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The Founding Fathers, Conservatism, and American Foreign Policy

THOSE whose habit it is to observe intellectual styles have long been aware of the peculiar influence which the cluster of attitudes known as historicism has exercised over the mind of the student of man's past. Indeed, the belief that the flow of the historical process is fundamentally beyond man's control, that ethical systems and political philosophies are mere expressions of or rationalizations for arcane psychological drives or underlying social forces, and that the sole focus for the study of the human condition should be what is historically or empirically knowable, have seemed to many to constitute the very *weltanshauung* of historiography, the framework which defines the boundaries of the historian's craft. Fashions change, however, in historiography as elsewhere; and while there is no definite sign as yet that the historian-historicism romance is about to end in divorce, there is some evidence that the ardors of youth are cooling, and that the eye of the American historian is wandering off in less constricting directions. Students of the nation's past now occasionally concede the truth of the late Richard Weaver's dictum that ideas have consequences, and knowledge that the political and social theories which have animated the American experience are worth attention, both for their own sake and because of the impact which ideas have had upon the course of American history.

A number of writers, for example, have in recent years called attention to the considerable significance of ideas in the emergence of a genuinely-American nationalism. Lacking the support of most of those elements usually thought to constitute the essence of nationhood, such as a controlling set of religious convictions, an historically-defined territory, and a specifically differentiating group of cultural antecedents, America, it is argued, instead has been united principally through ideological commitment. "In its very origin as a nation," Hans Kohn has written, "the United States was the embodiment of an idea." In Kohn's view, ideas and "free human decisions" have exercised far more influence upon the development and growth of the American nation than the "natural and subconscious forces" which have fashioned the destinies of other peoples.[1]

Similarly, students of United States foreign policy now typically assign great importance to intellectual attitudes and political ideas in their analyses of the forces which have shaped the American tradition in international policies.[2] Few, in fact, would challenge the assertion that the nation's earliest vision of itself had a significant impact upon our foreign policy then, and moreover may continue to affect our behavior now; indeed, for a time there appeared to be general agreement that from

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1. Kohn, *American Nationalism: An Interpretive Essay* (New York: Collier Books, 1961), p. 25. See in general pp. 15-48. Also illuminating in this connection is Yehoshua Arieli, *Individualism and Nationalism in American Ideology* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1964).
2. See, for example, Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961); Arnold Wolfers and Laurence W. Martin (eds.), *The Anglo-American Tradition in Foreign Affairs* (New Haven Conn.: Yale University Press, 1956); Paul A. Varg, *Foreign Policies of the Founding Fathers* (East Lansing, Mich.: Michigan State University Press, 1963); Arthur A. Ekirch, Jr., *Ideas, Ideals, and American Diplomacy* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1966).

the early period of the national history down at least to the beginning of this century our statesmen acted with wisdom and effectiveness as they sought to promote national aims and interests in an often-hostile international environment. This effectiveness in practice, moreover, was normally attributed to soundness of thought: It was, so the argument ran, precisely because of their perceptive understanding of the behavior of men and nations that our statesmen were able so readily to fashion foreign policies which served the commonweal.

THERE shortly developed, however, an often-bitter disagreement among scholars concerning the purposes and ideals which motivated the foreign policies of the Founding Fathers, and thus too disagreement over the essential nature of the policies themselves. The sharpness of the debate was in no way reduced by the near-unanimity which existed on the matter of the effectiveness of our early foreign policy; indeed, perhaps this very fact contributed to its intensity. The polarities of opinion are revealed in particularly acute form in the literature of the much-discussed idealist-realist controversy of the 1950's.[3]

Partisans of both camps agreed that the principles of a lost "golden age" of American foreign policy need to be rediscovered and applied to the problems of the present if the United States is to survive the contemporary crisis of world politics, but there agreement ended. The idealists, on the one hand, asserted that American foreign policy from the very birth of the republic has embodied a diplomatic tradition and a pattern of thinking about interstate relations essentially different from the European experience in diplomacy; in particular, they argued, American statesmen have consistently acted in terms of ethical principle and uniformly repudiated the base designs of "power politics." The realists, on the other hand, argued that at the foundation of the Framers' reflections about international relations was tough-minded understanding of the problems of the human condition and an insistence on the primacy of the "national interest" and national security over moral principle which was in the finest tradition of European statecraft.

The controversy, in short, has centered on opposing interpretations of the historical relationship between principle and self-interest in American foreign policy, and on the relevance of that historical relationship for the present and future. In large measure, the controversy represented a debate over the national myth, for protagonists on both sides were really arguing over the extent to which Americans are like the rest of men, and over the significance of any differences (or samenesses) for our past successes and present difficulties in international affairs.

The realist-idealist debate, of course, has been superseded by a new controversy. During the middle and late 1960's the entire American tradition in foreign policy became increasingly subject to criticism from the so-called revisionist historians, many of whom are associated with the New Left. Members of this school, if it can be termed such, commonly argue that from the beginning the purposes of American foreign policy have been identical with those said to have inspired classical European imperialism: The United States (or, more properly, the self-serving elite which controls the nation's political structure) has always sought to dominate weaker peoples and nations in order to enhance its own power, especially its economic power. The "globalism" of the Johnson years, from this perspective, is not the aberration which it has appeared to many, but a logical culmination of nearly two centuries of national policy.[4] With this view idealists and realists alike, not to mention most establishment liberals, have generally taken issue; but in any event, it is clear that at present the very foundations of American foreign policy are under serious attack, and when we ex-

3. The literature of this controversy is of course extensive and can only be representatively cited here. For the hard-core "realist" position see the many writings of Hans J. Morgenthau, especially *Scientific Man and Power Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), and *In Defense of the National Interest* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1951); for more moderate statements of the same general view see George F. Kennan, *American Diplomacy 1900-1951* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), and Robert E. Osgood, *Ideals and Self-Interest in America's Foreign Relations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953). For the "idealist" reply see Frank Tannenbaum, *The American Tradition in Foreign Policy* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), and Thomas I. Cook and Malcolm Moos, *Power Through Purpose* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1954).

4. For an early example of the argument, see William Appleman Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1959).

amine the criticism carefully, we find that it is closely related to a steadily-growing confusion concerning the very origins and meanings of the American tradition in foreign affairs itself. Not only is the academy – and the nation – badly divided over the goals and purposes appropriate for United States foreign policy in the present; it is increasingly uncertain as well about the extent to which the Founding Fathers and their successors were isolationist or internationalist, continentalist or globalist, in the past.

I.

CONSERVATIVE writers have for a variety of reasons not participated to any great extent in the debate within the academy over the meaning of the early American tradition in international politics, but there is no reason to wonder about the location of their sympathies in any case; it has always been *de rigueur* among conservatives to praise the prescient wisdom and farsighted statesmanship of the Founding Fathers, and rare is the man of the Right who would challenge Jefferson's judgment that the Framers, considered collectively, constituted "an assembly of demigods." To be sure, a bit of discussion might produce agreement that the conservative credentials of at least some of the Framers are open to question. Most conservatives, for example, would not challenge the assertion that Thomas Paine's speculations on the nature of the best regime more frequently resemble those of the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment than the principled realism of Edmund Burke; some might even concede that the philosophy of Jefferson himself, however praiseworthy his commitment to limited government, was heavily influenced by hedonist and utopian ideas, and thus that his place in the conservative tradition of political thought is open to some question. Such concessions as these, however, are of relatively minor significance, and merely point up the danger involved in speaking facilely of *the* thought of a large group of men, ignoring the differences both of principle and nuance inevitably to be found among them. In the main, conservatives display little sympathy for the critics of the nation's founders, and it matters not at all whether that criticism is directed at their political thought or their acts of state.

Thomas Paine

". . . his speculations on the nature of the best regime more resemble those of the philosophies of the Enlightenment than the principled realism of Edmund Burke."

A number of students of American political thought, however, including several who are generally classified as men of the Right themselves, have raised more fundamental challenges to the conservative credentials of the Founding Fathers, and, strangely enough, the more widely-read conservative writers have rarely attempted to deal with their arguments directly. Perhaps most familiar of these is the argument of Professor Louis Hartz (to be sure no friend of conservatism) that the entire American political tradition is liberal in its very essence; the absence in seventeenth-century America of "the feudal and clerical oppressions of the Old World," he asserts, made the United States inhospitable ground for political speculation which placed a high value on tradition, order, and virtue, and as a consequence our political thought came to be shaped almost entirely by the ideal of "atomistic social freedom" which he identifies with John Locke.[5]

More to the point, however, may be the

5. See Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, & Co., 1955) *et passim*, but especially Chap. i.

reflections of Martin Diamond (as a student of Leo Strauss, Diamond can be pardoned for looking at the "settled truths" of our political traditions from an uncommon perspective), who suggests after a close reading of *The Federalist* that the Framers either devoted little thought to the fundamental purposes of politics, or accepted a view of those purposes significantly influenced by the utilitarian hedonism of Hobbes and Locke.[6] Strauss himself, of course, develops this point of view more completely, and asserts rather unqualifiedly that all of modern political thought, including both the American tradition and much of what in the contemporary period goes by the name of conservatism, actually is rooted in the tradition of political philosophy which originated with Machiavelli and Hobbes and which stands in lasting antithesis to the tradition of "classic natural right."[7] While these judgments may appear excessive, many other scholars with a variety of orientations have remarked at length upon the general impact of Enlightenment thought on the American tradition in its formative stages.

A careful analysis of these arguments, let it be said, is beyond the scope of this essay. Quite obviously, the conservative credentials of the Founding Fathers or the position of American thought in the Western tradition of political philosophy cannot be assessed until first the meaning and nature of conservatism itself have been carefully defined; it is clear, for example, that conservatives with a "libertarian" orientation will regard the influence of Lockean notions of natural right (if it could be established that the Framers' approach to the question of what is right by nature was more modern than classical) with somewhat less anxiety than the spiritual heirs of Edmund Burke. Moreover, the American heirs of Burke are by no means reluctant to acknowledge the genius of the Framers as institution builders of the first rank; and most will readily concede that only rarely before in history have there existed political structures better designed than the constitutional system of 1788 to enforce a proper balance between freedom and order and thus better calculated to sanction the free development of the human personality, surely two of the more important concerns of every "traditionalist."

It is doubtless at least partially for this reason that men of the Right have historically been unwilling to examine the political thought of the Framers too critically; one of the dominant concerns of conservatism of every variety in the present period is the preservation of what is left of the institutional system of 1788, and we are reluctant to offer aid and comfort to those outside the conservative tradition who, by attacking the motives and values of the Founding Fathers, seek to justify radical changes in the structure of the nation's political order. Finally, it is clear that most of the more far-ranging reevaluations of American political thought are rather wide of the mark. A careful reading of the Framers makes it clear that a great variety of influences, classical and medieval as well as modern, shaped their approach to the lasting questions of politics, and the work necessary to sift these influences and especially to determine their relative importance has been barely begun.

Nevertheless, it does not seem possible to doubt that modern and particularly Enlightenment thought did exercise a significant influence on the Framers' political outlook, and particularly on their view of the ultimate possibilities for essentially improving the "human condition," at least in America; and the implications of that fact ought to receive more attention from conservatives than has thus far been the case. Moreover, careful analysis of the Framers' thinking concerning the nature of international relations, and in particular their views on the future role of the United States in world affairs and the future evolution of international political society, suggests that similar influences were at work here as well. It is with this area that the remainder of this essay is concerned.

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6. Diamond, "Democracy and *The Federalist*: A Reconsideration of the Framers' Intent," *American Political Science Review*, LIII (March, 1959), pp. 52-68.

7. See his *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), and, for a brief statement, the preface to *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1958). Actually, Strauss does not appear overly concerned, from a philosophic point of view at least, with the conservative-liberal encounter, and in any event tends to define conservatism itself rather narrowly: He sees it as a mode of thinking about politics which identifies the good with the ancestral or traditional, and thus as a species of "conventionalism," in opposition to which the tradition of classic natural right arose originally.

II.

EVEN a cursory reading of the contemporary literature of American foreign policy yields the striking conclusion that a consensus has emerged concerning a view once exclusively identified with the American Right: Condemnations of the "utopian interventionism" and "naive internationalism" said to be characteristic of America's recent diplomacy are now commonplace, and liberals and moderates alike surpass one another in deprecating the failures of design and execution which marred the international policies of Wilson and F. D. R.[8] The terms "interventionism," "internationalism," and "globalism" are, of course, employed rather indiscriminately; they are applied, often simultaneously and without the necessary distinctions, to general patterns of international behavior and to specific policies judged, frequently in retrospect, to have been ill-advised, as well as to the underlying attitudes and ideas said to have issued in such policies. But it is the latter in particular which are singled out with growing frequency for analysis, as part of the new attention devoted of late to the place of ideas and concepts in policy formation. Thus, recent critics fulminate against the tendency of American statesmen to define the purposes of diplomacy essentially in moral rather than in political terms, to believe that discerning American policies can alter the traditional patterns of interstate relations, and to suppose that it is possible and desirable to recast the political systems of the world in the Anglo-Saxon parliamentary mold and thus to banish force from international history. These critics, as previously suggested, usually assert that it is only in the twentieth century that American policy has fallen under the sway of such innocent convictions, and frequently their argument is accompanied by a call for a return to the realism of the past, and especially to that of the Founding Fathers.

A judicious analysis of the writings of the nation's earliest statesmen, however, suggests that many of the innocent and millenarist notions usually associated with Wilson and F. D. R. originate at an early point in the nation's history, during the revolutionary period and beyond, and hence do not at all constitute a mere twentieth-century aberration. If correct, this argument not only implies that the influence of the early period upon the nation's subsequent diplomatic tradition needs to be carefully reevaluated, but also — and more importantly — that the tendency towards an uncritical and utopian internationalism in foreign policy is deeply embedded in the American political consciousness and, therefore, that the task of "getting America back on the track" in international politics is apt to prove considerably more difficult than is commonly assumed. The argument therefore must be developed at some length.

IT must be reiterated that only in recent decades have scholars begun to trace with care the origins and development of many traditional "American" notions about foreign policy and interstate relations, and it was not until the pioneering studies of Max Savelle, Felix Gilbert, and others, that the English origins of many of the ideas once thought to be characteristically and uniquely our own began to be appreciated.[9] In any event, the historical record is beginning to emerge with clarity.

The period during which the American colonies were established was one of international tension and conflict; hence, it is not surprising that the expatriate Englishmen developed firm views on international issues, and that these bore strong resemblance to those of their homeland brethren. Gilbert has noted that the gradual democratization of the English political system created both a tradition of public concern with policy issues, and pressure on the national leadership to seek at least a modicum of popular support for policy decisions; hence, important national problems were frequently analyzed both in the press and in widely-distributed tracts and pamphlets.[10] The channels of communication between the European continent and the New World were never totally closed after the settlement of America, and the colonists were normally kept appraised of both

8. It must be noted of course that the spirit which animates the new "realism" of the moderate Left is profoundly different from that of the conservative criticism of Wilson and F. D. R., a point which I hope to make at length in a succeeding essay. Let it suffice here to observe that there is no evidence that political wisdom is any more a characteristic of the members of the contemporary liberal establishment than it was of their predecessors.

9. See especially Gilbert, *op. cit.*, and Savelle, *The Origins of American Diplomacy* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1967).

10. Gilbert, *op. cit.*, pp. 19 ff.

the intellectual and the policy conflicts arising out of the "mercantilistic ideas and dynastic ambitions" of the European diplomatists.[11] Debate and discussion concerning the merits of "isolationism," the importance of the European balance of power, and the necessities involved in formulating a national economic policy, therefore, had become part of the American political tradition long before the issues assumed a particular local significance.

In similar fashion many of the ideological convictions of the Enlightenment passed into the American consciousness, infusing into the intellectual milieu of the time something of the confident belief of the *philosophes* in the imminence of a golden age of peace and harmony, and disseminating as well their expectation that economic relations would eventually replace political relations as the characteristic form of social intercourse among men and nations.[12] It was during the Enlightenment also that the notion of "national interest" emerged, eventually to replace earlier constructs of dynastic interest and "reason of state"; the latter, of course, were felt to be increasingly anachronistic in an age of broadening popular concern with and participation in the political process. Characteristic Enlightenment themes moreover included a stress on the need to discover the mechanical laws thought to lie at the root of politics, and, somewhat paradoxically, an emphasis on the role of reason in the settlement of man's social and political conflicts.[13] All of these influences were vital forces in the formation of the American political mind.

BUT there was much, in addition, in the actual experience of the colonies which stimulated them to develop their own attitudes toward foreign policy and international relations. From the earliest days of settlement in the Western Hemisphere, the colonies engaged in direct dealings with their neighbors, both sister-colonies and non-English neighbors such as the Dutch and French; they thus acquired experience in "international relations," and gradually developed characteristic patterns of thinking and acting with respect to these relations. To such seventeenth-century experiences can be traced the origin of American commercial interests, the growing awareness of the relevance of the European power-balance to the international position of the colonies, and the development of such traditional American "principles" as the "freedom of the seas," the "pacific settlement of disputes," and the "doctrine of nonintervention." Savelle suggests that these ideas were already old by the time of the Revolution, having developed out of the Old World experience and the particular needs and interests to which the colonists themselves responded. Recent scholarship, finally, has stressed both the economic motives which lay behind much of the colonies' international posturing from the very beginning,[14] and the role which partisan considerations played in shaping foreign policy attitudes, particularly as a genuinely-autonomous political order emerged in the New World in the second half of the eighteenth century.[15]

Most importantly, however, colonial thought very early came to be marked by an intense belief in the distinctive quality of the social order which had been established in the New World, and by a conviction that America had been selected by Providence Herself to make a profound contribution to the amelioration of the human condition. To be sure, the Founders were not mistaken in perceiving that there were significant contrasts to be drawn between the Old World and the New: Class distinctions in the colonies were less important, the gulf between rich and poor more narrow, and social mobility more possible and more obvious. But whatever the realities which lay concealed behind the rhetoric, it is clear that at the very foundation

11. Savelle, *The Colonial Origins of American Thought* (Princeton, N. J.: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1964), pp. 86 ff.

12. See the discussion in Gilbert, "The 'New Diplomacy' of the Eighteenth Century," *World Politics*, IV (October, 1951), pp. 1-38.

13. For general analyses of the *weltanschauung* of the Enlightenment, see Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1932); Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); and Louis I. Bredvold, *The Brave New World of the Enlightenment* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: The University of Michigan Press, 1961).

14. Varg, *op. cit.*, especially Chaps. i-iii, discusses succinctly the emergence of the colonists' views concerning their future role in international trade.

15. See, for example, Alexander De Conde, *Entangling Alliance: Politics and Diplomacy under George Washington* (Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1954).

of the colonial *weltanschauung* rested a self-conscious, often highly-articulated image of two different worlds: One was dominated by courts and kings, given to the subordination of liberty and the rights of the person to the interests of the few, and to the conduct of foreign affairs according to the base dictates of expediency; the other, inspired by the principles of republican virtue, dedicated to individual self-fulfillment and the protection of personal liberty, and to the strict observance of settled moral principles in human relations. The United States is not as other nations are: both our goals and our practices serve to distinguish us sharply from other peoples with whom we come into contact in world affairs, for we have created on these shores a new kind of political community, essentially moral in character and untainted by the imperfections and deficiences of the old.[16] "In this legend," Cushing Strout has written, "America is the land of the Future, where innocent men belong to a society of virtuous simplicity, enjoying liberty, equality, and happiness; Europe is the bankrupt Past, where fallen men wander without hope in a dark labyrinth, degraded by tyranny, injustice and vice."[17] These convictions were expressed in a great variety of ways, under infinitely variegated circumstances, by poets, divines, publicists and statesmen; but whatever the particular formulation, few caught up in its spirit would have quarreled with Herman Melville's mid-nineteenth century assertion that "God has predestined, mankind expects, great things from our race; and great things we feel in our souls."[18] Taken by themselves, of course, such statements reveal much about the political outlook of early America and are deserving of further study from that perspective alone. But what is more important for our present purposes is that the early Americans were also persuaded that there was a significance attached to the settling of the United States that far transcended the nation's borders. The Founders, in fact, directly linked their early vision of America's future to a set of expectations concerning the future of other nations and peoples as well: precisely because America was a new kind of political society, they believed, she was to become the model society for the universe, and ultimately — in some unspecified way — would be the means for mankind's political redemption, the vehicle for the realization throughout the world of the natural rights of man.

16. As two recent commentators on American foreign policy have expressed it, the colonists and their successors believed that their "role was not really political. Though it was political in form, it was understood to be a moral role. We were participants in a great moral experiment, the creation of a new kind of political community." Edmund A. Stillman and William Pfaff, *Power and Impotence: The Failure of America's Foreign Policy*, (New York: Random House, 1966), pp. 16-17.

17. Strout, *The American Image of the Old World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 19.

18. The quotation is from *White-Jacket: or the World in a Man-of-War* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), p. 181. For a general survey of the development of the idea of mission in American history, see Edward McNall Burns, *The American Idea of Mission: Concepts of National Purpose and Destiny* (New Brunswick, N. J.: Rutgers University Press, 1957).

Benjamin Franklin

"The cause of America is 'the cause of all mankind . . . assigned us by Providence'."

THUS we find Benjamin Franklin, heralded in a widely-praised study as preeminently an exponent of political realism,[19] observing that the cause of America

19. Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1954).

is "the cause of all mankind . . . assigned us by Providence."[20] Thomas Paine frequently expressed similar views. Although far from a systematic or consistent political thinker, he never wavered in his insistence that only republican governments had a moral right to exist, and he frequently expressed his belief in the need for "a general revolution in the principle and construction of governments."[21] If the world's political institutions could be reformed, he believed, and monarchies and other authoritarian political systems replaced by governments whose authority rested on the will of the people, war could be eliminated from human affairs.[22] Thus, he saw the American Revolution, "the most virtuous and illustrious revolution that ever graced the history of mankind," as a proper harbinger of a new world order, in which the "spirit of jealousy and ferocity" which had in the past animated the policies of nations would give way to "the dictates of reason, interest and humanity,"[23] and force no longer would be the arbiter of international quarrels. America, he believed, had it in her power "to begin the world over again," and he expressed the hope that his adopted homeland would prove to be "*the Mother Church* of government."[24]

But it was Thomas Jefferson, widely celebrated in American historiography for his generous optimism concerning human nature, who was perhaps most expansive of all in his views concerning the international significance of the American Revolution: "While we are securing the rights of ourselves and our posterity," he wrote, "we are pointing out the way to struggling nations who wish, like us, to emerge from their tyrannies also."[25] In an address to the citizens of Washington in his final days in the presidency, he wrote even more grandiloquently:

> *The station which we occupy among the nations of the earth is honorable, but awful. Trusted with the destinies of this solitary republic of the world, the only monument of human rights, and the sole depository of the sacred fire of freedom and self-government, from hence it is to be lighted up in other regions of the earth, if other regions of the earth shall ever become susceptible of its benign influence. All mankind ought then, with us, to rejoice in its prosperous, and sympathize in its adverse fortunes, as involving everything dear to man.*[26]

Like Paine, Jefferson frequently asserted that war was fundamentally caused by failures of political organization: When Old World tyrannies had been superseded by popular governments on the American model, reason and self-interest soundly calculated would govern relations among nations and a new era in world affairs would begin.

However, even those of the Founding Fathers with a reputation for realism and toughmindedness in matters political—those generally considered to be conservatives, if you will—were no more able than Paine and Jefferson to avoid the temptation to attach transcendent significance to the birth of the American nation. "I always consider the settlement of America with reverence and wonder," John Adams wrote in a draft of an early public address, "as the opening of a grand scene and design in Providence for the illumination of the ignorant, and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth."[27] During the Revolution, he observed approvingly in a letter to Thomas Diggs that Americans had come to accept a very special view of their nation's destiny:

> *The Americans at this day have higher notions of themselves than ever. They think they have gone*

20. Franklin to Samuel Cooper, May 1, 1777, in Francis Wharton, *Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* (6 Vols.; Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1889), II, p. 313.

21. Philip S. Foner (ed.), *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine* (2 Vols.; New York: The Citadel Press, 1945), I, p. 341.

22. See, for example, *ibid.*, p. 9, pp. 342-43, p. 449.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 123, p. 397.

24. *Ibid.*, p. 45, and II, p. 1350.

25. Jefferson to William Hunter, March 11, 1790, Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert E. Bergh (eds.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (20 Vols.; Washington, D. C.: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903), VI, p. 35.

26. H. A. Washington (ed.), *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (9 Vols.; Washington, D. C.: Taylor and Maury, 1853-54), VIII, pp. 157-58.

27. Draft of speech for local legal society, February 21, 1765, Charles Francis Adams (ed.), *The Life and Works of John Adams* (10 Vols.; Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1851), I, p. 66.

through the greatest revolution that ever took place among men; that this revolution is as much for the generality of mankind in Europe as for their own. They think they should act a base and perfidious part toward the world in general if they were to go back; that they should manifestly counteract the designs of Providence, as well as betray themselves, their posterity, and mankind.[28]

His son fully agreed. "The general history of mankind, for the last three thousand years," wrote John Quincy Adams in terms indistinguishable from those used by his predecessors, "demonstrates beyond all contradiction the progressive improvement of the condition of man, by means of the establishment of principles of International Law, tending to social benevolence and humanity."[29] "Every system established upon a condition of things essentially transient and temporary," he wrote in a set of diplomatic instructions to Albert Gallatin and Richard Rush, "must be accommodated to the changes produced by time"; on that basis he predicted the end of colonialism, the demise of unfair restrictions upon commercial intercourse, and the final passing of monarchy from the world political scene.[30] Even Alexander Hamilton, whose thought of all the Framers is closest to the great tradition of European statecraft and the Machiavellian tradition of *Realpolitik*, often expressed his conviction that America's cause was also "the cause of virtue and mankind."[31] "The world has its eye upon America," he wrote in an essay published in 1784. "The noble struggle we have made in the cause of liberty has occasioned a kind of revolution in human sentiment. The influence of our example has penetrated the gloomy regions of despotism, and has pointed the way to enquiries which may shake it to its deepest foundations."[32]

To be sure, the elder Adams and Hamilton were far from convinced that the end of monarchy and the rise of democratic political systems throughout the world would necessarily usher in an era of international harmony; both remained too much aware of the pervasive impact of human frailty to perceive that kind of significance in the American Revolution. Even Paine and Jefferson, as will be noted below, did not urge the United States herself to undertake the transformation of the political universe through direct action in the foreign policy arena. But enough has been said, nevertheless, to show that a very expansive view of the nature and destiny of the American republic pervades the thought of the Founding Fathers, and it seems clear that insufficient attention has been paid to the influence of this view on the development of the nation's characteristic mode of thinking about international relations.

Alexander Hamilton

". . . whose thought of all the Framers is closest to the great tradition of European statecraft."

28. Wharton, *op. cit.*, III, p. 677.

29. National Archives, Records of the Department of State, *Diplomatic Instructions; All Countries*, X, p. 148, quoted in George Lipsky, *John Quincy Adams: His Theory and Ideas* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1950), p. 279.

30. July 28, 1818, Worthington C. Ford (ed.), *Writings of John Quincy Adams* (7 Vols.; New York: The Macmillan Co., 1913-17), VI, p. 396.

31. The quote is from an early pamphlet; see Henry Cabot Lodge (ed.), *The Works of Alexander Hamilton* (12 Vols.; New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), I, p. 52.

32. *Ibid.*, IV., p. 289. See, similarly, his letter to George Washington, April 14, 1794, *ibid.*, V, p. 105, and Hamilton to Rufus King, October 2, 1798, *ibid.*, X, p. 321.

III.

WHEN the nation's early statesmen turned to the concrete problems of foreign policy, of course, they became absorbed with concerns far more immediate than transcendent visions of the world's future. Like that of all nations, the foreign policy of the United States has always displayed a zealous regard for the security of the state and related interests. Many writers, in fact, have argued that security interests have been the main preoccupation of American foreign policy since the nation's earliest days; in any event, an examination of the historical literature reveals that the nation's leadership was able to relate to a concern for security virtually all of the international and many of the domestic policies undertaken during the early period: the outcome of the various colonial wars, the independence movement, the drive to absorb Canada and Nova Scotia, the insistence on the Mississippi as the nation's western boundary, the continuing obsession with the Floridas, the effort to strengthen the national government after the Revolution, the Monroe Doctrine, and the movement west after 1830.[33] Indeed, it is beyond argument that the statesmen of the new republic exhibited a truly remarkable penchant for viewing national security and its requirements in ever-expanding terms; and security interests which were originally moderate in scope and focused on concrete threats to national self-preservation and survival were progressively redefined until they encompassed a demand for permanent security against all future contingencies.

Some of the reasons for the progressive expansion of early American security interests are not difficult to identify. Land, as Charles A. Beard once noted, "forms the material basis of every nation."[34] The location and configuration of a nation's territory, as well as the resources contained within it, are vitally related to the state's survivability, and hence statesmen of necessity must be concerned with the security of national boundaries and with the existence of friendly or unfriendly powers in contiguous or neighboring areas. In the case of the United States, such concerns were immediate and pressing, since real and potential challenges to the nation's territorial integrity and political independence occurred along every boundary throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries.[35] But the explanation for the progressive enlargement of American security interests cannot be found solely in the practical exigencies facing our early statesmen. Equally important was the way in which the nation's founders both defined security itself, and interpreted the relationship between America's security and the future of the international community.

Here a brief aside is in order. Students of international politics, who generally are explicit in identifying the protection and promotion of security interests as among the cardinal purposes of national policy, appear to assume that the functional significance of the term "security" is reasonably clear and recognizable, and thus that "security" is an unambiguous standard for the articulation and analysis of national objectives and policies. It is often assumed as well that policies directed toward the protection of security interests will under all but the most extreme circumstances be much more limited in compass and direction than policies with other motivations, e.g., than those inspired by universalist ideologies. Both assumptions rest on an incomplete analysis of the meaning of "national security" as an objective of foreign policy. The term "security," in fact, can and does have a number of specific meanings and is normally employed as shorthand for a variety of more concrete interests, all of which have specific implications for foreign policy. Depending on whether it is the nation's population, territory, political independence, or way of life for which security is being sought, therefore, the specific policy pursued will vary greatly; the preservation of a nation's political independence, for example, might require the surrender of territory, and the preservation of life might require giving up both territory and independence. In particular, if a nation seeks security for its culture,

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33. For an analysis of early colonial concern with the security problem, see Savelle, *Colonial Origins*, pp. 87 ff.

34. Beard, *The Idea of National Interest* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1934), p. 50.

35. The literature treating the international history of the period contains ample evidence of this point. For surveys of some of the foreign policy problems, security and otherwise, which the new nation confronted, see A. B. Darling, *Our Rising Empire* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940), and R. W. van Alstyne, *American Diplomacy in Action* (Stanford University, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1944), Part I.

its political tradition, or its values and national ideals, the policies undertaken in the name of security may prove to be very broad indeed in scope and direction, especially if these ideals and values themselves have far-reaching implications.[36]

Once again, a careful reading of the literature of early American history shows that security for the Founding Fathers was largely defined in terms of principles and values; America for them was never a mere segment of territory or an aggregation of people, but the bearer of a new moral order, the embodiment of the natural rights of man. And those principles were held to possess universal validity and, at least ultimately, universal applicability as well. In this way the security of the United States was linked, implicitly if not explicitly, with the security of other nations and peoples, and theirs with that of the United States; if the security sought as the goal of national policy is security for a set of universally-valid principles, it is not difficult for the architects of policy to conclude that the quest for security involves far more than a quest for the realization and preservation of those principles within one's own territory. Indeed, the quest for security quite logically tends to become a quest for the realization of those values in the world at large, and in theory at least security policy becomes indistinguishable from the universal moral crusade. Thus, although it can readily be conceded that self-preservation and security were major foreign policy goals during the early period of American history, the preservation sought was "the preservation of a body whose soul remained dedicated to the principles of the Declaration of Independence"[37] and not the more narrow objectives frequently associated with security policies.

SEVERAL of the Founders linked American security with the future of other nations in another way as well. Jefferson, Paine, and even to a degree the second Adams believed that liberty was indivisible; not only would the success of the American enterprise have a profound impact upon the future of the rest of mankind, but, conversely, the failure of freedom abroad was certain to result ultimately in the collapse of the American republic. Jefferson, thus, was speaking for many of the early Americans when he said:

> *I look with great anxiety for the firm establishment of the new government in France, being perfectly convinced that if it takes place there, it will spread sooner or later all over Europe. On the contrary a check there would retard the revival of liberty in other countries. I consider the establishment and success of their government as necessary to stay up our own, and to prevent it from falling back to that kind of Half-way house, the English constitution.*[38]

American security, in this view, requires a compatible international environment; in the last analysis this nation would not be secure until surrounded by a world of republican states.[39]

It was this very broad interpretation of security and its requirements which led the United States to act very vigorously in advancing her interests, territorial and otherwise, during the early period, and to the gradual development of what A. K. Weinberg called "a feeling of preordained right to ideal security."[40] Thus, it was not only a messianic interpretation of America's destiny which inspired an expansive view of the purposes of foreign policy in the era of the Founding Fathers, but a magnified view of national security as well. Rather than restraining the exuberance introduced into the nation's earliest articulation of international aims and objectives, the security doctrine of the Framers reinforced it.

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36. To be sure, even when it is the preservation of the nation's territorial integrity that is the policy goal, the resulting undertakings may be far from limited in scope, as the phenomenon of "self-defensive expansionism" illustrates: States may seek limited territorial acquisitions, such as naval and air bases, in order to better protect the national homeland; these new acquisitions, in turn, must therefore be protected, perhaps through further expansion, thus setting in motion an imperialist drive which, logically at least, need not stop short of world domination.

37. The phrase is used by Harry Jaffa in describing Lincoln's view of national purpose; see *Equality and Liberty* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 173.

38. Jefferson to George Mason, February 4, 1791, Paul L. Ford (ed.), *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (12 Vols.; New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-1905), VI, pp. 185-86.

39. Robert W. Tucker in *Nation or Empire* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1968), argues that the tendency to view America's survival as inextricably linked to the development of a compatible international environment constitutes the core of the nation's traditional security doctrine.

IV.

WHAT, then, it may be asked, of the doctrine of isolationism, fabled in our historiography as the dominant theme of early American diplomatic history? If the Founding Fathers were accustomed to defining the purposes of American policy in messianic and indeed in utopian terms, how were they able to manipulate so masterfully the power factors inherent in the international situation of the time, expelling the European powers from the continent and securing and expanding America's territorial domain? Was this not "political realism" in the finest tradition of continual statecraft?

It was, of course, precisely that. The relevant fact is that the isolationist impulse of America's early statecraft was in large part motivated by a prudent awareness of the new nation's relative military and political weakness. The ultimate destiny of the United States could not be realized if the nation were destroyed in the course of involvement in the conflicts of Europe, and the Framers wisely chose to concentrate upon the problems involved in forging political independence, guaranteeing the nation's boundaries, stimulating national growth and exploiting our fortuitous global position for economic and political advantage. Many of the early Americans, including Paine and Jefferson, were subject as well to occasional pessimism concerning the short-run prospects for mankind's political and social emancipation, and this pessimism was inspired by a frequently-accurate perception of vast differences between the American social order and its counterparts in Europe and Latin America.[41] Paradoxically, the optimism which so marked an attribute of the American political outlook contributed to the spirit of non-involvement as well. If man's political emancipation was a foreordained result of the march of history, there was no need for the new nation to risk its own immediate interests in an effort to advance the process.

At the core of the Founding Fathers' isolationism, however, was prudence; in the existential context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a nation as politically and militarily weak as the United States had no alternative but to walk a prudent path in world politics, however strong its belief in its global mission and destiny. In the future, however, different possibilities might emerge. Thomas Jefferson, whose isolationist sentiments are widely known, expressed a by-no-means uncommon view in a statement which is rarely quoted; "Not in our day," he said, "but at no distant one, we may shake a rod over the heads of all, which may make the stoutest of them tremble."[42]

In a later period of American history, the paradoxical combination of optimism and realism which in the early period served to confine American interests largely to the Western Hemisphere would be rendered irrelevant by events. No longer could American military and political weakness justify a policy of non-involvement in world affairs, for the United States would be a world power in fact as well as in pretension; no longer could an isolationist policy be defended as a realistic response to the challenges of world politics, for other great powers would arise to threaten both American security and America's expectations concerning the evolution of world politics; no longer could the United States remain quietly confident that the world would gradually move toward acceptance of American ideals if only we held high "the beacon on the summit of the mountain" for the edification of other peoples and nations,[43] for in the twentieth century the world would

40. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1935), p. 385. The disposition of the Framers to interpret the objectives of national security in very nearly absolute terms received added impetus from an additional influence of the natural rights mode in political philosophy upon the thought patterns of early America. That approach, of course, views "rights" as existing in isolation, unencumbered by any but a self-interested concern for the claims of others, and rejects the classical view of the origins and nature of political community. Translated into foreign policy terms, these views encouraged a tradition of self reliance and vigor in the interpretation and defense of national interests, including security.

41. Thus the same convictions concerning the "uniqeness" of America which inspired a belief in the nation's world mission could — and did — lead to a contradictory urge to withdraw from the world to avoid contaminating contact with the degenerate and corrupt societies of the Old World.

42. Jefferson to Thomas Leiper, June 12, 1815, Ford, *op. cit.*, XI, pp. 477-78.

43. The phrase, echoing remarks of Jefferson's, is from John Quincy Adams, *An Address Delivered at the Request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington; On the Occasion of Reading The Declaration of Independence on The Fourth of July, 1821* (Washington, D.C.: Davis and Force, 1821), p. 21.

be scarcely more free than it was in 1800. America possessed the power, and history required a push; and thus it was that the national goals implicit in the nation's earliest vision of itself and in its earliest definition of national security and its requirements became in our time the explicit ground of an activist international policy.

But in any case, an interventionist ideology is quite compatible with limited policies, if circumstances demand the latter; and recognition of the extent to which the Founding Fathers accepted an "idealist" view of America's future does not in any way constitute a denial of the effectiveness or "realism" of their statesmanship.

Neither does this argument imply acceptance of either the "globalist" or the "vulgar realist" critique of contemporary American foreign policy. The former is in any case considerably overdone; however critically one views the errors which have characterized recent United States diplomacy, it is clear that the nation has not been engaged in indiscriminate intervention throughout the world for the past four decades, either due to an abiding hatred of communism or for any other reason. Our interventions have been few, if often ill-managed and ill-timed, and it would not be difficult to establish a case for more "intervention," not less, if it could be presumed that such activities in the future would be managed with greater effectiveness and efficiency than in the past. The position of the "vulgar realists," articulated by commentators such as Hans Morgenthau and George Kennan, is equally mistaken and pernicious, since it involves a surrender to ethical relativism and ultimately a total denial of the role of moral choice and moral purpose in politics. Both groups of critics, in fact, are seeking, by means of vigorous attacks on the nation's diplomacy past and present, to justify their demand for an abdication by the United States of its contemporary global responsibilities.

THE position taken here is quite different. It can no longer be questioned that one of the principal failures of United States foreign policy in the twentieth century has been at the level of design; American statesmen have proved to be incapable of thinking relevantly about the nation's purposes, and have not adequately grasped the difficulties involved in achieving moral purpose in the complex world of international politics. Thus American efforts to translate purpose into policy have repeatedly proved futile. To be sure, this failure to relate American foreign policy adequately to reality has many causes, but it has been the contention of this essay that among those causes should be included the tendency of the nation's earliest statesmen to articulate the purposes of foreign policy almost exclusively in moral-ideological terms, and to ignore the political factors which inevitably limit the achievement of purpose, however defined. Thus, it would appear that however impressive the Founders' own accomplishments in the diplomatic arena, they bear partial responsibility for the origination of a pattern of thinking about world politics which continues to exercise a pernicious influence on American policy.[44] The nation needs conservative wisdom in foreign policy as elsewhere, but in seeking such wisdom we cannot rely uncritically upon the nation's past.

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44. For an extended analysis of the impact of America's "principles" upon recent United States foreign policy, see Stanley Hoffman, *Gulliver's Troubles, or the Setting of American Foreign Policy* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1968).