

# Why the Great Powers Permitted the Creation of an American Hegemon

CHAD E. NELSON

THE YEAR THE UNITED STATES declared its independence, a German writer conjectured, “Are we at the beginning of an epoch in history that will forever remain remarkable to posterity? Isn’t the foundation stone being laid right now on the other side of the ocean for a powerful state that in the future, when American fleets will cover the seas, might terrify the European powers?”<sup>1</sup> Americans thought so. Gouverneur Morris boasted in 1801, “the proudest empire in Europe is all but a bauble, compared to what America *will be, must be* in the course of two centuries, perhaps one.”<sup>2</sup> European powers may be more than a “bauble” today, but Morris’s prediction, and that of many other Europeans, was more or less correct. Why, then, did the European powers not do something to prevent this outcome?

This is a puzzle, particularly for the realist tradition, which has dominated the discussion of how great powers respond to the rise of rival states and potential hegemon. Probably the most fundamental claim from this tradition on this topic is that because states do not rely on the goodwill of other states, they fear other states becoming more powerful than they are, and thus they will try to prevent the rise of competitors. Because this logic is

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Horst Dippel, *Germany and the American Revolution, 1770–1800: A Sociohistorical Investigation of Late Eighteenth-Century Political Thinking*, trans. Bernhard A. Uhlendorf (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag GmbH, 1978), 194.

<sup>2</sup>Jared Sparks, *Life of Gouverneur Morris, with Selections from His Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers* (Boston: Gray and Bowen, 1832), 3:144.

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CHAD E. NELSON is an assistant professor of political science at Brigham Young University.

so basic, it exists in many different theories, such as the power transition literature begun by A.F.K. Organski, Dale Copeland's dynamic differentials theory, and John Mearsheimer's theory of great power politics.<sup>3</sup> Often the empirical analysis of realist theories has focused on one region: Europe. In some of this work, there is a problem of selecting on the dependent variable—analyzing cases of great power war to examine claims about how states respond to rising powers. However, the case of the United States has garnered some attention, particularly in light of John Mearsheimer's offensive realist theory.<sup>4</sup>

There are several reasons why the response to the rise of the United States is of particular interest to international relations scholars. First, there is the intrinsic importance of the case. The predominance of American power over the rest of the world has arguably been the single most important factor in international politics for much of the last century and will be for the foreseeable future. Therefore, it behooves scholars to understand how this situation arose. Second, the case specifically addresses the issue of how states will respond to potential hegemonies in other regions, which is relevant to the debate about how states will respond to the rise of China—a particular topic of interest. Third, as an important “dog that did not bark,” the case can shed light on the constraints or conditions under which realist theories that predict balancing will operate. The issue at hand is not just whether the realist hypotheses assessed are right or wrong in predicting great power behavior, but how salient were the motives that these realist theories identify in this case, and what were the possible constraints if these motives existed?

The assertion that states will attempt to prevent the rise of regional hegemonies often assumes, usually tacitly, that leaders have long time horizons. That is, they craft policies based on potential outcomes relatively far in the future. This is at odds with assumptions that are frequently made about leaders in the realm of domestic politics—for example, that leaders' time horizons extend only as far as the next election cycle. I argue that in the case of the response to the rise of the United States, leaders did not have the long time horizons assumed by the realist theories assessed, and

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<sup>3</sup>A.F.K. Organski, *World Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1968); Dale C. Copeland, *The Origins of Major War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000); and John Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001).

<sup>4</sup>Colin Elman, “Extending Offensive Realism: The Louisiana Purchase and America's Rise to Regional Hegemony,” *American Political Science Review* 98 (November 2004): 563–576; Richard Little, “British Neutrality versus Offshore Balancing in the American Civil War: The English School Strikes Back,” *Security Studies* 16 (January–March 2007): 68–95; and Peter Thompson, “The Case of the Missing Hegemon: British Nonintervention in the American Civil War,” *Security Studies* 16 (January–March 2007): 96–132. See also Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), chap. 3.

this explains the acquiescence of the great powers to American hegemony rather than alternative explanations.

The assertion that states will attempt to balance against potential hegemon is common in the realist tradition. I focus specifically on testing the assertions of offensive realism elaborated by John Mearsheimer and Colin Elman because their theories make explicit claims regarding the case of the United States. I first elaborate these theories. I then discuss their assumptions about a leader's time horizons and consider the components of time horizons and how to identify them. Next, I explicate French and British policy in cases in which the great powers were most likely to arrest the rise of the United States: the Louisiana Purchase, the "Manifest Destiny" expansions of the 1840s, and the American Civil War. I conclude that there is little evidence for offensive realist theories, as well as for alternative explanations. Preventing American hegemony was never a significant aim of policymakers because leaders did not have the time horizons required to consider American hegemony a threat.

## INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORY AND THE RESPONSE TO THE RISE OF THE UNITED STATES

Most scholarship that specifically addresses the question of how states responded to the rise of the United States as an emergent great power or regional hegemon examines the rapprochement between the United States and Great Britain at the end of the nineteenth century, when the United States is often officially accorded great power status.<sup>5</sup> Some scholars argue that Britain accommodated the United States because it had a similar racial identity or because it was a fellow democracy.<sup>6</sup> A realist perspective does not see much of a puzzle as to why this rapprochement took place: Britain conceded to the shift in power that had made America

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<sup>5</sup>This includes the historical literature and the literature on rapprochement. A few of the more important historical works include Charles S. Campbell, *Anglo-American Understanding, 1898-1903* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1957); R.G. Neale, *Great Britain and United States Expansion, 1898-1900* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1966); and Bradford Perkins, *The Great Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1895-1914* (New York: Atheneum, 1968). For the literature on rapprochement, including an analysis of Anglo-American rapprochement at the turn of the century, see Stephen R. Rock, *Why Peace Breaks Out: Great Power Rapprochement in Historical Perspective* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989); and Charles Kupchan, *How Enemies Become Friends: The Sources of Stable Peace* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010).

<sup>6</sup>For the former, see Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), chap. 2; and Stuart Anderson, *Race and Rapprochement: Anglo-Saxonism and Anglo-American Relations, 1895-1904* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1981). For the latter, see Daniel M. Kilman, *Fateful Transitions: How Democracies Manage Rising Powers, from the Eve of World War I to China's Ascendance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2014), chap. 3.

predominant in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>7</sup> The end of the nineteenth century was obviously too late for Great Britain or any other power to prevent American hegemony. The United States had already grown to continental proportions by the middle of the nineteenth century. What must be addressed, then, is why the great powers, especially Great Britain, allowed such a situation to develop in the first place.

John Mearsheimer claims that in the nineteenth century, “the Europeans, especially the British, were determined to do what they could to contain the United States from further expanding its borders.”<sup>8</sup> This is in line with his theoretical argument that, given the structural constraints of international politics, all great powers seek to be regional hegemons and to prevent other states from becoming hegemons, even in regions outside their own.<sup>9</sup> Mearsheimer’s historical analysis, however, focuses on the United States’ expansion across the North American continent. He does not discuss in detail other states’ response to American expansionism.

Elman more explicitly addresses this issue, as well as the case of the Louisiana Purchase in particular. He claims that the logic of Mearsheimer’s theory is ambiguous regarding extraregional behavior. Elman uses an explanatory typology to derive different predictions than Mearsheimer for the expected behavior of great powers in such cases. Great powers may try to prevent the “inevitable” bid for hegemony of a sole great power in another region. But they might also be forced to acquiesce to the rise of a hegemon. The stopping power of water makes offensive realism “regionally focused,” and a corollary “is that *local* power considerations will dominate a state’s strategic calculations.”<sup>10</sup> This means there is a different set of incentives for extraregional policy. While a continental great power in a region of other such powers will not prefer a state in another region achieving regional hegemony, it will be most concerned with its own bid for local dominance. If the two goals conflict, the great power will have to meet

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<sup>7</sup>See Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 246. This argument is illustrated by the views of Lord Salisbury, who was the British prime minister in this period. He had no sympathy for the United States on account of a shared racial understanding and had a loathing for American democracy. As one scholar has characterized, he viewed America’s rise as “inevitable but unwelcome.” He was under no illusion that a policy of balancing against the United States was feasible. That was a policy whose time had long since passed. As he said in 1902, “It is very sad, but I am afraid America is bound to forge ahead and nothing can restore the equality between us. If we had interfered in the Confederate War it was then possible for us to reduce the power of the United States to manageable proportions. But two such chances are not given to a nation in the course of its career.” See Kenneth Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power in North America: 1815–1908* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 344; and Andrew Roberts, *Salisbury: Victorian Titan* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1999), 50.

<sup>8</sup>Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 251.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 141–142.

<sup>10</sup>Elman, “Extending Offensive Realism,” 567.

its local needs first. Elman also deduces that an insular state in a region with multiple great powers that is acting in another region that has only one great power will acquiesce, even “*support*” that state’s inevitable hegemonic bid because the hegemon will be available as a balancer of last resort in its own region.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, in the context of America’s regional rise, there are two sets of predictions regarding the behavior of France and Britain toward the United States, which were the great powers that were in a position to react to the potential of American hegemony. Mearsheimer claims that both Britain and France will try to prevent the United States from emerging as the hegemon of North America. Elman argues that France’s policy will be to balance against America’s attempt at hegemony unless it interferes with France’s bid for hegemony in Europe. Britain, on the other hand, will acquiesce, even supporting American hegemony so that it is available as a balancer of last resort in Europe.

These realist claims are important to assess, not only in themselves but also because other theories about how states responded to the rise of the United States have explicit or implicit realist assumptions. It is expected that the great powers would have a balancing strategy against the United States, and so the fact that they did not means that other factors were at play. For example, there was no balancing strategy because the United States was a democracy or the Confederacy was a slave-owning state. If, however, leaders did not have the time horizons required of such a balancing strategy, there is no need to resort to other factors to explain the supposed anomaly.

### TIME HORIZONS

The offensive realist theories of Mearsheimer and Elman, as well as other theories that predict that states will do what they can to balance against potential rivals, assume that leaders have long time horizons. That is, they make policy choices based on the desirability of outcomes in the distant future.<sup>12</sup> Mearsheimer and Elman do not explicitly discuss the issue of time

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<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 566 (Figure 1, cell 13), 567.

<sup>12</sup>Many theories of international relations have implicit assumptions about leaders’ time horizons, but the subject is surprisingly neglected, both from an empirical and a theoretical perspective. For a discussion of time horizons in international politics, see Ronald R. Krebs and Aaron Rapport, “International Relations Theory and the Psychology of Time Horizons,” *International Studies Quarterly* 56 (September 2012): 530–543; Aaron Rapport, “The Long and Short of It: Cognitive Constraints on Leaders’ Assessments of ‘Postwar’ Iraq,” *International Security* 37 (Winter 2012–2013): 133–171; Philip Streich and Jack S. Levy, “Time Horizons, Discounting, and Intertemporal Choice,” *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 51 (April 2007): 199–226; and Monica Duffy Toft, “Issue Indivisibility and Time Horizons as Rationalist Explanations for War,” *Security Studies* 15 (January–March 2006): 34–69. For time horizons and the rise of great powers, see David M. Edelstein, “Time Horizons and the Rise of Great Powers” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chicago, August 29–1 September 2013).

horizons, although Mearsheimer mentions that great powers will never be satisfied with something less than hegemony given the potential for changes in the distribution of power 10 or 20 years down the road.<sup>13</sup> Their theories, which maintain that great powers will try to prevent the rise of hegemon elsewhere, or that states will sometimes support a hegemon elsewhere to be available as a balancer of last resort, assume that leaders are considering possible outcomes decades in the future in their current policy calculations. What constitutes long and short time horizons is context dependent, and the line between short, medium, and long horizons is imprecise. But the relative ends of the spectrum should be uncontroversial given the context. In the context of leaders considering the rise of great powers, I assume that a leader who only considers possible events a few years in the future has a short time horizon, whereas a leader who considers possibilities at least several decades off has a long time horizon. Elman's and Mearsheimer's claim that European statesmen in the nineteenth century were crafting their policies for what would occur in the twentieth century certainly assume a long time horizon. There has been some discussion of whether Mearsheimer's theory inconsistently assumes that leaders have both a short and a long time horizon.<sup>14</sup> The more salient question is whether assuming leaders having long time horizons is empirically accurate.

Time horizons are a product of three components. The first component is how far into the future a person looks. In this case, was it even conceived by Britain and France that the United States might one day become a regional hegemon? Further, did they consider that an American hegemon could become powerful to the point that it could become a factor in the security calculations of their own region? If they did not look that far into the future, then obviously concerns about American hegemony would not play a role in their decision-making calculus. The second component is the subjective value of the good or event in question. How desirable was it to policymakers to prevent American hegemony? The value of this good can change over time, thus affecting a leader's time horizons. For example, even

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<sup>13</sup>Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 34–35.

<sup>14</sup>Gerald Geunwook Lee argues that there is a contradiction in this regard—Mearsheimer emphasizes short time horizons to highlight the danger of anarchy, but a long horizon when powers engage in preventative war and forgo cooperation out of a concern for relative gains. But as Shiping Tang rightly points out, the “strange mix” that states heavily discount the future when considering present cooperation but also act with a very long time horizon when planning for future conflict is not necessarily contradictory; in fact, it is logical if leaders have worst-case assumptions of others' intentions. See Gerald Geunwook Lee, “To Be Long or Not to Be Long—That Is the Question: The Contradiction of Time-Horizon in Offensive Realism,” *Security Studies* 12 (Winter 2002–2003): 196–217; and Shiping Tang, “Fear in International Politics: Two Positions,” *International Studies Review* 10 (September 2008): 451–471, at 460.

if policymakers attached significant value to preventing an American hegemon from developing in the long term, if there were nevertheless benefits of allowing America to rise in the short and medium term, and costs associated with preventing that possibility from developing, that would further predispose them against a long time horizon than if they just had to pay up front the costs of some future benefit. The third component is a person's discount factor, that is, how much weight one gives to future units of time, or the general tendency toward (im)patience. If the future weighs little in an individual's present decision making, the smaller the discount factor and the shorter the time horizon.<sup>15</sup>

How can one identify leaders' time horizons? Time horizons can be constructed on the basis of explicit but especially implicit evidence. In other words, the evidence is not just what actors do and say but what they do not do and do not say. Concerning how far into the future leaders consider, one can get a sense of whether they were even looking at the long term if they mention long-term possibilities. If those possibilities are not even mentioned, then that (imperfectly) indicates they were thinking in a shorter time span. In terms of valuing future units of time and goals versus present costs, it is particularly revealing if there is evidence of leaders explicitly considering these trade-offs. But this reasoning may often be implicit, especially if leaders have much shorter horizons than the goal in question. Leaders do not always ruminate on why they are not taking a particular course of action, especially if the question of trade-offs was so obvious that the point did not have to be explicitly argued. If leaders have shorter time horizons, then we would expect that the bulk of the evidence to demonstrate that the goals of the policies they pursue are in the shorter term, which implicitly reveals that they do not have longer time horizons.

The best instances to observe whether leaders have long time horizons is to examine critical junctures, cases of punctuated equilibrium, in which events have a disproportionate effect on future outcomes. In this case, it would be instances in which there were decisive opportunities to prevent American hegemony. The great powers could have tried to prevent the rise of the United States in the nineteenth century in several ways. They could have altered their trade and finance policies that aided the internal development of the United States. But, more decisively, they could have prevented American attempts to expand their territory and/or supported separatist movements to cut the United States down to size and establish

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<sup>15</sup>These three components of time horizons are identified by Krebs and Rapport, although I make a modification by allowing the value of the good in question to vary over time. See Krebs and Rapport, "International Relations Theory," 530–531.

a balance of power on the continent. Three prominent episodes fit this bill: the Louisiana Purchase; the Manifest Destiny expansions of the 1840s, when the United States within three years acquired Texas, the Oregon Territory, and a large portion of Mexico; and the American Civil War. The first two episodes of expansion established American rule over the bulk of the North American continent. The Civil War was the best opportunity to help secure the permanent dissolution of the Union and a balance of power on the continent.<sup>16</sup> At these crucial junctures, it was clear that the future of the United States as the hegemon of North America was in question. If there was a motive among the great powers to prevent American hegemony, these are the most likely instances in which one would expect such sentiment to be expressed, and thus they are the cases selected for analysis.

Did Britain and France attempt to prevent American hegemony? If so, what prevented them from being successful? If they did not attempt to thwart the United States, why not? Did Britain acquiesce to American hegemony to create a balancer of last resort? Were leaders operating with the long time horizons assumed by the realist theories discussed? I address these questions in an examination of these three cases, beginning with the single greatest territorial expansion of the American Republic, the Louisiana Purchase.

### THE LOUISIANA PURCHASE

The Louisiana Purchase, the French sale of the vast western Mississippi basin to the United States, doubled the size of the United States and helped ensure the “durability of the union”—meaning that the territory to the west of the Appalachians, oriented toward the Mississippi, would not break from the Atlantic states. Given that the Louisiana Purchase laid the foundation for the United States to become a state of continental proportions, why did the great powers permit this transaction to take place?

#### *France and the Louisiana Purchase*

The spotlight naturally falls first to the French, who sold the Americans the territory. In the late 1790s, the French showed increasing interest in reacquiring the Louisiana Territory from Spain as a part of a larger empire in the Western Hemisphere. The center of this empire was to be

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<sup>16</sup>There are other less significant American attempts at expansion, notably, Florida and Cuba, and possibilities to support separatists, such as the Aaron Burr conspiracy to establish an independent state in what was then the American Southwest.

Saint-Domingue, modern-day Haiti, which had been enormously profitable to the French as a supply of sugar prior to the outbreak of revolution there in 1791.<sup>17</sup> When France reacquired territory in North America, it had an interest in blocking American expansion that would overrun its territories. The question is to what extent fears of American hegemony factored in the French decision to reacquire the Louisiana Territory in the first place. In other words, did the French want to block the United States' expansion because they were establishing an empire in the Americas, or were they establishing an empire in Americas (at least partly) because they wanted to block the United States' expansion?

Elman argues that France reacquired the territory in order to prevent America from becoming a regional hegemon. Elman does not provide explicit acknowledgment of this rationale from Napoleon or French officials. Instead, his argument relies on the timing of French actions: "the period from January through March of 1803 partly disentangles the economic benefits of the Caribbean from the strategic benefits of the west bank of the Mississippi" because by January, Napoleon had given up on colonizing Saint-Domingue, yet he pursued the Louisiana project.<sup>18</sup> His hold on Louisiana indicates that blocking American expansion was an end in itself.

However, Elman's evidence for this timing, and thus his claim that the French had an independent interest in blocking the United States, is not convincing. Some have suggested that Napoleon gave up on the entire colonial project in January, when he learned of the failure of his army to subdue the insurrection in Saint-Domingue, which meant that he had no use for Louisiana once he had lost the main colony that Louisiana was supposed to support.<sup>19</sup> The evidence suggests, however, that Napoleon had not given up on Saint-Domingue in January 1803, or even when he decided to sell Louisiana in March. He continued to devote a significant amount of resources to subduing the insurrection on Saint-Domingue even while he was selling Louisiana, and he appeared to be on his way to

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<sup>17</sup>Anglo-American writers have variously referred to the French colony of this period as San Domingo, Santo Domingo, St. Domingue, and Saint-Domingue. For the sake of consistency, this article will use only the last term.

<sup>18</sup>Elman, "Extending Offensive Realism," 573. Elman says that "by January, Napoleon knew that France's plans were in serious trouble" (573), but the table in his article (571) puts it more forcefully: before December of 1802, Napoleon's policies had been to garrison Louisiana and recover Saint-Domingue; from January to March 1803, his policy was just to garrison Louisiana. The logic of his argument requires that Napoleon had given up on subduing Saint-Domingue, and yet he pursued Louisiana.

<sup>19</sup>Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986 [1903]), 313.

crushing the insurrection.<sup>20</sup> However, the British declaration of war and subsequent blockade of the island doomed French efforts.

While Elman's argument hinges on the claim that Napoleon first resigned himself to giving up on Saint-Domingue while retaining control of Louisiana, the opposite seems to have been the case. He could not hold on to both, so he jettisoned Louisiana and attempted to put down the insurrection in Saint-Domingue before war with the British commenced.<sup>21</sup> But he ended up losing both because war came before he expected. There is evidence of a French desire to use the Louisiana Territory to block American expansion.<sup>22</sup> But this seems to be about securing the territory Napoleon was acquiring.<sup>23</sup>

The only evidence of long-range considerations about the effect of the growth of the United States on French security was when Napoleon himself raised the issue and, in the same breath, explicitly ruled out that he was thinking in those terms. Announcing his decision to sell the Louisiana Territory to his minister of the treasury, who negotiated the purchase, Napoleon considered that "[p]erhaps it will also be objected to me, that the Americans may be found too powerful for Europe in two or three centuries: *but my foresight does not embrace such remote fears.*"<sup>24</sup> Indeed, none of the arguments made to Napoleon to convince him to keep the territory included the concern about the growth in power of the United States.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Thomas O. Ott, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789–1804* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1973), 179, 186 n. 50; and T. Lothrop Stoddard, *The French Revolution in San Domingo* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 347–348.

<sup>21</sup>Alexander DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 157.

<sup>22</sup>Previous plans in the French archives that outlined how France should reconstitute its empire in the New World note the value of Louisiana in serving as a bulwark against and an element in controlling the United States. See Ronald Dwight Smith, "French Interests in Louisiana from Choiseul to Napoleon" (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1964), 205–206; Ronald D. Smith, "Napoleon and Louisiana: Failure of the Proposed Expedition to Occupy and Defend Louisiana, 1801–1803," *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 12 (Winter 1971): 21–40, at 25; and E. Wilson Lyon, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy, 1759–1804* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1934), 66.

<sup>23</sup>The strongest French claim of an intention to block the United States appears to be an article in the official periodical, *Gazette de France*. After complaining about American interference in Saint-Domingue, it couched the French reacquisition of Louisiana as a defensive move (that England should support) because it was helping to secure European interests in the New World, particularly the West Indies, against a voracious United States. "Relative to the United States from the Gazette De France, of the Last of April," *The Spectator*, 9 June 1802, 1.

<sup>24</sup>Francios Barbe-Marbois, *The History of Louisiana, Particularly of the Cession of That Colony to the United States of America*, ed. E. Wilson Lyon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1977 [1830]), 276; emphasis added.

<sup>25</sup>The minister of the navy and the colonies, Denis Decrès, perhaps most inclined to think in these terms, emphasized to Napoleon the potential economic benefits of the territory. *Ibid.*, 270–274. Some French writers and colonial officials expressed a concern that the sale of Louisiana would endanger French New World possessions. See A.P. Nasatir, "An Opposition to the Sale of Louisiana" *Louisiana History: The Journal of the Louisiana Historical Association* 3 (Summer 1962): 192–201, at 198.

In fact, Napoleon's policy had been to stay on relatively good terms with the Americans, which, he believed, would keep them out of the hands of the British and, even better, promote hostility between America and Britain. The occupation of Louisiana had reversed the progress recently made, but Napoleon seems not to have been overly concerned with the Americans' negative reaction, as long as peace with Britain was secure.<sup>26</sup> As the peace deteriorated, however, France had more reason not to antagonize the Americans, who were sending signals that they were drawing closer to Britain.

Napoleon's own explanation of the sale of the Louisiana Territory to the Americans points to deteriorating relations with the British and the Americans. Napoleon wanted to get money for territory that the British would likely take anyway so that he could finance the upcoming war with Britain. And he wanted to cultivate the friendship of the United States to disrupt the growing rapprochement between Britain and the United States.<sup>27</sup> The strategic rationale of cultivating American friendship and perhaps keeping the territory from eventually falling from Spanish into British hands is why France sold the territory to the United States and never considered selling it to Spain, which would have been the option to take if Napoleon was concerned about building up an American hegemon. In short, Napoleon's major security concerns involved the British. His policy toward the Americans was a by-product of that concern. While he desired an empire in the Americas, including Louisiana, the obvious consequence would be that this would prevent American expansion. But there is no evidence that this was a goal in and of itself—that France acquired the territory for the express purpose of blocking the rise of a regional hegemon in North America that would be in a position to threaten France's security at a future date.

### *Britain and the Louisiana Purchase*

British policymakers for the most part expressed no alarm at the possible American acquisition of Louisiana. Their attitude was one of either indifference or active encouragement of American expansion. When rumors circulated in 1798 that the Americans were considering conquering Florida and Louisiana, British foreign secretary Lord Grenville replied that the conquest of those territories by the United States, "instead of any cause of

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<sup>26</sup>Napoleon probably thought that once France controlled the Mississippi River trade, the United States would be forced to cultivate the friendship of France. This was what was suggested in two of the most extensive surveys of the time on the possibilities of France colonizing Louisiana. See Lyon, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy*, 64; Smith, "French Interests in Louisiana," 193; and Smith, "Napoleon and Louisiana," 24.

<sup>27</sup>Lyon, *Louisiana in French Diplomacy*, 202.

Jealousy, would certainly be Matter of Satisfaction to this Government.”<sup>28</sup> But Britain took little interest in it. British policymakers’ indifference changed when their peace with Napoleon deteriorated. Their policy was to facilitate the American acquisition of the territory, which would help keep France out of North America and cement ties between the two nations.<sup>29</sup> Prime Minister Henry Addington told the American representative that if war were to break out with France, Britain would capture New Orleans and hand it over to the United States. He assured him the British had no interest in the territory—“if you can obtain it, well, but if not, we ought to prevent its going into the hands of France.”<sup>30</sup> The British government even helped the sale proceed by allowing a British bank to finance America’s cash payment to Napoleon.<sup>31</sup>

The British evinced no motive of acquiring the territory, let alone preventing it from falling into the hands of the Americans, because of the security consequences of a potential hegemon in North America. Those who disagreed with the policy of facilitating the transfer of the territory to the Americans did so not because of the potential threat of an American hegemon in North America but because they thought that leaving Napoleon in Louisiana would drive the United States into the arms of Britain and bog Napoleon down in the New World.<sup>32</sup>

### *Summary*

Observers had been forecasting an American hegemon as early as its independence. British and French officials were probably aware of this prospect and how the Louisiana Purchase would further that possibility; Napoleon certainly was. But they were not alarmed at that outcome. To the extent that they thought about it at all, it was a distant concern. For example, British foreign secretary Lord Hawkesbury in 1801 asked the American minister where New Orleans was on the map: “His lordship

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<sup>28</sup>Bernard Mayo, ed., *Instructions to the British Ministers to the United States, 1791-1812* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971 [1941]), 158.

<sup>29</sup>Adams, *History of the United States*, 538; and Bradford Perkins, *The First Rapprochement: England and the United States, 1795-1805* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1955), 166.

<sup>30</sup>Rufus King, *The Life and Correspondence of Rufus King*, ed. Charles R. King (New York: Da Capo Press, 1971 [1897]), 4:241.

<sup>31</sup>Barings in London and Hope & Co. in Amsterdam were the two banks that financed the sale. Francis Baring specifically asked for and received the approval of the deal from Prime Minister Addington. See Philip Ziegler, *The Sixth Great Power: Barings, 1762-1929* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 70-72.

<sup>32</sup>This was the opinion of the British ambassador to Paris and the chargé in the United States, although the latter had originally suggested the appeasement policy. See Earl Charles Whitworth, *England and Napoleon in 1803, Being the Dispatches of Lord Whitworth and Others*, ed. Oscar Browning (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1887), 30; and James Alexander Robertson, *Louisiana under the Rule of Spain, France, and the United States, 1785-1807*, (Cleveland, OH: Arthur H. Clark, 1911), 2:21.

seemed to have never considered the subject and remarked that it must be a very long time before a country quite a wilderness could become of any considerable value.<sup>33</sup>

There is no evidence for the claim that the great powers had a deliberate strategy of blocking American attempts to gain hegemony in North America or that they promoted American hegemony so they would have a balancer of last resort. For both Britain and France, their foreign policies were more immediately related to keeping the United States out of the arms of the other side given their current conflict. Both had a similar strategy to achieve that: appeasement. Britain thought that its help in securing the Louisiana Territory would secure the goodwill of the United States, as did France for its sale of the territory. Thus, leaders had time horizons much shorter than assumed by balance of power theories.

### MANIFEST DESTINY EXPANSIONS

From 1845 to 1848, the United States acquired more than 1.2 million square miles of territory in three steps: the annexation of Texas, the settlement of the Oregon Territory, and the acquisition of a good deal of northern Mexico. The incorporation of what is now the western United States consolidated American hegemony on the continent and, importantly in a maritime age, put it in a position to dominate the Gulf of Mexico and the northern Pacific. Did Britain and France have the ambition to check the advancement of the United States?

#### *Texas*

Texas had rebelled against Mexico and declared itself an independent state in 1836. Texas applied for annexation to the United States but was rebuffed and turned to Britain for support. One possible British motive for supporting the independence of Texas was a balance of power strategy: Texas would provide a bulwark against American expansion into Mexico. The initial response from Britain, however, was muted. British foreign secretary Lord Palmerston is sometimes considered to have had a strategy of containment toward the United States, but it may be better described as a weak preference than a strategy. He told his chancellor of the exchequer in 1837, "To us perhaps it does not very much signify what becomes of Texas, though in a Political view it would be better that Texas should not be

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<sup>33</sup>Robert Ernst, *Rufus King: American Federalist* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), 269–270.

incorporated with the Union; commercially it would make little difference.”<sup>34</sup> What was driving British policy toward Texas was not containing the United States but rather Britain’s economic ties with Mexico: the British feared that the continuing futile attempts of Mexico to reconquer Texas would prolong Mexico’s political and thus economic instability.<sup>35</sup> Although the British urged Mexican leaders to recognize Texas, they did not go along. In part out of deference to Mexican sentiment, Britain only recognized Texas in 1842, when other nations, including the United States and France, had recognized the republic.

However, in early 1844, when it became clear that the United States was planning on annexing Texas, the foreign secretary who followed Palmerston, Lord Aberdeen, considered a much more overt policy of supporting Texas. This seems to have been motivated by a desire to use the Texas question to test and deepen Britain’s relations with France, the “entente cordiale,” and, secondarily, to pull France away from the United States and toward Britain.<sup>36</sup> Aberdeen proposed to French foreign minister François Guizot that Britain and France partake in a joint policy to guarantee Texan independence. This would hopefully encourage Mexico to recognize Texas and Texans to maintain their independence. Aberdeen was disappointed when his minister in the United States informed him of America’s determination to annex Texas.<sup>37</sup>

American resistance compounded other issues—increasing Texan interest in annexation, Mexico’s unwillingness to recognize Texas, and the fact that relations between France and Britain were becoming strained as a result of other matters. Guizot let it be known to the British in December of 1844 that France did not have as much at stake in the matter, not having large possessions in America, and was certainly not willing to breach peace with the United States.<sup>38</sup> The two retreated from their assertive strategy. This was despite the fact that British and French leaders had considered that not just Texas but the larger future of Mexico

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<sup>34</sup>Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power*, 78.

<sup>35</sup>Leila M. Roeckell, “Bonds over Bondage: British Opposition to the Annexation of Texas,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 19 (Summer 1999): 257–278.

<sup>36</sup>Wilbur Devereux Jones, *Lord Aberdeen and the Americas* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1958), 33, passim; and David M. Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation: Texas, Oregon, and the Mexican War* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1973), 157. Aberdeen shared Palmerston’s view that Texan independence was of “minor consequence” because its importance to Britain was primarily economic, and annexation had little effect on British economic interests. David L. Dykstra, *The Shifting Balance of Power: American-British Diplomacy in North America, 1842–1848* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999), 64.

<sup>37</sup>Ephraim D. Adams, *British Interests and Activities in Texas: 1838–1846* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1910), 178–81.

<sup>38</sup>*Ibid.*, 190–191; and Justin H. Smith, *The Annexation of Texas* (New York: AMS Press, 1971 [1911]), 404.

was at stake.<sup>39</sup> Texas was officially annexed in 1845, as matters were brought to the brink over Oregon.

### *Oregon Territory*

Britain and the United States had agreed to jointly occupy the Oregon Territory, the modern Pacific Northwest, since 1818. A British fur trading company, Hudson's Bay Company, was the predominant power in the region. Its motives, though, were guided by profits rather than by a desire to act as a bulwark against American expansion.<sup>40</sup> The British had offered to divide the territory along the Columbia River, but this was not acceptable to the Americans. Most American offers insisted on divvying the territory at the 49th parallel, which would give them control of the Puget Sound, one of the best harbors on the North American continent. Bringing matters to a head, dark horse presidential candidate James Polk swept to victory in 1844 on an expansionist ticket, and in his inaugural address, he asserted that the right of the United States to all of the Oregon Territory. The British resisted this extreme American bluster, and eventually their proposal to divide the territory at the 49th parallel, except the southern end of Vancouver Island, was accepted.

There is no evidence that the British were trying to use the negotiations to contain American expansion for long-term geopolitical reasons. Had the British been serious about containing the United States, they could have taken steps to expand their influence in the region in the years prior to the settlement. They also could have exploited America's war with Mexico to drive a harder bargain. The final settlement gave the Americans almost all of what they could have wanted. The British stood firm against what they regarded as outrageous demands for all the territory, not so much because of the value of the territory itself.<sup>41</sup> There was a British interest

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<sup>39</sup>Jones, *Lord Aberdeen and the Americas*, 92; and R.A. McLemore, "The Influence of French Diplomatic Policy on the Annexation of Texas," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 43 (January 1940): 342–347, at 342.

<sup>40</sup>There were some attempts by the Hudson's Bay Company to diversify and settle, but "their priority remained commerce; settlement was more of a ploy to secure their trading position than an opportunity to expand British territory." The fact that the company moved its headquarters in 1841 from the north shore of the Columbia River to Vancouver Island illustrates that acting as a bulwark against American expansionism was not its priority. Donald A. Rakestraw, *For Honor or Destiny: The Anglo-American Crisis over the Oregon Territory* (New York: Peter Lang, 1995), 40; and John S. Galbraith, *The Hudson's Bay Company as an Imperial Factor, 1821–1869* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 192, 222, passim.

<sup>41</sup>For example, Aberdeen wrote to Peel that the Oregon question was suited for arbitration because "it's real importance is insignificant; but the press of both countries, and public clamor, have given it a fictitious interest which renders it difficult for either government to act with moderation, or with common sense." Robert C. Clark, "Aberdeen and Peel on Oregon, 1844," *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 34 (September 1933): 236–240, at 240.

in preserving a British harbor on the Pacific Coast. But more than the territory was the need to defend British honor rather than completely capitulate. Foreign Secretary Aberdeen had already been attacked by the opposition for selling out the British position in the settlement of the boundary dispute in Maine. Although the British threatened the use of force, they clearly had no desire to do so. Prime Minister Robert Peel commented in the House of Commons that one month of war would have been more costly than the value of the whole territory.<sup>42</sup> He was referring, of course, to the present value of the territory rather than the long-term asset it would become to whoever possessed it.<sup>43</sup>

### *California/Northern Mexico*

At the same time the United States was considering annexing Texas and proposals were bandied about dividing the Oregon Territory between Britain and the United States, a swath of territory that was then northern Mexico lay dangerously vulnerable. The real prize was California where there was fertile land and two outstanding harbors that, according to British and French agents, were ripe for the picking.<sup>44</sup> Given the potential of the territory and the relative ease with which it could be taken, it is not surprising that proposals were floated by British and French agents, public and private, to take over the territory. The French ambassador to Mexico warned in 1841 that the territory would inevitably fall, either to the United States or Britain, and urged that France seize it. The French consul at Monterey wrote to Guizot, extolling “how many advantages [California] possesses! And how quickly it would grow in the hands of one of the three great maritime powers of the world!” “Its prosperity,” he warned, “would renew the miracles of the Anglo-American prosperity, and in a half century this country would

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<sup>42</sup>*Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, LXXXVII, 3rd Ser. (London: G. Woodfall and Son, 1846), 1052.

<sup>43</sup>The French did not play a significant role during the Oregon crisis. The French minister to the United States noted the maritime benefits of the territory that would have important commercial advantages in the future. But there was little interest at stake for France. Guizot scarcely corresponded on the matter. See George Vern Blue, “France and the Oregon Question,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 34 (March 1933): 39–59; and George Vern Blue, “France and the Oregon Question, Part II,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 34 (June 1933): 144–163.

<sup>44</sup>Britain had investigated the condition of California in 1841 and found it completely defenseless. A French diplomat who was dispatched from Mexico City to gather intelligence on the region wrote that “it is evident that California will belong to whatever nation chooses to send there a man-of-war and two hundred men.” Jones, *Lord Aberdeen and the Americas*, 26; Hubert Howe Bancroft, *History of California*, vol. IV, 1840–1845 (San Francisco: A.L. Bancroft & Company, 1886), 260.

become a powerful auxiliary for the nation which had colonized it.”<sup>45</sup> The advice, however, was ignored.

The British minister in Mexico also suggested in 1841 that the San Francisco Bay harbor should not fall into the hands of another power. Aberdeen responded that he “was not anxious for the formation of new and distant Colonies, all of which involve heavy direct and still heavier indirect expenditure, besides multiplying the liabilities of misunderstanding and collisions with Foreign Powers.”<sup>46</sup> A year later, he specifically told the American minister to Britain that he did not mind the U.S. acquisition of California.<sup>47</sup> In 1845, a British consul in Mexico, probably with Mexican support, drew up a detailed plan to colonize California. The private initiative was forwarded to Aberdeen to see how far the British government would back it. Aberdeen felt that it was too late and would be “unbecoming,” giving the United States grounds for offense through its apparent intention of blocking it.<sup>48</sup> However, when the Mexican minister came to him with a proposal of British protection, Aberdeen considered it, again as a means to develop relations with France.<sup>49</sup> Peel, however, was cool on the idea, and Aberdeen quickly dropped it. A last-ditch effort by Mexico in 1846 met the same fate under Palmerston. Local officials and the First Lord of the Admiralty were enthusiastic about the territory, and there was some criticism in the British press of the failure of its government to check the United States: “An active minister, who had a forecast of the future, might secure [California] as an appendage to Oregon.”<sup>50</sup> But the British never seriously attempted to take California as a means of blocking American expansion.

War soon broke out between Mexico and the United States, and it was recognized that the war would bring California, and perhaps all of Mexico, into the American orbit. But Britain and France stood passively by.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>45</sup>Abraham P. Nasatir, “The French Consulate in California, 1843–1856,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 11 (September 1932): 195–223, at 217.

<sup>46</sup>Ephraim D. Adams, “English Interest in the Annexation of California,” *American Historical Review* 14 (July 1909): 744–763, at 747.

<sup>47</sup>Lester G. Engelson, “Proposals for the Colonization of California by England: In Connection with the Mexican Debt to British Bondholders, 1837–1846,” *California Historical Society Quarterly* 18 (June 1939): 136–148, at 142.

<sup>48</sup>Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico* (New York: Macmillan, 1919), 2:302.

<sup>49</sup>Aberdeen also told Peel that “we might have established our *Protectorate* long ago, if we had thought it proper.” Jones, *Lord Aberdeen and the Americas*, 69, 96.

<sup>50</sup>Engelson, “Proposals for the Colonization,” 146.

<sup>51</sup>The British in particular had several pretexts to insert themselves in the conflict whereby they could have allied with Mexico and contained American aims, but they passed these opportunities up. Wilbur Devereux Jones, *The American Problem in British Diplomacy, 1841–1861* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 60.

In 1848, Britain pointedly refused to guarantee the new borders of Mexico.<sup>52</sup> The British reaction to the expansion of American influence in the isthmus between North and South America in the 1850s is a fitting coda to the great powers' response to American expansion during the 1840s. The strategic significance of Central America was increasing along with the possibility of a trans-isthmus canal, and it was the logical place for Britain to stop American expansion. Britain, in the face of American pressure, relinquished its protectorates of the Mosquito Coast and the Bay Islands of Honduras in 1860.<sup>53</sup> The United States was unquestionably the hegemon of North America.

### *Summary*

British and French observers were not unaware that annexing Texas, settling the border of the Oregon Territory at the 49th parallel, and conquering northern Mexico would make the United States the hegemon in North America. In fact, European observers expected the United States would expand more than it did, anticipating that all of Mexico would be absorbed.<sup>54</sup> How this could affect European New World possessions, and even how it could eventually effect Europe itself, received some attention. Alexis de Tocqueville had famously observed in 1835, before the expansions, that Europe would one day be squeezed by the United States and Russia.<sup>55</sup> Friedrich List issued a similar warning. In a memorandum he delivered to the British Parliament, which was read by both Palmerston and Peel, he warned that America was growing geometrically, while Britain was growing arithmetically. He proposed an Anglo-German alliance and urged policymakers to focus on the needs of not only the current generation but also the next generation.<sup>56</sup>

In the Chamber of Deputies in June of 1845, Guizot defended his Texas policy by declaring that “in America, as in Europe, by reason of our political

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<sup>52</sup>Pletcher, *The Diplomacy of Annexation*, 578.

<sup>53</sup>Kenneth Bourne, “The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty and the Decline of British Opposition to the Territorial Expansion of the United States, 1857–1860,” *Journal of Modern History* 33 (1961): 287–291; and Mary Wilhelmine Williams, *Anglo-American Isthmian Diplomacy: 1815–1915* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1965 [1916]), 224–299.

<sup>54</sup>Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 2:309.

<sup>55</sup>Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. George Lawrence (New York: Doubleday, 1969), 412–413.

<sup>56</sup>W.O. Henderson, *Friedrich List: Economist and Visionary* (Totowa, NJ: Frank Cass, 1983), 117–123. For other such warnings, see Ernest R. May, *Imperial Democracy: The Emergence of America as a Great Power* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1961), 3; Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York: Ronald Press Co., 1955), 79–80; and Lynn M. Case, *French Opinion on War and Diplomacy during the Second Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1954), 223.

and commercial interests we need independence, an equilibrium of the several states. This is the essential idea which ought to determine the policy of France in America."<sup>57</sup> President Polk responded vigorously against this attempt to establish a "balance of power" on the continent, and Guizot offered a timid rejoinder.<sup>58</sup> Guizot's speeches are significant in that they seem to be the only evidence of a statesman publicly resisting American hegemony. There were some private grumblings among British officials to the same effect.<sup>59</sup> But these were at most indications of abstract preferences and not reflections of the actual policy priorities of Britain and France.

The most deliberate attempt to contain American expansionism was Guizot's and Aberdeen's resistance in 1844 to the annexation of Texas, which was a means for a more immediate policy objective: shoring up the entente cordiale. The dispute over the Oregon Territory had Britain preparing for war, but the motive was to preserve British honor in the dispute, not any long-range concern about the implications for American power that additional territory would provide. Even given the relative ease with which California could have been taken by the British and French, the immediate costs and embroilment with the United States were not worth the future benefits. While it may seem like France and Britain capitulated their interests in the face of American expansion, it depends on how their interests are defined. From their perspective, they maintained the peace, allowing their economic interests to flourish, and preventing themselves from becoming unnecessarily bogged down by distractions. This was their more immediate interests, and it was what prevailed, despite some of the protests from diplomats on the spot. Leaders were not operating under the long time horizons assumed by a balancing strategy.

## THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR

Given Britain and France's unwillingness to thwart the expansion of American power, the one hope for preventing U.S. hegemony on the American continent was internal discord within the United States. Predictions of an American colossus were often accompanied by predictions of American disunion. The United States was regarded by many in Europe as too big to constitute a federal republic, and the supposition that it would collapse under its own weight gained credence in the 1850s as the sectional debate in America grew more and more poisonous. The lack of a balancing

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<sup>57</sup>Frederick Merk, *The Monroe Doctrine and American Expansionism, 1843-1849* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1971), 50.

<sup>58</sup>Dexter Perkins, *The Monroe Doctrine, 1826-1867* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1933), 70-74, 87-89, 113-120.

<sup>59</sup>See, for example, Bourne, "The Clayton-Bulwer Treaty," 290.

strategy against American power could perhaps be explained by a strategy of inaction: America's very expansion would prove its demise. But policy-makers were not doing anything to hasten that fall.<sup>60</sup> There would be a continuation of such a policy, or lack thereof, during the greatest opportunity to promote a balance of power on the North American continent, the American Civil War.

### *Britain and the American Civil War*

Upon outbreak of the "War Between the States," Russian diplomats predicted British policy under a logic familiar with balance of power theory: "The English government, at the bottom of its heart, desires the separation of North America into two republics, which will watch each other jealously and counterbalance one the other. Then England, on terms of peace and commerce with both, would have nothing to fear from either; for she would dominate them, restraining them by their rival ambitions."<sup>61</sup> The Russian minister in the United States predicted that Great Britain would soon give recognition and, if required, armed support to the South in return for cotton.<sup>62</sup> But British leaders did not pursue such a strategy, and there is little evidence they shared such a sentiment.<sup>63</sup> Rather than contemplating action along the lines the Russian minister expected, there was consent among British leaders to stay out of the conflict, and a strict policy of neutrality was established.

An opportunity to intervene in the conflict arose in the fall of 1861. Americans boarded a British mail steamer, the *Trent*, and, in violation of international law, abducted Confederate agents sent to lobby Britain and France for recognition. In Britain, the *Trent* seizure and celebratory American bravado were universally viewed as an outrage, an affront to

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<sup>60</sup>Wilber Jones notes that while a British grand strategy of encouraging sectional differences may have been in British geostrategic interests, "although one occasionally finds references in the private correspondence to the diplomatic advantages of such a split, there is not the slightest evidence that Britain at any time tried overtly or covertly to promote it." Jones, *The American Problem*, 207.

<sup>61</sup>Ephraim D. Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1924), 1:50–51.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 2:269–270.

<sup>63</sup>The person most likely to think in these terms was Prime Minister Palmerston, and it is often asserted, with little or no evidence, that he did. It appears there were only two occasions on which he observed that a divided union would be beneficial to British interests: in a letter to Lord Somerset, the First Lord of the Admiralty in December of 1860, and in a letter to Foreign Secretary John Russell in January 1862, commenting on French plans in Mexico. The best that can be said is William Gladstone's recollection in 1896 that Palmerston desired the severance of the United States but held his tongue. Howard Jones, *Blue and Grey Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 36; George L. Bernstein, "Special Relationship and Appeasement: Liberal Policy Towards America in the Age of Palmerston," *The Historical Journal* 41 (1998): 725–750, at 741; and John Morley, *The Life of William Ewart Gladstone* (New York: Macmillan, 1903), 2:82.

British prestige. The *Trent* crisis might have provided an ideal opportunity to secure Southern independence.<sup>64</sup> Britain prepared for war, and an ultimatum was sent requiring the United States to release the captives and apologize in seven days or face the consequences. But rather than use the crisis as a pretext for war, the British were satisfied when the Americans returned the prisoners. What brought the British the closest to war with the Americans since the Oregon crisis was again an issue of honor.

In the summer and fall of 1862, Britain came closest to intervention in the conflict in the form of mediation. The impetus was from a humanitarian concern to stop the senseless killing and the fear that a prolonged conflict could harm British economic interests. During the extensive debate over intervention among British policymakers, the motivation to prevent the United States from attaining regional hegemony was never invoked as a compelling rationale for British policy.<sup>65</sup> Most of the debate turned on whether the North had been sufficiently humbled on the battlefield so that it would accept mediation. Palmerston considered recognizing the Confederacy if the offer of mediation was rejected. Even British recognition would have been a major psychological boost for the South and, perhaps more important, the peace camp in the North, which had considerable political leverage at this point. But when news came that the Battle of Antietam was a tactical draw, Palmerston decided to wait until further victories to sort things out. He was not interested in provoking Northern ire.

Nevertheless, the failure of the British thus far to intervene on the side of the Confederacy is not necessarily evidence against the claim that the British desired to break up American hegemony. There was a universal belief among British policymakers that Southern victory was inevitable.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>64</sup>Wilber Jones notes that “[a]ll these facts—the calm in Europe, the support of France and Russia, the lack of imperial concerns, and the virtual unanimity of opinion behind the Government at home—suggest that Lord Palmerston in 1861 was virtually free to handle the *Trent* crisis as he saw fit. Had he believed British security demanded a war, and the splitting of the Union, he certainly could have started one.” Jones, *The American Problem*, 204.

<sup>65</sup>Again, the most likely to express such sentiments in the cabinet was Palmerston. However, a biographer notes that it “may be assumed, of course, that he still desired the division of the republic, as a consummation which would offer great advantages for his country. But his available letters for these months contain, as it happens, no references to this desire, much less expressions of that deep hostility to the North with which he and some of his colleagues have been credited.” Herbert C.F. Bell, *Lord Palmerston* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), 2:326.

<sup>66</sup>It is difficult to exaggerate how widespread this sentiment was. Duncan Campbell states that “the only view upon which a real consensus existed [in English public opinion] was that the Confederacy could not be conquered.” Duncan Campbell, *English Public Opinion and the American Civil War* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2003), 97. This is also emphasized in Jones, *Blue and Grey Diplomacy*, passim. This is in contrast to Mearsheimer’s claims that one reason the British did not intervene on the side of the Confederacy was the belief that the North would prevail even if the South received British assistance. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 489.

While the North was fighting for a principle, the South was fighting for survival. And while the South merely had to stay alive, the North had to conquer the South. The purpose of mediation was to expedite the process. Given that British policymakers still expected the South to eventually win its independence, a balance of power strategy might expect that the British would remain neutral.<sup>67</sup> After all, why should England get its hands dirty when the South was doing its work for it? From this perspective, one would look for a window of intervention—between the time that British policymakers thought Southern victory was assured to the time they thought that their cause was hopeless—when it would have been advantageous to throw their weight on the side of the South to ensure that the North’s bid for regional hegemony was blocked. But in fact, the pattern was just the opposite of what one would expect: intervention was still considered when the South’s victory was thought to be assured, but it was when it appeared that the North could defeat the South that considerations of intervention were shelved.

The possibility of intervention did not die in the fall of 1862 because it was by no means clear to British policymakers that the Confederacy’s days were numbered. A number of factors through the winter and spring of 1863 dampened the likelihood of intervention, but these were peripheral to the fact that inaction continued because there was no change in the fundamental reason for nonintervention in 1862: the South still had not won a decisive victory, and the North was still intent on reunion, which made intervention dangerous. There were military setbacks by the Union in the early summer of 1863, which led to an effort by Southern sympathizers in the House of Commons to renew their efforts to gain recognition for the South. But Palmerston and Foreign Secretary John Russell brushed the effort off.

However, the fall of Vicksburg, which split the Confederacy, and Robert E. Lee’s defeat at Gettysburg in July of 1863 were serious defeats for the South. These losses did not necessarily spell the inevitable defeat of the Confederacy, as hindsight bias suggests. As late as the summer of 1864, British leaders thought that the two sides had exhausted themselves and Palmerston was insinuating that if the South could finally humble the

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<sup>67</sup>If the independence of the South was considered assured, Britain’s strategy may be considered one of both “buck-passing” discussed by Mearsheimer, whereby a state lets the local powers check the threat of a potential hegemon (intervening only when local powers cannot contain the threat), and “bloodletting,” whereby a state ensures that a war between its rivals is a “long and costly conflict that saps their strength” Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, 141, 154.

North, he would recognize the Confederacy.<sup>68</sup> But it was clear in the summer of 1863 that the South was in serious trouble.<sup>69</sup> If Britain desired the breakup of the United States but had heretofore allowed the Confederacy to do the heavy lifting, it was now clear that the Confederates would need British help.<sup>70</sup> However, there was no such response from the British. For the rest of the war, Britain continued to adhere to a strict policy of neutrality and gave no serious consideration to mediate in the conflict. As the war drew to a close, there were a few people who called for Britain to side with the South to preserve the balance of power, as they were worried about the possibility that the Union's righteous fury might be turned north into Canada. But these people were marginal.<sup>71</sup> British leaders never considered intervention, diplomatic or otherwise.

Some scholars have argued that normative reasons explain why Britain did not intervene on the side of the Confederacy during the Civil War. Brent Steele maintains that, following Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, the conflict gradually became seen in terms of slavery, and once the conflict became framed in this way, it was against British "ontological security," their own identity and values, to side with the slaveholding South.<sup>72</sup> However, intervention was shelved in 1862, when Steele asserted that slavery was not an issue, for reasons that remained valid throughout the war—Britain was not willing to go to war with the North, and so it would intervene only when both sides accepted, which meant that the South would have to humble the North sufficiently on the battlefield. This did not occur. Palmerston, in response to a Confederate proposal toward the end of the war to abolish slavery in return for recognition,

<sup>68</sup>Thomas E. Sebrell II, *Persuading John Bull: Union and Confederate Propaganda in Britain, 1860–1865* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014), 183–84; and Brian Jenkins, *Britain & the War for the Union* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1980), 2:336.

<sup>69</sup>The British minister to the United States, in a dispatch to Russell only a few days after the battles, even sketched out the possibility that General Lee's army could be destroyed and the Confederate states would separate. James J. Barnes and Patience P. Barnes, *Private and Confidential: Letters from British Ministers in Washington to the Foreign Secretaries in London, 1844–1867* (Selinsgrove, PA: Susquehanna University Press, 1993), 328.

<sup>70</sup>The situation is analogous to the American position in the fall of 1777 during the War for Independence. The American victory at Saratoga proved a level of competency, but George Washington's defeats convinced the French that the Americans could not get the job done without overt assistance. See Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1975), 89–90.

<sup>71</sup>One figure who was not marginal was the queen's acting private secretary, Lieutenant General Charles Grey, who "thought there was a good deal to be said for a preventative war with the North." Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power*, 270.

<sup>72</sup>Brent Steele, "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War," *Review of International Studies* 31 (July 2005): 519–540. The point is also made by Kinley Brauer, "The Slavery Problem in the Diplomacy of the American Civil War," *Pacific Historical Review* 46 (August 1977): 439–469, at 460.

explicitly rejected the notion that slavery was an issue.<sup>73</sup> His stance is consistent with the fact that issues of slavery were always ancillary arguments for nonintervention, prefaced with “besides” or “moreover” for a position he had other reasons to accept.<sup>74</sup> As discussed, he had insinuated as late as 1864 that he was willing to recognize the Confederacy provided a change in battlefield fortunes. He had, after all, put aside his views on the slavery issue when he had recognized Texas as an independent republic.

Peter Thompson and Richard Little make similar arguments that norms of nonintervention and neutrality explain British policy.<sup>75</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, leader of the opposition, responded to this claim in the House of Commons: “whatever may have been the disinclination of Her Majesty’s Government to interfere in the conflict,” it is not due to an abstract objection to interference—“they have employed the autumn in interfering in almost every part of the world, except America.”<sup>76</sup> There was no across-the-board British adherence to neutrality or nonintervention, and British neutrality in the Civil War was not due to the precedence of international law. First of all, international law was sufficiently malleable to support interference. Foreign Secretary Russell, citing Emmerich de Vattel, argued that international law justified intervention when he was pressing for mediation in 1862. And, as discussed, the reason intervention was shelved was not because of an interpretation of international law but because they concluded that it was too dangerous to intervene until the North had received more military defeats.

The British adhered relatively faithfully to a policy of neutrality because they did not believe it was in their interest to adhere to a policy that would provoke the wrath of either side. The question is why not, and it reaches beyond British policy during the Civil War, which was really an extension of a pattern of inaction that had characterized British and French policy. The claim that Britain was constrained by normative factors—neutrality, nonintervention, antislavery—assumes that if these constraints had not been present, Britain would have been actively taking steps to prevent American hegemony. But the longer view when those constraints were not a factor reveals no such policy.

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<sup>73</sup>Palmerston promptly denied that slavery in the South had ever been, or was now, a barrier to recognition; British objections to recognition were those which had long since been stated, and there was nothing ‘underlying’ them.” Adams, *Great Britain and the American Civil War*, 2:250.

<sup>74</sup>See, for example, Evelyn Ashley, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry John Temple Viscount Palmerston* (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1879), 2:405; and G.P. Gooch, ed. *The Later Correspondence of Lord John Russell: 1840–1878*, (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1925), 2:333.

<sup>75</sup>Thompson, “The Case of the Missing Hegemon”; and Little, “British Neutrality.”

<sup>76</sup>*Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*. vol. CLXIX, 3rd Ser. (London: Cornelius Black, 1863), 84.

### *France and the American Civil War*

France played a secondary role to Britain in the foreign relations of the American Civil War. In most cases, the French played a supporting role, conferring with and backing British policy, including the policy of neutrality at the outset of the war, and supporting Britain during the *Trent* crisis. An exception to the French coordinated policy was Napoleon III's unilateral offer of mediation in January 1863. He had previously pushed the British for mediation and had proposed a plan with Britain and Russia in November of 1862. When this failed, he unilaterally offered mediation that he knew would be rejected. Napoleon's push for intervention was not motivated by a desire to secure a balance of power in America but by domestic political calculations—to show his constituency, which was hurting from the Northern blockade of Southern cotton, that he was attempting to alleviate their pain.<sup>77</sup>

During the Civil War, France overstepped the bounds of a joint intervention in Mexico with Britain to collect debts and instead used French troops to establish an Austrian prince as monarch of Mexico. Napoleon III's motives for doing so have been the subject of debate.<sup>78</sup> One of the selling points Napoleon III used on the British and Mexicans was that French intervention, by rejuvenating Mexico, would create a barrier to North American encroachments, but this is one of the least convincing motives for his activities in Mexico. If that was a principal motive, he would have intervened in Mexico in the decade prior, when Mexicans had repeatedly appealed to the French, rather than when the breakup of America was thought to be assured.<sup>79</sup> At the same time that his Mexico scheme was facing difficulties, it became increasingly clear that the North would prevail, and Napoleon abandoned his monarch in Mexico. Thus, although Napoleon III occasionally expressed a desire to block American expansionism, it was never a driving force behind French policy.

### *Summary*

In the Civil War, the stance of Britain and France was simple: avoid any pretext for getting involved in the fight. Palmerston more than once quoted the aphorism “they who in quarrels interpose, will often get a bloody nose”

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<sup>77</sup>Lynn M. Case and Warren F. Spencer, *The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1970), 594.

<sup>78</sup>A brief overview of the literature can be found in Michele Cunningham, *Mexico and the Foreign Policy of Napoleon III* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 2–5.

<sup>79</sup>The Mexican requests and France's response are chronicled in Nancy Nichols Barker, *The French Experience in Mexico, 1821–1861: A History of Constant Misunderstanding* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1979), 141–160.

as a basis of his policy.<sup>80</sup> Why did they not see it as in their interest to get involved? The notion that Europeans would gain from a divided United States was not unknown. Pro-Southern parliamentarian John Roebuck, for example, noted on the floor of the House of Commons, “Eighty years made the Republic such a Power, that if she had continued as she was a few years longer, she would have been the great bully of the world.”<sup>81</sup> However, avoiding the immediate costs of tangling with the Federals drove British and French policy, which worked against securing the breakup of American hegemony.

There were, in fact, benefits to American hegemony for Britain and France, at least in the short and medium term, which was more explicitly acknowledged when the future of that hegemony seemed in doubt during the Civil War. One of the motives Americans had for obtaining hegemony in North America was to keep the state weak. In the unusual conditions of North America, expansionism was a substitute for state building. American statesmen wanted to prevent a competitive security environment from developing, as in Europe, as this would require a stronger state and a standing army, thus endangering liberty. Europeans benefited from this weak state, which, for the most part, did not engage in European diplomacy and did not embroil them in conflicts in the Western Hemisphere, confining the bulk of their interactions to trade. When that arrangement seemed to be breaking down, British and French observers did not see it as a necessarily positive development. The breakup of American hegemony would (and did) create powerful states that threatened to suck the British and French in to a dangerous caldron.<sup>82</sup> Perhaps American hegemony gave Britain a balancer of last resort in Europe, but there is no evidence that Britain appreciated this longer-term benefit. It was rather the more immediate benefit of a peaceful North America that the British prized.

## REALISM, TIME HORIZONS, AND AMERICAN HEGEMONY

The claim that states balance against potential hegemon is not born out in this case. Mearsheimer’s theory highlights Anglo-American hostility,

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<sup>80</sup>Bell, *Lord Palmerston*, 2:275; and Jenkins, *Britain & the War for the Union*, 2:336.

<sup>81</sup>*Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, vol. CLXXI, 3rd Ser. (London: Cornelius Black, 1863), 1777.

<sup>82</sup>British and French statesmen expected a more aggressive Confederacy to challenge their interests in Central America and for the North to strike at Canada as consolation. See Jones, *Blue and Grey Diplomacy*, 39; and Bourne, *Britain and the Balance of Power*, 80. Benjamin Disraeli warned in the House of Commons in 1863 that a divided America would not be like the United States of the past but an America of armies, diplomacy, and war. A French pacifist even before the war broke out warned that it was in Europe’s interest that America remain united, otherwise powerful states would develop. *Hansard’s Parliamentary Debates*, vol. CLXIX, 3rd Ser., 82; and Henry Blumenthal, *A Reappraisal of Franco-American Relations, 1830–1871* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 119–20.

which serves as a useful antidote to overly pacific estimates of this relationship. Contemporaries would have balked at the claim, often now expressed, that there was a tacit alliance between the United States and Britain in the nineteenth century. But preventing American hegemony was not in any significant way British or French policy. In contrast to Mearsheimer's claim that the Europeans were doing what they could to contain America, they made no significant attempt to stop it. There were plenty of opportunities at relatively low cost that the British and French could have taken if blocking American hegemony was their goal. France could have sold the Louisiana Territory to Spain. Britain could have at least not actively encouraged American acquisition of the territory. Britain and France could have recognized Texas much earlier than they did and provide it with support. The British could have expanded their settlement of the Oregon Territory when they dominated the region, or at least they could have used the conflict with Mexico to drive a harder bargain. Both France and Britain could have easily taken California or supported private parties in their attempts to colonize the area.<sup>83</sup> They could have guaranteed the territorial integrity of Mexico as a means to deter the United States. They made no significant attempts to aid the Confederacy during the American Civil War. They could have at least recognized the Confederacy. Despite occasional grumblings among the British and French that America was becoming too powerful, they ultimately were not willing to do anything about it, even very basic, preliminary probes.

Elman's claim that the French desired to block the United States but were constrained by their regional objectives is also not sustained by the evidence. Napoleon wished to reconstruct the French Empire in the New World, which would incidentally block America's future expansion, but that was not his objective. Britain's facilitation of the Louisiana Purchase is in line with Elman's prediction, but British policy was not motivated by the strategy of supporting American regional hegemony so that it would serve as a balancer of last resort in Europe.

There is both a logical and an empirical problem with Elman's claim that an insular power in a region of multiple powers will acquiesce or even support the hegemonic bid of a power in another region. The logical problem is that it is not clear why an insular state would submit to an inevitable hegemonic bid by a lone power, while a continental power

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<sup>83</sup>In addition to the potential English colonists of California mentioned earlier, another private party whose requests for British assistance in settling the West were ignored was the Mormons. See Gerrit John Dirkmaat, "Enemies Foreign and Domestic: U.S. Relations with Mormons in the U.S. Empire in North America, 1844–1854" (PhD diss., University of Colorado, 2010), 171–178.

among other powers would possibly balance against such a state. One would think, given the theory's own logic, that an insular state, unable to mount a hegemonic bid in its own region and also protected from other powers in its region (both because of the stopping power of water) would have relatively more freedom to act in other regions to prevent the rise of a hegemon than a continental power. Thus, if anything, one would expect Britain to be more hostile to America's hegemonic bid than France.

Empirically, the claim that Britain would support the hegemony of the United States because an American hegemon would share Britain's fear of a European hegemon, and thus be available as a balancer of last resort, has no support. British statesmen of the nineteenth century surely would have scoffed at this notion. Precisely when Europe was most threatened by a potential hegemon—when Napoleon was at the peak of his power and initiating an invasion of Russia—the United States initiated war with Great Britain. Napoleon's attempt at hegemony not only did not deter President James Madison from declaring war on Britain, it increased it: "He consciously linked Napoleon's impending invasion of Russia with the assumption that Britain would be unable to supply its meager forces in Canada."<sup>84</sup>

The importance of geographically local issues for great powers is not caused by the supposed tactical problem of the stopping power of water that Elman and Mearsheimer emphasize. Beyond the fact that Canada, British territory, was contiguous with the United States, it was not the expanse of water between the Europeans and the Americans that made America defensible but the expanse of land that the Americans had. Water was the highway, the means by which the most powerful navy in the world could advance upon and pummel America's Eastern Seaboard. But, as the British experienced during the American Revolutionary War, just because it could control the major cities on the coast, that did not confer control of the larger territory.

Local issues alone are not the reason why the European powers acquiesced to American hegemony. The notion that a power like Britain would not be concerned with what was going on across an ocean is belied by the fact that it was intensely interested in places like India, halfway around the world. Elman discusses the problem that arises when a great power's policy

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<sup>84</sup>Lawrence S. Kaplan, "France and the War of 1812," *Journal of American History* 57 (June 1970): 36–47, at 37. While some Federalists were concerned with Napoleon's increasing power, Kaplan notes that "[t]he administration leaders brushed aside as chimerical the possible consequences of a French victory; their interests was in the here and now." Lawrence S. Kaplan, "France and Madison's Decision for War, 1812," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 50 (March 1964): 652–671, at 671.

of blocking a potential extraregional hegemon interferes with its bid for hegemony in its own region, as in the Louisiana case. A more defensive, and generally more salient, motive is the concern of being left in the lurch—the worry by states that other powers would take advantage of it while it was engaged in peripheral affairs, thus the need to coordinate with other powers. The French in particular were constrained by activities on the Continent and the policies of Great Britain. But these constraints were not overwhelming. The two times that France launched bids for a New World empire were without British support when there were quite a few European concerns. When the two were coordinated and things were calm on the Continent there was little action.<sup>85</sup> The French often supported Britain, and in any case, Britain was much less dependent on French policy and Continental matters. The structural factor of multipolarity in Europe was not what was fundamentally holding the powers back from taking action in the New World. Britain's and France's sensitivity toward European matters or other colonial matters and their general unwillingness to take much risk, if any, to prevent American hegemony underscores the question of why they saw this issue as so peripheral.

Two principal liberal theories, the democratic peace and economic interdependence, are other possible arguments why there were not greater efforts to prevent the rise of the United States.<sup>86</sup> Curiously, these theories depend on the realist argument: states would have tried to prevent the rise of the United States had it not been for these factors. If the realist motive is not cogent, then the arguments are superfluous.

The democratic peace argument can be dismissed on its own terms. By some measures, Britain could qualify as a democracy after the 1832 Reform Act, and it would be expected to act with restraint toward a fellow democracy. There were British figures that regarded America as a model and advocated a pacific relationship with the rising power. However, much more common among the ruling elite, whether Whig, Liberal, Tory, or Conservative, was disdain for American democracy. In foreign as well as domestic affairs, these figures unfavorably contrasted what was considered

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<sup>85</sup>Napoleon's New World scheme was launched when it was known that there was only a temporary truce between France and Britain; Napoleon III's attempt in Mexico occurred at the same time as Italian unification and when Prussia began to flex its muscles. The beginnings of American manifest destiny expansion occurred when Europe was calm and an informal alliance, the "entente cordiale" existed between France and Britain.

<sup>86</sup>An application of the democratic peace theory to the question power transitions is Kilman, *Fateful Transitions*. For one of the many works that assert that economic interdependence leads to peace, see Richard N. Rosecrance, *The Rise of the Trading State: Commerce and Conquest in the Modern World* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

a radical political system with their own, in which learned, sophisticated men such as themselves coolly held the reigns of foreign policy. Their perception of American democracy did encourage caution, but because they considered “mob rule” easily provoked, and, for the most part, they wanted to steer clear of conflict. It is notable that two of the most serious crises between the nations after the War of 1812 were the Oregon and *Trent* crises, and British leaders were not at all constrained by their public’s supposed benevolent feelings toward the United States. In fact, the opposite was the case. In the case of Oregon, Conservative foreign secretary Aberdeen had to conduct a propaganda campaign to get the British public to support his concessions toward the United States and thus disarm the Whig opposition.<sup>87</sup> There is little evidence that policymakers favored a more belligerent policy but were constrained by domestic politics.<sup>88</sup> And, of course, the democratic peace theory also does not explain why the British and French did not adhere to a policy of preventing American hegemony when they were not considered democracies.

There is more evidence that the economic interdependence particularly between Britain and the United States seemed to play a role in the British desire not to get dragged into a conflict with America. The two nations were each other’s biggest trading partner in this period, in addition to the extensive role of British finance. Policymakers occasionally voiced that economic factors constrained British hands. But this factor should not be exaggerated. For one, there was no reason to suppose that even war would do more than temporarily disrupt their economic relationship, as was the case in the War of 1812. Also, economic interests in some cases favored a policy of preventing American hegemony, namely, British interests in securing the free trade of cotton in Texas and the Confederacy. But more importantly, the notion that the British had a political interest in preventing American hegemony that they had to put aside because of their economic interests has the situation backward. Economic matters did tend to dominate the relationship between Britain and American, but that was because political factors did not count for much. As one historian commented about Palmerston, “There is no reason to disbelieve the sentiment

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<sup>87</sup>Frederick Merk, “British Propaganda and the Oregon Treaty,” *American Historical Review* 40 (October 1934): 38–62.

<sup>88</sup>Bernstein argues that the policy of appeasing the United States in the period from 1840 to 1865 was “forced on” Liberal governments by their middle-class constituency that perceived a special relationship between the two countries. But he does not provide evidence that the Liberal governments had aims that were any different than their constituencies, and the policy originated, as he notes, with a Conservative government. Bernstein himself says that because no important British interests were involved, they usually gave way to American bluster. See Bernstein, “Special Relationship.”

so often encountered in his letters that what he wanted most from the United States was for her to let Britain alone diplomatically, and confine their relations to trade and occasional meaningless exchanges of prominent visitors.”<sup>89</sup>

The evidence in the several cases assessed here provides a common answer for why there was not a strategy of balancing against American hegemony. It was not because the great powers were supporting an American hegemon to be available as a balancer of last resort. And it was not because they were restrained by norms against slavery or intervention, respect for a fellow democracy, or economic interdependence. The great powers never had a policy of balancing against American hegemony because they did not have the long time horizons assumed by such a policy.

One aspect of leaders’ time horizons is whether they looked far enough into the future to see that an American hegemon could threaten their security. While there is not abundant evidence, it seems as if leaders did consider that possibility. From even before the independence of the colonies, observers noted the possibilities of a relatively underpopulated continent, very loosely controlled by European powers, facing a state bent on expansion. They watched as America became a hegemon, and, as discussed, there was an expectation that the United States would expand more than it did. Most of the anxiety produced in the reflections on American hegemony concerned the more immediate issue of the American threat to European colonial possessions in the New World. Ruminations on how an American hegemon could eventually affect the security situation in Europe were relatively rare. But the idea was sufficiently present that, even for most leaders who did not pen specific reflections, they probably at least conceived that an American hegemon could in the distant future pose a security concern to Europe.

The bigger limitation was less how far into the future leaders were looking and more how they weighed future units of time and the good in question. Napoleon’s foresight in 1803, for example, was limited not by his ability to envision that an American hegemony could cause problems for Europe but by his trade-off between present and future goals. The bulk of the evidence that the British and the French were not operating under the long time horizons required by offensive realism is that their identifiable goals were much more immediate. There were various rationales for the policies of the powers: to keep the United States an ally against their adversary in the Napoleonic Wars, to enhance the relationship between

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<sup>89</sup>Jones, *The American Problem*, 199.

Britain and France, to protect their honor, and to avoid the costs of conflict with the United States. These rationales all have in common that they were more immediate goals, which indicates that future units of time were not weighed heavily. The good in question, a balance of power in North America, was also of questionable value in at least the short term. The distant issue of the consequences of American hegemony for Europe was one that would have to be sorted out down the road. In the short and medium term, there were benefits to American hegemony, as well as costs to disrupting it, that, although minor in the long run, drove French and British policies.

## CONCLUSION

If American hegemony was a negative development for the great powers, it was one that would only be realized in the long term, measured by decades or longer. It may be argued that American hegemony was an unambiguous liability in the long run because of its dominance of the Western Hemisphere and the globe more generally. But, as John Maynard Keynes famously said in another context, “*in the long run we are all dead.*”<sup>90</sup>

Why the great powers accommodated the United States at the turn of the century, which is the focus of much of the literature, is overdetermined. The most basic reason why they did so is because there was nothing they could do about it. It was much too late to prevent American hegemony. This article has shown why the great powers did not do something about it earlier—it was too early. There is little evidence that preventing American hegemony was ever a goal of the great powers. Their strategies were driven by more immediate issues. They did not have the time horizons assumed by offensive realist theories, by other realist theories that assert that great powers will try to balance against potential hegemons, or by other theories that assume this would have been the policy of great powers if not for the factor it identifies. The single factor of leaders’ time horizons explains British and French accommodation to American power.

There are a variety of issues regarding time horizons that remain to be examined, such as whether and why there are variations among leaders’ time horizons and how the way in which a great power rises affects the response from other powers. But even the straightforward question examined here provides insights that can be applied to other cases. The United States is the only regional hegemon and, as such, has been hugely consequential. But there are other important cases in which a great power’s growth was not checked and leaders’ short time horizons could have been a

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<sup>90</sup>John Maynard Keynes, *A Tract on Monetary Reform* (London: Macmillan, 1924), 80.

factor. The rise of great powers usually occurs over a long time. It is easier to arrest their growth earlier than later. But when great powers are more able to take action, they are less willing to do so given their time horizons.

For example, one case that is arguably on a similar scale of significance to international politics as the rise of the United States is the rise of Germany. This is a case in which a potential hegemon emerged in the same region as the great powers. The best way to prevent a potential German hegemon would have been to prevent German unification to begin with, particularly the territory seized in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War of 1870. One key actor was Britain. The British attitude toward German unification has been described as “sometimes benevolent and sometimes indifferent, but there was a general willingness to let events take their course.”<sup>91</sup> British policy, or lack thereof, is considered an important precondition for German unification, and thus it has been criticized as a missed opportunity. Historian Klaus Hildebrand, however, chides these accusations as “inappropriate” because “the threat which Germany was later to pose to Britain, to the European balance of power, and to the British Empire had not yet developed and was not clearly recognizable.”<sup>92</sup> His argument is essentially that the critics are unreasonably expecting that leaders should have longer time horizons than they do.

Another case that dominates discussion today is the rise of China. It has long been obvious that the most populous country in the world and a great center of civilization could become a major force in world politics. The story of Napoleon declaring “Let China sleep, for when she awakes she will shake the world” is most likely apocryphal, but it is a cliché that has been in use for more than a century. China’s rise owes less to territorial expansion than the German and American cases, but one decisive opportunity to arrest China’s growing power was to prevent it from obtaining nuclear weapons. President John F. Kennedy was particularly alarmed at the possibility of China passing the nuclear threshold, claiming that the Chinese “are going to be our major antagonist of the late 60s and beyond.”<sup>93</sup> Yet the issue was not

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<sup>91</sup>Klaus Hildebrand, “Great Britain and the foundation of the German Reich,” in Klaus Hildebrand, *German Foreign Policy from Bismarck to Adenauer: The Limits of Statecraft*, trans. Louise Wilmont (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989): 3–42, at 8. See also Richard Millman, *British Foreign Policy and the Coming of the Franco-Prussian War (1848–71: With Special Reference to England and Russia)* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1958); and Paul Henry Scherer, “British Policy with Respect to the Unification of Germany, 1848–1871” (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin, 1964), 331–374, 403–454, *passim*.

<sup>92</sup>Hildebrand, “Great Britain,” 34.

<sup>93</sup>William Burr and Jeffery T. Richelson, “Whether to ‘Strangle the Baby in the Cradle’: The United States and the Chinese Nuclear Program, 1960–64,” *International Security* 25 (Winter 2000–2001): 54–99, at 67.

among his top priorities. President Lyndon B. Johnson took unilateral action off the table. Among other reasons, scholars suggest that Johnson probably did not want to strike China in a presidential campaign in which he was running on a “peace platform” opposing Barry Goldwater.<sup>94</sup> While an American official in 1962 reported there could be “little doubt but that over the long run a Chicom nuclear program could have a degrading effect on the U.S. political and military positions” in the region, the basis of American policy appears to have been driven by more immediate issues.<sup>95</sup>

These and other cases could be further investigated. The Chinese case in particular raises the larger issue of preventative wars. For every supposed preventive war, there are many missed opportunities.<sup>96</sup> There are many potential reasons for this, such as the political costs of preventive war. But surely one reason that is underdeveloped in the literature is that when preventive wars are most effective they lie outside leaders’ time horizons.

It is often assumed that leaders have short time horizons regarding domestic politics. Perhaps that assumption holds for international politics as well. And perhaps leaders’ shorter time horizons explain why it seems they often manage situations given the international context rather than structure that context.\*

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<sup>94</sup>Ibid., 88. See also Michael Lumbers, *Piercing the Bamboo Curtain: Tentative Bridge-Building to China during the Johnson Years* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), 68–74.

<sup>95</sup>Cited in Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011), 70.

<sup>96</sup>For statistical evidence of this claim, see Douglas Lemke, “Investigating the Preventive Motive for War,” *International Interactions* 29 (2003): 273–292.

\*The author thanks Joslyn Barnhart Trager, David Edelstein, Miriam Elman, Ron Gurantz, Or Honig, Deborah Larson, Dov Levin, David Palkki, Paul Poast, Brian Rathbun, Dane Swango, Art Stein, Marc Tractenberg, and Robert Trager for their suggestions on previous versions of this article.