Diplomatic Inception: How George Washington Used Jay’s and Pinckney’s Treaties to Preserve Peace and Prosperity in the United States During the Early Federal Period

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Historical Paper

Paper Length: 2155 Words

Process Paper: 499 Words
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Process Paper

Topic Choice

I was interested in how George Washington handled diplomacy during his presidency because I had learned in school about his prowess in battle but had never learned about his diplomatic actions. I mentioned this to my teacher and she suggested that I research Jay’s and Pinckney’s treaties. I did a few searches online and was interested in what I found. I also found enough information that I was confident I could successfully research the topic without running into trouble finding sources.

Conducting Research

To conduct my research, I searched online for various terms relating to Jay’s and Pinckney’s treaties. I searched for background information, why the treaties were necessary, what the treaties did, and the results of the treaties. I also looked online for primary sources to use, such as old newspaper articles relating to the treaties. My history teacher helped me by providing guidelines for what topics I should research relating to the treaties to ensure I had enough information to form a strong thesis with enough information about the background for my topic as well as information about what happened after the treaties were signed.

Creating Project

My class was required to write papers about their NHD projects before making their competition projects. Because I chose the paper category, I was able to use the paper that I had already written and adapt it to the different requirements of the official competition, and revise it more. I began by listing the facts that I obtained from my research. I came up with a thesis and then organized the facts into an outline. Using this outline, I wrote the first draft of my paper. My teacher helped me revise it and I submitted it to the required paper assignment for her class. I
then edited my paper into the final version to submit to the NHD competition. I alternated revising my paper and working on my annotated bibliography, process paper, and title page until I finished the entire project for the regional competition. After the regional competition, I asked multiple teachers to read the paper and then combined their suggestions into my submission for the state competition. I added more information on the historical impact for the national competition.

**Historical Argument**

My historical argument is that George Washington protected the US from war, helped the economy flourish, and set a precedent for how future presidents should handle foreign policy by signing Jay’s and Pinckney’s treaties.

**Significance in History**

My topic was significant because George Washington was the first President. Because he was the first person to sign treaties for the US, his actions influenced how future US foreign policy would be handled. These treaties were also significant because of what they accomplished. Jay’s Treaty prevented a potential war that could have been catastrophic for the US, and Pinckney’s Treaty helped the US economy to flourish. George Washington’s policy of neutrality has impacted many presidents’ diplomatic decisions, notably in the World Wars. The treaties defined how the US should handle foreign policy and helped the US to prosper.
Works Cited

Primary


This primary source newspaper article helped demonstrate that the treaty was very unpopular when it was signed.


This primary source newspaper included an article refuting criticisms of Jay’s Treaty, which was useful for understanding the public’s view of the treaty at the time it was signed.


The primary source content of Jay’s Treaty was useful for finding quotes to put in the paper. It was also useful for finding exact details of what the treaty declared.


The original content of Pinckney’s treaty was useful while researching what the treaty did.

This transcript of President Washington’s Farewell Address was very helpful for understanding Washington’s mentality on foreign policy in his own words.


This collection of letters was useful when researching President Washington’s personal opinions on Jay’s Treaty.

**Secondary**


This article was about the Bosnian war. It was helpful when researching the precedent of neutrality that Washington set for future presidents.


This website was useful for providing basic information about the Jay Treaty, such as what it achieved. It was a useful jumping-off point for further research.


I used this article to learn basic details about Pinckney’s Treaty like who signed it. It was useful as the first source I used to begin my research about the treaty.

This blog post on Pinckney’s treaty provided a lot of useful information about Pinckney’s treaty, especially background information about how the Spanish, British, and Pinckney’s Treaty were related to each other.


This website provided information about the Articles of Confederation including what they were and why the system failed. This information was useful for understanding the background information leading up to Jay’s Treaty.


This source provided some useful details about the creation and signing of Jay’s Treaty. It also included information about the public’s response to news of the Treaty.


This website provided details about the need for Jay’s Treaty, its creation, and the public response to it being signed. It also included background information about what was going on in the world at the time.

These annotations on a letter written by George Washington contained details on the public’s response to Jay’s Treaty. These were useful when researching the aftermath of Jay’s Treaty being signed.


Onuf, Peter. “Thomas Jefferson: Foreign Affairs.” Miller Center, https://millercenter.org/president/jefferson/foreign-affairs. Accessed 28 February 2022. This article provided information about President Thomas Jefferson’s foreign policy decisions during his presidency. This information was useful when researching the lasting impact of Washington’s diplomatic decisions.


This article provides information about the precedent in diplomacy that George Washington set for future presidents.


This article contains basic information about the revolutionary war, which helped me understand the background of Jay’s Treaty.


This book details the years soon after the treaties were signed. It was useful for gaining information about the implications of the treaties being signed.


This website included facts about President John Adams’ diplomatic decisions during his presidency. These facts were useful while researching the impact that Washington’s foreign policy decisions had on future presidents’ policies.

This article on the Neutrality Acts had information that was useful when researching the impacts of Washington’s policy of neutrality.


This secondary source article included information about the War of 1812 and the Treaty of Ghent. This information was useful for learning about the impact of Jay’s Treaty.


This website provided background information about what was happening in the world at the time that Pinckney’s Treaty was signed. It also included information about the motivation for signing the treaty.
While George Washington is mainly known for his success in war, as president he used his diplomatic power to sign important treaties with Great Britain and Spain to ensure the safety and prosperity of the fledgling United States. Because the United States was so new, ensuring that another war did not break out with Great Britain was essential. In 1794, George Washington signed Jay’s Treaty with Great Britain, ensuring peace between the two countries. Soon after, in 1795, he signed Pinckney’s Treaty with Spain to establish the southern border of the United States and improve trading rights. The Spanish were afraid of a possible anti-Spain alliance forming between Great Britain and the United States, and Washington took advantage of this with Pinckney’s Treaty. By signing Jay’s and Pinckney’s treaties, George Washington prevented a war, ended territorial disputes, allowed the United States’ economy to flourish, and set a precedent for how future presidents should handle diplomacy.

After the Revolutionary War, tensions remained high between the United States and Great Britain. US markets were flooded with British imports and US exports were blocked by British trade restrictions and tariffs. Britain’s continued occupation of northern forts, which they had promised to vacate in the 1783 Treaty of Paris, was another cause of animosity. The British were also impressing American sailors and seizing naval and military supplies. After the French Revolution, a war started between France and Britain in 1793 causing divisions to emerge in the US government over which country the US should support in the war. The young United States was still vulnerable from the Revolutionary War, so it could not afford to go to war with Great Britain again. Because of this, Washington sent Chief Justice John Jay to negotiate with the British. Jay’s only bargaining advantage was the threat that the US would join the Danish and Swedish governments in protecting their neutral status and resisting Great Britain’s attempts to seize their goods by force. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, in an attempt to
establish good relations with Great Britain, had independently informed British leaders that the US would not assist the Danish and Swedish, which left Jay with almost no leverage to force Britain to concede to US demands. After much deliberation and negotiation, Jay finalized the treaty with British foreign minister Lord Grenville on November 19, 1794. Jay’s Treaty guaranteed the US safety but in return granted Britain additional rights, including severely restricting Americans’ commercial access to the British West Indies, providing compensation for pre-Revolutionary War debts that American merchants owed to Britain, allowing the British to seize US goods bound for France if they paid for them, and allowing Britain to confiscate French goods on US ships without payment (“John Jay’s Treaty, 1794–95”).

The treaty guaranteed “inviolable and universal Peace” between the US and Great Britain (Great Britain & Us, Jay’s Treaty Article 1). Britain agreed to evacuate the Northwest Territory by June 1, 1796. This guarantee of peace was vital for the safety of the young nation. The treaty also allowed citizens of the United States to trade in the West Indies but limited each ship to 70 tons (Great Britain & Us, Jay’s Treaty Article 12). Additionally, the treaty declared the Mississippi River open to both countries, allowing British merchants access to frontier outposts, and prohibited privateers (private ships commissioned for war) from being outfitted in US ports if they were being outfitted by Britain’s enemies.

Jay’s Treaty was extremely unpopular with US citizens because it favored Great Britain. In Boston, graffiti appeared on a wall stating “Damn John Jay! Damn everyone who won't damn John Jay!! Damn everyone that won't put lights in his windows and sit up all night damning John Jay!!!” (Mintz and McNeil) Even though it was unpopular, Washington implemented it, realizing that it was the price of peace with Great Britain. He concluded that avoiding “unsettled” conditions, allowing the US time to regroup and prepare in case of a future conflict, was more
important than aggressively pursuing a more “favorable” treaty (“George Washington Papers”). While the treaty only marginally benefited the US, it succeeded in securing peace until 1806, when tensions over trade restrictions were building into the War of 1812 (“John Jay’s Treaty, 1794–95”).

Meanwhile, as John Jay was in London to negotiate the treaty with Great Britain, Spanish diplomats became wary that Jay’s negotiations would result in an anti-Spain alliance between the US and Great Britain. When Britain ceded two Florida colonies to Spain in the Treaty of Paris (1783), it was unclear whether the border was the original line or another boundary 85 miles to the north. The US had insisted that it was the southern boundary, which led to a dispute between the two countries. In retaliation, Spain closed New Orleans, at the mouth of the Mississippi, to all American goods. Because of the increasing number of Americans living on the western side of the Appalachian Mountains, this closure was very significant. Instead of taking a relatively easy water route to Eastern and European markets, settlers had to move their goods over the mountain range, adding time, peril, and cost to trade routes. Another treaty could help settle these matters.

Making treaties was difficult in the country’s early years due to the lack of executive power under the Articles of Confederation, so the border issue was not solved. But when the newly passed Constitution created a stronger Executive branch, President Washington decided to try to have New Orleans reopened to US goods. Spanish officials were hesitant to allow Americans into a strategic frontier area, so, despite Washington’s pleas, they kept the Mississippi River closed to American shipping. Spain and the US both claimed to own the area that is now Alabama and Mississippi. Spain held several forts in the disputed area and could count on resistance from native people living in the area against attempts to survey the land. However, in 1794, due to the war with France, Spain’s interests changed.
Spain had joined other European nations in the fight against France, but they had faced defeats in the Caribbean and Europe. King Charles IV of Spain handed political affairs to Manuel de Godoy who attempted to extract Spain from its temporary alliance with Great Britain, its traditional enemy, and restore peace with France. Godoy’s policy was risky, as making enemies of the British would put Spanish colonies in the Americas at great risk. It was even more concerning because John Jay had just gone to London to negotiate his treaty with Great Britain. An alliance between Great Britain and the US could potentially turn both countries against Spain. Spain’s position had weakened due to its military defeats, so diplomats were more willing to change its restrictive policies toward the US. Because of these considerations, Godoy sent a request to the US for a representative to negotiate a new treaty. George Washington selected the minister to Great Britain, Thomas Pinckney (“Treaty of San Lorenzo/ Pinckney’s Treaty, 1795”).

On October 27, 1795, The Treaty of San Lorenzo, also known as Pinckney’s Treaty, was signed, which protected both countries and helped the United States’ economy flourish. Unlike Jay, Pickney managed to negotiate terms more favorable to the United States. The treaty with Spain formally established the southern border of the United States at 31°N latitude. It also allowed US citizens rights to free navigation of the Mississippi River through Spanish territory and tax-free temporary storage of goods in New Orleans, making it much easier for US merchants to trade goods with settlements west of the Mississippi River and other countries. In addition, it voided guarantees of military support that Spanish officials had previously made to Native Americans, whose land was currently being taken by the US, effectively robbing Native Americans of military aid in the fight for their land and making it easier for the US to continue to expand west of the Mississippi River. Because Spain’s fear of Jay’s Treaty gave Pickney the upper hand in negotiations, he was able to dismiss many of Godoy’s requests to protect US
interests. Godoy asked for a formal alliance between Spain and the US in the treaty, but Washington was against any permanent alliances that would ensnare the US in military conflict and restrict its freedom. He believed that by keeping commercial and political interests separate, the United States would benefit from trading with multiple European powers while distancing itself from their political conflicts. Washington even stated in his farewell address that “it is our [US] true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.”

Godoy also insisted on requiring duties for goods passing through New Orleans, but Pinckney took advantage of Spain's continuing fear and their resulting desire for a treaty with the US and threatened to leave the negotiation table, causing Godoy to drop his request. Using Jay’s Treaty as leverage resulted in Pinckney’s Treaty being signed without an alliance or duties on goods passing through New Orleans, preserving free trade on the Mississippi and honoring Washington’s desire for a neutral United States.

Pinckney’s Treaty was extremely important because Spanish territories bordered the US and Spain controlled commerce on the Mississippi River, making strong relations with Spain essential. The Mississippi River was vital to the American economy because, at the time, it was the only way to get goods in and out of the Northwest Territory. The treaty was a significant reversal in Spanish policies that had attempted to maintain a buffer region in North America. It also placed the US in a much stronger position with European powers compared to the concessions made in Jay’s Treaty because the United States was able to successfully negotiate more of their demands. After it was signed, Pinckney’s Treaty was also quite popular in Spain, with citizens celebrating in the streets and King Charles IV giving Godoy the title Prince of the Peace. Pinckney’s treaty was successful in helping the economy and protecting both countries, and was popular in both the US and Spain.
During his presidency, George Washington set a precedent for how his successors should handle diplomacy. When war broke out between France and Britain in 1793, Washington resisted the inclination to assist the French, even though they had aided the US in the Revolution. Instead, he chose to sign a treaty with Great Britain to prevent a war while the US was militarily vulnerable. He acted quickly, sending John Jay to negotiate before waiting for legislative approval, setting an example for future presidents of acting quickly when diplomatic issues arise ("Presidential Diplomacy"). Unfortunately, President John Adams, Washington’s successor, strayed from Washington’s policy of neutrality by passing laws that were hostile toward France, which resulted in the Quasi-War. Adams’ successor, President Thomas Jefferson, returned to Washington’s position on foreign affairs and remained neutral in conflicts between Britain and France throughout the early 1800s by restricting trade with both countries (Miller Center). Close to a century later, in the 1900s, President Woodrow Wilson followed suit and kept the US neutral in WWI for as long as he could, saving thousands of American lives and protecting US naval interests. Two decades later, President Franklin Roosevelt used the Neutrality Acts of 1937 and 1939 to keep the United States out of European conflict while still allowing trade with its allies ("The Neutrality Acts, 1930s"). This neutrality in WWII lasted until the US was directly attacked, making isolation impossible. In the 1990s, the United States avoided sending troops into the Bosnian War for as long as possible, deciding instead to focus on a diplomatic solution between Muslims, Croats, and Serbs over control of the newly created nation-state ("November 1995: The Dayton Accords - National Museum of American Diplomacy"). It was only after the Dayton Accords were signed, creating the new state of Bosnia and Herzegovina, that Clinton authorized the first deployment of US ground forces to Bosnia to help lay the groundwork for NATO peacekeeping forces ("Clinton Sends First Troops to Bosnia"). By doing this, President
Clinton was able to preserve US neutrality in the war and protect US soldiers while also maintaining relationships with NATO allies. Presidents Wilson, Roosevelt, and Clinton, by following Washington’s example of neutrality, saved thousands of American lives and protected US resources.

Jay’s and Pinckney’s Treaties were successful in maintaining peace and establishing how the US should handle foreign policy. Because the young US was fragile, Jay’s Treaty was necessary to maintain peace until the US grew stronger, and it succeeded. While it was unpopular, it was still vital to ensure the safety of the nation. Taking advantage of Spanish fear caused by Jay’s Treaty, Pinckney used the Treaty of San Lorenzo to gain rights for the US, including helping the economy, ending territorial disputes, and protecting both countries from conflict. Jay’s and Pinckney’s Treaties were vital for protecting the US, enhancing the economy, and granting the US rights, and they set a precedent for how future presidents should handle diplomacy.