, which is more beloved and esteemed than any other Nation of the World.” Adams insisted that he had not taken sides among domestic factions: “I

have endeavoured to have the good Graces of the Leaders, and I have no Reason to suspect that I do not enjoy their Esteem, and I have recieved from the Prince [the Stadtholder] repeatedly and in strong Terms by his Secretary the Baron de Lerray Assurances of his personal Esteem.”¹⁶¹

In the parties which divide the Nation I have never taken any Share. I have treated all Men of all Parties whom I saw alike, and have been used quite as well by the Court Party as their Antagonists. Both Parties have been in bodily Fear of popular Comotions, and the Politicks of both appear to me to be too much influenced by the alternate Fears and I must add Hopes of Popular Comotions....Your Advice to be well with the Government and to take no Measures which may bring upon me a public affront, is perfectly just. All appearance of Intrigue, and all the Refinements of Politicks have been as distant from my Conduct, as You know them to be from my natural and habitual Character.¹⁶²

As Adams put it to one of his Congressional allies:

My Memorial, contrived as it was, and coming out as it did, compelled all Parties to Speak in its Praise. The Courtiers themselves were obliged to say, it is cunningly drawn up, it is sensible it is eloquent, it is fine, it is elaborate &c &c. The opposite Party cryed it is admirable, it is excellent, it is noble, it is the best Thing that ever was writ. I am well informed

¹⁶⁰ Livingston to Adams, 20 November 1781, *PJA*, 12: 74-6. The editors of the *Papers of John Adams* note that the source of Livingston’s quotation is not known.

¹⁶¹ Adams to Livingston, 19 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 240-5.

¹⁶² Adams to Livingston, 14 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 233-4.

that the common People, read it, with the Utmost Greediness and often with Tears in their Eyes. I dont believe that any Letters which have gone from hence, have Spoke much in its Praise. The reason is the Friends of Liberty dare not. Letters from the opposite Party may have condemned it in America, although they dared not to disapprove it here...¹⁶³

Adams contended that his “militia diplomacy” in general and the *Memorial* in particular were justified not only in terms of their positive effect on Dutch foreign policy and on the future of the Dutch regime, but also on the views of enlightened statesmen throughout Europe. He told his Congressional ally James Lovell that he had worded parts of *Memorial* carefully, to persuade the Hapsburg Emperor, Joseph II, that Austria was taking a considerable risk if it ignored the future value of American commerce. “When I wrote in that Memorial, those Words, ‘a System, (that of making equitable Treaties with all the Commercial Powers, without being goverd or monopolized by any) from which the Congress never will depart unless compelled by Some Powers declaring against them, which is not expected,’ had the Emperor and him alone in View.” Adams told Lovell that he could easily imagine the Emperor’s response:

When he [Joseph] saw that Memorial, was it not natural for him to Say, “the manner in which my Mother [Maria Theresa] recd the American Minister Mr Lee, and the continual Puffs of the English, have made the Americans Suspect me. Whom else, except Portugal can they Suspect? All the other Powers have

declard themselves in their favour or neutral. I’le remove this Jealousy. Il even See this memorialist. I’l join the armed Neutrality. Il visit my maritime Towns make Regulations to favour their Commerce, with America. Nay more, I will do America a greater Honour, than even France has done. I’l adopt their Sublime Systems of Reason, Philosophy and Civility, in adopting their Code of religious Liberty, by which I shall favour my Commerce with them as much, as I shall do them honour. I will do this memorialist the Honour to show him and all the World that I am of his opinion that it is of vast Importance that the Freedom of Inquiry, the Right of private Judgment and the Liberty of Conscience should be imparted to all Mankind.”¹⁶⁴

Adams was convinced that Joseph’s recent grants of religious toleration to Protestants throughout the empire, including the “Edict of Toleration” issued by the governors general of the Austrian Netherlands (Belgium), was the direct result of the American Revolution’s effect on the calculations of foreign rulers.¹⁶⁵ But the logic of the American Revolution was not completely self-evident; it required demonstration through activist American diplomacy. Adams catalogued these positive and widespread effects for the benefit of Secretary Livingston:

The Memorial, as a Composition, has very little Merit, yet almost every Gazette in Europe has inserted

¹⁶³ Adams to James Lovell, 25 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 269

¹⁶⁴ Adams to James Lovell, 25 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 268-69.

¹⁶⁵ Walter W. Davis, *Joseph II: An Imperial Reformer for the Austrian Netherlands* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974), p. 189–219.

it, and most of them with a Compliment, none with any Criticism. When I was in Paris and Versailles afterwards, no Man ever expressed to me the smallest disapprobation of it, or the least apprehension that it could do any harm. On the contrary, several Gentlemen of Letters expressed higher Compliments upon it than it deserved. The King of Sweden has done it a most illustrious honor, by quoting one of the most material Sentiments in it, in a public Answer to the King of Great Britain; and the Emperor of Germany has since done the Author of it the honor to desire in the Character of Count Falkenstein to see him, and what is more remarkable has adopted the sentiment of it concerning religious Liberty into a Code of Laws for his Dominions, the greatest Effort in favor of Humanity, next to the American Revolution, which has been produced in the eighteenth Century.

“By comparing Facts and Events and Dates, it is impossible not to believe, that the Memorial had some Influence in producing some of them,” Adams insisted. “When Courts and Princes and Nations have been long contemplating a great system of affairs, and their Judgments begin to ripen, and they begin to see how things ought to go and are agoing, a small Publication, holding up these objects in a clear point of View, sometimes sets a vast Machine in motion at once like the springing of a mine. What a Dust We raise, said the Fly upon the Chariot Wheel?¹⁶⁶

Adams was convinced that Livingston’s criticism of his behavior in the Netherlands was prompted by the French legation in America, which was acting under the instructions of Vergennes (and the views of Franklin). Adams never moved off his ground. Nearly three decades later, to defend his actions as a Revolutionary War diplomat, Adams published his response to Livingston along with documents relating to his controversial diplomatic mission. “There is not an effect of that memorial, suggested in this letter as possibly or probably flowing from it, that I do not now in 1810, after near thirty years of examination and reflection, believe to have been produced by it.”

Conclusion

The notion that John Adams’ *Memorial* to the States-General of the Netherlands had not only advanced the cause of liberty in the Dutch Republic but also persuaded political leaders throughout Europe to adopt enlightened policies surely struck Benjamin Franklin as fantastic. “He means well for his country, is always an honest man, often a wise one, but sometimes and in some things, absolutely out of his senses,” was Franklin’s famous and enduring judgment of his Revolutionary War colleague.¹⁶⁷

Franklin, however, was hardly indifferent to the global fate of liberty and enlightenment or the role that America, and Americans, could play in fostering political reform. While in France he became a member and later grand master of the Masonic Lodge of the Grand Sisters; many future leaders of the French Revolution were members of the same lodge. For these Masons, according to Franklin’s biographer Carl Van Doren, “the American constitu-

¹⁶⁶ Adams to Livingston, 21 February 1782, *PJA*, 12: 253-6.

¹⁶⁷ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Viking Press, 1938), p. 694.

tions were looked upon as a grammar of liberty. This was a lodge of constitutionalists, hoping that France might put constitutional limits to its monarchy.” Whatever Franklin said or did with this group remained behind closed doors. When the news of the French Revolution reached America in the winter of 1789-90 just before his death, Franklin reflected:

The convulsions in France are attended with some disagreeable circumstances; but if by the struggle she obtains and secures for the nation its future liberty, and a good constitution, a few years enjoyment of those blessings will amply repair all the damages their acquisition may have occasioned. God grant that not only the love of liberty, but a thorough knowledge of the rights of man, may pervade all the nations of the earth, so that a philosopher may set his foot anywhere on its surface, and say, ‘this is my country!’¹⁶⁸

Historian Robert R. Palmer, whose study of the “age of democratic revolution” remains the most thorough analysis of the topic, offered this conclusion:

The effects of the American Revolution, as a Revolution, were imponderable but very great. It inspired the sense of a new era. It added a new content to the conception of progress. It gave a whole new dimension to ideas of liberty and equality made familiar by the Enlightenment. It got people in the habit of thinking more concretely about political questions. It made them more readily critical of their own governments and society. It dethroned England, and set up America, as a model for

those seeking a better world. It brought written constitutions, declarations of rights, and constituent assemblies into the realm of the possible. The apparition on the other side of the Atlantic of certain ideas already familiar in Europe made such ideas seem more truly universal, and confirmed the habit of thinking in terms of humanity at large....America made Europe seem unsatisfactory to many people of the middle and lower classes, and to those of the upper classes who wished them well. It made a good many Europeans feel sorry for themselves, and induced a kind of spiritual fight from the Old Regime.¹⁶⁹

This Working Paper has focused on the “indirect approach” that typically marked the Founders’ line to foreign regime change. First, the American Revolution and an independent United States would demonstrate the viability of republican government and a commercially-oriented foreign policy. The result, second, would be a new configuration of power in the Euro-Atlantic state system, and more liberal rules of international behavior, which would be conducive not only to American security but also to the cause of political reform and popular sovereignty, rightly understood. Third, American statesmen would take the national interests of various states into account while encouraging this transformation, while appealing in parallel to enlightened public opinion throughout Europe. They believed that this opinion, over time, would be in an ever stronger position to guide those national interests in a moderate direction and to undertake liberal domestic political reform, while necessarily taking

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 656-7, 773 (quote).

¹⁶⁹ Palmer, *The Age of the Democratic Revolution: The Challenge*, p. 282.

into account the particular circumstances of each foreign regime.

The path to liberty and enlightenment proved to be neither straight nor sure. “The Nations of Europe, appeared to me, when I was among them, from the beginning of 1778, to 1785 i.e. to the commencement of the troubles in France, to be advancing by slow and sure Steps towards an Amelioration of the condition of Man, in Religion and Government, in Liberty, Equality, Fraternity Knowledge Civilization and Humanity,” Adams reflected decades later to Thomas Jefferson.¹⁷⁰ But events outran the ability and power of the United States to influence the evolution of a liberal international order that would be conducive to gradual reform and (relatively) peaceful regime change. American statesmen like Adams and Jefferson (just like Adams and Franklin) could not agree upon the proper policies to conduct the indirect approach, especially after the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. American commerce did not change the nature of international relations but rather sucked the United States into the maelstrom of European conflicts. But the idea of an indirect approach to foreign regime change was not forgotten, only deferred.

¹⁷⁰ Adams to Jefferson, 15 July 1813, Lester J. Cappon, ed., *The Adams-Jefferson Letters* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), p. 357.