

Looking East

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

Much as it would have liked to, the United States could not avoid conflict with other world powers after gaining independence. In particular, the French alliance that was essential for the nation's victory in the War for Independence was, by the 1790s, especially polarizing. In 1789, France descended into the chaos of the French Revolution, which ended only with the rise of the emperor Napoleon during the early 19th century. Reactions to the French Revolution contributed to the growing partisan divide between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans in the United States, as Federalists advocated for closer ties with Great Britain, while many Democratic-Republicans sympathized with the French.

In addition to examining American reactions to the French Revolution, this tutorial discusses the American conflict with the Barbary States of North Africa, which represented the United States' first encounter with the Islamic world.

1. The French Revolution

Europe was rife with conflict following the outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789. Until 1815, when the French emperor **Napoleon** was defeated at Waterloo, France, Great Britain and their respective allies were engaged in a fierce struggle over dominance of the European continent. Fighting between these European powers also occurred throughout the world, including in the Middle East, Asia, and the Americas. Historians estimate that over two million people were killed or wounded in these conflicts.



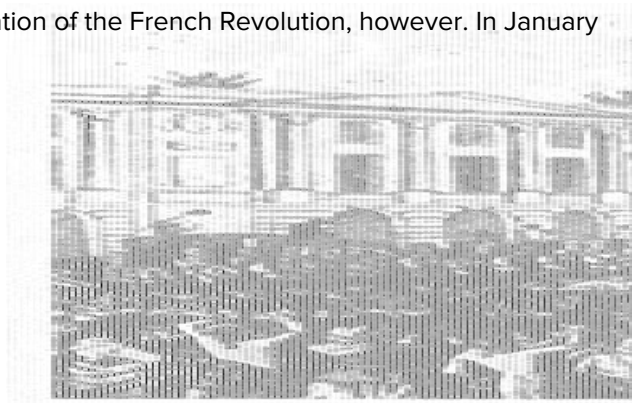
PEOPLE TO KNOW

Napoleon

Emperor of France from 1804 until his defeat in 1815 in the Napoleonic Wars.

In 1789, revolutionaries in France challenged the authority of King Louis XVI and issued the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen*, which, among other things, challenged monarchy by adopting republican principles associated with natural equality and liberty. In 1791, a constitutional monarchy replaced King Louis XVI's monarchy and, one year later, France was declared a republic after a revolutionary army defeated an invading Prussian-Austrian force that was allied to the remnants of the French aristocracy. From the perspective of the United States, the first years of the French Revolution made it appear that republicanism — the political and social philosophy that was the creed of American revolutionaries — was spreading throughout the world, as other revolutionary groups were struggling against monarchy.

Events in 1793 and 1794 challenged this simple interpretation of the French Revolution, however. In January 1793, the French people beheaded King Louis XVI by using a gruesome device known as the *guillotine*. The following years became known as the Terror, or a period of extreme violence against any perceived enemies of the revolutionary government. French revolutionaries advocated direct representative democracy while also remaining quick to criticize or threaten anyone who spoke out against them.



DID YOU KNOW

French revolutionaries went so far as to dismantle Catholicism, the state church, and replace it with a new philosophy known as the Cult of the Supreme Being.

Despite the shared experiences of the War for Independence, and the important role that the French played in that conflict, American opinions regarding France diverged sharply during the 1790s as France descended into the chaos of its own revolution. Although they expressed concern toward the violent turn in the French Revolution, Thomas Jefferson and Democratic-Republicans seized upon the French revolutionaries' struggle against monarchy as a welcome harbinger for a broader republican movement around the world. Some sympathizers even went so far as to suggest that the violence of the French Revolution was necessary for the elimination of the monarchy and an aristocratic culture that supported a hereditary class of rulers over the common people.

A depiction of the beheading of Louis XVI during the French Revolution. The violence of the revolutionary French horrified many in the United States—especially Federalists, who saw it as an example of what could happen when the mob gained political control and instituted direct democracy.

To the Federalists, however, the French Revolution epitomized the dangers of direct democracy, or “mobocracy.” This was especially the case after the execution of the French king in 1793. Federalists viewed the execution with alarm, and expressed concern that the radicalism of the French Revolution would encourage the American masses to challenge Federalist rule at home.

Such divisions over the French Revolution intensified further when France declared war on Great Britain and Holland in February 1793. After the declaration, France requested that the United States make a large repayment of the money it had borrowed from France during the War for Independence.

Knowing that Great Britain would judge any aid given to France as a hostile act, President George Washington issued a Proclamation of Neutrality in April 1793. Washington believed that the United States was too young of a nation and its institutions were too fragile to sustain any conflict with a European power. Moreover, by declaring American neutrality, Washington hoped that the United States would be able to preserve commercial relations with both powers.



DID YOU KNOW

Washington issued the Proclamation of Neutrality without asking the Senate for advice or consent.

Washington's action established the executive branch as the federal government's foremost authority in matters of foreign policy.

Democratic-Republican societies denounced Washington's actions and publicly declared their support for the French. Although the majority of Democratic-Republicans did not believe that the United States should enter the conflict on France's behalf, they remained sympathetic toward the French Revolution and believed that American neutrality would inadvertently help Great Britain.

Meanwhile, Federalists, particularly Alexander Hamilton, compared the activities of the Democratic-Republican societies to the radicalism of the French Revolution. The Federalists argued that Democratic-Republicans in general, led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, would steer the United States toward anarchy. For these reasons, Hamilton and other Federalists believed that the United States should foster closer ties with Great Britain and remain aloof of the chaos in France.



DID YOU KNOW

Alexander Hamilton argued that the United States was not obligated to assist France because the treaty of alliance between both countries, signed in 1778, only required the United States to assist France in a defensive war, rather than an offensive one.

In these ways, the French Revolution, along with the American response to war on the European continent, contributed to the growing partisan divide in the United States.

2. Citizen Genêt and Jay's Treaty

The American response to two events—one on behalf of revolutionary France and the other connected to Great Britain—highlighted how partisanship could filter into foreign affairs.

In the spring of 1793—despite Washington's neutrality proclamation—the revolutionary French government sent **Edmond-Charles Genêt** to the United States to negotiate an alliance with the American government. He landed in Charleston, South Carolina, and during his journey northward, he was greeted by crowds who sympathized with the French cause. As if this was not enough to concern Federalists, France empowered Genêt to issue *letters of marque*—documents authorizing ships and their crews to engage in piracy—to allow him to commission American ships to capture British ships while flying the French flag. Genêt also encouraged the organization of volunteer American militia units to attack British and Spanish colonial possessions in North America.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Edmond-Charles Genêt

French ambassador to the United States during the French Revolution who attempted recruit American support in France's war against Britain.



DID YOU KNOW

In an American port, Genêt outfitted a captured British ship known as the *Little Sarah* and, in defiance of President Washington, sent it to sea as the *Petite Democrate*, which attacked British ships under the French flag.

In what became known as the **Citizen Genêt affair**, President Washington demanded that France recall the minister. Moreover, Federalists such as Alexander Hamilton used Genêt's actions to defend Washington's neutrality proclamation and to discredit Democratic-Republicans who sympathized with France. Deeming his return to France as too dangerous, Genêt chose to resign and remain in the United States, where he later married the daughter of the governor of New York.



TERM TO KNOW

Citizen Genêt Affair

A controversy centering around French representative Edmond-Charles Genêt, who arrived in the

United States in 1793 and tried to convince Americans to join France's war against Great Britain. Most importantly, the affair spurred Great Britain to instruct its naval commanders in the West Indies to seize all ships trading with the French. Under such orders, the British captured hundreds of American ships and their cargoes in the West Indies. The British navy also instituted the practice of **impressment**, much to the consternation of Americans.



TERM TO KNOW

Impressment

The kidnapping of sailors, including many American citizens who had emigrated from Great Britain, to serve in the British navy.

In this tense situation, the United States sent John Jay, then a Supreme Court Justice, to Great Britain to negotiate. The following agreement, known as **Jay's Treaty**, was among the most controversial instances of Washington's administration and furthered the partisan divide between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans.



TERM TO KNOW

Jay's Treaty

A controversial agreement between the United States and Great Britain in 1794.

Jay went to Great Britain under instructions to secure compensation for captured American ships; to ensure that the British relinquished forts they still occupied in the Ohio River Valley (despite the fact that the 1783 Treaty of Paris already required the British to do so); and to gain an agreement for American trade in the West Indies.



DID YOU KNOW

Although Jay personally disliked slavery, his mission also required him to seek compensation from Great Britain for enslaved people who left the United States with the British at the end of the War for Independence.

Jay's Treaty achieved most of these goals. The British agreed to turn over its frontier forts to the United States. The United States also gained the opportunity to trade freely in the West Indies, in exchange for guaranteeing favorable treatment to goods imported from Great Britain. However, the treaty did nothing to address the British Navy's kidnapping of American sailors (also known as impressment). This concession, along with those pertaining to trade, signaled that the United States accepted British supremacy on the high seas and sought to continue close trade relations.

While Federalists touted the economic benefits of commerce with Great Britain, Democratic-Republicans denounced Jay's Treaty as a betrayal to France and they expressed their frustrations in the streets. In some cities, John Jay was burned in effigy. In others, copies of the treaty were burned publicly. There was even one occasion where an audience in New York threw stones at Alexander Hamilton when he was speaking in favor of the treaty.

In the summer of 1795, the Senate ratified Jay's Treaty by the slimmest of margins. The partisan divide between Federalists and Democratic-Republicans could not have been wider.



DID YOU KNOW

One year after the ratification of Jay's Treaty, with France and Great Britain still at war, the French began to seize American ships in the West Indies and, until 1800, fought an undeclared naval war — also known as the Quasi-War — with the United States. Between 1797 and 1799, the French seized 834 American

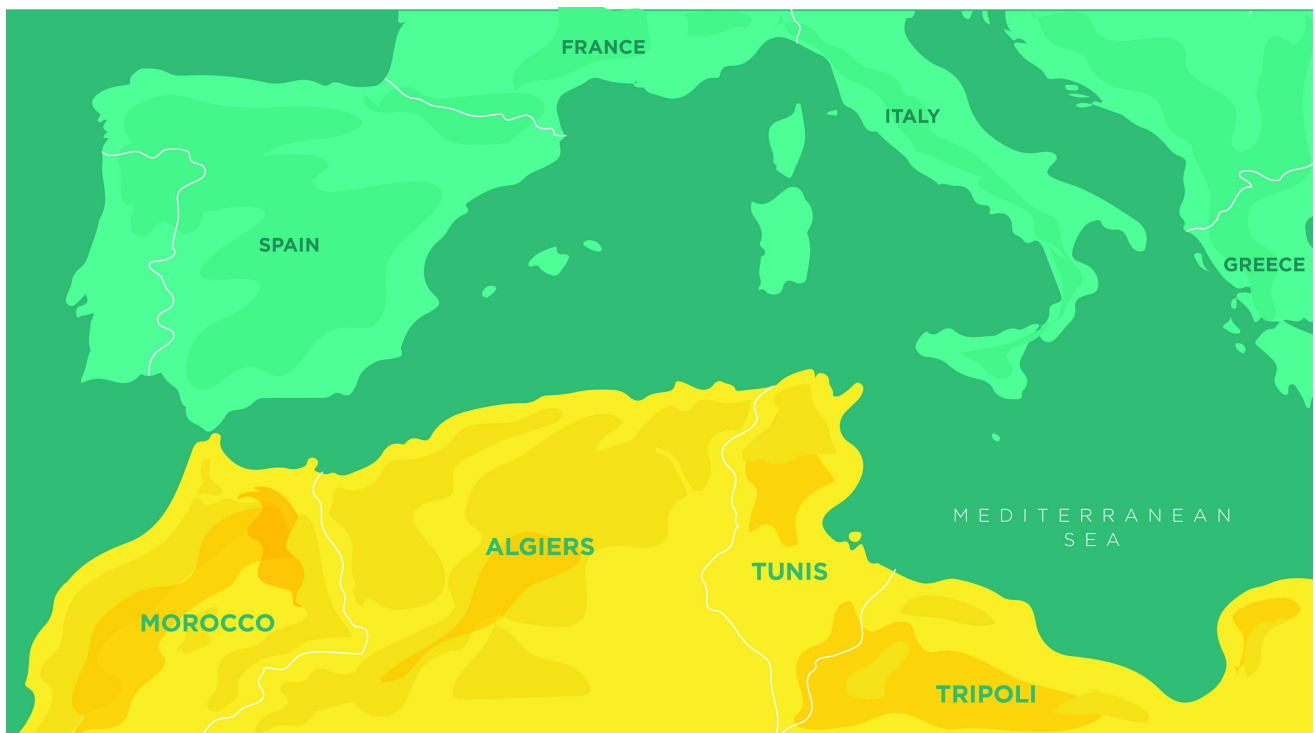
ships. In response, President John Adams urged the buildup of the American Navy, which consisted of only a single vessel at the time of his election in 1796.

3. The Barbary Wars

While the ongoing war between France and Britain represented the primary foreign relations challenge for the new nation, the United States also sought to defend its sovereignty in the Mediterranean.

By the early 19th century, the Barbary States of North Africa, which included Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli, were not significant threats to nations such as Great Britain and France, who simply intimidated them with their powerful navies or bought them off with annual tributes. However, less powerful nations that lacked the necessary naval and financial resources were more susceptible to attacks from the Barbary States. Having only recently gained independence, the United States was one of these nations.

➔ **EXAMPLE** Between 1785 and 1796, pirates from the Barbary States captured 13 American ships and enslaved over 100 sailors. In response, the American government agreed to issue hundreds of thousands of dollars in ransom payments and pay annual tributes.



Map of Barbary States which included Tripoli (modern-day Libya), Tunis (modern-day Tunisia), Algiers (modern-day Algeria), and Morocco. These Barbary States are located on the Northern coast of Africa.



DID YOU KNOW

Although many Americans referred to the Barbary raiders as pirates, Europeans granted them the legal status of privateers, in which they received commissions to attack the ships of their competitors. For instance, in 1785, Great Britain encouraged Algiers to attack American ships trading in the Atlantic and the Mediterranean.

Shortly after taking office in the spring of 1801, President Thomas Jefferson refused Tripoli's demand for an

increased tribute, and Tripoli declared war on the United States. What followed was the first war fought by the United States, one that Jefferson prosecuted without receiving an official declaration of war from Congress.

The climax of the conflict came in February 1804, when Stephen Decatur led a daring raid into Tripoli's harbor and besieged the city. The next year, William Eaton, a former American diplomat to Tunis, along with a group of American marines and a combined force of 500 Greek, Albanian, and Arab mercenaries, seized the port city of Derne. In June 1805, the United States signed a peace treaty with Tripoli, which ended the war.



DID YOU KNOW

The attack at Derne inspired the lyrics “to the shores of Tripoli” in the U.S. Marine Corps hymn. Conflict with the Barbary States, collectively known as the **Barbary Wars**, offered a significant test for naval and marine forces of the United States. They also provided the nation's first encounter with the Islamic world. Indeed, during a previous attempt to establish peaceful relations, an American peace treaty insisted that the United States was not founded on Christianity. Regardless, in the wake of the war with Tripoli, a number of Americans celebrated the conflict as a victory of liberty over tyranny. In Europe, Americans associated tyranny with monarchy and aristocracy. In Africa and the Middle East, meanwhile, many Americans associated tyranny with Islam, and they viewed the peoples and states who practiced this religion as exotic and incompatible with American freedom and liberty.



TERM TO KNOW

Barbary Wars

A series of conflicts between the United States and the Barbary States (Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli) during the first two decades of the 19th century.



DID YOU KNOW

The Barbary Wars flared up again during the War of 1812, when crews from Algiers captured several American ships and enslaved numerous sailors. In 1815, the United States sent 17 warships—the largest fleet the nation had ever assembled—into the Mediterranean and forced the Barbary States to release all imprisoned sailors.



SUMMARY

As the historian Gordon S. Wood has written, “The United States was born amidst a world at war.” As a result, the young nation struggled to establish itself and defend its sovereignty in an increasingly violent Atlantic World. War between France and Great Britain accentuated partisan divisions within the United States, as Democratic-Republicans sympathized with France while Federalists looked more toward Great Britain. Meanwhile, incidents such as the Quasi War with France and the Barbary Wars in the Mediterranean revealed that the United States would actively defend its access to the high seas.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Barbary Wars

A series of conflicts between the United States and the Barbary States (Morocco, Algiers, Tunis, and Tripoli) during the first two decades of the nineteenth century.

Citizen Genêt Affair

A controversy involving French representative Edmond-Charles Genêt, who arrived in the United States in 1793 and tried to convince Americans to join France's war against Great Britain.

Impressment

The kidnapping of sailors, including many American citizens who had emigrated from Great Britain, to serve in the British navy.

Jay's Treaty

A controversial agreement between the United States and Great Britain in 1794.



PEOPLE TO KNOW

Edmond-Charles Genêt

French ambassador to the United States during the French Revolution who attempted recruit American support in France's war against Britain.

Napoleon

Emperor of France from 1804 until his defeat in 1815 in the Napoleonic Wars.



DATES TO KNOW

1789

The French Revolution begins.

1791

A constitutional monarchy in France replaces King Louis XVI's monarchy.

1792

France is declared a republic.

1793

King Louis XVI is executed and the "Reign of Terror" begins; France declares war on Holland and Great Britain; George Washington issues a Proclamation of Neutrality; known as the Citizen Genêt affair, a French representative tries to convince Americans to join France's war.

1794

Jay's Treaty is negotiated between the U.S. and England.

1795

Jay's Treaty is ratified by the Senate.

1798–1800

An undeclared naval war called the Quasi-War is fought between France and the United States.

1801–1805

The Barbary Wars occur between the United States and the Barbary States.

1815

Napoleon is defeated at Waterloo; the war ends between Britain and France.