The United States’ relationship with the wider world changed enormously over its first eighty-odd years of existence. Between the Revolution and the Civil War, the dynamic between the United States and other world powers shifted as the country grew in population and influence. In its early years, the United States was vulnerable to interference by acquisitive European empires; this weakness prompted isolationist policy as a practical solution to avoid being drawn into European power-plays. Attitudes about American weakness changed, both domestically and internationally, as the years passed and the situation in the United States – and in other countries—altered with time and circumstance; American foreign policy changed to accommodate these new conditions. Limits on the United States’ global reach were imposed not only by practical considerations, but also by the world’s view of the United States – and the United States’ vision of itself and its place in the world.

In its early years, the United States’ government opposed involvement with global affairs outside of trade; this was a reflection on the vulnerability of the burgeoning country in face of European powers. In his farewell address, George Washington advocated political neutrality as a means to avoid undesirable involvement in the conflicts of more powerful European nations. Alliance with European powers was viewed negatively because attachment to any given power would necessarily “entangle [American] peace and prosperity in the toils of European ambition, rivalship, interest, humor, or caprice;”\(^1\) in other words, the United States would be drawn into conflicts in which it had no true driving interest simply by virtue of its alliances. From its inception the United States had treaties of “Amity and Commerce” with European nations, even

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\(^1\) George Washington, Farewell Address, September 19, 1796.
in absence of alliance\(^2\), and commerce was seen as fundamentally tied to both peace and prosperity, internally and externally, for the country.\(^3\) International ties meant obligations even when the alliances had theoretical benefits for the United States\(^4\) — while these benefits might include trade advantages with a particular country the costs could include involvement in wars that did not directly affect the United States, disruption in trade with the enemies of their ally, and/or political divisions within the States themselves.\(^5\) Washington’s cautionary note that “an attachment of a small or weak toward a great and powerful nation dooms the former to be the satellite of the latter”\(^6\) speaks to the way that American leaders then viewed their country: relative to European countries, the United States was inferior in size and influence.

The idea that European powers might try to claim – or reclaim—parts of the United States was also alarmingly plausible during the United States’ early years and served as a limit to American attempts to project itself into the wider world. The Spanish and British empires were very real threats to the young country’s borders: the Spanish Empire attempted to entice Kentucky and Tennessee to leave the United States by offering increased opportunities for trade via the Mississippi,\(^7\) and the British Empire pecked at American borders from Canada in the north, the eastern seaboard, and frontier outposts to the west.\(^8\) A large measure of American vulnerability to these empires stemmed from the fact that the United States was outside the ‘zone’ of the Law of Nations. This was a sort of code of conduct for how war was to be fought between European countries: in essence, the ‘law’ ensured that wars within Europe were very

\(^2\) Foreign Treaties data, 1789-1867, interactive world map.
\(^3\) Lecture Notes, February 3, 2016.
\(^4\) Ibid.
\(^5\) Ibid.
\(^6\) Washington, 1796.
\(^7\) Lecture Notes, February 1, 2016.
\(^8\) Lecture Notes, February 15, 2016.
limited and ended in peace treaties, rather than conquest\textsuperscript{9}. These courtesies were extended only to the “civilized nations” of Europe; warfare conducted outside of this region was subject to no limits and could end in conquest\textsuperscript{10}. The United States very badly wanted to become a ‘civilized nation’ protected by the Law of Nations because, outside of it, their country was subject to a great deal of legalized violence and exploitation by European powers. Members of the League of Nations were licensed to direct violence against native peoples and were the arbiters of what was and was not lawful commerce – privateering at the hands of British ships\textsuperscript{11}, as well as regular charges of unlawful trade\textsuperscript{12}, were serious problems faced by the United States. This lack of designation as a ‘civilized nation’ served as a major impediment for the expansion of American global reach because the sovereignty of the United States was not respected by all of the powerful European nations\textsuperscript{13}.

American perceptions of their place in the world began to change when, following the Napoleonic wars, the Spanish Empire began to break apart; isolationist, neutral policy no longer seemed like the sole vehicle of national prosperity. The British Empire was still a source of threat and limitation for the United States; both Henry Clay and Robert Walsh addressed the ways in which Great Britain policed American expansion. Clay, writing in 1818, cautioned against military intervention in Florida because of how other nations, “particularly Great Britain”\textsuperscript{14}, would perceive such an act. When Clay wrote this in 1818 the United States had yet to station any navy agents abroad\textsuperscript{15} and had only conducted a handful of marine landings\textsuperscript{16}; still,

\textsuperscript{9} Lecture Notes, February 3, 2016.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} John Adams, Message to Congress, May 16, 1797.
\textsuperscript{12} Lecture Notes, February 3, 2016.
\textsuperscript{13} Lecture Notes, February 8, 2016.
\textsuperscript{14} Henry Clay, speech and motion on recognition of the Independent Provinces of the River Plata, March 24-25, 1818.
\textsuperscript{15} 1820 entry, Timeline.
\textsuperscript{16} Overseas marine landings data, 1785-1818, interactive world map.
he warned that the United States had “already been accused of inordinate ambition”\textsuperscript{17} regarding territorial expansion, and that they ought not lend credence to the claim. Walsh, one year later, complained bitterly about claims made by members of the Congress of Vienna that an American acquisition of Florida would compromise British security. The idea that Americans acquiring “a contiguous province […] by fair negotiation”\textsuperscript{18} was at all comparable to British “grasping of every maritime station in the four corners of the globe”\textsuperscript{19} scandalized Walsh, in no small part because it “impl[ied] an extraordinary sort of equity”\textsuperscript{20} between the two countries. This was astounding because British holdings were so much more immense than American ones that any unbiased eye, in Walsh’s view, would immediately see that Great Britain was a greater threat than the United States. Clay’s words also reinforced the thought that Britain was seen as insurmountably powerful, but his thoughts on Spanish-American exports reveal a notion heretofore unseen: the idea that quasi-imperial involvement in South America would be a means to greater profit for the United States, even if such a trade relationship should destroy their trade relationship with Great Britain. A viable alternative to England’s “colonial monopoly”\textsuperscript{21} had emerged; with the degradation of the Spanish Empire, new opportunities arose for the United States that reduced some of the limitations imposed by dependence on an all-powerful Britain.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the American story of itself – and of the world around it – had shifted so that armed conflict was seen as a means to ensuring the United States’ success, rather than a sure path to ruination. Early foreign military conflicts of the United States primarily concerned piracy in the Caribbean; by the end of the 1830s American naval forces

\textsuperscript{17} Clay, 1818.


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{21} Clay, 1818.
were involved all around the world and new types of engagement had emerged.\textsuperscript{22} The United States viewed itself as a paragon of democracy and liberation, the “great example”\textsuperscript{23} that other countries wished to emulate; the United States used this rhetoric of protection to justify the imposition of a sort of anti-colonial imperialism in South America where Americans would interfere with and manage South American governmental affairs without engaging in active colonization.\textsuperscript{24} Private groups of Americans formed filibuster campaigns to go into other countries and ‘liberate’ territory, often in the name of freedom\textsuperscript{25} but without the full acquiescence of those who lived there; the Americans’ desire to see a territory annexed into the collective “Our Country”\textsuperscript{26} was more important than resident wishes, the desires of the United States government, and international law. As the United States’ wealth and influence began to grow, too, American perceptions of non-Americans became distorted by the rise of popular media that portrayed Americans as noble bringers of justice to all parts of the world\textsuperscript{27}. As the years counted down to the Civil War, the rhetoric promoted in tracts and novels justified an increasingly common form of military venture, the “punitive expedition”, by rationalizing violence in context of strict racial hierarchies that put the white American on top.\textsuperscript{28} A punitive expedition involved United States military going to an exotic place and bombarding people in retribution for something bad that had happened to Americans; this violence was justified because the people attacked were being punished for a bad deed, and also because the American narrators emphasized just how “deeply they regretted the necessity of the present action”\textsuperscript{29} while

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\textsuperscript{22} Foreign Military Actions data, 1789-1867, interactive world map.
\textsuperscript{23} Clay, 1818.
\textsuperscript{24} Lecture Notes, February 24, 2016.
\textsuperscript{25} Lecture Notes, March 2, 2016.
\textsuperscript{26} John O’Sullivan, “Annexation,” \textit{United States Magazine and Democratic Review,} 1845.
\textsuperscript{27} Lecture Notes, March 23, 2016.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid.
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they were cannonading the place. The days in which the United States defined itself as *weaker* than Britain were gone; instead, the national narrative compared Americans favorably to other countries that it could, depending on the story, benevolently rescue or regretfully annihilate by virtue of its new military power and unique claim to liberty\textsuperscript{30}.

The United States’ involvement in the global stage was initially limited by its weak position relative to the powerful British and Spanish empires. Outside the League of Nations, the United States was not seen as a political equal to the ‘civilized nations’ of Europe; its early economy and (lack of) navy were not conducive to international influence. Its isolationist, ferociously neutral, politics were informed by this position of relative weakness. When the tides turned and the United States began to find itself in a position of relative power to its neighbors, these policies changed. So too did the United States’ vision of its role in the world: whereas before the United States was unapologetically isolationist, they became interventionist to the point that they acted in other sovereign nations in a quasi-imperial fashion. The United States no longer saw itself as a small player. The early material limits imposed by empire – vulnerability, lack of military, limited global influence – were exploded by wealth and influence so that the United States was capable of holding its own on the international level; the ideological limits imposed by those early material circumstances altered so that the United States felt entitled to go put American footprints and cannonballs in sovereign countries around the world less than eighty years after the country’s inception.

\textsuperscript{30} Lecture Notes, March 23, 2016.