

Citizen Genet and Foreign Policy

Although one of the first tasks of the new government was to strengthen the domestic economy and make the nation financially secure, the United States could not ignore foreign affairs. The cornerstones of Washington's foreign policy were to preserve peace, to give the country time to recover from its wounds, and to permit the slow work of national integration to continue. Events in Europe threatened these goals. Many Americans watched the French Revolution with keen interest and sympathy. In April 1793, news came that France had declared war on Great Britain and Spain, and that a new French envoy, Edmond Charles Genet – Citizen Genet – was coming to the United States.

When the revolution in France led to the execution of King Louis XVI in January 1793, Britain, Spain, and Holland became involved in war with France. According to the Franco-American Treaty of Alliance of 1778, the United States and France were perpetual allies, and the United States was obliged to help France defend the West Indies. However, the United States, militarily and economically a very weak country, was in no position to become involved in another war with major European powers.

On April 22, 1793, Washington effectively abrogated the terms of the 1778 treaty that had made American independence possible by proclaiming the United States to be "friendly and impartial toward the belligerent powers." When Genet arrived, he was cheered by many citizens, but treated with cool formality by the government. Angered, he violated a promise not to outfit a

captured British ship as a privateer (privately owned warships commissioned to prey on ships of enemy nations). Genet then threatened to take his cause directly to the American people, over the head of the government. Shortly afterward, the United States requested his recall by the French government.

The Genet incident strained American relations with France at a time when those with Great Britain were far from satisfactory. British troops still occupied forts in the West, property carried off by British soldiers during the Revolution had not been restored or paid for, and the British Navy was seizing American ships bound for French ports. The two countries seemed to be drifting toward war. Washington sent John Jay, first chief justice of the Supreme Court, to London as a special envoy. Jay negotiated a treaty that secured withdrawal of British soldiers from western forts but allowed the British to continue the fur trade with the Indians in the Northwest. London agreed to pay damages for American ships and cargoes seized in 1793 and 1794, but made no commitments on possible future seizures. Moreover, the treaty failed to address the festering issue of British "impressment" of American sailors into the Royal Navy, placed severe limitations on American trade with the West Indies, and accepted the British view that food and naval stores, as well as war materiel, were contraband subject to seizure if bound for enemy ports on neutral ships.

American diplomat Charles Pinckney was more successful in dealing with Spain. In 1795, he negotiated an important treaty

settling the Florida border on American terms and giving Americans access to the port of New Orleans. All the same, the Jay Treaty with the British reflected a continuing American weakness vis-a-vis a world superpower. Deeply unpopular, it was vocally supported only by Federalists who valued cultural and economic ties with Britain. Washington backed it as the best bargain available, and, after a heated debate, the Senate approved it.

Citizen Genet's antics and Jay's Treaty demonstrated both the difficulties faced by a small weak nation caught between two great powers and the wide gap in outlook between Federalists and Republicans. To the Federalists, Republican backers of the increasingly violent and radical French Revolution were dangerous radicals ("Jacobins"); to the Republicans, advocates of amity with England were monarchists who would subvert the natural rights of Americans. The Federalists connected virtue and national development with commerce; the Republicans saw America's destiny as that of a vast agrarian republic. The politics of their conflicting positions became increasingly vehement.

1. Which of the following was **not** a cornerstone of George Washington's foreign policy?
 - a. Give the country time to recover from its wounds
 - b. Permit the slow work of national integration to continue
 - c. Preserve peace
 - d. Secure sovereignty over all western lands

2. What 1778 agreement stated that the United States and France were perpetual allies, and the United States was obligated to help France defend the West Indies?

3. President Washington ignored the 1778 treaty with France by proclaiming that the United States was "____."

4. Citizen Genet was Edmond Charles Genet, a French envoy whom the United States government requested be recalled after he threatened to take the cause of American support for the French directly to the American people.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. What was settled by the Jay Treaty (1794)?

6. What was settled by Pinckney's Treaty (1795)?

7. To the Republicans, backers of the increasingly violent and radical French Revolution were dangerous radicals.
 - a. True
 - b. False