

12.2 President Washington Creates a Foreign Policy

When George Washington took office as the nation's first president in 1789, America was looking weak. The army that Washington had commanded during the Revolutionary War had gone home. It had not been replaced for two reasons. First, an army would cost money that the government did not have. Second, Americans had learned that a standing army could be used to take away their liberty. State militia troops, they believed, could handle any threats the country might face.

And there were threats. The new nation was surrounded by unfriendly powers. To the north, Britain still controlled Canada. The British also refused to abandon their forts in the Ohio Valley, even though this region now belonged to the United States. To the south and west, Spain controlled Florida and Louisiana.

Events in Europe also threatened the new nation. As you read in Chapter 11, in 1789, the French people rose up against their king and declared France a republic. Most Americans were thrilled by the French Revolution. However, when France went to war with Britain in 1793, President Washington faced a difficult decision. During its own revolution, the United States had signed a treaty of alliance with France. (*Alliances* are agreements made with other nations to aid and support each other.) In that treaty, the United States had promised to aid France in time of war. Many Americans were eager to honor that pledge, even if it meant going to war with Britain.

Washington knew that the United States was not prepared for war. Instead, he announced a policy of **neutrality**. Under this policy, the United States would do nothing to aid either France or Britain in their war against each other.

Before leaving office, Washington summed up his foreign policy in his famous farewell address. The United States, he said, could gain nothing by becoming involved in other nations' affairs. "It is our true policy," he declared, "to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world." Washington's policy of avoiding alliances with other countries became known as **isolationism**. For the next century, isolationism would be the foundation of American foreign policy.



neutrality a policy of not choosing sides in a war or dispute between other countries

isolationism a policy of avoiding political or military agreements with other countries; first established by George Washington

George Washington was considered a hero even in his own time. Here we see Lady Liberty crowning a bust of Washington. The inscription on the bust reads "First in War, First in Peace, First in the Hearts of His Countrymen."