

## Balance of Power Thought and The Intellectual Framework of Americas' Revolutionary Diplomacy

Todd F. Cooper

Americans like to think of themselves as unique; a new alloy made from disparate races and forged in the furnace of a new world. Beginning with this premise, many historians of American diplomacy have discovered a foreign policy unique from that practiced by Europeans. In supporting their case, they point to America's geographical position, the reforming impulse of Puritanism, the influence of free traders, the impact of the Enlightenment, and the very act of immigration itself. Taken all together, their case for the singularity of the American experience, and thus for a different approach to the making of foreign policy appears iron clad.

In exhibiting the manifestations of America's unique foreign policy historians frequently cite three documents. The first is *Common Sense* written by Thomas Paine in February of 1776. In this clarion call for independence Paine argued away the British connection:

But the injuries and disadvantages which we sustain by that connection are without number; and our duty to mankind at large, as well as to ourselves, instruct us to renounce the alliance: because, any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain, tends directly to involve this Continent in European wars and quarrels, and sets us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint . . . It is the true interest of America to steer clear of European contentions . . .

Europe is too thickly planted with Kingdoms to be long at peace, and whenever a war breaks out between England and any foreign power, the trade of America goes to ruin, because of her connection with Britain . . . <sup>1</sup>

Paine called for a foreign policy that stressed separation from the "political" events of Europe which disrupted American trade.

The second document linking America with an isolationist imperative is John Adam's "Model Treaty" of 1776. Proposed as the form from which all American treaties were to be drawn, the draft treaty called for complete freedom of trade as the basic principle of future commercial relations. It also insisted that the United States form no more than a "commercial connection" with other countries. Felix Gilbert explained the importance of the "Model Treaty": "Where as usually commercial conventions were sources of friction and instru-

1. Thomas Paine "Common Sense," in Moncure Daniel Conway (ed.) *The Writings of Thomas Paine* 1 (New York: 1969), pp. 88-89.

ments of power politics reinforcing political alliances by commercial preferences, the Americans wanted to establish a commercial system of freedom and equality which would eliminate all cause for tension and political conflicts."<sup>2</sup>

More than just a model for future American treaties, the "Model Treaty" was to have an ameliorating effect upon all of international relations once adopted by other nations. Linking this reformist impulse with the French philosophes, Felix Gilbert lays out the ideas:

The picture which the philosophes envisaged of the relations among nations after the rule of reason had been established was implied in their criticism of the existing foreign policy . . . There should be no difference between the 'moral principles' which rule the reactions among individuals and 'moral principles' which rule reactions among states. Diplomacy should be 'frank and open'. Formal treaties would be unnecessary; political alliances should be avoided particularly. Commercial conventions should refrain from all detailed regulations establishing themselves to general arrangements stating the fundamental rules and customs of trade and navigation. In such a world, the connections among the different states would rest in the hands not of governments but of individuals trading with each other.<sup>3</sup>

The third most cited document on America's unique heritage is George Washington's "Farewell Address" given in 1796 upon his retirement from office. Contributed to by James Madison and Alexander Hamilton and heavily influenced by domestic politics, Washington's valedictory reminded Americans:

Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships and enmities.

Our detached and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course . . .

Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation? Why quit our own to stand upon foreign ground? Why, by interweaving our destiny with that of any part of Europe, entangle our peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalry, interest, humor, or caprice?<sup>4</sup>

More than anything else, these three documents link American foreign policy thought during the Revolutionary era with the twentieth-century conflict between isolationism, internationalism, realism, and idealism. To read back into these documents the foreign policy debates of this century is to miss the ideas

2. Felix Giblert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: 1961), pp. 49-52.

3. Gilbert, *Farewell Address* p. 65.

4. Harold C. Syrett ed., *American Historical Documents* (New York: 1970), p. 146.

within them. What stands out in these and in other documents is not the uniqueness of the American approach to diplomacy but its similarity to that of Europe. If Americans wished for a more enlightened era in international relations they never took their eye off of the present; and if they wished to remain free from European wars, they did so out of the knowledge that while their interests differed from Europeans their connections with Europe threatened their neutrality. In praising the "genius" of America's amateur diplomats, historians have missed the source of this genius. Americans practiced diplomacy as did their European cousins and in doing so brought to diplomacy the same "mind-set" as well. This "mind-set" or "method of analysis" stressed the balance of power.<sup>5</sup>

## I

The eighteenth century represents the era of the "classical" balance of power system in Europe. During this time not one of the five major powers — Great Britain, France, Prussia, Austria, and Russia — had sufficient power to dominate the others. Whenever one state acquired too much power or attempted to upset the balance by conquest, a coalition of states formed to oppose it. This process of coalition-building took place with such regularity that observers of international relations believed it happened automatically.

Students of international affairs saw this rough parity between major European states as part of nature, and thus opened to scientific investigation. Arising from the Newtonian Enlightenment, the science of diplomacy attempted to discover the laws that governed the behavior of nations. Like all scientists, diplomats required special training. France established the first school for diplo-

5. For the traditional accounts of the role of ideas in the diplomacy of the Revolutionary period see Samuel F. Bemis, *Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York: 1942) and his *Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York: 1935); Thomas Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People* 9th ed. (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: 1974); Alexander Deconde, *History of American Foreign Policy* 2nd ed. (New York: 1971) Gilbert, *Farewell Address*; Paul Varg, *Foreign Policy of the Founding Fathers* (Michigan: 1963); for those who wish to see the continuing influence of the ideas of Felix Gilbert on current historiography see Gregg L. Lint "American Revolution and the Law of Nations, 1776-1789," *Diplomatic History* I, no. 1, (Winter, 1977). For those who challenge the traditional interpretation see William A. Williams, *Contours of American History* (New York: 1961); Richard Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* (New York: 1965); Norman A. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* (New York: 1964); Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Colonies into Nations: American Diplomacy 1763-1801* (New York: 1972); and most recently James H. Hutson, "Intellectual Foundations of Early American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* I, no. 1, (Winter, 1977). The idea that Americans took advantage of the situation in Europe, that is European's "distresses" originated with Bemis. See Bemis, *Diplomatic History*: also Max Savelle, *The Orgins of American Diplomacy: The International History of Anglo-America, 1492-1763* (New York: 1967).

mats in 1712 and Britain followed twelve years later. The science of diplomacy stressed observation, categorization, and a search for governing laws. Those laws that they discovered stressed the four key concepts of interest, power, flexibility, and interrelation.<sup>6</sup>

Founded upon observation and molded by belief, a peculiar "analysis" developed based upon the concepts of interest, power, flexibility, and interrelation. That a balance of power system existed one cannot say. The ability of any nation to dominate Europe speaks more to the limits of power than it does to the workings of natural law. Still the development of this analysis, called here the balance of power analysis, shaped policy as if such a system existed. It is towards showing the existence and use of this analysis, first by Europeans and, more importantly, by Americans, that our attention now turns.

## II

Of the four concepts that supposedly governed the behavior of states, none had more importance in helping observers determine that behavior than the concept of national interest, for it offered the key to understanding the laws that governed international relations. Writers on the role of interest in foreign policy were considered the experts of diplomacy. Their writings formed what has been called the school of the "doctrine of the interest of states." This analytic method strove to find the "true" interest of states as opposed to their "imaginary" or "apparent" short term interest. Both Bolingbroke and Prufendorf stressed the concept of "perpetual" interest of a state, which depended upon the "Situation and Constitution of the Country and the Natural Inclination of the people."<sup>7</sup>

Few historians would argue that European leaders failed to pursue their own interest in foreign policy. Indeed the concept of interest dominated European foreign policy thought. One of the many myths that lingers, however, is that during the Revolutionary War America's leaders thought not in terms of interest, but in terms of neutral international law. This belief is pure fantasy, for as Dr. John Mitchell wrote in 1757, "Interest rules all the World. Why should it not rule our Colonies?"<sup>8</sup>

A concept of national interest did motivate American leaders. "As a delegate," John Dickenson of Delaware explained, "I am bound to prefer the general Interest of the Confederacy . . . ." Thomas Paine wrote in *Common Sense*

6. Edward V. Gulick, *Europe's Classical Balance of Power* (Ithaca: New York, 1955), Chaps. 1-2.

7. Gilbert, *Farewell Address* pp. 95, 97.

8. Dr. John Mitchell quoted in Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* pp. 8-10; Lint, "American Revolution and the Law of Nations".

of the "true interest of America" and Washington spoke of Europe having "a set of primary interests". Even the "Model Treaty's" famous principle that "free ships shall make free goods", (claimed to show best the American commitment to international law) rested on the solid foundation of recognized national interest. "The Principle that Free Ships shall make free Goods, will assist us in procuring of present Supplies," wrote author John Adams to James Warren.<sup>9</sup>

American leaders based their policies upon interest as a concept and believed that all other nations did the same. In July 1779 while discussing the possibility of continued French aid regardless of American peace terms, William Whipple reminded his fellow Congressional delegate Josiah Barlett that "all nations will be influenced by their own interest," and that "it requires no great depth in Politics to discern that the alliance already entered into (with France) is as much for the interest of our ally as ourselves . . . ." Even those radicals like Samuel Adams who wished nations would be governed by "disinterested Motives to interpose in Support of the Common Rights of Mankind" realized that only "when it suited the interest of foreign Powers . . . would they aid us substantially."<sup>10</sup>

It fell to Alexander Hamilton to produce in the "Pacificus" papers the most cogent defense of the concept of interest. In the fourth installment dated July 10, 1793 Hamilton addressed the "very favorite topic of gratitude to France" which had been used to suggest that the United States come to France's aid. "Faith and justice between nations are virtues of a nature the most necessary and sacred," wrote Hamilton, "but the same cannot be said of gratitude." After explaining that while "between individuals, occasion is not unfrequently given for the exercise of gratitude, . . . among nations they perhaps never occur. Indeed, the rule of morality in this respect is not precisely the same between nations as between individuals." He finished his defense of Washington's "Neutrality Proclamation" by adding:

It is not here meant to recommend a policy absolutely selfish . . . but to show, that a policy regulated by their own interest . . . is, and ought to be, their prevailing one; and that either to ascribe to them [nations] a different principle of action, or to deduce, from the supposition of it, arguments for a self-denying and self-sacrificing gratitude on the part of a nation . . . is to misrepresent or misconceive what usually are, and ought to be, the springs of national conduct . . . <sup>11</sup>

9. John Dickenson to Ceasar Rodney, May 10, 1779, in Edmund C. Burnett ed., *Letters of the Members of the Continental Congress* 4, (hereinafter referred to as *LMCC*) (Washington D.C.: 1923), pp. 204-205; John Adams to James Warren, December 9, 1780, in W.C. Ford ed. "Warren-Adams Letters," vol. 2, in *Massachusetts Historical Society Collection* 72, (Hereinafter referred to as *W-AL*), p. 155.

10. William Whipple to Josiah Barlett, July 27, 1779, Burnett, *LMCC* 4, p. 346; Samuel Adams to James Warren, April 17, 1777, Ford, *W-AL* 2, p. 31. Paine, *Common Sense*; Syrett, *Historical Documents* p. 146.

11. Alexander Hamilton, "Pacificus", July 10, 1793, in Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* pp. 60-61.

Interest ruled the eighteenth century. While America's leaders were principled men, and some such as Samuel Adams bemoaned the lack of disinterested behavior on the part of others, American leaders pursued a foreign policy with specific goals in mind and they realized others did the same. If they supported a principle, they did so only for the specific interest that could be achieved by using it.

### III

Balance of power thought provided America's Revolutionary leadership with a dispassionate analysis of the workings of international affairs. It taught that all nations have a national interest, which they pursued even at the cost of war. Additionally, it taught that all nations share a common interest: each attempts to increase its power at the expense of others.

Power, of the four components of the balance of power analysis, was the easiest to gauge. A state's power came from the abundance of her natural resources, the size of her population, and the extent of her trade. These factors determined how many troops a country could field. "One must regard as a fundamental maxim and incontestable principle" wrote a French diplomat, "that the reputation and prestige . . . of a state . . . is necessarily based upon power."<sup>12</sup> Power offered a state the capability of pursuing its interests in the international arena and protecting it against similar designs of other states. Therefore, writers on the balance of power assumed that any nation strove to maximize its power and thus its influence.

A state's power could flow from many springs, but by the middle of the eighteenth century most international theorists saw a trade surplus as crucial. If a country sold more to other countries than it bought, its hard currency would grow. In an era when professional armies (often made up of criminals and mercenaries) fought wars a country needed a full treasury or faced unpleasant options.

In this mercantilistic scheme, colonies and surplus trade went hand in hand. The Spanish economist Geronimo de Uztariz explained that a nation could not have a large population, strong armies, and international prestige without having great commerce. In the *Theory and Practice of Commerce* he showed France, Holland, and England as nations that received their wealth and power from colonies. Emmerich de Vattel in the *Law of Nations* pointed to England as the perfect example of a state whose power came from its external commerce, including that with its colonies. "Today" he wrote in 1750, "it is chiefly commerce which places in its [England's hand] the balance of Europe." Because of its dominate role in the trade of Spanish America after the Treaty of Utrecht and the wealth she derived from her own colonies, England was seen as being a

12. Gilbert, *Farewell Address* p. 91.

threat to the balance of power in Europe. It was this threat that turned France towards establishing a permanent alliance with Spain and attempting to prevent the spread of English colonies in America.<sup>13</sup>

The English were well aware of the source of their power. In a paradoxical speech the Duke of Newcastle argued for the breaking of the Spanish mercantile system for "should too large a share of them come into the hands of any nation in Europe [besides England] . . . they might be employed to purpose . . . which might one day prove fatal to the balance of power." The war between Britain and France for control of North America was a war for power in Europe. Dr. John Mitchell reminded his English readers in 1757 that the colonies would add seamen as well as commerce to the strength of England, and "the result of this contest in America . . . must surely be to gain a power and dominion, that must sooner or later command all the Continent, with the whole trade of it . . ." <sup>14</sup>

As tension grew between Britain and her American colonies after 1763, European analysts pointed to America as Britain's Achilles' heel. Nicholas Ray, a New Yorker, reminded his English audience of some of the international facts of life: "The ruling policy of every State is unquestionably self-interest; the policy therefore of every State of Europe . . . must induce them to wish a revolt of our Colonies . . ." "It is by the American Continent only", an anonymous writer warned the British in 1775, "that the balance of Europe can be any Longer in your hands." If Americans achieved a separation then "Britain . . . would cease to be formidable at Sea . . ." prophesied Hugh Williamson in 1775. He also questioned Britain's survival: "Will she be a match for France," he wrote, "when the colonies are thrown into the scale?" <sup>15</sup>

American leaders, schooled in the European tradition of international politics, also thought in terms of power. In fact, power dominated their thinking. Bernard Bailyn has observed that their theory of politics "rested on the belief that what lay behind every political scene . . . was the disposition of power." Americans understood their position within the British Empire. Indeed, in terms of power, they believed that by denying Britain America's trade, the mother country would be forced to compromise. They also believed that the European balance of power would protect them against British retaliation. America's trade would induce France, Spain and Holland to aid the colonies and thus reduce Britain's power. Young Alexander Hamilton saw no other option open to Britain except compromise. "In whatever light we view the matter," he wrote, "the consequences to Great Britain would be too destructive to permit her to proceed to extremities, unless she has lost all just sense of her own interest." <sup>16</sup>

13. Savelle, *Orgins* pp. 228-231.

14. *Ibid.*, pp. 228-231; Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* pp. 8-10.

15. Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* pp. 29, 45, 73, 75.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 56, 60-61; Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Orgins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1967), p. 55.

Even when Britain refused to compromise, Americans felt strong enough to challenge Britain with war. "A false Estimate of the Power and Preserverance of our Enemies was friendly to the present revolution," James Duane reminded Washington, and "you cannot forget the opinions which were current on the Floor at the first and second Congress and how firmly they established this Error."<sup>17</sup>

Since balance of power analysis held that all nations attempted to extend their power by territorial acquisitions as well as by trade, the disposition of the territories that surrounded the newly formed United States concerned the men at Philadelphia. American leaders had no doubt about the importance of Canada in this regard. For almost one hundred years, the French and their Indian allies had terrorized the frontier region of the English colonies. In 1775-1776 an American army failed to capture Canada allowing General Burgoyne a staging area for his ill-fated campaign. Despite the continued possibility of British use of Canada as a base of operations, Washington argued against a Franco-American assault to capture it. He did so on the grounds of insufficient power, and as he wrote to Henry Laurens, "the introduction of . . . French troops into Canada would be too great a temptation to be resisted by any power." Washington feared the geo-political consequences that would follow from the French control of Canada. He saw America in a precariously weak position if France controlled the Saint Lawrence River and Spain controlled the Mississippi River. It would place America within the jaws of a Bourbon nutcracker and give the Compact sufficient power to enable them "to dictate to all America."<sup>18</sup>

Washington's military mind was not the only one that thought in terms of power. A true estimate of power relationships was an integral part of balance of power analysis. America needed to control Canada for just that reason. "I jump in Oppinion with you" noted Robert Morris to Horatio Gates, "that Canada must be ours at all events; should it fall into the hands of the Enemy they will soon raise a Nest of Hornets on our backs that will sting us to the quick." John Adams admitted that the American fear of the consequences that would arise from British control of Canada occasioned "our remarkable Unanimity" in wishing to capture it.<sup>19</sup>

In terms of power, Canada's importance went beyond its possible use as a staging area in times of war. Balance of power analysis showed direct relationship between the size of a country, the size of its population and thus the size of its wealth and power. Drawing upon these ideas Franklin had urged Britain to take Canada in 1763 and John Sullivan, in May of 1781, argued for its capture:

17. James Duane to George Washington, October 10, 1780, Burnett, *LMCC* 5, pp. 414-415.

18. George Washington to Henry Laurens, in Worthington C. Ford ed., *The Writings of George Washington* 3, (New York: 1889-1893), p. 240.

19. Robert Morris to Horatio Gates, April 6, 1776, John Adams to James Warren, February 18, 1776, Burnett, *LMCC* 1, pp. 353-355, 416.



When I consider that the enemy . . . hold uninterrupted the Province of Canada, containing more territory than all other thirteen United States; and that this Province, which almost encircles Us, must from its situation, and by the natural increases of its inhabitants, soon become sufficiently powerful in conjunction with the naval force of Britain to deprive us of those privileges for which we have long contended . . . for upon commencement of hostilities . . . Britain will only have to put her naval force in motion and the Whole of the States from their situation with respect to Canada will be immediately invested by land and Sea . . . These considerations induce me to propose to Congress the immediate invasion of Canada . . .<sup>20</sup>

Americans coveted more than Canada. The disposition of the Maritime Provinces, the Mississippi valley and control of that river, greatly concerned the United States. But even the question of Florida, an area not claimed, interested America's leaders. "It is supposed Spain has had her eye on the Floridas," Cornelius Harnett informed his fellow Congressman Richard Caswell. "This is a matter which may require great deliberation, and [it raises] the question [of whether] to have the Spaniards or the English for our Neighbors . . ."<sup>21</sup>

American leaders during the Revolution recognized the role power played in the field of international relations. Balance of power analysis showed a threat from the proximity of foreign troops in Canada. It also taught that the possessor of Canada would acquire a great increase in power. This relationship between territory and power pushed Americans to acquire the great expanse west of the Appalachian mountains. Americans saw power as a constant and necessary force in affairs between nations, and while they acknowledged and respected it they did not fear to use it. As Congressman James Lovell told General Horatio Gates: "I admire the thought of writing the Treaty of Peace with the Bayonett."<sup>22</sup>

#### IV

Each state had its own interest which depended upon many factors: the most notable being the acquisition of power. In balance of power analysis all states shared one other "true" interest: the preservation of the balance of power. Writers on the balance of power assumed that all nations strove to maximize their power and influence. If an ally became too strong, however, a state needed to be ready to change allies to maintain the balance. This need led to the formation of the third concept of balance of power analysis — flexibility. Abbe

20. John Sullivan, "Proposed Address to Congress", May 2, 1781, Burnett, *LMCC* 6, pp. 75-76.

21. Cornelius Harnett to Richard Caswell, September 14, 1779, Burnett, *LMCC* 4, p. 164.

22. James Lovell to Horatio Gates, April 19, 1779, Burnett, *LMCC* 4, p. 164.

de Pradt stressed that "enemies" must be ready to "come together for the common defense, and allies momentarily separate for the same reason." Lord Brougham agreed that preventing the domination of Europe by any one state was the highest interest of all states. "No previous quarrel with any given state," he wrote, "no existing condition even of actual hostility, must be suffered to interfere with the imperative claim of the general security."<sup>23</sup>

It would be an exaggeration to assert that Europeans changed allies as if international affairs were a square dance. By 1775, however, this trading of partners created a degree of precedent which enabled Americans to change allies with remarkable results.

American influence in international affairs came from the importance of her trade in the growth of British power. The French believed that the separation of the thirteen colonies from the British Empire would reduce British power. Beginning with Foreign Minister Choiseul in 1764, the French eagerly followed the growing discontent in America, and by 1775 they were clandestinely aiding the colonies. France became hostage, however, to the fear of reconciliation between the two warring parts of the British Empire. This gave the Americans influence within the alliance that far out-weighed their power.

During the negotiations over the Treaty of Alliance with France in 1777, Franklin skillfully used the concept of flexibility which played on France fears of an Anglo-American reconciliation. In a memorandum to Louis XVI dated January 13, 1778, French Foreign Minister Vergennes pointed out that if France did not ally with America "England [would] take advantage of it by making a reconciliation." "The results of this will be that America will become our perpetual enemies . . . and the coalition of the English and Americans will draw after it our expulsion, and probably that of the Spaniards, from the whole of America." Vergennes did not need to remind the King of the increase in British power that would result from her complete control of the New World's trade. He then went on to add that it would be a "mistake to suppose that the United States will not lend themselves to the proposals of the Court of St. James."<sup>24</sup>

Arthur Lee also tried the same tactic with the Spanish. "If Great Britain would again be united to America by conquest or conciliation," he warned Madrid, "It would be vain to menace her with war." Lee painted his grim picture of the power Britain would possess if it controlled the United States. "Great Britain knit to such a growing strength" as America, he continued, "would reign the irresistible though hated arbiter of Europe." In threatening reconciliation both Franklin and Lee drew upon traditional balance of power analysis to drive home their point. That the maneuver succeeded better with the French than it did with the Spanish speaks more to divergent conceptions of interest on the

23. Gulick, *Balance of Power* pp. 10-11; Gilbert, *Farewell Address* p. 91; Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* p. 5.

24. Bemis, *Diplomacy* pp. 58-61; Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* pp. 27-30.

part of the Bourbon partners than to the skill or lack of on the part of the negotiators.<sup>25</sup>

During the peace negotiations of 1782, Franklin, Adams and John Jay skillfully played upon the British hope of dividing the United States and France, and the French hope of keeping the British Empire apart. Playing both sides from the middle the Americans negotiated a separate peace with Great Britain on very favorable terms and then convinced the French to agree to it. Indeed, Americans saw the threat to change allies as their ultimate protection against the intrigues of the French. Even the pro-French delegate from Maryland, Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer, in a letter to George Weedom, conceded that France would not attend to America's "interest" as much as "we might like". Still he was unafraid of a double-cross. "I think France must procure us tolerable terms," he wrote, "or She cannot expect to keep us long in her interest . . . ." Thomas Rodney a delegate from Delaware also realized this threat would moderate French policy. While he voted against giving the French court a veto over the action of American Ministers to a European peace conference, he still did not feel concerned when it passed. He understood that the "mediating powers will readily consent to our Independence . . . for it will be ever in the Interest of France that they should do this least we should at a future day form an Alliance with Great Britain," John Adams summed up this belief well: "the habit of affection or enmity between nations are easily changed as circumstances vary and essential interest alter."<sup>26</sup>

## V

Interest, power, and flexibility, all were of vital importance to the formulation as well as the execution of foreign policy. Interest determined the ends of policy with power and flexibility as the means. If a President or a Prince paid close attention to only these three concepts, however, this analysis would still be incomplete. Those who made foreign policy, both in Europe and in the United States, knew that no nation existed outside the influence of another, that all lived in the same world. Thus no nation could be isolated, for an event anywhere might effect all.

None would dispute that the major states of Europe realized their interdependence. G.F. Von Martens, an eighteenth-century authority on the balance of power, asserted that "the resemblance in manner and religion, the intercourse

25. Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* p. 113.

26. Daniel of St. Thomas Jenifer to George Weedom, June 5, 1781, Thomas Rodney to Cesar Rodney, June 15, 1781, Burnett, *LMCC* 6, pp. 112, 121-122; Van Alstyne, *Empire and Independence* p. 161.

of commerce . . . have so multiplied the relations between each particular state . . . [that] one may consider Europe . . . as a society of nations . . . ”<sup>27</sup> The question is whether Americans saw this interrelationship and used it to analyze events abroad. This question begs another: perhaps Americans realized that all nations were interrelated but wanted to separate themselves as best they could. Put another way, were Americans isolationists?

In order for a nation to pursue a policy of strict neutrality or isolationism certain conditions must be met: that a nation must be seen as unimportant in the greater web of international relationships, or so important that a general agreement places it beyond the influence of any one nation. Neither of these conditions were present in the case of Britain's continental colonies. The nation that held the keys to America's trade was thought to hold the keys to the European balance of power. Such a prize as this could never be declared as off limits either by the European powers or by Americans themselves, the Monroe Doctrine notwithstanding.

Still the belief that Americans wished to be separated from Europe and could be rests upon strong evidence. One major document that stressed the geographical position of the colonies and the advantage it offered was *Common Sense*. Thomas Paine wrote that “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 . . . against whom we have neither anger nor complaint.”<sup>28</sup> If the British connection meant the spread of European wars to America, then separation promised neutrality. Paine's argument, however, ignored the importance that mercantilistic theory attached to America's trade.

The intellectual roots of Paine's assertion that America could remain isolated from European conflict came from the “doctrine of the two spheres”. This theory denied the interrelationship between the Old World and the New. It was more of an intellectual construct devised for practical purposes than an estimation on how the world worked. This purposeful separation arose from a desire on the part of Europeans to maintain peace in Europe while they fought for control of the Americas. The theory reached its height of influence in the middle of the seventeenth century when, in the 1686 Treaty of Whitehall, the French and the British agreed that fighting between their nationals in America would not lead to war in Europe. As the importance of the American trade rose in the estimation of European diplomats and scholars, the “doctrine of the two spheres” declined. By the 1770s and 1780s it had passed from favor.<sup>29</sup>

If an idea lacks currency, that does not mean it ceases to exist. Alexander Hamilton writing in the 11th *Federalist* used the concept of different spheres: “The world may politically, as well as geographically, be divided into four parts,

27. Gulick, *Balance of Power* pp. 10-11.

28. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* p. 26; Gilbert, *Farewell Address* p. 43. Paine, “Common Sense”.

29. Savelle, *Origins* pp. 210-215.

each having distinct set of interests." In his "Farewell Adress" Washington used the concept of separation to urge Americans not to involve themselves in the "ordinary vicissitudes" of European politics: "Our detachment and distant situation invites and enables us to pursue a different course . . . . Why forego the advantages of so peculiar a situation?" James Monroe in 1823 drew upon the same idea for his celebrated "doctrine". In it he reminded Congress and Europe that "in wars of the European powers in matters relating to themselves we have never taken any part, nor does it comport with our policy to do so."<sup>30</sup>

Further evidence that Americans desired to be free from European entanglements rested mainly with the "Model Treaty" of 1776. Written for the most part by John Adams during the summer of 1776, this document proposed commercial reciprocity. It stated that in its ports the United States would treat subjects of a foreign power as it treated its own citizens, provided the foreign power would do likewise in its ports. It was to be the "model" for all future American treaties and its other principle that "free ships shall make free goods" was incorporated to facilitate the acquisition of war material. The motivation of its author can be seen in a letter Adams wrote to John Winthrop in June of 1776. "I am not for soliciting any political connection, or military assistance, or indeed naval from France," the Massachusetts delegate wrote. "I wish for nothing but commerce, a mere marine treaty with them." Felix Gilbert summed up the traditional view of the "Model Treaty's" purpose when he wrote: "The Model Treaty and the accompanying instructions were designed to keep America out of European struggles."<sup>31</sup>

It would be erroneous to leave the impression that only Adams wished for no more than a commercial relationship with France, for a majority of Congress approved the "Model Treaty". Like all newly freed colonials, they did not wish to trade one master for another. During the debate over independence in the spring of 1776, Carter Braxton of Virginia articulated this concern. "It is said by Advocates for Separation that France will undoubtedly assist us," he informed Landon Carter, "But would such a blind precipitate measure as this be justified by Prudence? . . . Would not the Court [France] so famous for Intrigues and Deception . . . exact much severer terms than if we were to treat [with Great Britain]?" Braxton's concern arose from almost a century of conflict with France over North America. He feared that America's need for help would place her in a position where she could not resist French demands.<sup>32</sup>

Braxton's analysis took into account the weakness of the United States, the strength of Britain and the behavior of all states. Balance of power analysis

30. Greabner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* p. 53; the Farewell Address and Monroe Doctrine quoted from Harold C. Syrett ed., *American Historical Documents* (New York: 1970), pp. 146, 180.

31. Gilbert, *Farewell Address* p. 55; John Adams to John Winthrop, June 23, 1776, Burnett, *LMCC* 1, p. 502.

32. Carter Braxton to Landon Carter, April 14, 1776, *Ibid.*, p. 240.

taught that all nations maneuvered to increase their power. The international environment was a dangerous place for weak states, as the partition of Poland had showed. But as the perception of weakness led some to tread warily, a perception of strength made others bold. Those who wanted separation had a ready answer for Braxton's analysis and it too came from an investigation of balance of power. "You seem to apprehend danger from our being aided by despotic States," Richard Henry Lee wrote to Landon Carter. "[But] the help we desire, [will not] put it by any means in the power of France to hurt us . . . ." Thus seeing Britain weak and corrupt, the end of policy was the acquisition of war material for a short campaign. The means to this end was the "Model Treaty." The entire analysis, however, rested on a "false Estimate of the Power and Perseverance of the enemy," and an exaggerated view of the importance of American trade.<sup>33</sup>

Before any leader can pursue isolationist policies, he must believe his country unimportant to others and other nations unimportant to his. Twentieth-century isolationism arose, in part, from the belief that events in Europe were of little consequence to Americans. But America's Revolutionary leadership held no such illusions. The absence of American troops in Europe did not make the United States an isolationist nation. Balance of power analysis taught that all nations were interrelated and mercantilist thought stressed America's importance to the European balance of power. Their illusions, which produced the "Model Treaty," arose from the belief in America's importance. "Whatever European power possesses," America's trade wrote Robert Morris, "must become the most important in Europe." Or as John Adams put it: "A foreign Court will not disdain to treat with us upon equal terms. I think they cannot refuse . . . ." <sup>34</sup> Adams and others believed America needed to pay no higher price than the "Model Treaty" to enlist sufficient European aid to achieve victory.

The "Model Treaty" was not a document of isolationism but one of calculated benefit and cost. If behind it lay a degree of fear, or perhaps prudence, these feelings shrank before the euphoria generated by the Spirit of '76. This state did not last long, however. The rout of the American Army at Long Island in the summer of 1776 brought into clearer focus the true nature of America's power and needs. By December of 1776 William Hooper could sneer: "We have been holding forth new lines to France, by offering what we have not to give . . . ." <sup>35</sup> As the war was dragged on and the need for French assistance grew, Americans reevaluated the price for that assistance. By May of 1778 Congress readily approved a secret treaty of alliance with France. This treaty pledged the United States to guarantee French possessions in North America. Needless to say,

33. Richard Henry Lee to Landon Carter, April 30, 1775, *Ibid.*, pp. 468-469; James Duane to George Washington, October 10, 1780, [Burnett, *LMCC* 5, pp. 414-415.]

34. Robert Morris to Silas Deane, December 20, 1776, quoted in Hutson, "Intellectual Foundations," p. 11; John Adams to John Winthrop, June 23, 1776, Burnett, *LMCC* 1, p. 502.

35. William Hooper to Robert Morris, December 28, 1776, Burnett, *LMCC* 2, p. 195.

the fortunes of war brought about the reevaluation necessary to approve the alliance. But such a new estimate reflected an attempt to bring the ends and means of policy into balance and was not a retreat from isolationism.

America's Revolutionary leadership did not see their newly formed country as existing in a vacuum. On the contrary, many believed that their country's trade was crucial to the maintenance and growth of European power. In calling for the non-exportation of goods in 1775, Richard Henry Lee stressed the impact that this termination would have on all the countries of Europe. "The provisions of America are becoming necessary to several nations," John Adams recorded him as saying. "France is in Distress for them . . . England has turned Arable land into Grass . . . Spain is at war with Algerians and must have Provisions." Likewise, Americans knew events in Europe affected them. Colonial newspapers primarily reported international news and Americans drew conclusions on how these events affected the course of their lives. "The Demise of the French Crown is a great event in the Political System of Europe," John Adams wrote in 1774, and "of consequence must be a mighty Link in the Chain of Causes on American politics."<sup>36</sup>

Alexander Hamilton, in calling for a strong national government, stressed the idea that Europe and America, although separated by vast distances, materially affected each other. In the 6th *Federalist* he argued that the size and importance of America's shipping trade ensured the jealousy of Europeans:

There are appearances to authorize a supposition that the adventurous spirit, which distinguishes the commercial character of America, has already excited uneasy sensations in several of the maritime powers of Europe. They seem to be apprehensive of our too great interference in that carrying trade, which is the support of their navigation and the foundation of their naval strength. Those of them which have colonies in America look forward to what this country is capable of becoming, with painful solitude.<sup>37</sup>

In the 11th *Federalist* he used the potential power that the United States would accrue under a strong national government and the ways Americans could use that influence to call for the ratification of the Constitution:

A further resource for influencing the conduct of European nations towards us, . . . would arise from the establishment of a federal navy. There can be no doubt that the continuance of the Union under an efficient government, would put it in our power, at a period not very distant, to create a navy which, if it could not vie with those of the great maritime powers, would at least be of respectable weight if thrown into the scale of either of the two contending parties . . . Our position is in this respect a most commanding one . . . it will readily be perceived that a

36. H. Butterfield et. al. eds., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams* 2 (New York: 1961), p. 129; John Adams to James Warren, July 25, 1774 *W-AL* 2, p. 31.

37. Graebner, *Ideas and Diplomacy* p. 53; Syrett, *Historical Documents* pp. 146, 180.

situation so favorable would enable us to bargain with great advantage . . . .<sup>38</sup>

Hamilton alone did not see Europe and America as interrelated. Within his "Farewell Address" Washington was not calling for separation from Europe but for the need to remain flexible in the world of constantly shifting interests and allies. America's interests did not require a policy response to every event in Europe but the interrelation of the two continents did call for alliances with European powers. Washington cautioned his country men to steer clear of "permanent alliances", although they could "safely trust of temporary alliances." James Monroe as well, when he said that the United States planned to "never take part" in European matters that did not touch upon America's interests, did not say that what happened in Europe was of no consequence to Americans. "It is impossible that the allied powers should extend their political system to any portion of either continent," he warned the Holy Alliance, "without endangering our peace."<sup>39</sup>

## VI

"There is a Balance of Power in Europe. Nature had formed it. Practice and Habit have confirmed it, and it must forever exist."<sup>40</sup> With these words to James Warren in 1783, John Adams summed up the prevailing wisdom in the field of international relations. To the eighteenth-century mind, the balance of power existed as part of nature and as such its laws could be determined by observation. By 1775, this first science of international relations had distilled these laws down into the concepts of interest, power, flexibility, and interrelation forming a peculiar analysis that this paper referred to as the balance of power analysis. It, in turn, acted as an intellectual framework which dictated the perception of international events and the response to these events.<sup>41</sup>

Previously, many American diplomatic historians believed that the intellectual framework America's Revolutionary leadership used in making foreign policy decisions stemmed from a belief in international law, idealistic principles of French philosophies, and isolationism. Such a view cannot stand the test of evidence. Americans used the same analysis that Europeans used. This permitted them to take advantage of "European distresses."

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. John Adams to James Warren, March 20, 1783, *W-AL* 2, pp. 190-194.

41. The second science of international relations came to the fore as a result of the First World War in an attempt to achieve and maintain world peace. The current departments of international relations in the various universities around the country are the product of the formation of the second science.



Balance of power analysis shaped both the nature of the debate over foreign policy and the magnitude of America's peace demands. It taught that a large territory meant a large population; a healthy fishing industry and vigorous trade meant a strong navy and full treasury; and all together equaled state power. "We shall never be on a solid Footing," wrote Samuel Adams, "till Britain cedes to us what Nature designs we should have." Power was necessary in maintaining flexibility as well as for defense. Americans saw themselves as the key to the European balance of power and it was "obvious that all Powers . . . would be continually maneuvering Us, to work us into their . . . Balances of Power," as John Adams said to Richard Oswald in 1782. "Indeed," he went on, "it is not surprizing for we shall very often . . . be able to turn the Scale." Therefore America had to be powerful. If they were weak Adams realized that any "Alliance will be a snare." But with power "we may have what Alliance we Please, and none but such as we chuse."<sup>42</sup>

The Americans' desire for empire arose from more than territorial acquisitiveness on the part of land speculators. It had its roots in the drive for self-sufficiency and the power necessary to maintain flexibility in a dangerous world. The foreign policy debated during the Revolution, and up to the War of 1812, took place over the relative power of the United States and how to acquire more, not over isolationism or internationalism, realism or idealism. Only during the debate over the size and nature of the Army and Navy in a Republic would balance of power analysis be supplanted by an ideology. The role of the armed forces in republican ideology resulted in policy choices which limited the effectiveness of these organizations and thus reduced the power of the state. But even in this debate balance of power analysis played a key part. Once again it convinced many that the United States had more power and influence than it actually possessed, or other nations believed it possessed.

In 1936 the great American historian Samuel Flagg Bemis pictured "hard hearted Vergennes and his calculating fellow ministers" as "tireless . . . their capacity for reading and writing dispatches most insinuating in guile," and as conducting their foreign policy according to the "naked principles of Machiavelli . . . ." <sup>43</sup> Such a dark picture of European diplomacy may be somewhat overdrawn, but Bemis' picture of Americans as being the opposite no longer will stand. If Europeans followed the principles of Machiavelli so did the Americans, for both sides of the Atlantic studied under the same teacher: the balance of power.

42. Samuel Adams to James Warren, April 29, 1779, Burnett, *LMCC* 4, pp. 184-185; Butterfield, *Diary* 3, p. 61; John Adams to James Warren, March 20, 1783, *W-AL* 2, pp. 190-194.

43. Bemis, *Diplomacy* p. 37; and Bemis, *Diplomatic History of the United States* (New York: 1942), p. 18.