JOHN QUINCY ADAMS

AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF

American Foreign Policy

BY

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John Quincy Adams, son of the American Revolution, observer on the Continent of Europe of the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon, later from the new village capital on the Potomac a witness of the remoter wars of Latin America, understood the portents and opportunities of the age. At least as much as any other statesman of those days he realized his country's fortunate place and felt her Manifest Destiny as a continental power greater in potentialities for human freedom than any association of men hitherto seen on this planet. Sensing America's advantage from Europe's distress he peaceably broke through the paper trammels of Old World imperialism in the empty western stretches of North America. Diplomatically he carried the ball of American Empire – to use the wholesome phrase of his opponent Dr. John Floyd – across the boreal plains over the Rocky Mountains down through the continuous woods that veiled the Oregon, to establish republican sovereignty impregnably on the Pacific Coast beyond the reach of further European colonization. More than any other man of his time he was privileged to gather together, formulate, and practice the fundamentals of American foreign policy – self-determination, independence, noncolonization, nonintervention, nonentanglement in European politics, Freedom of the Seas, freedom of commerce – and to set them deep in the soil of the Western Hemisphere. On that solid ground they stood and prospered for a century to come.

It is easy now to lay down these classic principles in historical order and to appraise Adams's relation to them. Clear and simple they stand forth. Let them finally be listed, one by one. The foundations of American foreign policy came to rest in John Quincy Adams's time on the following fourteen fundamentals:

1. Sovereign independence to preserve the rights of English freemen. John Quincy Adams as a son of the American Revolution was completely devoted to its gospel.

2. Freedom of the Seas. John Quincy Adams through successive decades fought a slow but gaining fight for that great birthright of American independence. To enshrine the Freedom of the Seas – not to mention the freedom of international rivers – in international law and to abolish private warfare upon the oceans were the great goals of his life, never realized. No man has striven longer or more gloriously for that ideal.

3. Freedom of commerce and navigation: that is, reciprocal equality without discrimination against foreign subjects or ships, whether in homeland or colonies. John Quincy Adams was a consistent champion of this other birthright of American independence – twin birthright to the Freedom of the Seas. In the twentieth century it developed into the Open Door and the New Reciprocity.

4. Abstention from the "ordinary" vicissitudes and "ordinary" combinations and collisions of European politics and wars, first expressed in Washington's Proclamation of Neutrality in 1793, then in the Farewell Address of 1796, finally in the Monroe Doctrine of 1823. The reader of this volume

knows how John Quincy Adams moved contemporaneously in the spirit and practice of all three of those pronouncements, how he had some small influence on the formulation of the Farewell Address, how he followed Washington's Great Rule of foreign policy all his diplomatic life, how he was personally a power, during the deliberations of President Monroe's Cabinet, in laying down uncompromisingly the three dicta of the Monroe Doctrine, including the principle of Abstention. So far as Europe was concerned, he remained an unwavering isolationist; in 1823 his advice prevailed with President Monroe over that of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison.

5. The No-Transfer Principle: opposition to the transfer of adjacent colonial dominions in North America from one European sovereign to another, in order to prevent a strong imperialistic power from menacing American security and republican self-government by stepping into strategically dangerous parts of the dissolving Spanish Empire. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams extended this policy, first crystallized by the resolution of Congress of January 15, 1811, from contiguous territory like Florida or Texas to the Spanish islands of the Caribbean, from whence later it was to be expanded to all the Western Hemisphere.

6. Continental expansion. John Quincy Adams was certainly one of the great apostles of Manifest Destiny, if he did not coin the actual phrase itself. Born on the shore of Massachusetts Bay, a spot he loved above all others in the world, he did more than any other man diplomatically to push the sovereignty of the United States all the way over the mountains to the fabulous shores of the South Sea. In this his first career he was the greatest continentalist in American history.[2] Later, when continental expansion became identified in Adams's mind and politics with slavery expansion, he would turn about in his second career, one of the greatest personal reversals of the century, and oppose the march of Manifest Destiny into Texas and beyond the Rio Grande to the coast of California — Polk's superb complement to Adams's earlier diplomacy, a continental achievement that none other than John Quincy Adams would work in vain to block!

7. Self-determination of peoples, as evidenced by recognition of the independence of the revolted colonies of Spanish America. John Quincy Adams sensed keenly enough the destiny of independence for the whole Hemisphere from the ties of European imperialism, but he had his eyes and heart set first on the continental expansion of the United States in

[2] Comparison inevitably presents itself with another continentalist, Thomas Jefferson, friend of John Quincy Adams's boyhood years in Paris, author of the Declaration of Independence, and of *Notes on Virginia*, i.e. on North America. But of Jefferson it must always be remembered that during the Louisiana negotiations of 1803 he would have been willing to guarantee to France the whole west bank of the Mississippi — this would have denied to the United States its Manifest Destiny of expansion through to the other ocean.

North America. Not until he had staked that out forever in the triumphant Transcontinental Treaty of 1819 would he let his fixed view waver from North America to South America. His cool-headed calculation of his own country's Manifest Destiny on its own Continent balanced the warm-heartedness and mixed motives of Henry Clay's politics.

8. No further European colonization in the New World, a corollary to the self-determination and independence of the nations of America. This was a policy out of John Quincy Adams's own genius.

9. Nonintervention, as manifested in the Monroe Doctrine: to Europe, Hands Off America; and as next contained in the instructions of Henry Clay, written under the oversight and final responsibility of President John Quincy Adams, to the intended plenipotentiaries of the United States to the Congress of Panama.

10. The right of expatriation and naturalization and the wrong of impressment. No one expressed this doctrine of the immigrant nations of the New World more consistently, vigorously, or eloquently than John Quincy Adams throughout his lifetime.

11. Suppression of the African slave trade. Adams was only a belated convert to this humanitarian British policy, after public opinion in America had persuaded him that it would be politically expedient even at some risk of impressment. Then his political conversion became a moral conversion leading him step by step slowly and cautiously into the road of his second great career – the antislavery crusade, the resulting revolution of the Southern states against the Union, the final triumph of the Nation and the freeing of the slaves. All that, together with his personal and political biography after he left the Department of State for the White House, is a longer story, so big and so dynamic that it would take at least another volume to tell it.

12. Pan-Americanism. After the ratification of the Transcontinental Treaty, ensuring the continental future of the United States, following recognition of the Latin-American Republics, and after pronouncement of what we now call the Monroe Doctrine, John Quincy Adams was willing to follow Henry Clay toward an inter-American treaty structure, without commitment to the use of force, based on the maxim of Good Neighborhood, the Non-Colonization Principle, the No-Transfer Principle, the Monroe Doctrine, Nonintervention, and the other established fundamentals of the foreign policy of the United States; but neither Adams nor Clay, nor any North American statesman before the year 1940, proved willing to write those principles into a hemispheric alliance of the Republics of the New World.

13. International arbitration as practiced in the boundary and other controversies with Great Britain from Jay's Treaty to the Northeastern Boundary Question. John Quincy Adams was always willing to arbitrate justiciable questions – that is, questions relating to a point of interna-

tional law or the interpretation of a treaty – not involving national sovereignty or national honor; but he preferred direct diplomatic settlement to arbitration whenever possible.

14. Anti-imperialism. Implicit in all these fundamentals, which all together we may connect with the name of John Quincy Adams more than with that of any other one man, was a feeling strongly sensed and practiced, but never quite articulate, of anti-imperialism, which may be added as a cardinal principle of American foreign policy. It stemmed from the Anglo-American Revolution and the Latin-American Revolution of the New World. If one defines imperialism as dominion or control over alien peoples, the United States as an exponent of Manifest Destiny in North America can scarcely be said to have been an imperialistic power until the close of the nineteenth century; and even then it was so only temporarily, for a quarter of a century, during the new and dangerous frame of power and politics suddenly ushered in by the simultaneous appearance of Germany and Japan as aggressive world powers. That late-born, unwanted imperialism of the United States which followed the Spanish-American War was liquidated after the First World War just as soon as it seemed safe to do so, and the Republic went back to the classic fundamentals of its foreign policy as laid down in their aggregate by John Quincy Adams.

It is one thing to define the fundamentals of a nation's foreign policy; it is another to make them prevail. John Quincy Adams did not make all these principles prevail in his day, but he stood fast by them so that they lived to predominate in another day of greater national power. What was the secret of Adams's success in defining, defending, and sustaining American foreign policy in the first half-century of our independence? It was the adjustment of his personal qualifications to his country's interests and advantages instinctively grasped and painstakingly pursued.

Personally Adams was a competent, reliable, and agreeable man to do business with. His personal animus and choler he reserved for his political opponents at home who tried to pull him down by attacking the integrity of his diplomatic record. The representatives of foreign powers in Washington had no complaint to make on the score of amenities. But he thought always of his own country first. He did not believe in a global Santa Claus. He always insisted on a diplomatic equivalent for any concession made. He never surrendered an advantage, as Don Luis de Onís could testify, but he always preserved his temper in diplomatic intercourse and maintained a simple-mannered republican urbanity. He would yield in dignity to no one when to do so involved the dignity or prestige of his Government. Let a foreign diplomat near the Government of the United States assume a high tone, and Adams would reply, not in real anger or irascibility, but in kind, if necessary with added measure, as Stratford Canning and his fellows in office might have been able to testify. Let a Minister get angry or make a threat, or bluff, as once the good Frenchman