

# Foreign Affairs in the Young Nation

## 12.1 Introduction

Did you know that you are carrying a history lesson in your pocket or purse? You'll find it on any \$1 bill. Take out a dollar and see for yourself!

Look first at the portrait of George Washington. Americans still honor this leader as “First in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen.” But few remember that Washington defined our nation’s first **foreign policy**. During his presidency, Washington set principles that would guide the United States in its future dealings with other nations.

Turn the dollar bill over. You will see two circles showing the Great Seal of the United States. For thousands of years, governments have used seals like this one to mark their approval of important documents. Our nation’s founders thought that a national seal was so important that they began work on it the same day that they declared independence—July 4, 1776. In 1782, Congress approved the design we see today on our money.

The elements on the Great Seal represent the founders’ hopes and dreams for the United States. For example, the unfinished pyramid on one side of the seal signifies strength and endurance. The bald eagle on the other side is a symbol of national power. In one talon, it grasps the arrows of war. In the other, it holds an olive branch of peace.

The arrows and olive branch are perfect symbols of two foreign policy choices. The United States could be actively involved in world affairs, risking war. Or it could avoid involvement in other nations’ conflicts in the hope of staying at peace. Arrows or olive branch? Which choice would you have made for the new nation? In this chapter, you will read about four dilemmas faced by early presidents of the United States. Their decisions influenced the future of U.S. foreign policy.

## 12.2 President Washington Creates a Foreign Policy

When George Washington took office as the nation’s first president in 1789, America was looking weak. The army that Washington had commanded during the Revolutionary War had gone home. It had not been replaced for two reasons. First, an army would cost money that the government did not have. Second, Americans had learned that a standing army could be used to take away their liberty. State militia troops, they believed, could handle any threats the country might face.

And there were threats. The new nation was surrounded by unfriendly powers. To the north, Britain still controlled Canada. The British also refused to abandon their forts in the Ohio Valley, even though this region now belonged to the United States. To the south and west, Spain controlled Florida and Louisiana.

Events in Europe also threatened the new nation. As you read in Chapter 11, in 1789, the French people rose up against their king and declared France a republic. Most Americans were thrilled by the French Revolution. However, when France went to war with Britain in 1793, President Washington faced a difficult decision. During its own revolution, the United States had signed a treaty of alliance with France. (Alliances are agreements made with other nations to aid and support each other.) In that treaty, the United States had promised to aid France in time of war. Many Americans were eager to honor that pledge, even if it meant going to war with Britain.

Washington knew that the United States was not prepared for war. Instead, he announced a policy of **neutrality**. Under this policy, the United States would do nothing to aid either France or Britain in their war against each other.

Before leaving office, Washington summed up his foreign policy in his famous farewell address. The United States, he said, could gain nothing by becoming involved in other nations’ affairs. “It is our true policy,” he declared, “to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.” Washington’s policy of avoiding alliances with other countries became known as **isolationism**. For the next century, isolationism would be the foundation of American foreign policy.

## 12.3 Dilemma 1: What Should President Adams Do to Protect American Ships?

Isolationism sounded good in theory. But it was often hard to stay out of other countries’ conflicts. No one knew this better than John Adams, the nation’s second president. Adams tried to follow Washington’s policy of neutrality. With France, however, staying neutral proved difficult.

**The Jay Treaty** French leaders hoped that Britain’s refusal to leave the Ohio Valley would lead to war between England and the United States. Those hopes were dashed when Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay to London to settle things with the British. In the Jay Treaty, the British finally agreed to pull their troops from the Ohio Valley. French officials viewed the Jay Treaty as a betrayal by the United States. In July 1796, the French navy began attacking American merchant ships bound for Britain. Over the next year, French warships seized 316 American ships.

*The XYZ Affair* President Adams sent three envoys, or representatives, to France to end the attacks. French Foreign Minister Talleyrand refused to receive the Americans. Instead, they were met by secret agents, later identified only as X, Y, and Z. The agents said that no peace talks would be held unless Talleyrand received a large sum of money as a tribute. (A tribute is a payment of money as the price of protection.) “No! No! Not a sixpence!” responded the shocked envoys.

The XYZ Affair outraged Americans. At the president’s urging, Congress voted to recruit an army of 10,000 men. It also voted to build 12 new ships for the nation’s tiny navy. The slogan “Millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute!” was heard everywhere as Americans prepared for war.

Meanwhile, Congress authorized American warships and privately owned ships, called privateers, to launch a “half-war” on the seas. During this undeclared war, American ships captured more than 80 armed French vessels.

As war fever mounted, John Adams—never a lovable leader—found himself unexpectedly popular. His Federalist Party also gained support in all parts of the country. The question facing Adams was whether doing the popular thing by unleashing the arrows of war on France was also the best thing for the country.

#### **12.4 What Happened: Adams Pursues Peace**

Adams knew that no matter how good war might be for the Federalist Party, it would not be good for the country. In February 1799, the president announced that he was sending a peace mission to France. Federalist leaders were furious. They pleaded with the president to change his mind, but Adams would not budge.

By the time the peace mission reached France, Napoleon Bonaparte had taken over the French government. The Americans found that Napoleon was eager to make peace with both Britain and the United States. He had already ordered an end to the seizure of American ships and the release of captured American sailors.

More importantly, Napoleon agreed to end France’s 1778 alliance with the United States. While the alliance with France had been essential to the United States during the Revolutionary War, it had brought nothing but trouble since then. In exchange, the Americans agreed not to ask France to pay for all the ships it had seized. This meant that the U.S. government would have to pay American ship owners for their lost property. To Adams, this seemed a small price to pay for peace.

Choosing the olive branch cost Adams political popularity. His pursuit of peace caused strong disagreements within the Federalist Party. These disagreements cost Adams and the Federalists votes when he ran for reelection in 1800. As you read in Chapter 11, Jefferson defeated Adams, and the Federalist Party lost much of its support. Over the next few years, Adams would watch his Federalist Party slowly fade away.

Still, Adams had no regrets. He wrote:

*I will defend my missions to France, as long as I have an eye to direct my hand, or a finger to hold my pen.... I desire no other inscription over my gravestone than: “Here lies John Adams, who took upon himself the responsibility of the peace with France in the year 1800.”*

Adams left the nation at peace and with no permanent alliances that might drag it into war. He had a right to feel proud.

#### **12.5 Dilemma 2: How Should President Jefferson Deal with Pirates?**

Peace with France did not last long. By 1803, France and Britain were again at war. As the conflict heated up, both nations began seizing American ships that were trading with their enemy. President Thomas Jefferson, who took office in 1801, complained bitterly that “England has become a den of pirates and France has become a den of thieves.” Still, like Washington and Adams before him, Jefferson tried to follow a policy of neutrality.

*Impressment* Remaining neutral when ships were being seized was hard enough. It became even harder when Britain began impressing, or kidnapping, American sailors to serve in the British navy. The British claimed that the men they impressed were British deserters. This may have been true in some cases, as some sailors may well have fled the terrible conditions on British ships. Yet thousands of unlucky Americans were also impressed and forced to toil on Britain’s “floating hells.”

American anger over impressment peaked in 1807 after a British warship, the *Leopard*, stopped an American warship, the *Chesapeake*, to search for deserters. When the *Chesapeake*’s captain refused to allow a search, the *Leopard* opened fire. Twenty-one American sailors were killed or wounded. This attack triggered another case of war fever, this time against Britain.

**Piracy** American ships faced a different threat from the Barbary States of North Africa: piracy, or robbery at sea. For years, pirates from Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli had preyed on merchant ships entering the Mediterranean Sea. The pirates seized the ships and held their crews for ransom.

Presidents Washington and Adams both paid tribute to Barbary State rulers in exchange for the safety of American ships. While Americans were shouting “millions for defense, but not one cent for tribute” during the XYZ Affair, the United States was quietly sending money to the Barbary States.

By the time Jefferson became president, the United States had paid the Barbary States almost \$2 million. The ruler of Tripoli, however, demanded still more tribute. To show that he was serious, he declared war on the United States. Jefferson hated war. But he also hated paying tribute. The question was, which was worse?

### **12.6 What Happened: Jefferson Solves Half the Problem**

As much as Jefferson hated war, he hated paying tribute more. In 1802, he sent a small fleet of warships to the Mediterranean to protect American shipping. The war plodded along until 1804, when American ships began bombarding Tripoli with their cannons. One of the ships, the Philadelphia, ran aground on a hidden reef in the harbor. The captain and crew were captured and held for ransom.

Rather than let pirates have the Philadelphia, a young naval officer named Stephen Decatur led a raiding party into the heavily guarded Tripoli harbor and set the ship afire. A year later, Tripoli signed a peace treaty with the United States. Tripoli agreed to stop demanding tribute payments. In return, the United States paid a \$60,000 ransom for the crew of the Philadelphia. This was a bargain compared to the \$3 million first demanded.

Pirates from other Barbary States continued to plunder ships in the Mediterranean. In 1815, American and European naval forces finally destroyed the pirate bases.

Meanwhile, Jefferson tried desperately to convince both France and Britain to leave American ships alone. All of his efforts failed. Between 1803 and 1807, Britain seized at least a thousand American ships. France captured about half that many.

When diplomacy failed, Jefferson proposed an **embargo**—a complete halt in trade with other nations. Under the Embargo Act of 1807, no foreign ships could enter U.S. ports, and no American ships could leave, except to trade at other U.S. ports. Jefferson hoped that stopping trade would prove so painful to France and Britain that they would agree to leave American ships alone.

The embargo, however, proved far more painful to Americans than to anyone in Europe. Some 55,000 seamen lost their jobs while their ships rotted at deserted docks. In New England, newspapers cursed Jefferson’s “Dambargo.” They also pointed out that embargo spelled backward reads “O-grab-me,” which made sense to all who were feeling its pinch.

Congress repealed the unpopular Embargo Act in 1809. American ships returned to the seas, and French and British warships continued to attack them.

### **12.7 Dilemma 3: What Should President Madison Do to Protect Sailors and Settlers?**

President James Madison, who took office in 1809, tried a new approach to protecting Americans at sea. He offered France and Britain a deal: If you agree to stop attacking American ships, the United States will stop trading with your enemy.

Napoleon promptly agreed to Madison’s deal. At the same time, he gave his navy secret orders to continue seizing American ships headed for British ports. Madison, who desperately wanted to believe Napoleon’s false promise, cut off all trade with Britain.

Meanwhile, the British continued seizing ships and impressing American sailors. Madison saw only one way to force Britain to respect American rights. He began to think about abandoning Washington’s policy of isolationism and going to war with Britain.

New Englanders and Federalists generally opposed going to war. Merchants in New England knew that war would mean a **blockade** of their ports by the British navy. They preferred to take their chances with the troubles at sea.

Many people in the South and to the west, however, favored war. Like all Americans, they resented Britain’s policy of impressing American sailors. They also accused the British of stirring up trouble among Native Americans in the states and territories to the northwest.

Trouble with the Indians was growing as settlers moved into the Ohio and Mississippi Valleys, pushing Indians off their lands. Two Shawnee Indians—a chief named Tecumseh and his brother, the Prophet—tried to fight back by uniting Native Americans up and down the Mississippi River into one great Indian nation. On November 7, 1811, Tecumseh and his warriors fought with a militia force led by Indiana governor William Henry Harrison in the Battle of Tippecanoe Creek. After the battle, Harrison’s men found British guns on the battlefield.

Americans were outraged. Several young congressmen from the South and West, including Henry Clay of Kentucky and John C. Calhoun of South Carolina, were so eager for war with Britain that they were nicknamed “War Hawks.” They

argued that the way to make the northwestern frontier safe for settlers was to drive the British out of Canada. Once that was done, Canada could be added to the United States.

Losses at sea, national pride, and a desire to make the frontier safe for settlement all contributed to the reasons for war. Still, Madison hesitated. Was the nation strong enough to launch the arrows of war? Or should he hold tightly to the olive branch of peace?

### **12.8 What Happened: Madison Launches the War of 1812**

Madison chose to abandon isolationism. At his request, Congress declared war on Britain on July 17, 1812. This was a very bold step for a nation with an army of 7,000 poorly trained men and a navy of only 16 ships.

***Battles on Land and Sea*** War Hawks were overjoyed when war was declared. They thought that conquering Canada was “a mere matter of marching.” They were wrong. In 1812, 1813, and again in 1814 American forces crossed into Canada, but each time they were turned back.

The British, too, found the going much rougher than they expected. On September 10, 1813, an American naval force under Oliver Hazard Perry defeated and captured a British fleet of six ships on Lake Erie. Perry’s victory enabled William Henry Harrison to push into upper Canada, where he defeated the British in a major battle. Chief Tecumseh, who was fighting on the side of the British, was killed in the fighting. But in December, the British drove the Americans back across the border.

By 1814, Napoleon had been defeated in Europe, and Britain was able to send 15,000 troops to Canada. American hopes of conquering Canada were at an end.

Meanwhile, in August 1814, another British army invaded Washington, D.C. The British burned several public buildings, including the Capitol and the White House. President Madison had to flee for his life.

Next the British attacked the port city of Baltimore. On September 13, an American lawyer named Francis Scott Key watched as the British bombarded Fort McHenry, which guarded the city’s harbor. The bombardment went on all night. When dawn broke, Key was thrilled to see that the American flag still waved over the fort. He captured his feelings in a poem that was later put to music as “The Star-Spangled Banner.”

***The Battle of New Orleans*** Two days before the unsuccessful attack on Baltimore, a British fleet had surrendered to American forces after the Battle of Lake Champlain in New York. In Britain, news of this defeat would greatly weaken the desire to continue the war. But the news took time to travel, and in the meantime British commanders in America launched another invasion. This time their target was New Orleans.

The city was defended by General Andrew Jackson and a rag-tag army of 7,000 militia, free African Americans, Indians, and pirates. On January 8, 1815, more than 7,500 British troops marched confidently into battle. Jackson’s troops met them with deadly fire, turning the field of battle into a “sea of blood.” Some 2,000 British soldiers were killed or wounded, compared with only about 20 Americans.

The Battle of New Orleans was the greatest American victory of the war. It was also totally unnecessary. Two weeks earlier, American and British diplomats meeting at Ghent, in Belgium, had signed a peace treaty ending the war. The news did not reach New Orleans until after the battle was fought.

***Results of the War*** Although both sides claimed victory, neither Britain nor the United States really won the War of 1812. And the Treaty of Ghent settled none of the issues that had led to the fighting. Instead, the problems of impressment and ship seizures faded away as peace settled over Europe. Still, the war had important effects.

First, Indian resistance in the Northwest weakened after Tecumseh’s death. Over time, most of the Native Americans who fought with Tecumseh would be driven out of the Ohio Valley.

Second, national pride in the United States surged. Many Americans considered the War of 1812 “the second war of independence.” By standing up to the British, they felt, the United States had truly become a sovereign nation.

Third, the war had political effects. The Federalists were badly damaged by their opposition to the war, and their party never recovered. Two of the war’s heroes—William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson—would later be elected president.

### **12.9 Dilemma 4: What Should President Monroe Do to Support the New Latin American Nations?**

James Monroe became president in 1817. After the excitement of the War of 1812, he was happy to return the nation to its policy of isolationism. Americans began to turn their attention away from Europe to events happening in their own backyard. From Mexico to the tip of South America, colonial peoples were rising up in revolt against Spain.

**Latin America's Revolutions** In Mexico, the revolt against Spanish rule was inspired by a priest named Miguel Hidalgo. On September 16, 1810, Hidalgo spoke to a crowd of poor Indians in the town of Dolores. "My children," Hidalgo cried, "when will you recover lands stolen from your ancestors three hundred years ago by the hated Spaniards? Down with bad government! Death to the Spaniards!" Hidalgo's speech, remembered today as the "Cry of Dolores," inspired a revolution that lasted ten years. In 1821, Mexico finally won its independence from Spain.

Two other leaders liberated South America. In 1810, a Venezuelan named Simón Bolívar launched a revolution in the north with the cry: "Spaniards! You will receive death at our hands! Americans! You will receive life!" José de San Martín, a revolutionary from Argentina, led the struggle for independence in the south. By the end of 1825, the last Spanish troops had been driven out of South America.

**The New Latin American Nations** Many Americans were excited by what Congressman Clay described as the "glorious spectacle of eighteen millions of people struggling to burst their chains and be free." The British also supported the revolutions, for their own reasons. Spain had not allowed other nations to trade with its colonies. Once freed from Spanish rule, the new Latin American nations were able to open their doors to foreign trade.

Other European leaders were not so pleased. Some even began to talk of helping Spain recover its lost colonies. In 1823, Britain asked the United States to join it in sending a message to these leaders, telling them to leave Latin America alone.

President James Monroe asked former presidents Thomas Jefferson and James Madison for advice. Should the United States do something to support the new Latin American nations? If so, what?

### 12.10 What Happened: The U.S. Issues the Monroe Doctrine

Both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison liked the idea of joining with Britain to send a warning to the nations of Europe. Jefferson wrote to Monroe, "Our first and fundamental maxim [principle] should be, never entangle ourselves in the broils [fights] of Europe. Our second, never to suffer Europe to meddle with...America, North and South."

President Monroe's **secretary of state**, John Quincy Adams, agreed with Jefferson's principles. But he insisted that "it would be more candid [honest], as well as more dignified," for the United States to speak boldly for itself. Though never a bold man himself, Monroe agreed.

In 1823, President Monroe made a speech to Congress announcing a policy that became known as the **Monroe Doctrine**. Monroe stated that the nations of North and South America were "not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers." The United States, he said, would view efforts by Europeans to take over "any portion of this hemisphere as dangerous to our peace and safety."

Europeans denounced Monroe's message as arrogant. "By what right," asked a French newspaper, did the United States presume to tell other nations what they could do in "the two Americas"?

Americans, however, cheered Monroe's message. It made them proud to see the United States stand up for the freedom-loving people of Latin America. If Europeans "attempt to control the destinies of South America," boasted a Boston newspaper, "they will find...an eagle in their way."

In the years ahead, the Monroe Doctrine joined isolationism as a basic principle of U.S. foreign policy. The doctrine asserted that the United States would not accept European interference in American affairs. It also contained another, hidden message. By its very boldness, the Monroe Doctrine told the world that the United States was no longer a weak collection of quarreling states. It had become a strong and confident nation, a nation to be respected by the world.

### 12.11 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about the birth of foreign policy in the United States. You used a spectrum to chart the range of U.S. foreign policy from isolationism to involvement.

Our first president, George Washington, knew that the young United States was not prepared for war. He established a policy of isolationism that stated America would avoid alliances with other countries. Each president following Washington faced new dilemmas that required decisions about what was best for America.

During the presidency of John Adams, the dilemma involved French attacks on American ships. Adams followed Washington's policy of isolationism and kept America at peace.

President Thomas Jefferson also faced threats at sea. When peace talks failed, he declared an embargo on American ports. It, too, was unsuccessful. President James Madison then tried offering a trade deal to both France and Britain. But the attacks at sea continued. Madison finally abandoned isolationism and declared war on Britain in 1812. The War of 1812 resulted in a peace treaty with Britain.

President Monroe's dilemma was whether or not to support the new Latin American states. Monroe issued a policy called the Monroe Doctrine. In it, he warned the nations of Europe to leave the Americas alone. The

Monroe Doctrine established the United States as a strong and confident nation, willing to stand up for its own freedom and that of others. In the next chapter, you will learn how the United States developed a stronger national identity in the first half of the 19th century.