

Empire or Republic? The American Foreign Policy of John Quincy Adams

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I extend my thanks to the members of the Schiller Institute, to Helga, and to Lyn, for being such an inspiration over all these years....

My assigned task today was to talk about American history, and a little about John Quincy Adams [1767-1848], and to put some of our present foreign policy into historical context, so we can compare and contrast.

First, I was really interested in the points that Helga was making in the first panel about a “paradigm shift.” And one of the things that occurred to me as I listened to her was this idea: “Paradigm shift”: Well, let’s recover some of our values. And Bruce Fein was very inspirational in that too, in his awesome remarks (see above). *Recovering some of our values*, so that we can go forward creatively.

And when we’re going forward creatively, I also agree that we also have to change the world. And from my international relations point of view, foreign policy-diplomatic point of view, I’m interested in the international system, and in transforming it. I don’t like the system we have now. So we want to transform the international system. That’s what we need to do.

Part I: An American Perspective

Before I go into some historical background, I want to make three main points:

1. John Quincy Adams believed in a foreign policy of peace through diplomacy and international law, and he believed in a policy of development, economic and social development, through international *cooperation* and commerce. And commerce in a big sense: interchange of goods and services, ideas, and cultural interaction. A bigger definition of commerce than we might normally make, like trade.
2. John Quincy Adams opposed intervention into the internal affairs of sovereign states. As it was pointed out in the first panel, he wasn’t interested in going forth and seeking monsters to destroy—intervening in the affairs of sovereign states abroad.
3. John Quincy Adams op-

posed imperialism.

Those are the three things I think are most typical of John Quincy Adams’ legacy, in terms of key principles, key values, which should be incorporated into American foreign policy today.

Now, I’m going to sketch out a traditional American understanding of our foreign policy and ourselves within the world. Then I’ll talk a little bit about John Quincy Adams, himself, his background. And then, thirdly, I’ll wrap up and bring the historical context all the way up to fairly recent times.

So, a traditional American perspective on our nation’s history would highlight the goals of sovereign in-



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dependence, social and economic well-being, and also the dangers of encirclement, civil war, and division. In this regard, allow me to make four points:

1. Our Colonial period, from 1609 to 1776, demonstrated that we were not at all “isolated” from world politics. Never have been. In fact, it was a challenge to maintain our security given that we in our small colonies hugging the Atlantic Ocean were encircled by formidable imperial powers: France and Britain to our north, and Spain (and later France) to our west and south. European politics, diplomacy, and war had a direct impact on our security and well-being. We have never been *isolated* from world politics. So I want us to dispense with any notions of being isolated. We want to *engage* the world in a constructive and positive way. We want to *transform* the international system.

2. The Seven Years War, from 1756 to 1763, in which the British Empire nullified French power to our north, resulted in our increasing vulnerability to British imperial power by eliminating our potential French ally in Canada. Thus the road was cleared for an ever-increasing imperial restriction of our rights, and for the limitation of our economic and geographic potential by the imperial power, Britain. This was, of course, the cause of our American Revolution, or part of the cause.

3. American success in the War of 1812—again, the British Empire was trying to stifle us through military means—put a check on British designs to reverse the results of our American Revolution. As a consequence, we were able to populate and develop our country to the point where we stood as the third industrial power in the world by 1850, behind the British and the French empires.

However, for some years, reactionary circles in Britain and France sought a way to break up our American Union, and thereby nullify the economic threat the United States posed to these two empires.

4. Britain and France conspired in a design to “divide and rule” our republic, by separating the North from the South, via the mechanism of a Civil War. The French placed Austrian Archduke Maximilian on the throne in Mexico; and the British, playing various sides, aided the Southern slave power—and that’s what we used to call it in the old days, the slave power, which was what it was. And in one scenario, Texas would have been taken away from our Republic, our Union, and served as a “buffer state,” and a kind of little toy of the British.

Owing to President Lincoln’s leadership, and to the victory of the Union military forces, however, this design failed, and our Union, thank God, was preserved. And I think the recent Spielberg movie [“Lincoln”] was fabulous, refreshing our minds and our memories of what we were struggling for back in that period of time.

Part II: John Quincy Adams (1767-1848)

Now let me turn to John Quincy Adams. Just to give us a sense of his background and preparation, and the quality of our diplomacy in the early years of the Founding Fathers.

John Quincy Adams was the son of President John Adams. And, from an early age, he was educated for a life of public service. He accompanied his father, who was an American envoy to France (1778-1779), and to the Netherlands (1780-1782). We were trying to negotiate a loan from the Netherlands at that time.

So, young John Quincy was accompanying his Dad, and thereby learning first-hand about international affairs and diplomacy. He studied at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, and learned the Dutch language as a consequence. And, of course, we can remember the great humanist Erasmus [1466-1536] who had a relationship to the University of Leiden.

With this experience under his belt, young John Quincy Adams then accompanied Francis Dana as our envoy to St. Petersburg, Russia, in trying to secure the recognition of Russia to our fledging Republic; he served for three years as a secretary to the mission. As a consequence of this activity, he begins to learn some Russian, and also forges that deep interest in U.S.-Russian relations, *positive* U.S.-Russian relations.

Then, during this time, he traveled to Sweden, Finland, and Denmark. He learned French and Dutch, and became familiar with German and other European languages. Returning home to the Boston area, he graduated from Harvard, earned a Masters Degree, and went on to study and practice law.

Now, here’s where the diplomacy begins to come in on its own account: In 1793, President George Washington appointed young Adams, at age 26, as minister to the Netherlands. Back in those days, we didn’t have ambassadors, we had ministers—that was the highest rank. Next, President Washington, in 1796, appointed

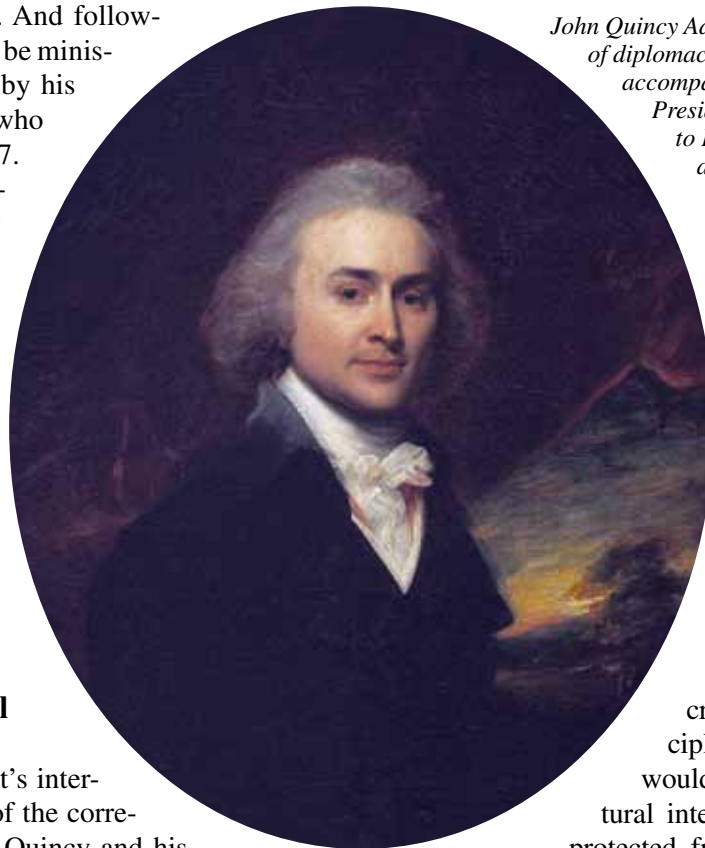
him minister to Portugal. And following that, he's appointed to be minister to Prussia, in Berlin, by his father John Adams, who became President in 1797. So we can see the development of this very young John Quincy Adams, within the sort of maelstrom of European power politics and imperial dynastic politics of the day, and also developing deep cultural relations with various European circles, which we would call today, progressive circles.

Washington's Farewell Address

Now, following that, it's interesting to note that some of the correspondence between John Quincy and his father found its way to President George Washington, when he was drafting his famous "Farewell Address." So, some of the famous concepts and values which were in this all-important document, incorporated some of the thoughts and concerns and concepts of John Quincy Adams, the young diplomat in the Netherlands. The thrust of young Adams' argument was that the United States must remain independent from European affairs and endless intrigue.

President James Madison appointed John Quincy Adams, in 1809, as our first full-fledged minister to St. Petersburg, where he served until 1814. He was aware of the Napoleonic Wars, and then later, negotiated the Treaty of Ghent, which ended our War of 1812 between the British Empire and the United States. He was then sent to London as minister from 1815-1817.

Returning to the United States, President James Monroe appointed John Quincy Secretary of State, a Cabinet position he held till 1825. Adams' masterful diplomacy gained Florida, parts of the West, a treaty with Spain, etc. Mutual respect, mutual benefit, of course, are part of these diplomatic concepts from this old, traditional period of time. And also, he was the author in many ways of the Monroe Doctrine, which



John Quincy Adams assimilated the principles of diplomacy as a young man, accompanying his father, the future President John Adams, on missions to France and the Netherlands; and later as secretary to the American envoy to St. Petersburg, Russia. (Portrait by John Singleton Copley, 1796).

simply meant that we wanted to restrict the European imperial powers from messing around in our New World, from undermining the potential independence of South American states. And the idea of the Monroe Doctrine was to create a community of principle, under law, where we would have commerce and cultural interaction, and we would be protected from intervention by European imperial powers.

I want to make a comment while I'm at this point, about other young Americans who went to Europe during this period, to study history, in particular, and I guess it's appropriate for the Schiller Institute: The locus of study for these young Americans was at the University of Göttingen in Germany. And a number of our early diplomats, people who became diplomats, studied at this particular university in Germany, *not* in England.

Prof. Arnold Hermann Ludwig Heeren taught there in the departments of philosophy and history. And I want to point out that many of our young persons who studied there, studied under him, and went on to become American diplomats, including George Bancroft, who was the first American to earn a PhD degree. And who did he earn it from? The University of Göttingen. And who was his professor? Professor Heeren.

Professor Heeren wrote fascinating books on European history, and also ancient Greek history. And his innovations in European history included his focus on the economic and financial dimensions of the European state system. So this gives you an idea of the culture we had in the early 19th Century of American di-

plomacy; respectful of international law, the concepts of [Hugo] Grotius [1583-1645]; also of [Samuel von] Pufendorf [1632-94], and a Swiss writer on international law, [Emmerich] Vattel.

There was a concept of the United States as a republic, moving in the international community, wherein international law was important. And where international law was a consideration to be sure, moral and ethical. And this stems from the 1648 Westphalian settlements; and this ethos of a European state system, actually became transformed into an ethos of a global international system under law, if we read Grotius or Pufendorf, in particular.

Part III: Imperialism Grips the American Foreign-Policy Elite

Now, moving from that, does present-day American foreign policy resemble *anything* that John Quincy Adams and the Founding Fathers would have wanted and approved? Of course not. That's the simple answer. Washington today is caught up in the policy of imperialism launched in 1898 by the Spanish-American War.

By "imperialism," I will just basically use Prof. [John A.] Hobson's classic discussion of imperialism in his classic book, *Imperialism*. This is the idea of the domination—which Bruce Fein referred to—of various geographic parts of our planet through military means, overt military force, or financial means—economic imperialism, finance capitalism.

And I would correct Lenin and Marx: We've had 200 years of experience, or 150 years or so of experience, since Marx and all those guys. It's not the means of *production*; it's the means of *finance*. It's the means of finance. That's the issue, when we start talking about the international financial picture

today, and the fascism creeping through Europe today, the technofascism in Europe. This is *finance*.

Now, as a result of the 1898 war against Spain: That's the beginning of our imperial faction in our politics. We didn't have these characters before. They were *lurking around*, kind of subservient to the British Crown, doing bad things here and there, but we never had this whole movement toward imperialism, until 1898, the Spanish-American War. As a result of that war, in the national election of 1900, imperialism was a major campaign issue by the Democratic Party! They were accusing the Republican Party of imperialism, and they [the Democrats] didn't like it. So, imperialism, in the political discourse of the United States, in terms of foreign policy, is nothing new. It's in the Democratic Party platform of 1900.

So, let's think about that too. Keep that in the back of our mind.

Now, shortly thereafter, the Democrats under Woodrow Wilson fell into the policy themselves, or factions of the Democrats. So we can say that we have had an imperial faction in both parties since 1898. We've also had—which Lyn staunchly represents—an anti-impe-



A Catalan newspaper lampoons "Uncle Sam's" folly in the Spanish-American War (1898).

rial faction in the United States. So, we've had this back and forth now for well over a century, between these competing goals and competing visions for the United States.

Now, I will make six points, and then conclude, allowing some time later for questions, and I'd be delighted to answer any questions on contemporary policy.

1. After our Civil War, a different approach to the U.S. was set into motion by the former colonial power, the British Empire. In the context of the rise of Germany, and thus, Anglo-German imperial rivalry, the British sought to enlist the support of the United States through elite circles susceptible to British influence of one kind or another.

At the same time, certain elite circles in the United States were encouraged to develop an *imperial outlook* favorable to London, rather than maintain the traditional outlook of a strong and independent republic. Not an empire! A strong and independent *republic*.

A Wholly Unnecessary War

2. In the United States, the "imperial faction," in 1898, launched a wholly unnecessary war against Spain, and thereby obtained the Philippines as a colony. The British quietly supported this action, as London calculated it would cut against expanding German influence in the Pacific, and would promote closer relations between the British Empire and elites in the United States. Such relations would be useful, in British calculations, in the coming European war, which eventually broke out in 1914.

And I just said 1898: The ascendancy and dominance of the American imperial faction followed the Spanish-American War of 1898. Which was sort of set up in the 1890s by the British, French, and Russians, the Triple Entente to contain Germany. I want us to bear that "containing Germany" in mind. Because, who are we containing these days? China, right? Or trying to.

The ascendancy and dominance of the American imperial faction followed the Spanish-American War of 1898, and as I just mentioned, "imperialism," as United States foreign policy, became a national political issue during the national elections of 1900. Those who opposed imperialism were labeled "*isolationists*" in the press controlled by the imperial faction. "Oh, they're isolationists; they don't want to be imperialists." Non-interventionists might be a better



Gen. William Odom, former head of the National Security Agency, said, at the time, that the decision to go to war against Iraq was the greatest strategic blunder in U.S. history. Shown: flag-draped coffins returning from Iraq.



YouTube

phrase, not isolationists. Anti-imperialists might be a better phrase.

3. The Democratic Party soon fell to the "imperial faction" under President Woodrow Wilson. We can all remember [Col.] Edward Mandell House [1858-1938], and a number of other advisors to President Wilson, in this kind of direction.

4. After the end of the Cold War, caused by the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States had an *historic* foreign-policy and national-strategy choice to make. Our imperial faction, then dominant, proposed the vain, and unsustainable, policy to become the global hegemon in a so-called unipolar world which they sought to create. Traditional patriotic circles proposed we peacefully coexist as a strong republic, and responsible great power, within an emerging *multipolar* world respecting sovereignty, international law, common development; these giant projects that are so fantastic, that we've seen today. A world of peace and development.

5. The Bush Administration's unnecessary and disastrous Iraq and Afghan wars will cost the United States an estimated \$5 trillion by 2020. That's not even mentioning outlying years after that. So we just shot \$5 trillion. As Gen. Bill Odom, former head of the Na-

tional Security Agency [NSA], said at the time, the strategic decision to go to war against Iraq is the greatest strategic mistake in the history of the United States. That's Gen. William Odom, the former head of the NSA, which is much larger than the CIA, or any of these guys—it's like really serious! And here he's saying this is the greatest strategic mistake our country has ever made; and he's a general, or was; he passed away, unfortunately.

The imperial faction learned *nothing* from the failure of its unnecessary and costly wars in Korea and in Vietnam. In fact, there is a marked continuity in policy and personnel from the old anti-communist "China Lobby," to the Korean War, to the Vietnam War, and now to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, to the present policy of "managing the rise of China."

I'll just say parenthetically, really quickly, before I wrap up: Back in 2001, I was at the State Department for a few days of briefings on U.S. foreign policy, as this new [Bush] administration was coming in. And a lot of the luminaries were there; and we heard from a number of top folks from State, briefing us as to what's to come.

I'll never forget one of the presentations by Dick

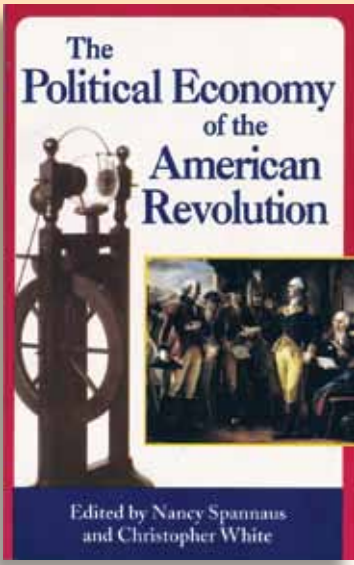
Armitage, who was a high muckety-muck, and he was giving us a kind of walk-around-the-world strategically. And he said, what we've got to focus on now, is, we've got to manage the rise of India and China. I'm thinking to myself, just a minute; what's this guy talking about? What is his head wrapped around? We, the United States, are going to be "managing" the rise of a billion or so Indians, and billion and a half Chinese, and we're going to be managing, and telling them what to do, and how to fit into the international system that we created, and all of that? And that's not to mention the Iraq War.

6. Nothing has changed under Obama.

That's it.

Thank you.

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