

One Man's Legacy: The Genêt Affair and the Development of Early American Foreign Policy

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ABSTRACT

The Genêt Affair was a fundamental crisis in the development of early American foreign policy. This paper argues that the controversy surrounding Edmond Charles Genêt exposed the tensions between revolutionary support and national interest in American politics, forcing the Washington administration to decide what the policy of neutrality would mean for the young republic. Through close analysis of primary sources such as George Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality, Thomas Jefferson's Opinion on the French Treaties, and contemporary newspaper accounts, alongside modern scholarship, the paper displays how Genêt's actions transformed a diplomatic dispute into a greater test of executive authority and constitutional power. By recruiting privateers and appealing directly to the American public, Genêt challenged the federal government's ability to control foreign policy and exposed the limits of partisan support for the French Revolution. The paper explains how the Genêt Affair was not simply a short-lived diplomatic crisis, but a defining episode that helped establish neutrality as a central principle of American diplomacy and strengthened the authority of the national government in foreign affairs.

INTRODUCTION

"The Republics of France and America: may they be forever united in the cause of liberty." This was the statement uttered throughout America at numerous banquets celebrating the arrival of "Citizen" Edmond Charles Genêt, the French minister to the United States during the French revolution. To many Americans, Genêt appeared as the representative of a sister republic fighting for liberty. Yet his arrival would soon provoke one of the first major foreign policy crises of the United States.

Just six years after the signing of the *Treaty of Paris*, formalizing American sovereignty and the conclusion of the American Revolution, and only two months after the ratification of the U.S. constitution, the Third Estate (now calling themselves the National Assembly) broke away from the First and Second Estates of the Estates General, marking the official commencement of the French Revolution.¹ The French revolution shared with the American Revolution the ultimate goal of dismantling the monarchical systems of oppression they had been subject to all too long. It was in fact the ideals

¹ Keith Michael Baker, *Jean-Paul Marat : Prophet of Terror* (University of Chicago Press, 2025), 235.

penned in the *Declaration of Independence* that inspired the French pursuit of “liberty, equality, and fraternity” in the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*.² For these reasons, Americans viewed the French revolution as an extension of the American revolution and carried with them strong feelings of support for the French revolutionary cause. Such sentiments were reflected in large public celebrations of the French revolutionaries’ moments of success. The Philadelphia Society went as far as to adopt the French custom of addressing each other as “citizen,” and the Boston Society affiliated themselves with the radical Jacobins of France.³

Beyond the grassroots enthusiasm for the French revolution, the United States government, ever since the American revolution, had been in a strong alliance with the royal French government. On February 6, 1778, with the signing of the *Treaty of Alliance*, a military pact between America and France, both nations “[joined] their councils and efforts against the enterprises of their common enemy, [Britain].”⁴ On the same day, signed just moments earlier, the two nations ratified the *Treaty of Amity and Commerce*, entering into a formal diplomatic and commercial partnership.⁵ These treaties solidified the diplomatic and ideological relationship between the United States and France during the American revolution, creating expectations of mutual support between the two nations.

However, the political upheaval that emerged in France during the revolution would soon place the alliance under enormous strain, forcing American politicians to reconsider the nation’s role in European affairs. As tension between France and Britain, supported by other European monarchies, boiled into a full scale war, American politicians looked at the French treaties as a force that would lock the nation into the European fight—a fight that the young American military was far too weak to partake in. The possibility of being drawn into a European war provoked serious debate among American politicians concerning how the United States should define its foreign policy toward Europe. The question was no longer whether Americans sympathized with the French Revolution, but whether revolutionary ideology should determine American foreign policy. The actions of Edmond Charles Genêt forced the United States to answer that question.

The Federalists—led by Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton—embraced a policy of neutrality towards the European conflict that prioritized stability between America and Britain. The Democratic-Republicans emerged as the major opposition party to the Federalists. Led by Thomas Jefferson, former Minister to France and current Secretary of State, the party expressed its staunch support for the French revolutionaries and by association, lent their support to the French war effort.⁶ As

² Rett R. Ludwikowski, "The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and the American Constitutional Development," *The American Journal of Comparative Law* 38 (1990): 451, <https://doi.org/10.2307/840552>.

³ Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy : Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2005), 56.

⁴ "Treaty of Alliance," Treaty of Alliance with France (1778), National Archives, last modified February 6, 1778, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://www.archives.gov/milestone-documents/treaty-of-alliance-with-france>.

⁵ *U.S. Statutes at Large*, vol. 8, *Treaties Between the United States and Foreign Nations*, 1845, Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v8/>.

⁶ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy : Jefferson to Lincoln*, 41, 55.

debates over the French treaties intensified, neutrality became more than a diplomatic preference; it became a test of American sovereignty, executive authority, and national interest.

No moment in early American history more dramatically exposed these tensions than the Genêt Affair—a diplomatic crisis that involved the recruitment of Americans to outfit privateers to fight on behalf of the revolutionary French government. By appealing directly to the American public to recruit American privateers and openly defying the Washington administration's policy of neutrality, Genêt transformed ideological sympathy for France into a direct political and diplomatic crisis. Moreover, the Genêt Affair tested the limits of American neutrality and shaped American foreign policy by pushing the United States to establish neutrality as a central principle of American diplomacy, strengthen executive authority over foreign affairs by grounding the policy in constitutional supremacy, and distinguish revolutionary ideology from its national interest. In doing so, the crisis marked a fundamental shift in the United States' conception of foreign policy—from one rooted in solidarity with revolutionary France to one guided by a pragmatic national interest of neutrality. This episode in American history established the principles that would guide American foreign policy throughout much of the nineteenth century.

The Genêt Affair has long been recognized by historians as a defining foreign policy crisis of the Early Republic. Current scholarship has examined the affair through a variety of lenses, including its role in the development of political parties, the expansion of executive authority over foreign affairs, the evolution of American neutrality and Franco-American relations, and the growth of American nationalism and an independent conception of national interest. Although the existing scholarship has examined the Affair as a diplomatic crisis, a catalyst in political party development, and a test of neutrality and executive authority, this paper argues that these developments are best understood as interconnected consequences of a single event, demonstrating that Genêt's challenge to the Washington administration simultaneously strengthened neutrality, executive authority, and the nation's conception of national interest rather than treating them as independent historical developments.

To develop this argument, this paper draws upon a range of primary sources, including presidential proclamations, cabinet opinions, diplomatic correspondence, congressional legislation, political essays, judicial proceedings, and contemporary newspapers. Together, these sources are used to reconstruct the events of the Genêt Affair and the competing constitutional, diplomatic, and political interpretations that emerged from it. They are analyzed alongside modern scholarship on the Early Republic to situate the diplomatic crisis within broader debates over foreign policy. By comparing governmental documents with contemporary public responses and modern scholarship, this paper establishes how the Genêt Affair reshaped the United States' understanding of neutrality, executive authority, and its national interest.

“THE CAUSE OF FRANCE IS THE CAUSE OF MAN, AND NEUTRALITY IS DESERTION.”

*From Anonymous to George Washington, on the dissent of neutrality.*⁷

The War of the First Coalition fundamentally changed the direction of the French Revolution—and American support for it. Suddenly, France's ideological battle between republicanism and monarchism morphed into a full scale war between these factions. European monarchies, led by Britain, presented massive military opposition the United States could not feasibly protect both themselves and France against.⁸ Britain was at the time the United States biggest trading partner (see Figure 3), but more importantly, boasted the world's strongest navy, one the United States was not suited to handle.

The alliance with France quickly jeopardized the security promised to the United States through the treaties from 1778 as it directly involved the nation in France's conflict with Britain. If the United States wished to avoid the imminent conflict that would potentially lead to their military demise, it would need to redefine its alliance with France to one grounded in stability and neutrality.⁹ This opinion was validated by the execution of the French king Louis XVI by the radical Jacobins. His execution was not a singularity, rather representing one out of nearly seventeen thousand public executions performed during the “Reign of Terror.” Hamilton and many other Federalists feared such radical behavior would flood into the United States given the immense popular support for the revolutionary ideals, intensifying the need to replace the treaties of mutual defense with neutrality.¹⁰ Sean Wilentz explains how Washington and the Federalists essentially “declared that the Franco-American mutual defense treaty of 1778...had died along with Louis XVI” under the idea that the new revolutionary government did not represent the royal government that drafted the treaty with the United States.¹¹ Washington officialized this position legally through his *Proclamation of Neutrality* (April 22, 1793) in which the United States was to conduct itself “friendly and impartial toward the belligerent powers [of Europe].”¹²

Of course, Washington's Proclamation was not without its own opposition. Jefferson, who spoke on behalf of the majority of the Democratic-Republicans, fiercely rejected the termination of the treaty of

⁷ “Anonymous to George Washington, 3 May 1793,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified May 3, 1793, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-12-02-0409>.

⁸ Harrison W. Mark, “War of the First Coalition,” *World History Encyclopedia* (April 18, 2023), https://www.worldhistory.org/War_of_the_First_Coalition/.

⁹ Harry Ammon, “The Genêt Mission and the Development of American Political Parties,” *The Journal of American History* 52, no. 4 (1966): 725, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1894343>.

¹⁰ Alexander Hamilton and Joanne B. Freeman, *Writings Alexander Hamilton ; Joanne B. Freeman, Editor*, 3rd ed. (Literary Classics of the United States, 2010), 795.

¹¹ Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy : Jefferson to Lincoln*, 55.

¹² George Washington, “Neutrality Proclamation,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified April 1793, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-12-02-0371>. Original source: *The Papers of George Washington*, Presidential Series, vol. 12, 16 January 1793–31 May 1793, ed. Christine Sternberg Patrick and John C. Pinheiro (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 472–474.

mutual defense, arguing that such treaties (and their contingent alliances) were forged by the people of the nations rather than their governments. Consequently, Jefferson writes in his paper *Opinion on the French Treaties* (April 28, 1793) that the Franco-American treaties were “not treaties between the US. & Louis Capet, but between the two nations of America & France, and the nations remaining in [existence], [though] both of them have since changed their forms of government, the treaties are not annulled by these changes.”¹³ Jefferson’s opinions resonated among many regular Americans. In one instance, the *Columbian Centinel* reports on inhabitants of Salem, Massachusetts who engaged in public displays of dissent against Washington’s Proclamation.¹⁴ This type of opposition provided the backbone for the support Genêt would need to appeal to Americans and challenge the Washington administration. The ideological divisions surrounding the French revolution paved the way for the constitutional and diplomatic conflicts that would solidify American neutrality, executive authority over foreign policy, and reshape the nation’s conception of its national interest.

While Washington’s policy of neutrality would receive its share of political backlash, no singular force threatened it more than Genêt. Genêt arrived in Charleston in April of 1793 to a crowd brimming with excitement.¹⁵ He brought with him a mission from France and a boisterous ego that would not hesitate to completely disregard the President’s policy of neutrality. Carol Berkin describes Genêt’s mission from France as such:

His primary mission was to press Washington's government to accept the French interpretation of the treaties signed by the two countries in 1778. This would allow France to establish a base of operations on American soil and in American territorial waters. France would then use the United States as a launching pad for privateers who would prey on British ships and recruit an army of American citizens for an invasion of Spanish-held Louisiana and Florida.¹⁶

Rather than immediately traveling to Philadelphia to meet Washington, Genêt remained in Charleston where he directly recruited American privateers to attack British ships in the Caribbean.¹⁷ In the April 1873 edition of the *Atlantic Magazine*, James Parton provides a retrospective retelling of the affair. He describes Genêt’s celebrated journey-by-land from Charleston to Philadelphia, noting how “wherever there were people to make a demonstration, the people were only too glad to demonstrate.”¹⁸ However,

¹³ Thomas Jefferson and Merrill D. Peterson, *Writings* (Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 422-23.

¹⁴ "George Washington responds to the people of Salem," *Columbian Centinel* (Boston, Massachusetts), June 19, 1793, 3.

¹⁵ Elliot Warren, "Edmond Charles Genet," *Digital Encyclopedia*, George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed May 20, 2026, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/edmond-charles-genet>.

¹⁶ Carol Berkin, *A Sovereign People : the Crises of the 1790s and the Birth of American Nationalism* (Basic Books, 2017), 81.

¹⁷ Joseph F. Stoltz III, "Genet Affair," *Digital Encyclopedia*, George Washington's Mount Vernon, accessed May 21, 2026, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/genet-affair>.

¹⁸ James Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," *The Atlantic*, April 1873, 391, accessed May 13, 2026, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1873/04/the-exploits-of-edmond-genet-in-the-united-states/630315/>.

Genêt was met with a completely different set of emotions upon meeting Washington, who sternly denounced his actions in Charleston as direct violations of the *Proclamation of Neutrality*.¹⁹ This confrontation would provide the impetus for Genêt's clash with the government over his disregard for executive and federal authority.

A CRISIS OF NEUTRALITY

Genêt's first mistake was failing to recognize that Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality represented more than a diplomatic preference—it was the administration's attempt to establish neutrality as the guiding principle of American foreign policy, which superseded his desires for outfitting privateers.²⁰ Genêt was not simply asking Americans to jump onto a boat he captured. He was asking them to join a full scale war—one which the United States was already committed to remaining impartial towards. Shortly after his discouraging meeting with Washington, the French frigate, the *Citizen Genêt*, docked in the port of Philadelphia. Accompanying it was the *William*, a British ship which the French crew had seized in U.S. territorial waters. Among the French crew were two Americans recruited to Genêt's cause, one of whom was Gideon Henfield.²¹ Henfield was in Charleston seeking a ship that would take him to Philadelphia. Lacking the funds to afford passage, he boarded the *Citizen Genêt* whose captain Pierre Johannan promised him the "berth of prize-master." When the *William* docked in Philadelphia, it was Henfield who arrived with it as prize-master.²² Angered that they had been attacked by American actors, the British requested Henfield's immediate prosecution. Justice James Wilson of the Supreme Court stated in accordance with the existing policies of neutrality that Americans "could not engage in acts of war against Great Britain or any other nation with whom the United States had signed a treaty of peace."²³ The incident demonstrated how difficult neutrality would be to maintain when foreign powers could recruit American citizens directly into European conflicts, enlightening the Washington administration of the need for federal enforcement to successfully uphold the policy.

In a second act of offense to Britain, French privateers captured the British ship the *Little Sarah*, which Genêt reappropriated as a French ship, renaming it *La Petite Démocrate (The Little Democrat)*.²⁴ The mercantile ship was harbored in Delaware where it was refitted with fourteen guns, and boarded by an armed crew of one hundred and twenty men. These changes to the ship were made after Jefferson directly warned Genêt that "no vessel could lawfully be equipped in a port of the United States for a purpose

¹⁹ Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," 396.

²⁰ Warren, "Edmond Charles Genet."

²¹ Christopher J. Young, "Connecting the President and the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," *Journal of the Early Republic* 31, no. 3 (2011): 447-8, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41261631>.

²² Young, "Connecting the President and the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," 448.

²³ Young, "Connecting the President and the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," 449.

²⁴ Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," 398.

hostile to a nation at peace with the United States.”²⁵ Secretary of the State of Pennsylvania Alexander Dallas requested the detention of *La Petite Démocrate* in the harbor, to which Genêt replied “I hope no attempt to seize her will be made; for, as she belongs to the Republic, she must defend the honor of her flag, and will certainly repel force by force.”²⁶

At this point, Washington and the Federalists were beyond enraged—not simply because Genêt had defied all their orders and the policies of neutrality, all while disregarding presidential authority by appealing directly to Americans, but because he had transformed American ports into active participants in the European conflict, threatening the United States’ claim of impartial neutrality. Hamilton was deeply troubled by the repercussions of Genêt’s actions, noting that he had turned the United States into “an instrument of hostilities against Great Britain.”²⁷ The government’s fear of provoking British retaliation was now dangerously tangible. British minister to the United States George Hammond pressured the U.S. government to restore and indemnify all British prizes captured by Genêt and the French privateers.²⁸ Hammond’s demands demonstrated the extent to which Genêt’s actions had endangered the United States’ position as a neutral power. By permitting French privateers to operate from American ports and seize British vessels, the Washington administration risked convincing Britain that the United States had effectively aligned itself with France despite its official declarations of neutrality.

In order to prevent the crisis Genêt had instigated from metastasizing into a greater, unwinnable conflict with Britain, Washington recognized that his administration would need to take immediate action to curtail the minister’s exploits. This came through Hamilton and Secretary of War Henry Knox’s proposal for the employment of a battery armed by a militia charged with arresting and preventing *La Petite Démocrate* from departing the harbor.²⁹ Jefferson expressed his apprehension to this in his *Dissenting Opinion on the Little Sarah*, saying that it was “morally certain that bloody consequences would follow” Hamilton and Knox’s proposal and risked entering into an armed conflict with France.³⁰ He sought a more diplomatic solution, addressing Genêt directly by correspondence demanding that his ships and their prizes “give no further umbrage by their presence in the Ports of the United States.”³¹ While the two sides of the cabinet differed in their methods, both took a forceful stance in attempting to prevent Genêt from continuing his outfittings and in doing so, exerted executive control over the enforcement of neutrality. The Cabinet’s efforts were in vain however, as Genêt continued arming the *La Petite Démocrate* and eventually set it to sea.

²⁵ Parton, “The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States,” 398.

²⁶ Parton, “The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States,” 399.

²⁷ Berkin, *A Sovereign People : the Crises of the 1790s and the Birth of American Nationalism*, 102.

²⁸ Sandra Moats, *Navigating Neutrality : Early American Governance in the Turbulent Atlantic* (University of Virginia Press, 2021), 88, digital file.

²⁹ Thomas Jefferson et al., “Cabinet Opinions on the Little Sarah,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 8, 1793, accessed May 24, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-26-02-0395>.

³⁰ Thomas Jefferson, “Dissenting Opinion on the Little Sarah,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 8, 1793, accessed May 24, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-26-02-0396>.

³¹ Thomas Jefferson, “Thomas Jefferson to Edmond Charles Genet,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 5, 1793, accessed May 24, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-26-02-0189>.

Genêt proved that the United States' policy of neutrality was simply a "paper policy" vulnerable to attacks like those of his own, requiring swift federal action to curtail their consequences. Genêt transformed neutrality from a diplomatic position into an actively enforced principle of American foreign policy. The crisis demonstrated that neutrality could not survive as a mere diplomatic declaration; it required executive authority capable of restricting foreign military activity within American territory and preventing private citizens from entangling the United States in European war.

A CRISIS OF AUTHORITY

Genêt's second mistake was failing to respect executive authority for foreign policy by circumventing the government and appealing directly to the American people. He exploited the fact that a profuse amount of Americans viewed him in a very positive light, indicated by the numerous banquets hosted in his honor that he attended and garnered support from (see Figure 1).³² Parton notes that Americans "were willing to fit out vessels at their own expense; all they asked of Genet was authority."³³ Indeed, Genêt was not hesitant to deliver on this authority. He supported the formation of Jacobin clubs across Atlantic cities to spread revolutionary support and create a base for recruiting privateers in addition to convincing South Carolina Governor Moultrie to hand out privateering commissions.³⁴ These actions mobilized public support for revolutionary France outside the control of the federal government, as seen in *The Eastern Herald and Gazette of Maine's* article describing Philadelphians "favorite hopes" of Genêt and his endeavors in the United States.³⁵ By refusing to negotiate with the federal government (as was prescribed by his mission from the French government,) Genêt ignored the Washington administration's authority over foreign policy—attempting to influence foreign policy through popular revolutionary support rather than through official diplomatic channels. In doing so, Genêt raised the question of whether foreign policy would be directed by the President or by popular revolutionary enthusiasm.

A return to Henfield's story exposes the extent to which the revolutionary ideology Genêt helped spread had an effect on foreign policy enforcement. Upon hearing about the British's request for Henfield's prosecution, Genêt subsidized Henfield's attorney costs for the trial—hiring three Republican attorneys to represent Henfield's case.³⁶ Over the course of the trial, arguments from each side were presented regarding the legality and constitutionality of Henfield's actions. Evidence of revolutionary sentiment among the jury began to reveal itself throughout the trial as Judge Wilson addressed them saying "upon your verdict...the interests of four millions of your fellow-citizens may be said to depend."³⁷ These

³² Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," 390.

³³ Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," 390.

³⁴ Parton, "The Exploits of Edmond Genet in the United States," 390, 401.

³⁵ "The Address of the Citizens of Philadelphia to Edmond Charles Genet.," *The Eastern Herald and Gazette of Maine* (Portland, Maine), June 1, 1793, 4.

³⁶ Young, "Connecting the President and the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," 448.

³⁷ Young, "Connecting the President and the People: Washington's Neutrality, Genet's Challenge, and Hamilton's Fight for Public Support," 450.

sentiments were of great importance to the trial as “American juries were expected to determine fact as well as law” in the eighteenth century.³⁸ In essence, the jury’s decision on this case would not only determine whether Henfield was guilty or not, but also the constitutionality of his prosecution. In a grand blow to Washington and the government, the jury acquitted Henfield, demonstrating the extent to which revolutionary ideology among ordinary Americans (influenced by foreign actors like Genêt) could undermine the federal government’s ability to conduct a coherent and independent enforcement of neutrality. Justice Marshall described how “Henfield was celebrated with extravagant marks of joy and exultation.” Genêt hosted a grand party celebrating the acquittal of “Citizen Henfield,” who would later defect and become a French citizen—ironically, Henfield would be captured by the British whilst fighting for France on the high seas.³⁹

Henfield’s case was intended to make known the consequences of thwarting neutrality. Instead, it made a positive example of Henfield’s actions, alarming the federal government of the ability of popular revolutionary sentiment to dictate foreign policy. By ruling in favor of Henfield, the jury had effectively interpreted the *Proclamation of Neutrality* as merely a proclamation with no legal and constitutional weight. Through circumventing the federal government, instilling and reaffirming popular revolutionary sentiment, Genêt would once again have his way.

Genêt made it clear to the federal government that they would need to take firm command over the enforcement of neutrality to prevent the rise of greater threats of conflict with Europe. In respect to Henfield’s case, Attorney General Edmund Randolph hurriedly published a warning in numerous newspapers that despite the jury’s ruling, Americans were prohibited from engaging in conflict between Britain and France.⁴⁰ This move reflected the Washington administration’s desire to prevent Americans from engaging in hostile acts towards Britain similar to those of Henfield. Hamilton published a more broad assertion of neutrality in his *Pacificus* essays, a series of seven essays defending the Proclamation of Neutrality and the President’s power in enforcing it.⁴¹ In *Pacificus No. I*, Hamilton asserts that the President is constitutionally vested with the powers to control foreign affairs, noting that the executive branch is an “organ of intercourse between the [domestic] Nation and foreign Nations.”⁴² Rather than allowing public revolutionary enthusiasm or foreign ministers to dictate American foreign policy, Hamilton argued that the executive possessed the authority to determine the nation’s international posture,

³⁸ Young, “Connecting the President and the People: Washington’s Neutrality, Genet’s Challenge, and Hamilton’s Fight for Public Support,” 450.

³⁹ Young, “Connecting the President and the People: Washington’s Neutrality, Genet’s Challenge, and Hamilton’s Fight for Public Support,” 451.

⁴⁰ Young, “Connecting the President and the People: Washington’s Neutrality, Genet’s Challenge, and Hamilton’s Fight for Public Support,” 451.

⁴¹ Hamilton published his seven essays under the pseudonym *Pacificus* (hence the name of the series), latin for “peacemaker.” He originally wrote nine essays in the series, though published the last two under a different pseudonym: *Americanus*. These essays famously sparked a constitutional dispute with James Madison (writing as “*Helvidius*”) over presidential powers in foreign policy—Madison arguing that such power was reserved for Congress.

⁴² Alexander Hamilton, “*Pacificus No. I*,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified June 29, 1793, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0038>.

supplying the constitutional justification for neutrality being an enforceable national policy directed by the executive branch. In *Pacificus No. III*, Hamilton complements executive authority by leaning into the executive “duty” to protect neutrality, saying the “President was in every view fully justified in pronouncing, that the duty and interest of the [United States] dictated a Neutrality in the War.”⁴³ Here, Hamilton framed neutrality as a constitutional responsibility necessary to protect the United States from entanglement in European conflict.

With Hamilton establishing the rhetorical basis for executive authority, it now came time for Washington and the federal government to wield their power over foreign policy—namely by demanding the recall of Genêt. Genêt had violated neutrality numerous times to a tipping point with the federal government. Evidence of support for Genêt’s recall exists in Washington’s cabinet opinions, where Jefferson, Hamilton, Knox, and Randolph unanimously agreed on August first that “a letter should be written to the Minister of the U.S. at Paris...resuming the points of difference which had arisen between the government of the U.S. & mister Genet, assigning the reasons for the opinions of the former, & desiring the recall of the latter.”⁴⁴ Upon receipt of the U.S.’ demand, the Jacobin government, recognizing the conflict Genêt had provoked, agreed without hesitation to the minister’s recall.⁴⁵ Washington later addressed Congress on December 5th where he said “it is with extreme concern, I have to inform you, that the proceedings of the person whom [France] have unfortunately appointed their minister plenipotentiary here have breathed nothing of the friendly spirit of the nation which sent him; their tendency, on the contrary, has been to involve us in war abroad, and discord and anarchy at home,” further defending the executive decision from August.⁴⁶ Never before had the United States faced circumstances so dire that required them to demand the recall of any foreign representative. Jefferson himself noted in his essay, *Liberty Warring on Herself*, the extreme nature of the circumstance, saying “a precedent for it could scarcely be found.”⁴⁷ Genêt would effectively set the precedent that foreign agents are expected to abide by the nation’s policies of neutrality—and a failure to do so would result in similar repercussions faced by Genêt.

In the government’s final dance to uphold neutrality, congress passed the *Neutrality Act of 1794*. Over ten sections, the act reinforced the government’s authority for enforcing neutrality, stating that any person who commits acts in service of foreign nations, therefore violating neutrality, shall “be adjudged guilty of a high misdemeanor, and shall be fined and imprisoned at the discretion of the court in which the

⁴³ Alexander Hamilton, “Pacificus No. III,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified July 6, 1793, accessed May 25, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-15-02-0055>.

⁴⁴ Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, Henry Knox, and Edmund Randolph, “Cabinet Opinion on the Recall of Edmond Genet,” *Founders Online*, National Archives, last modified August 23, 1793, accessed May 15, 2026, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-13-02-0352>.

⁴⁵ Eugene R. Sheridan, “The Recall of Edmond Charles Genet: A Study in Transatlantic Politics and Diplomacy,” *Diplomatic History* 18, no. 4 (1994): 482, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24912307>.

⁴⁶ George Washington, *A Message of the President of the United States, to Congress, relative to France and Great Britain delivered, December 5, 1793: With the Papers Therein Referred To: Published by order of the House of Representatives.*, H.R. Doc. No. 3, at iii-iv (Dec. 5, 1793).

⁴⁷ Thomas Jefferson and Merrill D. Peterson, *Writings* (Literary Classics of the United States, 1984), 689.

conviction shall be had.”⁴⁸ The act further stipulates the President’s authority over foreign affairs, saying “it shall be lawful for the President of the United States...to employ such part of the [military] of the United States...for the purpose of taking possession of, and detaining any such ship or vessel, with her prize or prizes if any, in order to the execution of the prohibitions and penalties of this act, and to the restoring such prize or prizes.”⁴⁹ The act reiterated much of the previous discourse used by the government to enforce neutrality. Where it differed was in the newfound legal weight it held being a federal law, making it the “supreme Law of the Land” governing neutrality.⁵⁰ With its passage came the government’s ability to more successfully prosecute any violators of the original prohibitions of the Proclamation of Neutrality. The passage of the *Neutrality Act of 1794* reflected the extent to which Genêt had transformed the federal government’s approach to foreign policy enforcement. Neutrality would no longer be solely defended by presidential proclamations requesting voluntary public compliance. Instead, the federal government increasingly viewed neutrality as a diplomatic position requiring centralized legal and executive enforcement against both foreign interference and domestic revolutionary activism. In codifying neutrality into federal law and affirming the President’s authority to enforce it, the *Neutrality Act* represented the institutional culmination of the constitutional and diplomatic conflicts initiated by the Genêt Affair.

IN THE WAKE OF GENÊT

This paper began with a United States that expressed profoundly a sense of “amity” to the people and government of France—and it will end with a nation that rebuked allegiances of any sort to the “belligerent” powers of Europe. During the revolutionary era, the parallel championing of republican ideals—liberty, equality, and the pursuit of happiness (fraternity in the case of the French)—forged a revolutionary brotherhood between the two nations. This ideological affinity, however, would be short-lived.

Where ideology failed to protect the United States from the conflict posed by European discord, pragmatism stepped in. Washington and the federal government expeditiously enforced neutrality by banning the outfitting and arming of vessels, the enlistment of Americans into service of foreign nations, military expeditions against powers at peace with the United States and ultimately, requesting the formal recall of the minister to France (the first such instance in American history) denoting a general trend towards pragmatic diplomacy. Moreover, in the context of this period, the crisis triggered the transformation of neutrality from merely an executive proclamation into a concrete, federal legal principle of the United States through the passage of the *Neutrality Act of 1794*. For the next century, the United

⁴⁸ U.S. Congress, U.S. Statutes at Large, vol. 1, 1st through 5th Congress, 1789–1799 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lsl-v1/>).

⁴⁹ U.S. Congress, Statutes at Large, vol. 1 (1789–1799).

⁵⁰ As per Article VI, clause 2 of the United States Constitution: “the Laws of the United States...shall be the supreme Law of the Land.”

States would remain committed to its abstention from foreign factions; this policy would only falter at the advent of World War I.

Through a holistic eye, the affair dramatically changed the country's definition of its national interest, from one grounded in the republican ideals of the American—and concurrently the French—Revolution, to one that prioritized pragmatic diplomacy out of fear of entering into European conflicts over those ideals. While the U.S. did not necessarily lose its republican ideals at home, it lost its allegiances grounded in those ideals abroad. Upon Washington's voluntary decision not to run for a third term as president, he delivered his "Farewell Address" to the people of the United States. In the six thousand word valediction, Washington reiterated the nation's "true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world," alerting Americans of the dangers of engaging in alliances with foreign nations.⁵¹ Washington's warning reflected the lessons of the Genêt Affair, in which ideological attachment to revolutionary France had threatened to draw the United States into European conflict, therefore reinforcing the Washington administration's growing preference for pragmatic diplomacy over ideological alliance. In forcing the United States to balance revolutionary ideals against national sovereignty and political stability, Genêt helped establish the principles of neutrality, executive diplomacy, and independent national interest that would guide American foreign policy throughout much of the nineteenth century.

Genêt's story culminates in a great moment of irony. Despite the United States' demand for Genêt's recall, the minister never made the voyage back to France. Had he returned, the Jacobin government would most likely have placed Genêt on trial for treason, followed by his public execution by guillotine. Washington and Randolph, recognizing this, granted Genêt political asylum in the United States, where he was later naturalized as a U.S. citizen and had a family. Ironically, the man whose actions helped push the United States away from revolutionary France would ultimately spend the remainder of his life within the republic he had so dramatically challenged.

⁵¹ George Washington, "Washington's Farewell Address," Washington's Farewell Address, Senate.gov, last modified September 17, 1796, accessed May 13, 2026, https://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/resources/pdf/Washingtons_Farewell_Address.pdf.

APPENDIX



Figure 1: A Banquet to Genêt.⁵²



Figure 2: Genêt meets Washington in Philadelphia.⁵³

⁵² Howard Pyle, A Banquet to Genêt, 1897, illustration.; Originally published in Harper's Magazine. Has since been circulated.

⁵³ Stoltz, "Genêt Affair."

Our imports from the same countries, are

Spain and its dominions	335,110
Portugal and its dominions.	595,763
France and its dominions	2,068,348
Great Britain and its dominions	15,285,428
United Netherlands and their dominions	1,172,692
Denmark and its dominions	351,364
Sweden and its dominions	14,325

These imports consist mostly of articles on which industry has been exhausted.

Figure 3: Table of foreign imports from Europe (in dollars per year) from Jefferson's Public Papers.⁵⁴



Figure 4: Genêt's grave in East Greenbush, New York.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Jefferson and Peterson, Writings, 436.

⁵⁵ "Edmond-Charles Genêt," Find a Grave, <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/23891453/edmond-charles-genet>.

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