The United States began expanding its boundaries and control at her very conception- the minute victory was declared in the Revolutionary War. From that point on, whether conscious or not, she began a campaign to expand her great virtues and ideals throughout the America’s and eventually the world. What started as thirteen colonies rapidly grew westward as the United States wiped out the Natives and battled the great powers of Europe for control of land and commerce. As the United States began its expansion it first conquered the Native Americans and then slowly spread its presence throughout the globe. During this era of expansion the United States sought to establish themselves as a global power through the use of treaties and a rapidly growing naval presence; this expansion was limited at first by resistance from the Native Americans and as the nation grew, by the rivaling empires of Great Britain and Spain.

The Native Americans were some of the first to experience the zealous desire for growth and expansion by the early settlers and citizens of the United States. In a letter to George Washington, Henry Knox attests to their mistreatment saying, “It is, however, painful to consider, that all the Indian tribes, once existing in those States now the best cultivated and most populous, have become extinct.” He then goes on to explain how the destruction was unlikely to stop by stating, “If the same causes continue, the same effects will happen; and, in a short period, the idea of an Indian on this side of the Mississippi will only be found in the page of the historian.” Knox’s story tells of how the states were ‘destined’ to continue their expansion, however should not do so at the expense of the Native Americans. The government sought to combat this destructive course through the creation of many treaties, which both parties agreed on terms of peace and mutual respect.
These treaties were not upheld on the government’s end and the Native Americans experienced the brutal consequences of the westward expansion through the betrayal of America’s promises. The Cherokees were one of the few remaining tribes in 1829 when they addressed the government’s disregard of the treaties. They ask the government, “In what light shall we view the conduct of the United States and Georgia, in their intercourse with us in urging us to enter into treaties?” Like many other tribes that had entered into countless treaties, yet were still being forced off their land. The government acted with complete disregard for any previous guarantees made in those treaties. The Cherokees even pointed out that even if the treaties were nullified, “Our understanding of the treaties is further supported by the intercourse law of the United States, which prohibits all encroachments upon our territory.” These treaties were nothing more than political propaganda that they could use to convince the world that they were properly expanding their states.

The Native Americans were not the only people the United States sought to make treaties with. During their destruction of the Native Americans, they were also entering into treaties with Spain and Europe for control of more American soil and a seat at the table of the global powers. The government started its quest to establish treaties across the globe in Britain starting in 1782. Although many of these initial treaties were regarding the separation of the colonies from the power of Britain, once this separation was achieved, they began concerning commerce and further peace. By 1823 they had entered into 45 different treaties with many different nations. Most of these were with Britain, however many were with other European nations and even moved into northern Africa. In this same year James Monroe spoke about the United States relations with Europe saying, “Our policy in regard to Europe, which was adopted at an early stage of the wars which have so long agitated that quarter of the globe… [is] to cultivate friendly
relations with it, and to preserve those relations by a frank, firm, and manly policy, meeting in all instances the just claims of every power, submitting to injuries from none." This attitude speaks to the United States ambition to maintain a peaceful and prosperous relationship with the powers of Europe. The latter part that speaks of “submitting to injuries of none” hints at the necessity of protection, of a defense system, that Monroe and others were also in the process of establishing.

During this era of establishing a global presence the government began developing its naval defenses in order to protect the homeland, the trade with other nations and better establish its powerful rank amongst the other powers who also had mighty naval forces. John Adams raises the issue of a necessary naval presence in a 1979 message saying, “The naval establishment must occur to every man who considers the injuries committed on our commerce, the insults offered to our citizens, and the description of vessels by which these abuses have been practiced.” He saw the growing trade amongst nations and the risks that were posed to the American merchants by foreign forces if the United States did not have a strong naval force. He also knew that the trade was vital to growing the economy, which needed to be strong in America’s infancy. Later in his message he speaks in reference to America’s growing power admitting, “However we may consider ourselves, the maritime and commercial powers of the world will consider the United States of America as forming a weight in that balance of power in Europe which never can be forgotten or neglected.” Adams is demanding that the United States establish their presence in the global market. He thought that with the addition of a strong naval force the powers of Europe would not be able to disregard America any longer and would need to accept the power America had to impact the global market. Being accepted by the powerful nations in Europe was a goal that the government wanted to achieve during this time and they knew building a rivaling naval force would get the attention they wanted from Europe.
The navy was thus established is 1794 and began rapidly expanding across the globe. By 1835 they reached as far as East India, with numerous squadrons stationed along the way. Most of the Navy’s early concerns were in the West Indies and coasts of Europe. 41 naval military actions were taken in the Indies and 23 in Europe by 1850, the rest accounted for only 19 and were spread across Africa, Asia and the pacific, and South America. This concentration in two places was due to the heavy trade in the Indies and the presence that Spain and Britain held in those trade routes. The United States was forced to concentrate their naval resources in these European powered areas in order to compete and protect their trade. Had they not been so concerned with establishing their trade relations and routes in the Indies and Europe, the navy may have been able to achieve an even broader and more dominant global presence in the mid 1800’s.

While early America had always been concerned with the trade in Europe and the Indies, they had to first take care of the trade and business at home, dealing with the Native Americans. As they were able to slowly shift more attention to establishing their global presence, they quickly gained status as a powerful nation through their treaty relations with many different nations and development of a strong naval force. It was through a culmination of all these individual actions, treaty by treaty, ship by ship, that led to the vast influence America had by the time the Civil War occurred. The rivaling forces of the European powers limited their ability in expanding as rapidly as some may have wished capable, however by the mid 1800’s America, as John Adams put it, had a “balance of power in Europe which can never be forgotten or neglected.”
1. Henry Knox to President George Washington 1789
2. Memorial of the Cherokee Nation 1829
3. Interactive Map, Foreign Treaties 1785-1823
4. James Monroe, Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1823
6. 1835 entry, Timeline
7. Interactive Map, Foreign Military Action, 1785-1850