

**History 282 US Diplomatic  
Discussion Transcript for August 25, 2020  
Revolutionary Diplomacy**

**Main Reading: Chapter 1, Herring**

From the outset, George Herring does a masterful job of demonstrating how influential diplomatic considerations were in the shaping of the United States. His version of the revolutionary war is largely fought in Paris and other European capitals as amateur diplomats such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams pursued the nation's interest in a series of ventures designed to promote alliance-building, peace-making, security and commerce during the 1770s and 1780s. Every student in a course like this one should be able to compare and contrast the styles of Adams and Franklin using an array of memorable examples from his book. Though Herring doesn't provide these particular quotations, I always portray their differences with their competing mottos. Adams liked to say that "Facts are stubborn things." More elusive and subtle, Franklin's advice was always, "Never contradict anybody." But what I hoped that students could appreciate after reading Herring's lengthy opening chapter is that these differences in style masked a great deal of shared strategic goals. Franklin relied more on finesse (and celebrity), but he was after almost all of the same goals as Adams. That's the key, not only to understanding those individual diplomats as decision makers, but also to appreciating how US diplomats were able to secure independence from BOTH Britain and France as the war came to a very successful conclusion for the new republic.

The following selections come from student comments & questions.

**EARLY DIPLOMATIC CHALLENGES**

STUDENT COMMENT: I was deeply surprised as I read Herring's first chapter, seeing how vulnerable, impotent, and powerless the young republic was. The federation, hoping to be a new example to the old world, had to struggle with foreign relations, European pressures, ineffective system of the federal government, African pirates, territorial conflicts with native Americans, and hostile trade environment with Europe. And none of these could be disregarded since all of them were the matters of the newborn nation's survival. Among all these imminent issues, building stable diplomatic relations with other European countries, especially with France, and receiving foreign aids and supports for the Revolution was the priority of the rebelling colonies. The colonies lacked the money to spend, soldiers to fight, and weapons to retaliate against British attacks. Overall, colonists were unprepared for the Revolution. The alliance with France during the wartime was so crucial because colonies could use France as leverage to put pressure on England. Colonies could also receive financial and military supports from France. Moreover, the treaty with France that guaranteed France's obligation to the independence of American colonies was a solid "rock" in American people's minds which they could count on. However, the French were not as much motivated as colonists thought. France provided "limited" aids to the colonies, and the French force did not fight "aggressively." France was more interested in ways how they could successfully control

the Continental Congress and earn maximum national profits out of the colonies and Revolution. They wanted colonies to remain "dependent" and "weak." The adverse French trade policy towards the federation proved that France did not hope the young republic to grow in its economic or military power and wanted America to serve their national interests.

STUDENT COMMENT: While there were competent leaders of the American military, the emerging state simply did not possess the financial means to provide for a war; therefore, the US needed foreign support. It was crucial for Franklin to gain support from the French, without which the US would not have had the necessary funding or international support. Franklin expertly pitted the rivalry and humiliation felt by the French in regard to Great Britain and eventually gained their support, partly in thanks due to the American victory in the Battle of Saratoga (Herring 20-21). However, while the French were a necessary ally, it was vital that the US regarded the French aid cautiously, so as to not be manipulated. Attached to the French, the Americans gained a third 'ally' in the Spanish. Spanish monetary aid was accepted; however, they did not trust the growing Americans and saw them as a security threat to their interests. This was explicitly seen when the Spanish refused to allow the US access to the Mississippi river and the port of New Orleans, despite the British passing along this right in the Treaty of Paris (Herring 46). Foreign support from the French, and to a lesser extent the Spanish, was crucial in the defeat of the British; it did not mean, however, that they would retain easy diplomatic relations with these countries in the early stages of US diplomacy. Overall, the US ideally sought to escape the politics of Europe but were continually brought into the fray.

### **US – FRENCH ALLIANCE**

STUDENT COMMENT: Even though the American revolutionaries were in need of French assistance – for various reasons, from gaining monetary and military resources to acquiring acknowledgement of American independence among France and other European nations – it was a “dangerous gambit” because it could leave them vulnerable to French demands. After broadcasting the British Empire as a governing body that had failed them, Americans were determined “to break the shackles of despotism” (16); but, there was the chance that their newly-found independence would be replaced by dependence on France, accidentally confined to paying back their dues after requesting a costly alliance. The Model Treaty demonstrates this caution, where John Adams insists that they avoid political connections with France or military commitments to European wars, that they do not receive orders from French authority and that France renounces territory in North America, so that Americans are not subjected to any other European power.

However, although it does much to protect American independence, I find that Adam’s Model Treaty does not take into consideration the concerns that France held. Despite the trade advantages that the Americans were offering, Herring points out that France doubted their commitment and/or ability to achieving independence, making it difficult for France to fund and aid a war that is was not prepared for (18). As a result, Franklin’s presence in France was pivotal to altering French perception of the American Revolution, making it seem “less

threatening, more palatable, and even fashionable” (20) to the point where he was able to draw them from their reluctance into a perpetual alliance.

STUDENT COMMENT: The US-French alliance was crucial to the success in the American Revolution. They provided much-needed funds and military assistance to the revolutionary cause. France's work to include Spain in the alliance created an added threat to England and made the revolutionary war a more European threat than a colonial one. The French and Spanish mobilized their navies to fight the British in the Caribbean as well the Atlantic. The danger of direct attack from France and Spain was so great that it led to England unable to reinforce their troops in North America fully. The French provided the American colonies one billion lives throughout the war. The alliance was a risk because even though the American colonies had established trade with the French-Canadian colonies, they had sided with the British in the seven years' war (French and Indian War). The French were also not entirely behind the idea of revolution, which was difficult for the Americans because they could not fully trust their ally.

STUDENT COMMENT: Upon examining in detail the events that took place throughout the early years of the Revolutionary War, two major events early in the war, in my opinion, solidified that this would be a long, challenging war for the British. The victory in the Battle of Saratoga in October 1777, as stated in the text, was the deciding victory to clinch the decision for the French to intervene in the war. Next, on February 6, 1778, less than 2 years after declaring independence, the newly founded United States struck up what was arguably the most important alliance in our nation's history. On this day, France and the United States agreed to an alliance. I believe one could argue this day was single handedly one of the most important days in United States history. With no French alliance, the newly founded United States simply had no chance at winning this war. Forming an alliance with a foreign power that had similar foreign interests was extremely important to the United States winning the war. It is surprising to me, because I always hear about the Boston Tea Party of 1773, the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776, and several other important dates around that era, but I had never of the heard February 6, 1778 alliance mentioned, and I believe this date is just as important as any other date of that time period. On this day, February 6, 1778, the United States formed its first alliance with a foreign power and put themselves in a legitimate position to gain independence. With no French alliance, there is no victory.

STUDENT COMMENT: The thing that stood out to me the most was the sheer amount of foreign aid that came to us in the Revolutionary War. The reason I found this fascinating was that in High School we were not told anything about this, we just were under the impression that we won the war due to guerilla tactics and a fighting spirit. We also were always told France was our “oldest ally” and that we never got into conflict with them. It shows how much history is written by the victors and how much is omitted.

### **ADAMS VERSUS FRANKLIN**

STUDENT COMMENT: Adams's diplomatic strategy seemed to be one-dimensional whereas Franklin's was multi-faceted. Interestingly, Herring's own convictions about the two men seem to be somewhat visible in his writing. Herring referred to Adams multiple times as a “self-

righteous” individual and his diplomatic ideas to be “naive.” In distinguishing the approaches between the two men, it is essential to examine the principles of the Model Treaty, or Plan of 1776 that Adams played a large role in writing. The core value of this treaty was to avoid any kind of quarrel with Europe and to be in no way politically connected to European countries. Adams believed that the best way to gain French support in the revolution was to entice them through commercial means. He thought this economic offer would suffice because France wanted revenge on Britain, and trade with America was essential to Britain so entering a trade agreement with France would damage the British economy. Adams’s overall position was to focus on forging a productive economic relationship while maintaining no military or political connection with France. Franklin, on the other hand, was more practical in his approach. He was more willing to give. Specifically, Franklin’s approach included negotiating political and territorial agreements (giving France the West Indies and guaranteeing whatever land in North America each has acquired) along with economic arrangements. Herring described Franklin as a man of many trades (scientist, journalist, politician, philosopher) who sparked French attention after landing in Paris. Herring described his residence in France, his appearance, and the way he presented himself in greater detail in order to explain the complex strategy that Franklin used to secure the alliance. As part of his strategy, he created a version of himself that he believed would be appealing to the French and fit their perception of American diplomats. Herring described Franklin as being cosmopolitan and having keen insight into the desires and motivations of other nations. He understood France’s reluctance to get involved in the foreign affairs of America so he negotiated and sold French involvement by making it seem “less threatening, more palatable, and even fashionable to the court.” (p. 20). Herring also described him as having exercised a certain degree of patience while the French officials calculated their decision. Franklin strategy also included showing signs of admiration for French culture- which I find to be necessary in a transaction like this one but Adams had always critiqued Franklin for being submissive. While Adams’s approach would not have been successful in gaining France as an ally, (Herring insinuated this and I also believe this), it would have created a more liberal trade agreement. Franklin’s approach secured France as an ally and made American independence possible, but it simultaneously created new problems.

**STUDENT COMMENT:** The diplomatic approaches of John Adams and Benjamin Franklin are a microcosm of the struggle in American diplomacy between committed idealism and pragmatic tradition, respectively. From the start, Adams approached the alliance with France firmly grounded in rather lofty beliefs. The Model Treaty to which he contributed significantly emphasized avoidance of strict commitments, no reliance on foreign troops, and non-interference rather than active support (pg. 17). It emphasized the role of commercial power and free trade as an incentive rather than revenge or balancing European power (ibid). Adams’s suspicious of French motivations and apprehension to commitment would later affect the peace negotiations, playing off of similar concerns in John Jay and complicating the peace process greatly (pg. 31). In contrast, Franklin’s approach was rooted in a combination of traditional diplomacy and popular appeal. Franklin was quick to integrate himself into Parisian life, engaging in a sort of early public diplomacy with French high society. Despite numerous difficulties, he was able to gather great financial support and played concerns in France about American negotiations with Britain to his and his country’s favor (pg. 20). In the end,

“desperation led pragmatism to win out over ideals,” and Franklin’s traditional approach proved successful, even securing the approval of the committed idealist Adams (pg. 21). While Adams’s approach kept the United States’ motivations and commitments pure and limited, it was not enough to secure the support of France, a great power firmly committed to the existing diplomatic process. Franklin’s pragmatic and popular diplomacy was necessary, both to convince France of the safety of betting on the American Revolution (pg. 20) and for building French goodwill. The tension between these two Founding Fathers and their diplomatic strategies underlines a major theme of American diplomacy, the debate on whether it should keep pure to its ideals or settle for pragmatic benefits.

STUDENT COMMENT: Franklin’s diplomatic method revolved around presenting, “ himself to French society as the very embodiment of America’s revolution, a model of republican simplicity and virtue.” (Herring 19). Since he was already a celebrity, by dressing up in a rugged cloak and fur hat he became the symbol of the down to earth humble American fighting for independence. Franklin also, “had an instinctive feel for what motivated other nations” (Herring 20) and was able to spin everything in favor of the United States. Franklin also was able to gain more support for the American Revolution by, “not appearing too radical” (Herring 20) which made the French less afraid to join the Americans. Franklin used this fake persona for the overall benefit of the American Revolution. His fame and his connections gave him influence to stay longer in France and have more diplomatic power and sway than Adams.

However, Adams more so than Franklin was able to achieve more than Franklin did. Adam did not trust Britain and France but his hatred for France made it easier for him to break, “ the terms of their treaty with France and negotiating separately with Britain’ (Herring 31). Obviously, Adam’s approach did not make him truly liked in France but in the end, he was able to get, “much of what they wanted and far more than their 1781 instructions called for” (Herring 32).

### **FOREIGN POLICY ORIGINS OF CONSTITUTION**

STUDENT COMMENT: It is interesting to see how American Representatives like Franklin play both sides of the foreign policy spectrum after independence was granted to get the best overall result for America. At times they would side towards their enemy Britain and others towards their ally of France. Naturally after the war the actors involved were in a great amount of debt and fell into a depression. On the states side this led to the formation of a central government in New York to discuss and try to solve national issues. To try and fix it they sent ambassadors, (like Jefferson to France and Adams to England) to try and work on deals for trade to bring in more money and business in attempts to get out of debt. As well as trying to solve the debt problem, a new problem came about with the native Indians living in the west. Britain wrongfully gave away land that was not theirs which led to tensions getting high. America saw this and tried to be as accommodating as possible but fell short as conflict was seemingly inevitable. With all these problems and little solutions being produced, anarchy was a big concern because it could jeopardize everything that America had just fought for. Due to this the constitutional convention was called where state delegates met to discuss issues and how to fix them. This was a big part of what led to the system that still stands to this day...