



Avoiding the Old World: Anglo-American Relations and the Formation of U.S. Isolationism, 1783–1823

Yuning Wu*

School of International Relations and Diplomacy, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100089, China

*Corresponding author. Email: 202220116011@bfsu.edu.cn

Abstract. This paper reexamines the development of American isolationism from 1783 to 1823, arguing that it was not an inherent ideological principle but a product of evolving Anglo-American relations. Isolationism, the study contends, arose from a dynamic process in which economic dependence on Britain gave way to political resistance and ultimately to assertions of autonomy. Through analysis of the Jay Treaty (1794), the War of 1812, and the Monroe Doctrine (1823), the paper shows how pragmatic compromises and conflicts gradually transformed into a coherent narrative of independence. Using both primary documents and revisionist scholarship, it demonstrates that isolationism was a strategic discourse shaped by historical circumstance rather than a timeless American instinct. Rather than signifying disengagement from global affairs, early isolationism reflected an effort to redefine the nation's place within the Atlantic system dominated by Britain. By framing U.S. foreign policy as an act of identity construction through differentiation, the study challenges the exceptionalist tradition and reveals isolationism as an adaptive response to external power relations. Ultimately, it argues that isolationism represented not a retreat from Europe, but a reconfiguration of America's relationship with it—an assertion of dignity and self-determination amid structural constraints.

Keywords: Anglo-American Relations, Isolationism, National Identity Formation

1 Introduction

American isolationism has often been portrayed as a defining and timeless feature of the nation's foreign policy identity. From Washington's Farewell Address in 1796 to the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, scholars have interpreted isolationism as a long-standing American inclination to remain detached from European conflicts [1]. However, this seemingly coherent tradition has been increasingly questioned. More recent studies argue that isolationism is not a fixed doctrine from the outset, but rather the product of shifting historical contexts and power dynamics - most notably those arising from the United States' protracted engagement with Britain [2] [3].

Scholarly debate over the origins of isolationism often centers on a divide between two major interpretations. Advocates of the 'exceptionalist' perspective posit that isolationism emerged directly from republican ideology, rooted in a fear that foreign alliances would corrupt the experiment of liberty [4]. In contrast, revisionist historians propose that early U.S. foreign policy was less a matter of doctrine than of circumstance—marked by pragmatic choices, contradictions, and the shifting dynamics of Atlantic power politics. For instance, Bemis (1965) interprets the Jay Treaty not as an expression of ideological withdrawal but as a pragmatic recognition of America's reliance on British trade, while Perkins (1962) identifies the War of 1812 as a critical turning point, transforming bilateral hostility into a wider rejection of European political involvement [5] [6].

The background to this study lies in the paradoxical relationship between the United States and Britain in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Despite achieving political independence in 1783, the United States remained economically tied to British markets, as British demand for American raw materials and British dominance in shipping sustained American trade networks. The Jay Treaty of 1794 symbolized this pragmatic reliance, securing commercial privileges while reinforcing a degree of subordination to British economic power. At the same time, unresolved territorial disputes, maritime tensions, and Britain's restrictions on American trade exposed the fragility of this arrangement, culminating in the War of 1812. This conflict represented more than a military struggle; it marked a symbolic rejection of dependence on Britain and catalyzed the redefinition of American foreign policy identity.

The War of 1812 further underscores the constructed nature of isolationism. Although inconclusive in military terms, the conflict carried immense symbolic weight. It allowed American leaders to portray resistance against Britain as an affirmation of national dignity, thereby transforming a pragmatic dependence into an ideological rejection. The resonance of Madison's congressional message, framing the war as a defense of freedom, demonstrates how political rhetoric redefined practical grievances into existential struggles for sovereignty. In this respect, isolationism emerged less as a preexisting principle than as a rhetorical and political resource mobilized in response to crises.

Furthermore, the formulation of the Monroe Doctrine exemplifies the culmination of this process, but its emergence cannot be separated from Anglo-American dynamics. Britain's Foreign Secretary George Canning, motivated by the desire to secure commercial access to Latin America, proposed a joint declaration opposing renewed European intervention. Although the United States declined to co-sign in order to preserve its independent posture, the Monroe Doctrine nonetheless aligned closely with British interests. It represented not only a foreign policy stance but also a discursive assertion of autonomy—an attempt to transform shared Anglo-American objectives into an exclusively American principle. Crucially, the doctrine's credibility relied less on U.S. military strength than on Britain's naval dominance, which in practice enforced the very separation it proclaimed in theory. This reveals how isolationism functioned as both an identity marker and a strategic posture, balancing aspiration with pragmatic constraints. Taken together, these developments indicate that isolationism evolved through a dialectic of dependence, resistance, and autonomy. Its origins are inseparable

from the young republic's struggle to reconcile economic necessity with political independence in its dealings with Britain. What appeared, in retrospect, as a coherent tradition was in fact a contested and adaptive response to historical circumstances.

Theoretically, this paper draws on concepts of national identity formation in international relations, which emphasize that identity is not an inherent essence but a relational construct produced through interaction and differentiation. As scholars such as Benedict Anderson (1983) and Anthony D. Smith (1991) argue, national identity emerges through collective narration and opposition to an 'Other' [7] [8]. In this sense, early American foreign policy can be read as a process of identity performance—a means by which the new republic defined itself in contrast to Europe, and especially to Britain, as both political model and moral adversary. Constructivist perspectives in international relations likewise stress that state identity is historically contingent, shaped through encounters, conflicts, and reciprocal perceptions [9]. Applying this lens, isolationism appears not as an intrinsic American instinct, but as a discursive and strategic response to Britain's dominance in the post-revolutionary Atlantic world.

Reconsidering isolationism from this perspective is of great significance because it undermines the notion of isolationism as an enduring and ahistorical principle, instead placing its development within the broader trajectory of American state formation. Moreover, it underscores that the United States' foreign policy identity did not emerge independently, but was shaped through its persistent encounters with British power.

Against this background, this paper seeks to re-examine early American foreign policy by tracing its development through four interrelated dimensions: dependence and pragmatism, conflict and resistance, identity through opposition, and assertion of autonomy. First, it investigates the ways in which economic and diplomatic reliance on Britain shaped early U.S. strategy. Second, it explores how unresolved disputes and the War of 1812 transformed this dependence into resistance. Finally, it analyzes how the rejection of European influence contributed to the formation of an autonomous American diplomatic identity. By integrating these dimensions, the study not only situates isolationism within the historical process of state-building but also highlights the central role of Anglo-American relations in shaping the contours of U.S. foreign policy.

2 Methodology

This paper draws on selected primary and secondary sources concerning the origins of American isolationism, analyzing and integrating their findings to synthesize key insights into how isolationism emerged not as an innate principle but as a product of Anglo-American interaction. This research is designed as a historical review with interpretative analysis, and relevant materials are included according to the following indicators: (1) directly related to early U.S. diplomacy and Anglo-American relations from independence to the Monroe Doctrine, (2) English-language sources, (3) published works that have undergone scholarly peer review, and (4) availability of complete texts for systematic analysis. The source selection process began with an initial screening of titles, abstracts, and publication contexts, with the purpose of excluding

works that focus solely on domestic politics without substantial engagement with foreign policy. The remaining materials—comprising diplomatic histories, political theory studies, and edited volumes of primary documents—were then evaluated for their relevance to the themes of dependence, conflict, identity, and autonomy. In addition to secondary literature (e.g., Bemis 1965; DeConde 1963; Perkins 1968), this paper incorporates primary sources such as The Jay Treaty (1794), George Washington's Farewell Address (1796), and the Monroe Doctrine (1823), which allow for a contextualized reconstruction of early foreign policy debates. The methodology combines qualitative historical interpretation. The qualitative approach centers on close reading and comparative interpretation of primary sources, situating them within existing historiography to trace the gradual evolution of isolationist discourse. Quantitative analysis, though not extensive, was employed in the initial stages through keyword categorization and bibliometric review to ensure a comprehensive scope of relevant literature. This twofold approach enables both broad coverage of scholarship and in-depth examination of critical debates. This paper acknowledges the limitations inherent in this methodology. While quantitative patterns in bibliographic surveys provide useful indications of scholarly focus, they cannot establish definitive causal relationships between Anglo-American conflicts and the rise of isolationism. Similarly, reliance on translated or edited primary texts may introduce interpretative bias. To mitigate these issues, the paper integrates contextual analysis and historiographical comparison, employing both critical judgment and synthetic reasoning. Through this approach, the paper seeks to construct a nuanced understanding of isolationism as historically contingent, showing how it developed through America's negotiations, conflicts, and accommodations with Britain rather than from an inherent national ideology.

3 Result

3.1 Dependence and Pragmatism

The Jay Treaty of 1794 must be understood against the background of unresolved tensions between Britain and the United States after independence. Although the Treaty of Paris (1783) formally ended the Revolutionary War, it left numerous issues unsettled. Britain retained military forts in the Northwest Territory, justified by America's failure to repay pre-war debts, while American merchants suffered from the seizure of ships under Britain's maritime policies during the French Revolutionary Wars. At the same time, the United States, diplomatically weak and militarily vulnerable, lacked the leverage to impose its will. In this context, the Jay Treaty emerged as an attempt to stabilize relations with the former colonial power and prevent renewed conflict [2] [5].

Yet beyond these political disputes lay a deeper economic dependency. The United States remained closely tied to Britain as its primary trading partner. American planters relied on British markets for the export of tobacco, rice, and cotton, while New England merchants depended on British credit and shipping infrastructure [3]. As John Jay candidly observed during the negotiations, "The United States cannot exist without trade, nor trade without Britain" [10]. Such reliance placed the young republic in a

vulnerable position: despite political independence, its prosperity remained subject to British commercial goodwill.

Britain, for its part, pursued an economic policy designed to maintain its dominance over transatlantic commerce. American merchants were subjected to discriminatory tariffs, while access to the lucrative British West Indies was granted only on restrictive terms [11]. Moreover, Britain's naval supremacy allowed it to impose blockades and seize American vessels suspected of trading with France. These measures reinforced the asymmetrical nature of the Anglo-American relationship, demonstrating that Britain sought to contain American economic expansion while preserving its own imperial advantages.

The Jay Treaty reflected these realities. Its provisions required Britain to evacuate frontier forts and created commissions to arbitrate debts and maritime claims, but in return the United States accepted Britain's continuing restrictions on neutral trade. George Washington defended the treaty pragmatically, insisting that "peace ought to be pursued with unwearied diligence, while there is hope that negotiations can terminate in it". Federalists justified it as a necessary compromise to safeguard commerce and prevent war, while Republicans condemned it as a betrayal of revolutionary ideals. Public outrage was intense: newspapers like the *Aurora General Advertiser* charged Jay with having "bartered away the honor of his country" [12], and effigies of Jay were burned in protest.

These disputes illustrate that early American diplomacy was shaped not by abstract doctrine but by pragmatic calculations rooted in dependence. While the treaty secured short-term stability and preserved essential trade, it exposed the fragility of America's economic autonomy and sharpened the ideological divide over how the republic should relate to Europe. In this sense, the path toward isolationism began not with an instinctive rejection of foreign ties but with a reluctant compromise born of necessity—and a growing awareness that reliance on Britain was politically and strategically unsustainable.

3.2 Conflict and Resistance

The uneasy balance of dependence established under the Jay Treaty soon gave way to renewed antagonism. Despite efforts at conciliation, unresolved disputes continued to sour Anglo-American relations. Britain's ongoing restrictions on neutral trade, impressment of American sailors, and support for Native American resistance in the Northwest Territory exacerbated tensions. These grievances, compounded by the United States' perception of being treated as a subordinate actor in the Atlantic system, pushed the republic from reluctant accommodation toward open resistance [6].

The War of 1812 crystallized this shift. President James Madison, in his war message to Congress on June 1, 1812, condemned Britain's actions as "a series of acts hostile to the rights of a free and independent nation" [12]. He cited impressment, trade blockades, and violations of U.S. sovereignty as causes for war. The War Hawks in Congress, such as Henry Clay and John C. Calhoun, pressed for military confrontation, arguing that America must defend its honor and assert its independence against British

arrogance. Such rhetoric reveals how the conflict was framed not merely as a dispute over trade but as a struggle for national dignity and self-definition.

The war itself was inconclusive on the battlefield, yet politically transformative. British forces burned Washington, D.C. in 1814, while American troops secured symbolic victories at battles such as New Orleans in 1815. These events fed into a narrative of resilience against imperial power. Although the Treaty of Ghent (1814) restored the status quo ante without resolving the original disputes, the war nonetheless reinforced the perception that reliance on Britain was untenable.

In Congress and public discourse, the War of 1812 came to symbolize the final break with dependency. Republicans presented the war as proof that America could no longer remain entangled in European conflicts and must chart its own course. Federalist opposition to the war, expressed at the Hartford Convention (1814), only deepened the partisan divide, but the postwar settlement undermined the credibility of accommodationist positions. This illustrates that the conflict laid the foundation for the myth of isolationism, portraying distance from Europe not only as desirable but as essential for safeguarding republican liberty.

Thus, the War of 1812 marked a decisive turning point in the evolution of American foreign policy. From a phase of dependence under the Jay Treaty, the United States moved into open resistance, defining itself through opposition to Britain. While militarily indecisive, the war's political legacy was profound: it strengthened nationalist sentiment, legitimized suspicion of European entanglements, and advanced the construction of isolationism as both strategy and identity.

4 Discussion

4.1 Identity through Opposition

One of the most significant patterns to emerge from the preceding analysis is that American identity during the early republic was forged less through internal consensus than through external opposition. The Jay Treaty debate already suggested that defining what it meant to be independent required positioning the United States against Britain, its former colonial master. What began as a pragmatic trade arrangement was reframed, in the public sphere, as a question of whether the nation had betrayed or defended the Revolution [5] [12]. This reframing demonstrates how foreign policy disputes quickly became vehicles for broader struggles over national self-definition.

By the time of Washington's Farewell Address, the association between "Europe" and political danger had become conventional wisdom. Yet, as DeConde reminds us, Washington's warning against entangling alliances was not timeless dogma but an attempt to preserve fragile unity in the face of domestic division and external vulnerability [2]. Jeffersonian theory radicalized this logic. Jefferson and his followers portrayed Europe as both morally corrupt and structurally hostile to republican liberty, thereby positioning American distinctiveness as a deliberate rejection of Old World practices [4]. The rhetoric of "empire of liberty" is telling: identity was constructed by opposition, not isolation, and opposition itself became the rhetorical ground on which independence was performed.

The War of 1812 intensified this oppositional identity. Madison's message to Congress framed the war as a defense of "the rights of a free and independent nation," turning grievances over trade and impressment into a moral test of sovereignty [12]. This framing matters: it was not Britain's actions alone that generated isolationist discourse, but the way American leaders interpreted those actions as challenges to national dignity. As Perkins notes, the war became a symbolic break, even if it failed to resolve the underlying disputes [6]. The politics of identity mattered more than the material outcomes: victory at New Orleans or the mere endurance of the conflict was recast as proof that the republic had earned its place apart from Europe.

Therefore, isolationism in this period was less about detachment and more about differentiation. The young nation defined itself against an imagined Europe—monarchical, corrupt, and domineering—and in so doing, established the narrative framework that would sustain isolationist rhetoric throughout the nineteenth century.

4.2 Assertion of Autonomy

If opposition was the medium through which identity was constructed, autonomy was the political form through which it was asserted. The Monroe Doctrine represented the culmination of earlier trends by explicitly drawing a hemispheric line between Europe and the Americas. Yet its significance lies not simply in its policy content, but in the way it translated identity claims into a diplomatic doctrine. By declaring the Western Hemisphere off-limits to European intervention, the United States turned its oppositional narrative into a formal principle of statecraft.

At the same time, the doctrine reveals a central paradox of autonomy. The United States proclaimed its independence from Europe, yet in practice relied heavily on Britain's naval supremacy to give the doctrine credibility [3]. This tension suggests that autonomy in the early republic was as much discursive as it was material. American leaders sought to project sovereignty through words and principles, even when their ability to enforce them remained limited. In this sense, the Monroe Doctrine was aspirational: it asserted what the nation wanted to be, rather than what it already was.

Still, this aspirational quality mattered. Jeffersonian statecraft consistently blurred the line between principle and policy, and the Monroe Doctrine extended this tradition by transforming a defensive logic into an assertive one [4]. The doctrine not only demarcated geographic boundaries but also provided a conceptual language of autonomy that subsequent generations would adapt to justify both restraint and expansion. This demonstrates that the very discourse of separation from Europe fed into the logic of Manifest Destiny, demonstrating that isolationism and expansionism were not opposites but two sides of the same nationalist coin.

Hence, these findings highlight that isolationism should be understood less as a static principle than as a dynamic process. Dependence on Britain created conditions for opposition; opposition provided the rhetorical framework for identity; and autonomy was asserted as the logical extension of that identity. Each stage was contingent, contested, and shaped by historical circumstance, yet together they produced the impression of a coherent tradition. By re-examining this trajectory, we see that isolation-

ism was not a timeless instinct but a historically situated strategy—an evolving response to the challenge of defining America's place in a world dominated by Britain and Europe.

5 Conclusion

This paper has examined the evolution of American isolationism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, situating it not as a timeless doctrine but as a historically contingent response to Anglo-American relations. The analysis traced three key phases: initial dependence and pragmatic accommodation under the Jay Treaty, the shift toward conflict and resistance during the War of 1812, and the eventual assertion of autonomy through the Monroe Doctrine. The findings demonstrate that isolationism was forged through a dialectical process—reliance gave way to opposition, opposition shaped national identity, and identity culminated in autonomy. Three broader conclusions can be drawn. First, isolationism should be understood as the product of historical negotiation rather than ideological inheritance. Far from emerging fully formed in 1776, it developed through pragmatic encounters with Britain's economic and naval dominance, exposing the fragility of early American independence. Second, isolationism functioned as a discourse of differentiation: Americans defined themselves against Europe's perceived corruption, hierarchy, and imperial ambition, thereby constructing a republican identity through opposition. Third, isolationism operated as both an aspirational and strategic principle. The Monroe Doctrine formalized autonomy in rhetoric and policy, even as it depended on Britain's power in practice. These findings complicate the conventional view of isolationism as an instinctive or exceptionalist trait. Instead, they reveal isolationism as a dynamic process embedded in the struggles of state-building, shaped by dependence, contestation, and symbolic assertion. Moving forward, this interpretation highlights how the United States' foreign policy identity was never fixed but continually negotiated within the Atlantic world. Just as African states must disentangle themselves from colonial legacies to realize political stability, the early United States had to disentangle its self-image from Britain's shadow to articulate autonomy. Isolationism, therefore, was not the absence of connection but the redefinition of connection—an effort to reshape power relations and create the space for an independent American voice in world affairs. By revisiting this trajectory, the study provides a corrective to exceptionalist narratives and underscores the importance of contextual, relational perspectives in international history. Only by recognizing isolationism as historically constructed, rather than innate, can we fully grasp its enduring influence on American foreign policy and its implications for the nation's evolving role in global politics.

References

1. Weinberg, Albert K. (1935). *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History*. Johns Hopkins University Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/manifestdestiny0000unse/page/n5/mode/2up>.
2. Anderson, Benedict. (1983). *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Available at: Verso. https://archive.org/details/imaginedcommunit0000ande_s3l3.
3. Smith, Anthony D. (1991). *National Identity*. University of Nevada Press. Available at: <https://archive.org/details/nationalidentity0000smit>.
4. Wendt, Alexander. (1992). "Anarchy Is What States Make of It: The Social Construction of Power Politics." *International Organization*, 46(2): 391–425. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300027764>
5. Braumoeller, Bear F. (2023). *The Myth of American Isolationism Revisited*. Harvard University Press. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24909828>
6. Rees, Wyn. (2025). "The Ukraine War, the Indo-Pacific and Anglo-American Relations." *Journal of Transatlantic Studies*, 23(1): 15–32. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1057/s42738-025-00149-3>.
7. Tomja, Arjana, Dumani, Ardit, & Teqja, Eralda. (2025). "AngloAmerican Special Relationship: Evolution and Current Dynamics from the Cold War to the Brexit Era." *Albanian Journal of Political Science*, 7(2): 45–67. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36941/jesr-2025-0042>.
8. Specter, Michael G. (2022). *The Atlantic Realists: Empire and International Political Thought Between Germany and the U.S.* Stanford University Press. Available at: <https://www.sup.org/books/history/atlantic-realists>.
9. Fishman, Emily. (2025). *Chokepoints: American Power in the Age of Economic Warfare*. Oxford University Press. Available at: <https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/in00000368053>.
10. Ward, Alexander. (2024). *The Internationalists: The Fight to Restore American Foreign Policy After Trump*. Knopf. Available at: <https://www.ebooks.com/en-us/book/210847218/the-internationalists/alexander-ward/>.
11. Scott, William, Genz, Benjamin, Elmasry, Sarah, & Adewole, Samuel. (2024). "Words of War: Exploring the Presidential Rhetorical Arsenal with Deep Learning." *American Political Science Review*, 118(2): 233–251. Available at: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2412.08868>.
12. Dombrowski, Peter, & Reich, Simon. (2021). *Comparative Grand Strategy: A Framework for Analysis*. Cambridge University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108956687>.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

