Who are we, we Americans? Are we champions of liberty, both civil and religious, both at home and abroad? Are we a nation of many immigrant nations and thus a template for a united humanity? Are we a new Chosen People in a new Promised Land? Are we exceptional because of a unique immunity from the weight of history? Are we universal insofar as all other nations are destined to follow the trail we blaze until, as the poet Tennyson prophesied in *Locksley Hall*, “the war-drum throb’d no longer, and the battle-flags were furl’d / In the Parliament of man, the Federation of the world”? Or do Americans suffer from the most outlandish delusions of grandeur in history? Do we just fool ourselves by wrapping our private pursuits of happiness in sanctimonious pieties? Or are Americans *all the above*: good, bad, and ugly for the reason that we have been freer than any people in history to indulge the full range of human nature?

I believe sociologist Robert Bellah was correct to impute to the United States a civil religion. It can never become explicit, of course, but the American civil religion (or ACR as I call it) is like the atmosphere in which we live and move and have our being, because most Americans have always believed, or wanted to believe, or pretended to believe that their nation was planted by Providence and endowed with a mission to the whole human race. Today it goes by the name “exceptionalism,” a term invented during the early Cold War. But the debate over U.S. foreign relations has from the start revolved around the moral as well as practical question of how to reconcile America’s interests with its values or, to put it in ACR terms, the question of what America’s God requires of us.¹

Are we called to be peaceful exemplars of the American Creed or militant vindicators of it? A city upon a hill trusting in Providence...
to work His will among nations? Or an army of knights on a crusade to help history along? Are we saved by faith or by works? The title of my 1997 book, *Promised Land, Crusader State*, suggests my answer. During our first 120 years, America’s foreign policy closely guarded her place as a holy land, set apart from the wicked Old World. The United States was never isolationist—that is a naive or vicious epithet coined in the 1890s—but it was jealous of its neutrality and unilateralism. During that first century—call it the Washingtonian era—the purpose of foreign policy was to keep the corrupt outer world from shaping our nation. Accordingly, U.S. statecraft was guided by four traditions: liberty at home, but no foreign crusades; neutrality dictating no entangling alliances; a separate American system of states codified in the Monroe Doctrine; and continental expansion on the principle that the Constitution follows the flag.

A second century began with the Spanish-American War in 1898, a century during which the purpose of foreign policy was to enable the United States to shape the corrupt outer world in its own image. Accordingly, U.S. statecraft came to be guided by four new traditions: Progressive imperialism of the Teddy Roosevelt sort; Wilsonianism or liberal internationalism; Cold War containment; and global meliorism, my admittedly clunky term for foreign aid, democracy promotion, and nation building.

The big historical forces that triggered the 1890s transition are no mystery. They included America’s industrialization and rise to world leadership, the concomitant economic globalization, Europe’s new imperialism and colonial wars, the attendant naval arms races, encroachments on our Monroe Doctrine sphere, and the worrisome spread of social revolutions (as opposed to anti-colonial ones). Perhaps a serious updating of U.S. grand strategy was inevitable. But that meant the Progressive Era elites in politics and the clergy needed to make a veritable reformation in the civil religion and sell to the people the idea that God was calling Americans to flex their muscles, exercise their virtue, and reform the whole world. Progressive imperialism proved a tantalizing hors d’oeuvre, but the people and their representatives choked on the main course, which was Wilson’s crusade in the First World War. So the Progressives succeeding in invalidating the old Washingtonian consensus but failed to legitimate a new Wilsonian consensus. Hence, the American understanding of its relationship to the world entered a period of uncertainty, which lasted until Pearl Harbor.

World War II and the early Cold War marked a second major transition during which a new consensus coalesced in the belief that God now called America to champion the cause of freedom, first against fascist aggression and then against godless communism. That consensus sustained the grand strategy of containment until an overextended Soviet bloc collapsed of its own contradictions. But victory in the Cold War perversely deprived the United States of its enemy. So foreign policy came up for grabs again as Left and Right waged culture wars over globalization, multiculturalism, transnationalism, and exceptionalism. After the 9/11 attacks, the G. W. Bush administration tried to transcend all those disputes by establishing a benevolent U.S. hegemony. But its abject failure to do so leaves us all, especially younger Americans, in the midst of another civil religious crisis. What would God have Americans do in the twenty-first century?

Before 1898 most Americans believed the answer was to defend our hard-won liberties, command the respect of the Old World’s powers, pursue peace, friendship, and com-
merce with all nations, but otherwise mind our own business. Would such a modest foreign policy serve the United States today or just hasten the world’s descent into chaos? It is not my purpose to pronounce on the relevance of the Promised Land or Crusader State model, much less to suggest how Barack Obama should deal with Egypt, Syria, Iran, or China. My aim is to get the history right, unlike those on the Left and putative Right who contrive a “usable past” in order to push their present agendas.

To get the Founding Fathers right we must begin with their own history. For 150 years after the founding of Jamestown, the ACR was an extension of the BCR: the British civil religion, developed during the tumultuous Tudor and Stuart dynasties. First the English tamed Christianity by making their king the head of an Anglican (not Catholic) church. Then they tamed the monarchy by asserting parliamentary supremacy in 1688. The upshot was a Protestant, Whig commercial culture dedicated to the release of the national energies in pursuit of wealth and power. The BCR’s patron saints included Richard Hakluyt, Walter Raleigh, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke, and its implicit gospel was that the kingdom of God is of this world. The English baptized themselves the providential vanguard of human progress and then seemed to prove it by the stunning rise of their navigation, science, and colonization, imbued with what I call “the four spirits of English expansion.”

The first spirit was economic: a hustling rural and commercial capitalism that taught an ethic of self-improvement and ultimately inspired the Glorious Revolution. Under the Whig ascendency that followed, England became Great Britain and rose to power and glory on the strength of a “fiscal-military state” supported by voluntary taxes and a floating national debt. The third spirit was legal: the common-law judgment that only improvement of land conferred ownership, hence as John Locke argued in his Second Treatise on Civil Government, colonists had every right to dispossess indigenous Indians.3

Needless to say, those four spirits were bred in the bones of the mostly Anglo-Protestant settlers in America. But ironically, the British Empire’s climactic victory in the Seven Years War, the conquest of Canada, tore it apart. After 1763 the British Crown and parliament enacted reforms to appease their new French and Indian subjects, while imposing restrictions on the territorial and commercial growth of their own colonists! It seemed to Americans that they transgressed all four spirits of their expansion and became apostates in their own church! No wonder colonial Patriots stopped drinking the health of King George and instead damned his eyes. They included Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, and low-church Anglicans newly inflamed by the First Great Awakening, as well as Unitarians, Deists, and Freemasons drawn to the philosophies of the Enlightenment. But whether awakened, enlightened, or both, Americans put their lives, fortunes, and sacred honor on the line because they believed their liberty, self-government, free enterprise, and expansion (that is, ideals and interests alike) were sanctioned by the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God. The American struggle for independence was a species of holy war.4

The American colonies had long displayed

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1. "Promised Land" as a foreign policy concept was discussed by various American leaders, such as Thomas Jefferson, who believed in non-intervention and a focus on domestic affairs.
2. British Civil Religion (BCR) refers to the development of Protestantism in England, particularly during the reigns of Elizabeth I and James I, where the king was made head of the church.
3. The 1763 Treaty of Paris, which ended the Seven Years War, allowed Britain to impose taxes and regulations on the American colonies, leading to tensions and eventually the American Revolution.
4. "Holy war" in this context refers to the idea that the American Revolution was a sacred cause justified bynatural rights and divine providence.
a millenarian streak—just think of Jonathan Edwards or George Whitefield—and the recent victory over the French Catholics had quickened expectations. But Tom Paine’s *Common Sense* closed the deal precisely because the Deist preached a nonsectarian civil religion that all colonists might embrace. Paine called monarchy “the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry,” lamented how the Israelites had demanded an earthly king “to be as all other nations,” and called on Americans to *begin the world over again*. In the electric phrase “Ye that oppose independence now, ye know not what he do!” Paine even made independence the Messiah and Tories the Roman soldiers on Calvary. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine the Continental Congress taking the leap into treason *without* faith that they were actors in a play scripted by the Author of History.

Who was this Author? Most Protestants assumed the God watching over their country was the same one they worshiped on Sunday. But the ACR God was not trinitarian and had no name but a hundred names. Franklin called him the Father of Lights and Supreme Architect; Washington, the Almighty Being, Invisible Hand, and Parent of the Human Race; Adams, the Patron of Order, Fountain of Justice, and Protector; Jefferson, the Infinite Power; Madison, the Being who Regulates the Destiny of Nations; Monroe, the Almighty and Providence; John Quincy Adams, the Ark of our Salvation and Heaven; Andrew Jackson, that Power and Almighty Being Who mercifully protected our national infancy. For Freemasons like Washington he was also that mystical G whose All-Seeing Eye watches over the Unfinished Pyramid on the Great Seal of the United States. If Americans fell to quarreling over the identity of their national God, the Union could not survive. So the Declaration of Independence and Constitution were silent about religion, not because the Revolution was secular, but because it was civil religious. The secret of the First Amendment is that in prohibiting an establishment of religion and guaranteeing its free exercise, it *legalized all sectarian heresies while establishing a national civil religion*.7

What are we talking about? Here is a good definition: “A civil religion is a set of beliefs and attitudes that explain the meaning and purpose of any given political society in terms of its relationship to a transcendent, spiritual reality, that are held by the people generally of that society, and that are expressed in public rituals, myths, and symbols.”8 That transcendent, spiritual reality is what distinguishes civil religion from nationalism and ideologies of state worship. Americans did not worship themselves or their government, but rather the deity who made them “one out of many” (*e pluribus unum*), a “new order for the ages” (*novus ordo seclorum*), and “blessed their undertakings” (*annuit coeptis*). I call it divine-right republicanism as opposed to divine right of kings. The implicit covenant was that of Moses’s Farewell in Deuteronomy: if Americans obeyed the commandments by practicing republican virtue, the Lord would make them a great nation; if Americans disobeyed, they would be cast out and become a byword among nations.9

Which brings us at last to foreign relations. Did their sacred self-image enjoin the Founders to practice an aggressive ideological statecraft based on pride, ideology, and militancy, as if an echo of Cromwell’s Calvinist Commonwealth or foretaste of the Jacobin French Revolution? Not at all. Rather, their sacred self-image enjoined them to practice a “new diplomacy” based on humility, prudence, law, and reciprocity. The Founders clung to the view that their nation was
special not because of anything it was doing in other lands but because of what it was becoming at home. To be sure, the Founders were by no means convinced the American people would sustain sufficient republican virtue; but if they did “seek ye first the kingdom of God,” the Founders imagined that “all this shall be added unto you” and the United States would become a land of liberty under law, populous, prosperous, united, and utterly sovereign—which by the way is what the word empire meant to eighteenth-century Britons.\textsuperscript{10} George Washington gave eloquent voice to that in his last general orders to the Continental Army on April 18, 1783: “For, happy, thrice happy, shall they be pronounced hereafter, who have contributed anything, who have performed the meanest office; in erecting this stupendous fabric of freedom and empire on the broad basis of independence; who have assisted in protecting the rights of human nature, and establishing an asylum for the poor and oppressed of all nations and religions.”\textsuperscript{11}

To be sure, the Continental Congress briefly imagined that John Adams’s Model Treaty of 1776 would suffice to win foreign recognition just by offering free trade. Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and Robert Morris knew better. They waged dogged and deceptive espionage, war, diplomacy, and finance in order to realize the Glorious Cause. Nor was anybody abashed because power politics were employed to protect what was truly sacred: liberty at home. Nor is it in the least surprising that the strategic principles informing American statecraft included the very ones by which Britain secured her own spectacular rise. First, unshakable unity, which in Britain’s case had meant suppressing particularism on the part of the Scots, Irish, and Welsh so foreign powers could not meddle and the energies of a United Kingdom could be mobilized for expansion. Hence the Parliamentary Acts of Union in 1707 were a powerful precedent for the American Federalist movement. Second, pursuit of a favorable peace by remaining aloof from the European powers when possible and permitting only temporary alliances in emergency. That enabled the British to play offshore balancer while pursuing expansion and commerce in the wide world. In fact, a maritime grand strategy was even more promising for the United States than it had been for the United Kingdom and Dutch United Provinces, because America was so much larger, remoter, and more richly endowed. Third, the fiscal prudence needed to sustain a floating national debt and so finance the wars that became necessary. Needless to say, the Bank of England was the model for Alexander Hamilton’s Bank of the United States, the purpose of which was to make wars possible but never attractive.

George Washington always stressed, as strongly as he knew, that peace was the path to national greatness. Everyone knows his Farewell Address, but few know that he drafted the first “National Security Strategy” as early as May 1783. He began by describing the potential threats to the United States posed by Britain’s and Spain’s North American empires and hostile Indians on the frontier. (So much for the myth of isolationism.) Moreover, the Atlantic Ocean wasn’t a moat but a potential avenue for attack against America’s lengthy, exposed coastline. Accordingly, Washington proposed that Congress provide for a standing army to garrison forts on the frontiers and coasts; a well-trained militia in every state; arsenals stocked with weapons and ammunition in case of emergency; a military academy; and a permanent navy. He titled the document “Sentiments on a Peace Establishment.”\textsuperscript{12}
The Federalists who gathered in Philadelphia in 1787 likewise fixed upon the conditions that make for a favorable peace. That explains the apparent anomalies of a Constitution that inhibited foreign adventures through a division of foreign policy powers and yet contained no instructions at all regarding the use of those powers except, of course, to “preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution of the United States.” Were the Framers naive, absent-minded, or oblivious to the importance of foreign policy and defense?

Of course not. The impotence of the Articles of Confederation to unify policies for trade and defense were what moved Federalists to convene the convention in the first place, and the first thirty articles in The Federalist Papers urged ratification on foreign policy grounds. Yet when we look at the Constitution itself, all we find are those few, familiar clauses in Article I, Section 8, which grant Congress power to (1) regulate foreign commerce; (2) define and punish piracy on the high seas; (3) declare war; and (4) raise and support armies for no more than two years at a time, provide for a navy, and call up state militias in need. Article II, Section 2, is sparer still, merely granting the president power to (1) serve as commander in chief, (2) appoint ambassadors, and (3) make treaties with the advice and consent of the Senate.

That’s all. No one is delegated authority to make or execute foreign policy. No mention is made of a power to recognize or derecognize foreign regimes, terminate treaties as opposed to make them, make peace as opposed to war, declare neutrality in the wars of others, annex or cede territory, bestow or deny foreign aid, impose sanctions, regulate immigration and the status of aliens, proclaim Great Rules like Washington’s or Doctrines like Monroe’s, or for that matter prescribe or proscribe any specific diplomatic behavior at all!

What were the Framers thinking? I believe they were thinking just what we would expect them to think if we study the political and intellectual history of their time and place, the history they themselves studied, and of course their own highly articulate arguments. The only people who may be surprised by their thinking are those who imagine America’s Founders to have been demigods who personified universal law and meant to design an instrument to impose on all humanity—in other words, people who think America’s Founders were akin to the Jacobins.

They were not. As the very first sentence of Forrest McDonald’s great book on the subject states: “The Framers of the Constitution were, for the most part, intensely practical men who were skeptical, even contemptuous, of abstract schemes of political theory.”13 The Framers were not Neoplatonists, Thomists, Kantians, Rousseauians, or proto-Straussians. They were Anglo-Americans steeped in the common law, Protestant theology, the English and Scottish Enlightenments, and classical history. They meant to fashion a government able to defend the United States whatever that may require, hence they left its foreign policy powers vague and elastic. But they also meant to fashion a government that did not threaten their own liberty. So they separated the powers to raise and command armies, to make and wage war.14

The lessons of history, not least the War of Independence itself, persuaded Federalists of the need for a single robust executive to execute foreign relations and command the military. Sound philosophy supported that judgment. John Locke considered executive prerogative to include “the power of war and peace, leagues and alliances, and all the transactions with all persons and communities without the Commonwealth.” The alternative, he warned, must be “disorder and ruin.” The Anglophile Montesquieu
deemed domestic policy the business of the legislature, and foreign policy that of the executive. Sir William Blackstone’s voluminous commentaries on common law found ample precedent for the Crown’s exclusive authority over war and diplomacy so long as it was exercised for the public good in a constitutional manner.

But Americans also identified strongly with Britain’s countertradition, the “Country Party” or Whig opposition to executive caprice. Even Hamilton, who otherwise insisted that foreign affairs were “executive altogether” because of their need for unity of command, secrecy, and dispatch, nevertheless conceded in Federalist No. 75 that history did not warrant so exalted an opinion of human virtue as to “make it wise to commit interests of so delicate and momentous a kind, as those which concern its intercourse with the rest of the world, to the sole disposal of . . . a President of the United States.”

Abraham Lincoln would echo this wisdom when he noted that the Framers “resolved to so frame the Constitution that no one man should hold power of bringing this oppression upon us.” James Madison was sufficiently worried about executive malfeasance that he wanted all residual or implied constitutional powers to rest with Congress. In sum, the office of president was a novelty, and the expectations of the Framers regarding its evolution cannot be fully guessed. But we can be sure no one wanted to invite the tyranny of a monarch like George III or a demagogue like Oliver Cromwell.

Washington was inaugurated the first president in 1789 just one week before the Estates General convened in Paris and the French Revolution began. Accordingly, U.S. politics in those formative, precedent-setting years was dominated by vicious disputes over Washington’s declaration of neutrality, the controversial Jay Treaty with Britain, the Citizen Genêt Affair, and the rise of the Democratic-Republican Party led by Jefferson. That has tempted some authors to claim that Washington wrote his Farewell Address of 1796 just to boost the electoral campaign of Vice President John Adams.

But such a crabbed interpretation ignores the fact that Washington knew that everything he did and said—especially his parting words—set a powerful precedent. He spoke quite consciously for the ages. Moreover, the crises of the 1790s were not atypical but prototypical, likely to recur throughout the future, hence they were parables illustrating Washington’s principles. Nor were those principles recent inspirations. They appear again and again in his papers dating back decades. We may therefore take Washington at his word when he says to the American people that his motive is “zeal for your future interest.”

Washington did not need to exhort the American people to love liberty, for that is interwoven “with every ligament of your hearts.” But he recommends “to your frequent review” the qualities required to preserve liberty, including patriotism, wisdom, virtue, prudence, and unity, the “main pillar in the edifice of your real independence, the support of your tranquility at home, your peace abroad, of your safety, of your prosperity, or that very liberty which you so highly prize.”

Washington then turns to the most common poison in the body of a republic, the spirit of faction: “This spirit, unfortunately, is inseparable from our nature, having its root in the strongest passions of the human mind. It exists under different shapes in all governments, more or less stifled, controlled, or repressed; but, in those of the popular form, it is seen in its greatest rankness, and is truly their worst enemy.” Therefore it is
imperative that Americans maintain their system of checks and balances and be constantly on guard against the encroachment of one branch of government upon the powers of another.

The survival of even the sturdiest Constitution, however, ultimately rests on the character of the people. Therefore, Washington exhorts Americans to cultivate six healthy habits:18

(1) “Of all the dispositions… which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

(2) “…cherish public credit. One method of preserving it is to use it as sparingly as possible, avoiding occasions of expense by cultivating peace.”

(3) “Observe good faith and justice toward all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it?”

(4) “The nation which indulges towards another a habitual hatred or a habitual fondness is in some degree a slave…. Against the insidious wiles of foreign influence the jealousy of a free people ought to be constantly awake.”

(5) “The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is in extending our commercial relations, to have with them as little political connection as possible…. It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.”

(6) “Even our commercial policy should hold an equal and impartial hand; neither seeking nor granting exclusive favors or preferences…. There can be no greater error than to expect or calculate upon real favors from other nations.”

Thus did Washington define the character of the United States in terms of liberty, unity, and sovereignty in domestic policy, and peace, neutrality, and reciprocity in foreign policy. He declared Europe a separate sphere, and he predicted enormous growth for the republic if it cherished these rules. He warned of the damage Americans’ own character flaws might wreak, and he allowed for emergencies caused by the bad faith of foreigners. His principles derived from reason, experience, religion, morality, and enlightened self-interest, and he bade his countrymen, as they rose to greatness, “to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence.”

In short, the Farewell Address sketched out, with prophetic authority and breathtaking pragmatism, all four of the “Promised Land” diplomatic traditions. First: liberty, unity, and sovereignty at Home, but no gratuitous, costly, ideological crusades abroad. As Washington’s most brilliant protégé, John Quincy Adams, put it in his famous speech of 1821: America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.” Second: neutrality except in temporary emergencies. Third: an American system of republics with the Old and New Worlds off-limits to each other’s meddling. Fourth: expansion through diplomacy, purchase, pioneering, and force as a last resort. The foundations of all four traditions were international law, mutual respect, and reciprocity among civilized nations.

Review in your memory the main episodes of nineteenth-century history and you will see how American statesmen stayed the course. Jefferson, for all his wild talk in favor of the French Revolution, announced in his inaugural, “We are all Federalists; we are all Republicans,” pledged “no entangling alliances,” clung to neutrality in the Napoleonic Wars, and acquired Louisiana peaceably. When the long-suffering Madi-
son at last asked Congress to declare war on Britain in 1812, it was a unilateral act in defense of American honor: there was never a question of alliance with Bonaparte. After 1815 Secretary of State John Quincy Adams made permanent peace with Britain on the Canadian frontier and a treaty with Spain, which ceded Florida and extended U.S. claims to the Pacific. His Monroe Doctrine then warned European powers against new colonization in the Americas and promised in return that the United States would not intervene in European affairs.

Andrew Jackson was so fiercely protective of American honor that this land soldier sharply expanded the U.S. Navy but avoided gratuitous conflict even during the Texas war of independence. His protégé James K. Polk, by contrast, risked (some say invited) war against Mexico for annexationist goals. But when northern humanitarians tried to turn the war into a crusade to occupy and uplift all of Mexico, Polk recoiled. The 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo ceded to the United States only those strategic, sparsely populated lands it was in their national interest to acquire.

Weren’t some Americans tempted to charge into ideological wars in support of republicanism? Yes, indeed. Jefferson, Henry Clay, William Seward, U.S. Grant, and some others displayed a split-mindedness, a utopian streak that led them to imagine vain things like global revolution or global government. But such fanaticism never came close to capturing U.S. foreign policy.

What of the Civil War? Didn’t that great moral crusade eventuate in Reconstruction, America’s first nation-building project? Yes, it did, but it also ended—and was seen to have ended—in tragic failure. Well, didn’t the Civil War mobilization prepare the United States for a career as a paladin of democracy in the world? Not to hear Lincoln tell it. There isn’t a word—not a word—about foreign policy in all his collected works save for the iredic hope at the close of the second inaugural that Americans might “cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations.” Nor is there any evidence that the Civil War deflected U.S. diplomacy from its Washingtonian principles.

On the contrary, two of the most striking features of postbellum politics are the frugality of the Congress and its vigorous reassertion of constitutional powers in matters of foreign policy. The budget shrank from $1.3 billion in 1865 to a lean $241 million in 1877 before inching back upward with the building of the so-called New Navy. Of course, the United States was blessed by a neighborhood that needed little active defense. But wise policy also ensured that the nation made no enemies, and no one imagined the United States imitating European imperialism in Africa or Eurasia. Indeed, Republican Charles Sumner, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, stated emphatically: “Empire obtained by force is un-republican, and offensive to the first principle of our Union, according to which all just government stands only on the consent of the governed. Our country needs no such ally as war. Its destiny is mightier than war. Through peace it will have everything.”

The Gilded Age was also the era when the Senate made a habit of reciting Washington’s Farewell Address at the start of each session. Why did the old ways seem good?

They seemed good, I think, because between 1787, when the Constitution was drafted, and 1897, when William McKinley was inaugurated, the United States was contained—self-contained—by four powerful checks against zealotry. The first was relative weakness. The United States might be a potential hegemon in the New World but remained a minor player in the world at large. So American
statesmen proclaimed the *doctrine of separate spheres* and were pleased that it seemed to stick. The second was *westward expansion*. No one in his right mind wanted to risk the nation’s Manifest Destiny in North America by picking ideological quarrels overseas. The third was the *wisdom of history*. American statesmen in the nineteenth century—unlike today’s ignoramuses—knew the lessons of Athens and Rome and lived in healthy fear of an American Alcibiades, Caesar, or Cromwell. The fourth was the residual Christian anthropology embedded in U.S. institutions. Almost all the Framers had believed, if not in original sin or Calvin’s total depravity, then in their philosophical equivalent, the *incorrigible imperfection of human nature*. That is why Federalists were anxious to check and balance powers, while Anti-Federalists feared any general government at all. Indeed, a major check on hubris and adventurism was the Constitution itself.

Finally, standing above and validating the prudent traditions and checks was the American civil religion, which taught that law must follow the flag so that any peoples and lands acquired must be accorded statehood. Under that dispensation even white racism served as a check on colonialism. In retrospect, since we know what happened in 1898, it is easy to build an argument that the United States was destined to bid for world power, and probably sooner than later given the thrust of the Progressive movement.

But it certainly would have surprised most Americans of the time to learn their hallowed foreign policy traditions were about to be jetisoned. Just listen to the inaugural address of Democrat Grover Cleveland, in 1885:

> The genius of our institutions, the needs of our people in their home life, and the attention which is demanded for the settlement and development of the resources of our vast territory dictate the scrupulous avoidance of any departure from that foreign policy commended by the history, the traditions, and the prosperity of our Republic. It is the policy of independence, favored by our position and defended by our known love of justice and by our power. It is the policy of peace suitable to our interests. It is the policy of neutrality, rejecting any share in foreign broils and ambitions upon other continents and repelling their intrusion here. It is the policy of Monroe and of Washington and Jefferson—“Peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliance with none.”

Listen now to the Republican Benjamin Harrison, who ran against Cleveland in 1888. The first to imagine the presidency as a bully pulpit, Harrison preached old-time civil religion. Thus he took it as axiomatic that piety, virtue, and hard work were rewarded with material plenty, but also reminded Gilded Age American audiences “that it is not, after all, riches that exalt the Nation. It is a pure, clean, high, intellectual, moral, and God-fearing citizenship that is our glory and security as a Nation.” Harrison taught the “good old Biblical maxims” on which Lincoln had said all sound policy rested. He insisted America’s truly dangerous enemies were not Great Powers abroad but a lapse of integrity and purity at home. He believed republicanism would spread in the world by “sympathy and emulation” and feared the harm Americans might do to themselves and to others should they undertake to extend their institutions by force. That is why Harrison never recanted his slogan:

> “We Americans have no commission from God to police the world.”

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On the American Revolution as a holy war, see McDougall, Freedom Just around the Corner, 202–38.

In New England, the "black regiment" of clergy led by Jonathan Mayhew preached political resistance as a religious duty. In New Jersey, Princeton's president John Witherspoon persuaded students like James Madison that the American cause was sacred to the Lord. In Richmond, Patrick Henry declared, "there is a just God who presides over the destinies of nations; and who will raise up friends to fight our battles for us," before concluding, "Give me liberty or give me death.” In Philadelphia, the Continental Congress called the colonists to penitence, prayer, and fasting, and resolved in March 1776 “that it may please the Lord of Hosts, the God of America, to animate our officers and soldiers with invincible fortitude . . . that a spirit of incorruptible patriotism and undefiled religion may universally prevail.” Down in South Carolina, Judge William Henry Drayton expressed that "mythic and mystic spirit of 1776 when he declared the colonists' miraculous fortune, long-suffering, self-denial, and success in battle proved that the Lord of Hosts fought alongside them. Connor Cruise O'Brien, God Land: Reflections on Religion and Nationalism (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1988), 29; Hezekiah Niles, ed., Principles and Acts of the Revolution in America (1822), cited in Catherine L. Albanese, Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1976), 140.


James G. Wilson, The Imperial Republic: A Structural History of American Constitutionalism from the Colonial Era to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 1–9. When the Founders casually boasted that America was or would become a great empire, what they had in mind was not even remotely akin to the global alliances and foreign military deployments the United States has engaged in since 1941. The word empire meant one of three things in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The obvious first meaning was autocratic rule by a capricious emperor who crushed the liberties of his subjects and exploited them in pursuit of power and glory. Americans abominated that sort of empire. A second usage connoted a vast region larger than the typical European kingdom and singled out for some characteristic. That is the sense in which Jefferson spoke of an Empire of Liberty. The third meaning of empire in Early Modern English, however, connoted a very specific legal identity: utter, untrammeled sovereignty. When Henry VIII broke with the papacy, he bade Parliament to pass a formal statute declaring “this realm of England is an Empire,” meaning a realm subject to no superior authority, either temporal or spiritual, on the face of the earth. As William Blackstone explained in his famous Commentaries on the Laws of England, 4 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 1:235, the words empire and imperial as used by Parliament simply means that the English king “owes no kind of subjection to any other potentate on earth.” The Founders and constitutional Framers assuredly understood that when Congress broke away from the English Crown, it was declaring the United States to be an empire in the sense of “utterly sovereign.”


Conventional wisdom holds that besides the personal presentations, the Farewell Address was drafted mostly by Hamilton. In May 1796 the president sent him an earlier draft composed in tandem with James Madison with permission “to throw the whole into a different form.” See Felix Gilbert, To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1961), 123–36. But recently John Lambertson Harper, Alexander Hamilton and the Origins of U.S. Foreign Policy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), and O'Brien, First in Peace, 161–67, have argued that Washington was the principal author. Hamilton's main contribution, writes Harper, was to incline the text "toward a prudent, realistic recognition of America's long-term inseparability from the European state system that it otherwise would not have
had” (177). That is, the Address emphasized the wisdom of neutrality precisely because the United States could not “isolate” themselves from the rivalries of the European powers. See also Karl-Friedrich Walling, Republican Empire: Alexander Hamilton and War and Free Government (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), and Lawrence S. Kaplan, Alexander Hamilton: Ambivalent Anglophile (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), who faults Hamilton for failing to appreciate how frightening his visions of national greatness appeared to the Jeffersonian opposition. He quotes John Adams to the effect that Hamilton "knew no more of the sentiments and feeling of the people of America, than he did of those of the inhabitants of one of the planets" (159).

17 David C. Hendrickson, Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789–1941 (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009), 25–34. Washington was enraged by suggestions that his policies had ulterior or self-serving motives. Thus, when he heard rumors that Jefferson was accusing him of secret favoritism toward Britain, Washington candidly wrote that he assumed the rumors had to be false "unless (which I do not believe) he has set me down as one of the most deceitful, & uncandid men living. . . . Having determined, as far as lay within the powers of the Executive, to keep this country in a state of neutrality, I have made my public conduct accord with the system, and whilst so acting as a public character, consistency, & propriety as a private man, forbid those intemperate expressions in favor of one Nation, or to the prejudice of another, wch many have indulged themselves in—I will venture to add—to the embarrassment of government, without producing any good to the Country. With very great esteem & regard I am—Dear Sir Your Obedt & Affecte Go. Washinton": private letter to Henry Lee (August 26, 1794), in David Hoth and Carol S. Eber, eds., The Papers of George Washington, Presidential Series 16 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 603–4.

18 http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/washing.asp—emphasis added.


20 Charles Sumner, Prophetic Voices Concerning America: A Monograph (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1874), 175.


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