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GEORGE WASHINGTON'S POLITICAL SKILL IN STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: THE JAY TREATY DEBATE

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In the spring of 1794 America appeared to be on the brink of war with England. Citizens claimed that the British government resisted opening its ports to American ships, interfered with neutral shipping rights to fight its war with France, and violated sections of the 1783 Treaty of Paris that ended the American Revolution.ⁱ Amid clamors from Federalists and Republicans that ranged from negotiations, defense measures, and commercial non-intercourse, President Washington chose to nominate Supreme Court Chief Justice John Jay as a special envoy to negotiate disputes between the two nations. Jay's "mission," announced Washington, demonstrated to the world America's "reluctance to hostility."ⁱⁱ The treaty that Jay returns to the Washington administration answered very little of the concerns he was sent to address, but did establish that the United States would not enter the fight between France and England. The lack of concessions from the British government enraged the American populist and politicians alike, and put Washington in the difficult situation of deciding whether or not to ratify the treaty and, if signed, how to use his political leadership to earn the support of a divided Congress. This case study examines Washington's presidential leadership as he skillfully maneuvers the numerous issues with the Jay Treaty while remaining committed to the overall strategy of his administration.ⁱⁱⁱ

George Washington to James Anderson; 21 December 1797

System in all things is the soul of business. To deliberate maturely, & execute promptly is the way to conduct it to advantage.

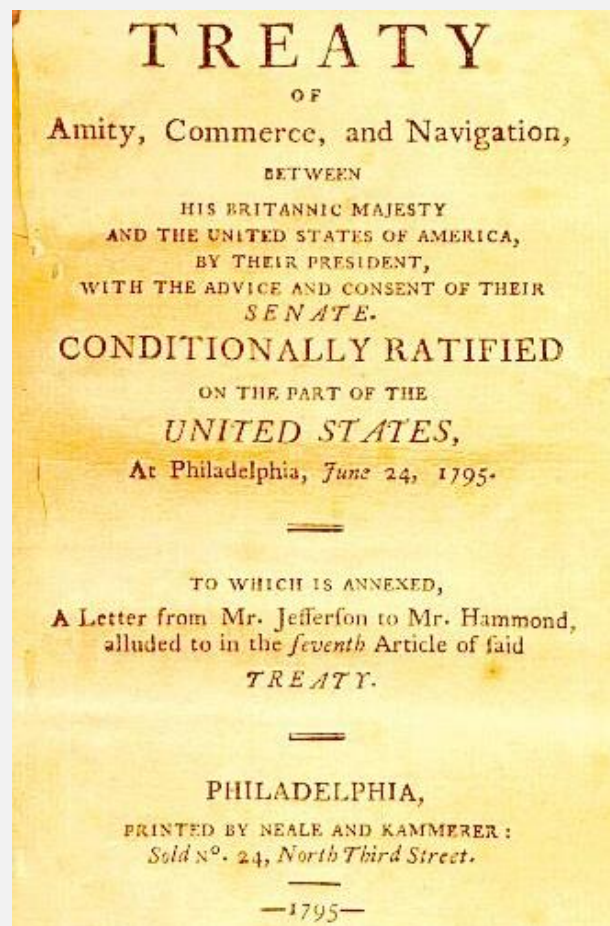


Background

Not long after April 30, 1796, when the House of Representatives approved funding for the much-maligned *Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation, Between His Britannic Majesty and the United States of America*, commonly known as the Jay Treaty, opponents as well as supporters of the measure attributed the remarkable turnabout to the stature of its most prominent backer: President George Washington. As Benjamin Rush, a Treaty opponent, recalled to John Adams years later, “no sooner did General Washington ratify it than a majority of our citizens defended it.”¹ But it was not simply his personal popularity, reputation, or admirable character that assured victory, but strategic behind-the-scenes, highly focused acts of political skill that proved masterful.

If the fact of Washington’s influence has been taken for granted, what has not been established is exactly how the President’s leadership and persuasion regarding the Treaty worked. It was not only Washington’s unique prestige, influence, and stature that contributed to the triumph of the Jay Treaty, but also his skillful deployment of particular political skills that turned the tide of public opinion and helped bring about the climactic 51-48 House vote to approve funding for the Jay Treaty.²

Conventionally, scholars have portrayed Washington as a largely symbolic president.³ But much recent scholarship has argued that Washington was more directly involved in the actions of his administration and that he played a far more engaged role than we have been led to believe.⁴ As Stuart Leibiger observes, “Because his governance was in many ways so subtle — seemed reluctant to assume political office, acted behind the scenes, and often wrote unrevealing letters — Washington himself is partially responsible for many



Courtesy of MVLA

Debates about Jay’s Treaty caused Washington to establish a firm protocol concerning the constitutional treaty-making process. His response to the public uproar over the treaty also helped define the executive’s role in shaping public sentiment. In May 1796, Washington expressed the hope that his ratification of the Jay Treaty would provide America with peace and the time to become a prosperous and powerful nation. (*Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*).

¹Benjamin Rush to John Adams, June 13, 1811 in L.H. Butterfield (ed.) *Letters of Benjamin Rush* 2 vols. (Princeton, 1951), 2: 1084.

²For the discussions of Washington’s role in the Treaty debate see Lance Banning, *The Sacred Fire of Liberty: James Madison & the Founding of the Federal Republic* (Ithaca, 1995), p. 532, note 48. See also James Thomas Flexner, *Washington: The Indispensable Man* (Boston, 1974), pp. 325-346, John E. Ferling, *The First of Men: A Life of George Washington* (Knoxville, 1988), pp. 454-465, and Ron Chernow, *Washington: A Life* (New York, 2010), pp. 729-737, 740-745. For the Washington-Madison relationship on this point see Stuart Leibiger, *Founding Friendship: George Washington, James Madison, and the Creation of the American Republic* (Charlottesville, 1999), especially pp. 197-209.

³Forrest McDonald’s study of Washington’s presidency concludes: “the harsh reality of Washington’s presidency is that the Father of his Country was not, except in a symbolic sense, particularly efficacious in establishing the permanence of his country, or even of the executive branch of his country’s government...George Washington was indispensable, but only for what he was, not for what he did.” See *The Presidency of George Washington* (Lawrence, 1974), pp. 185-86. See also Kathleen Bartoloni-Tauzon, *For Fear of an Elective King: George Washington and the Presidential Title Controversy of 1789* (Ithaca, 2014).

⁴Glenn A. Phelps, *George Washington and American Constitutionalism* (Lawrence, 1993) for the fullest statement of this view. See also Marc Landy and Sidney M. Milkis, *Presidential Greatness* (Lawrence, 2000). Leibiger’s *Founding Friendship* takes a similar interpretive stance. The classic statement on the concept is Fred Greenstein, *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as Leader* (New York, 1982).

Treaties which are not built upon reciprocal benefits, are not likely to be of long duration.

G. Washington

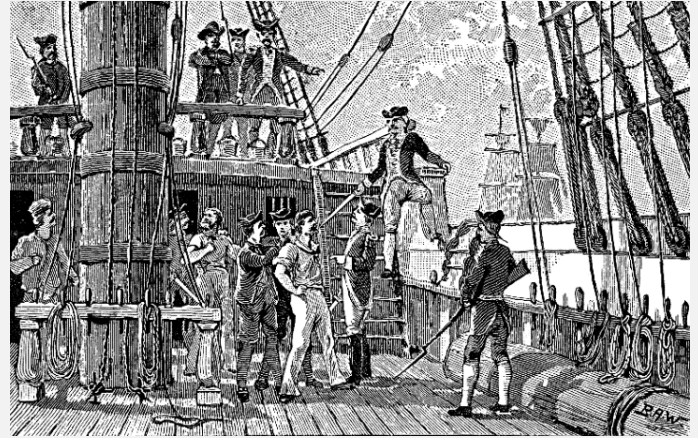


historians' decision to relegate him to the background."⁵ Significantly, Washington's actions in the Treaty debate not only shaped the outcome of the debate; they also illuminate his style of political leadership. He seemed to sense the gravitas of the times and the center of gravity of the country and what was expected of a leader in this newly constructed country.

Framing the Argument

In November 1794 Chief Justice of the Supreme Court John Jay, whom Washington had appointed to negotiate the Treaty with Great Britain, sent the completed Treaty to the Senate, which ultimately voted 20-10 to approve the measure. But two more actions were required: first, Washington had to sign or ratify the document and second, the House of Representatives had to approve funding for commissions authorized by the treaty to investigate claims. Before Washington could act – and whether this delay was strategic or administrative is unknown – a Treaty opponent leaked his copy of the document to publisher Benjamin Franklin Bache. Bache published the Treaty on June 29, 1795, and, as expected, this leak prompted outrage and denunciations and incited a furor directed at the Treaty, its negotiator, and the Washington administration.⁶

President Washington was torn. Privately, he shared many of the concerns critics had about the Treaty. But he also sensed that perhaps Jay had gotten all he might from the British in negotiations.⁷ Undecided on whether to sign the measure and troubled by protests against it, Washington slowed the process down and solicited information to more effectively rebut criticisms of the Treaty. In a confidential letter to his most trusted advisor, former Treasury Secretary Alexander Hamilton, Washington asked how the country stood. "It is not the opinion of *those* who were determined (before it was promulgated) to *support*, or *oppose* it, that I am solicitous to obtain... My desire is to learn from



Impressment of American Sailors by the British. Henry E. Chambers School History of the United States (New Orleans, LA: F.F. Hansell & Bro, 1887)

When the British Navy found itself without sufficient manpower, it turned to impressment (forced recruitment) of American merchant vessels. While it was legal in Britain to maintain this practice, many Americans felt it was unconstitutional. The Jay Treaty did not address this issue, and after the British impressed more than 15,000 American sailors for the Napoleonic wars with France, it became one of the major factors for the inception of the War of 1812. (PBS.org)

dispassionate men, who have knowledge of the subject, and abilities to judge of it, the genuine opinion they entertain of *each* article of the instrument; and the *result* of it in the aggregate."⁸ Washington was thus parsing the political landscape, seeking to understand the opponents and supporters of the Treaty but also the more dispassionate undecideds.

Even as he sought advice, Washington was already forming opinions of his own. Before leaving for Mount Vernon on July 15, he received a proclamation from the Boston Selectmen opposing the Treaty and urging him not to sign it. But if Washington was not yet publicly committed, he was not entirely neutral either. He

⁵Leibiger, Founding Friendship, p. 224

⁶For a full account of the Treaty negotiations and terms see Jerald A. Combs' excellent book, The Jay Treaty: Political Battleground of the Founding Fathers (Berkeley, 1970).

⁷Ferling, First of Men, p. 456 and Combs, Jay Treaty, p. 165 for discussions of Washington's initial attitudes toward the Treaty.

⁸Washington to the Secretaries of State, Treasury, War, and the Attorney General, June 29, 1795 in John C. Fitzpatrick (ed.) The Writings of George Washington 39 vols. (Washington, D.C. 1931-41), 34: 224-25; Washington to Alexander Hamilton, July 3, 1795, in Ibid. 34: 226-28.

Differences in political opinions are as unavoidable as, to a certain point, they may perhaps be necessary; but it is to be regretted, exceedingly, that subjects cannot be discussed with temper on the one hand, or decisions submitted to without having the motives which led to them, improperly implicated on the other.

G. Washington



expressed to several correspondents his alarm over the opposition to the Treaty and his anger at the tactic those opponents used. Taking note of the “violent, and extraordinary proceedings” against the Treaty, Washington wrote that he took the opposition seriously: “Not because there is *more* weight in *any* of the objections...than were foreseen at first; for there are *none* in *some* of them; and *gross* misrepresentations in *others*.” Another letter a few days later found Washington bitter at the nature and tactics of opponents. The prejudices against the Treaty were “more extensive than is generally imagined...How sh[oul]d it be otherwise? when no stone has been left unturned that could impress on the minds of the people the most arrant misrepresentation of facts.” Perhaps in time, “when passion shall have yielded to sober reason,

the current may possibly turn.” But at present the situation was fraught with difficulty.⁹

Not willing to let such “arrant misrepresentations” go unchallenged, Washington publicly dispatched a response to an anti-Treaty proclamation from the Boston Selectmen that both clearly articulated his position and subsequently shaped the tone and content of the Federalists’ counterattack. This letter nicely captures Washington’s thoughts on the proper roles to be acted by the people and by Washington himself as President. He began bluntly and strategically: “In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow-citizens.” Toward that end his system had been to “contemplate the United States, as one great whole,” overlooking all other personal or local considerations. A strategic leader is one who is focused on the system as a whole, not its constituent parts, as leadership scholar Jerry Hunt wrote in 1991.¹⁰ Washington explained that his “system” operated on the belief that “sudden impressions, when erroneous, would yield to candid reflection.”

Washington next turned to the Treaty in particular. “Without a predilection for my own judgment, I have weighed with attention every argument, which has at any time been brought into view. But the constitution is the guide, which I never will abandon. It has assigned to the President the power of making treaties, with the advice and consent of the senate.” Referring to the 1787 Constitutional convention, which he chaired, Washington noted that it was supposed that those branches of government would have the most information and could decide wisely “without passion” and prejudice. The President and Senate “ought not to substitute for their own conviction the opinions of others” or to expect to find “truth thro’ any channel but that of a temperate and well-informed investigation. Under this persuasion,” he concluded. “I have resolved on the manner of executing the duty now before me.”¹¹ As a former general and Commander-in-Chief of the



Faneuil Hall, Boston. Illustration from a steel engraving from the Massachusetts Magazine, 1789.

Often called the “Cradle of Liberty,” Faneuil Hall was a popular meeting place for American patriots before, during, and after the Revolutionary War. On July 13, 1795, citizens of Boston convened in Faneuil Hall to write a letter to President George Washington outlining 19 reasons they were opposed to the Jay Treaty. The document was signed by nine Boston Selectmen and prefaced by a cover letter that read, “At a very numerous meeting, of the Inhabitants of the Town of Boston, in Faneuil Hall, the inclosed proceedings were unanimously adopted...” (*Founders Online*).

⁹Washington to Edmund Randolph, July 29, 1795 and July 31, 1795 in *Writings* 34: 254-57; 264-67.

¹⁰Hunt, J. G. (1991) *Leadership*: New Synthesis, Newbury Park, CA: SAGE.

¹¹Washington to the Boston Selectmen, July 28, 1795 in *Writings* 34: 252-53.

Remember that it is the actions, and not the commission that make the officer, and that there is more expected from him, than the title.

G. Washington



Continental Army, he was a thoroughly disciplined master of command leadership. He understood both his authorization and role commanding a tight military hierarchy, but his new role as President had yet to be similarly defined and tested.

Nevertheless, his message sent a clear signal to anti-Treaty critics in Boston and elsewhere that he would not be intimidated or coerced. The statement adumbrated Washington's understanding of his role in the constitutional system. It also expressed – without announcing a decision on the Treaty itself – his firm belief that he was acting in the national interest, and it gently rebuked the Selectmen for presuming to influence his

decision. The effect of Washington's reply was further enhanced and magnified because it was reprinted in various newspapers – we have to ask if Washington or his supporters may have been the source of the leak – and because Washington sent similar versions of the message to other petitioners who wrote decrying the Treaty.¹²

The message also announced several themes that became central to the Federalist campaign to win support for the measure. The need for careful study was one. So, too, was the idea that the public must delegate to and trust in the constituted authorities who were designated to deal with foreign affairs. Thus, Washington's observation that the Constitution "has assigned to the President the power of making treaties, with the advice and consent of the senate" was not merely a superfluous civics lesson but a cornerstone of the Federalist conception of the proper workings of government in the 1790s. On all these points, Washington's letter articulated messages that were central to the themes advanced by the pro-Treaty effort and was itself an early, public effort that strategically carried great weight. While he had not yet decided to sign the Treaty, the anti-Treaty ruckus served to solidify Washington's revulsion at the opponents' tactics and likely moved him closer to support.

Fostering Trust in Washington

Even before he announced a decision on what action to take, Washington saw pleasing signs in the public debate. Washington praised the "Camillus" essays (the first of which appeared July 22) in a letter to Hamilton. "I have seen with pleasure that a writer... has promised to answer, or rather defend the treaty... To judge of this work from the first number, which I have seen, I auger well of the performance."¹³ Washington made it clear how crucial it was that able defenses of the Treaty begin to appear in the public papers. He noted that friends of the administration should spare no effort to promulgate



John Jay, Gilbert Stuart, 1794; National Gallery of Art

John Jay, an important Federalist figure, was also a close political ally of George Washington and Alexander Hamilton. His career in public service was varied, including involvement in the campaign for the Constitution, serving as the nation's first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and as Governor of New York. Jay remained above the fray that resulted from his treaty. As the Governor of New York, Jay helped pass a gradual emancipation law in 1799 that led to the eventual end of slavery in New York in 1827. (*Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*).

¹²To some petitioners, however, he made no reply at all. If his response to the Boston Selectmen was firm but controlled, his anger clearly bristled at some of the petitions and resolutions he received that summer. About a resolution from citizens of Petersburg, Virginia he noted coldly: "Tenor indecent No answer returned." See the editorial note in [Writings](#) 34: 254.

¹³Washington to Hamilton, July 29, 1795 in [Writings](#) 34: 262-64. The "Camillus" or "Defence" essays were written mainly by Hamilton (28 of 38) with assistance from Rufus King (10) and appeared in newspapers from July 1795 to January 1796.

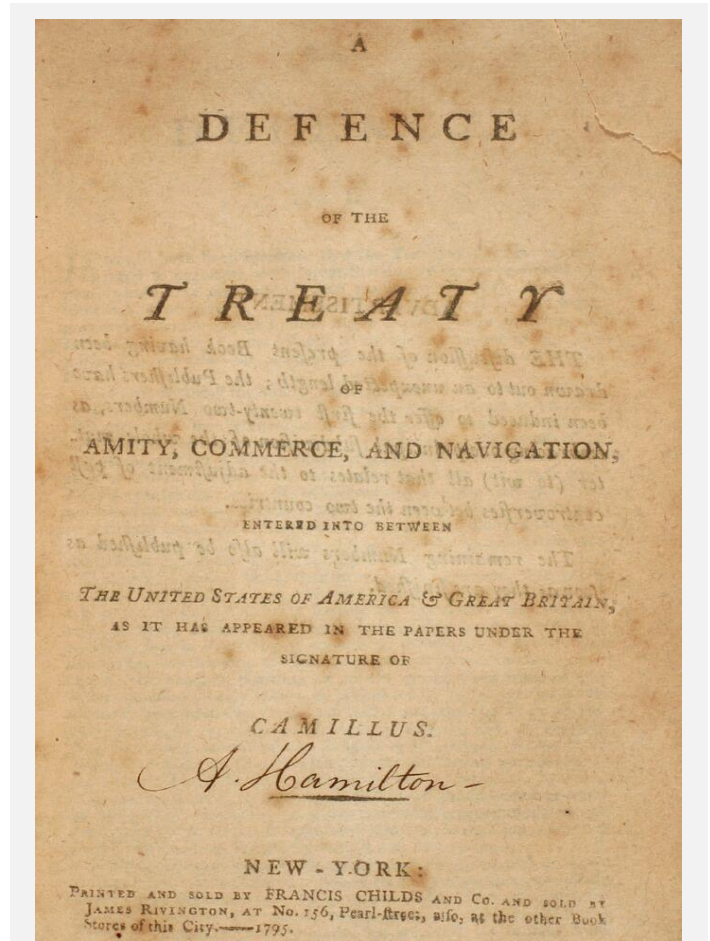
While we are contending for our own liberty, we should be very cautious not to violate the rights of conscience in others.

G. Washington



“Camillus” and other pieces like it; otherwise, “a few only will derive lights from the knowledge, or labour of the author; whilst the opposition pieces will spread their poison in all directions.” Ultimately this would mean that Congress would have an unrepresentative sense of true public opinion among its constituents. “The difference of conduct between the friends, and foes of order, and good government, is in noth[in]g more striking than that, the latter are always working, like bees, to distil their poison; whilst the former, depending, often times *too much*, and *too long* upon the sense, and good dispositions of the people to work conviction, neglect the means of effecting it.” In fact, Federalists had already launched – with the President’s full backing – a large, long-lasting, and hugely effective public campaign to win public support for the Treaty; they would not “neglect the means” of effecting public opinion.¹⁴ Washington’s decision to ratify the Treaty on August 14, 1795, capped a furious six-week interval of efforts designed by both sides to sway Washington’s mind. His decision had a powerful effect. Some critics became even more vitriolic, heaping scorn and criticism on Washington. But others, concluding that with Washington’s ratification the matter was now a done deal, became inactive and largely dropped the matter, a concession to the power and sweep of the President’s influence even among Treaty critics.

In their own rallies and newspaper and pamphlet campaigns, Federalists stressed the same themes that Washington had encouraged. In many ways it was a precursor to the strategic modern day “coordinated campaign.” They made their most direct appeals to the public in the important pro-Treaty meeting called by New York merchants at the Tontine Coffee House on July 21. With its expression of the belief that this was the best treaty that could be arranged, that it would preserve peace and prevent war, and that the constituted authorities knew best and should be trusted, a New York Chamber of Commerce resolution nicely summed up the



A Defence of the Treaty of Amity, Commerce, and Navigation; entered into between the United States of America & Great Britain; as it has appeared in the papers under the signature of Camillus [pseud.]; Hamilton, R. King, Jay; 1795; call #Y 1795.H.

Photograph ©New-York Historical Society

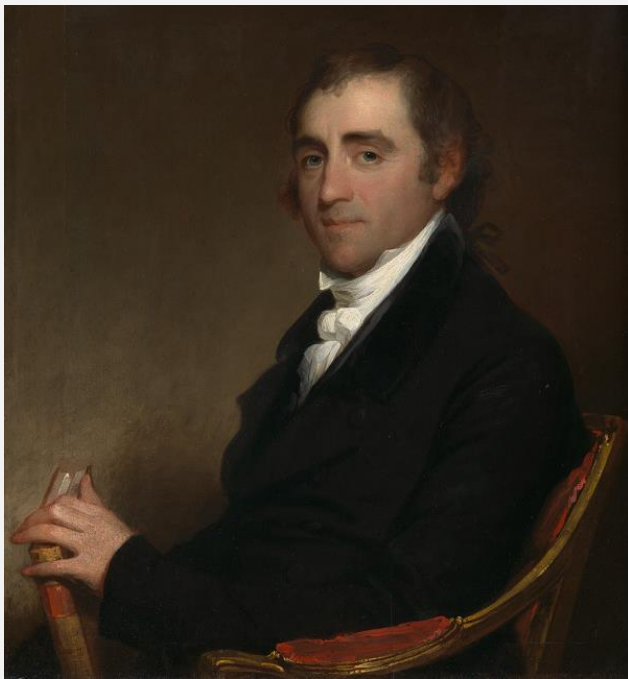
On June 24, 1795, the Senate gave its consent for the Jay Treaty and in July, before George Washington ratified it on August 14, 1795, its contents were made public. Citizens of the new nation were very opposed to the terms of the treaty and made their protestations clear. “The Defence” essays, more commonly known as the “Camillus” essays, were written by Alexander Hamilton and Rufus King to defend the Jay Treaty. Hamilton wrote the first of the essays, and 28 of the total 38, while King wrote the other 10. They were published regularly from July of 1795 until January of 1796. (*Founders Online*)

¹⁴Washington to Edmund Randolph, August 3, 1795, which discusses Washington’s wish that answers to public resolutions on the Treaty appearing in the papers, pro or con, be disseminated immediately so that no time would lag without a response. See [Writings](#) 34: 268-69. For a fuller discussion of the Federalists’ extensive campaign to win public support for the Treaty see Todd Estes, “Shaping the Politics of Public Opinion: Federalists and the Jay Treaty Debate,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 20 (Fall 2000), 393-422, and Estes, *The Jay Treaty Debate, Public Opinion, and the Evolution of Early American Political Culture* (Amherst, Massachusetts, 2006).

Few, who are not philosophical Spectators can realise the difficult and delicate part which a man in my situation had to act... I walk on untrodden ground. There is scarcely any action, whose motives may not be subject to a double interpretation. There is scarcely any part of my conduct w[hi]ch may not hereafter be drawn into precedent.



central themes of the Federalist campaign. Federalists in Philadelphia and Boston also organized merchants and the community to rally behind the treaty and the president – just as Washington had encouraged Treaty supporters to do – and sent similar addresses.¹⁵



Fisher Ames by Gilbert Stuart, c. 1807. Oil on Wood, National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Gift of George Cabot Lodge

Fisher Ames was an American essayist and Federalist politician born April 9, 1758 in Dedham, Massachusetts. He graduated from Harvard College in 1774 and taught for 5 years before being admitted to the bar for practicing law. In 1788 he was a member of the Massachusetts Ratifying Committee and became a member of Congress in 1789. Along with Alexander Hamilton, Ames believed the country could only survive with a strong central government. It is believed that the greatest speech of his life was given in 1794 in favor of the Jay Treaty; he believed that it preserved peace with Great Britain. In 1804, he declined to become the President of Harvard College, citing his failing health. He passed away July 4, 1808. (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*)

The success of these Federalist efforts was manifested in several ways, not the least in pro-Treaty meetings that begat petitions and resolutions sent to Washington. The pro-Treaty petitions also suggested what seemed to many to be a gradual shift in public opinion. Federalist leader Fisher Ames made it clear in September that Washington's leadership was having a decisive influence. The accounts he received from Newport indicated that the Treaty protests had been so overheated that the general public took little notice and even the "anti-treaty men are ashamed of the business." Ames also observed that he had recently visited a number of country taverns and concluded from his conversations that "the yeomanry are yet right. They say the men in the government know best what to do, and the President will not see the country wronged, much less wrong it himself." The public seemed to display "confidence in, and almost adoration of the President" and a strong determination to support the government. Ames closed by noting that Washington's response to the Boston Selectmen "is greatly extolled, and I believe has done more towards calming the country, than all the good pieces published in Webster and the Sentinel."¹⁶

By October the wave of opposition to the treaty had dissipated. Washington himself, responding to an anti-Treaty petition from Petersburg, Virginia, noted, "It would have been pleasing to me to have found a universal concurrence of my fellow-citizens in the same opinion; and I flatter myself, that what diversity of sentiment exists, will daily diminish." As judged by other Federalists, at least, Washington was correct.¹⁷

The depth of public feeling and affection for Washington gave Federalists a powerful weapon as the second stage of the public debate was about to begin. Washington's unequaled stature, prestige, and public support was vital to Federalist efforts to win final approval for the Treaty. He benefitted from what social psychologist Ed Hollander called "idiosyncrasy credit,"¹⁸ the reserve of unexpended credit accorded to trusted

¹⁵This account of the New York pro-Treaty meeting is drawn from Alfred F. Young, *The Democratic Republicans of New York: The Origins, 1763-1797* (Chapel Hill, 1967), esp. pp. 454-55; the *New-York Journal* July 29, 1795; and *Dunlap and Claypoole's...* July 28, 1795.

¹⁶Ames to Oliver Wolcott, Jr. September 2, 1795 in *Wolcott Papers* 1: 229-230.

¹⁷Washington to Samuel Hopkins, Junior, quoted in *GUS* October 13, 1795; *GUS* October 20, 1795.

¹⁸Hollander, Edwin (1958). "Conformity, status, and idiosyncrasy credit". *Psychological Review* 65 (2): 117-127.

Every post is honorable in which a man can serve his country.



leaders. But again, it was not merely the enormous respect he commanded but his own abilities as a leader that served the pro-Treaty campaign well.

Strategic Patience

Goaded by Benjamin Bache, the Republican opposition in the House of Representatives was eager to get a hold of the Treaty, but Washington refused to yield it to them. Washington had good reasons for delaying the submission. Not only did he want to wait for the cycle of public opinion to turn more favorably toward the Treaty, but he also had a considerable advantage up his sleeve to mollify lingering opponents – the Pinckney Treaty with Spain, which negotiated navigation rights on the Mississippi and was, all in all, an unambiguously beneficial Treaty. Washington knew that leading with the Pinckney Treaty would soften public and private opposition to the Jay Treaty and, as people would think them interconnected – a point Federalists made repeatedly—it would build momentum for the British treaty, too. Accordingly, on February 26, 1796, Washington submitted Pinckney’s Treaty to the Senate just a few days before he sent the long-awaited Jay Treaty to the House.¹⁹

The fact that House Republicans found themselves so agitated was owed in large part to the extraordinary sense of timing and delay Washington practiced.²⁰ By waiting to submit the treaty he made good use of a crucial tool utilized by strategic leaders –deftly seizing the moment. The strategic delay and timing were set to overcome any objections. Bartunck and Necochea (2000) and others write of taking the right action at just the right time.²¹ This ability is known as Kairotic time and “kairotic moments have a long tradition in both Greek philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology.” (Kinneavy, 1986)²². Washington took advantage of this kairotic moment by

recognizing the strategic significance of the unexpected opportunities now afforded to him. It may have been that insight, intuition, or both played a significant role in making the appropriate judgment. Demonstrably, Washington revealed the importance for strategic leaders to delineate not only what strategically to pursue but also when strategically to execute.

Then, another barrier presented itself. On February 29, 1796, Washington declared the Treaty to be in effect by proclamation, and the next day sent the Treaty to the House at long last. Just a day later, New York Republican Edward Livingston proposed a resolution calling on Washington to put before Congress copies of Jay’s instructions on negotiations plus all of the documents and correspondence pertaining to the Treaty. It was an extraordinarily bold request, implying that the House had a full constitutional right to debate and pass judgment on the *merits* of the Treaty, not merely to make appropriations for it.²³

House Republicans, with some Federalist support, passed Livingston’s revised resolution 62-37 and sent it to Washington on March 25. Washington had told Gouverneur Morris earlier that month that he expected that the Treaty would be censured “in several points.” But he had confidence that the “great change...in the public mind with respect to this Treaty within the last two months, is apparent to every one.” That had, of course, been the primary reason for the strategic patience to wait before submitting the document to the House. The President believed, furthermore, that “If the people of this country have not abundant cause to rejoice at the happiness they enjoy, I know of no country that has. We have settled all our disputes, and are at Peace with all Nations.” To Washington the matter seemed straightforward, but the House resolution, passed by such a wide margin, gave him pause, even though it ultimately served to strengthen his resolve not

¹⁹DeConde, *Entangling Alliance*, p. 133; Combs, *Jay Treaty*, pp. 172-73.

²⁰James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: The New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven, 1993), p. 129 makes this point effectively.

²¹Jean M. Bartunek, Raul A. Necochea (2000). “Old Insights and New Times: Kairos, Inca Cosmology, and their Contributions to Contemporary Management Inquiry.” *Journal of Management Inquiry* 9 (2): 103-113.

²²Kinneavy, J.L. (1986) *Kairos: A Neglected Concept in Classical Rhetoric* In J.D. Moss (Ed.). *Rhetoric and Praxis: The Contribution of Classical Rhetoric to Practical Reasoning*, pp. 79-106. Washington, D.C. Catholic University of America Press.

²³The preceding paragraphs draw on Combs, *The Jay Treaty*, pp. 171-178; Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism*, pp. 441-445; Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic*, pp. 127-129; and John C. Miller, *The Federalist Era: 1789-1801* (New York, 1960), pp. 171-174.

It doubtless is important that all treaties and compacts formed by the United States with other nations, whether civilized or not, should be made with caution and executed with fidelity.



to cede privileges to the House that he fervently believed they should not hold.²⁴

Washington's response on March 30 was polite but firm. He refused to hand over the papers, reiterated his earlier delineations of Constitutional authority, and once again framed the Treaty debate more as a question of Constitutional authority and Presidential stature than about the terms of the instrument itself. His response at once recognized the prerogatives of the President and Senate in conducting foreign policy, and asserted his own independence (while taking pains not to appear above the law) by instead portraying the House as usurpers of constitutional authority. He identified the House request for papers for what it was: a blatantly partisan political act. "The nature of foreign negotiations requires caution; and their success must often depend on secrecy: and

even when brought to a conclusion, a full disclosure of all the measures, demands, or eventual concessions...would be extremely impolitic: for this might have a pernicious influence on future negotiations." This was why, he argued, the Constitution very clearly vested these powers in the executive and the Senate. "To admit then a right in the House of Representatives to demand, and to have as a matter of course, all the Papers respecting a negotiation with a foreign power, would be to establish a dangerous precedent." He closed: "A just regard to the Constitution and to the duty of my Office, under all the circumstances of this case, forbids a compliance with your request."²⁵

It was a command performance, galvanizing Treaty supporters and once again asserting Washington's primacy in the debate while recasting it in the most favorable terms for Federalists. Brilliantly fusing constitutionality with his own stature and reputation, Washington deployed this address to reframe the public contest almost as one of personalities between the House and the President so as to maximize his transcendent position. The President reiterated the same statements about constitutional prerogatives he spelled out the previous summer in his reply to the Boston Selectmen when he had told them that they needed to trust their duly chosen public leaders. Now he told the House to do the same with regard to the Senate and President.

Washington's message brought about two results. First, it shrewdly shifted the terms of the debate from the Treaty itself to the much firmer ground of the constitutionality of the House's request for the papers. Second, by standing up to House Republicans in refusing the request, Washington placed himself back at the center of the Treaty debate. As they went door to door in some towns and wrote to newspapers, Federalists could now plausibly present the Treaty as a referendum on Washington. The Republicans had challenged his authority; he had reasserted it. And for a good many citizens, the Treaty might be questionable but



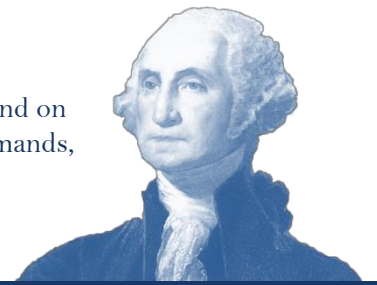
Reproduction sign for the Aurora in Philadelphia. Courtesy of MVLA.

Benjamin Franklin Bache was the printer and publisher of the Philadelphia Aurora, a leading Democratic-Republican newspaper in the 1790s. During his short life, Bache became a vocal critic of the early Federalist Party and George Washington's administration. He learned the art of printing from his grandfather and namesake, Benjamin Franklin. By Washington's second term, Bache was leveling accusations of corruption and bad character against Washington, and the Aurora became a perpetual antagonist of the first president. (*Digital Encyclopedia of George Washington*)

²⁴George Washington to Gouverneur Morris, March 4, 1796 in [Writings](#) 34: 483. For more on Washington's constitutional thought and actions see Phelps, [George Washington and American Constitutionalism](#), especially chapter six.

²⁵"To the House of Representatives" March 30, 1796 in [Writings of Washington](#) 35: 2-5. As usual, Washington asked Hamilton's advice and the former Secretary complied (see Hamilton to Washington, March 29, 1796 in [PAH](#) 20: 85-103).

The nature of foreign negotiations requires caution; and their successes must often depend on secrecy: and even when brought to a conclusion, a full disclosure of all the measures, demands, or eventual concessions... would be extremely impolitic.



Washington was not. In actively placing himself at the center of the debate, Washington gave Treaty proponents the full power of his prestige to use in the battle.

Socially Astute

The House spent the month of April in an intense, furious debate over the Treaty. The contest in the hall was accompanied by one in the streets as both sides rallied the public, circulated petitions, and called on every resource at their disposal to prevail. Fractious debate culminated in three climactic votes on April 30, the last being on the proposal to fund the Treaty itself, which passed 51-48 with several Republicans crossing the aisle to vote for funding.²⁶

Republican Treaty opponents realized clearly the powerful effect Washington had on the outcome of both the House vote and also the contest for public opinion. One of James Madison's long-time allies and former colleagues from Virginia, Joseph Jones, wrote to Madison to tell him of the effectiveness of the Federalist petition drives for the Treaty. "Many...follow implicitly the decision of the Executive majestrate from a respect for his former services and established Character," he wrote. A few days later Madison told Thomas Jefferson that the people had been made to fear war if the Treaty were rejected, "and have thence listened to the summons 'to follow where Washington leads.'" And late in May 1796 Madison again told Jefferson that petitions favoring the Treaty were still coming in to Congress. "The name of the President & the alarm of war, have had a greater effect, than were apprehended on one side, or expected on the other."²⁷ In short, the opposition had been outmaneuvered.

Presenting himself as the guardian of the Constitution before a rapacious House proved to be a strong argumentative position for Washington, as well as excellent politics. He also acknowledged the

effectiveness of the pro-Treaty petitions in the final House vote. Nothing, Washington believed, "but the torrent of Petitions, and remonstrances which were pouring in from all the Eastern and middle States, and were beginning to come pretty strongly from that of Virginia, requiring the necessary provisions for carrying the Treaty into effect," would have assured the narrow vote in favor of funding.²⁸

That those petitions came "pouring in" owed much to a vast Federalist campaign to apply popular political pressure to Congress, and the main instrument in that campaign was George Washington. Washington himself issued public messages, encouraged Treaty supporters to publish defenses, monitored the debate closely, and used the full discretionary powers of his office by timing the release of the Treaty to the House for maximum effectiveness, and then refused a request for papers as an unconstitutional affront. In short, Washington displayed nearly all the hallmarks of what political scientist Fred Greenstein termed the hidden-hand presidency: the delegation of tasks to others, the use of personality, the instrumental use of language to send signals and make a case, and the development of broad-based support that transcended normal political divisions.²⁹

George Washington: The Politically Strategic Leader

Well before he assumed the Presidency, Washington had developed a clear constitutional vision that was well-known by his closest collaborators. Thus, he could freely delegate to his advisors, confident in their ability to operate independently. This was a conscious style of leadership. Washington chose to lead this way, but not because he lacked the abilities to do things himself. He far preferred to work behind the scenes and serve as orchestrator and not as actor. The nature of such a

²⁶For the House debate and vote see Combs, pp. 171-188, Elkins and McKittrick, pp 441-449.

²⁷Joseph Jones to James Madison, May 1, 1796; Madison to Thomas Jefferson, May 9, 1796; and Madison to Jefferson, May 22, 1796, all in J.C.A. Stagg et. al. (eds.), *The Papers of James Madison* (Charlottesville, 1989) 16: 345-47; 342-43; and 363-65.

²⁸Washington to Joseph Leech, May 5, 1796; Washington to Thomas Pinckney, May 22, 1796 in *Writings* 35: 35-36; 61-63.

²⁹For a valuable discussion of earlier Federalist efforts to design a political culture which centered around Washington and his great prestige see Simon P. Newman, "Principles or Men? George Washington and the Political Culture of National Leadership, 1776-1801," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 12 (1992), 477-507.

My politics are plain and simple. I think every nation has a Right to establish that form of Government under which It conceives It shall live most happy; provided it infracts no Right or is not dangerous to others.

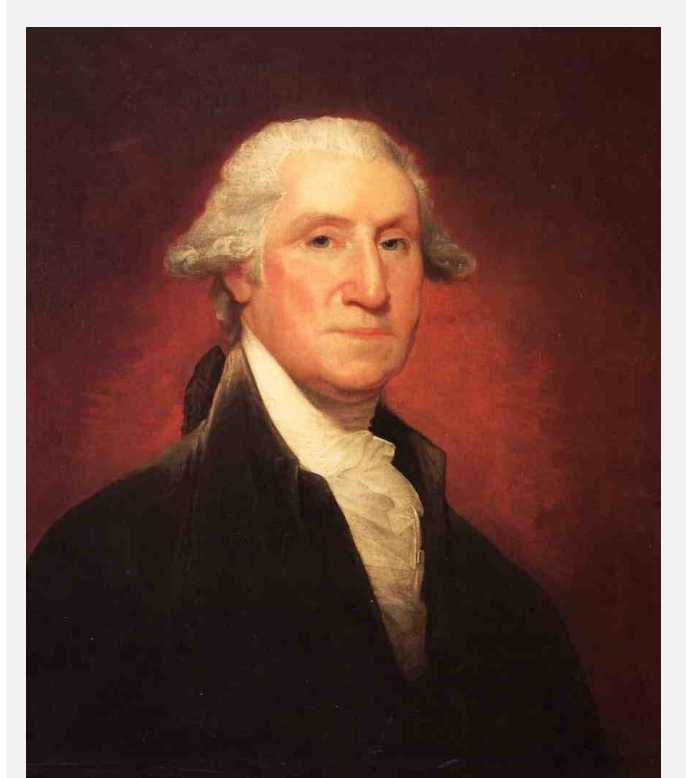
G. Washington



leadership style was *not* to be seen devising or directing efforts; rather, a hidden-hand leader approved of what was done in his name or in the name of his administration but he usually provided guidance and direction from behind the scenes, not out front. Washington exercised presidential leadership in precisely this manner during the Jay Treaty debate. He always maintained control of his administration even as he acted through intermediaries.

Strategic leadership includes the ability to “anticipate, envision, maintain flexibility, think strategically, and work with others to initiate change.”³⁰ Working from an organization-as-a-whole perspective, strategic leadership surveys the environment and adapts to subtle changes, holds the cognitive and behavioral complexity of the situation, and makes decisions at optimal times. A strategic leader evaluates his or her situation realistically, assesses the opposition, and seeks a congruent message that will bring resolution broadly. Lastly, a strategic leader maximizes the use of idiosyncrasy credits to forge change.³¹

Washington asserted his strategic position to manage the treaty process as authorized by the Constitution. He believed it was his exclusive role to do so, but he may not have fully reckoned with the leaking of the document before the Senate ratified the Treaty. Though he had dealt with insubordination in his military role, he viewed the treaty opposition as political transgression. Still, he cleverly stepped back, sought the advice of trusted allies like Alexander Hamilton, and quietly instructed and deployed supporters with key constituencies to push back against the opposition. He had what Boal and Hooijberg³² termed “absorptive” or adaptive capacity: the ability to recognize new environmental and political factors and to assimilate them and then nimbly pivot to maneuver around constraints. Lastly, Washington benefitted from a tremendous bank of “idiosyncrasy credits” that allowed the public to accept him as “working in the best interest of the country.”



George Washington; Gilbert Stuart 1796
This portrait is commonly known as both the Vaughan Portrait and the Athenaeum Portrait. It is one of the surviving examples that resided in the collection of London merchant Samuel Vaughan. Scholars disagree about the final product, questioning Stuart’s ability to capture Washington’s likeness. (MVLA)

The Jay Treaty won full approval for a variety of reasons, but Washington’s leadership was crucially important. At every turn, the President provided strong, forceful leadership --both in public and behind the scenes-- calling on the vast reserves of good will most Americans had for him and deploying with great skill and impeccable timing the discretionary powers he had regarding submission of the Treaty. On this matter, Washington stood tall, and the case of the Treaty debate offers convincing evidence of the effectiveness of his political leadership.

³⁰Boal, K.B and Whitehead, C.J. (1992) In R.L. Phillips and J. G Hunt, Strategic Leadership: A Multi-Organizational Level Perspective, pp. 237-255, Westport, CT: Quorum.

³¹Grandstaff, M. and G. Sorenson, Strategic Leadership: The General’s Art, (2009) Management Concepts: Vienna, Virginia

³²Boal, K.B. and Hooijberg, T. (2001) Strategic Leadership: Moving On. *Leadership Quarterly*, (11) 4, pp. 515-549.



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Appendix A.

George Washington to Boston Selectman, 28 July 1795

Gentlemen,

In every act of my administration, I have sought the happiness of my fellow-citizens. My system for the attainment of this object has uniformly been, to overlook all personal, local and partial considerations: to contemplate the United States as one great whole: to confide, that sudden impressions, when erroneous, would yield to candid reflection: and to consult only the substantial and permanent interests of our country.

Nor have I departed from this line of conduct on the occasion which has produced the resolutions contained in your letter of the 13th instant.

Without a predilection for my own judgment, I have weighed with attention every argument which has at any time been brought into view. But the Constitution is the guide which I never can abandon. It has assigned to the President the power of making treaties, with the advice and consent of the Senate: It was doubtless supposed that these two branches of government would combine, without passion, and with the best means of information, those facts & principles, upon which the success of our foreign relations will always depend: that they ought not to substitute for their own conviction the opinions of others; or to seek truth thro' any channel but that of a temperate and well informed investigation.

Under this persuasion, I have resolved on the manner of executing the duty now before me. To the high responsibility, attached to it, I freely submit; and you, gentlemen, are at liberty to make these sentiments known, as the grounds of my procedure. While I feel the most lively gratitude for the many instances of approbation from my country; I can no otherwise deserve it than by obeying the dictates of my conscience. With due respect I am—Gentlemen Your Obedient





Appendix B.

George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, 29 July 1795

My dear Sir,

Your letters of the 20th and 21st. Instt found me at this place, after a hot & disagreeable ride.

As the measures of the government, respecting the treaty, were taken before I left Philadelphia, something more imperious than has yet appeared, must turn up to occasion a change. Still, it is very desirable to ascertain, if possible, after the paroxysm of the fever is a little abated, what the real temper of the people is, concerning it; for at present the cry against the Treaty is like that against a mad dog; and every one, in a manner, seems engaged in running it down.

That it has received the most tortured interpretation, & that the writings agt. it (which are very industriously circulated) are pregnant of the most abominable mis-representations, yet, there are to be found, so far as my information extends, many well disposed men who conceive, that in the settlement of *old* disputes, a proper regard to reciprocal justice does not appear in the Treaty; whilst others, also well enough affected to the government, are of opinion that to have had *nocommercial* treaty would have been better, for this country, than the restricted one, agreed to; inasmuch, say they, the nature of our Exports, and imports (without any extra: or violent measures) would have forced, or led to a more adequate intercourse between the two nations; without any of those shackles which the treaty has imposed. In a word, that as our *exports* consist chiefly of *provisions & raw materials*, which to the manufacturers in G. Britain, & to their Islands in the West Indies, affords employment & food; they must have had them on *our* terms if they were not to be obtained on their *own*; whilst the *imports* of this country, offers the best mart for their fabricks; &, of course, is the principal support of their manufacturers: But the string which is most played on, because it strikes with most force the popular ear, is the violation—as they term it—of our engagements with France; or in other words, the prediliction shewn by that instrument to G. Britain at the expence of the French nation. The consequences of which are more to be apprehended than any, which are likely to flow from other causes, as ground of opposition; because, whether the fact is, in *any* degree true, or not, it is the interest of the French (whilst the animosity, or jealousies betwn. the two nations exist) to avail themselves of such a spirit to keep *us & G. Britain* at variance; and they will, in my opinion, accordingly do it. To what *length* their policy may induce them to carry matters, is too much in embryo at this moment to decide: but I predict much embarrassment to the government therefrom—and in my opinion, too much pains cannot be taken by those who speak, or write, in favor of the treaty, to place this matter in its true light.

I have seen with pleasure, that a writer in one of the New York papers under the Signature of Camillus, has promised to answer—or rather to defend the treaty which has been made with G. Britain. To judge of this work from the first number, which I have seen, I auger well of the performance; & shall expect to see the subject handled in a clear, distinct and satisfactory manner: but if measures are not adopted for its dissimulation a few only will derive lights from the knowledge, or labour of the author; whilst the opposition pieces will spread their poison in all directions; and Congress, more than probable, will assemble with the unfavorable impressions of their constituents. The difference of conduct between the friends, and foes of order, & good government, is in nothg. more striking than that, the latter are always working like bees, to distil their poison, whilst the former, depending, often times *too much*, and *too long* upon the sense, and good dispositions of the people to work conviction, neglect the means of effecting it. With sincere esteem & regard

I am your Affecte.





Appendix C.

George Washington to Edward Carrington, 1 May 1796

Dear Sir,

With much pleasure I received your letter of the 22d Ulto; and if the sense of the great body of Citizens in Virginia should be expressed in the manner you seem to expect, it would give me and I believe I might add, every friend to order and good government throughout the United States, very great satisfaction: More so that similar sentiments from any other State in the Union; for people living at a distance from it, know not how to believe it possible. that its Representatives both in the General & State Legislatures can speak a language which is repugnant to the sense of their Constituents; especially too, as they seem to give the tone to all the States south of them.

Whatever my own opinion may be on this, or any other subject, interesting to the Community at large, it always has been, and will continue to be, my earnest desire to learn, and to comply, as far as is consistent, with the public sentiment; but it is on great occasions only, and after time has been given for cool and deliberate reflection, that the real voice of the people can be known.

The present, however, is one of those great occasions; than which, none more important has occurred, or probably may occur again, to call forth their decision. And to them the appeal is now made. For no candid man, in the least degree acquainted with the progress of this business, will believe for a moment, that the ostensible dispute, was about papers- or that the British Treaty was a good one, or a bad one; but whether there should be a Treaty at all without the occurrence of the house of Representatives. which was striking at once, & boldly too, at the fundamental principles of the Constitution; and if it were established, would render the Treaty making Power not only a nullity, but such an absolute absurdity, as to reflect disgrace on the framers of it: for can any one suppose, that they who framed, or those who adopted that Instrument, ever intended to give the power to the President & Senate to make Treaties (and declaring that when made & ratified, they should be the Supreme law of the land) and in the same breath place it in the powers of the house of Representatives to fix their Veto on them? unless apparent marks of fraud or corruption (which in equity would set aside any contract) accompanied the measure, or such striking evidence of National injury attended their adoption as to make War, or any other evil preferable. Every unbiased mind will answer in the negative.

Whence the source, and what the object of all this struggle is, I submit to my fellow citizens. Charity would lead one to hope that the motives to it have been pure. Suspicions, however, speak a different language- and my tongue, for the present, shall be silent. Such further information on this head (or any other similarly important) which may come to your knowledge- and your leisure and inclination may enable you to give- will be very acceptable to Dear Sir Your Obedt & Obliged Servt





George Washington

Appendix D.

Fisher Ames to the House of Representatives, 28 April 1796

IT would be strange that a subject which has aroused in turn all the passions of the country should be discussed without the interference of any of our own. We are men, and, therefore, not exempt from those passions; as citizens and representatives we feel the interests that must excite them. The hazard of great interests can not fail to agitate strong passions. We are not disinterested; it is impossible we should be dispassionate. The warmth of such feelings may becloud the judgment and for a time pervert the understanding. But the public sensibility, and our own, has sharpened the spirit of inquiry and given an animation to the debate. The public attention has been quickened to mark the progress of the discussion, and its judgment, often hasty and erroneous on first impressions, has become solid and enlightened at last. Our result will, I hope, on that account be safer and more mature, as well as more accordant with that of the nation. The only constant agents in political affairs are the passions of men. Shall we complain of our nature—shall we say that man ought to have been made otherwise? It is right already, because He, from whom we derive our nature, ordained it so; and because thus made and thus acting, the cause of truth and the public good is more surely promoted.

The treaty is bad, fatally bad, is the cry. It sacrifices the interest, the honor, the independence of the United States and the faith of our engagements to France. If we listen to the clamor of party intemperance, the evils are of a number not to be counted, and of a nature not to be borne, even in idea. The language of passion and exaggeration may silence that of sober reason in other places; it has not done it here. The question here is, whether the treaty be really so very fatal as to oblige the nation to break its faith. I admit that such a treaty ought not to be executed. I admit that self-preservation is the first law of society as well as of individuals. It would, perhaps, be deemed an abuse of terms to call that a treaty which violates such a principle. I waive, also, for the present, any inquiry what departments shall represent the nation and annul the stipulations of a treaty.

I content myself with pursuing the inquiry whether the nature of this compact be such as to justify our refusal to carry it into effect. A treaty is the promise of a nation. Now, promises do not always bind him that makes them. But I lay down two rules which ought to guide us in this case. The treaty must appear to be bad, not merely in the petty details, but in its character, principle, and mass. And in the next place, this ought to be ascertained by the decided and general concurrence of the enlightened public.

I confess there seems to be something very like ridicule thrown over the debate by the discussion of the articles in detail. The undecided point is, shall we break our faith? And while our country and enlightened Europe await the issue with more than curiosity, we are employed to gather piecemeal, and article by article, from the instrument, a justification for the deed by trivial calculations of commercial profit and loss. This is little worthy of the subject of this body, or of the nation. If the treaty is bad it will appear to be so in its mass. Evil to a fatal extreme, if that be its tendency, requires no proof; it brings it. Extremes speak for themselves and make their own law. What if the direct voyage of American ships to Jamaica with horses or lumber might net one or two *per centum* more than the present trade to Surinam; would the proof of the fact avail anything in so grave a question as the violation of the public engagements?

What is patriotism? Is it a narrow affection for the spot where a man was born? Are the very clods where we tread entitled to this ardent preference because they are greener? No, sir, this is not the character of the virtue, and it soars higher for its object. It is an extended self-love, mingling with all the enjoyments of life, and twisting itself with the minutest filaments of the heart. It is thus we obey the laws of society, because they are the laws of virtue. In their authority we see not the array of force and terror, but the venerable image of our country's honor. Every good citizen makes that honor his own and cherishes it not only as precious, but as sacred. He is willing to risk his life in its defense, and is conscious that he gains protection while he gives it. For, what rights of a citizen will be deemed inviolable when a State renounces the principles that constitute their security? Or if his life should not be invaded, what would its enjoyments be in a country odious in the eyes of strangers and dishonored in his own? Could he look with affection and veneration to such a country

Edmund Burke



as his parent? The sense of having one would die within him; he would blush for his patriotism, if he retained any, and justly, for it would be a vice. He would be a banished man in his native land.

I see no exception to the respect that is paid among nations to the law of good faith. If there are cases in this enlightened period when it is violated, there are none when it is decried. It is the philosophy of politics, the religion of governments. It is observed by barbarians—a whiff of tobacco smoke, or a string of beads gives not merely binding force but sanctity to treaties. Even in Algiers a truce may be bought for money, but when ratified even Algiers is too wise, or too just, to disown and annul its obligation. Thus we see, neither the ignorance of savages, nor the principles of an association for piracy and rapine, permit a nation to despise its engagements. If, sir, there could be a resurrection from the foot of the gallows, if the victims of justice could live again, collect together and form a society, they would, however loath, soon find themselves obliged to make justice that justice under which they fell, the fundamental law of their State. They would perceive it was their interest to make others respect, and they would, therefore, soon pay some respect themselves to the obligations of good faith.

It is painful, I hope it is superfluous, to make even the supposition that America should furnish the occasion of this opprobrium. No, let me not even imagine that a republican government, sprung as our own is from a people enlightened and uncorrupted, a government whose origin is right, and whose daily discipline is duty, can, upon solemn debate, make its option to be faithless—can dare to act what despots dare not avow, what our own example evinces, the States of Barbary are unsuspected of.

No, let me rather make the supposition that Great Britain refuses to execute the treaty, after we have done everything to carry it into effect. Is there any language of reproach pungent enough to express your commentary of the fact? What would you say, or, rather, what could you not say? Would you not tell them, wherever an Englishman might travel, shame would stick to him—he would disown his country. You would exclaim: England, proud of your wealth, and arrogant in the possession of power—blush for these distinctions which become the vehicles of your dishonor. Such a nation might truly say to corruption, thou art my father, and to the worm, thou art my mother and my sister. We would say of such a race of men, their name is a heavier burden than their debt.

On this theme my emotions are unutterable. If I could find words for them, if my powers bore any proportion of my zeal, I would swell my voice to such a note of remonstrance it should reach every log house beyond the mountains. I would say to the inhabitants: wake from your false security; your cruel dangers, your more cruel apprehensions are soon to be renewed; the wounds, yet unhealed, are to be torn open again; in the daytime your path through the woods will be ambushed; the darkness of midnight will glitter with the blaze of your dwellings. You are a father—the blood of your sons shall fatten your cornfield; you are a mother—the war-whoop shall wake the sleep of the cradle.

On this subject you need not suspect any deception on your feelings. It is a spectacle of horror which can not be overdrawn. If you have nature in your hearts, it will speak a language compared with which all I have said or can say will be poor and frigid.

Will it be whispered that the treaty has made me a new champion for the protection of the frontiers? It is known that my voice as well as my vote have been uniformly given in conformity with the ideas I have expressed. Protection is the right of the frontiers; it is our duty to give it.

Who will accuse me of wandering out of the subject? Who will say that I exaggerate the tendencies of our measures? Will any one answer by a sneer that all this is idle preaching? Will anyone deny that we are bound, and I would hope to good purpose, by the most solemn sanctions of duty for the vote we give? Are despots alone to be reproached for unfeeling indifference to the tears and blood of their subjects? Have the principles on which you ground the reproach upon cabinets and kings no practical influence, no binding force? Are they merely themes of idle declamation introduced to decorate the morality of a newspaper essay or to furnish petty topics of harang from the windows of that State House? I trust it is neither too presumptuous nor too late to ask. Can you put the dearest interest of society at risk without guilt and without remorse?



John Jay

By rejecting the posts we light the savage fires—we bind the victims. This day we undertake to render account to the widows and orphans whom our decision will make, to the wretches that will be roasted at the stake, to our country, and I do not deem it too serious to say, to conscience and to God. We are answerable, and if duty be anything more than a word of imposture, if conscience be not a bugbear, we are preparing to make ourselves as wretched as our country.

There is no mistake in this case—there can be none. Experience has already been the prophet of events, and the cries of future victims have already reached us. The Western inhabitants are not a silent and uncomplaining sacrifice. The voice of humanity issues from the shade of their wilderness. It exclaims that, while one hand is held up to reject this treaty, the other grasps a tomahawk. It summons our imagination to the scenes that will open. It is no great effort of the imagination to conceive that events so near are already begun. I can fancy that I listen to the yells of savage vengeance and the shrieks of torture. Already they seem to sigh in the west wind—already they mingle with every echo from the mountains.

Let me cheer the mind, weary, no doubt, and ready to despond on this prospect, by presenting another, which it is yet in our power to realize. Is it possible for a real American to look at the prosperity of this country without some desire for its continuance—without some respect for the measures which, many will say, produce, and all will confess, have preserved it? Will he not feel some dread that a change of system will reverse the scene? The well-grounded fears of our citizens in 1794 were removed by the treaty, but are not forgotten. Then they deemed war nearly inevitable, and would not this adjustment have been considered at that day as a happy escape from the calamity? The great interest and the general desire of our people were to enjoy the advantages of neutrality. This instrument, however misrepresented, affords America that inestimable security. The causes of our disputes are either cut up by the roots or referred to a new negotiation after the end of the European war. This was gaining everything, because it confirmed our neutrality by which our citizens are gaining everything. This alone would justify the engagements of the government. For, when the fiery vapors of the war lowered in the skirts of our horizon, all our wishes were concentrated in this one, that we might escape the desolation of the storm. This treaty, like a rainbow on the edge of the cloud, marked to our eyes the space where it was raging and afforded at the same time the sure prognostic of fair weather. If we reject it the vivid colors will grow pale—it will be a baleful meteor portending tempest and war.

I rose to speak under the impressions that I would have resisted if I could. Those who see me will believe that the reduced state of my health has unfitted me almost equally for much exertion of body or mind. Unprepared for debate, by careful reflection in my retirement or by long attention here, I thought the resolution I had taken to sit silent was imposed by necessity, and would cost me no effort to maintain. With a mind thus vacant of ideas and sinking, as I really am, under a sense of weakness, I imagined the very desire of speaking was extinguished by the persuasion that I had nothing to say. Yet, when I come to the moment of deciding the vote I start back with dread from the edge of the pit into which we are plunging. In my view even the minutes I have spent in expostulation have their value, because they protract the crisis and the short period in which alone we may resolve to escape it.

I have thus been led by my feelings to speak more at length than I intended. Yet I have, perhaps, as little personal interest in the event as any one here. There is, I believe, no member who will not think his chance to be a witness of the consequences greater than mine. If, however, the vote shall pass to reject, and a spirit should rise, as it will, with the public disorders, to make confusion worse confounded, even I, slender and almost broken as my hold upon life is, may outlive the government and Constitution of my country.

Note. Delivered in the House of Representatives on April 28, 1796. On November 19, 1794, a “treaty of amity, commerce, and navigation” with Great Britain had been concluded, and in March, 1796, was proclaimed as the law of the land. On April 28 a resolution was offered that it would be expedient “to pass the laws necessary for carrying the treaty into effect.” Mr. Ames’s speech was on this resolution. Abridged.

