THE DIPLOMATIC THOUGHT OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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It is an irony of history that the independence of the liberal democratic United States was made possible by financial and military aid from the ancien régime of France. From the beginning, American revolutionary leaders took the possibility of foreign assistance into account in their calculation of the success of their struggle. Indeed, a major motive in their decision to declare independence was their desire to secure foreign “alliance.” This essay, one chapter of a projected book-length study of the diplomatic history of the American Revolution, analyzes the diplomatic thought of American revolutionary leaders in the early years of the Revolutionary War.

I Independence and Alliance

The population of the thirteen colonies increased almost tenfold in the seventy-five years before the Revolution. In 1701, it was estimated at mere 250,000. But it reached 2,500,000 in 1775.1 This phenomenal growth of colonial population was accompanied by the rapid expansion of colonial economy and of trade with Britain.

By the middle of the 18th century, Americans became quite conscious of the economic importance of British North America for the mother country. These colonies as a whole were a very important and rapidly growing market for English manufactures; they produced such strategic products as naval stores, lumber, iron and ships, and such valuable staples as tobacco, rice and indigo; furthermore, they provided the British West Indies, an important producer of staples, with foods and lumber.2 Americans began to claim that the power and prosperity of Great Britain depended largely upon her possessions in North America and would become more so in the future. At the threshold of the French and Indian War, several American publicists contended that these colonies were of such consequence to British trade that, if Britain lost them to France, she would lose her status as a first class power. British effort to conquer Canada and her decision to retain it for the security of the continental

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2 For statistical data relating to colonial trade, see Merrill Jensen, ed., American Colonial Documents to 1776 (English Historical Documents, IX) (London, Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1955).
colonies enhanced their self-importance.3

When Britain began to adopt new colonial policies, therefore, spokesmen for the colonies emphasized the unwisdom of a policy which would adversely affect colonial economy and curtail the capacity of the colonies to absorb English products. Thus John Dickinson remarked: “Her prosperity depends on her commerce, her commerce on her manufactures, her manufactures on the markets for them; and the most constant and advantageous markets are offered by the colonies.” Therefore, he observed, “the foundation of the power and glory of Great Britain are laid in America.” This feeling was shared by all the colonial spokesmen. To quote another example, George Mason wrote that “Great Britain owes to the increase of her wealth, the trade, the shipping and maritime power to her American colonies.”4 Because of this self-importance, American patriots could consider American independence as a practical possibility, when they were hard pressed by Britain. If American trade was so important to Britain, they could reason, it would provide them with a diplomatic bargaining power to achieve and maintain independence. Because of the value of American trade, they expected, Britain’s rivals would be induced to help the American cause to turn the scale of power balance to their favor.

It was a common belief among American patriots that rivalry between Britain and other maritime powers, especially France, was an advantage for America in her dealings with Britain.

Benjamin Franklin always viewed America’s dispute with Britain in the context of international relations. As early as 1766, he noticed the extreme curiosity shown by the French ambassador to Britain about the affairs of America. Two years later he wrote after his return from France that “all Europe (except Britain) appears to be on our side of the question. But Europe has its reasons. It fancies itself in some danger from the growth of British power, and would be glad to see it divided against itself.” For a while, he entertained the idea that another international crisis would be useful to solve the dispute with Britain in a way satisfactory to the colonies. As late as 1773, he wrote Joseph Galloway that a war with Spain and France would be to the advantage of American liberty, for “every step would then be taken to conciliate our friendship, our grievances would be redressed, and our claims allowed.”5

Patrick Henry spoke of American independence to his friends in 1773 and discussed it in an international context. “Where is France? where is Spain? where is Holland?” he asked, “the natural enemies of Great Britain—where will they be all this while? Do you suppose they will stand by, idle and indifferent spectators to this contest? Will Louis the XVI be asleep all this time? Believe me, no!”6

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6 William Wirt, Sketches of the Life and Character of Patrick Henry (Hartford, Silas Andrus, 1854), 111–2.
American patriots always tried to remind the Britons of international rivalry to induce them to make concessions to the colonies. They also mentioned it to convince fellow Americans that they could expect success in their struggle against Britain. Thus young Alexander Hamilton defended the strong stance taken by the First Continental Congress in one of his earliest published articles. Britain would not dare, he argued, to drive the colonies into an open rebellion; but if she should decide to subdue the colonies by force, the colonies would not be defeated. The current international situation would not allow her to send the whole of her army to America, because “the ancient rivals and enemies of Great Britain would never be idle.” Likewise John Adams wrote in a Novanglus letter: “How many ships can Britain spare…. Let her send all the ships she has round her island. What if her ill-natured neighbors, France and Spain, should strike a blow in their absence?”

The Second Continental Congress mentioned the possibility of foreign aid in a well known passage in the Declaration of the Causes of Taking up Arms: “Our cause is just. Our union is perfect. Our internal resources are great, and, if necessary, foreign assistance is undoubtedly attainable.”

When independence became a matter of practical possibility, Continental Congress began to think of contacting European courts to sound out their attitude. According to John Adams' later recollection, Samuel Chase proposed in Congress sometime in the fall of 1775 the dispatch of American ambassadors to France and Adams himself seconded the motion. Adams wrote that on the occasion he had made a long speech analyzing the international implications of their war and impressed his colleagues with his persuasive analysis. According to his autobiography, the analysis he made at the time was as follows:

That it was the unquestionable interest of France that the British continental colonies should be independent. That Britain by the conquest of Canada and their naval triumphs during the last war, and by her vast possessions in America and the East Indies, was exalted to a height of power and preeminence that France must envy and could not endure. But there was much more than pride and jealousy in the case. Her rank, her consideration in Europe, and even her safety and independence was at stake…. That interest could not lie, that the interest of France was so obvious, and her motives so cogent, that nothing but a judicial infatuation of her councils could restrain her from embracing us.”

It is doubtful, however, that he was then so firmly convinced of France siding with America against Britain, for he expressed to James Warren on October 7, 1775, his doubt

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of favorable response of European courts to the American cause.

Is there any possibility, that our ambassadors would be received, or so much as heard or seen by any man or woman in power at any of these courts?.. . .

An offer of the sovereignty of this country to France or Spain would be listened to no doubt by either of those courts, but we should suffer any thing before we should offer this. What then can we offer? An alliance, a treaty of commerce? What security could they have that we should keep it?.. . . Would not our proposals and agents be treated with contempt? and if our proposals were made and rejected, would not this sink the spirits of our own people elevate our enemies and disgrace us in Europe?.. . .

"God helps those who help themselves," and it has ever appeared to me since this unhappy dispute began, that we had no friend upon earth to depend on but the resources of our own country and the great virtues of our people... .

It is possible that he changed his assessment of French interest in American independence within a couple of weeks or so. But it is more likely that he made such a speech in Congress sometime in the spring of 1776 instead of the fall of the previous year.18

Anyway, it appeared that Chase's proposal developed into the decision by Congress in late November to establish the Committee of Secret Correspondence for the purpose of "corresponding with our friends in Great Britain, Ireland, and other parts of the world."19 The committee, made of Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison, Thomas Johnson, John Dickinson, and John Jay, soon began to gather information on the attitude of European courts toward the American war.4

The committee was heartened in December 1775 by the visit of Achard de Bonvouloir, a secret agent sent by French Foreign Minister Charles Gravier de Vergennes, to Philadel-

12 Gilbert Chinard and Felix Gilbert both think it doubtful for Adams to make such a clear long statement in the fall of 1775. Chinard, Honest John Adams (Boston, 1933), 88; Gilbert, "The 'New Diplomacy' of the Eighteenth Century," World Politics, IV (1951), 23n. See an editorial comment in DAJA, III, 327n. "In this present paragraph JA blended inextricably together measures that were proposed and debated in Congress from Sept. through Dec. 1775 and others that were dealt with after his return to Congress early in Feb. 1776 following a two-month leave of absence."
14 Franklin et al., Committee of Secret Correspondence [CSC], to Arthur Lee, 12/D/75, RDC, II, 63; "It would be agreeable to Congress to know the disposition of foreign powers towards us... ." BF to Charles William Frederick Dumas, 19/D/75, ibid., 65: "But we wish to know whether any one of them [European powers] ... is disposed magnanimously to step in for the relief of an oppressed people, or whether if, as it seems likely to happen, we should be obliged to break off all connection with Britain, and declare ourselves an independent people, there is any state or power in Europe who would be willing to enter into an alliance with us for the benefit of our commerce, which amounted, before the war, to near seven millions sterling per annum, and must continually increase, as our people increase most rapidly. ...the committee of Congress, appointed for the purpose of establishing and conducting a correspondence with our friends in Europe, of which committee I have the honor to be a member, have directed me to request of you that, as you are situated at The Hague, where ambassadors from all the courts reside, you would make use of the opportunity which that situation affords you of discovering, if possible, the disposition of the several courts with respect to such assistance or alliance, if we should apply for the one or propose for the other... ."
phia. This Frenchman met the members of the committee several times and gave a non-committal, but encouraging answer to their question regarding the attitude of the French court. Bonvouloir reported that they wanted to know if France would help America and on what conditions she would. According to his report, they asked whether France would be willing to help America if she was guaranteed of such conditions as an exclusive trade for a certain period and "a neutrality or even with a little help," in future wars between France and Britain.

On February 16, 1776, George Wythe proposed in Congress to seek alliances with foreign powers. Congress took up his proposal for consideration, although no decision was made on the matter. Meanwhile, however, the Secret Committee and the Committee of Secret Correspondence decided in early March to send Silas Deane, a Connecticut merchant and delegate to Congress, to France as an agent for the two committees. He was directed to serve not only as a procuring agent, but also as an informal diplomat. The Committee of Secret Correspondence instructed Deane to seek an audience with Comte de Vergennes, French foreign minister, and to sound his attitude toward American affairs.

The subject of overtures to France was recurrently debated throughout March and April. John Adams recorded his thought in his diary.

"How is the interest of France and Spain affected, by the dispute between B(ritain) and C(olonies)? Is it the interest of France (to) stand neuter, to join with B, or to join with the C. Is it not her interest, to dismember the B. Empire? Will her Dominions be safe, if B. and A(merica) remain connected? Can she preserve her possession in the W.I. She has in the W.I. Martinico, Guadeloupe, and one half of Hispaniola. In case a reconciliation should take place, between B. and A. and a war should break out between B. and France, would not all her islands be taken from her in 6 months?"

Thus he felt it certain by this time that France would take her side with America. Then what kind of alliance with her would be best for America? He was very sensitive to the danger inherent in a close connection with France. "1st. No political connection, submit to none of her authority—receive no governors, or officers from her. 2nd. No military connection. Receive no troops from her. 3rd. Only a commercial connection, i.e. make a treaty to receive her ships into our ports." Even when he used the term "alliance," what he meant was only a commercial treaty and a minimum political entente. In the contemporary usage, the term was used rather loosely. He was willing and eager to receive French assistance. But he was basically an isolationist.

John Adams was now so confident of the possibility of a French alliance and so opti-
mistic about America's ability to continue the war that he did not take the threat of a rumor-
ed partition treaty among European powers seriously. The possibility of partition of
America began to be mentioned in the American press as independence became a public
issue. The partition of Poland by the three powers and the transfer of rebellious Corsica
from Genoa to France were cited as recent precedents. Even some circumstantial evidences
were mentioned to hint that such a scheme was in the making.

Samuel Adams, writing over the signature of "Candidus" in early March, urged fellow
Americans to declare independence promptly and apply to France for assistance, assuring
his readers that France would find it in her interest to grant it. If Americans delayed de-
claring independence and application for an alliance, however, France would be tempted
to accept an offer of Canada by Britain," he warned, "then we may be indeed become pro-
vinces!" Possibly he made use of the spectre of a partition treaty in order to force the
hand of reluctant patriots. However, such advocates of independence as Richard Henry
Lee and Patrick Henry were apparently genuinely alarmed by this possibility. When Lee
wrote Henry that "whilst we are hesitating about forming alliance, Great Britain may . . .
seal our ruin by signing a treaty of partition with two or three ambitious powers," Henry
echoed back the same apprehension: "May not France, ignorant of the great advantages to
her commerce we intend to offer, and of the permanency of that separation which is to take
place, be allured by the partition you mention?" Therefore he thought it was "absolutely
necessary" to anticipate "the efforts of the enemy by sending instantly American ambas-
sadors to France." Since the two issues of independence and foreign alliance were closely
related in the thinking of Richard Henry Lee, it was natural for him to combine his famous
resolution of June 7, 1776, for independence with a resolution for foreign alliance.

Lee's resolutions were opposed by such moderates as James Wilson, R. R. Livingston,
Edward Rutledge and John Dickinson. They declared that they were friends to the pro-
posed measures themselves. They conceded that it would be impossible for the colonies
to be united with Britain again. Yet they regarded that these measures were still too early
to take. They observed that the middle colonies were not yet ripe for independence. They
pleaded for a delay for the sake of unity. A premature declaration of independence would
bring forth disunity in the united front and thereby greatly weaken America's position. It
might make securing a satisfactory foreign alliance impossible. As for foreign alliances,
they expressed doubt that France and Spain would be very willing to be American allies.
Those countries, they pointed out, had reason to be jealous of that rising power which might

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22 JA to JW, 16/Apr/76, Warren-Adams Letters (Massachusetts Historical Collections, LXII, LXXIII, 1919,
1925), I, 228.
American History, LVIII (1972), 878-885, gives an analysis of the background of the rumor. It is the thesis
of his article that "the primary reason Congress acted when it did is that it was driven by a fear that Great
Britain was offering to partition North America with France and Spain in return for their military assistance
in suppressing the rebellion." (ibid., 877) That fear is certainly one factor which drove Congress to declare
independence, but it is not clear whether it was the most decisive factor. John Adams, the leading advocate
of independence, was not alarmed. Such an opponent of declaring independence as John Dickinson used
the possibility of partition to argue for a more cautious policy.
25 RHL to PH, 20/Apr/76, J.C. Ballagh, ed., Letters of Richard Henry Lee (2 vols., 1911-4), I, 177-8; PH
to RHL, 20/May/76, Henry, Patrick Henry, I, 410.
one day strip them of their American possessions. They mentioned that these countries might instead try to cooperate with Britain for some territorial compensation. Thus it would be safer for Congress, they insisted, to act after it had heard of French disposition from its agent. They also argued that it would be more effective to declare independence after the victory of the next campaign.

These arguments were answered by leading advocates of independence, such as John Adams, Richard Henry Lee, George Wythe and others. Supporters of the resolutions were optimistic of the rising tide of pro-independence opinion in the middle colonies and therefore did not agree that serious disunity would develop as a result of an immediate declaration of independence. They argued that France and Spain could not fail to help American independence because of their interest. Those powers might be aware of America’s rising power, but they would certainly prefer independent America to a more formidable Anglo-American combination. An immediate declaration might bring forth prompt French assistance, putting America in a better position to fight the enemy. The next campaign would not necessarily be won. Therefore it was unwise to wait for its result.26

The militants however did not force the issue immediately. They compromised with the moderate’s strategy of delay, agreeing to postpone the decision on independence until July. On the other hand, the moderates agreed to set up three committees immediately to begin drafting a declaration of independence, a plan for foreign alliances and articles of confederation.27

By the time when Congress took up the issue of independence on July 2, the mood of Congress was overwhelmingly for independence. John Adams expected no serious debate. But John Dickinson made a long speech pleading for further delay. Dickinson argued for a losing cause, and as such this speech was not paid much attention. But his speech is interesting because it discussed the issue of independence mostly in the context of external affairs. To declare independence now, he argued, was not a proper way to win foreign alliances. To win in the battlefield would be the best way to impress foreign powers. If Americans began the empire in so high a style by a declaration of independence, France and Spain would perceive the future danger to their colonies lying at the door of the new nation. Furthermore, to declare independence single handedly would constitute treating France with contempt, especially after the application was made to France. Such an action on the part of America would make the French attitude exceedingly cool toward America. She would then certainly be attracted by a British offer to partition her American possessions with her. Thus an immediate declaration of independence was like “destroying a house before we have yet another; and then asking a neighbour to take us in when he is unprepared.”

26 Jefferson’s notes of the debate, Julian P. Boyd, ed., Papers of Thomas Jefferson (multi-volume, Princeton, P.U.P., 1950– ) [PTJ], I, 299–313; John Adams commented on the opponents’ argument in a letter to John Winthrop, 23/Je/76, “it is said...that such a declaration will put us in the power of foreign States; that France will take advantage of us when they see we cannot recede, and demand severe terms of us; that she, and Spain, too, will rejoice to see Britain and America wasting each other. But this reasoning has no weight with me, because I am not for soliciting any political connection, or military assistance, or indeed naval, from France. I wish for nothing but commerce, a mere marine treaty with them. And this they will never grant until we make the declaration, and this, I think, they cannot refuse, after we have made it.” WJA, IX, 409.

27 JCC. V, 425, 431.
Dickinson offered his own version of the best American strategy to win foreign support—to act on the matter of independence with a prior understanding with France. "Let us in the most solemn manner inform the House of Bourbons, at least France, that we wait only for her determination to declare our independence. We must not talk generally of foreign powers but only of those that we expect to favor us. Let us assure Spain that we never will give any assistance to (a rebellion in) her colonies. Let France become a guarantor for us in arrangements of the kind." Thus Dickinson proposed a policy of low posture, quite in contrast to John Adams' almost arrogant "help-us-if-you-like-but-surely-you-will" approach. Dickinson proposed political cooperation with France to win its support for independence whereas Adams advocated a policy of unilateral action even while soliciting French help. Although Dickinson advocated a prior political understanding with France, this does not mean that he trusted the French good will. On the contrary, he regarded the French as shrewd and artful. It was his opinion that Americans had to be artful too in dealing with such a nation, taking full consideration of their psychology.

It is interesting to observe that Dickinson revealed in the same speech his tenacious Anglophile and Francophile sentiments. "Suppose we shall ruin her (Britain). France must rise on her ruins. Her ambition. Her religion. Our (dangers from thence). We shall weep at our misfortune brought by our rashness." Possibly, Dickinson, desperate to delay independence, tried rather contradictingly to play up traditional Francophobia in the mind of his colleagues. Anyway, it may be said that Dickinson, too, was aware of the danger of excessively close ties with France, although he emphasized the need to act on the independence issue with prior understanding with France. He too, like John Adams, wanted strong France to be counterbalanced by strong Britain.

It is clear that the issue of independence was closely related to the issue of foreign alliances in public and private discussions among the patriots in 1776. Proponents of independence argued sometimes as if they were advocating it as a means to obtain foreign assistance. Because patriot leaders believed in the international importance of American trade, which they considered could greatly affect not only balance of trade but also balance

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28 J.H. Powell reconstructed his speech out of Dickinson's memo which was written mostly in abbreviation. "Speech of John Dickinson Opposing the Declaration of Independence, July 1, 1776," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, LXV (1941), 458-481. The words in parenthesis in the quotation are either Powell's or mine. Dickinson later defended his action in "To my Opponents in the late Elections of Councillor for the County of Philadelphia...," giving the reasons why he opposed the declaration. C.J. Still, Life and Times of John Dickinson, 1732-1808 (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania Historical Society, 1891), appendix, 368-373.

29 This Francophobia among the Americans did not disappear completely even after the conclusion of the French-American alliance and influenced American attitudes toward foreign affairs. American attitudes towards France are discussed in detail by William C. Stinchcombe, The American Revolution and the French Alliance (Syracuse, S.U.P., 1969) and briefly by Ralph L. Ketcham, "France nad American Politics, 1763-1793," Political Science Quarterly, LXXVII (1963), 198-223.

30 According to his autobiography, John Adams spoke in Congress "that it never could be our interest to unite with France, in the destruction of England, or in any measures to break her spirit or reduce her to a situation in which she could not support her independence. On the other hand it could never be our duty to unite with Britain in too great a humiliation of France." DAJA, III, 329.

31 For example, Richard Henry Lee wrote Landon Carter, a Virginia moderate patriot, "It is not choice then but necessity that calls for Independence, as the only means by which foreign alliance can be obtained." 2/Je/76, LMCC, I, 469.
of power, they were confident of the support of other maritime powers, especially France, to American independence. They interpreted the international implications of the revolution and predicted foreign responses primarily from the viewpoint of power politics in the mercantilist world.

However, there was among them—among the militants as well as the moderates—an awareness that France and Spain, especially the latter, might not welcome American independence because they would be afraid of possible impact of this precedent on their own American colonies and also of potential threat of this rising empire to the security of their colonies. There was, however, no apparent awareness that absolutist France and Spain might regard the victory of republicanism in America as a potential menace to their political system. If there existed such an apprehension among the patriots, then their declaration of independence might have been written differently. It is ironical that the American patriots, while enunciating a revolutionary political doctrine in the Declaration of Independence, made this declaration at least partly to procure assistance from despotic monarchs. Even passionately anti-monarchical Thomas Paine took for granted helping hands from absolute monarchies, such as France and Spain, to republican America.

II The American Model Treaty with France

Having declared independence, Congress prepared for negotiating treaties with European powers. A committee had been appointed to draft a model treaty in June. The committee consisted of John Adams, John Dickinson, Benjamin Franklin, Benjamin Harrison and Robert Morris. John Adams was entrusted by his colleagues in the committee with a leading role in drafting a model treaty with France.

Adams' thinking on the nature of the treaty to be negotiated has already been mentioned. Although he wanted French help, he was opposed to any political and military connections with France or any other power. He thought simply of opening American trade to France as well as other nations on a liberal reciprocal basis. The opening of American trade to France, Adams considered, would be an ample compensation to her for all the aid she would provide. Her share in American trade would be a vast resource for her commerce and naval power, and a great assistance to her in protecting her East and West Indian possessions as well as her fisheries. Even if the benefit of American trade were set aside, Adams reasoned, "the dismemberment of the British empire alone was worth for France more than all the exertions America should require of her even if it should draw her into an eight or ten years war."

Relying on the text of several commercial treaties of liberal nature as his reference,

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85 DAJA, III, 329.
Adams put his own ideas into a draft treaty. According to his plan of the treaty, France and the United States should mutually grant the nationals of the other party the same commercial privileges as their own nationals. Since Adams wanted French naval protection for American shipping against British attack, his plan provided for mutual naval protection of the other party's merchant marine. This was a mutual obligation, but it would certainly be one-sided in reality. Furthermore, Adams' plan required the French king to protect American shipping from pirate princes of the Barbary coast. It was the protection that the British king had used to provide the colonists with. Adams never thought of giving the French king any special privileges in return. He was even unwilling to include a "no separate peace" clause in his draft treaty. As soon as the United States forced Britain to recognize its independence, Adams maintained, the United States should detach itself from European international rivalry and thereafter keep itself uninvolved in a European war.

During such a war, it would be the best interest of the United States to have maximum freedom in trading with belligerent nations. Therefore he took trouble to define neutral rights of the contracting parties in detail, giving each of them extensive freedom to engage in foreign commerce without interference from the other party at war.

The principle of "free ships make free goods" was of course adopted; and contraband was defined very narrowly. Adams's treaty plan did not provide any political commitment on the part of the United States except the pledge of no military assistance to Britain in case of French involvement in the Anglo-American War. However, his plan expected the French king to make self-denying pledges. Adams thought it wise to preclude French territorial claims in North America, making the United States the sole inheritor of the British North American possessions. Thus his treaty provided:

"in case of any war between the most Christian King and the King of Great Britain, the most Christian King shall never invade nor under any pretence attempt to possess himself of Labrador, New Britain, Nova Scotia, Acadia, Canada, Florida . . . on the Continent of North America, nor of the islands of Newfoundland, Cape Breton, St. John's Anticosti . . . , it being the true intent and meaning of this treaty the said united States shall have the sole, exclusive, undivided and perpetual possession of all the countries, cities and towns, on the said continent, and all islands near to it, which now are, or lately were under the Jurisdiction of or subject to the king or crown of Great Britain, wherever shall be united or confederated with the said united States. Nor shall the most Christian King . . . made any claim, or demands to the said countries, islands, cities, and towns mentioned (above). . . , or any of them, or to any port thereof, for, or on account of any assistance afforded to the said united States, . . . or on any other account whatever."

Adams did not want either British or French presence in North America. Not only the western lands lying between the Appalachians and the Mississippi but also Canada with its adjunct maritime provinces which had once been possessed by France and now by Britain should be made territories of the new nation. Since the previous year, Congress

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had been trying to make Canada the fourteenth member of the Union. Congress had tried to capture strategic cities in Canada by its military force and also to induce Canadians to join the union by sending commissioners to negotiate them. It was willing to promise the Canadians equality with other colonies and non-interference with the religious institution. The patriots had great interest in the outcome of their Canadian campaign. But it was not successful. Neither was their Canadian diplomacy. But Americans continued to desire to make Canada and other British North American possessions a part of their territory. Canada seemed to them to be important for their expansion as well as for their security. Thus Adams included this pledge by the French king in his treaty plan. Again he did not include any pledge on the part of the United States in return for the self-denying pledge by the French king. Thus comments a textbook on American diplomatic history on the plan of treaties finally adopted, which was almost the same as Adams's original plan, "seldom had so much been asked of so many for so little."38

His draft treaty, approved by the committee, was submitted to Congress on July 18. A number of delegates felt that the plan might not be so attractive to France as to induce her to risk a war against Britain. When Congress, meeting as the committee of the whole, discussed it on August 22 and 27, as John Adams later recalled, "many motions were made to insert "articles of entangling alliance, of exclusive privileges, and of warranties of possessions" into the treaty plan."39 No record exists of the debate. Probably, James Wilson, who wrote some critical comments on the margin of his copy, offered several amendments.40 He probably suggested the addition of "no separate peace" clause and articles which promised to supply French forces with provisions when they undertook to recover lost territories in the Carribean and not to make peace with Britain with commercial terms more favorable than those granted to France. He might also have argued that the United States should be prepared to offer such an inducement as an exclusive contract of limited duration with France for the supply of masts. Wilson, who supported the independence resolution with great reluctance, was much less optimistic about the strength of America than Adams and felt it quite urgent to have a powerful partner. Therefore he was willing to offer more favorable terms to France. However, such militants as Samuel Adams and Richard Henry Lee were also disturbed by the thought that the terms of Adams's plan were not sufficient to induce France to take a side with independent America.41

John Adams defended his plan, and succeeded in getting it approved with minor revisions. Congress added a new article that reaffirmed French rights in the Newfoundland fisheries.42 Congress then proceeded to appoint the committee to draft the instructions to

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37 For the Canadian campaign: William M. Wallace, *Appeal to Arms: A Military History of the American Revolution* (Chicago, Quadrangle, 1951, 61), 67–84. For the instructions given to the Commissioners, 20/Mb/76, *JCC*, IV, 215–219. Numerous references to Canadian affairs are found in the letters written by the members of the Congress in the period from the fall of 1775 to the spring of 1776 (cf. *LMCC*, I). Not only Northerners but Southerners were greatly concerned with the outcome of their efforts in Canada.


39 *DAJA*, III, 338.

40 His comments are printed in *JCC*, V, 576n–585n.

41 JA to John M. Jackson, 30/D/17, *WJA*, X, 269.

42 For the text of the model treaty as approved by the Congress, see *JCC*, V, 768–779.
be given the American Commissioners to France. There was a considerable amount of
discussion in both the drafting committee and the committee of the whole. Some members,
including James Wilson and Richard Henry Lee, wanted to allow the Commissioners to
retreat considerably from the line of the treaty plan in their negotiations. However, the
adopted instruction kept the extent of such retreat to the minimum.

If France was unwilling to grant Americans commercial rights equal to those of French-
men, the negotiators should propose that the status of the most-favored nation be mutually
granted. As for the eighth article, the instruction admitted that it "will probably be attended
with some difficulty." Therefore the document empowered the negotiators to proposed
to add to it "that the United States will never be subject, or acknowledge allegiance, or obe-
dience" to Britain "nor grant to that nation any exclusive trade, or any advantage in trade,
more than to his most Christian Majesty." They were also empowered to offer that any
separate peace treaty would be effective after six months after notified to the other party.
The instructions also permitted the negotiators to omit several articles regarding American
commercial privileges in France and neutral rights. The Commissioners were instructed to
solicit for an immediate supply of arms and ammunitions, to be sent under convoy by France.
The instructions expected that France would not let the United States sink in the present
contest. But the document directed the negotiators to put pressure on the French court
with a suggestion that "a reunion with Great Britain may be the consequence of a delay,"
if the court should be slow in taking action.

Congress chose Franklin, Silas Deane and Thomas Jefferson as the Commissioners of
the United States to be sent to France. As Jefferson could not accept the assignment,
Arthur Lee, another Virginian, was appointed in his place. The choice of Franklin was
logical. He was the best known American in France. He had been active in nascent dip-
lomatic affairs as a member of the Committee of Secret Correspondence. Deane was in
France as a purchasing agent and quasi-diplomat. Arthur Lee was in London, serving as
a correspondent for Congress.

The model treaty can be regarded as the first crystalization of American idea of national
interest. Maximum freedom in foreign trade, no long-term political ties with any European
power, and acquisition of as much British North America as possible as the territory of the
new nation, that is, no nearby presence of British or French power—such were the main
pillars of the American concept of national interest. How much they could realize this
concept of national interest depended on their military fortune and diplomatic skill. The
model treaty represented, so to speak, the maximum of American national interest. As
such, no patriots disagreed, although some of them feared that something more should be
promised to induce France to help them.

With the adoption of the model treaty and the appointment of the Commissioners to
France, the Continental Congress was ready to start its diplomacy in Europe. The basic
assumption of its diplomacy was that, because of America's importance in the international
balance of power, such British rivals as France and Spain would support the American cause.
Seeking their aid, however, Congress did not want to tie America down with the system of
European power politics. In short, it attempted to invoke the balance of power in the Old

43 JCC, V, 709–710, 718.
44 For the various amendments proposed and the text of the adopted instructions, see, JCC, V, 813–817.
45 JCC, V, 827, 897.
World to liberate the New World from it. The model treaty was the purest embodiment of such an aim. But it was a difficult task to be completely outside the system of European power politics while making use of it. Thus Congress and its Commissioners became willing to have a little closer ties with the Bourbon powers to secure their guaranty of American independence and an imperial domain for America.

When the three American Commissioners contacted Vergennes in late December 1776, they immediately sensed the French court’s reluctance to risk a war. They thought that they had better offer something more than a treaty of commerce as an inducement. On February 2, they mutually agreed to take responsibility to go beyond their instructions and offer France and Spain a pledge of no separate peace in the case of their participation in the war with Britain in return for a similar pledge on their part.46

Their feeling was not out of touch with the current sense of Congress. By the end of 1776, most of the patriot leaders at home, confronted with an adverse military situation which forced Congress to evacuate Philadelphia, became exceedingly anxious to secure speedy military intervention by France and Spain.

For example, Robert Morris, depicting a gloomy picture of the state of affairs in America, told the Commissioners in a letter that the American situation was so critical that probably only a decision by France to join the hostilities could save the American cause.47 The official dispatch of the Committee of Secret Correspondence explained the situation more optimistically. But they too were emphatic about the extreme importance of French intervention.48

On December 24, Congress appointed an ad-hoc committee of five, composed of Richard Henry Lee, Samuel Adams, Elbridge Gerry, John Witherspoon and Abraham Clark, and entrusted them with the task of making a plan for obtaining foreign assistance. On December 30, Congress adopted the committee’s recommendation with a few amendments. Congress resolved to send its commissioners to the courts of Vienna, Spain, Prussia and Tuscany for the purpose of concluding a treaty of amity and commerce and procuring assistance from these courts to prevent Britain from obtaining mercenaries in Europe. The Commissioners in Paris were directed to try to induce the French king to attack the electorate of Hanover, or any part of the dominions of Great Britain in Europe, the East or West Indies.49

In order to induce the French to join the war, the Commissioners were instructed to propose to make trade between the United States and the West Indies a monopoly of French and American vessels. They were likewise instructed to assure the French king that, if French forces in conjunction with American forces should reduce Newfoundland and Cape Breton, and if the French fleet should help the United States reduce Nova Scotia, the United States would be willing to make fisheries in those regions a French and American monopoly and a half of Newfoundland a French territory, provided that Nova Scotia, Cape Breton and the remaining half of Newfoundland be annexed to the United States. Congress authorized them to make another proposal in case the two concessions above should prove

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47 RM to Commissioners, 21/D/76, RDC, II, 231–238.
48 CSC to Commissioners, 21/D/76, ibid, II, 226–231.
insufficient: that the United States would assist French force to reduce the British West Indies and agree to make these conquered islands French possessions.

Congress also decided to authorize the Commissioners to offer the Spanish king assistance in the conquest of Pensacola, provided, however, that he should be willing to grant the Americans free navigation of the Mississippi and use of the harbor of Pensacola. They were also authorized to promise that the United States would declare war against Portugal if desired by France and Spain.50

“Upon mature deliberation of all circumstances,” the Committee of Secret Correspondence advised the Commissioners, “Congress deem the speedy declaration of French and European assistance so indispensably necessary to secure the independence of these states, that they have authorized you to make such tenders to France and Spain as they hope will prevent any longer delay of an event that is judged so essential to the well-being of North America.” However, the Committee cautioned that the object was to get the assistance “on terms as much short of the concessions now offered as possible,” although not “at the risk of a delay that may prove dangerous to the end in view.”51

Had John Adams been in Congress, he would possibly have opposed deviation from the approach Congress had adopted under his leadership. His absence and the unfavorable military situation helped Congress move away from the principles of the model treaty.

It is remarkable, however, how little American leaders were willing to concede even when they felt it urgent to secure armed intervention. Those so-called concessions revealed their desire to obtain an extensive empire for their new nation with military assistance from the Bourbon powers. William Hooper, a member of Congress, was aware of the nature of those self-conceited “concessions.” “We have been holding forth new lines to France,” he wrote to Robert Morris, “by offering what we have not to give and provided they will conquer the whole of Newfoundland and secure fishing, that we will most bountifully and most graciously give them one half of it for their trouble.”52 It may be argued that, by offering France to make Newfoundland fisheries a joint monopoly, Congress indicated its willingness to perpetuate a political alliance with Europe. It is clear, however, that Congress did not regard such an offer the best policy, since the instructions called it a “concession.”

Encouraged by the deviation from the line of the original instructions on the part of Congress, the Commissioners proposed to Vergennes and Count d’Aranda, Spanish Ambassador to France, a plan of a triple alliance between France, Spain and the United States against Britain and Portugal. According to this plan, hostilities were to continue until Spain had conquered Portugal, until the United States had established their independence, and until France and the United States had expelled Britain from North America and the West Indies. Peace was to be concluded only by the joint consent of the allies.53

This proposal did not bring forth any immediate response. But the Commissioners

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50 Ibid., 1055–56, 1057.
51 CSC to Commissioners, 30/D/76, RDC, II, 240. Corwin writes in his French Policy, 97, that Congress authorized the Commissioners to make “any tenders necessary” to secure the immediate assistance of the Bourbon powers. His quotation is inaccurate and misleading. Congress did not give them such a broad power of discretion as was implied by Corwin. Congress merely entrusted them to use their own judgment within the extent of the concessions specified by the instructions.
52 WH to RM, 28/D/76, LMCC, II, 195.
wrote encouraging reports to Congress, emphasizing the French and Spanish disposition to continue secret aid, the general attitude of European nations friendly to the American cause, the progress of military preparation in France and Spain, and the increasing strain in French-British relations.54

Meanwhile, the atmosphere of crisis had faded in America after the success of Washington's surprise attacks in New Jersey in January 1777. American leaders, especially those known as militant patriots, regained self-confidence and became less desperate for foreign alliances. Samuel Adams could contend in April 1777, "I have been always of opinion that we must depend upon our own efforts under God for the establishment of our liberties." Later he remarked that it would increase the future safety and honor of the United States if "we would establish our liberty and independence, with as little aid as possible."55 John Adams, who had returned to the Congress, reiterated his preference for simple commercial relations with no political and military obligations to European nations. He questioned the wisdom of trying to drag France or Spain into the war. The result of such an attempt might be America's entanglement in the quarrels of Europe. Scorning "cowardly spirit" desperate for French intervention, Adams wrote his friend that he would "run the risk of fighting it out with George and his present allies" if America could have "a free trade with Europe."56

Although Congress remained eager for formal recognition by and overt extensive assistance from France and Spain, it did not fall into such a state of alarm as it had done towards the end of 1776.57

Conclusion

In spite of the universal principles announced in the Declaration of Independence, the American revolutionaries never aimed or expected a universal revolution. They did not even expect that the people in the mother country who had shared a liberal tradition with them would respond to the declaration and take a side with the American cause. They had hoped for several years that the people in England would topple down the ministry hostile to the American cause. The declaration of independence was in part the result of their disillusion with the British public.

The American revolutionaries did not expect either that the peoples on the European Continent, awakened by the American message of "self-evident" principles, would shake off their own old regimes and come to America's assistance. Unlike the French and Russian revolutionaries, American revolutionary leaders never tried to bring forth an international revolutionary war by their ideological appeal. It is only an afterthought that the American Revolution was a "shot heard round the world."58

54 BF, SD to CSC, 9/Apr/77, RDC, II, 285-290.
56 JA to GW, 3/May/77, LMCC, II, 354.
57 CFA to Commissioners, 2/May/77, 2/Jul/77, RDC, II, 313-315, 438-441.
58 Informative on this problem is John C. Rainbolt, "Americans' Initial View of Their Revolution's Signif-
It was the hope of the American revolutionaries that the rulers of Britain's rival powers, especially the French king, would come to their assistance. They viewed the international significance of their revolution from a view point of commercial advantage and power politics. Confident of the economic and strategic value of American trade, the American revolutionaries expected that France and Spain, especially the former, could be induced to help American independence. They had some fear that the rulers of colonial empires, especially the Spanish, might not welcome an example of colonial independence. They hoped, however, that France and possibly Spain, too, because of great advantage of British-American split, would take a side with America against Britain. There was among them no significant fear that their republicanism would alienate the rulers of the old regimes from the American cause.

Both the advocates of immediate independence (the militants) and their opponents (the moderates) in Congress expected French, and to a lesser degree, Spanish, aid to their revolution. They both were also aware of some possibility of Britain and her rivals reaching an agreement to partition America. But they differed how best they could forestall such danger. While the militants argued for immediate independence and immediate dispatch of a diplomatic mission, the moderates argued for secret pre-declaration negotiations with France.

When Adams's draft of a model treaty with France was considered in Congress, there was considerable discussion about the question whether the terms were attractive enough for France to take sides with America. But it does not appear that any one proposed anything more than temporary political commitments or very limited temporary economic concessions. There was a basic consensus about the fundamentals of American national interest—minimum political connections with Europe, liberal trade opportunities with all nations and the acquisition of the maximum of British territories in North America. Such principles as non-entangling alliances and liberal trade relations may qualify, as Felix Gilbert argues, the diplomacy of the American Revolution as a "new diplomacy in the eighteenth century." But these principles were not the products of a zeal which aimed at revolutionizing or even reforming the existing international order. These were the products of practical calculation of American interest. Acting within the framework of international relations dominated by mercantilist powers and monarchical regimes, American revolutionary leaders sought assistance from the regimes of France and Spain. Their diplomacy aimed at making use of the dynamics of the existing framework of international relations to achieve independence and maximize American interest. While making use of European power politics, however, they wanted to disengage themselves from it as soon and as much as possible. In short, they wanted to escape from the old world of power politics, instead of revolutionizing it.

