

A Declaration of Independence for Diplomatic Historians

As Thomas Jefferson insisted in 1825, the Declaration of Independence was “the fundamental act of union of these States.”¹ According to the text of the Declaration, this union claimed “the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them.” Now that the old “political bands” with Britain had been “dissolve[d],” the new nation was entitled by the law of nations to negotiate *new* “political” (that is, diplomatic) ties with other European powers. Independence was clearly a means toward higher ends: far from leaving the American states in their natural, anarchic condition with respect to one another, it drew them into a new and unprecedented “union,” a union that could in turn forge further alliances – or unions – across the Atlantic.

The conventional narrative of the American founding posits a clear distinction between the Declaration, marking the destruction of the old regime and the articulation of the “inherent and inalienable rights” (of individuals) on which the new American republics would be established, and the Constitution, creating a “more perfect union” (of states) that secured the new nation’s independent standing in the larger world. But we should listen more carefully to Jefferson, who saw his Declaration as an “act of union” – and who later feared that the federal Constitution *jeopardized* union by concentrating too much power in the new national government. We should not rush through the first paragraph of the Declaration in order to get to the “self-evident” truths of the second. For Jefferson the great, self-enacting claim of the Declaration is to be found in its opening sentence, where he asserts that the Americans constitute “one people.” The Lockean logic in the next paragraph does nothing to explicate or substantiate, but instead deflects attention away from, that bold claim to nationhood. The natural rights talk of the second paragraph may have been pregnant with profound implications for later generations of democrats and libertarians, but it is Jefferson’s *first* paragraph that changed the world.²

1. Minutes of the Board of Visitors, University of Virginia, 4 March 1825, in *Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Merrill Peterson (New York, 1984), 479. The text of the Declaration, cited below, may be found in *ibid.*, 19–24.

2. For a brilliant discussion of this theme see J. G. A. Pocock, “States, Republics, and Empires: The American Founding in Early Modern Perspective,” in *Conceptual Change and the Constitution*, ed. Pocock and Terence Ball (Lawrence, KS, 1988), 57–61.

Jefferson and his revolutionary colleagues first invoked the law of nature and nations in order to define satisfactory terms of union *within* the British Empire. Only when rebuffed by a corrupt and tyrannical imperial administration did they declare independence and form a more limited American union. "Union" was not the belated outcome of the Revolution, but rather its central and defining problem from the very outset. American constitutionalism was shaped by the Revolutionaries' experience in successive world systems. Frustrated in their quest for imperial reform, American patriots became proponents of an independent federal union and a more liberal world order.

The original intentions of the American Revolutionaries have always been difficult to discern because of the vast discrepancies between their world – and their words – and ours. The biggest obstacle to contemporary understanding is *not* the anachronism of an agenda-driven "originalist" jurisprudence, but rather the unexamined premises of our national history. The basic unit of analysis, the "nation," is taken for granted, and the intentions of the founders are therefore assumed to revolve around *its* magnificent prospects – and their forecast of our great achievements. But the Revolutionaries could not have had our idea of what a "nation" is, or of how it might be situated in the "world." Indeed, it is the indeterminacy of these terms (at least by our definitions), and their distinctive configuration that demand scholarly attention. Students of international thought and practice can and should make a major contribution to this continuing debate.

II

Diplomatic historians have played only a marginal role in the recent historiography of revolutionary and early national America. One simple explanation for this is specialization: foreign policy specialists confine themselves to the history of diplomacy, narrowly defined. The "real" Revolution does not take place in their domain – nor, by most recent accounts, does it take place on the battlefield (where, in any case, military historians hold sway). But diplomatic historians have conceded too much.³ The Revolution constituted an epochal moment in international history, a "new order for the ages." The Revolutionaries' agenda was shaped by political and economic developments in the Atlantic world and their goals were articulated in the cosmopolitan idiom of the Enlightenment.

Not only was the Revolution played out on a world stage, but the definition of the world itself was its overarching issue. This definition has two crucial

3. I strongly endorse Melvyn P. Leffler's recent call to arms: "If diplomatic historians listen closely [to colleagues in other fields] we should hear that we are being summoned to play a central role in the future writing of American history." Leffler, "New Approaches, Old Interpretations, and Prospective Reconfigurations," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Spring 1995): 174. This central role should begin with the reinterpretation of the Revolution. For an assessment of the current state of the historiography see William Earl Weeks, "New Directions in Early American Foreign Relations," *ibid.* 17 (Winter 1993): 73–96.

dimensions, both of fundamental concern to diplomatic historians. The more familiar has to do with relations among states: here, as I suggested above, it is important to emphasize affinities in contemporaneous understandings of *empire*, *union*, and *world*. But the Revolution is as important for offering a new definition and model for the constituent part, the *nation*, as it is for promoting change in the *international* system as a whole. Indeed, Jefferson's Declaration was supposed to constitute a more perfect world order for the colony-states, a transcendent and inclusive national identity for the American people, and a legitimate (recognizable) government to represent union and nation, states and people, in the larger world.

All of this might be self-evident to a historian who had *not* kept up with historiographical trends. The ideological turn in American revolutionary scholarship, the so-called republican synthesis, has led to the general neglect of the political and constitutional issues that most concerned earlier generations of colonial and imperial historians. As long as the interpretive focus had been on the constitution and governance of the British Empire, the inter-imperial, diplomatic context was never far from view. After all, the Revolution would not have taken place without the elimination of the French presence in North America resulting from Britain's decisive victory in the Seven Years War; subsequent British efforts to consolidate their geopolitical advantage – by pacifying a radically destabilized frontier, by rationalizing administration and raising taxes – provided the proximate causes for colonial rebellion. But this is all so familiar that it has faded into the dim historiographical background. Constitutional and diplomatic questions have been cast still deeper in the shadows as political historians focused on ideological appeals, group psychology, and the progress of popular mobilization. The exceptionalist tendencies of the ideological school have been powerfully reinforced by the community study approach of the “new” social historians, with their bottom-up view of the world.

The narrowly provincial bias of the ideological approach led historians of the American Revolution to neglect problems of imperial organization and international politics. After all, as John Adams told Jefferson in 1815, “The Revolution was in the Minds of the People, and this was effected, from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen Years before a drop of blood was drawn at Lexington” – and before other nations were drawn into its vortex.⁴ Drawing deeply (in characteristically provincial fashion) on the British Real Whig tradition and its American permutations, focusing obsessively on the putative “great transition” from republicanism to liberalism, the ideological historians could tell the subsequent history of constitution-writing, political mobilization,

4. Adams to Jefferson, 24 August 1815, in *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Capon, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill, 1959), 2:455. Bernard Bailyn uses this quotation as the epigraph of his *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1967), the most important and influential book in the republican canon.

and state-building with only the most perfunctory reference to the international context. Given the prevailing view, so influentially articulated by Gordon Wood, that constitutional reform was at best only coincidentally concerned with problems of *interstate* relations, the *international* context inevitably would seem still more peripheral, and even less consequential.⁵

The republicanists' formulation of the role of ideas and ideology, powerfully strengthened by the (mis)appropriation of the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz and historian of science Thomas Kuhn, has obscured the cosmopolitanism of the American Revolution.⁶ On one hand, their conceptual genealogy took them back to British opposition and ultimately Florentine and classical sources; on the other, close analysis of the colonial American reception of this tradition underscored its distinctively British and provincial cast. Ironically, the Americans' derivativeness, their lack of originality, and their anachronism – manifest in their putatively “paranoid” inability to understand the world they lived in – set them apart as a distinctive, “exceptional” people.

The ideological historians defined the *subject* of contemporaneous debate in timeless terms that deflected attention away from the broader geopolitical context and issues that precipitated the imperial crisis, focusing instead on the supposedly more fundamental questions – of citizenship and character, liberty and power, private and public interest – that continue to absorb political theorists. With the “real” subject of debate so narrowly defined, it was easy to discount and distinguish other, more cosmopolitan streams of thought: obsessed as they were with defending themselves against a corrupt and grasping ministry, the Americans would have little interest in reading and thinking about the larger world.

The good news is that the republican paradigm has begun to collapse, at least in its original site, under the weight of accumulated anomalies.⁷ Diplomatic historians have an important stake in this demolition and renewal project, for it was the republicanists' – and social historians' – definition of the Revolution that pushed them to the far margins of the field. One of the immediate benefits of this paradigm crisis will be that diplomatic historians will begin to recognize and build on their own historiographical tradition. As they do so,

5. Gordon S. Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776–1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969). See my critical commentary in “State Politics and Ideological Transformation: Gordon S. Wood’s Republican Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 44 (July 1987): 612–16.

6. For an illuminating discussion of these appropriations see Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992), 328–30 and passim.

7. The influence of the republican interpretation spread far beyond its original site, the study of political mobilization in the colonies' emergent public sphere. In a playful post-mortem, Daniel T. Rodgers notes that republicanism has continued to flourish in outlying fields – in labor history, the history of American political culture in later periods, and legal history – even as rapidly declining interpretive yields have led students of Revolutionary political thought to look elsewhere for inspiration. Rodgers, “Republicanism: The Career of a Concept,” *Journal of American History* 79 (June 1992): 11–38.

they will find themselves well situated to define the future course of revolutionary and early national historiography.

The study of “republicanism” itself would have followed a more cosmopolitan path had the ideological historians paid more heed to Gerald Stourzh, whose brilliant studies of Franklin and Hamilton focused on the development of revolutionary American ideas about empire, foreign policy, international law, and world order.⁸ The rising tide of republican revisionism also led diplomatic historians to discount and dismiss Felix Gilbert’s classic essay on the intellectual origins of American foreign policy.⁹ Rather than building on promising beginnings in their own field, diplomatic historians increasingly positioned themselves as consumers of hand-me-down intellectual history. If the new nation’s founders subscribed to – and were defined by – the tenets of Real Whig, “classical” republican ideology, the more cosmopolitan currents of thought delineated by Stourzh and Gilbert would barely lap against American shores.

The interpretive wheel has begun to turn, however, now that republicanism’s historiographical charisma is so rapidly fading. The vacuum is already being filled. Important work by scholars such as John Phillip Reid and Jack P. Greene on the crisis of the British imperial constitution has begun to restore a more cosmopolitan perspective to revolutionary historiography that diplomatic historians will find increasingly congenial.¹⁰ Their traditional concerns – war and peace, foreign relations, and international politics – will become, by this redefinition, much more integral to the main historical narrative. Revolutionary diplomacy will not be treated as a secondary plot line (with most of the action

8. Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1954); idem, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, 1970).

9. Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1961). James Hutson’s assault on Gilbert played a key role in the “republican” turn away from Enlightenment cosmopolitanism: with John Adams as his skeptical proxy, and republicanism providing the intellectual ballast for a “realistic” assessment of the new nation’s proper course in a dangerous world, Hutson could turn the Revolution’s idealist impulses inward, away from the larger world. Hutson, “The Intellectual Foundations of Early American Diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History* 1 (Winter 1977): 1–19; idem, *John Adams and the Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (Lexington, KY, 1980). The persuasiveness of Hutson’s argument, David Fitzsimons has recently shown, depends on how we understand “republicanism.” See Fitzsimons, “Thomas Paine’s New World Order: Idealistic Internationalism in the Ideology of Early American Foreign Relations,” *Diplomatic History* 19 (Fall 1995): 569–82, esp. 575–76, for astute commentary on Hutson’s reliance on the “republican synthesis” in dismissing Gilbert’s depiction of a “liberal internationalist” strain in early American thinking about foreign policy.

10. John Philip Reid, *The Constitutional History of the American Revolution*, 4 vols. (Madison, 1986–93). Reid argues, in conscious opposition to the ideological school, that the Americans’ understanding of the customary British (imperial) constitution was plausible and orthodox, not the artifact of republican paranoia and anachronism. In other words, the Revolutionaries were engaged in a transatlantic debate over the constitution of an “extended polity.” Jack P. Greene offers a broader reading of this debate, with more direct links to issues of federal organization (and world order) in *Peripheries and Center: Constitutional Development in the Extended Politics of the British Empire and the United States, 1607–1788* (Athens, GA, 1986).

offstage); nor will constitutional historians continue to give such scant notice to the founders' foreign policy concerns, so ably delineated in Frederick Marks's *Independence on Trial*.¹¹

But I also see a great opportunity for foreign policy historians to take the lead in exploring new questions. "Presentism" may in this case be a conceptual advantage, for the present state of the world strongly suggests the historicity of the nation-state and of the international regime. As we come to terms with a complex contemporary world order in which classical definitions of sovereignty and state capabilities cease to make much sense, we should be better equipped to see what the world was like *before* the ascendancy of the "modern" international system.

III

The language of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence suggests that eighteenth-century Anglo-Americans did not make a clear distinction between *domestic* – or imperial – and *foreign* relations. This apparent confusion invites us to take a closer look at the world from the perspective of the revolutionary generation – and *not* according to the way we have reflexively parceled out the historiographical terrain among specialists.¹² Patriot leaders understood their colonies to be "states," and they hoped to reform the imperial constitution through agreements that could be described as "treaties." Indeed, the argument against parliamentary sovereignty suggested that imperial connection could only be "federal," a relationship constituted by treaty. Jefferson recalled that John Adams and other congressional radicals insisted that the American colonies had always been "independent" with respect "to the people or Parliament of England," "that so far our connection had been *federal* only & was now dissolved by the commencement of hostilities."¹³

For eighteenth-century Americans, "empire" was a protean concept, a bundle of emergent, potentially contradictory definitions.¹⁴ As a complex, extended polity, the British Empire provided a template for American federalism, but it was also a kind of embryonic world order. One of the empire's leading weaknesses was the absence of authoritative definitions and common

11. Frederick Marks, *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Baton Rouge, 1973). For a discussion of constitutional historiography that urges more attention to federalism and foreign policy issues see Peter S. Onuf, "Reflections on the Founding: Constitutional Historiography in Bicentennial Perspective," *William and Mary Quarterly* 46 (April 1989): 341–75.

12. For a brilliant example of how diplomatic history written with a consciousness of the problematic distinction between "domestic" and "foreign" can challenge and revise conventional assumptions in early American political history see James E. Lewis, Jr., *"We Shall Have Good Neighbours": The American Union and the Collapse of the Spanish Empire, 1783–1829* (forthcoming).

13. Jefferson's notes on debates in Congress, 7 June 1776, *Autobiography*, 6 January 1821, in Peterson, ed., *Writings*, 15.

14. Reid, *Constitutional History of the Revolution, Greene, Peripheries and Center*. See also Richard Koebner, *Empire* (Cambridge, England, 1961); and Klaus E. Knorr, *British Colonial Theories, 1570–1830* (Toronto, 1944).

understandings that could have legitimized ministerial reform efforts. The shared language of British constitutionalism did not promote, but instead probably impeded, the articulation of an *imperial* constitutional order. Not surprisingly, leaders of the colonial resistance movement turned in frustration toward natural law – the law of nature and nations – in defense of their political rights and civil liberties. But American patriots did not see their efforts to codify a new constitutional order as a rejection of the imperial connection: quite the contrary, most of them continued to believe, until the bitter end, that the negotiation of strategic and commercial “treaties” would lay the foundation of a more perfect and enduring *Anglo-American* union.¹⁵

If the extended polity of the British Empire was an inchoate states-system, the European balance of power was equally inchoate – and particularly so in the extra-European world. Indeed, at the time of the American Revolution, the law of nations was the law of European sovereigns: Europe *was* the “world.” In declaring their independence Americans boldly claimed membership in this “international” community – the “commonwealth” or “federal republic” of *European* sovereignties. They did not seek to isolate themselves from Europe, nor were they eager to participate – without powerful allies and on radically unequal terms – in the anarchic struggle of all against all that was supposed to be the natural state of nations. On the contrary, for Americans independence was the threshold of union, both among the American states and with prospective European trading partners.

Visionary republican Revolutionaries wanted to change the world: by extending the boundaries of the European system, by enhancing the system’s capacity for progressive improvement through the practice of enlightened diplomacy, by perfecting a legal regime among their own state-republics that would eliminate the causes and pretexts of war.¹⁶ Through painstaking and protracted negotiation of the Articles of Confederation (1777–1781), the states gave constitutional form to the union enacted in Jefferson’s Declaration. Not

15. On the turn to natural rights – and the quest for union within the empire – see the valuable discussion in Stephen A. Conrad, “Putting Rights Talk in its Place: The *Summary View* Revisited,” in *Jeffersonian Legacies*, ed. Peter S. Onuf (Charlottesville, 1993), 254–80, esp. 260–61. Confusion about the role and authority of Congress as putative successor to the British Crown’s prerogative powers suggests continuities in revolutionary constitutionalism that the decision for independence has obscured. Jerrilyn Greene Marston, *King and Congress: The Transfer of Political Legitimacy, 1774–1776* (Princeton, 1987). On the importance of treaties in revolutionary thought see Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison, 1993), 108–13. The following two paragraphs reprise themes developed at greater length in our book.

16. The idea that the United States was a prototype for a “more perfect” world order was fashionable among world federalists such as James Brown Scott during the era of the League of Nations. Scott, *The United States of America: A Study in International Organization* (Washington, 1920). For signs of renewed interest in this theme see the interesting essays by Daniel H. Deudney, “The Philadelphian System: Sovereignty, Arms Control, and Balance of Power in the American States-Union, circa 1787–1861,” *International Organization* 49 (Spring 1995): 191–228, and “Binding Sovereigns: Authorities, Structures, and Geopolitics in Philadelphian Systems,” in *State Sovereignty as Social Construct*, ed. Thomas J. Biersteker and Cynthia Weber (Cambridge, England, 1996), 190–239.

surprisingly, the terms “treaty” and “constitution” were used interchangeably: “The Treaty [of Confederation] is the Constitution, or mode of Government for the collective North-American Commonwealth.”¹⁷

When “nationalists” later sought to reform or replace the Articles, they argued that federal ties alone were insufficient to sustain American independence. In his “Vices of the Political System,” James Madison described the Articles as a “federal constitution,” an alliance of “independent and Sovereign States” that could *not* preserve the union.¹⁸ Madison clearly intended to transform the union itself into a kind of state, founded on “the great vital principles of a Political Cons[ti]tution” and monopolizing all the essential powers exercised by a true sovereignty. But the Federalists were at a loss for words to articulate their redefinition of the union. Whatever their original intentions, they insisted that the states would be preserved and strengthened under the new dispensation: it would *not* be a “consolidated” government. No matter how “perfect” the whole, *union*, was still defined by its constituent parts, the *states*. And the new Constitution drafted at Philadelphia was, like the Articles, “federal” (from the Latin *foedus*, “of or pertaining to a covenant, compact, or treaty”) – a term that would continue to be used to denote alliances between independent sovereignties.¹⁹

Historians and political theorists give Madison and his fellow nationalists too much credit for calling themselves “Federalists” and so preempting their opponents’ proper ideological position and self-designation. Conceptual confusion arguably gave the Federalists the short-term advantage in the ratification debates, but it is also true that it would frustrate the designs of subsequent generations of centralizers and modernizers. American federalists – whatever they might be called – would continue to invoke the authority of Vattel and other law of nations writers; states’ rights constitutionalists would invoke the Declaration of Independence and the Articles of Confederation as they sought to impose a strict construction on the *federal* constitution. The supposedly decisive transformation of the union – from a loose federation of sovereign states to a more highly integrated, centrally directed “compound” national republic – thus was much less apparent to contemporaries than it is to modern commentators.

The interpretive problems here derive from the failure of scholars to take ideas seriously – or, perhaps more accurately, to take the right ideas seriously. Contemporaneous talk about federalism is explained away: as being merely instrumental and often obfuscatory (for those of an anti-intellectual, materialist bent) or as expressing more fundamental, underlying concerns (for the ideo-

17. *The Constitutions of the Several Independent States of America; The Declaration of Independence; The Articles of Confederation; The Treaties between His Most Christian Majesty and the United States of America* (Philadelphia; reprinted London, 1782), vii.

18. “Vices of the Political System,” April–June 1787, in *The Papers of James Madison, Congressional Series*, ed. J. C. A. Stagg et al., 17 vols. (Chicago and Charlottesville, 1962–91), 9:351–52.

19. *O.E.D.* See Pocock, “States, Republics, and Empires,” 60–61.

logical school). What these scholars fail to understand is that the central problem in American political discourse from the imperial crisis through the Civil War was the definition of the federal union. This discourse periodically was refreshed by referring to its natural law (law of nations) sources and, increasingly, to the principles that supposedly had animated previous generations of patriots, in 1776, 1787, and 1798.²⁰

The extent to which Madison, the “father of the Constitution,” betrayed his nationalist faith and embraced Jeffersonian states’ rights heresies in 1798 remains controversial.²¹ My strong inclination is, with Lance Banning, to emphasize the Virginian’s primary commitment to sustaining a “federal balance” that would preserve his state’s corporate identity, rights, and interests while at the same time enabling the government of the union to function effectively on the world stage.²² This balancing act was not inspired simply by prudential concerns for the multifarious, often conflicting interests that would have to be rationalized and reconciled in the “extended republic.” During and after the ratification debates, Madison and other so-called nationalists, including James Wilson of Pennsylvania, demonstrated their continuing indebtedness to the cosmopolitan premises of internationalist thought: the Constitution formed a “more perfect union”; the law of nations would be enforceable without recourse to violent sanctions; the new system represented the culmination of a “peace plan” tradition that had engaged the most enlightened minds in Europe.²³ Predictions of “rising glory” invoked this new world, and the regime of piety, virtue, prosperity, and social happiness that it would inaugurate.

Few Revolutionaries shared Alexander Hamilton’s vision of the United States as a great hemispheric power, modeled on Britain. For Jefferson, whose “federal and republican principles” triumphed in the election of 1800, the American union represented the antithesis of the Old World’s detested balance of power.²⁴ Yet the United States *did* become something of a “power” in the conventional European sense, whatever the pretensions of Jefferson and his

20. See the suggestive essays by Andrew Lenner, “A Tale of Two Constitutions: Nationalism in the Federalist Era,” *American Journal of Legal History* 40 (January 1996): 72–105, “John Taylor and the Origins of American Federalism,” *Journal of the Early Republic* (forthcoming), and “Separate Spheres: Republican Constitutionalism in the Federalist Era,” *American Journal of Legal History* (forthcoming).

21. See the spirited assault on Madison’s inconsistent stands on federalism issues in Kevin R. Gutzman, “A Troublesome Legacy: James Madison and ‘The Principles of ’98,’” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Winter 1995): 569–89.

22. Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison and the Founding of the Federal Republic, 1780–1792* (Ithaca, 1995).

23. Peter S. Onuf, *Origins of the Federal Republic: Jurisdictional Controversies in the United States, 1775–1787* (Philadelphia, 1983), 205; F. H. Hinsley, *Power and the Pursuit of Peace* (Cambridge, England, 1963).

24. The quotation is from Jefferson’s inaugural address, 4 March 1801, in Peterson, ed., *Writings of Jefferson*, 494. For further discussion of Jefferson and the problem of union see Peter S. Onuf, “Thomas Jefferson, Missouri, and the ‘Empire for Liberty,’” in *Thomas Jefferson and the Changing West: From Conquest to Conservation*, ed. James P. Ronda (Albuquerque, 1997), 111–53.

followers. Robert Tucker and David Hendrickson's merciless evisceration of Jeffersonian "statecraft" makes much of this ironic, if not tragic, discrepancy between profession and practice.²⁵ For these critics – and for most other historians of early American foreign policy as well – the advantages of closer ties with Britain are self-evident, and the challenge is to explain why Jeffersonians failed to recognize this. But this line of criticism assumes that the "United States" was a "nation" with identifiable national interests that could have been rationally pursued. To the contrary, partisan and sectional conflict in the early republic revealed the fragility of a union always seemingly poised on the brink of disintegration. As a result, "federal" relations with European powers could not be extricated from the federal bonds among Americans: not surprisingly, the characteristic response to an unpopular "foreign" policy – whether it was the Federalist tilt toward Britain in the 1790s, or the anti-British tilt of Republican commercial diplomacy thereafter – was to threaten disunion.

The problem of national identity brings us back to the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration had enacted a weak union, a union without constitutional form or authoritative sanctions, precisely because the bonds that tied the American patriots were so powerful. Joined in an act of parricide, risking death for their treason against the Crown, Jefferson and his revolutionary band of brothers "mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortune, & our sacred honor." For Jefferson, the claim to nationhood set forth in the Declaration's opening paragraph depends, in theory, on the social contract principles of the subsequent paragraph. But it is Jefferson's sense of betrayal and rejection – "*the last stab of agonizing affection*" – by the British people – "*unfeeling brethren*" – that gives those general principles their particular force.²⁶ The patriots' exalted state of revolutionary brotherhood reflected, even as it negated, a fantasy of transatlantic union, the myth of a transcendent British national identity. Anglophilia was thus transmuted into Anglophobia and one people became two. No federal alliance or constitution could make the "union" the American patriots now declared more perfect, for in the act of killing the king they had made themselves into a new nation.²⁷

The paradox of the Declaration is that the strong assertion of national *identity* should entail such a weakly articulated national *government*. Jefferson and his followers do not deserve all the credit – or blame – for this paradoxical state of affairs. As Charles Royster has shown, patriotic Americans generally defined independence and nationhood in highly idiosyncratic and, from the perspec-

25. Jefferson, the self-deluded idealist, wanted "both empire and liberty" and thought "he could have the one without sacrificing the other." Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1990), 20. See also Doron S. Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York, 1993).

26. My understanding of Jefferson's sentimental politics is indebted to Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993).

27. Winthrop D. Jordan, "Familial Politics: Thomas Paine and the Killing of the King, 1776," *Journal of American History* 60 (1973-74): 294-308.

rive of the would-be central government, highly self-serving ways.²⁸ Indeed, to an extraordinary extent Americans measured their patriotism against the exactions and abuses of *any* distant, despotic governmental authority – and that distance, as resistance to federal excise taxes showed, did not have to be very great.²⁹

Yet it would be a mistake to embrace the High Federalist perspective on Jeffersonian heresies, a perspective that diplomatic historians (sharing Hamilton's predilection for "energetic" and effective government) find all too congenial. Citizen soldiers, inspired by popular patriotic fervor, might not provide effective firepower on the battlefield, and tax resisters could make life difficult for Hamilton's Treasury, the most visible hand of the early federal state. But Jeffersonian Republicans did show, through ideological appeals and party organization, how the "fiction" of popular sovereignty could be mobilized into effective political power. They successfully promoted and exploited nationalist sentiment in ways that Anglophiliac Federalists found dangerously unsettling and (literally) alienating.

Jefferson's inaugural address defined the limits of national community, thrusting beyond its pale "any among us who would wish to dissolve this Union or to change its republican form." Jefferson forecast a welcome respite from the party battles of the 1790s, a renewed commitment to the "federal and republican principles" of 1776, and a practical refutation of the Federalists' "theoretic and visionary fear that this Government, the world's best hope," lacked the "energy to preserve itself." "On the contrary," Jefferson exclaimed, in words that could only provoke incredulity and derision among Hamiltonian High Federalists, "I believe this . . . the strongest Government on earth."³⁰ "Strength" was predicated on a union of principle and sentiment, not in Jefferson's estimation on the national government's coercive resources or deep pockets. By defeating the Federalists at the polls, Republicans reenacted and revived the patriotism of 1776, and so presented to the world an irresistible, impregnable force.

Jefferson's implicit identification of Republicanism and Americanism became increasingly explicit in later years. His most remarkable statement on this theme, one of particular interest to diplomatic historians, may be found in a letter he wrote to William Duane, editor of the *Aurora*, a leading Republican newspaper, in 1811. "During the *bellum omnium in omnia* of Europe," wrote Jefferson, the "union" of all our country's "friends" was absolutely essential in order "to resist its enemies within and without. If we schismatize on either men or measures, if we do not act in phalanx, as when we rescued it from the satellites of monarchism [in 1800], I will not say our *party*, the term is false and misleading,

28. Charles Royster, *A Revolutionary People at War: The Continental Army and American Character, 1775–1783* (Chapel Hill, 1979).

29. Thomas P. Slaughter, *The Whiskey Rebellion: Frontier Epilogue to the American Revolution* (New York, 1986).

30. Inaugural address, 4 March 1801, in Peterson, ed., *Jefferson Writings*, 493–94.

but our *nation* will be undone. For the republicans are the *nation*.”³¹ These proscriptive sentiments are somewhat embarrassing for modern Americans who are taught that party competition is a good thing; surely the “nation” is much more than any “party.” But our perspective may be “false and misleading,” for we are too inclined to take our national identity as a given, and to assume that our contentious ancestors were all in fact “good” Americans who, alas, sometimes, in the heat of partisan controversy, failed to recognize each other’s patriotism. British colonists were not born, but became “American,” and the becoming – the professions and practices that signified active consent – followed no preordained path.

The revival of scholarly interest in invented traditions, imaginary communities, and the formation of national identities offers a new perspective on the political and ideological work of Jefferson and his fellow Republicans. For one thing, it suggests that Jeffersonian Anglophobia is not simply a perversely personal, deeply irrational quirk or anomaly, the result of one man’s misreading of European diplomacy and politics. American national identity was constantly being renegotiated as successive administrations responded to real and imagined threats at home and abroad. The Federalists’ achievement was to gain a measure of legitimacy and stability for the new federal government; Jefferson and the Republicans tapped a broader and deeper vein of patriotic sentiment by harking back to the moment of the new nation’s birth in the midst of a revolution against British authority.³² This primal act of national definition did not necessarily translate into anti-British policies for later generations, or even for Jefferson himself. But for the triumphant Jeffersonians of 1800 it did require eternal vigilance against forces at home and abroad that would exercise illegitimate and despotic power at the expense of liberty and union.³³

The legacy of Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, and the revolutionary changes it represented and inspired, is profoundly ambivalent. On one hand, the Declaration constituted a weak federal alliance or “union” that constantly threatened to fly apart; the principles it articulated offered powerful arguments against subsequent efforts to give that union more energy or structure. At the same time, however, the Declaration boldly proclaimed the birth of a new people. In declaring themselves independent, the Americans launched a new

31. Jefferson to Col. William Duane, 28 March 1811, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Andrew A. Lipscomb and William Ellery Bergh, 20 vols. (Washington, 1903–4), 13:28–29.

32. On the Federalists see Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788–1800* (New York, 1993), esp. chap. 1, “legitimacy,” 31–75. A persistent source of terminological confusion is the identification of Federalists as “nationalists.” Hamiltonian centralizers may have been state-builders, but they did not promote or develop “nationalist” sentiment in the modern (Jeffersonian) sense of the term.

33. This theme is elaborated in my essay, “Federalism, Republicanism, and the Origins of American Sectionalism,” in Edward L. Ayers et al., *All Over the Map: Rethinking American Regions* (Baltimore, 1996), 11–37, esp. 11–15. By far the best study of American nationalism is David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776–1820* (Chapel Hill, 1997).

epoch in the history of Western political civilization, offering glimpses of the awesome and unprecedented power of nationalist regimes to mobilize people and resources.

We might conclude that Jefferson's federal constitutionalism and his appeal to popular patriotic sentiment worked at cross purposes, in the former case to disperse energy and authority in a complex polity, in the latter to mobilize popular resources and initiatives in the larger project of nation-building. Or we might suggest a dialectical, or complementary relationship: for Jefferson to believe in a fully consensual federal union of equal, independent, and self-governing states, he *had* to believe in a fundamental homogeneity of sentiments, principles, and interests in the American people – that is, in their national identity. The diplomatic historian might suggest yet another reading of the Declaration and the story it tells of our national beginnings. For the American Revolution was first and foremost an episode in the history of the European states-system: a provincial fragment of the British people made themselves into the new American nation *not* because they knew that this was their destiny, but rather because they hoped to secure their rights within a more perfect British imperial order. Yet if the birth of the American nation was inadvertent, its implications would be far-reaching, both for the old European system of diplomacy and, more profoundly, for the new world of nation-states that emerged from its ruins.