

Remarks at the American Academy of Diplomacy Security & Alliances Conference

Montalto, October 28, 2017

©James R. Sofka 2017

Consider a familiar-sounding situation: a treaty ally of the United States undergoes a revolution.

The government with which the United States signed the treaty is overthrown and replaced by a repressive regime bent on exterminating internal enemies. Conflict erupts, threatening to engulf the United States in its wake. Media-savvy agents of the foreign power try to influence the American press to get the United States to see things its way. Foreign agents come to the East Coast and manipulate the American party system to build support for their cause. American diplomats are torn between treaty obligations on the one hand and national security on the other as internal factions cleave political consensus at home.

Sound familiar? Maybe South Vietnam, 1963? Iran, 1979? Turkey, 2016? Nope. Welcome to America, in the summer of 1793.

Wrenching debates as to the wisdom, utility and cost of security alliances are as old as the Republic; indeed, it was through one that the nation achieved its independence in 1783. With them come rewards, opportunities, and dangers—then and now. The earliest efforts of American diplomacy were consumed with how to manage alliance politics in a chaotic world. It was not always pretty—wrestling with these problems, Secretary of State Thomas Jefferson grew frustrated and grumbled “I have always considered diplomacy the pest of the world.”

This was an understandable outburst given the stress he was under at the time, but when his blood pressure dropped, Jefferson helped create precedents for the handling of security alliances that have conditioned American diplomacy for two centuries.

Political Scientist Arnold Wolfers observed that security alliances cluster at the “poles” of politics. Weak states desperately want guarantees of survival and will pay any price to get them; on the other hand Great Powers use them to maintain order on their terms and prevent destabilization. The United States migrates from one pole to the other from 1776 to 2017, as we will discuss throughout today—for now I will discuss the earlier context and the lessons it created for future diplomatic efforts.

America wins its War of Independence through its alliance with France, achieved after almost a year of negotiation in 1778. Some in the Continental Congress thought it a dangerous move, fearing it would only lead to the replacement of the Union Jack with the *fleur de lis* in America.

They were outvoted, and the Treaty of Amity and Commerce becomes America's oldest alliance, and soon to be one of its most problematic.

At first it was a great deal for the United States—it widened the war, overwhelmed Britain, and allowed France to legally back American forces—just what Congress wanted. France made no demands for American territory at the peace table and got little from the deal beyond humiliating Britain, always an incidental pleasure in Paris. Scholars of the treaty have argued that the United States enjoyed an unprecedented lucky break from what they see as French miscalculation to enter the war.

Regardless, the deal is reciprocal and perpetual, calling on the United States to give France the equivalent of what today is called Most Favored Nation trade status as well as to offer “true and sincere friendship” to Paris—a vague political commitment and soon to be the subject of acrimonious debate. A crisis erupts in 1793, after the Revolutionary Government that took power the year before executes the king in January and Britain and Spain add in to the coalition against France—already at war with Prussia and Austria-- in February. Now the French gov't wants reciprocity from America—to ban British ships from American ports and the use of American economic power against London to fulfill the 1778 pact. France demands President Washington's assistance on the grounds that the alliance created an existential American commitment to France.

Washington, deeply alarmed, solicited strategic advice from Jefferson and Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton as to American options under the terms of the alliance. Their white papers become two of the most important documents on how to manage a security dilemma in the American diplomatic archives. All agree that entering the war would be disastrous but disagree as to the implications of America's commitment to France under the treaty.

Hamilton argued the deal was null as the king was dead and his regime overthrown—America signed the pact under his rule and it died with him. Hamilton advocated that the treaty be immediately voided and argued it would be sensible to work more closely with London, which he saw as the better long term bet for American security.

Jefferson maintained that the treaty was still in force as it was signed with the French state, and not the king's regime. Citing Pufendorf and Grotius, he argued that treaties exist beyond the span of a single government, much as land deeds passed on through generations. He does not want to abandon the treaty as it could be useful down the road as the political situation changes or as a lever against London. That said, Jefferson's reading is that America does not have to enter the war—it would be enough to be neutral and not harm French interests to fulfill its treaty obligations.

Washington embraces Jefferson's advice to “split the baby” but this proves harder to do in diplomatic practice than in position papers. French ambassador Edmond Genet was soliciting op-eds in American papers demanding payback for France's role in American independence and

was paying American privateers to haul captured British ships into American ports over the President's objection. London was furious and demanded the United States put an end to it and alluded to war as a consequence if it did not.

Jefferson's diplomatic minuet with Genet was a masterpiece. He used a counter-media strategy and 'public diplomacy' to outflank Genet's rabid appeals. Most critically, he weaponized Hamilton's threat of a British alliance against Paris—saying in effect that pressing too hard would lead Hamilton to prevail and this would be a worse outcome for Paris.

This diplomatic tactic may be familiar to many of you: Jefferson's play was to pitch Genet with "I'm your only friend here, the only guy between you and Hamilton." In sum--take half a loaf (American neutrality) rather than lose the entire pact if Hamilton won the debate.

Amazingly, it worked. Faced with this challenge, Paris backed down and accepted American neutrality rather than belligerency or "tilt" to London. Jefferson writes a scathing critique of Genet's unprofessionalism to Paris, and declares him *persona non grata* and the ambassador is recalled to France, where his execution is certain. But, in a final exercise of tact, Jefferson agrees to give Genet political asylum and he lived the rest of his life in upstate New York, married to the daughter of NY governor and Jefferson political crony George Clinton. Jefferson's diplomacy was so deft it impressed arch-cynic Prime Minister George Canning in Britain, who 30 years later said that it was the best model he could find of a state extricating itself from a treaty commitment without sparking a war, while leaving the treaty itself intact. Coming from Canning, this was no small praise.

Jefferson wins the day in 1793 both strategically and tactically. The immediate crisis is resolved, though threats to American neutrality flare up to the war of 1812 and Jefferson later deals with some of them as President. What take-aways emerge from this crisis?

1. It creates a popular mythology that the "Founders were isolationists." This is sheer fantasy. Washington and Jefferson did stress the dangers of "ENTANGLING alliances" in their Farewell and 1st inaugural. The modifier "Entangling" is critical. Both knew the United States wouldn't exist without an alliance. What they were worried about—and took away from 1793—was that alliances should be tools rather than drivers of American foreign policy. Both were masters of keeping options open and saw true isolationism impractical and likely suicidal for the United States.
2. The 1793 crisis helped create our modern two-party system. While divisions existed much earlier, the debate on the French alliance divides American politics into pro-French & pro-British camps and the media blitz orchestrated by Hamilton, Jefferson, Madison and others accentuated these divisions. The tone and operations of American politics was completely different after 1793 than before, especially regarding international issues.

Students of American partisan politics should raise a glass to Genet and a foreign alliance for giving birth to the field.

3. Hamilton and Jefferson's approaches to handling security alliances endured long after they were gone; indeed, elements exist to this day. Both were Realists and they agreed on a number of key points—that the United States was weak, that it should avoid getting into the European war, and that it needed time to grow its commerce and military and diplomatic establishment to better compete with the European powers.

But they had significant strategic differences. Hamilton believed that the United States needed a strong external ally to provide security. He presaged the “special relationship” that would later characterize Anglo-American relations. Language, commerce, and history connected these countries, he reasoned, and the British political system was stable, especially compared to France. The cost was that America would have to follow London's lead on trade and it would limit American options, but to him the security it offered made it a price worth paying. The Jay Treaty of 1795, largely negotiated personally by Hamilton after Jefferson left the Cabinet, was intended as the foundation for this vision of an American alliance strategy—a static model, built on an enduring and visible union between London and its former colonies.

In contrast, Jefferson preferred a dynamic model of security—adaptive to change and taking advantage of ambiguity in defending American security interests. In his mind, Hamilton's pledge of an entente with Britain gave away what America should rather sell at a high price and it would make the United States a “second Portugal”—Britain would never allow it to achieve rival status.

Jefferson articulated a balance of power approach—to keep the French alliance on the books as a veiled threat against London, but to neuter it of any direct American commitment to France. Later he threatened Napoleon with an Anglo-American alliance in negotiations over Louisiana. Fearing a French takeover of New Orleans in 1802, Jefferson threatened to “marry ourselves to the British fleet and nation.” In 1807 he reversed again, hinting to London that American neutrality was negotiable. In 1804, he rejected Tsar Alexander's offer of an alliance under which Russia would help the United States in its war in North Africa in exchange for American support to Russia in the European war. Jefferson saw this as too constricting for American policy towards France and Britain given shifting European alliances.

At a conceptual level, Jefferson's triangular security diplomacy anticipated Bismarck's later efforts versus Austria and Russia or Richard Nixon's—who assiduously studied Bismarck's model-- with the Soviet Union and China. Bismarck famously said of

alliances “I scatter my promises like rose petals so that I don’t have to actually carry any of them out.” Jefferson would have warmly approved of the Iron Chancellor’s sentiment.

The difference of course—to return to Wolfers—is that Bismarck and Nixon led Great Powers which did not have territorial ambitions and which were largely concerned with maintaining status quos and preventing bad things from happening on their peripheries. The stakes for America in the Founding period—where survival was contingent on endless overseas variables-- were vastly higher.

To use a different metaphor, Hamilton’s model of security alliances was based on chess—a clear, overt display of pieces on the board with the Stars and Stripes and Union Jack together on one side of the table. Jefferson’s was essentially poker—using ambiguity and occasional bluff to offset a weak hand and to play for time and better cards. It worked, until it didn’t when Madison tried it in 1812.

4. Another key takeaway of the 1793 crisis is that until World War I the United States avoids direct, enduring security alliances as a matter of policy. While America engages in commercial treaties, land purchases, and informal alignments with nations over the world—Mexico, Venezuela, China, Japan, and Russia, to name a few—there was no analog to the 1778 French Treaty. The conscious goal was to avoid what Glenn Snyder has called “Alliance Capture”: the process by which a security guarantee becomes a millstone. Also, following Wolfers’ model, as a “middle power” at that point American neither needed nor could effectively dominate an external guarantee of security.

The Monroe Doctrine is often interpreted in such terms, but in reality it was a unilateral, independent British decision by Canning to prevent further French and Spanish colonization in the New World. President Monroe & Sec. of State JQ Adams piggybacked on it and harnessed it to American advantage but it was not a formal alliance. Rather it was an informal convergence of interests serving separate needs. America became a “free rider” to a British policy supported by the power of the Royal Navy—ironic, given current American obsession with alliance cost-sharing.

Part of the reason for this avoidance of direct guarantees was also due to dumb luck: geography, general peace in Europe after 1815, and the diminishing importance of North America as a subject of European colonization made them less important. But the lessons of 1793 endured—Dean Acheson spoke of them as late as 1947.

The only outlier was the Civil War period, where Jefferson Davis’s government followed the old playbook of the Continental Congress—to try to recruit a European ally. While Lincoln was content with European neutrality, Davis needed active support, but the

Confederate effort failed where Franklin succeeded. The moral odium of slavery, combined with the diminished importance of Southern cotton and agriculture given new markets in India and Egypt, as well as the absence of a bipolar European war at the time, created too heavy a lift. Lincoln's economy and growing industry had more throw-weight in Europe than Hamilton could have imagined, and despite flirtations from Napoleon III and Palmerston, the Confederacy could not seal a deal. Battlefield misfortunes after 1863 did not help, and while London and Paris had real quarrels with Union policy and the interception of their vessels and officers none were acute enough to trigger belligerency.

Another eminent student of the 1793 crisis was Woodrow Wilson, who researched the episode as part of his academic work on the Founding period. While an admirer of Jefferson, Wilson came to see the *Realpolitik* behind his strategy--and Bismarck's--as too dangerous in the modern era of industrial warfare. In his mind, sidebar security alliances created more insecurity and suspicion than order, and merely propelled arms races. Worse, the compression of time by modern communications reduced the latitude for diplomatic settlements and finesse. Jefferson had 4-6 weeks to think while dispatches went back and forth across the Atlantic. By 1919 the telegraph had cut that response time to 4-6 minutes. The very ambiguity and flexibility that Jefferson and Bismarck saw as conducive to deterrence could be misinterpreted in the heat of a crisis. These convinced Wilson that security guarantees had to be directed towards, and managed by, institutions rather than states.

The League of Nations was designed to serve this innovative concept. Collective security—all states united to preserve order itself, without a specified external enemy—could achieve what his predecessors could not: the maintenance of a permanent, existential status quo mediated by institutions and structures. Clemenceau famously said “war is too important to be left to the generals.” In Wilson's view, security was too important to be left to states.

This was not an entirely new idea, of course—Metternich attempted something similar a century before. Article VI of the Vienna Treaty of 1815 mandated that all Powers must agree to negotiation before taking action destabilizing to peace—a “time out” clause-- and any state could call a conference at any time to discuss issues of mutual concern. Wilson commissioned the State Department to research this precedent in 1919 (as did the British Foreign Office), but he found Metternich's system too ad hoc. It was ultimately doomed by a lack of enforcement mechanisms, and it fell into disuse in less than a decade.

The League was designed to do what Metternich could not—institutionalize order by judicial enforcement and automatic sanctions and, if necessary and so authorized, collective military response. But its institutional and political failings are well-known and could occupy us

here for weeks—excluding Germany and the Soviet Union, the halfhearted endorsement by Britain and France, and ultimately the failure of the US Senate to ratify the pact-- are but tips of the iceberg. The League failed to translate an abstract concept of universal security into a manageable, self-perpetuating model of world order that would replace traditional state-to state security guarantees

The result was a “back to the future” model on the eve of the Second World War. American non-participation in the League, coupled with its history since 1793 of avoiding entangling security commitments which could recoil on American politics, as well as interwar distaste for activist Jeffersonian-style diplomatic balancing with rivals, left America punching below its political weight in international affairs. The war would change this, of course, and Roosevelt’s vision for a new world order would be more activist, and power-centric, than Wilson’s. The American approach to security alliances after 1945 would contain elements of both Hamiltonian and Jeffersonian thought—“special relationships” on the one hand as well as *Realpolitik* and counter-balancing on the other—demonstrating more continuity than cleavage with the nation’s diplomatic history in a new era.