

Preemption, Unilateralism, and Hegemony: The American Tradition?

by David C. Hendrickson

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Abstract: Historian John Lewis Gaddis has found precedent for the current war on terror in early American history, arguing that the British burning of the capitol in 1814 had an impact on defense policy similar to the terrorist attacks of 9/11, leading to an emphasis on preemption. In basic respects, Gaddis restates the consensus among diplomatic historians that the early republic's foreign policy focused on preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony. But these depictions of early American diplomacy conflate separate eras and ignore an opposing tradition that was more moderate and principled. They are not without some truth, but their imperious sway in histories of our country needs to be checked and balanced.

The tale is well known. In the summer of 1814, a British force landed in the Chesapeake, marched toward Washington, and burned all the public buildings in the district. The British justified this destruction as retaliation for American forces' earlier burning of York, the capital of Upper Canada. Only at the last moment did an enterprising Dolley Madison gather Washington's portrait from the impending bonfire at the stone house where the president lived. Before they torched the place, British officers sat down for the meal that had been prepared for President and Mrs. Madison, who had fled in haste.¹

The effect of the disaster, distinguished historian John Lewis Gaddis recently wrote, was like that of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. The experience of surprise attack led to an emphasis on preemption as a way of ensuring America's security. "The pattern set by this now barely remembered violation of homeland security is one that has persisted ever since: that for the United

¹Samuel Eliot Morison, *Oxford History of the American People, 1789–1877*, vol. II (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), pp. 122–23.

States, *safety comes from enlarging, rather than from contracting, its sphere of responsibilities.*"² Americans, Gaddis argues, "have generally responded to threats—and particularly to surprise attacks—by taking the offensive, by becoming more conspicuous, by confronting, neutralizing, and if possible overwhelming the sources of danger." The surprise attack of 1814 had an immediate issue in the Seminole War of 1817–18, Gaddis believes, and the policy of preemption to which it gave rise was also reflected in the wars against Mexico in 1846 and Spain in 1898.

Though other historians had drawn a close link between America's nineteenth-century foreign policy stance and its dominant attitude at the beginning of the twenty-first century, Gaddis was the first to link these two "surprise attacks." Nor had anyone before proposed American diplomat John Quincy Adams as a forerunner to George W. Bush. In basic respects, though, Gaddis's approach restates the consensus among diplomatic historians regarding the early republic's foreign policy. *Preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony* are often seen as the defining characteristics of American foreign policy in this period.³

But these depictions of early American diplomacy have serious flaws. Though widely accepted, they conflate separate eras; they misleadingly see events through the lens of a unified nation or dominant empire; they do not see the way in which the exigencies of the union usually constituted the true wellspring of policy; and they fail to register the existence of forces opposed to those given predominant status. The entrenched interpretations are not without the color of truth, but their imperious sway in histories of our country needs to be checked and balanced.

Preemption

Gaddis links America's willingness to undertake a preemptive war against the Seminole in 1817 to its experience of the British attack on Washington, much as the 2003 war on Iraq can be directly linked to 9/11. But the burning of Washington was very different from the 9/11 attacks. The British attack on Washington wasn't a "surprise," but rather the culmination of a war that had begun two years earlier. The U.S. government knew that the British had landed in the Chesapeake, which put Washington in a fright. The surprise was only that there was no defense available, the militia having mustered only 7,000 of the 95,000 called to the colors. That the British might burn towns along the coasts was by no means unthinkable, given what they had done in the southern states during the War of Independence. The danger of coastal depredations had been fully digested as likely in the debates before

² John Lewis Gaddis, *Surprise, Security, and the American Experience* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), pp. 12–13.

³ Melvyn P. Leffler, "Think Again: Bush's Foreign Policy," *Foreign Policy*, Sept./Oct. 2004.

the war of 1812, and had always constituted a known argument for caution in embarking on war against Great Britain.

Just as the burning of Washington was not a surprise attack comparable to 9/11, the first Seminole War was not a case of preemption. The United States did not act in anticipation of an imminent attack, but after a whole series of incidents of mutual butchery. This was not a policy of preemption but a policy of chastisement against marauding bands on the frontier. General Andrew Jackson's actions were not brought into question because he used force against the Indians and runaway slaves, but because he went beyond his instructions in capturing the Spanish forts at St. Marks and Pensacola and putting to death two British subjects. Secretary Adams defended him in the cabinet, as Gaddis notes, on the ground that Florida was a "derelict province" and that the British traders and the Spanish commander had given succor to desperadoes. President James Monroe and Secretary Adams, however, had no intention of acquiring Florida through a war, while others in the cabinet and Congress thought Jackson had acted rashly and unconstitutionally. Secretary of War John Calhoun wrote:

However improper the conduct of Spain has been, and however desirable to us to possess the Floridas, I am decidedly of the opinion that the peace of the country ought to be preserved. Should other powers be involved and the war general, the wisest man cannot see the result we must suffer. We want time. Let us grow.⁴

The general conclusion Americans drew from the war of 1812 was that the United States had passed through a harrowing crisis that almost broke up the union. Any major war promised a renewal of that danger. With respect to the European powers, therefore, American leaders acted on the conviction that time was on their side. They had no need to rush anything. Far from being interested in time-urgent theories of preemption, they believed, with Madison, that "delay [was] our ally, and even guaranty for every thing."⁵ Madison's administration negotiated the Rush-Bagot agreement with Britain demilitarizing the Great Lakes in 1817, not a sign of "anxious aggrandizement." Though no one felt more deeply "that total want of preparation which preceded the last war" than Calhoun, his plan for military reform sensibly called for a small cadre that could be enlarged in the event of an attack by a European power.⁶

The real strategic conclusion drawn from the War of 1812 was the danger of extensive reliance on foreign commerce, for such dependence had shown itself to be a potent route toward war. That danger argued not for preemption, but for a revival of the Hamiltonian system of a great interior

⁴ Quoted in John Niven, *John C. Calhoun and the Price of Union* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), p. 69.

⁵ Quoted in James E. Lewis, *The American Union and Problem of Neighborhood: The United States and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire* (Chapel Hill, N.C.: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), p. 94.

⁶ Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (New York: MacMillan, 1967).

market capable of producing all that was necessary for national independence and far less subject to the vagaries of European politics and war, a key argument on behalf of the tariffs of 1816, 1820, and 1824.

American statesmen had good reason for caution in embracing war with any European power, for it had become a kind of fixed observation that European war would inexorably produce sharp divisions among the American states. In 1797, Jefferson noted that “if we engage in a war during our present passions, and our present weakness in some quarters, our Union runs the greatest risk of not coming out of that war in the shape in which it enters it.” John Quincy Adams’ father, President John Adams, believed that devoutly in 1799; Alexander Hamilton, hardly the warmonger that President Adams thought he was, saw that danger, too. The policy of “no entangling alliances” is often attributed to America’s belief in its moral superiority over Europe, and Jefferson in particular often gave vent to that sentiment. Of even deeper influence and significance in fostering the need for separation from Europe, however, was the basic fear that war with a European power would set in motion forces that would dissolve the Union. As Jefferson wrote after the War of 1812: “The war, had it proceeded, would have upset our government, and a new one, whenever tried, will do it.” Peace became, on this reckoning, the sovereign remedy for all such ailments.⁷

It is the Mexican War of 1846, not the Seminole War of 1817–18, that is the first instance of “preemption” or “preventive war” in American history, though it was not avowed as such by its author. Instead, President James Polk moved U.S. forces into the disputed territory on the left bank of the Rio Grande; after Mexico attacked this insult to its national territory, the president claimed that “American blood has been shed on American soil.” Polk, however, had previously set his sights squarely on the acquisition of the Pacific ports of San Diego and San Francisco, and he feared that Britain might get there first. Since the Mexicans wouldn’t sell, he trumped up a war that would allow the United States to receive “indemnities,” thus attempting to obscure the plain truth that the effect of the war—the acquisition of California and other territories—was also the cause. The Mexican War, which historians often view as the paradigmatic act of nineteenth-century diplomacy, is actually highly unusual in the context of the predominant U.S. foreign policy commitments in the half-century after the making of the Constitution. Before that “unfortunate war,” senior statesman Albert Gallatin noted, the United States had acted in its external relations “in strict conformity with the dictates of justice and displayed the utmost moderation”:

⁷ Jefferson quoted in Henry Adams, *History of the United States During the Administrations of James Madison* (New York: Penguin, 1986 [1889–91]), p. 1122; Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, June 21, 1797, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *Writings of Jefferson*, vol. VII (New York: Putnam, 1892), pp. 149–50.

They never had voluntarily injured any other nation. Every acquisition of territory from foreign powers was honestly made, the result of treaties not imposed but freely assented to by the other party. The preservation of peace was ever a primary object. The recourse to arms was always in self defense.

Even if this observation is discounted, a war undertaken thirty-two years after the precipitating event—the supposed trauma of the sack of Washington—can scarcely ratify the hypothesis that the two events had anything to do with each other. We may as well attribute the Panama invasion of 1989 to the launch of Sputnik in 1957.⁸

Unilateralism

Gaddis's emphasis on unilateralism as a defining feature of early American foreign policy is also misleading. The first count against it is that leaves unmentioned, and seems to deny, the professed American commitment to the law of nations. American jurists and statesmen insisted that the United States was a member of the particular community constituted by "the Christian nations of Europe, and their descendants on this side of the Atlantic," in the words of New York State Court chancellor James Kent. This "community of nations" was "united by religion, manners, morals, humanity, and science, and united also by the mutual advantages of commercial intercourse, by the habit of forming alliances and treaties with each other, of interchanging ambassadors, and of studying and recognizing the same writers and systems of public law." It was the early generation of American statesmen who spoke most often of "the beautiful fabric of international law" and who acknowledged membership in the community it reflected; the rise of Jacksonian democracy blew a number of holes in that fabric. Yet still, the law of nations exercised a profound hold on thoughtful expositors of the American experiment such as Charles Sumner, who said in 1851: "As in our domestic affairs, all acts are brought to the Constitution, as to a touchstone; so, in our foreign affairs, all acts are brought to the touchstone of the law of nations—that supreme law—the world's collected will—which overarches the grand Commonwealth of Christian States."⁹

⁸ Albert Gallatin, "Peace with Mexico," Henry Adams, ed., *The Writings of Albert Gallatin* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1879), III, pp. 555–91. Gaddis acknowledges that Polk "stretched the 'derelict state' argument beyond where Adams wanted to take it" (p. 19), but otherwise emphasizes continuity in outlook between them. This seriously understates the mortal antagonism that existed between Adams and the Jacksonians. Adams saw the annexation of Texas and the conquest of Mexico as springing from the vision of a slave-tainted "military monarchy" that would extinguish freedom and would be "rent asunder like the empire of Alexander or the kingdoms of Ephraim and Judah." Leonard L. Richards, *The Life and Times of Congressman John Quincy Adams* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 172, 182.

⁹ James Kent, *Commentaries on American Law* (New York, 1826), vol. I, pp. 3–4. On the law of nations more generally, see Daniel G. Lang, *Foreign Policy in the Early Republic: The Law of Nations and the Balance of Power* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985).

That commitment to law mattered, practically and morally. When European war broke out in 1793, to roar for two decades more, the legal institution of neutrality provided an indispensable basis to the general American desire to stay out of the war while retaining its citizens' ability to trade. Whatever the rights and wrongs of its policy in pressing its neutral claims, America did so within the framework of law.¹⁰ That framework was of indispensable utility in the conduct of diplomacy, and one could no more conduct a successful negotiation without reference to law than one could make war without ordnance and killing machines. The "great increase which has taken place in the intercourse among civilized and commercial states," as Webster noted, had connected the United States "with other nations, and given us a high concern in the preservation of those salutary principles upon which that intercourse is founded. We have as clear an interest in international law, as individuals have in the laws of society."¹¹

This sensibility of Whig internationalism—one shared by Hamiltonian Federalists, Jeffersonian Republicans, and National Republicans like Madison, Henry Clay, and Adams—admittedly weakened in force over time. It was challenged by a "Jacksonian persuasion" that was impatient under the restraints of law and that recognized no higher authority than the *vox populi*. Jackson was willing to say, "Damn Grotius! Damn Vattel! Damn Pufendorf!"¹² But this is not something that Adams would say, nor was it representative of the attitude of any of the presidents who preceded Jackson in office.

The most serious weakness in the "unilateralist" interpretation of American statecraft is the failure to see how the American federal union was itself a form of international organization, a *novus ordo seclorum* that sought to constitutionalize an incipient international anarchy.¹³ The delicacy of this arrangement was such that "no entangling alliances" quickly emerged as a vital necessity if the union were to hold together. "Nothing will secure us internally," as Jefferson expressed this common insight, "but a divorce from both [Britain and France]."¹⁴ Any alliance with a European power, just like any European war, risked a differential impact on the sections and threatened to dissolve the union.

¹⁰ See contrasting discussions in Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (Oxford, 1990) and Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1994).

¹¹ Daniel Webster, "The Revolution in Greece," Jan. 19, 1824, *Papers of Webster: Speeches and Formal Writings* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1986), vol. 1, p. 97.

¹² John William Ward, *Andrew Jackson: Symbol for an Age* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1955), pp. 62–63. On the "Jacksonian persuasion," see Walter Russell Mead, *Special Providence: American Foreign Policy and How It Changed the World* (New York: Knopf, 2001), pp. 218–63.

¹³ See David C. Hendrickson, *Peace Pact: The Lost World of the American Founding* (Lawrence, Kan.: University Press of Kansas, 2003).

¹⁴ Jefferson to Gerry, op cit.

In keeping with the emerging American doctrine of the “two hemispheres,” it became the policy of the U.S. government to ensure a political separation between the American system and the European system. Thus, in response to a British effort to mediate the dispute between the United States and Spain over Florida, Adams declined the offer, appealing to “the policy, both of Europe and of the United States, to keep aloof from the general federative system, of each other.”¹⁵ Nor was Adams tempted by the great idea championed by Clay, that the United States, in league with the newly independent South American republics, “should become the center of a system which would constitute the rallying point of human freedom against all the despotism of the Old World.”¹⁶ Adams denied the existence of “a community of interests or of principles between North and South America. . . . As to an American system,” Adams said emphatically, “We have it; we constitute the whole of it.”¹⁷ Adams was wary of anything that would compromise “the principle of neutrality to all foreign wars,” for that was “fundamental to the continuance of our liberties and of our Union.”¹⁸

President Monroe’s famous doctrine of 1823, which Adams largely authored, was that the United States would view “as dangerous to our peace and safety” any attempt on the part of the Holy Alliance “to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere.” The British government also opposed the putative project of the Holy Alliance and had proposed a joint statement, but the American government declined the offer of British Foreign Secretary George Canning, whose policy, he later explained, was to call “the New World into existence, to redress the balance of the Old.” In taking an independent stance, American officials recognized that British opposition to this project threw mother and daughter into an unprecedented and happy alignment, since no such enterprise could succeed in the face of British seapower.¹⁹ Adams nevertheless, wanted to avoid “the appearance of taking a position subordinate to that of Great Britain.” The British had also proposed a self-denying ordinance that would keep Cuba and Texas out of both British and American control, but Adams wanted to keep open the possibility “that the inhabitants of either or both may exercise their primitive rights, and solicit a union with us.” Much as this policy reflected, on Adams’s part, a keen desire not “to come in as a cockboat in the wake of the British man-of-war,” it did not preclude him from seeking the concurrence of governments in Europe and South America on behalf of principles he deemed sound. And his policy was

¹⁵ Adams to Deonis, Mar. 12, 1818, cited in *The Papers of Henry Clay*, James F. Hopkins et al., eds. (Lexington, Ky., 1959–1992, 11 vols.), vol. II, p. 816n.

¹⁶ Speech on South American Independence, May 10, 1820, in *Papers of Henry Clay*, vol. II, pp. 856–57.

¹⁷ Sept. 19, 1820, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, vol. V, p. 176.

¹⁸ Mar. 9, 1821, *ibid.*, pp. 324–25.

¹⁹ See Harvey Sicherman, “Cheap Hawks, Cheap Doves, and the Pursuit of Strategy,” *Orbis*, Fall 2005.

defensive in character. If the Holy Alliance was spoiling for a fight with the United States, he wrote, “it should be our policy to meet, and not to make it. . . . We should retreat to the wall before taking up arms, and be sure at every step to put them as much as possible in the wrong.”²⁰ Underlying this policy was Adams’s belief that America had “a spear and a shield; but the motto upon her shield is *Freedom, Independence, Peace*.”²¹

If one is seeking a brief depiction of the foreign policy of the United States in the early and middle republic, “union and independence” is far better than “unilateralism.” Independence meant freedom from foreign domination and avoidance of dependence on the wars and politics of Europe; union meant the reconciliation of difference so as to achieve the classic aims of the federative system—peace among the several states in the federal union and protection against the wiles and threats of foreign powers.²² The two bedrock principles of union and independence, immortalized in Washington’s Farewell Address, profoundly shaped the most important objectives, doctrines, and principles of American diplomacy. Their persistence attested to the continuing force of the analysis that looked to the federal union “as to the sheet anchor of our hopes, and to its dissolution as to the most dreadful of our dangers.” With unity, as John Quincy Adams summarized this recurrent theme, “a large *permanent* army” would never be necessary, and the possibility of external invasion requiring a large temporary force would steadily diminish with the growth of population and strength. With disunity, however, the catalogue of European horrors could not be avoided. As Adams eloquently wrote:

If we once divide, our exposure to foreign assault will at once be multiplied in proportion to the number of states into which we shall split, and aggravated in proportion to the weakness of every single part compared with the strength of the whole. The temptations of foreign powers to invade us will increase with the prospect of success which our division will present them, and fortresses and armies will be then the only security upon which the disunited states can rely for defense against enemies from abroad. This is not the worst. Each of the separate states will from the moment of disunion become with regard to the others a foreign power. Quarrels, of which the seeds are too thickly sown, will shoot up like weeds in a rank soil between them. Wars will soon ensue. These must end either in the conquest of one party by the other, or in frail, precarious, jealous compromises and momentary truces under the name of peace, leaving on both sides the burden of its army as the only guarantee for its security. Then must the surface of our country be bristled over with double and treble ranges of rock-hewn fortresses for barriers, and our cities turned into goals by a circumference of impenetrable walls. Then will the great problem of our statesmen, too, be what proportion of the people’s sweat and blood can be squeezed from them

²⁰ Quoted in Greg Russell, *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1995), pp. 141, 260.

²¹ John Quincy Adams, *An Address Delivered at the Request of a Committee of the Citizens at Washington* (Washington, D.C.: Davis and Force, 1821), p. 31.

²² See David Hendrickson, “Independence and Union: Foundations of American Internationalism,” *Orbis*, Winter 2005.

to maintain an army without producing absolute death. I speak in the sincerity and conviction of my soul in declaring that I look upon standing armies, intolerable taxes, forced levies, contributions, conscriptions, and requisitions as the unavoidable and fatal chain of which disunion is but the first link.²³

Here was the source of American constitutionalism and diplomacy in the early and middle republic, the foundational principle that imparted life to its internal order and its external action.

Hegemony

What, then, of the third term in Gaddis's formulation? Did the United States seek hegemony over North America? And may we use "hegemony" as a virtual synonym for "empire"? These questions require care in answering, for in some respects empire was indeed a "way of life," in other respects it emphatically was not.

Certainly the idea of an American system that would incline the competitions of Europe in this quarter of the globe to America's advantage kindled from the first moments of American independence. John Adam's confident prediction in 1776 that the colonies, were they to form a union for external defense, would be unconquerable by all monarchies of Europe, was an early expression of this aspiration. Another was the call in *Federalist* No. 11 for one great American system that would incline European competitions in the new world in favor of the United States. The objective of combining the strength of a great empire with the freedom of the small republic went to the core of the American scheme—Jefferson's concept of an "empire of liberty" or "empire for liberty" is yet another expression that mimicked Montesquieu's famous formulation of the objective of a federative republic.

For most of the nineteenth century, however, this aspiration was not seen to entail any claim to hegemony over South America, about which little was known in the early years of the century. Nor did it mean that in the 1820s, when James Monroe pronounced his doctrine. In the nineteenth century, Great Britain was much more important to South America than the United States, either as a source of loans or naval protection from other European powers. The Monroe Doctrine asserted no right of forcible interference in the governments of the other South American states. Its claim that no European state could henceforth establish new colonies in the Americas or join with Spain in restoring "legitimate" government was a principle that the South American republics were equally interested in asserting, even if there was no prospect of a formal alliance between North and South America to maintain this common principle (a point made abundantly clear in the 1826 debates in Congress over the Panama mission).

²³ Adams to Thomas Boylston Adams, Feb. 14, 1801, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Worthington C. Ford, ed. (New York: MacMillan, 1913), vol. II, pp. 499–502.

The clearest and most undeniable instance of empire—understood not as dominion over a large territory but as the domination of other peoples—was the eviction of the Indian nations that stood in the path of white frontiersmen, always anxious for new land. Its vivid symbol is the Trail of Tears, the route followed in the late 1830s by the Cherokees to their new homes in Oklahoma after having been given the choice of removal or submitting to white institutions. Still, we should not conflate the Indian removal that President Jackson and his party undertook in the 1830s with the preceding policy of the federal government. Authority over Indian affairs had been lodged in the federal government under the Constitution to avoid a situation wherein the aggressive actions of one state might implicate the rest in war. The federal government, in accordance with this policy, had made some 200 treaties with Indian nations and was generally considered more favorable than the states were to Indian claims and less subject to corruption and special interests. While the federal government sought to obtain voluntary consent from the Indians for their removal (as it had obligated itself to do when it accepted the land cessions of the southern states), it had refused until Jackson's administration to take the next step, which was to secure removal whether the Indians accepted it or not.

The states'-righters who supported Jackson in this instance were warned by critics that they had embarked on a dangerous course. "If the friends of State rights propose to sanction the violation of these Indian treaties," warned Congressman Henry Storrs of New York, "they must bear him out to the full extent of this thoughtless usurpation." The House report favoring removal, Storrs noted, had not assigned much weight to "the stately forms which Indian treaties have assumed, nor to the terms often employed in them," but considered them as "mere names. . . . It requires no skill in political science to interpret these treaties. The plainest man can read your solemn guarantees to these nations, and understand them for himself." Storrs pointed out that republics, like monarchies, had been oppressive in their day, warning that America was about to confirm that truth by its own example.²⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville concurred, noting that it "was impossible to destroy men with more respect for the laws of humanity." Tocqueville believed that the federal government had been "sincerely desirous of saving the remnant of the natives and of maintaining them in the free possession of that territory which the Union has guaranteed to them." But the tremendous resistance of the several states led it to abandon these efforts, "and to let a few savage tribes perish, since they are already half-decimated, in order not to endanger the safety of the American Union."²⁵

²⁴ May 15, 1830, in *Register of Debates*, 21st Cong., 1st Sess., vol. VI, Gales & Seaton, pp. 994–1016, at p. 998.

²⁵ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, translated by Henry Reeve, edited by Francis Bowen (New York: Knopf, 1945 [1835]), vol. I, pp. 368–69, 365.

The Inevitability of “Nationalistic Expansion”

The relentless process of white advance over the Indians of the old Southwest, so strongly suggestive of democratic imperialism and ethnic cleansing, has the air of inevitability about it. Also having the air of inevitability is the subsequent “march to the Pacific” in the Mexican War. Historian Walter McDougall expresses the views of most when he writes that “what is required is not a long explanation of U.S. expansion, but rather a short explanation of why U.S. expansion needs no explanation.”²⁶

Yet this image of the nation expanding relentlessly across the continent needs careful qualification. In the first three decades of the nineteenth century, most observers considered the Rocky Mountains as the westernmost limit of the United States. The Great American Desert, the name commonly used to denote the area between the Mississippi River basin and the mountains, was set aside as an Indian reserve. Even those who were anxious to see the development of new republics on the west coast, like Senator Thomas Hart Benton of Missouri, considered it unlikely and undesirable that they should form part of the union. As late as 1849 President Zachary Taylor held that “California and Oregon were too distant to become members of the Union, and that it would be better for them to be an Independent Government.”²⁷

Appreciating that what is now considered inevitable was once considered impossible gives us a better sense of the way people thought about the union’s expansion to the Pacific for the first fifty years after the making of the constitution. Summarizing what he took to be a consensus that expansionist wars were not in the nation’s interests, Daniel Webster argued, “No nation ever had less to expect from forcible aggrandizement. The mighty agents which are working out our greatness are time, industry, and the arts. Our augmentation is by growth, not by acquisition, by internal development, not by external accession.”²⁸ When territorial expansion came in leaps and bounds, as it did in the mid-1840s, it was because an unusual concatenation of factors overwhelmed the restraints, largely sectional and constitutional in character, that forbade offensive action. Among those factors in the 1840s was a transportation and communications revolution that over the previous two decades had compressed distance and put the west coast of North

²⁶ Walter McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997), p. 79.

²⁷ D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History, vol. 2, Continental America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). See also the discussion in Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History: A Reinterpretation* (New York, 1966), ch. 1; and also by Merk, *Albert Gallatin and the Oregon Problem* (Cambridge, 1950), ch. 2.

²⁸ Daniel Webster, “The Revolution in Greece,” Jan. 19, 1824, in *Papers of Webster: Speeches and Formal Writings*, vol. I, p. 88.

America into play among the Great Powers, especially Britain. An equally important factor was the emergence of a bid for mastery within the union by a coalition of the southern and western states—a coalition that did not survive the Mexican War.

American territorial expansion, often identified exclusively with nationalism, owed greatly to sectional impulses. Although expansion was always justified by virtue of the benefits it would bring the whole union, these justifications were invariably advanced amid profound suspicion that much narrower and more selfish purposes underlay the projects. During the Civil War, Horace Greeley gave classic expression to this sectional emphasis when he explained why the North would not let slavery alone:

Slavery never left the North alone, nor thought of so doing. 'Buy Louisiana for us!' said the slaveholders. 'With pleasure.' 'Now Florida!' 'Certainly.' Next: 'Violate your treaties with the Creeks and Cherokees; expel those tribes from the lands they have held from time immemorial, so as to let us expand our plantations.' 'So said, so done.' 'Now for Texas!' 'You have it.' 'Next, a third more of Mexico!' 'Yours it is.' 'Now, break the Missouri Compact, and let Slavery wrestle with Free Labor for the vast region consecrated by that Compact to Freedom!' 'Very good, what next?' 'Buy us Cuba, for One Hundred and Fifty Millions.' 'We have tried; but Spain refuses to sell it.' 'Then wrest it from her at all hazards!'

All this while, Greeley argued, slavery had used “the Union as her catspaw,” had dragged “the Republic into iniquitous wars and enormous expenditures,” and had grasped “empire after empire thereby.”²⁹ Greeley exaggerated when he attributed expansion entirely to an aggressive slaveocracy, and in fact, New England complained bitterly at every step along the way. However, sectional advantage or disadvantage was a potent factor in every transaction Greeley mentioned. To understand the process of expansion, one must see the struggle for empire over North America, an aim pursued against both aboriginal peoples and European powers, as also a sectional struggle for preeminence within the union.

The most striking feature of American expansion is that “the expansionists were not nationalists and the nationalists were not expansionists,” in the memorable phrase of historian David Potter. Both the Federalists and the Whigs were of political persuasions that celebrated the American nation, but they were conscious of its fragility and feared that excessive expansion might break it up. Jeffersonian Republicans and Jacksonian Democrats, by contrast, generally declined to set limits on “the extent to which the federative principle may operate effectively,” but theirs was a union in which power was to be “domesticated, diffused, and decentered.” For Jefferson, as historian Peter Onuf has remarked, there was a world of difference “between an extended polity held in place by consolidated, coercive power and a consensual union

²⁹ Horace Greeley, *The American Conflict* (New York, 1864–66), vol. I, pp. 354–55; cited in Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery* (New York, 1960), p. 6.

of free republican states in a regime of reciprocal benefits and perpetual peace.”³⁰

Anticipating the contemporary argument over “widening” or “deepening” the European Union, it seemed in no wise anomalous that those advocating centralization, as George Bancroft observed in the 1840s, “must wish and have ever wished to narrow our territory” whereas Democrats “with States Rights, know no limit to the possible extent of the Federal Union.”³¹ By the 1850s, as Potter noted, “Manifest Destiny had reached a supreme paradox: northern unionists who believed in American nationalism resisted most proposals for further territorial growth of the nation, while states’ rights southerners who denied that the Union was a nation sought to extend the national domain from pole to pole.” John O’Sullivan, who coined the phrase “manifest destiny” in the late 1830s, was a perfect representative of the tendency, being a stalwart advocate for expansion over the continent in the 1840s and supporting the right of the southern states to withdraw from the union in the 1860s.

Mexico or Bust

The perils of expansion were well illustrated by the annexation of Texas and the war with Mexico. In 1844, Clay warned that “no motive for the acquisition of foreign territory would be more unfortunate, or pregnant with more fatal consequences, than that of obtaining it for the purpose of strengthening one part against another part of the common confederacy.” It was certain, Webster argued, that territorial expansion would reopen the slavery question and produce convulsions. From the beginning, Clay, Webster, and other Whigs saw in the acquisition of territory by conquest the establishment of a new issue that would probably have to be resolved by force. Their once unquestioned leadership in shaping American foreign policy, however, was now lost. Their appeal to pacific principles, the known calamities of war, public faith, treaties, and the opinion of the civilized world; their warning that the spirit of conquest and aggrandizement would recoil upon its authors, destroying the constitutional balance of the existing union—all this was cast aside. Their verdict, nevertheless, did not pass away. “The Southern rebellion,” Ulysses S. Grant concluded in his memoirs, “was largely the outgrowth of the Mexican War. Nations, like individuals, are punished for their transgressions.

³⁰ David Potter, *The Impending Crisis: 1848–1861* (New York: Harper, 1976), pp. 173; Jefferson’s Second Inaugural Address, Mar. 4, 1805; Merrill D. Peterson, *Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Viking, 1984), p. 519; Peter S. Onuf, *Jefferson’s Empire: The Language of American Nationhood* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

³¹ George Bancroft to Robert J. Walker, June 19, 1844, cited in Michael A. Morrison, *Slavery and the American West: The Eclipse of Manifest Destiny and the Coming of the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 31.

We got our punishment in the most sanguinary and expensive war of modern times.”³²

The Mexican War represented something new and different in American history. It broke out of the restraints previously governing policy, with spectacular results. There is, for instance, no comparison between the way President Madison and the Twelfth Congress had reached a declaration of war and the way Polk got his. For the first time, an American president showed it possible to exercise the executive power of commander-in-chief in a way that left Congress with little practical alternative but to acquiesce; the power of the purse was a poor instrument to reign in an executive who was in a position to move forces into a position provocative of war, and who could get war requisitions from a reluctant Congress by charging against a negative vote a betrayal of the valiant soldiers in the field. This aroused fears of Bonapartism and Caesarism to many minds still steeped in British, French, and Roman precedents.

The Mexican War was undoubtedly a compelling instance of the traits of “preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony” in nineteenth-century American diplomacy. At the same time, it is misleading to see it as the culmination of a set of precepts that had been inculcated from the beginning, or at least since 1814. To those representative American statesmen of the second generation who had most thoroughly imbibed the pacific precepts of the American system and who stood near death at the time of the war—Adams, Gallatin, Clay, and Webster—the war appeared an alien and repulsive event, a repudiation of everything their country stood for. Their common opposition to the belligerence and “palpable lies” that distinguished American policy; their appeal to the fact that American policy was thought utterly unjustifiable in the common opinion of Europe; their evocation of the true standard of policy and the true mission of the United States; their understanding that conquest threatened a dissolution of the Union—all this signified a revolt of the older generation against the new, expansionist generation. It demonstrates discontinuity in outlook rather than the culmination of a supposedly characteristic belief in a warlike “manifest destiny.”

There is much in the argument over the contemporary Iraq War that recalls the argument over the Mexican War. If contemporary proponents of “preemption, unilateralism, and hegemony” want to stand on the narrow shoulders of President Polk, they have every right to do so. But to view Polk’s actions as typical of policies that had been pursued for a generation is to do an injustice to the historical record. His war measures were considered a sharp departure from hallowed traditions and were denounced as such by those who had been the stewards of American foreign policy in the preceding generation. It may be conceded that policies akin to those he championed constitute a

³²Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters*, Mary Drake McFeely and William S. McFeely, eds. (New York: Library of America, 1990 [1885]), pp. 116, 42.

temptation to which the United States has subsequently fallen victim more than once, but that is a far cry from the conclusion that they represent the default position or original understanding of American statecraft. Adams' vision of an America that inscribed *Freedom, Independence, Peace* on its shield— itself a direct inheritance of the foreign policy of the founding fathers—is more entitled to that claim.

