A Companion to U.S. Foreign Relations
Colonial Era to the Present
Volume I
EDITED BY CHRISTOPHER R.W. DIETRICH
WILEY Blackwell
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Volume I

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Preface

Many Histories

What follows is a collection of highly informative essays on the writing of the history of the foreign relations of the United States. But historiography is always more than just a literature review. These volumes ask a series of crucial questions about the past: What have been the key moments and themes in the history of U.S. foreign relations? How do those moments reflect the broader nature of the nation’s global interactions? How did the United States become a colonial power and a global superpower? Who has shaped and been shaped by major foreign-policy decisions, at home and abroad? In short, why is the study of the history of U.S. foreign relations so fundamentally important?

The essays here represent the work of a new generation of scholars who pose these and other probing questions that reach to the heart of American national identity. A brief word on the field’s critics is useful here. Writing on the history of U.S. foreign relations has never really been restricted to the field of “diplomatic history” – the enlightening but sometimes cramped study of powerful officials and the outward-looking policies they made. To depict diplomatic history as simply “the world according to Washington,” as some have, was always to build a bit of a straw man. But scholarship written in the past generation has included an ampler array of actors and ideas beyond conventional policymakers like presidents and secretaries of state, beyond conventional arguments about grand strategy and national security. Scholars of ideology and political economy have revealed the ways in which the formation and international rise of American power was entwined with imperial expansion and global integration. Historians of labor, migration, development, and human rights have examined international networks and the place of modernization, morality, and movement in the decisions of state and non-state actors. The upsurge in cultural and social history in the past two decades has encouraged historians to weave U.S. foreign relations together with histories of race, gender, class, national identity, and religion. Scholars have increasingly unearthed the economic, racial, and patriarchal structures that undergirded U.S. power in the nineteenth century and after. Historians of popular culture and politics have helped us understand how social movements, media, and nongovernmental
organizations shape the myriad interactions of the United States with other actors. Global and international historians have encouraged us to remember that American actors, while exceedingly powerful in the twentieth century, never operated in a vacuum. Americans did have a great deal of what historians call “agency” – the power to transform their own and other peoples’ lives – but their possibilities were shaped by events beyond their control as often as not.

Such insights have allowed this generation of historians to write new histories that build on ongoing debates about the nature of American international power, rather than replace them. Such a roomy understanding of the history of U.S. foreign relations should be celebrated, and this collection serves as a snapshot of a dynamic field. The first volume contains essays that analyze the history of U.S. foreign relations from the eighteenth century to the middle of the twentieth, a period in which the United States won independence, expanded its borders rapidly, fought major wars, and joined the ranks of the modern, industrial imperial powers. Readers will find much of interest in terms of traditional questions of power, expansion, and wealth. They will also find essays that cover topics from propaganda to philanthropy, that discuss the lives of people from legislators and diplomats to artists and missionaries. The contributors cover a wide variety of methodologies, drawing from fields of U.S. political, diplomatic, legal, and military history. They examine the links between U.S. foreign relations and the study of American culture, ideology, race, gender, and religion, as well as the study of migration, Native American history, the political economies of industrialization and imperialism, and U.S. interactions with a wide variety of characters at home and abroad.

Great new opportunities have opened up with the deeper integration of the history of U.S. foreign relations with other schools of study. The chapters of the second volume analyze a dizzying array of topics for the period dominated by the Cold War, decolonization, and U.S.-led globalization. The volume begins with a series of essays on military bases, black internationalism, development, narcotics, public diplomacy, decolonization, and other topics. Subsequent chapters examine U.S. relations with different actors from Europe, Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. The volume also features essays on the Vietnam War, nuclear politics and diplomacy, international political economy, and the end of the Cold War. As in the first volume, the chapters analyze older and newer currents of thought in the history of U.S. foreign relations, including the study of human rights, non-state actors and non-U.S. perspectives, modernization and development, natural resources, and the material and cultural worlds inhabited by U.S. actors and their interlocutors.

The result is wonderfully messy. Just as different pasts bleed into different presents, so too are the borders of the topography of the history of U.S. foreign relations not neatly parcelled out. The study of diplomacy was and still is a question of how people used the levers of power and wealth, and diplomacy continues to provide a well-defined center and periphery to the flourishing range of approaches discussed in the following pages. All the while, new approaches have helped us understand not only official decision-making but also the wider world that informs it. This project is thus meant above all to help students, scholars, and the general public take in hand the challenging and fascinating scope not of the singular story but of the many histories of U.S. foreign relations. Its essays reveal the benefits of the inclusive spirit that should
be at the core of modern historical scholarship. Different methods in historians’ toolkits can congregate to provide us with a better understanding of the past.

Historical research in the last decade has drawn our attention to the many causes and consequences of crucial moments and trends in the history of U.S. foreign relations – from the American Revolution to the Cold War to the Global War on Terror. At the most fundamental level, the histories that follow remind us how the nation’s interactions at home and abroad have shaped not just the practice of American power but the ways it has been understood over time: how people work out what values and interests drive U.S. foreign relations, what consequences derive from the practice of American power, what it means to be American. These are questions for yesterday, for today, and for all time.

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My partner Verónica Jiménez Vega and my son Emiliano Dietrich-Jiménez deserve many thanks and much love for their consistent support. Finally, I would like to thank our readers. To capture the motivations and beliefs of people in the past is the historian’s trade, but you are the reason for our work.
Chapter One

Imperial Crisis, Revolution, and a New Nation, 1763–1803

David Narrett

The immediate origins of U.S. foreign relations lie in the period following the Seven Years’ War. It was then that American colonists invoked English constitutional principles in opposition to the mother country’s new taxation measures and stringent customs regulation. Parliament’s Coercive Acts of 1774 galvanized colonial protests to new heights, triggering the meeting of the First Continental Congress. While not calling for independence, Congress resolved on October 14, 1774 that Parliament could not legitimately bind the colonies’ “external commerce” unless such regulations worked “to the mutual benefit of both countries.” This defense of “American rights” was soon buttressed by the Continental Association – local committees dedicated to enforcing the non-importation of British goods (Ford et al. 1904–1937, 1, pp. 66, 68–69). An autonomous American commercial policy was evident before the first shots were fired at Lexington on April 19, 1775.

It is difficult to overstate the radical change in American colonial perspectives that occurred from the British conquest of Canada in 1760 to the congressional resolves of 1774. In 1760, Benjamin Franklin rejoiced at a shared imperial triumph: “I have long been of Opinion, that the Foundations of the future Grandeur and Stability of the British Empire, lie in America; and tho’, like other Foundations, they are low and little seen, they are nevertheless, broad and Strong enough to support the greatest Political Structure Human Wisdom ever yet erected” (Franklin to Lord Kames, Jan. 3, 1760, in Labaree et al. 1959–2017, 9, p. 7). Fourteen years later, Franklin described British foes of American rights as being so ignorant of the colonies that they “appear to be no better acquainted with their History or Constitution than they are with the Inhabitants of the Moon” (Franklin to Lord Buckinghamshire, Apr. 2, 1774, in Labaree et al. 1959–2017, 21, p. 177). Paradoxically, U.S. foreign relations were born in conflict against imperial Britain, while also being shaped by British colonial
foundations, which influenced the fledgling nation’s engagement in continental and Atlantic spheres in both war and peace.

A major historical debate in early American foreign relations involves the character of nationhood – how the United States seemingly followed paths to independence, sovereignty, and power that moved inexorably toward continental empire, the spread of republican institutions, and commercial liberalism on the world stage. Robert Kagan, one recent proponent of this view, writes: “At America’s birth … foreign policy and national identity were intimately bound together, and they would remain so for the next two centuries” (2006, p. 42). Kagan sees the American pursuit of empire stirred by a “revolutionary ideology,” which made “the young American republic dangerous in the eyes of others,” whether those “others” were European monarchies or Indian peoples who stood in the way (2006, p. 4).

Eliga Gould offers a quite different analysis than Kagan’s by emphasizing how the United States began as a “protean and contingent polity” that struggled to gain international respect and to “appear worthy of peaceful relations with other nations” (2012, pp. 12–13). From still another perspective, early American foreign relations may be explained through the problem of union – beginning with the difficulty that Great Britain faced when tightening control over American colonies which viewed themselves as equal members of the empire. The United States necessarily had to find new federative structures to endure as a nation, let alone to acquire power in continental and maritime spheres. As Gould and Peter S. Onuf jointly explain: “The dialectic of whole and part, of diversity in union, was central to constructing a viable constitutional order for the United States … The great question was whether identification with Britain could be redirected toward ‘America,’ and whether an alliance of state-republics could effectively replace, and fulfill the promise of, the imperial connection” (2005, p. 7). The American Union’s gradual accretion of power spelled retreat for Native peoples, especially as the latter lost European imperial support (Sadosky 2009, p. 8). Moreover, U.S. territorial expansion raised the issue of slavery’s growth and attendant sectional rivalry. The Southern states’ dependence on slavery had its own imperial impetus. Slaveholders were not only eager for new lands but also wary that escaped blacks would find refuge in bordering foreign or Indian territories.

These and other important issues in the history of American foreign relations from 1763 to the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 may be examined in four main periods: imperial crisis (1763–1775), revolution and war (1775–1783), postwar struggles under the Articles of Confederation (1783–1788), and the evolution of national policy under the presidencies of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson (1789–1803). These periods should be considered as guideposts within a broad and multifaceted story.

The Imperial Crisis (1763–1775)

While the Stamp Act crisis of 1765 centered on the issue of Parliamentary taxation, it also exhibited colonial disquiet with British policies for the North American interior. The Revenue or Sugar Act (1764) and the Stamp Act mandated that tax revenues be applied toward the growing cost of colonial defense and administration. In early 1763, about 8000 British soldiers were stationed in frontier outposts such as Fort Pitt
and Detroit as well as in Canada (Shy 1965, p. 114). Small garrisons were soon established in East and West Florida. (“The Floridas” – as Britons dubbed those colonies – came into the empire by the English acquisition of former Spanish and French territories as stipulated in the Treaty of Paris of 1763.) Colonials along the Atlantic seaboard viewed Great Britain – and not themselves – as bound to pay for regular troops in these areas. Colonial opinion on this point was little affected by Pontiac’s War (1763–1765), a violent upsurge of Indian resistance against the British presence in the Ohio country and the Great Lakes region.

Rejecting Parliamentary taxation on constitutional grounds, colonial declarations of rights expressed a particular sense of responsibility within the empire. John Dickinson’s “Farmer’s” Letters of 1767, written in response to the Townshend Acts, contended that Americans merited special dispensation from the mother country because the colonies were obligated to import British manufactures under the Navigation Acts. Moreover, taxes that drained American pocketbooks would necessarily weaken the British economy, which depended in large measure on transatlantic trade. Colonials wanted economic reciprocity on their own terms, not imperial dictation. The non-importation movement encouraged ordinary colonists as well as elites to express a shared pride in American identity. Alarmed by colonial protests, royal ministers such as George Grenville and Charles Townshend could not fathom why American subjects should be so adamant against shouldering any tax burden on behalf of an empire that protected them.

Historians have taken diverse approaches to explaining the escalating tensions between Britain and the colonies. During the 1960s, Bernard Bailyn illuminated the Revolution’s ideological origins by analyzing radical Whig perceptions that made colonials acutely protective of their liberties (Bailyn 1967). Theodore Draper has probed “the struggle for power” between an empire bent on upholding metropolitan authority and colonies forging their own path and breaking away from “external restraints and prohibitions” (1995, p. 516). In truth, there was a complex interplay between American ideology and interest. One should also emphasize political fissures within both Great Britain and its North American colonies. A minority in the British governing elite sharply criticized ministerial policy in 1774–1775, while many colonials were either ambivalent or opposed to the movement toward independence.

British trans-Appalachian policy is a significant and yet often overlooked element of the imperial crisis. The Royal Proclamation of 1763 established a provisional boundary line between colonial settlement zones east of the Appalachians and Indian “hunting grounds” to the west. The Proclamation, which was issued during Pontiac’s War, reflected a concerted British attempt to stabilize North American frontiers and to prevent the recurrence of colonial–Indian conflicts that would require royal military intervention. The King’s government deliberately replaced General Jeffrey Amherst, British commander-in-chief in North America, whom the ministry blamed for precipitating Pontiac’s War by his ham-fisted management of Indian relations (Anderson 2000, pp. 552–553).

Anglo-American ambitions were hardly stilled by the Proclamation Line. The crown itself had set a precedent for provincial expansionists by authorizing a huge land grant in 1749 to the Ohio Company – a partnership of wealthy Virginians who intended to promote settlement at the Forks of the Ohio and adjoining territory. British victory in the Seven Years’ War encouraged the formation of new land
companies and associations with heady goals of trans-Appalachian land speculation, colonization, and participation in the Indian trade. Rather than focusing simply on private profit, prominent land partnerships advocated colonial growth and imperial aggrandizement. For example, the Illinois Company, organized in Philadelphia in 1766, aimed to establish a new British colony at mid-continent (Sosin 1961, pp. 140–141). The company’s goals, which were articulated by lobbyist Benjamin Franklin in London, included British predominance over the French and Spanish, control of the fur trade, and the furtherance of economic links between Illinois and the Gulf of Mexico (Benjamin Franklin to William Franklin, Aug. 28, 1767, in Labaree et al. 1959–2017, 14, pp. 242–243).

The story of the land companies in the dozen years before the Revolution is a tangled one. The companies often competed strenuously against one another for royal favor because of rival provincial affiliations and overlapping claims to Indian lands. Moreover, British secretaries of state for the American colonies wavered in their approach to trans-Appalachia. The Earl of Shelburne seemed receptive to the formation of two interior colonies in 1767, whereas Lord Hillsborough turned against this plan the next year (Sosin 1961, pp. 155, 168). The most influential companies augmented their political clout through well-placed British lobbyists and shareholders. Sir William Johnson, superintendent of Indian Affairs above the Ohio, strived for peaceful colonial–Native relations but also had an interest in land speculative and western colonizing schemes. Indian nations did not present a united front against colonial expansion. In 1768, the Iroquois (Six Nations) were the leading Native supporters of the Treaty of Fort Stanwix, by which the Proclamation Line was moved to the west and southwest along a line from the Ohio to the Great Kanawha and Tennessee rivers. In effect, the Iroquois benefited at the expense of the Shawnees, Cherokees, and other Indian groups living within or close to the ceded territory. The new line also appeared to legitimize ordinary colonial families who had squatted on land west of the mountains (Hinderaker 1997, pp. 168–170).

The extended talks in London between land company spokesmen and British officials showed possibilities of convergence between colonial and imperial interests. By mid-1773, however, the King’s government had shifted decisively against an American expansionist agenda for a variety of reasons – imperial budgetary constraints, concerns about triggering an Indian war, disgust over colonial resistance to metropolitan authority, and apprehension about emigration by British and Irish laboring folk to the North American interior, or the “backcountry” as it was then called. The Quebec Act of 1774 threatened the territorial growth of the Atlantic seaboard colonies by enlarging Quebec’s boundaries to encompass the entire region from the Great Lakes southward to the Ohio River and westward to the Mississippi. American Whigs denounced this measure as a violation of longstanding colonial charter rights.

British authority in interior regions was in decline during the early 1770s. The story of the Green Mountain Boys movement furnishes one example. Ethan Allen’s frontier vigilantes upheld their land titles in order to defeat New York’s presumptive jurisdiction over the so-called “New Hampshire Grants” – a region that emerged as Vermont during the Revolutionary War (Bellesiles 1993). Far southward, the withdrawal of British troops from Fort Pitt in 1771 exacerbated tensions between Virginia and Pennsylvania over western jurisdictional claims. The Earl of Dunmore, Virginia’s governor, led his colony into war with the Shawnees in 1774 without royal
authorization (Hinderaker 1997, pp. 170, 193). Though Dunmore later proved himself a staunch royalist in the face of Whig opposition, he was as eager as Patrick Henry, George Washington, and other colonial leaders to make a fortune in western lands. By early 1775, royal authority was all but dead in the Southern backcountry. Richard Henderson, founder of the Transylvania Company, made his own treaty with Cherokee headmen in March 1775, by which the latter purportedly ceded all their people’s lands between the Cumberland watershed and the Kentucky River (Hinderaker 1997, p. 196). Growing white settlement to the south along the Watauga and Holston rivers would stir the Cherokees to war in 1776.

The American Revolutionary War thus had continental dimensions that were as integral to the genesis of U.S. foreign relations as congressional policies vis-à-vis France and Spain, as discussed below.

**Revolution and War (1775–1783)**

In July 1775, the Second Continental Congress contended that it was forming an army to defend liberty rather than to separate from Great Britain. This official posture reflected the need to attain colonial consensus before any leap to independence was made. By late August, however, circumstances on the northern frontier led fledgling American forces toward an invasion of Quebec. Richard Montgomery, commander of Continental troops along Lake Champlain, decided to move northward lest the British and their Indian allies in Canada launch a southward strike via the same waterway. Headquartered outside Boston, George Washington detached Benedict Arnold and about 1000 men in mid-September for a supportive thrust at Quebec via the Kennebec River and the Maine wilderness. Arnold carried a manifesto, drafted in Washington’s name, which called on Canadians to unite with Americans in a common struggle for liberty (Anderson 2013, pp. 144–145). The stated American goal was liberation rather than conquest—a theme that would echo across subsequent generations, especially when the United States assumed a major role in world affairs. As events transpired, the Quebec invasion proved a costly political and military defeat for the Whig cause.

In that context, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* broke through the veil of warfare for limited political gains by calling for an immediate declaration of independence. His pamphlet had some practical foreign-policy advice beside its clarion denunciation of monarchy and its passionate embrace of American freedom. Paine clearly understood that only by fighting for independence could the colonies expect to gain French and Spanish recognition and assistance. He extolled the American interest in trade with continental Europe and advocated an American fleet to safeguard commerce. When *Common Sense* was published in early 1776, the colonies were already fast moving on the local and provincial level to repudiate British authority. Chances of peaceful reconciliation were all but dashed when Parliament passed the Prohibitory Act of December 22, 1775, declaring that American merchant vessels would henceforth be regarded as enemy ships at sea. In March 1776, Congress itself authorized privateers to operate under letters of marque against British shipping. In early April, the delegates in Philadelphia opened American ports to the ships of all nations except Great Britain (Bemis 1957, pp. 29–30; Kaplan 1972, pp. 85–89). The Declaration of
Independence was a bold statement of an independent foreign policy. It announced to the American public and the wider world that the colonies were now “Free and Independent States” with “full power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do” (Ford et al. 1904–1937, 5, p. 514).

James Hutson has argued that Congress’ early foreign policy was motivated by practical considerations rather than by abstract notions of transforming the existing international order. He points to John Adams’ Plan of July 1776 – what historians would later call “the Model Treaty” – a blueprint for foreign relations based on commercial reciprocity and the recognition of neutral maritime rights, but not anticipating American exemption from customs duties in foreign ports (Hutson 1977, p. 45). This plan was incorporated into instructions of September 24, 1776 that Congress adopted for its commissioners to France. While not calling for a formal alliance with France, the delegates pressed for commercial ties and the supply of French arms and munitions. The United States disavowed any reconciliation with Great Britain and recommended a flexible negotiating posture toward this end. If the commissioners believed the war effort could not be adequately sustained, they were instructed to inform the French that the United States might be compelled to undertake “a Reunion with Great Britain” should France delay to enter an alliance (Ford et al. 1904–1937, 5, p. 816). In short, congressional diplomacy presumed that France could not afford to allow the United States to fail lest the British Empire be restored to its full might. This was “the trump card” of American foreign policy (Bemis 1957, p. 47).

The national diplomacy of Congress and its emissaries was not the sole arm of American foreign relations during the Revolutionary War. The states and private citizens – notably white frontier leaders and settlers – had a marked influence in the continental and international arenas. U.S. relations with Indian peoples should certainly be considered in this context. The states and private citizens pursued particular goals. Indian peoples forged their own policies, too, in response to changing circumstances and heightened pressures. A thorough understanding of American foreign relations during the war necessarily requires multiple geographic perspectives and an awareness of connections between local, regional, and international developments.

Consider, for example, the case of Virginia’s independent diplomacy with Spanish authorities in Louisiana. In late June 1776, the Virginia Committee of Safety sent Captain George Gibson and about 20 militiamen to New Orleans with the aim of securing arms and munitions from the Spanish governor of Louisiana. Through the good offices of merchant Oliver Pollock, who acted as an American agent in New Orleans, the Virginians procured a substantial store of Spanish gunpowder and sent it up the Mississippi and Ohio rivers by the spring of 1777 to strengthen the Old Dominion’s frontier defense. At the orders of Virginia’s government, Gibson presented Louisiana Governor Luis de Unzaga y Amezaga with the proposition of an American attack on the British Mississippi and a foray against Mobile and Pensacola, strategic ports within British West Florida (Narrett 2015, pp. 70–72). Though no invasion developed from this initiative, the proposal indicates that Congress had only partial direction of American foreign relations in the war’s early stages.

While the American war effort reached a crisis point in late 1776, Congress moved well beyond the idea that a commercial treaty would be sufficient to draw France into the conflict against Great Britain (Horsman 1985, pp. 14–15). Meeting at Baltimore
on December 30, 1776, the delegates instructed American commissioners in Europe – Arthur Lee, Silas Deane, and Benjamin Franklin – that the United States was resolved on joint military action with France for two major purposes: (i) to conquer Newfoundland and Cape Breton and wrest the cod fishery from Great Britain; and (ii) to assist France, if called upon, in the capture of British Caribbean islands. The proposal’s details are especially revealing about American territorial and commercial ambitions. If successful in prospective Canadian maritime offensives, Congress favored an equal division of Newfoundland with France, with the United States retaining all of Nova Scotia and Cape Breton. It would acquiesce in French possession of whichever British West Indian islands were gained. Congress further authorized its commissioners to attempt a treaty of commerce and alliance with Spain that was consonant with commitments to France. The delegates conceived of quid pro quo once again. The United States would assist Spain in gaining possession of Pensacola, provided that American citizens “shall have the free and uninterrupted navigation of the Mississippi and use of the harbour of Pensacola” (Ford et al. 1904–1937, 6, p. 1057). Congress perceived the war in continental terms – with a melding of territorial and commercial ambitions – even during the most perilous circumstances of 1776. One also detects the goal of satisfying distinct regional interests by pursuing the fisheries for New England and navigation on the Mississippi for Virginia and other states.

As Robert Kagan writes, America’s leaders were “practical idealists” who had a sharp sense of power politics and who “feared unequal alliances” but “were not shy about seeking foreign entanglements when they needed them” (2006, p. 57). The ship that carried Franklin to France in November 1776 captured two British merchant vessels as prizes as it approached its destination. Franklin welcomed this risk-taking and helped dispose of the loot to French merchants even though such actions might compromise France’s official standing as a neutral power. The Comte de Vergennes, France’s foreign minister, tolerated American privateers operating from French ports to a certain point, though he issued desist orders to the U.S. commissioners when Britain threatened France with war over the matter during the summer of 1777 (Dull 1985, pp. 80–85). American privateers blurred the line between private adventurism for profit and service to nation.

Jonathan Dull, the foremost recent authority on the Franco-American alliance, maintains that the French government was wary of fully committing to the American cause in 1776. The Comte de Vergennes believed that France would require at least 2 years to ready its navy for war with Britain. Though officially neutral, France took important measures to aid the American war effort by funneling large quantities of military supplies and other provisions across the Atlantic, via a shadow company (Rodrigue Hortalez et Cie.) funded by Versailles. The Spanish crown contributed an equivalent amount in financial aid to this effort. France expected that American merchants would pay for the supplies through tobacco shipments.

Had the 13 colonies not developed a vibrant shipping economy before the war, it would have been scarcely possible for the Continental Army to obtain sufficient munitions and goods from abroad to carry on the conflict. It was Robert Morris, Philadelphia merchant and head of the congressional Secret Committee of Commerce, who appointed agents in the several colonies and in the French and Dutch Caribbean to manage the purchase and shipment of war materiel. Conducting trade variously on private and public accounts, Morris and his merchant correspondents forged lines of
credit that exposed themselves to considerable financial risk given that Congress had limited resources at its disposal. The American cause received a lift when French supply ships reached New Hampshire and the Caribbean in early 1777 (Alberts 1969, pp. 19–21, 45–48). While Continental soldiers often suffered severely from inadequate civilian support and an inefficient and corrupt commissary system, private overseas merchants and privateers helped to keep the Revolution afloat.

The internationalization of the American Revolutionary War is often dated from the beginnings of the U.S.–French alliance. This observation has some truth, though it is clear that the conflict was already shaking the status quo in the Atlantic world before then. The escalation of international warfare came in stages. France’s entry into the war was the catalyst for the subsequent outbreak of hostilities between Britain and Spain in 1779 and for the British decision for war against the United Provinces of the Netherlands in 1780. These overlapping conflicts pressed Britain’s military capacity almost to the breaking point, thereby aiding the American cause. The well-known role of French land and naval forces at Yorktown is only the most obvious sign of how the United States benefited from a broadening war.

The American victory at Saratoga was a clear influence on France’s decision to enter two treaties of February 6, 1778 with the United States – the first a treaty of amity and commerce and the second a treaty of alliance. Most important, the treaty of alliance bound both nations in a common struggle if war should break out between France and Great Britain. (Hostilities were a virtual certainty once the French government formally announced the accord.) Moreover, the treaty declared the purpose of the alliance was to maintain “the liberty, Sovereignty, and independence” of the United States (Bemis 1957, p. 63). The United States was recognized as rightful sovereign over British continental territories and Bermuda, if conquered during the war. France obtained U.S. recognition of wartime gains that it might make in the British Caribbean. Both parties pledged not to make a separate peace with Britain or to lay down arms without securing the independence of the United States. These terms were a great boon to the American cause.

There were significant differences between French and Spanish diplomatic approaches to the American Revolution. While both countries desired to weaken Britain and invested large sums toward that goal, Spain balked at recognizing American independence, lest it endorse a colonial revolution that could set an example for its own vast American possessions. Moreover, Spanish government ministers perceived the United States as a potential expansionist power that aimed at the Mississippi and could in time threaten Mexico. The Conde de Floridablanca, who became Spanish foreign minister in 1777, was miffed late that year when Vergennes moved toward recognizing American independence. When Spain finally entered the war in 1779, it would join as a formal ally of France but not of the United States.

Thomas E. Chávez argues that Spanish assistance to the United States during the Revolution amounted to “an intrinsic gift” that included substantial aid “in the form of actual fighting, supplies, and money” (Chávez 2002, p. 213). This interpretation calls worthwhile attention to Spain’s military and financial intervention, though it may understate the degree to which U.S.–Spanish tensions arose during the war itself rather than being simply a postwar phenomenon. The actions of Bernardo de Gálvez, Louisiana’s intrepid governor, are especially important to understanding Spain’s role as both erstwhile supporter and rival of the United States. Nephew of José de Gálvez,
minister of the Indies, don Bernardo had a gift for humbling the British on the Mississippi even while his government was still officially neutral. In 1778, he temporarily sheltered American raider James Willing and his comrades in New Orleans after the latter had plundered British plantations on the Mississippi’s east bank. Gálvez likewise permitted U.S. agent Oliver Pollock to sell looted property and slaves in his capital. Pollock also borrowed heavily from Gálvez to help finance George Rogers Clark’s Illinois campaign in 1778. In no way, however, did Gálvez countenance any permanent American occupation of the British Gulf Coast territories that he coveted for his king. He put off any definite response to Patrick Henry, Virginia’s governor, when the latter wrote him about the prospective American acquisition of British West Florida. Once Spain entered the war, Gálvez boldly invaded British territory, took Baton Rouge, and gained the surrender of Natchez. In 1780–1781, he secured military support from Cuba that enabled him to capture Mobile and Pensacola. He offered General John Campbell, the defeated British commander of Pensacola, the privilege of having his roughly 1000 men shipped to any British site except for St. Augustine or Jamaica. Campbell chose New York City – the North American headquarters for British forces. Gálvez’s acquiescence stunned many in Congress, who naïvely imagined the Spanish governor to be a wholehearted friend. Spain’s war against Britain did not easily coalesce with U.S. military or political objectives (Narrett 2015, pp. 81, 89, 101–103).

There was an unbridgeable gap between American expectations of Spanish friendship and Floridablanca’s stance toward the United States. John Jay’s failed mission to Spain of 1780–1781 is highly revealing. Since September 1779, Congress had been prepared to recognize prospective Spanish gains at British expense in the Floridas, provided that Madrid would recognize U.S. navigational rights on the Mississippi. Jay was charged with the task of securing Spanish recognition of American independence, negotiating an alliance, and gaining a loan of $5 million (Ford et al. 1904–1937, 15, pp. 1084, 1120). Floridablanca neither budged on the Mississippi issue nor offered a formal acknowledgment of U.S. independence, which the Spanish minister believed should come only after Congress reached a peace settlement with Great Britain. Imperial Spain intended not only to stanch U.S. territorial expansion but also to block foreign commercial penetration into the Gulf of Mexico and the spread of contraband trade with its colonies (Narrett 2015, pp. 109–113). Benjamin Franklin meanwhile expressed an American commitment to free trade via the Mississippi that may be seen as a precursor of the “open door” policy of the late nineteenth century. Writing from Paris on October 2, 1780, he cautioned Jay not to yield to Spain on the navigation question. “Poor as we are, yet as I know we shall be rich, I would rather agree with them [the Spanish] to buy at a great Price the whole of their Right on the Mississippi [sic] than sell a Drop of its Waters. – A Neighbor might as well ask me to sell my Street Door” (Labaree et al. 1959–2017, 33, p. 357).

Feeling badly slighted in Madrid, Jay carried a deep anti-Spanish animus when he joined John Adams and Benjamin Franklin as commissioners to negotiate a peace with Britain in Paris in 1782. In discussions with British emissary Richard Oswald, Jay suggested that Britain attempt to reconquer West Florida from Spain. Though the British ministry proved uninterested in that plan, the preliminary U.S.–British treaty had a secret article favoring Britain over Spain depending on the final European peace settlement. If Spain remained in possession of West Florida, the United States insisted
on a southern boundary at the 31st parallel. If Britain regained that colony, however, the American commissioners were prepared to recognize English sovereignty to 32°28′ – about 100 miles above the 31st parallel – an area that included the strategic and fertile Natchez district. Congress subsequently repudiated the secret article on Florida as an ill-conceived complication (Dull 1985, p. 149; Narrett 2015, pp. 109–111).

In all, the American peace commissioners achieved a highly favorable treaty with the mother country by conducting negotiations without directly consulting France, which they were bound to do by congressional instructions. They determined on this course in order to counteract Spanish and French diplomacy seeking to confine the United States to a boundary east of the Appalachians (Bemis 1957, pp. 233–234; Morris 1965, pp. 307–309). Adams, Franklin, and Jay took advantage of the fact that Britain wanted to shelve its failed North American war so that it could concentrate its formidable naval might against the Bourbon powers. In 1782, the Spanish and French failed in their campaigns to take Gibraltar and to launch an invasion of Jamaica. Britain recouped prestige at the war’s end – a sign that the British Empire was by no means crippled by its defeat in North America.

The final U.S.–British peace treaty was understandably hailed by Congress. The treaty terms included British recognition of American independence, an end to hostilities, and a U.S. boundary that encompassed trans-Appalachian territories from the Great Lakes as far south as the 31st parallel on the Mississippi and lands eastward to the Chattahoochee River. American fishing rights in the Grand Banks were recognized, though with limitations on curing fish in British maritime colonies. Both Britain and the United States guaranteed one another free navigation on the Mississippi for its entire length, notwithstanding the fact that neither had possession of the river at the time. The treaty essentially placed the United States and Spain in dispute over navigation of the Mississippi and a territorial boundary above the Gulf of Mexico. The Spanish government believed that it had a right to territories as far north as the Ohio – a very great leap above the 31st parallel, as claimed by the United States. The British–Spanish peace treaty added to the confusion. By that accord, Britain ceded West Florida to Spain but without defining the colony’s northern bounds. The English government also yielded East Florida to Spain by treaty. This circumstance created further ground for U.S.–Spanish contention in the near future.

There is a growing literature in U.S.-Indian relations in the war years. The most detailed and useful overview is found in Colin Calloway, The American Revolution in Indian Country (1995). Though a summation of this complex subject is beyond the scope of this chapter, several points should be emphasized. First, Congress had limited control over colonial–Indian conflicts, especially in Southern frontier regions at the war’s outset. The first major clash occurred in the summer of 1776, when the militias of Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia devastated the Cherokee country in response to Indian raids on white settlements and suspected Cherokee–British collusion. Second, Congress failed in its attempt to secure the neutrality of the Iroquois confederacy. The war shattered the unity of the Iroquois League and ushered in divisions and civil war prior to American General John Sullivan’s invasion of 1779 – a campaign that wrought havoc in Iroquoia. Third, Britain gained significant though inconstant support among numerous Indian groups through its opposition to American settler expansion. The crown supplied Native allies with presents, trade goods,
munitions. Fourth, settler–Indian conflicts raged in certain trans-Appalachian regions without clear-cut military outcomes by the time of the U.S.–British peace of 1783. Chickamauga militants among the Cherokees continued the fight against white settlers, but other Cherokee factions favored accommodation with American frontiersmen. The Shawnees above the Ohio attacked Kentucky’s white settlers even while suffering counterblows over years.

Indian peoples were just as stunned by the British cession of their territories through the 1783 Treaty of Paris as they were shocked by the French surrender of their lands to Britain in 1763. Alexander McGillivray, a Creek leader of Scots-Indian parentage, declared that the British government had no right to transfer his people and their lands to any power (DuVal 2015, pp. 246–248). In 1784, he and other Creek leaders entered an alliance with the Spanish in order to protect themselves against U.S. expansion. Far northward, a substantial group of Mohawks under the charismatic Joseph Brant relocated west of the Niagara River to take advantage of British protection. Crown officers in Canada officially endorsed the old Fort Stanwix boundary of 1768 in order to confine American sovereignty, but this idea had little effect given the U.S.–British peace treaty and the great influx of white settlers into Iroquoia after the war (Taylor 2006, pp. 115–116).

The United States asserted its title to all trans-Appalachian territories situated between the Great Lakes and the Floridas that had formerly adhered to the British monarch. U.S.–Indian relations in the post-war era were deeply entangled in American rivalry with both Great Britain and Spain. This subject is a fertile one for borderlands history, which analyzes overlapping dimensions of imperial rivalry and colonial–Native contestation, especially in regions not firmly controlled by any single nation or ethnicity.

Postwar Struggles under the Articles of Confederation (1783–1788)

The new nation’s foreign relations were greatly hampered during the 1780s by constitutional and political limitations on national power and authority. Drafted in 1777 but not approved until 1781, the Articles of Confederation defined the United States of American as “a perpetual Union” by which the states entered “into a firm league of friendship with each other for their common defence, the security of their Liberties, and their mutual and general welfare.” The Articles bound the states to assist one another against all “attacks made upon them, or any of them.” As the arm of the Union, Congress was endowed with supreme power in war and diplomacy, while the states retained their sovereignty and all powers not explicitly granted to the United States. Congress could call upon the states for monetary contributions but had no explicit authority to tax. Nor could it pass laws regulating commerce between the states or between the United States and foreign countries. This limitation did not preclude congressional emissaries from negotiating commercial treaties or other international accords with foreign powers. Treaties required the approval of nine states in Congress to be legally binding. Indeed, all fundamental federal powers (declaring war, raising troops and a navy, entering treaties or alliances, borrowing money, emitting bills of credit) required this same super-majority within a Congress in which each state, no matter how large or small, had one vote (Morris 1987, pp. 86–91).
The Confederation’s weakness was evident in Spanish and British policies toward the United States. By a royal edict of 1784, Carlos III of Spain closed the Mississippi River to foreign shipping in all areas where it lay between crown territories. British Orders in Council of 1783 prohibited U.S. merchant vessels from entering the English West Indies and banned certain American produce (fish, dairy products, and meats), while admitting other goods to the islands in British ships only. American merchants commonly circumvented these restrictions, since colonials on the islands regarded imperial prohibitions as hurtful to their needs. Still, the Orders in Council had a negative impact on the American economy, especially in Northern states that had profited substantially from the Caribbean trade during the colonial era. James Madison and other leaders in Congress worked in vain to amend the Articles so that Congress could regulate trade and discriminate against British shipping. But trade regulation and duties remained under the control of states that competed against one another in commerce. The Confederation also suffered because of political incapacity to amend the Articles, a procedure requiring the approval of all state legislatures. Congress thus proposed, but could not gain, unanimous state legislative approval for a tariff (impost) that might pay down the national debt. Congressional insolvency and domestic disorders eventually spurred nationalist-minded leaders to consider more thorough changes to the federal system.

While ineffectual toward Britain, the American Union was badly divided by foreign secretary John Jay’s controversial negotiations with Spanish ambassador Diego de Gardoqui. Eager to bolster trade during an economic downturn, Jay requested in 1786 that Congress should permit him to negotiate an accord that would open Spanish peninsular ports and the Canary Islands to American shipping. As a quid pro quo, the United States would defer use of the Mississippi River within Spanish territory for 25–30 years (Bemis 1960, pp. 77–86). This proposition created intense sectional discord. Seven northern state delegations initially supported the plan, while the five most Southern states stood strongly in opposition. Outrage flamed most hotly in southwestern frontier regions such as Kentucky, where settlers contended that a denial of navigation would deprive them of their natural rights and any hope of economic prosperity. Some disgruntled Westerners and their Eastern allies talked of invading Spanish territory if the national government failed to secure their demands. Jay’s proposed negotiation was finally derailed because of the need for approval by nine states in Congress to carry a treaty.

James Wilkinson of Kentucky, a former brigadier in the Continental Army, took advantage of congressional weakness to forge his own negotiating path down the Mississippi to New Orleans during the summer of 1787. Wilkinson’s gambit was encouraged by Louisiana Governor Esteban Miró and provincial intendant Martín Navarro, who believed that Spain was risking too much by a general denial of U.S. navigation on the Mississippi. Miró and Navarro welcomed Wilkinson’s overture as a means of securing an informal alliance with trustworthy Western American elites who might be given commercial privileges or encouraged to colonize Louisiana. Wilkinson was eager to oblige. He swore a secret oath of allegiance to the Spanish monarch and dangled the prospect of Kentucky’s separation from the Union and its political alignment with Spain. Miró and Navarro meanwhile lobbied effectively for a change in Spanish imperial policy. By royal order of December 1, 1788, the Spanish crown authorized Kentucky’s downriver shipment of goods to Louisiana on the payment of
a 15% customs duty – a rate to be lowered for “notables”; that is, for influential men such as Wilkinson. Madrid also approved the settlement of “respectable” U.S. nationals in Louisiana, who would receive land gratis on condition of taking an oath of allegiance to the monarch. The Spanish government deferred any commitment to support an independent Kentucky and instead awaited political developments that might swing American frontier districts toward an alliance with Madrid (Whitaker 1962a, pp. 99–103; Narrett 2015, pp.137–138, 169–171).

Wilkinson’s negotiations were a symptom of problems stemming from the weakness of congressional authority over frontier districts, settler movements aimed at independence from older colonial jurisdictions, and the impact of settler–Indian clashes and warfare. Adding to these difficulties was the fact that certain states held large and sometimes conflicting claims to territories extending from the Appalachians to the Mississippi. It was not until 1784 that Virginia agreed to yield its claims above the Ohio River to the federal government. Even then, Virginia upheld the lawful right of its Continental Army veterans to bounty lands in the ceded region. George Rogers Clark and his soldiers also held claims to Ohio lands based on the general’s militia campaign in the Illinois country during the Revolutionary War (Onuf 1983, pp.98–100; Narrett 2016, pp. 4–5).

The impulse to independent frontier statehood hampered Congress in forging a national foreign policy that would govern relations with Britain, Spain, and Indian peoples. During the latter stages of the Revolutionary War, Vermont’s state council, headed by brothers Ethan and Ira Allen and Governor Thomas Chittenden, turned to secret negotiations with the British in Canada out of frustration that Congress withheld recognition of an independent Green Mountain State and denied it admission to the Union. The Allen brothers responded by weighing a possible reunion with the British Empire provided that their terms for autonomy and self-government were met. It is debatable whether the Allens truly intended a break with the United States – a move by no means favored by most Vermont citizens – or whether they were using Canadian negotiations to stave off British invasion and to enhance their leverage with Congress. Like all shrewd frontier powerbrokers, the brothers maximized options in uncertain conditions to advance their political and personal agendas (Bellesiles 1993, pp. 197–203).

The southwestern frontiers of the United States posed the greatest challenge to Congress because of their rapid settlement after the war, persistent white–Indian warfare, and uncertainty relative to Spanish Louisiana and the Gulf region. Kentucky politicos generally favored a constitutional separation from their parent state of Virginia, but bickered over the procedures and timing of that process. It was not until 1792 that Kentucky was finally admitted as the 15th state in the Union – just after Vermont’s admission the previous year. The Watauga and Holston river settlements of far western North Carolina were also torn by civil strife, eventually leading to violence in 1786 and 1787 between a group of white inhabitants favoring the establishment of an independent State of Franklin and those opposed to such a new jurisdiction. John Sevier, Franklin’s governor, had an aggressive expansionist agenda that targeted Muscle Shoals on the Tennessee River, which lay in territory critical to the Cherokees, Chickasaws, and Creeks. Sevier confidentially lobbied for Spanish commercial privileges on rivers emptying into the Gulf of Mexico, but the Franklin movement collapsed in 1788 because of internal discord. This failure hardly stilled other settler
schemes of western land engrossment and the quest for trade routes to the Gulf (Whitaker 1962a, pp. 109–110).

Unlike other states, which yielded western territorial claims to the nation during the 1780s, Georgia continued to maintain its right to interior lands reaching to the Mississippi. In 1785, the Georgia state legislature declared jurisdiction over the Natchez district – a largely Anglo-American plantation and farming region on the Mississippi’s east bank that was under Spanish governance. Spain held the area by virtue of Gálvez’s victory over Britain in the war during 1779–1781; Georgia’s claims stemmed from its colonial charter and the U.S.–British treaty that designated an American boundary at the 31st parallel, which lay south of Natchez. Georgia attempted a peaceful coup d’état in 1785, but failed in the face of Spanish military resolve and insufficient popular support in the disputed region. Congress rebuked the attempted coup as a threat to national sovereignty, but it still contended that the U.S. southwestern boundary included Natchez and all territory below to the 31st parallel (Narrett 2015, pp. 120–126). Georgia’s citizens meanwhile clashed with the Creek confederacy, which obtained munitions from Spanish officials in Florida and from the British merchant house of Panton, Leslie and Company, which had Spain’s license to manage Indian commerce out of St. Augustine and Pensacola. In time, this private company, guided by William Panton, broadened its commercial privileges and became a power in its own right.

The Northwest Ordinance of 1787 was the most significant achievement of Congress in frontier policymaking prior to the adoption of the new federal Constitution. The Ordinance is noteworthy for its regulations concerning territorial governance and the admission of territories as future states. Secretary of War Henry Knox strongly supported the Ordinance, as did members of Congress who understood that frontier lawlessness and uncontrolled settler–Indian conflicts flared in the absence of federal authority (Onuf 1987, pp. 58–59). Nationalists bolstered their case by pointing to problems caused by George Rogers Clark’s failed campaign of 1786 against the Wabash Indians. In the aftermath of a failed offensive, Clark’s Kentucky militiamen fueled international controversy by confiscating the property of Spanish Louisiana merchants at Vincennes. Congress was further alarmed by reports that Clark and his confederate Thomas Green were plotting to recruit frontier volunteers for an unauthorized assault on Natchez (Narrett 2016, pp. 11–14). The federal quest for orderly expansion above the Ohio was directly tied to fears of anarchic and separatist tendencies in trans-Appalachian settlement zones. The furtherance of national authority would be a foremost goal of the Washington administration under the new federal system established in 1789.

The Evolution of National Policy Under the Presidencies of Washington, Adams, and Jefferson (1789–1803)

The necessities of shoring up the Union took precedence over imperial aggrandizement during Washington’s presidency. True, the Washington administration carried on several offensives against Indians of the Northwest from 1789 through 1794. The first two campaigns under Generals Harmar and St. Clair failed miserably prior to Anthony Wayne’s victory over confederated Indian nations at the Battle of Fallen