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John Quincy Adams and the ethics of America's national interest

GREG RUSSELL

This essay examines John Quincy Adams'[1] diplomatic and ethical thinking and explores the implications of this legacy for the exercise of American power in contemporary world affairs. Both as America's most accomplished Secretary of State in the nineteenth century, and through his voluminous public and private papers, Adams helped to identify the normative foundations of the national interest. In particular, he defined the limits of America's obligations to defend human rights and to intervene on behalf of revolutionary principles in the quarrels of distant nations. Attention focuses here upon Adams' contribution to historic debates concerning: (1) individual and national rights which must be defended if freedom is to be maintained; (2) the basis for American neutrality in the 1790s; and (3) the claims upon American diplomacy generated by the independence movements of South American and Greek patriots.

A reconsideration of the diplomatic and intellectual contribution of John Quincy Adams to the orientation of American foreign policy serves a number of useful purposes. First, it challenges the view that realism and idealism in foreign policy are mutually exclusive categories. Second, it makes a contribution to the ongoing debate about the global responsibilities of American power. Adams reminds us that the American desire to serve the needs of mankind is inspired by the moral purposes of the American Union. The United States was consciously created by a people dedicated to a set of ethical and political principles held to be of universal significance. 'From the time of the Declaration of our Independence', according to Henry Kissinger, 'Americans have believed that this country has a moral significance for the world'.[2] But Adams, influenced by political ethics, was also conscious that America's native achievement and worldwide example must be tempered by an element of *restraint*, deriving from a proper respect for the variety political experience found elsewhere.

[1] John Quincy Adams (1767–1848), the son of John and Abigail Adams, enjoyed a career unsurpassed by any other American of his generation. A graduate of Harvard College (1787), he served as: Minister to Netherlands (1794); Minister to Prussia (1797); Member of Massachusetts Senate (1802); United States Senator (1803); Minister to Russia (1809); Minister to Great Britain (1815); Secretary of State (1817); President of the United States (1824); Member of the House of Representatives (1831–48).

[2] Henry A. Kissinger, 'Morality and Power'', in Ernest W. Lefever (ed.), *Morality and Foreign Policy* (Washington, 1977), pp. 59–60.

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The education and duties of an American statesman

John Quincy Adams' political philosophy derived in great measure from his reading and converse with eighteenth-century thinkers, in particular John Locke. But it also provided a synthesis of old ideas; he was obligated to the 'long tradition of medieval political thought, back to St. Thomas [Aquinas], in which the reality of moral restraints on power, the responsibility of rulers to the communities which they ruled, and the subordination of government to law were axiomatic'.[3] Claiming to be without 'much relish for the speculations of the first philosophy', Adams believed in 'the genuine doctrines of Christianity in their application to the pursuit of happiness'. In addition, he pointed to the 'Socratic and Ciceronian moral philosophy as the most exalted system of human conduct ever presented to the world'. This blend of classical and Christian thought is broadly compatible with the moral-legal precepts shaping the Founders' faith in a constitution grounded in principles of 'higher law'.

> Its tenets were beyond the ordinary level of human infirmity; and so are those of Christianity. It made the essence of virtue to consist in self-subjugation; and so does Christianity. It gave out a theory of perfection to the aim of man, and made the endeavor to attain it a duty; so does Christianity. The perfect example . . . was not given, as by Christ; not even Socrates. Yet he, and Cicero . . . did attain an eminence of practical virtue . . . .[4]

In Adams' political theory, the Creator made man a 'social being', blending his happiness with that of his fellow man. Government was a necessary instrument to achieve this end, providing 'a restraint upon human action, and as such, a restraint upon Liberty'. The constitutional framers were 'aware that to induce the People to impose upon themselves such binding ligaments, motives were not less cogent than those from which the basis of human association were . . . necessary'.[5] Adams explained the link between rights and obligations in a revealing passage from his first State of the Union address.

> The great object of the institution of civil government is the improvement of the condition of those who are parties to the social compact, and no government . . . can accomplish the lawful ends of its institution but in proportion as it improves the condition of those over whom it is established . . . but moral, political, and intellectual improvement are duties assigned by the Author of Our Existence to social no less than individual man. For the fulfillment of these duties governments are invested with power, and for the attainment of the end . . . the exercise of the delegated power is a duty as sacred . . . as the usurpation of powers not granted is criminal and odious.[6]

Perhaps no American was better qualified to shape and direct American foreign policy during the 1814–28 era than John Quincy Adams. In support of President Adams' promotion of his son to Minister Plenipotentiary to Prussia in 1797, George Washington wrote: 'Mr. Adams is the most valuable public character we have abroad, and . . . there remains no doubt in my mind that he will prove himself to be

[3] George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory* (New York, 1937), p. 523.
[4] John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 12 vols. (Philadelphia, 1874–7), II, p. 462.
[5] John Quincy Adams, *The Lives of James Madison and James Monroe* (Boston, 1850) pp. 34–5.
[6] John Quincy Adams, 'First Annual Message', in Fred L. Israel (ed.), *The State of the Union Messages of the Presidents, 1790–1966* (New York, 1966), I, pp. 243–4.

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the ablest of our diplomatic corps'.[7] Thomas Jefferson spoke of Secretary of State Adams' state paper defending General Jackson's actions in Florida as 'among the ablest compositions [he had] ever seen, both as to logic and style' and recommended that it be thoroughly circulated in Europe as an illustration of the level of American statecraft.[8] John Quincy Adams knew the leading statesmen of Europe—particularly Czar Alexander, Talleyrand, Nesselrode, Capodistrias, Canning, and Castlereagh. He understood best the political and social values essential to cabinet diplomacy at the time of the Congress of Vienna following the defeat of Napoleon.

During these years, the United States signed the treaty of Ghent ending the War of 1812, issued the Monroe Doctrine, and strengthened its maritime power through the Rush-Bagot treaty (1817) with Britain to clear the Great Lakes of warships and by obtaining rights to fish off the coast of Labrador and Newfoundland. Americans extended their continental reach through the annexation of Florida, by removing Russian influence from the southwestern coast of North America, through the establishment of the American–Canadian boundary from the Great Lakes to the Rockies, and by staking their first claims to the Pacific Coast.[9] Adams was a central figure in all these transactions and, in each instance, saw a larger moral message for the exercise of power in defense of the national interest.

John Quincy Adams is a classic example of the political moralist in thought and word, who cannot help being a political realist in action. His international thought was anchored in the realist tradition of Washington and Hamilton; yet he did the better part of his work in a political environment dominated increasingly by Jeffersonian principles. Adams knew that ethics called into question the presence of self-interest in political life. But there 'must be force for the government of mankind, and whoever in this world does not choose to fight for his freedom, must turn Quaker or look out for a master'.[10] Adams disclaimed 'as unsound all patriotism incompatible with the principles of eternal justice' (*Fiat justitia, pareat coelum*). On numerous occasions, however, Adams conceded that this line of reasoning is not precisely applicable to the diplomatic craft. For Adams, negotiation and political compromise form a necessary part of any prudent attempt to reconcile conflicting values in changing situations. Neither intentions nor results are, by themselves, a moral guarantor of the national interest. Thus Adams would undoubtedly be troubled by our familiar dichotomy of realism and idealism. He would, as Tarcov explains, emphasize the complementary relation of principle and prudence. 'Principles are not self-applying: They do not tell you what to do. They require prudence and judgment for their application. Prudence is not self-sufficient either; it requires principles for guidance'.[11]

[7] George Washington to John Adams, 20 February 1797, in *Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston, 1853), VIII, p. 529.

[8] Thomas Jefferson to President Monroe, 18 January 1819, *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Paul Leicester Ford, 12 vols. (New York, 1904–5), X, p. 122.

[9] Walter Lafeber (ed.), *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire* (Chicago, 1965), p. 13.

[10] Adams to William Vans Murray, 22 July 1798, *The Writings of John Quincy Adams*, ed. Worthington C. Ford, 7 vols. (New York, 1917), II, p. 344.

[11] Nathan Tarcov, 'Principle and Prudence in Foreign Policy: The Founders' Perspective', *The Public Interest*, 86 (1984), p. 48.

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The rights of citizens and nations: Adams vs. Paine

Just prior to his twenty-fifth birthday, John Quincy Adams was catapulted to the centre of the nation's intellectual life with the publication of his Letters of 'Publicola'. These papers, inspired by the controversy between Thomas Paine and Edmund Burke concerning the French Revolution, point to Adams' reliance on natural law to establish the foundations of liberty and to defend minority rights in representative government. Like the writings of his father, Adams opposed the extreme views of Paine, while retaining faith in the American theory of natural rights. Paine's 'encomium upon the National Assembly of France' called into question American principles of self-governance: consent, liberty, accountability, human rights, petition, and representation. Moreover, Adams recognized that Paine's support for revolutionary principles in domestic affairs would touch directly upon the nation's foreign obligations. Paine was elevating 'concerns equally important to all mankind; and the citizens of the United States are called upon . . . to *rally* around the *standard* of this champion of Revolutions'.[12] Precisely how and under what circumstances America would support revolutionary causes beyond its own borders was a dilemma that Adams wrestled with throughout his public career.

The crux of Adams' debate with Paine concerned those political values—the conditions of individual freedom and the just composition of civil authority—that define the legitimate ends of power for republican government. In his 'miscellaneous' chapter, Paine observed that, 'when a man in a long course attempts to steer his course by anything else than some polar truth or principle, he is sure to be lost'. What Archimedes said of the mechanical powers of levers may be applied to Paine's estimation of modern liberal reason in the service of liberty: America's revolution 'presented in politics what was only theory in mechanics'. America provided a point in the political universe, 'where the principles of universal reformation could begin, so also was it best in the natural world'. Defending the natural rights of mankind would spell the end of those aristocratic and sinister impulses that sustained the diplomatic concert underlying the European balance of power. Paine called for a 'European Congress to patronize the progress of free governments, and promote the civilization of nations with each other'.[13] In Adams' view, the objectionable component in Paine's presentation was not so much 'the object which he promised to himself' (the defence of natural rights) but the 'dubious . . . principle on which he wrote'. Paine offered 'a commentary upon the rights of man, inferring questionable deductions from unquestionable principles'.[14]

Paine's *Rights of Man* begins with the premise that the British 'have neither Liberty nor a Constitution', that the only conceivable method to guarantee these blessings is to 'topple down headlong' their present government in imitation of the French model. The nation acts in accord with political right inasmuch as 'that which a whole nation chuses to do, it has a right to do'.

Man has not property in man; neither has any generation a property in the generation which are to follow. The Parliament . . . of 1688 . . . had not more right to dispose of the people of

[12] Adams, 'Publicola Nos. 1 & 2', *Writings*, I, pp. 65–72.
[13] *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, ed. William M. van der Weyde, 9 vols. (New Rochelle, 1925), VI, pp. 211, 231–2.
[14] Adams, 'Publicola No. 2', *Writings*, I, p. 69.

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the present day, or to bind or to control them *in any shape whatever*, than the Parliament or the people of the present day have to dispose of . . . or control those who are to live a hundred or a thousand years hence. Every generation is, and must be, competent to all the purposes which its occasions require. It is the living, and not the dead, that are to be accommodated.[15]

Adams objected that this was on occasion as a whole nation has a right to do whatever it chooses to do.

The right of one generation to legislate for its successors achieves legitimacy by the 'consent of that posterity . . . bound by their laws'. Adams saw no absurdity in the expressions of perpetuity adopted by the Parliament of 1688. Expressions of a similar nature were close at hand in the constitutions of the several states of the union. In defending the integrity of minority rights, the precepts of natural law enabled Adams to contend that 'immutable laws of justice and morality are paramount to all human legislation'.

The violation of those laws is certainly within the power, but it is not among the rights of nations. The power of a nation is the collected power of all the individuals which compose it. The rights of a nation are in like manner the collected rights of its individuals; and it must *follow* . . . that the powers of a nation are more extensive than its rights, in the very same proportion with those of individuals . . . It is of infinite consequence that the distinction between *power* and *right* should be fully acknowledged, and admitted as one of the fundamental principles of Legislators.[16]

If the majority is unrestrained 'by no law human or divine, and have no other rule but their sovereign will . . . to direct them', then what protection remains to defend those inalienable rights? Individual liberty becomes 'the sport of arbitrary power, and the hideous form of despotism may lay aside the diadem and sceptre, only to assume the party-colored garments of democracy'.[17]

Foreign policy in the early republic: Adams and the case for principled neutrality

As partisan attachments crystallized under the impact of the French Revolution, Adams became a Federalist, opposed to Republican or Jeffersonian democracy. He was convinced that the French revolutionary factions had gone wrong in seeking to overthrow other governments by a war of propaganda, particularly in declaring war on England, thus lining up all Europe against France. His letters of 'Marcellus' and 'Columbus', published in 1793, laid out a course of action that brought him into line with the foreign policy of Washington's Farewell Address, later reiterated in the Monroe Doctrine, and associated with the general concept of the two separate spheres, or systems, of policy.[18] Adams began in 'Marcellus' by relating political

[15] *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine*, VI, pp. 16–21; Adams, 'Publicola No. 2.', *Writings*, I, pp. 70–1.
[16] Adams, 'Publicola No. 2', p. 70.
[17] Adams, 'Publicola No. 2', p. 71.
[18] Secretary Adams affirmed the policy in a letter of instructions to the American Minister to Russia, declining the invitation of Czar Alexander I to join the Holy Alliance. 'The political system of the United States', he said, three years before the Monroe Doctrine, 'is extra-European. To stand in firm and cautious independence of all entanglement in the European system has been a cardinal point of their policy under every administration of their government from the peace of 1783 to the present day.' See Samuel Flagg Bemis, *American Foreign Policy And The Blessings Of Liberty* (New Haven, 1962), p. 261.

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ethics to the foreign policy conduct of *both* the nation and specific individuals. Europe's war made for 'an interesting question to every American': What course of action 'ought to be pursued by the United States . . . and by their citizens as individuals, in relation to the contending parties?' The individual 'must follow the dictates of his own discretion' yet the wisdom of national legislation as it relates to the nation's security 'involves . . . an answer to that which relates to individuals'. President Washington's proclamation of neutrality was not yet known in Boston when Adams warned his countrymen against privateering under a belligerent flag. It was to be hoped

> that this violation of the laws of nature and nations . . . may not in any instance be carried beyond the airy regions of speculation, and never acquire the consistency of practical execution. If the natural obligations of justice are so feeble among us that avarice cannot be restrained from robbery, but by the provisions of positive law, if the statute book is to be our only rule of morality to regulate . . . our duties towards our fellow creatures, let those whose ideals of equality are so very subservient to their private interests, consult the treaties between the United States and several powers now at war.[19]

Article VI of the Constitution declared that 'all Treaties made . . . under the authority of the United States, shall be the supreme Law of the Land'. Treaties with France (1778), Holland (1782), and Prussia (1785) required the United States to prevent its citizens from taking out letters of marque or arming privateers with commissions under either of the powers against either of the others. A similar act of hostility against Britain 'would be a direct violation of the 7th Article of the Treaty of Peace'. Even if the United States was not bound by treaty stipulations, 'the natural obligation of neutrality would operate on us individually, unless the nation should take a decisive part in favor of one of the parties'. American citizens would be legally responsible for property seized with violence under a commission. The commercial interest of the nation, then, dictated that American merchants 'should show a peculiar degree of circumspection in their conduct, because the country becomes . . . in some measure responsible for them'. Not only did Adams identify an ethical link between the actions of individuals and the actions of groups, but he also perceived a dire outcome for the national interest if the moral and legal precepts of neutrality were deserted for 'ill-acquired plunder'.[20]

Adams laid out a scenario that would become all-too-familiar to American seamen. In such circumstances, the individuals of the neutral nation have little recourse but to seek through their sovereign a desire for compensation. Yet the obligation could not be incurred without a serious cost to the nation. Even self-interest should induce Americans 'as we value our interests, or our reputations' to deprive adversaries of an opportunity 'to retort a complaint that the neutrality was first violated on our part'. The United States, said Adams, would never 'have an expectation of gaining a compensation for the *injured* individual, unless they can compel the *injuring* individual to make compensation in his turn'. A concern for both ethical intentions and political consequences dictated that the American government must be in position to 'disavow in the most decisive manner, all the acts of iniquity committed by our citizens'.[21]

[19] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 1', *Writings*, I, pp. 335–6.
[20] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 1', pp. 136–6.
[21] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 1', pp. 136–6.

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The 'natural injustice' of privateering was roundly condemned 'by the most amiable and virtuous moralists'. Adams pointed out that the treaty between the United States and Prussia (1785) provided for the following: 'All merchant and trading vessels employed in the exchange of products of different places . . . shall be allowed to pass free and unmolested; and neither of the contracting parties shall grant . . . any commission to any private armed vessel, empowering them to take or destroy such trading vessels or interrupt such commerce' (Article 23).

> For if the poet . . . has said, "War is murder," the plunder of private property, the pillage of all the regular rewards of honest industry and laudable enterprise, upon the mere pretence of a national contest, to the eye of reason and justice, can appear in no other light than that of highway robbery.

Beyond 'the uncontrollable law of necessity, or from the iniquitous law of war', Americans could certainly have 'no possible excuse for those who incur the guilt without being able to plead the palliation'.[22]

Adams agreed with Hamilton on the primacy of the national interest for the conduct of American diplomacy. However, he was perhaps closer to Jefferson and Madison in believing that authentic moral choices were at stake in the timing and methods by which the nation defended its security and reputation in foreign affairs. Federalists and Republicans alike consented to Locke's doctrine of emergency prerogative beyond the Constitution. 'It is fit that the laws themselves in some cases give way to the executive power rather than to the fundamental law and nature and government. This is the right to self-preservation and self-defense'.[23] Indeed, Adams justified a posture of neutrality towards the European powers as 'equally the dictate of justice and policy' *to the citizens of the United States.* The second installment of 'Marcellus' was devoted almost exclusively to the normative framework that should guide American statesmen in framing the obligations and duties of neutrality. Adams inquired into 'the line of conduct prescribed to the nation itself . . . by those immutable laws of justice and equity, which are equally obligatory to sovereigns and to subjects, to republics and to kings'.[24]

Unlike Hamilton, Adams was not prepared to make any consideration of general policy—dictated by the national interest—'a separate subject of inquiry'. An explanation for his reluctance can be found in one of the most undeniable principles of government—'that the truest policy of a nation consists in the performance of its duties'. The rights of nations constituted 'nothing more than the extension of the rights of individuals to the great societies, into which the different portions of mankind have been combined'. Adams cited a fundamental precept of Christianity to underscore the principle of reciprocity in relations among states: 'Whatsoever', says the author of Christianity, 'you would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them'. A parallel assignment is conferred by what the Declaration of Rights of the French National Assembly specified to be the essence of liberty. 'Liberty,' says the Declaration, 'consists in the power of doing whatever is not contrary to the rights of others'. Adams saw a vital connection between doing nothing contrary to the rights of others and America being able 'to enjoy and deserve the blessings of freedom'.

[22] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 1', pp. 135–6.
[23] See an analysis of Locke's position in the Statement of Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., before the Special Subcommittee On War Powers of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee of the United States, 14 July 1988.
[24] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', *Writings*, p. 139.

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Each nation 'forms a moral person' and each member of a nation is 'personally responsible for his society'.[25]

John Quincy Adams saw no discrepancy between the normative 'principles upon which our national conduct is to be grounded' and the 'impartial and unequivocal neutrality' that guided America between the contending parties. It was a feature of war, Hobbes believed, that 'the notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have no place'.[26] To the contrary, Adams viewed the natural state of nations—with respect to one another—as a state of peace, *demus petimusque vicissim*. It was what America had a right to expect from other nations, and 'for the same reason it is our duty to observe it *towards* them'. In addition to incurring a natural obligation, the United States was bound by treaties with France, England, Holland, and Prussia; provisions in each accord required America 'to observe the laws of peace with the subjects of their different governments'. This country had no right to interfere in their contentions.

> Whatever may be the current of our sentiments . . . we are not constituted judges of the respective merits of their cause . . . As men, we must undoubtedly lament the effusion of human blood, and the mass of misery, and distress which is preparing for a great part of the civilized world; but as the citizens of a nation whose happiness consists in real independence, disconnected from all . . . European politics, it is our duty to remain the peaceable and silent, though sorrowful spectators of the sanguinary scene.[27]

Americans might feel gratitude to France and 'be disposed to throw a veil over their . . . errors and crimes'; alternatively, as descendants of Englishmen, 'we may be willing to lose the memory of all the miseries they inflicted upon us in our first struggle against them'.[28] Adams called upon Americans to cast aside momentary political emotions in judging the rectitude of the nation's intentions. How his countrymen would judge that 'sanguinary scene' depended, in some measure, upon the degree of self- confidence through which to sustain a vision of the national purpose.

In addition to the combined considerations of natural duty and positive stipulation, Adams held that the case for neutrality could be defended by 'a forcible argument . . . derived from our interest'. He had in mind the commercial advantages that would be thrown into American hands with the nations of Europe at war. The necessities of the belligerent powers would increase 'as their means of supply will diminish, and the profits, which must infallibly flow to us from their wants, can have no other limitation than the extent of our capacity to provide for them'.[29]

The cost of America becoming a partisan to the conflict would be prohibitive. First, the United States would 'be engaged in a quarrel, with the laws of nations against us'. Second, the violation of political duties would, at the same time, constitute 'a departure from the principles of natural justice, and an express breach of the positive stipulations of peace and friendship with the several . . . powers'. Adams conceded that, against the unrestrained impulses of private avarice and ambition, arguments derived from the 'obligations of natural justice or written contract will be nugatory'. Third, and appealing to those whose 'interest is in any degree connected with that of their country', he reasoned that the United States had neither the resources to defend the nation against a substantial external threat nor the ability to make a material

[25] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', p. 139.
[26] Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford, 1947), p. 101.
[27] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', p. 139.
[28] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', p. 140.
[29] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', p. 141.

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difference in the contest of arms. Where, he asked, would American commerce turn 'if excluded from every market of the earth?' Without the defensive apparatus of war, what quarter would 'provide us with the arms and ammunition that will be indispensable?' The burden of an accelerating public debt left nothing 'to support us in the dreadful extremity to which our own madness and iniquity would reduce us'.[30]

Reconciling internal rights and external wrongs: America's support of human rights

John Quincy Adams brought his conception of political ethics—an arena within which power and principle intermingle and work out their uncertain compromises[31]—to bear upon national and international events that would shape the destiny of future generations. He refused to separate the nation's obligation to uphold human rights abroad from the European balance of power and from the significance of that equilibrium for American foreign policy in the Western Hemisphere. On the subject of European intervention in the Western Hemisphere, Adams' fierce nationalism was unequivocal: no new colonies and eventual European withdrawal. As the principal architect of the noninterference clause of the Monroe Doctrine, Adams thought of the American continent as a special preserve of the United States long before the president's message to Congress in 1823. In an exchange in 1821 with British Minister Stratford Canning regarding the English claim to the Oregon territory, Adams warned that 'there would be neither policy nor profit in cavilling with us about territory on this . . . continent'. When Canning inquired if 'you include our northern provinces [Canada] on this continent', Adams remarked: 'Keep what is yours, but leave the rest of this continent to us'.[32] A similar theme prevailed in Adams' exchange with Baron Tuyll, minister of Russia, over the *ukase* of 1821 establishing Russian territorial claims to the Pacific Northwest. Adams claimed that the United States 'would contest the right of Russia to any territorial establishment on this continent, and that we should assume . . . the principle that the United States are no longer subjects for any new European colonial establishments'.[33]

Adams relied upon commercial, geopolitical, legal and moral arguments to justify America's continental expansion and foreign policy interests. Noncolonization would, in the first instance, preclude the intrigues and conflicting territorial ambitions of Europe from the New World. Europe's colonial dependencies were objectionable because of the restrictions and exclusions on commerce and navigation. Adams insisted that the 'principle of mutual treatment upon a footing of equality with the most favored nation' was 'the great foundation of our foreign policy'.[34] Apart from

[30] Adams, 'Marcellus No. 2', p. 142.
[31] Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man And Immoral Society* (New York, 1932), p. 4.
[32] Adams, *Memoirs*, V. p. 252f.
[33] Adams, *Memoirs*, p. VI, 515. When Secretary of State Adams drew up in November 1823 the customary sketch of foreign policy topics which might interest the president in connection with the preparation of the forthcoming message, he included in the paragraph on the Russian negotiations a reference to the new dogma. That paragraph was taken over almost without verbal change by Monroe and thus it appeared in his communication to Congress. See Dexter Perkins, *The Monroe Doctrine, 1823–26* (Cambridge, MA, 1927), pp. 13–14.
[34] See Adams to Henry Middleton, 5 July 1820, *Writings*, VIII, pp. 46–51; Adams to Richard Rush, 6 February 1821, ibid. pp.92–4; Adams to Caesar Augustus Rodney, 17 May 1823, ibid. pp. 437ff; Adams to Richard C. Anderson, 27 May 1823, ibid. pp. 457–61. See also Henry Wheaton, *Elements of International Law*, 8th edn, ed. R. H. Dana (London, 1936), p. 82n.

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its legal justification, however, Adams' principle represented an adroit diplomatic manoeuvre. It committed the United States to no specific policy of any kind; it left open for debate the courses of action necessary to defend the new doctrine; it left open the possibility of a diplomatic retreat while giving the impression of great definiteness. Finally, the noncolonization principle drew its moral inspiration from Adams' belief that 'from the moral and physical nature of man . . . colonial establishments cannot fulfill the great objects of government in the just purpose of society'.[35]

In a letter of instruction to Henry Middleton, American minister to Russia, Adams analyzed 'the political system of Europe' growing out of the treaties concluded in Vienna, Paris, and Aix-la-Chappelle. The core of that system was an agreement among the five principal European powers for the preservation of general peace. Its primary goal, in eliminating the influence of the French Revolution, was 'the substitution of a system which would preserve them from that evil; the preponderancy of one power by the subjugation, virtual if not nominal, of the rest'. Declining the Czar's overture to the United States to become a formal partner in the Holy Alliance,[36] Adams argued that 'for the repose of America as well as Europe, the European and American political systems should be kept as separate and distinct from each other as possible'. Yet, on the eve of the French invasion of Spain in 1822, Adams realized that a pledge of neutrality did not eliminate the threat from Europe. American diplomatic history illustrated that this policy, 'however earnestly and perseveringly it was maintained, yielded ultimately to a course of events by which the violence and injustice of European powers involved the immediate interests and . . . essential rights of our own country'. With the Holy Alliance in mind, he alluded to 'a number of projects, hitherto abortive, of interposing in the revolutionary struggle between Spain and her South American colonies'.[37]

The Monroe Administration was challenged to define America's obligation to recognize and intervene on behalf of Latin American independence. Speaker of the House Henry Clay's moralism—'the glorious spectacle of eighteen millions of people struggling to burst their chains and be free'—was a popular response to the position, circulated by the French publicist Abbé de Pradt, that European powers might act to establish the region's independence on terms that would keep the new nations aligned with the Continent. Latin American independence was desired in Washington as an additional bulwark for American isolation; but was not supported with sufficient ardour to risk a European war. So long as Europe did not actively intervene, Monroe and Adams were content to stand aside and let Spain fight it out with her colonies,

[35] Quoted in George Dangerfield, *The Era of Good Feelings* (New York, 1963), pp. 268–9.

[36] The international government commonly called the Holy Alliance was based upon three treaties: The Treaty of Chaumont of 9 March 1814, The Quadruple Alliance signed at Paris on 20 November 1815, and the Treaty of the Holy Alliance of 26 September 1815. In contrast with the Quadruple Alliance—which presented, as it were, the constitutional law of the international government of the Holy Alliance—the Treaty of the Holy Alliance itself contained no principles of government at all. It proclaimed the adherence of all rulers to the principles of Christianity, with God as the actual sovereign of the world. Originally signed by the rulers of Austria, Prussia, and Russia, the Holy Alliance was adhered to by all the European rulers, with the exception of the Pope and the Sultan. The British monarch, for constitutional reasons, could not formally adhere; the prime minister acceded informally. See Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 5th edn (New York, 1973), pp. 435, 435n.2.

[37] Adams to Henry Middleton, *Writings*, VII, p. 47. See also Adams to Hugh Nelson, 28 April 1823, ibid. p. 370.

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but they would certainly oppose any attempt by the Holy Alliance to interpose.[38] Adams believed that America's support for revolutionary movements abroad involved both opportunities and clear-cut limits to the nation's moral authority in world politics. Clay recommended that the United States should countenance the South American patriots' cause 'by all means short of actual war'; 'it would give additional tone, and hope and confidence, to the friends of liberty throughout the world.' He proposed that 'a sort of counterpoise to the Holy Alliance should be formed in the two Americas, in favor of national independence and liberty, to operate by the force of example, and moral influence . . . '[39]

In his *Memoirs*, Secretary of State Adams recorded the reservations that he voiced in a long exchange with Clay on the limits of American power in the domestic affairs of these nations.

> I have never doubted that the final issue of their [the revolted provinces] present struggle will be their entire independence of Spain. It is equally clear that it is our true policy and duty to take no part in the contest . . . . So far as they are contending for independence, I wish well to their cause; but I have not yet seen . . . any prospect that they will establish free or liberal institutions of government . . . . Arbitrary power, military and ecclesiastical, is stamped upon their education, upon their habits, and upon all their institutions . . . I have little expectation of any beneficial result to this country from any future connection with them, political or commercial.[40]

Admittedly, the United States acquired some responsibility for the Spanish colonies since their cause drew upon 'the practical illustration given in the . . . establishment of our Union to the doctrine that voluntary agreement is the only legitimate source of authority among men, and that all just government is a compact'. To a cause reposing upon the sovereignty of the people, 'the sentiments of the government of the United States have been in perfect harmony with those of their people'.

> *Civil, political, commercial,* and *religious* liberty, are but various modifications of one great principle founded in the unalienable rights of human nature, and before the universal application of which, the colonial domination of Europe over the American hemisphere has fallen . . . Civil liberty can be established on no foundation of human reason which will not at the same time demonstrate the *right* to religious freedom . . . . To promote this event by all the moral influence which we can exercise by our example, is among the duties which devolve upon us in the formation of our future relations with our southern neighbors.[41]

Moreover, enlightened self-interest did not rule out significant moral gains for America and the world. Adams argued for the achievement of liberal principles of commercial relations and exchange, with the aim of opening South American ports to the commerce of the world and in relaxing imperial restrictions. He described the policy of the United States with regard to South America as based upon the two principles of 'entire and unqualified reciprocity' and permanent most-favoured-nation treatment, which were necessary to the realization of South American independence. In negotiating treaties of commerce, a nation should seek to

[38] Samuel Eliot Morrison and Henry Steele Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, 2 vols. (New York, 1959), I. p. 454.
[39] See Arthur Whitaker's useful summary of the Clay speech, in his chapter on John Quincy Adams' 4th-of-July oration of 1821. *U.S. and Latin American Independence*, ch. XII, 'The Reply to Lexington and Edinburgh'.
[40] Adams, *Memoirs*, V, pp. 324–5.
[41] Adams to Richard C. Anderson, Department of State, 27 May 1823, *Writings*, VII, pp. 466–7.

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satisfy its own interests but should also be willing 'to concede liberally to that which is adapted to the interest of the other'.[42]

Yet Adams cautioned that the independence of the Spanish colonies 'proceeded from other causes, and has been achieved upon principles, in many respects different from our own'. In America's revolution, 'the principle of the social compact was, from the beginning, in immediate issue'. Independence was 'declared in defence of our *liberties*, and the attempt to make the yoke a yoke of oppression was the cause and justification for casting it off'. The independence of the Spanish colonies, by way of comparison, was forced upon the inhabitants by the temporary subjugation of Spain itself by a foreign power. Adams' hopes notwithstanding, he saw 'no spirit of freedom pervading any portion of the population, no common principle of reason to form an union of mind: no means of combining force for exertions of resistence to power'. Being on terms of peace with Spain, and having 'relative duties to all the parties,' the United states was bound to consider the struggle for independence 'as a case of civil war to which their national obligations prescribed to them to remain neutral'.[43]

'The United States,' Adams advised, 'could not recognize the independence of the colonies as existing *de facto*, without trespassing on their duties to Spain, by assuming as decided that which was precisely the question of the war'. President Monroe, as Adams explained in a letter of instruction to the American minister in Columbia, 'considered the question of recognition, both in a moral and political view as merely a question of the proper *time*'. He also insisted that Spain 'had no right upon the strength of this principle to maintain the pretension, after she was manifestly disabled from maintaining the contest, and . . . to deprive the independents of their rights to demand the acknowledgments of others'. To fix upon 'the precise time when the duty to respect the prior sovereign right of Spain should cease . . . became in the first instance a proper subject of consultation with other powers having relations of interest to themselves with the newly opened countries, as well as influence in the general affairs of Europe'.[44] This was a clear statement on the limits of American unilateralism and how 'the moral influence which we can exercise' was inseparable from those methods by which national interests were related to the European balance of power.

Adams drew on related arguments by attempting in 1822 and 1823 to persuade President Monroe to moderate his open endorsement of the Greek Independence movement. The revolutionary tide had slowly gathered strength until 1821 it posed an immediate threat to Ottoman rule. Sultan Mahmud II retaliated with such violence that he aroused anti-Turkish sentiment throughout Western Europe and the United States. 'The mention of Greece fills the mind with the most exalted sentiments and arouses in our bosoms the best feelings of which our nature is susceptible', said President Monroe in his annual message of 1822. In the first draft of the Monroe Doctrine, the president proposed to condemn the French invasion of Spain, to acknowledge the independence of Greece, and to ask Congress for a diplomatic mission to Athens! Albert Gallatin proposed to lend the Greek government a fleet; William Cullen Bryant wrote *The Greek Partisan*, and Daniel Webster declared that

[42] See National Archives, Records of the Department of State, *Diplomatic Instructions*, All Countries, VII, p. 241. See also John Quincy Adams, 'Third Annual Message', in James D. Richardson (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents, 1789–1897* (Congress, 1900), p. 380.

[43] *Writings*, VII, pp. 442–3.

[44] *Writings*, VII, pp. 444–6.

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he preferred the Greeks to 'the inhabitants of the Andes, and the dwellers in the borders of the Vermilion sea'.[45] In his speech before Congress, Webster would answer for America 'when the first blast of the trumpet of liberty ran along the Ionian seas, and through the Peloponnesus'.

> The Greeks, contending with ruthless oppressors, turn their eyes to us, and invoke us, by their ancestors, by their slaughtered wives and children, by their own blood poured out like water, by the hecatombs of dead they have heaped up . . . to heaven; they invoke, they implore from us some cheering sound, some look of sympathy, some token of compassionate regard. They look to us as the great Republic of the earth—and they ask us, by our common faith, whether we can forget that they are struggling, as we once struggled, for what we now so happily enjoy?[46]

Not only did the moralism of Webster promise trouble with the Ottoman Empire, but it also threatened American shipping in the flourishing opium trade. 'This is no small item', Thomas H. Perkins wrote, under the pseudonym of 'A Merchant', in a Boston newspaper. 'Shall we then go on a crusade in favor of the Greeks and hazard the liberty of our citizens and a valuable trade?'[47]

The issue of assisting the cause of the Greeks was taken up at a cabinet meeting on 15 August, 1823. In addition to Gallatin's recommendation of assisting with a 'naval force' (one frigate, one corvette, and one schooner), both Secretary of War John C. Calhoun and Attorney General William Wirt were inclined to speak of yet another great war of revolution against tyranny. Adams believed his colleagues to be susceptible to 'two sources of eloquence at these cabinet meetings—one with reference to sentiment, and the other to action'. In this instance, championing the Greek cause 'is all sentiment, and the standard of this is the prevailing popular feeling'. As for a course of action, 'they are seldom agreed' and the meeting was 'dismissed, leaving it precisely where it was, nothing determined, and nothing practical proposed by either of them'. Having little patience 'for the enthusiasm which evaporates in words', Adams told Monroe 'I thought not quite so lightly of a war with Turkey'. He informed the president that the unamended version of his historic message

> would have an air of open defiance to all Europe, and I should not be surprised if the first answer to it from Spain and France and even Russia should be to break off diplomatic intercourse with us . . . The aspect of things is portentous; but if we must come to an issue with Europe, let us keep it off as long as possible. Let us by all means carry the opinion of the nation with us, and the opinion of the world.[48]

Even if the Holy Alliance were determined to take issue with the United States, Adams warned that 'it should be our policy to meet, and not to make it'.[49] In addition, the United States 'had objects of distress to relieve at home' while intervening in behalf of the Greeks would 'be a breach of neutrality, and therefore improper'.[50]

America's political and moral duties were similarly called into question by the

[45] Morrison and Commager, *The Growth of the American Republic*, I, pp. 458–9.
[46] See William H. Seward, *Life and Public Services of John Quincy Adams, Sixth President of the United States*, (Auburn, 1851), p. 124.
[47] Cited in Richard N. Current, *Daniel Webster and the Rise of National Conservatism* (Boston, 1955), p. 43.
[48] Adams, *Memoirs*, VI, pp. 195–6.
[49] Adams. *Memoirs*, VI, pp. 193–8.
[50] Allan Nevins (ed.), *The Diary of John Quincy Adams, 1794–1845*, pp. 300, 323.

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reconquest of Spain by France in 1822. On 16 August 1823, British Foreign Secretary George Canning put to Richard Rush, American minister at London, a request that both nations issue a joint declaration opposing any attempt by France or other European nations to take possession of Spain's colonies. This offer confronted the Monroe Administration with a fundamental choice: Did the nation's hemispheric interests require the projection of American influence into European politics, or could the United States entrust the independence of the Western Hemisphere to protections afforded by the Atlantic, British naval power, and Latin American resistance?[51] As Canning's overture was being transmitted to Washington, Baron Tuyll advised Adams that, unless the United States remained neutral, Russia might endorse European action within the Spanish empire. While some administration officials regarded this development as of sufficient warrant to accept Canning's offer, Adams considered any military threat from the Holy Alliance dubious and realized that Britain had the power to prevent it in any case. Canning's motive, he thought, was less in soliciting a superfluous American pledge than preventing, through self-denying agreement, future American expansion into Texas and the Caribbean. Such a pledge, of course, would later prove inconvenient if Cuba voted herself into the United States. Adams contended that the time was propitious to take a stand against the Holy Alliance while declining Britain's proposal. 'It would be more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our principles explicitly to Russia and France, than to come in as a cock-boat in the wake of the British man-of-war.'[52]

In an address delivered to the citizens of Washington in 1821, Adams referred to a 'principle of *duty*', by which American leaders were admonished that 'direct interference in foreign wars, even wars for freedom' would 'change the very foundations of our government from *liberty* to *power*'. Adams did not believe that 'this question of political morality transcendently important to the future destiny of this country [had] even be presented before'.[53] On his nation's duty to mankind, Adams thought 'our answer should be this: America, with the same voice which she spoke herself into existence as a nation, proclaimed to mankind the inextinguishable rights of human nature, and the only lawful foundations of government'. It was 'not by the contrivance of agents of destruction, that America wishes to commend her inventive genius to the gratitude of aftertimes'. Nor was the American purpose 'the glory of Roman ambition, nor Tu regere *Imperio* populos—her momento to her sons'.

> Her glory is not *dominion*, but *liberty*. Her march is the march of the mind. She has a spear and a shield: but the motto upon her shield is, *Freedom, Independence, Peace*. This has been her Declaration: this has been, as far as her necessary intercourse with the rest of mankind would permit, her practice.[54]

Adams drew a sharp line between intervention and sympathy in behalf of those fighting for freedom. 'Whenever the standard of freedom and independence, has been or shall be unfurled, there will [America's] heart, her benedictions, and her prayers be.' Similarly respect for the independence of other nations dictated that the nation

[51] Norman A. Graebner, *Foundations of American Foreign Policy, A Realist Appraisal from Franklin to McKinley* (Wilmington, 1985), p. 169.
[52] Adams, *Memoirs*, VI, pp. 177, 180–1.
[53] Adams to Edward Everett, 31 July 1822, *Writings*, VII, pp. 197–202.
[54] Adams, *An Address Delivered At the request of a Committee of the Citizens of Washington; On The Occasion Of Reading The Declaration of Independence, On The Fourth Of July, 1821*, (Washington, D.C., 1821), pp. 29–31.

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abstain 'from interference in the concerns of others, even when the conflict has been for principles to which she clings. . . .' Prudence placed limitations upon the presumption of American moral omnipotence. Universal principles alone did not entitle America to venture 'abroad, in search of monsters to destroy'. Here, Adams reflected the counsel of Edmund Burke: 'Nothing is so fatal to a nation as an extreme of self-partiality, and the total want of consideration of what others will naturally hope or fear.'[55] Adams was a political realist who recognized that universal norms cannot be applied to the actions of states in their abstract formulation, but that they must be filtered through the concrete circumstances of time and place.

Ethics, diplomacy, and the national interest

The statecraft of John Quincy Adams moves the debate about the moral dimensions of American diplomacy beyond the often facile distinction between realism and idealism, pointing instead to the interplay of power and principle in shaping the national interest. Adams' legacy testifies to important procedural aspects in defining the concept of national interest. First, the national interest is not a detached interest in the international environment *for its own sake*, independent of a nation's aspirations and problems. A nation's values, history, resource needs, and international relationships are components of the national interest. Second, the national interest does not involve the pursuit of abstractions such as peace or just war or other legal definitions. Third, the national interest is not simply a question of purpose or objective; it is also a question of method. On this last point, George Kennan explained:

> A study of the great decisions of national policy in the past leaves the historian impressed with the difficulty of analyzing the future clearly enough to make reliable calculations of the consequences of national action. It also reveals that too often the motives of national action are ones dictated for government by developments outside of its control. Its freedom of action, in these cases, lies only in the choice of method—in the *how* rather than the *what*.[56]

Ethical debate about America's national purpose reveals a vast and perhaps unbridgeable gap between those who would affirm the final ends of society and let it go at that and those who strive to relate means and ends. Adams spoke for the latter alternative. Affirming a nation's ultimate ends may bring a flush of moral self-satisfaction, but it is hardly a substitute for giving content to purposes in a changing historical context. Adams believed that acting in good faith and with justice towards all nations entails the ethical responsibility of self-judgement. A moral approach to foreign policy begins with the acceptance of one's limitations, of the need to bring national commitments and undertakings into a reasonable relationship with the real possibilities for acting upon the international environment. The connection between power and responsibility—between the sowing and the reaping—is integral.[57] Linking

[55] Edmund Burke, 'Remarks on the Policy of the Allies with Respect to France', *Works* (Boston, 1889), IV, p. 447.

[56] George F. Kennan, 'The National Interest of the United States', *Illinois Law Review* (January-February, 1951), pp. 730, 736, 738. See also Kenneth W. Thompson, 'A Realist Response to the Appeal for Pacifism', *Perspectives on Political Science*, 20 (1991), p. 74.

[57] See the comments of George F. Kennan, 'Morality and Foreign Policy', *Foreign Affairs*, 64 (1985–6), pp. 212, 215.

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external commitments to domestic vitality is essential for a debtor nation that seeks in the 1990s to rescue its own economic liberty, in addition to fighting for the political rights of victims of tyranny in distant lands.

The American Revolution, to quote Paine, 'was not made for America alone, but for mankind'. In the sphere of foreign affairs, however, those universal principles proclaimed by the Founders were not to be exported by fire and sword if necessary, but they were to be presented to the rest of the world through the successful example of the United States. Adams recognized basic logical and pragmatic hindrances to a consistent policy of defending liberal and revolutionary movements abroad. First, it is not the prime business of a state among other states to defend human or other political rights. Second, the defence of liberty can and must come into conflict with *other* interests that may be more important in a particular instance. To conclude from the omnipresence of the moral element in foreign policy that a country has a mission to apply its own moral principles to the rest of humanity is something else. For there exists an enormous gap between the judgement we apply to ourselves, our own actions, and the universal application of our own standards of action to others. As important as America's obligation to confront ruthless aggressors around the world, is the courage with which it confronts the limitations of its own moral example. It does make a difference, as Reinhold Niebuhr insisted, 'whether the culture in which the policies of nations are formed is only as deep and as high as the nation's highest ideals; or whether there is a dimension in the culture from . . . which the element of vanity in all human . . . achievements is discerned'.[58]

Finally Adams' role as both moral thinker and diplomatist suggests a limited, but important, point of convergence between the callings of the statesman and the philosopher. Diplomacy, like politics, is preeminently a realm of ways and means. It is the avenue along which ideals and objectives are realized. At some point, the philosopher, however amateur in matters affecting the organization of the state, must venture across the line that separates thought and action. The notion is often advanced that the intellectual stops being an intellectual by being practical. In becoming a practitioner, he ceases to be the conscience of society, becoming instead its ideologue. Yet a conscience that has never known the deep pathos of social action and the tragic choices of statesmen inevitably views the political scene from the false security of moral and intellectual superiority. Much of present-day social and political criticism in the United States rings with a note of 'holier than thou'. When the organic connection is destroyed between the philosopher's world and the world of shadows and imperfections, he loses a zest for discrimination in practical affairs and declares a plague on every man's house. If there is a germ of truth in the diagnosis of the unhealthy state of American intellectual life, then one is certainly justified in approaching rather in the spirit of a dialogue the continuing interplay between philosophy, diplomacy, and politics.[59]

[58] Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American Democracy* (New York, 1952), pp. 149–50.
[59] Kenneth W. Thompson, *American Diplomacy and Emergent Patterns* (New York, 1962), pp. xvii-xviii.

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