

## America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900

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# America's Encounters with Southeast Asia, 1800-1900

*Before the Pivot*

*Farish A. Noor*

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*To my daughter,  
Puteri Isabella*



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## A note on spelling

A note on the spelling of words and names as they appear in this book.

I have retained the spelling of names as they appeared in the texts that I refer to in the following chapters, and in some cases there have been differences between the way some names were written by different authors. In the case of place-names, I have retained the original spelling as found in the texts I refer to in the first instance, but have otherwise used contemporary local spellings in subsequent references. Whatever discrepancies or inaccuracies in spelling found in the originals have been retained, and are indicated as well.



# Introduction

The eagle in the Indies: America's early encounters with Southeast Asia, and how Southeast Asia was imagined in the nineteenth century

All moments, past, present and future, always have existed, always will exist. The Tralfamadorians can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance. They can see how permanent all the moments are, and they can look at any moment that interests them.<sup>1</sup>

– Kurt Vonnegut, *Slaughterhouse-Five*

## I A book about books, and why books matter

Book! You lie there; the fact is, you books must know your places. You'll do to give us the bare words and facts, but we come in to supply the thoughts.<sup>2</sup>

– Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*; or, *The Whale*

This is a book about books; and work on this book began while I was working on another book, that was also about books. What ties this work to my previous effort is my interest in how Southeast Asia was seen, imagined and depicted in the books that were written by Western authors in the nineteenth century; and how an entire region along with its peoples and cultures were discursively constructed in the writings that were produced by those who had come from the West and were encountering the world of the East Indies face-to-face for the first time.

This book will look at the writings of American authors – who came to Southeast Asia at different times and with different intentions – and how the Americans of the nineteenth century came to see Southeast Asia as a region that was distinct and different from the world they knew back home. I will attempt a close reading of their works, in order to show how the early encounters with Southeast Asia helped to frame an understanding of America's own identity (in the minds of the authors) as well as the identity of Southeast Asia and Southeast Asians, that were cast as America's constitutive Other. In the course of doing so, my approach will be a combination of both

<sup>1</sup> Vonnegut, pp. 26-27.

<sup>2</sup> Melville, *Moby-Dick*, pp. 429-430.

literary and discourse analysis, though set against a broader backdrop of history and political economy. I would like to state at the outset that this is not a work on the history of Southeast Asia or America, for much work has already been done in both domains by scores of able scholars. Rather, the aim of this work is to look at how American writers had imagined a part of Asia through the perspective of their own national identity, and how that identity was put in bold relief as it was contrasted to the idea of Southeast Asia as a region that was foreign and alien to them. In the course of this work I wish show how that idea of Southeast Asia was added to, modified and redefined time and again, as America's own development took it along a path which led it from being a former colony to an Asia-Pacific power.

There are three points that I would like to address in the introduction of this book: The first is that America's presence in Southeast Asia dates back much longer than many people may realize. In Southeast Asia today there is the popular belief that America's presence in Southeast Asia can be dated back to America's conquest of the Philippines after the Philippine-American War of 1899 to 1902, and that America's influence was most strongly felt across the region from World War Two to the end of the Cold War in 1989. This is obviously true, and America's hold on the Philippines in particular has been well documented by a range of eminent writers, both Filipino and American. McCoy and Scarano, for example, have looked at how America's conquest of the Philippines (and the occupation of Hawaii, Guam and Puerto Rico) expanded the territory of the United States and transformed it into a Pacific power, and also expanded the scope of American governmentality into domains that had hitherto been untouched, such as colonial race relations, colonial law enforcement, colonial education and the development of a vast communicative and logistical network that held America's Pacific territories together.<sup>3</sup> Theirs is an impressive volume that has offered a broad, macro-level account of the building on America's Pacific empire; and how that vast domain was regulated and governed by the modern American state. But my intention is to push the clock back even further, and look at how America was already present in Southeast Asia at the beginning of the nineteenth century, and how America's first tentative attempts to gain a foothold in the region had set the stage for its eventual arrival as a colonial power in the East Indies.

The second point follows from the first, and it is this: That on both sides of the Pacific America's early encounter with Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century is an area that has received relatively less attention

3 McCoy and Scarano.

when compared to the works that have been written about America's role in Asia in the twentieth century. Weatherbee's very detailed account of American-Southeast Asia relations, for instance, focuses on relations that were developed from the 1950s.<sup>4</sup> In my cursory examination of the history textbooks used in the schools of Southeast Asia I have seen that students – at both primary and secondary school level – are taught about the American revolution and America's role in the Pacific during World War Two; but the image of America that is conveyed is that of a *distant* land that has had little contact with Southeast Asia until very recently.<sup>5</sup> When discussing the colonial era from the eighteenth to mid-twentieth centuries, school books in Southeast Asia have tended to focus on the role played by the major European colonial powers – Britain, Holland, France, Spain and Portugal – while overlooking the fact that during the nineteenth century Southeast Asia was a region hotly contested by other states as well, and that citizens of many other countries, including America, were trying to establish a presence there for both themselves and their respective countries. Andreas Zangger's work on the history of the Swiss in Singapore is one of the few works that has looked at the role of other Europeans who were active in Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century,<sup>6</sup> while Khoo Salma Nasution's work on Germans and German-speaking Austrians and Jews in Penang is another work of importance as it traces the history of German missionaries like Johann Georg Bausum and freemasons such as Felix Henri Gottlieb.<sup>7</sup> Most recently Richard Hale's *The Balestiers: The First American Residents of Singapore* (2016) is among the few books that have focused on Americans in Southeast Asia in the same century.

The third point that I would like to raise is that America's rise as an Asia-Pacific power and a colonial presence in Southeast Asia was not a linear, predetermined process, but rather the result of a range of competing factors and pressures. The contingency that was at the heart of the American revolutionary project and present in its genesis, has been best captured in my opinion by Ellis in his study of the founding brothers of the revolutionary generation<sup>8</sup>; while it is Herring's recounting of America's complex evolution

4 See Weatherbee.

5 Noor, 'How Indonesia'.

6 Zangger has noted that by the 1820s there was already a Swiss presence in Southeast Asia, thanks to the solitary efforts of the Swiss merchant Auguste Borel, who had been sent to Cochinchina on behalf of the French government, and who later acted as a private Swiss merchant (pp. 19–24).

7 Nasution, pp. 21–30.

8 Ellis, *Founding Brothers*.

from colony to superpower that presents America's history painted upon a broad canvas, and which captures the contingency, accidents and ironies of America's eventual ascendancy as the undisputed power in the Pacific.<sup>9</sup> Ellis' work brings to the fore the complex questions of identity and purpose that troubled America's founding fathers so, while Herring's work highlighted the manner in which America's quest for recognition and later prominence necessarily brought it into contact with the rest of the world, and in the course of doing so shaped America's identity and destiny as well. Both these works remind us that contingency is the bedfellow of history, and that historical progression is hardly ever neat or linear. They also remind us that history is something that can be recorded at a number of levels – from the macro to the micro – and that there are in fact layers of histories that have to be peeled one by one. And that is where this work comes in.

Once again I would like to state that this is a book about books. What I intend to do in this work is to bring together some of the earliest known writings on Southeast Asia that were written by American authors in the nineteenth century. As we shall see in the following chapters, these authors were themselves men of diverse backgrounds – some of them were diplomats by appointment, others attached to the navy or the clerical orders – and they were among the first Americans to write about their experiences in Southeast Asia. They were often well aware of the fact that they were Americans abroad, and they were writing for the benefit of their fellow Americans back home. Elsewhere I have looked at how British authors – men of the East India Company in particular – had likewise produced a body of writing on Southeast Asia for the benefit of their king, their company patrons and their fellow countrymen, and in the course of doing so also defined themselves and justified their presence in Southeast Asia, creating a self-referential narrative that spoke as much about themselves as it did about the place they were writing about.<sup>10</sup> In this work I wish to show how America's early encounter with Southeast Asia not only produced some of the first American works on the region, but also helped to create a discursive community of like-minded American scholars, diplomats and adventurers who saw America as a nascent nation that was Western, and yet distinct and different from the rest of Europe – at least at the beginning.

What I aim to demonstrate is that the early American travellers to Southeast Asia did see themselves as a people who were different from other Westerners, and who wished to communicate and record that difference in

9 See Herring.

10 Noor, *Discursive Construction*.



their writing and the manner that they saw the world differently as well. Scholars like McCoy and Scarano have claimed that the American empire in the East was, in some respects, a distinctive kind of imperial state – a claim that echoes America's early claims to exceptionalism and uniqueness. But as this is a book about books, my intention is to offer a close reading of the works that were produced by the American writers who wrote about Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century. As such this work will focus on the content, tone and tenor of the writings that were produced by these American authors for the benefit of their fellow American readers at home; to see if there was anything distinctive about the works themselves, and if it could be said that there was a particular American understanding of Southeast Asia in the nineteenth century.

Before proceeding further I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank those who have been my fellow-travellers in this journey back to the past.

My thanks go to Saskia Gieling and Jaap Wagenaar of Amsterdam University Press for supporting my work over the years, and it goes without saying that this work would not have seen the light of day without their help and encouragement. I am also indebted to Chris Hale, producer and writer, with whom I have worked over the past five years in the related domain of film-making, and whom I have to thank for giving me the opportunity to translate some of my earlier work into documentary format for a wider audience. Chris has been more than a friend and supporter; and our discussions on the history and politics of Southeast Asia often dragged on late into the night. Together we travelled across Southeast Asia and Europe as we recounted the long and complex story of Europe's arrival in the East, and taxing though our journeys have been the final results were tangible and worthy of the effort.

My thanks also go to Rachel Harrison, Peter Carey and Martin van Bruinessen, whose works on Southeast Asia – past and present – have been so important in shaping and directing my own research. Rachel's work on Southeast Asian literature and film has been instructive in so many ways, reminding me of the power of narratives and language, and how our socio-political realities are discursively constructed. Peter's work in the recovery of the forgotten stories and narratives of Southeast Asia has been crucial in determining the focus of my work as well, for he has reminded me time and again that the power of narratives is found in political structures and differentials of power. Martin has been a friend, mentor and brother to me in so many ways, and it is thanks to him that my interest in Southeast Asia was rekindled two decades ago. In so many ways all of them have always

been close to me as I laboured away in my office. By way of acknowledging their presence in my work, I would like to thank all of them from the bottom of my heart.

A special mention also has to be made of my colleagues at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies and the School of History of the NTU School of Humanities. My thanks go to Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, Executive Deputy Chairman of RSIS; Joseph Liow, Dean of RSIS; Ralf Emmers, Associate Dean of RSIS; as well as my colleagues Ang Cheng Guan, Ngoei Wen-Qing, Irm Haleem, and Joel Ng in particular – fellow scholars with a keen interest in Asian history and politics, and who have been kind enough to bear with my incessant ramblings and petty obsessions about lost records, obscure letters and forgotten maps. I would also like to thank my friends David Henkel, Michael Feener and Kevin Tan, whose interest in the material history and archives of Southeast Asia matches my own, and with whom I have had many discussions about the region's past over drinks and dinner. I hope that the publication of this book proves that those chips were not consumed in vain, notwithstanding the deleterious effect they had on our waistlines.

In Europe I would like to thank the friends and colleagues whose hospitality I truly appreciated, and without whose help I would not have been able to conduct my research in the archives there: Christele Dedeant, Akanksha Mehta, Eric Germain, Violaine Donadello Szapary, Romain Bertrand, Wim Manuhutu, Marije Plomp, Willemijn Lamp, Chris Keulemans, Laila Zwaini, Dietrich Reetz, Saskia Schafer, Dominik Muller, Pablo Butcher and not least the late Henry Brownrigg, whose friendship I shall dearly miss. I would also like to thank Pierre Brocheux, whose extraordinary work on French Indochina was illuminating in so many ways, and which reminded me of how complex and nuanced the realities of colonialism were.

In Japan I would like to thank my friend and colleague Haruko Satoh, with whom I have had the enormous pleasure of working at OSIPP, Osaka University. Not to be forgotten are my academic friends in Osaka, Kyoto and Tokyo who have hosted me, and it is thanks to them that I learned so much about Japan's own rise as a Pacific power, which happens to be a concurrent theme in this book. My gratitude goes to Kazufumi Nagatsu, Shinzo Hayase, Naoki Soda, Misako Ito, Koji Sato, Mitsuhiro Inada, Carmina Yu Untalan and the staff of the National Diet Library and the Toyo Bunko Oriental Library of Tokyo.

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Last but not least, I have my wife, Amy, to thank for keeping me on the sane and lucid path. For the past three years my time and energy has been absorbed by two works that were written together at the same time, leaving me marooned in my office for nights on end. My failing health, and the maritime theme of the books, reinforced the impression that I was a leaky old rustbucket, foxed along the edges, lost at sea. During that period when I laboured alone it was the thought of Amy, and returning home to her, that kept me going; and it was Amy, my mother and my daughters who reminded me of what was truly important in life. I have them to thank for showing me that there is, after all, life after the nineteenth century.

*Farish A. Noor*

*RSIS, January 2018*



# 1 The curtain rises

## America's independence and the birth of a new naval power

The enduring idea of an isolationist America is a myth often conveniently used to safeguard the nation's self-image of its innocence.<sup>1</sup>

– George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*

### 1.1 'To be considered as Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre': America's genesis and the world beyond

Men make history, and the leading members of the revolutionary generation realized that they were doing so, but they could never have known the history they were making. [...] What in retrospect has the look of a foreordained unfolding of God's will was in reality an improvisational affair in which sheer chance, pure luck – both good and bad – and specific decisions made in the crucible of political crises determined the outcome. [...] If hindsight enhances our appreciation for the solidity and stability of the [historical] legacy, it also blinds us to the stunning improbability of the achievement itself.<sup>2</sup>

– Joseph J. Ellis, *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation*

The works that we will be looking at in this book were all written by Americans in the nineteenth century; from Jeremiah Reynolds' *Voyage of the United States Frigate Potomac* (1835) and Francis Warriner's *Cruise of the Frigate Potomac round the World* (1835) to Edmund Roberts' *Embassy to the Eastern Courts of Cochín-China, Siam, and Muscat* (1837), Fitch W. Taylor's *The Flag Ship, or, A Voyage around the World in the United States Frigate Columbia* (1840), Walter M. Gibson's *The Prison of Weltevreden* (1856), Albert Smith Bickmore's *Travels in the East Indian Archipelago* (1869) and Frank Vincent's *The Land of the White Elephant* (1874). They were written at a time when Americans had little first-hand knowledge of the world in general and American writers were beginning to write about the wider world from an American perspective for an American audience back home. But long before the United States of America established a presence in Southeast Asia and became an Asia-Pacific power, it had to secure a means to get to Asia first. How that came about, and how America made contact with Southeast Asia,

<sup>1</sup> Herring, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, pp. 4-5.

is a complex story that needs to be told in stages; and it takes us all the way back to the birth of the United States itself. This requires a recounting of events in the past, though we sometimes forget that at the genesis of things, the world was a fuzzy place indeed.

During the Presidency of Barrack Obama, there was much talk about America's 'Pivot to Asia' and the need for America to re-assert its role in the East and Southeast Asian regions. Much of this talk was accompanied by the claim that America had long since been around the region, and had played an important role in determining the development of Asia in modern times. But how true is this claim, and how did America make its presence felt in Asia in the nineteenth century? What were America's attitudes to Asia and Asians, and how did the early Americans view themselves and their role in the Southeast Asia in particular?

On 6 October 1784 the *Massachusetts Centinel and the Republican Journal*, a federalist newspaper published by William Warden and Benjamin Russell, featured a lengthy report on the war in India waged by the British East India Company. Included in that issue was an 'extraordinary insert' that reproduced in full the plea by the wife of Almar Ali Cawn, who had been captured by British forces. Ali Cawn's wife had written a petition to Britain's King George III, but the *Centinel* noted that the plea was turned down. The editors of the *Centinel* were supportive of the Indians and hostile to the British, and the report added that 'The petition was presented by the unhappy woman to the great man [King George], who, after he had perused it, gave orders that Almar Ali Cawn should be immediately strangled, and those orders were immediately executed. May the curse of the widow and the fatherless pursue him.'<sup>3</sup> The heavy editorializing that went into the report was indicative of the mood in America then, and how some Americans viewed Britain, India and Asia by extension. The *Centinel* made it abundantly clear that it felt that Britain's involvement in the Indian subcontinent was a case of imperial adventurism. That it expressed sympathy for the Indians and rained its curses upon King George says something about how some Americans were wholly opposed to empire-building then. Yet in a space of a century such attitudes were destined to change, and the country that had initially professed neutrality and the principle of non-intervention would ultimately become a colonial power as well.

3 The *Massachusetts Centinel and the Republican Journal*, William Warden and Benjamin Russell publishers, Boston, Massachusetts, 6 October 1784. 'Extraordinary Insert', pp. 1-2. Anti-British sentiment would remain a feature of the *Centinel*, even after it transformed to the *Columbian Centinel* (1790-1840).

This book looks at America's role and presence in Southeast Asia between the 1800 to 1900, and will argue that America in the nineteenth century was, in fact, a country with an identity and purpose that was in some ways different from the America that we know today; not least for the simple reason that America was itself a country-in-the-making. One work that looks at the state of America during its founding years is Joseph Ellis' *Founding Brothers: The Revolutionary Generation* (2002), which paints a sobering image of the young republic. A decade after its founding the population of the United States stood at less than four million, of which 693,250 were slaves. They were in turn surrounded by Native Americans who were ironically not Americans citizens.<sup>4</sup> The founding fathers had envisaged a country that had no king and no aristocracy, and where all citizens were equals.<sup>5</sup> (Though equality did not extend to Native Americans or the slaves who were regarded as property.) It was a country brought together by revolution and held together by the sinews of federalism, one that had no capital until Washington, DC, was chosen for that role. In 1790 the US's total debt stood at 77.1 million dollars, of which 11.7 million dollars was owed to foreign governments.<sup>6</sup> As Gordon has noted, after the revolution the American economy was in profound recession.<sup>7</sup> Notwithstanding its diminutive population and its huge debt, America's leaders were convinced that theirs was a nation that was destined for great things, and to play a larger role in the world in the long run. George Washington had written that:

The citizens of America have been placed in the most enviable condition, as the sole Lords and Proprietors of a Vast tract of Continent, comprehending all the various soils and climates of the World, and abounding with all the necessities and conveniences of life. [...] They are, from this period, to be considered as Actors on a most conspicuous Theatre, which seems to be peculiarly designed by Providence for the display of human greatness and felicity.<sup>8</sup>

It seemed then that the conditions were right for a new nation to be born, and as Ellis pointed out, 'if the infant American republic could survive its infancy, if it could manage to endure as a coherent national identity long

4 Herring, p. 57.

5 Ellis, *Passionate Sage*, p. 13.

6 Ibid., p. 55.

7 Gordon, p. xvii.

8 Quoted in Ellis, *Founding Brothers*, p. 7.

enough to consolidate its natural advantages, it possessed the potential to become a dominant force in the world'.<sup>9</sup> But America's birth was a painful and violent one, as Hoock has noted, and from its genesis Americans defined themselves in oppositional terms to those who they regarded as their enemies within and without – which included not only Britain and the powers of continental Europe, but also the Native American communities and black slaves who lived beside them.<sup>10</sup>

America's growth coincided with its first forays into the wider world, and how America's encounter with one part of the world – Southeast Asia – shaped, informed and determined the identity of both. It is a story with its own cast of characters – states, kingdoms and individuals – and laced with hazard and chance. In the manner that it shows how contingency often disrupts the best-laid plans of the wise and the bold, it is a useful reminder of the need to resist a linear reading of history too. America and Americans would indeed become 'actors on a most conspicuous theatre' as George Washington had foretold, but the plays they enacted and the scripts they read were not penned by a singular author.

To recount the story of America's early encounter with Southeast Asia we would need to go back to the beginning. Turning the clock back to the early nineteenth century we find an America that was poised to greet a new world. But as the young republic looked to the horizon and dreamt of crossing the seas, it had a particular problem: It was wanting of a navy.

## 1.II The birth of a new naval power

Our detached and distant situation invites and  
enables us to pursue a different course.

– George Washington's Farewell Address

In the year 1800, the United States of America – a young country made up of newly-independent states – was almost entirely defenceless at sea. Just how and why America was bereft of a naval force that could defend its territorial waters and merchant shipping abroad is a complex story, but it begins with the story of another force – the Continental Navy and the Continental Marines – that was created earlier, and then disbanded.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>10</sup> See Hoock.



During America's War of Independence it became abundantly clear that the American colonies would continue to be on the defensive as long as Britain was able to send troops and supplies across the North Atlantic to beef up its forces in North America and to battle against the revolutionaries. The US Department of War (set up in 1789) was created to ensure that the American army would remain under civilian control, and George Washington had assumed the role of commander-in-chief of the Continental Army. But it was John Adams who appreciated the need to form a navy in order to disrupt the flow of reinforcements being sent from Britain. On 26 August 1775 the State Assembly of Rhode Island passed the first resolution calling for the creation of an American naval force. The plan was to create a single American Continental fleet that would be funded by the Continental Congress, and on 13 October the force was established. Initially made up of merchant ships of various classes – from sloops to schooners – the Continental Navy's origins were humble. Congress called for the purchase of ships, which included the war brig USS *Andrew Doria* (which was the first American ship to receive a gun salute from another country, at the Dutch port of Fort Oranje in the Caribbean<sup>11</sup>); and later on 10 November two battalions of marines were raised to aid and assist American ships-of-war. Later thirteen new frigates were ordered by Congress (in December 1775), but the grand plans of Congress were thwarted by the economic realities of the time: Only eight frigates were finally completed, and none of them were a match for the first- and second-raters of the Royal Navy.

Out-gunned at sea, the ships of the Continental Navy directed their attention to the merchant ships and supply vessels that were coming from Britain instead. American vessels raided British merchantmen and supply ships along the American coast all the way south to the Caribbean – where they found themselves in the company of French privateers who were equally happy to plunder and capture English ships. Notwithstanding their successes at sea – one of the most notable being the combined operation between the Continental Navy and the Continental Marines in their joint attack on Nassau in March 1776, where they seized the town and captured 88 British guns – the American naval forces were not able to defeat the British Navy.

11 On 16 November 1776 the American brig-of-war the USS *Andrew Doria* approached the Dutch port of Fort Oranje, which was then under the command of the Dutch governor Johannes de Graaff. The ship fired the first salutary salvo, and this was met by an eleven-gun salute from the port. The event was of considerable importance to both the crew of the ship and the American government, for it was the first time another country had officially recognized the new American flag on a vessel.

Following Britain's defeat on land, the United States and Britain signed the Treaty of Paris (in 1783) that ended the Revolutionary War. Shortly after it was decided that the Continental Navy would eventually be disbanded, and in 1785 the eleven American ships that had survived the war were dismantled or sold off. Without a navy to defend its coastline, America's only form of naval defence then was the United States Revenue Cutter (USRC) service, which was established by Congress in November 1790 under the direction of Alexander Hamilton – who was then Secretary to the Treasury.<sup>12</sup> America could not afford a large naval force; and the young federation of states was made up of newly-independent ex-colonies that were jealously guarding their interests. Among the first generation of American citizens, there was some concern about the creation of a new federal system that would alienate the powers of the states to Congress, and rumblings against the creation of 'big government' where power – including military and naval power – would be concentrated at the political centre, or in the hands of an individual.<sup>13</sup>

America was then a young nation without much of a core identity – save that of being former colonies; and surrounded by European powers with vast empires that extended all the way to America's doorstep. As Herring pointed out, 'in a world of empires, the republic had to find ways to survive'.<sup>14</sup> But how? America was a fledgling nation-in-making, and at this stage of its history had no expansionist ambitions. It was the only nation in the Northern Atlantic theatre without a naval force that could be reckoned with, and it was about to learn that its discourse of free trade and freedom of navigation – to quote Hobbes – 'were but words, with no power to bind them'. But words did matter, and one word that mattered very much during the first decades of America's history was the word 'neutrality'.

The slow birth of the United States – from the declaration of independence in 1776 to the end of the American Revolutionary War in 1783 – produced a federation of thirteen states, each with a history and identity of its own. America's founding fathers were revolutionaries who had fought to rid themselves of the yoke of colonial rule, and there was the prevailing opinion

12 Johnson, *Guardians*.

13 George Washington himself had warned the American public – in his Farewell Address of 1796 – of the dangers of internal political conflict that may lead to the rise of powerful individuals in the republic. In his farewell note, he wrote that 'the disorders and miseries, which result [from political infighting], gradually incline the minds of men to seek security and repose in the absolute power of an individual; and sooner or later the chief of some prevailing faction, more able or more fortunate than his competitors, turns this disposition to the purposes of his own elevation, on the ruins of Public Liberty' (George Washington's Farewell Address).

14 Herring, p. 37.

that America should never become an imperial power itself. This sentiment was shared by some of the country's leaders like George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and it was almost elevated to an article of faith, as one of the founding principles of the new democracy. It was Washington himself who laid down the framework of American neutrality and isolationism, and in his Farewell Address (1796) he spelt out his meaning in no uncertain terms:

Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and Morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. Who can doubt, that, in the course of time and things, the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages, which might be lost by a steady adherence to it?<sup>15</sup>

Underlying this understanding of neutrality was a very American appreciation of geography and its location in the world. Washington, along with several other leaders of the revolutionary generation, saw America as a land apart, far away from the Old World of continental Europe; and had no wish to see the new country embroiled in the conflicts that were raging there. It was America's 'detachment and distant situation', Washington argued, that gave America the unique opportunity to chart another course altogether.

Despite all the talk of neutrality and isolationism by the founding fathers, Herring has argued that the first generation of American leaders were acutely aware of the importance of global politics. Tom Paine's call for independence 'hinged on estimates of the importance of the [American] colonies in the international system of the eighteenth century' and this anticipated the importance of foreign policy in America's own war of independence and the future development of its identity.<sup>16</sup> As Herring observed: 'the Revolutionary generation held to an expansive vision, a certainty to their future greatness and destiny'.<sup>17</sup> The republic needed to expand, and the need for an effective means to protect America's territorial waters and its merchant fleet would become increasingly obvious in the decades that followed. The Constitution was the first step towards remedying America's military weakness, for it

15 George Washington's Farewell Address.

16 Herring, p. 11.

17 Ibid., pp. 11-12.

'conferred on the central government authority to regulate commerce and conduct relations with other nations'.<sup>18</sup>

America's profession of neutrality was put to the test as the country fought its quasi-war with France with the Caribbean as the main theatre of conflict. It was in the West Indies that the United States bore the brunt of France's aggressive policy against maritime trade with Britain, and American ships were not spared. American estimates of their losses – both in the form of ships captured and cargo plundered in the Caribbean by the French – between 1794 to 1797 stood at around 25 million dollars.<sup>19</sup> Compounding matters for the American government and its business community then was the fact that the United States did not have a navy to speak of: Six frigates had been ordered in 1794,<sup>20</sup> but by 1797 only three were completed and on active service: the USS *Constitution*, USS *Constellation* and USS *United States*. (The following year the Department of the Navy was formally established, on 30 April 1798.)

As America was keen to expand its trading networks and trade with as many nations as possible, its ships were plying the trade routes from the West Indies all the way to the Mediterranean. It was off the coast of North Africa that American merchant vessels found themselves harassed, and sometimes captured, by the so-called 'Barbary pirates' of Morocco, Algiers, Tunis and Tripoli. The pirates of the North African coast had been the scourge of shipping for centuries, and American vessels were targeted too. John Adams and Thomas Jefferson both agreed that the American government's policy of paying tribute to piratical states was, in the long run, unsustainable for both economic and ethical reasons: The tributes were an enormous drain on the coffers of the state, and the annual payment of tribute merely reinforced the view that piracy was a lucrative means of making money. The problem, however, was that America did not have the means to protect its merchant vessels and was in no position to refuse the demands of the pirates. (The American government would continue to pay tribute to Algiers for fifteen years, from 1786 to 1800.) The threat of piracy was one of the main reasons that Congress approved the plan to build six new heavy frigates in 1794, to serve as escorts to America's growing merchant

18 Ibid., p. 57.

19 Fregosi, p. 140.

20 On 27 March 1794, Congress passed the Naval Act of 1794, which authorized the construction of six new heavy frigates that would make up the nucleus of the new American Navy. These were the USS *Constitution* (44, then later 54 guns), USS *United States* (44 guns), USS *President* (44 guns), USS *Chesapeake* (44 guns), USS *Constellation* (36 guns) and the USS *Congress* (36 guns). The cost of the six vessels was high by the standards of the day, amounting to \$688,000.00.