The United States was undoubtedly an ambitious nation from its roots. American political and economic activity in the 19th century was not confined to North America, as many believe; the United States pursued an agenda of both domestic and international influence between the ratification of the Constitution and the breakout of the Civil War, but the pursuits were not without their inhibiting factors. Although the United States was able to overcome certain limiting external forces through economic and military triumphs, obstacles to America’s global reach were present throughout the time period. The United States faced extensive limitations in its first decades as a sovereign state due to the challenge of establishing international legitimacy. After the United States transcended these limits, more limitations became immediately apparent: the intimidating presence of other global empires and the rugged persistence of people around the world who avoided the debilitating effects of domineering imperialism.

The earliest years of the new nation were certainly a time to celebrate tremendous achievements in successfully founding a republican democracy. But a much greater challenge weighed upon America’s leaders—how could the United States earn acceptance into the coveted “treaty-worthy law of nations?”¹ Earning international respect through forays into foreign policy, commercial activity, and domestic territorial gain became a primary focus for the United States government. One of the first items of concern was securing open commerce with international parties. Conflicts with the Barbary Pirates – skirmishes that were veiled as acts of aggression from Arab sailors – were some of the first military conflicts for the young country.² These battles were ultimately a victory for the United States. Developing ties with powerful European nations

¹ Lecture notes, February 9th, 2015.
² Lecture notes, February 11th, 2015.
was a diplomatic focus during these years; foreign treaties and diplomatic missions were largely contained to Britain, France, Spain, and the Netherlands. But even attempts at diplomacy could not prevent military action. Continued conflict with Britain led to an early test of American viability—the War of 1812. While the American claim of a stalemate is hotly disputed by historians today, the war helped the United States garner international credibility. Before the conflict, the relative lack of recognition of the United States as an international presence limited American ventures in global economic and political activity. Instead, the government aimed expansion efforts at the Western “frontier” with the Lewis and Clark and Pike expeditions; leaders deemed deeper expansion into the continent to be more attainable than pursuing international holdings, largely due to the lack of a strong navy. However, overcoming the basic limits to acceptance into the international scheme of nations allowed the United States to venture into naval development, among other noteworthy global empire strategies.

The United States’ transition from fledgling state into viable nation was impressive, but not enough for its leaders to embrace confrontation with other strong international empires; the expansive holdings and global presence of certain empires – namely, the British – were important limits to America’s global reach between the War of 1812 and the Civil War. There is a noteworthy lack of American activity in the continents of Africa and Australia, even by 1867. The British Empire had significant imperial possessions in both continents, and their established presence deterred Americans from approaching them aggressively. This strong limiting factor is particularly noteworthy when comparing America’s lack of success in these areas to their generally increasing global reach in the era. There was a sharp increase in international activity

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3 Diplomacy data, 1785-1819, interactive world map.
4 1804-1807 entry, timeline.
5 All data, 1867, interactive world map.
of the United States in the early 1820s as a result of the bold Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and the focus on developing US Navy Squadrons around the globe in the hopes of becoming a strong maritime empire.\textsuperscript{6,7} These developments in US policy and naval capabilities laid the foundation for an age of ever-increasing global footholds. The United States capitalized on the instability of newly-independent nations in South America by creating alliances, expanding military presence, and promoting independent military action in the region.\textsuperscript{8} A bulk of American foreign activity occurred in the Western Hemisphere, from Central America to the Pacific Islands, with an interventionist approach to the Monroe Doctrine. In this period, the United States engaged in its first international treaties – with Colombia, Tahiti, and Siam among them – and successfully added territory in the Mexican War.\textsuperscript{9} Conveniently, these actions dealt with small, turbulent nations (Colombia) and the remnants of declining empires (Mexico). Very few American actions involved confrontation with the dominant international empire of the day, the mighty British.

It was not only the powerful European empires that forced the United States to check its international ambition in the mid-19\textsuperscript{th} century. The strength of viable states around the world inhibited unbridled American expansion. This force was particularly strong in Asia. The United States recognized the strength and expertise of societies in China and Japan, but was able to classify them as inferior people because of claims of lack of transferability to Western culture.\textsuperscript{10} Nonetheless, Americans were hesitant to exploit this area of the globe. As of 1867, a vast majority of American activity in the East was missionary work in India and diplomacy with the British holdings in Hong Kong.\textsuperscript{11} This lack of forceful confrontation was a nod to the persistent

\textsuperscript{6}James Monroe, Seventh Annual Message, December 2, 1823.
\textsuperscript{7} 1819-1835 entries, timeline.
\textsuperscript{8} Lecture notes, February 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2015.
\textsuperscript{9} 1824-1848 entries, timeline.
\textsuperscript{10} Lecture notes, March 25\textsuperscript{th}, 2015.
\textsuperscript{11} Missionary and military data, 1815-1867, interactive world map.
strength of these societies, despite some earlier British intervention. Because the influence of imperialism was less pervasive in much of Asia than in other areas that America directly confronted, there was a much greater fear of failure in dealings with these prosperous nations. The limiting forces of strong nations that avoided the worst of imperialism is, again, evident through an understanding of the United States’ alternative focus areas of international activity. South and Central America endured hundreds of years of brutal treatment and subjugation at the hand of the Spanish empire; they emerged from the imperialism of the Spanish and the United States promptly engaged the struggling states in economic and diplomatic relations.\textsuperscript{12} Even in Asia, the United States would eventually focus its efforts on the Philippines, a nation that was consistently ravaged by the Spanish. Despite late economic pushes into Japan and China – with Matthew Perry’s gunboat diplomacy in 1853 and the 1866 punishment of locals, respectively – American reluctance to approach stable states dominated the era approaching the Civil War.\textsuperscript{13}

Despite the drastic setbacks of the Civil War, the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was a time of impressive expansion into global environments for the still-young United States. Evident in the interactive world map, the 19\textsuperscript{th} century was much more than a time of domestic imperialism for the United States; it was a series of steps towards fulfilling the ambitious American intentions to become a global power that would rival the British. The main obstacles to America’s global activity were early struggles to assert legitimacy, the consistent presence of other mighty global empires, and the subtle strength of states around the world that resisted imperial influences. During this time, the United States was just another ambitious state, using exploitive military, diplomatic, and economic strategies in its pursuit of global influence and imperial prosperity.

\textsuperscript{12} Lecture notes, February 23\textsuperscript{rd}, 2015.
\textsuperscript{13} Foreign military actions data, 1853-1866, interactive world map.