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During the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson administrations (from 1776 to 1807) neutrality was America's main foreign policy. In determining that neutrality was the overall focus of American diplomacy, one must assess the deviations from, as well as the success, of neutrality. Neutrality was originally implemented by George Washington in order to maintain the young country's best interests. However, lapses in neutrality occurred when the government was forced to favor one foreign power, either Great Britain or France, through treaties.

Furthermore, commercial interests ultimately drove America's decisions and thus influenced the effectiveness of neutrality. Despite such lapses in success, America's number one foreign policy remained neutrality. Political leaders found involvement in European affairs to be irrelevant and detrimental to the young nation, thus neutrality was the primary focus of America. George Washington was a strong supporter of neutrality despite his highly opinionated cabinet (Hamilton was pro-British and Jefferson pro-French).

In 1793, in response to King Louis XVI's beheading in the French Revolution, Washington issued the Proclamation of Neutrality which stated that America would "adopt and pursue a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers..." (D). Washington opted to remain neutral in order to avoid conflict with Britain and France, refusing to side with either one. Furthermore, Washington emphasized the necessity of neutrality in his farewell address in 1796. He explained that the "great rule of conduct for [Americans] in regard to foreign nations..." was to have "...s little political connection as possible" (J). Thus, Washington established the importance of

neutrality which was also supported by John Adams. During the Revolutionary War (right after the Battle of Saratoga) the Americans formed the Franco-American alliance and gained French support from the king. However, John Adams wrote in his diary in 1775, “ That We ought not to enter into any Alliance with her [France], which should entangle Us in any future Wars in Europe,” (A). Adams supported Washington’s push for neutrality and recognized the consequences of forming an alliance with France.

Adams was right about the Franco-American Alliance, which later resulted in France seeking American aid against Britain after Louis XVI was beheaded. On the other hand, Adams approved Jay’s Treaty with Great Britain which upset the French who were at war with the British. Jay’s Treaty settled the return of confiscated goods and ships to the Americans and established that pre-Revolutionary War debts must be paid as stated in the Treaty of Paris in 1783. Americans had avoided these debts even though the Treaty of Paris stated that “ creditors on either side shall meet... o the recovery of the full value in sterlingmoneyof all bona fide debts heretofore contracted,” (E). During the Jefferson administration, foreign tensions rose and eventually lead to the War of 1812. Jefferson also enforced neutrality, claiming in his Inaugural Address in 1801 that the nation will maintain “ honestfriendshipwith all nations, entangling alliances with none... ” (K). Such ideas were evident in his response to the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair. In 1807, the British warship Leopard fired on an American warship, the Chesapeake, killing three Americans and impressing four others.

Impressment was the act of forcing American sailors into the British navy as depicted in document M (M). Instead of declaring war as many American citizens wanted, Jefferson issued the Embargo Act, which cut off all American shipping to Europe in an attempt to cripple the British economy and prevent them from confiscating American goods and impressing their sailors.

However, Jefferson's attempt to maintain neutrality back-fired and crippled the American economy more than Europe's. Conflicts between Great Britain and France often caused lapses in America's focus on neutrality.

Specifically, during the Washington's administration and the French Revolution, "Citizen" Genet, the French minister to America, broke the typical rules of diplomacy by appealing directly to the American people. He called for American support of the French Revolution, pointing to the Franco-American Alliance which stated that the two nations shall "make all efforts in its Power, against their common enemy [Britain]..." (C). Such support would directly violate America's primary foreign policy, neutrality.

Thus, Washington refused to support the French Revolution and make an enemy of Great Britain. This decision angered pro-French Americans who supported France's aspiration to establish a republic. As a result, Thomas Jefferson, who was pro-French, resigned from his position of Secretary of State in disagreement with Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality. The ratification of Jay's Treaty with Great Britain further infuriated French supporters, failed to solve the issue of British impressment, and even promised that Americans would pay pre-Revolutionary War debt to Britain (F).

Moreover, it caused the French to be outraged with the Americans and started French seizure of American ships. Political tensions between the three nations continued during John Adams' presidency with the XYZ Affair in 1798. Three French agents, known only as X, Y, and Z, demanded a high fee from American delegates to enter negotiations for a treaty regarding the French seizure of American ships. This tested the young nation's focus on neutrality as outraged Americans called for war with France.

As a result, neutrality was pushed aside as the Quasi War, which was never officially declared, broke out. The public anger caused by the war strengthened the Federalist party, who used the power to pass the Alien, Sedition, and Naturalization Acts. These Acts limited Democratic-Republican power by: increasing the number of years required for immigrants to become citizens (Naturalization Act), by authorizing the president to deport aliens deemed a threat to the nation (Alien Act), and by making it illegal for newspaper editors to criticize the president or Congress (Sedition Act).

The Convention of 1800 concluded the Quasi War, however impressment continued into Jefferson's presidency during the Napoleonic Wars, making it more difficult for the young nation to maintain neutrality. Thus, conflicts between Great Britain and France often involved America despite the American focus on neutrality. Commercial interests often times caused disruptions of neutrality and competed as a priority of the young nation. Because commerce was of high importance to the growing nation, neutrality, in order to maintain trade, was necessary.

Thomas Paine even stated, “ Our plan is commerce,” and emphasized the importance of neutrality to the American economy by saying “ we ought to form no political connection with any part of it [Europe],” (B). For instance, Jay’s Treaty negatively affected American commerce and political relations with France. Additionally, James Madison criticized the treaty as being “ ready to sacrifice... the dearest interests of our commerce... ” (G). The treaty not only affected political diplomacy with France, but also affected relations with Spain and their North American colonies.

Spain saw the treaty as a sign that the Americans were building an alliance with Britain and felt a need to strengthen their American territories. This led to Pinckney’s Treaty, in 1795, which set the boundary line between the United States and the Spanish territories, as well as allowed the use of the Mississippi River and the Louisiana sea port to both the Americans and the Spanish (H). Pinckney’s Treaty protected American commerce along the Mississippi and resulted in peaceful relations with Spain. Later, during Adams’ presidency, the seizure of American merchant ships by France raised tensions that resulted in the Quasi War.

The disruption of American commerce forced the nation to disregard neutrality in order to protect their trading rights. The Convention of 1800 concluded the war and promised that “ Property captured... shall be mutually restored... ” (I). The Convention revealed the evident commercial intentions of the Quasi War and set the American economy as a priority equal to that of neutrality. However, Great Britain continued to seize American ships and impress American sailors. Instead of engaging in war, Jefferson opted to pass the Embargo Act of 1807 in an attempt to sustain neutrality.

The Act prevented trade with any European nation, attempting to damage Britain's economy and preclude impressment. Unfortunately, the plan backfired and devastated the American economy. Thus, Americans felt a greater need to deviate from neutrality in order to better their commerce. Although America faced disruptions in neutrality, ultimately, it remained the nation's overall primary foreign policy. From 1776 to 1807, neutrality kept the young nation out of unnecessary European conflicts and served to maintain the country's best interests.