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“The Dictates of Sound Policy”: Contending with the Western Indians under the New American Constitution

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“The Dictates of Sound Policy”:
Contending with the Western Indians under the New American Constitution

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Introduction

The new federal Constitution adopted as a result of the 1787 Philadelphia Convention endowed the national government with enhanced sovereignty and resources. In a drastic shift away from the weak confederation that had dominated the 1780s, the new government had the sole authority to regulate affairs with the Indians—a power which, until then, had been largely left in the hands of state officials and frontiersmen. Under the new Constitution, Congress was mandated with the power to make treaties and to regulate commerce with foreign nations, between states, and with Indians. Given the new nation’s propensity to territorially expand westward, treating with tribes in the mid-Atlantic and Ohio Valley regions would emerge as a central concern to national leaders.¹

As the new government assumed responsibilities, President George Washington and his Secretary of War Henry Knox actively pursued a policy that attempted to engender respect towards the Indians. Their rhetoric and commitment to soft power, however, have been overshadowed in the historical record by several limited military clashes between national forces and an Indian confederacy along the northwest frontier. The outcome of these confrontations largely directed the course of US-Indian relations for years to come. Campaigns led by senior military officer Josiah Harmar during the summers of 1789 and 1790 were intended to force the western Indians to recognize American territorial claims north of the Ohio River. After these missions failed to draw the western Indians into decisive battle, hope for a quick triumph—and with it, the opening of Ohio country to settlers—was placed in Arthur St. Clair’s hands in the summer of 1791. The recently appointed governor of the Northwest Territory, St. Clair was entrusted with the task of pushing hostile Indians behind the Ohio River in a show of strength

intended to decimate the western tribes’ will to resist the advance of American settlements. As per his instructions from Knox, resounding victory was sought “in order to avoid future wars.”\textsuperscript{2} This military campaign was expected to be definitive, compelling the Indians to cease all further confrontation with the mighty United States. However, hopes for an easy conquest were smashed as the American force was overpowered by an unanticipated Indian attack on November 4. The army fled in confusion, leaving over 600 dead soldiers on the battlefield.\textsuperscript{3} It was not until General Anthony Wayne’s army defeated the belligerent western tribes and a company of British traders at the August 20, 1794 Battle of Fallen Timbers that the Indians abandoned their large villages and vast cornfields in the Ohio Valley.\textsuperscript{4} By the end of 1795 the confederacy north of the Ohio River had been resoundingly defeated.

The nearly three years between St. Clair’s routing by the western Indians of Ohio country and Wayne’s definitive victory were peppered by a series of diplomatic gestures aimed at the western confederacy and the less aggressive Iroquois tribes that resided in western New York and Pennsylvania. Historians have long argued that this brief foray into soft power was merely an advanced method of procrastination, a tactic intended to preoccupy the Indian chiefs while Wayne could assemble and train a more adequate military force. In his seminal work on the expansion of the American frontier after the close of the Revolutionary War, Reginald Horsman presents a thesis that has subsequently become the standard assessment of diplomacy towards the Indians during the early 1790s. He takes as given that Washington and his cabinet had determined that military confrontation would be the primary policy against the confederacy of


\textsuperscript{3} For a full account of St. Clair’s 1791 defeat in the Ohio territory see James Ripley Jacobs, The Beginning of the U.S. Army, 1783-1812 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947), 66-123.

western tribes. He thereby writes off the national government’s peace missions as part of a temporary effort to convince the Indians “of the good intentions of the American government” in the hope that “this would maintain peace and protect the American frontier settlements” until a new army could be raised.\(^5\) By this logic, federal statecraft was little more than a stalling scheme, rather than a serious policy option with the ability to achieve desired strategic goals.\(^6\)

More contemporary historians, many of whom draw from Horsman’s assessment of relations with the western tribes, have presented a similar version of this argument. Alan Taylor’s wide-ranging examination of the northern borderlands after the Revolutionary War concludes that American diplomacy was dominated by Secretary of War Henry Knox, who at the president’s request “conspicuously offer[ed] peace while preparing for renewed war” throughout the early 1790s.\(^7\) Taylor concludes that the Washington cabinet made diplomatic envoys to the Indians clear and visible in order to detract attention from their primary motive—assembling a formidable army that would conclusively settle the question of western expansion.

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\(^6\) The argument that diplomacy towards the northwest American Indians was not a serious policy consideration in the years between St. Clair’s defeat at the hand of the western confederacy in November 1791 and Wayne’s victory against a similar force in August 1794 was popularized by Horsman, *Expansion and American Indian Policy*, 84-103. Subsequent historians giving serious consideration to these events have come to similar conclusions. Francis Paul Prucha has two works on the relationship between the federal government and American Indians, the former a major source for his seminal second work, Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years: The Indian Trade and Intercourse Acts, 1790-1834* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), 43-49; idem., *The Great Father: The United States Government and the American Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984). Dorothy V. Jones considers the entire period from 1789 to 1795 one of open war against the western Indians in which diplomacy was conducted to give the impression of righteousness. Jones, *License for Empire: Colonialism by Treaty in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 161-179. Most recently, Alan Taylor’s comprehensive examination of Indian relations during and after the revolution contends that the government’s ultimate and unbending goal was swift military victory, diplomacy a façade to distract from this foregone conclusion. Taylor, *The Divided Ground*, 237-242, 277-282.

\(^7\) Taylor, *The Divided Ground*, 267.
Portrait of Henry Knox by Charles Willson Peale, 1784.
Although Taylor does not assume that national leaders had *no* faith in diplomacy, he still concludes that it was merely a smokescreen intended to draw attention away from the primary objective—military conquest. Dorothy V. Jones similarly dismisses soft power as a measure taken to corroborate “American ideology [with] war,” comparing military clashes with the western confederacy to those with the Barbary pirates, and labeling both conflicts undeclared wars.\(^8\) Jones and Taylor represent two of the most prominent historians of national policy towards the Indians, both of whom rely on Horsman as an authoritative secondary source—even extending his thesis that early 1790s federal diplomacy towards the Indians north of the Ohio River was not taken seriously by the national government. These historians not only reject diplomacy as a valid policy option for national politicians within the Washington administration; they go a step further in arguing that soft power was used in the interim between major military campaigns in order to conceal the true federal aim of conquest.

This theory is not entirely unfounded. St. Clair’s 1791 defeat was a national disaster proving that a provisional army was insufficient against determined Indian warriors. Fully aware of the need for a standing army, Knox immediately called for regular infantry and cavalry, suggesting that “it is by an ample conviction of our superior force that the Indians can be brought to listen to the dictates of peace.”\(^9\) Congress promptly responded on March 5, 1792 with an act enabling the Secretary of War to more effectually protect the American frontier by training an organized and disciplined fighting force. The United States—at least temporarily willing to cede minor claims to some land north of the Ohio—was simultaneously providing Revolutionary War general Anthony Wayne with the funds to organize a massive army of over 5000 officers and non-commissioned privates. Historians boil this series of events down to a simple decision:

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\(^8\) Jones, *License for Empire*, 173.

\(^9\) Henry Knox, Statement Relative to the Frontier Northwest of the Ohio, December 26, 1791, in American State Papers: Indian Affairs, 197-199.
Washington’s cabinet tempered the desired end of a peaceful westward expansion with the means available. While diplomatic operations—ventures ostensibly intended to postpone serious warfare—were underway, Wayne prepared for an active campaign by assembling a battle-ready army and spending the winter before Fallen Timbers building the massive Fort Greenville in anticipation of military skirmish.10

Also, some people within the nation’s highest political circles doubted the sincerity of the unsuccessful diplomatic overtures towards the Indians. Writing about the collapse of dialogue with the western tribes in the summer of 1793, Jefferson declared that “our negotiations with the North-Western Indians have completely failed, so that war must settle our differences. We expected nothing else, and had gone into negotiations only to prove to all our citizens that peace was unattainable on terms which any one of them would admit.”11 The Secretary of State made clear his desire to quickly clear the path for tens of thousands of Americans who were settling trans-Appalachia, the majority of whom were from his home state of Virginia.12 Yet Jefferson’s views were not representative. As this paper will reveal, the idea that early Indian diplomacy was mere theatrical duplicity ignores a complex set of factors and an array of opinions indicating that statecraft was a serious consideration for many national politicians.

Jefferson’s statement to the contrary, many federal leaders under the new Constitution saw diplomacy towards the American Indian tribes as a foreign policy tool that carried major utility. With a new government still establishing itself, the 1790s were a period of political experimentation. Having just been granted central authority over Indian policy by the Constitution, the national government was still determining the best course of action towards an

assortment of sometimes belligerent resident foreigners living within claimed American territory whose allegiances were difficult to ascertain. Diplomacy towards the Indians represented one of several policy options for the new federal government. Statecraft was taken seriously because it provided strategic advantages that would be difficult or even impossible to achieve through military triumph.\textsuperscript{13}

Overall, Washington desired peaceful relations with the Six Nations—Senecas and smaller Iroquois tribes of New York and Pennsylvania—while moderating resistance to the advance of the American frontier by the western tribes of the Ohio Valley, a loose confederation of Miamis, Shawnees, Delawares, Wyandots, Ottawas, Ojibwas, Winnebagos, and Piankashaws. Although officially nonaligned, the Iroquois were openly sympathetic to the western Indians caught in a slow-burning territorial war with settlers along the northwest Ohio frontier.\textsuperscript{14} With the majority of federal government expenditures in the early 1790s allocated for dealing with the Indians, this balancing act came to occupy much of the Washington administration’s time and

\textsuperscript{13} This paper disputes the dominant opinion among historians that diplomacy was not a serious policy option towards the Indian tribes north of the Ohio River between major military confrontations with the western confederacy in November 1791 and August 1794. Primary sources fall into two major categories: journals and letters of individuals directly involved in diplomatic missions towards the Indians and similar documents from the architects of federal Indian policy. In the former category, this paper largely draws from The Timothy Pickering Papers [hereafter Pickering Papers], Frederick Allis, ed., 69 reels (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1966); and The Benjamin Lincoln Papers [hereafter Lincoln Papers], Frederick Allis, ed., 16 reels (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1967). The primary national politicians involved in formulating Indian policy were Washington and Knox. This paper draws upon The Henry Knox Papers [hereafter Knox Papers], Henry Knox Thatcher, ed., 55 reels (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1960); The Papers of George Washington-Presidential Series [hereafter Washington Papers-PS], Abbott, W.W., et al., eds. 15 vols. to date (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1987-); and American State Papers: Indian Affairs for their correspondences, speeches, and official documents. There are several secondary works published in the last fifty years that comprehensively encompass federal relations towards the Indians during this period and are used in this paper, including Prucha, American Indian Policy in the Formative Years, Taylor, The Divided Ground, Horsman, Expansion and American Indian Policy, and Jones, License for Empire. A host of secondary sources tangentially relate to the topic and many are used in this paper.

\textsuperscript{14} Horsman, Expansion and American Indian Policy, 16-66; Francis Paul Prucha, The Sword of the Republic: The United States Army on the Frontier, 1783-1846 (London: Macmillan, 1969).
resources. Amicable expansion of the American frontier depended on the ability to simultaneously end conflict with the western Indians and maintain the Six Nations’ neutrality.

Certainly, the question of Indian relations was a central one to the fate of the young nation. Aside from the obvious long-term implications of insecure borderlands, the expensive war in the Ohio country jeopardized the value of speculative land holdings throughout the frontier. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Hamilton, dreading the possibility of a consuming war that embroiled the presently nonviolent Iroquois, was quick to warn the president of the detrimental effect that a lengthy conflict would have on frontier lands—the most vital source of government revenue and, in turn, its primary means of funding Revolutionary War debt. In March 1791, he reasoned that the western lands’ “value depends upon the settlement of the frontiers, these settlements depend on Peace with the Indians.” The link between a strong government and lasting peace with the Indians could not have been clearer to federal leaders. The government needed to gain control over its unruly western land as a necessary step in achieving national greatness. Knox spoke frankly when he declared the American frontier to be “critically circumstanced.” To realize the potential for consolidated national authority made possible by the Constitution and maintain the price of western lands, the federal government needed to gain control over its borderlands. In order to accomplish this feat, it had to remove Indian opposition to the relentless westward advance of the frontier.

This paper examine a series of federal diplomatic missions to various Iroquois tribes, Six Nations councils, and the hostile western Indians that took place after St. Clair’s routing and before the determinant Battle of Fallen Timbers, which were intended to eliminate resistance to

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15 Prucha, The Great Father, 50-60.
18 Cayton, “Radicals in the ‘Western World,’” 80-82.
American expansion north of the Ohio River. During this period, the recent formation of a government with the sole authority to direct Indian policy meant that federal leaders were, for the first time, devising Indian policies with the power to be executed on a national scale. For this brief moment, diplomacy was the only major tactic used by national politicians to influence the Indians. After Fallen Timbers, statecraft was no longer a serious consideration. The victory effectively broke the Indian confederacy and resolved the federal problem of frontier settlement north of the Ohio. Expansion along this frontier no longer a pressing issue for the Washington administration, the western Indians were not a serious foreign policy concern after 1794.

This assessment of Indian policy during the three-year period between 1791 and 1794 begins with an examination of the national government’s diplomatic missions and a series of interconnected events that motivated these efforts. It then evaluates the principal objectives that underlay these actions—goals that made diplomacy a rational and vital policy option for federal politicians. Both a desire to strengthen the new national government and a wide-held belief in the inherent superiority of white Americans over their Indian neighbors fueled US strategy towards the Indians. In addition, European interests shaped Indian policy; national politicians had to tread lightly in the face of ambiguous British intentions, exaggerated Indian claims of British support, and the implications of France’s recent revolution. Simple pragmatism also played a role; expensive military action against the western Indians risked incurring even greater expense in grappling with the European powers. These factors all contributed to making diplomacy a viable and serious policy consideration for relating to the western Indians during the Washington administration.
Statecraft between St. Clair’s defeat and Wayne’s victory

During the Washington administration negotiating authority moved from state politicians and frontiersmen to the national government. Federal officials were hardly the first American diplomats sent to negotiate with antagonistic Indians. Before the Constitution placed the sole authority of Indian diplomacy in the hands of national politicians, Indian policy with the western tribes was confused and complicated. States often moved more rapidly than the central government in negotiating land away from the Iroquois and other tribes. During the 1780s, borderland states often became proficient at softening Indian resistance to the steady transfer of land into their possession. New York and Pennsylvania were particularly adept at dealing with western Indians tribes notorious for driving hard bargains. George Clinton, perhaps the most cunning governor in this regard, mastered the pomp of Iroquois ceremonies, the importance of the wampum-beaded belt, and became proficient in metaphorical speech common among Indian chiefs. Oneida chief Good Peter recalled Clinton’s ability to persuade past chiefs to “[trifle] away our land”; Clinton’s open attempts to trade literal fistfuls of money and goods for Iroquois land represent the audacity of a man at complete ease in the ways of the Oneidas.

State officials were not the only Americans who benefitted from diplomatic contact with the Indians. The land leaser, a category of settler that arose in the 1760s, negotiated frontier settlement deals with tribes concerned with maintaining aboriginal title. By the late 1780s, these middlemen involved in leasing Indian land to white settlers were the Americans in most regular

19 Horsman, Expansion and American Indian Policy, 17.
21 Good Peter narrative of past Indian land transactions, April 5, 1792, in Pickering Papers, 60.121-128.
contact with the Iroquois and western tribes. In addition, missionaries, active since before the
Revolution, often served as arbiters in disputes between Indians and frontier communities.
Between the early 1760s and mid-1790s, New York missionary Samuel Kirkland made it his
life’s goal to transform Indian tribes into temperate farmers in the American tradition. Fur
traders often became proficient in Indian languages and customs. Utica storekeeper Peter Smith
was particularly shrewd in cultivating the Oneidas’ sense of obligation by pampering their
debtors. There was no shortage of diplomatic cunning towards the Indians among early
American politicians, missionaries, and businessmen.

The Constitution shifted the ground, mandating Washington’s administration with
considerable power to regulate the states and control individuals. A marked transformation from
the weak and largely unenforceable Articles of Confederation, the Constitution made it possible
to consolidate national authority. Despite some resistance from the states, the president and the
members of his cabinet who supported strong national government—Knox, Hamilton, and Vice
President John Adams—were determined to set a precedent for federal leadership. This resolve
extended to the arena of Indian relations, an area in which diplomacy was a key tool in
constructing a coherent national policy. War was far from a predetermined outcome.

Knox, a voluble student of strategy, knew well the Clausewitzian maxim: “war is not a
mere act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political activity by other
means.” Military might was never the Secretary of War’s goal, nor was it always the primary
instrument by which he attempted to achieve the ultimate objective of peaceful frontier advance.
Advocating a system in 1789 that would induce the Indians into a state of dependence, Knox

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24 Ibid, 74-76.
25 Ibid, 228-231.
contended that “both policy and justice” would work to mollify the aggravated tribes. He skillfully adapted policy options to constantly varying circumstances that required tactical flexibility. For example, when promoting an expanded national military force in 1791, Knox lucidly cited the ability of a powerful army to reduce Indian attacks on frontiersmen by “occupying them for their own safety, and that of their families.” However, in April 1792, he emphasized the importance of tactful diplomacy, urging Governor of the Southwest Territory William Blount to speak to the Indians “with the confidence of men conscious of the fairest motives towards their happiness and interests in all respects.” Knox perpetually considered a wide array of policy options. War was merely one of many political instruments in a multifaceted approach towards the plethora of Indian tribes along the American frontier. Military engagement against hostile tribes was never conducted in a vacuum; Knox was constantly taking into consideration more sensitive methods of appeasing the Indians.

Knox and other national politicians, fully aware of that the new Constitution strengthened the executive, began to exert federal influence in the diplomatic sphere. Even before St. Clair’s humiliating 1791 defeat, which briefly eliminated the use of a national military force as a policy option, the federal government began to undertake a focused series of diplomatic actions that, considered collectively, amounted to a cohesive attempt to peacefully expand American territory by improving Indian relations. The Six Nations confederacy of Iroquois tribes—Mohawks, Oneidas, Tuscaroras, Onondagas, Cayugas, and Senecas equaling roughly 6,000 people by the early 1790s—was of vital political import to Washington’s administration. Extending from the

28 Henry Knox, Statement Relative to the Frontier Northwest of the Ohio, December 26, 1791, in ibid, 197-199.
30 Estimates based on Report of Samuel Kirkland, October 15, 1790, in Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.
Hudson Valley to Lake Erie and from the Adirondack Mountains into Pennsylvania, the scattered Six Nations were at a tenuous peace with the United States. This amity was perpetually jeopardized by settler incursions into tribal territory, deceitful land speculators, and the occasional Iroquois murder by vigilante frontiersmen.

Washington addressed this problem by selecting Revolutionary War veteran Timothy Pickering to lead a mission of goodwill to Tioga Point in November 1790 intended to placate and more importantly, reaffirm the neutrality of a small group of Senecas aroused over recent murders by white frontiersmen. The litigious politician did not seem to fit the role. Pickering’s early attempts to secure a position at the national level were hampered by Washington’s memory of him as a brash and defiant army captain during the Revolutionary War. In order for statecraft to become a viable component of federal Indian policy, however, the government needed skilled mediators who understood the stakes of their task—and Pickering proved to be that man. The assignment—communicating disapproval of murders at Pine Creek and assuring the Senecas that measures were being taken to “bring the offenders to justice”—was executed with sincerity. Knox was impressed, if somewhat surprised by this nearly flawless navigation of Indian etiquette. In December 1790, he relayed these sentiments to Washington, commending Pickering for conducting himself with “abilities and judgment, consistently with the Constitution and laws of the United States—and also with the candor and humanity which ought to characterize all the treatise of the General Government.” Reaffirmed during the meeting with Pickering, Seneca neutrality soon became even more important after military defeat at the hand of the western tribes.

After the devastating loss, federal leaders continued to use diplomacy to elicit promises of neutrality from potentially antagonistic tribes. The president and Knox, impressed by Pickering’s sincerity and pleased with the success of his mission to upstate New York, made the culturally adept and well-intentioned politician a more regular representative of the United States before Indian tribes. The twin military defeats in Ohio country during the summers of 1790 and 1791 made missions to the Iroquois and western Indians increasingly vital; they would not have been given so much weight, however, without a figure like Pickering whose diplomatic prowess, even if exaggerated, was highly trusted.

Diplomacy soon became the primary tactic in relating to the Six Nations and western tribes. Concerned about the tenuous state of affairs, Knox anxiously instructed Pickering to make preparations to meet chiefs and warriors from all of the Six Nations in the spring of 1791—particularly after Pickering’s successful mediation with a sizeable Seneca envoy at Tioga Point the previous fall. Although the Secretary of War was simultaneously making preparations to militarily engage the western Indians, diplomacy was considered to be an important device in maintaining the neutrality of the entire Six Nations. Knox confidently trusted Pickering’s ability to reaffirm that the Iroquois tribes would “abstain from joining the enemy.”

The ensuing council at Newtown Point represented the first instance in which the new national government was able to use diplomacy to coax a promise of collective neutrality from the Iroquois. Far more intricate than the Tioga Point meeting, it included roughly 1,000 Indians from nearly every Six Nations community. Although Pickering opened the assembly with

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34 Henry Knox to Timothy Pickering, May 2, 1791, in ibid, 60:2.
confident statements about American power and intentions, a series of cultural gaffes forced him to backpedal. Red Jacket, a chief of the Buffalo Creek Senecas, led the charge in exploiting the commissioner’s mistakes in Iroquois etiquette. After Pickering presented treaty papers reaffirming the friendship between the Six Nations and the United States, Red Jacket exploited the absence of a wampum ceremony and slyly threatened that “you are trying to put our old rules aside: but you know there is not one in our nations who knows writing. Therefore we are obliged to turn our faces to the British to know what the writings are when we receive them.”

Although he was forced to abandon the misguided request for military assistance in the Ohio war, Pickering affirmed Iroquois neutrality and federal protection of their lands. In doing so, he fulfilled the meeting’s primary goal despite earlier lapses in his ability to navigate the cultural nuance of such a large Indian gathering. Like earlier diplomatic envoys to the Iroquois, Pickering’s mission was conducted to ensure the uninterrupted neutrality of the potentially adversarial Six Nations, which would be essential as the United States pressed forward in the delicate process of negotiating with the antagonistic western tribes.

As Pickering toiled to reach agreement with the Iroquois, he was in close contact with Mohican chief Captain Hendrick Aupaumut who had been contracted by the United States to convey its new policy of conciliation to the Ohio country Indians in the hopes of winning their trust and persuading them to enter formal peace negotiations.

Fluent in English and a veteran of the Revolution, Aupaumut’s cultural fluidity and patriotic credentials made him a welcomed envoy to the belligerent tribes. In addition, American officials had an inflated conception of

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37 For a more detailed description of Hendrick Aupaumut and his role as a contracted go-between for the federal government see Alan Taylor, “Captain Hendrick Aupaumut: The Dilemmas of an Intercultural Broker,” Ethnohistory, 43.431-457 (Summer 1996).
Iroquois capacity to sway their western cousins.\textsuperscript{38} Aupaumut—unique among Iroquois chiefs both for his sobriety and agricultural lifestyle—spent the late summer months of 1791 as a guest of the Delawares and other western Indians. Although welcoming of the prominent Iroquois chief, the Ohio Indians were circumspect, wary of his assurances of American friendship and claim that “you have now nothing to fear.”\textsuperscript{39} As a valuable go-between, Aupaumut was dispatched again in the summer of 1792 as a diplomatic envoy to communicate messages of peace to the hostile tribes. He became the most prominent of a series of Indian envoys contracted by the American government to aid in diplomatic negotiations with more hostile tribes during the early 1790s.

After St. Clair’s crushing defeat in November 1791, diplomacy—already a central element of the American strategy—became the primary means of conducting policy towards the Indians. At Newtown Point, Pickering had suggested that a delegation of Iroquois chiefs would be received as honored guests in an impending visit to the national capital, Philadelphia. During the early 1790s, the Iroquois chiefs were perpetually wooed by the United States and Britain. Geographically significant to both nations, the Indians “regarded generosity as the measure of [American and British] sincerity.”\textsuperscript{40} Blatant attempts at persuasion with gifts and titles were supplemented by an equally rigorous effort to induce friendship from the Six Nations with visits from American emissaries. The Philadelphia trip was primarily an attempt to further solidify the amity of the Six Nations through a grand show of American might. Pickering understood that an indulging visit to the US capital represented a method of diplomatic persuasion that the British could not easily replicate:

\textsuperscript{38} J. David Lehman, “The End of the Iroquois Mystique: The Oneida Land Cession Treaties of the 1780s,” \textit{William and Mary Quarterly}, 3.47.4 (October 1990) 523-547.  
\textsuperscript{39} Hendrick Aupaumut account of envoy to western Indians, July-September, 1791, in Pickering Papers, 59:86.  
\textsuperscript{40} Taylor, \textit{The Divided Ground}, 274.
I think a visit of the principal chiefs to the President and Congress will have a very beneficial effect. I have no doubt that they have often heard United States vilified by the British, and represented as poor, mean and contemptible. The dignity of the President and the splendor of his house—the members of attendants, the magnificence of entertainments and the profusion of good things, which will be visible then and at the houses of the principal officers of States, cannot fail to strike them with surprise and to excite their reverence. 41

The unexpected victory of the Ohio country Indians added urgency to this visit. A hodgepodge of Six Nation chiefs and warriors trickled into Philadelphia in early March 1792. About 50 Iroquois were welcomed as honored dignitaries of immense strategic importance. 42 Pickering and Knox—convinced that Iroquois representatives could be used to influence the western confederacy—tactfully implored the chiefs to exert their influence in convincing the Indian confederates that war with the United States would be futile. 43 After over a month of spectacle and pampering, the chiefs departed from the capital with strengthened goodwill towards the American government and its settlers.

Not merely a show of pomp, the Philadelphia trip was intended to co-opt the Iroquois chiefs into federal diplomatic structures. Several of the chiefs who participated in the Philadelphia excursion were solicited by the United States to attend a council of the western Indian confederacy several months later carrying a proposal of peace from the United States. Their positive report back to Knox was corroborated by the dependable Aupaumut who eagerly wrote to Pickering in December that the western Indians “had never had such a pure good message from the White people.” 44 Heeding these overly optimistic messages, Knox set preparations into motion for a peace conference the following summer at Sandusky on Lake

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43 Clarfield, Timothy Pickering and the American Republic, 179-180.
Erie—an enormous diplomatic effort the size of which had never been attempted by the United States.

The federal government’s financial commitment to this undertaking and their choice of well-respected government officials to represent American interests demonstrated the weight that the Washington administration gave to the diplomatic mission. For peace commissioners, the administration appointed Pickering along with war hero and former Massachusetts Lieutenant Governor Benjamin Lincoln as well as Beverley Randolph, the recent Governor of Virginia. The commissioners were tasked with upholding the controversial January 1789 Treaty of Fort Harmar—an agreement that had established highly favorable borders for the United States in eastern and southern Ohio.  

In return the commissioners were authorized to pledge “the right of soil, to all the remaining Indian lands in that quarter, against the citizens or inhabitants of the United States.” The hostile western Indians were also to be offered fifty thousands dollars in goods and ten thousands dollars annually for their consent to the border established at Fort Harmar. A successful diplomatic mission would open the Old Northwest to thousands of fervent American settlers and establish a precedent for future land cessions. The commissioners set out from Philadelphia in late April 1793 and were soon met by several Six Nations chiefs and a retinue of Quaker and Moravian observers. In high spirits, Lincoln wrote excitedly about the several thousands western Indians who were expected to attend the proceedings and greenly anticipated “to meet the Indians under very favourable prospects of peace.”

After months of traversing the wild terrain of western New York and Pennsylvania, the commission sailed across Lake Erie to the mouth of the Detroit River in late July. There they

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47 Benjamin Lincoln to Ann Lincoln, July 9, 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10:35.
waited in anticipation of a summons from the confederate council encamped at Sandusky. Refusing to meet with the American agents, the council demanded that before entering negotiations the United States immediately remove its settlers from the west bank of the Ohio River “if you seriously design to make a firm and lasting peace.” Not authorized to surrender American claims to the boundaries reaffirmed at Fort Harmar, the commissioners had no choice but to return to Philadelphia dejected after months of fruitless travel. Soon after this definitive failure of diplomatic overtures to the western Indians, the Washington administration empowered Anthony Wayne to utilize his newly trained army in an expedition against the hostile tribes. The Battle of Fallen Timbers on August 20, 1794 doomed any Indian expectation of stemming the American advance deep into Ohio country.

Despite its ultimate failure, the Indian diplomacy of the early 1790s was a concerted and coordinated policy, a central component of the federal government’s expansion strategy. With Wayne’s army outfitted, trained, and itching for a fight with the Indians during the summer of 1793, the general received distressed calls from national leaders and high-ranking military officers urging him to exercise caution and refrain from engaging hostile warriors. Knox bluntly instructed Wayne to “solemnly forbid and restrain any attempts being made against any Indian towns or settlements.” Not only was the safety of the commissioners and their caravan at stake, but any military movement could potentially upset the delicate negotiations in which the American government had heavily invested. Even after the unsuccessful journey to negotiate with the western Indians at Sandusky, Knox hoped to avoid war.

Knox put this to paper in December of 1793, editing Washington’s message to Congress on Indian affairs. Knox decisively softened the president’s rhetoric by modifying his outward

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48 Timothy Pickering transcription of a speech by a deputation of Indian representatives to the Commissioners, July 27, 1793, in Pickering Papers, 60:162.
49 Henry Knox to the Commissioners to the Northwest Indians, June 6, 1793, in ibid, 59:162.
certainty in the inevitability of conflict. Washington had originally stated, “After the fairest experiments, peace being unattainable upon reasonable grounds, it appears to be incumbent upon the United States to use decisively such degrees of their force as shall be competent.” The amended message began, “If after the fairest experiments, peace is unattainable upon reasonable grounds.” Although the federal government was unable to produce the desired outcome through an intricate game of statecraft during the early 1790s, war was far from a predetermined outcome for national leaders.

**Federal Considerations**

As it set out to test its new capabilities under the Constitution, the newly strengthened executive branch faced major obstacles in assertive states and its own limited means. Diplomacy represented an area of federal supremacy through which the new government could simultaneously conduct policy and emphasize its supremacy over the states. Frontier defense against possible Indian attack—an area in which the states had traditionally played a major role—was at the forefront of this effort. Unlike the military realm where the divide between state and federal responsibility and privilege was yet to be settled, the national government’s control over statecraft and its power to make treaties was never in question. The diplomatic sphere emerged as an area of clear federal dominion that enabled Washington’s administration to simultaneously skirt the contentious issue of states’ rights while flexing its muscle as the “general sovereignty” of the country. Diplomacy towards the Indians was an important tool for federal leaders in realizing the potential power of the national government.

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51 Henry Knox on the Southern Indians, July 7, 1789, in American State Papers: Indian Affairs, 52-54.
relatively to the pacific overtures which have been made to the said Indians together with the result thereof, should be laid before you for your full information upon the subject.

It appears to be incumbent upon the United States to use decision in such degree of their force as shall be competent.

Henry Knox revisions on George Washington’s rough draft for a December 1793 message to Congress. Knox visibly softened the president’s tone, changing “After the fairest experiments, peace being unattainable upon reasonable grounds” to read “If after the fairest experiments, peace is unattainable upon reasonable grounds.” (Henry Knox edits on George Washington message to Congress, November 30, 1793, in Knox Papers, 34:160.) Emphasis mine.
Unlike diplomatic relations under the new Constitution, military realities on the frontier merged the efforts of the central and state governments. During the 1780s, state officials and their militias had played a prominent role in negotiating between mistrustful Indian chiefs and American settlers and speculators. Their perpetual advance carried with it the promise of massive financial benefit for the western states. Under the new Constitution, Knox empowered his generals to raise troops with the intent of replacing states as the primary armed force in confronting the hostile western Indians. However, the federal government was unable to guarantee the defense of its long and unruly border because these forces were inadequate and often ineffectual—particularly between 1789 and 1792. Given the reality of a limited and insufficient military, Knox had no choice but to cede a role in frontier defense to the states. When Governor George Matthews of Georgia approached him in March 1793 to purchase artillery from the federal government for setting up a magazine at Augusta in case of trouble with the Cherokee, Knox—reluctant to surrender border security—had no choice but to supply one thousands guns and a proportional amount of ammunition.  

State power over Indian interaction was evident even as Pickering and the federal envoy advanced towards Sandusky to conference with the warring tribes in 1793. Virginia Governor Henry Lee ensured Pickering that “no hostile incursions shall be made” by the state militia that may upset fragile negotiations. Pennsylvania Governor Thomas Mifflin made a similar proclamation, adding that such measures would “secure the personal safety of the commissioners.” In their assurances of tranquility, the governors highlighted their own command of organized and capable military forces. Pickering was not only assigned the difficult

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52 Henry Knox to George Matthews, March 9, 1794, in Henry Knox Papers II, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.
53 Henry Knox to the Commissioners to the Northwest Indians, June 6, 1793, in Pickering Papers, 59:165.
task of convincing Wayne to keep the recently erected national army restrained, but also had to extract similar assurances from the formidable state militias. The latter task was an indication of the important role that the western states continued to play in frontier defense.

Knox contributed to this confusing military situation by deferring to the states on some matters of national security. In a 1793 letter to the governors about improving defense, he concedes to the states the power to protect American citizens. “Although it is well known that under the present circumstances the President of the United States has no legal authority to direct any measures of defence,” wrote Knox, “he conceives it to be his duty to suggest to the executive of the respective states the consideration of the propriety of their placing such means as they may possess in a condition of utility.”54 Yielding the federal right to ensure necessary defensive fortifications, his request for the states to occupy critical marine positions was no more than a strong suggestion. The ambiguity that arose between state and federal military responsibility was not limited to fortifications. On March 3, 1791, Congress called for 2,000 levies to be raised from the states to supplement the St. Clair army if the general was unable to recruit sufficient men by July 10.55 Even war in the northwest borderlands—ostensibly a federal operation—was complicated by an inadequate national army that needed to enlist the assistance of the states, which happily seized this opportunity to uphold their military right. Knox wrote to Pennsylvania State Senator Richards Peters in March assuaging concerns over a potential discrepancy in the level of pay between state and federal levies. Knox assured Peters that necessary measures for frontier defense would take effect “as soon as any State Arrangement can possibly get into

54 Henry Knox draft letter to governors about improving defense, January 1793, in Knox Papers, 55:133.
operation.” An exasperated Knox soon called upon Congress to resolve the inevitable confusion that would result from a jumble of separate armed forces fighting side by side.\(^{57}\)

The need to enlist the aid of the states and St. Clair’s subsequent defeat made it clear that military armament and border defense would not be monopolized by the federal government. When Senator James Gunn informed the Secretary of War in July 1793 that 600 Creek warriors were preparing to enter Georgia territory, he did not count on assistance from Wayne’s army or the sporadic national infantry and sparse artillery stations along the southern frontier. Speaking frankly, Gunn told Knox that “militia men and militia generals are moving in every direction; your federal commander in this state has not capacity to command a platoon.”\(^{58}\) National military supremacy was a mere fantasy during the early 1790s and Washington’s cabinet had no choice but to ask for the help of the state militias by surrendering some defensive responsibilities.

Therefore, the national government looked to diplomacy as a strategy through which it could achieve similar outcomes as could be accomplished by military victory without the added nuisance of having to compete with the states. On the heels of the new national government’s assumption of operations and duties in March 1789, Knox set out to define the federal relationship with the Indians. In July, he famously outlined his stance:

The independent nations and tribes of Indians ought to be considered as foreign nations, not as the subjects of any particular State. Each individual State, indeed, will retain the right of pre-emption of all land within its limits, which will not be abridged, but the general sovereignty must possess the right of making treaties, on the execution or violation of which depend peace or war.\(^{59}\)

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57 Henry Knox to Major Sergeant, War Department, May 19, 1791, in ibid., 28:63.
58 James Gunn to Henry Knox, June 10, 1793, in ibid., 34:50.
This statement is a clever assertion of the federal government’s superiority.\textsuperscript{60} Knox was intent on establishing a precedent when he labeled the Indian tribes “foreign nations,” an area of clear national sovereignty. He invoked the specific topic of federal supremacy because national politicians planned to conduct diplomatic relations with the Indians. Unlike the military arena, an area in which the national government clearly yielded major responsibilities to the states, diplomacy was a sphere purely relegated to the federal level. This status made diplomacy an attractive policy option for Washington’s cabinet, which was concerned with asserting the hegemony of the national government.

This policy of negotiation, expertly managed by Knox, was employed from the beginning of Washington’s tenure. The federal government commissioned presumably allied Iroquois chiefs—the deceptive Mohican Joseph Brant most notable among them—on missions of reconciliation to the western Indians. Frustrated with the continual failure of these journeys to hostile tribes, Iroquois chief Good Peter grumbled “we have sent to the Western Nations so many belts of peace as would make a very large heap. Now what more shall we do in the matter?”\textsuperscript{61} Good Peter did not fully understand the true nature of these delegations. They were not solely designed to open lines of communication with the western confederacy, but were also intended to strengthen relations between the Iroquois chiefs and the distant national government through diplomatic channels. In his first speech to the 1791 Iroquois council, Pickering candidly told the gathered warrior and chiefs that the “general government” was the only American body with the power to “treat with the Indian nations.”\textsuperscript{62} Several weeks later, he reiterated this point, assuring the tribes that “the President means to be your father” and would “appoint no agent under him

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\textsuperscript{60} See for example Robert F. Berkhofer, who concludes that its meaning is based in the debate surrounding state versus federal government. Berkhofer, \textit{The White Man’s Indian} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), 143.

\textsuperscript{61} Timothy Pickering transcription of Good Peter Speech, July 14, 1791, in \textit{Pickering Papers}, 60:104.

\textsuperscript{62} Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, July 1, 1791, in \textit{ibid}, 60:79.
but one both capable and honest, to assist you in management of your affairs.”  

Pickering was taking the reigns of a diplomatic power play already two years old. Unlike military operations, soft power presented federal leaders with a unique opportunity to assert national dominance in Indian affairs.

Many in the Washington administration believed that these efforts would positively reverberate in two areas that the federal government gravely needed to assert its authority—its long, undefended frontier and the assertive settlers. Boundary lines that had been established in the Indian treaties of the 1780s were insufficient to restrain white aggression and deemed unreasonable by many tribes.  

When Pickering addressed the Iroquois council in the summer of 1791, he displayed characteristic frankness when elucidating the government’s primary goals: “to defend our frontier, and save the settlers from destruction.”

A focal point of the state-federal question, border security was carried out by an assortment of state militias, national troops, and vigilante frontiersmen. Treaty with the hostile Indians would generate sweeping diplomatic resolution to the border problem on a scale that only the federal government could provide. Cessions by treaty would strengthen the claim of federal primacy in Indian affairs by forcing the grantees, the Indians, and the states to interface with Philadelphia on all questions relating to frontier lands.  

In an October 1791 speech on Indian affairs, Washington was not only referring to St. Clair’s army when he said that “I have directed such measures for establishing the tranquility of the western frontier, appeared adequate and proper for that purpose.”  

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63 Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, July 15, 1791, in ibid, 60:108.
64 Prucha, American Indian Policy in the Formative Years, 45.
66 Jones, License for Empire, 171.
diplomatic solution to the border crisis, resolution of which would serve to consolidate federal
hegemony over the American frontier.

Concern about secure borderlands was inseparable from the thorny issue of the forcefully
independent and often unruly settlers. This expanding population of largely impoverished
Americans—their financial insecurity driving them westward into vast stretches of untamed
land—dreamt of wealth yet to be discovered in the uncultivated soil. During the long journey to
liaise with the western Indians at Sandusky in 1793, Benjamin Lincoln, rather than fretting over
the forthcoming negotiations, filled his personal journal with passages of astonishment over the
land before him and plans for its development. The quintessential optimistic settler, he eagerly
hypothesized that the land “is capable of giving support to an hundred times as many inhabitants
as now occupy it…I cannot persuade myself that it will remain long in so uncultivated a state.”

The influx of settlers into what had been exclusively Indian lands brought the two parties into
perpetual confrontation. Fueled by American incursion into previously exclusive hunting
grounds and tales of Indian warriors destroying entire frontier communities, these conflicts
became increasingly frequent. Frontier leaders like Reverend David McClure, although
maintaining an independent streak, called upon the federal government to defend its citizens
residing in the western borderlands. Without immediate military assistance from the government,
settlers would kill neighboring Indians in acts of retribution or, more often, out of a vague
preemptive fear. McClure worriedly wrote to Knox in October 1792 and, exemplifying this
widespread anxiety, cautioned that “the frontier people may be slaughtered with impunity and

68 Benjamin Lincoln journal, July 14, 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10.42.
69 Taylor, The Divided Ground, 136.
that the injury done or offered to an Indian by one frontier man may be avenged upon women, or
children living one, two, three or five hundred miles distant.”  

The Washington administration was forced to walk a fine line between dissociating itself from acts of frontier justice while endeavoring to build national loyalty among thousands of settlers. After meeting with the mistreated Seneca community at Tioga Point, Pickering was thoroughly convinced that American land speculators and settlers were primarily responsible for frontier disturbances.  

He assured the Iroquois chiefs that rogue settlers “scattered along the frontier” who wished to destroy the Indian tribes did not represent the sentiments of the government. High-minded federal leaders did not want themselves or their celebrated new government to be affiliated with these lawless scoundrels. As late as 1805, the eloquent Massachusetts statesman Fisher Ames argued of the western settlements that “it is infinitely more probable that they will sink into barbarism than rise to the dignity of national sentiments and character.”  

These potentially “barbarous” frontiersmen, however, were at the center of domestic political discourse. During the early 1790s a significant number of white men living in western lands began to consider themselves American citizens and members of communities. Attaining their allegiance necessitated the difficult task of elevating national over local authority and abstract impersonal principles over local ties. In order to demonstrate its value to the settlers, the government in Philadelphia had to make good on its duty to protect them.

Given the erratic military performance of federal troops and the prominence of state militias in assuming defensive responsibilities, successful diplomacy with the western Indians

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70 David McClure to Henry Knox, October 1, 1792, in Knox Papers, 32:112.
71 Clarfield, Timothy Pickering and the American Republic, 119.
72 Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, July 1, 1791, in Pickering Papers, 60:80.
74 Cayton, “Radicals in the ‘Western World,’” 78.
had the ability to establish secure borderlands and sweeping support from the settlers. An unambiguous resolution to the myriad border disputes through statecraft would spare the expense and public debate surrounding a national army while securing the loyalty of frontier communities. For this reason, diplomacy was taken very seriously by national politicians. Referring to the settlers, Knox reported to Congress in 1787 that the national “government must keep them both in awe by a strong hand, and compel them to be moderate and just.”

Diplomacy, an art over which the Washington administration had a near monopoly, was uniquely appealing to federal leaders because its successful execution would simultaneously solidify settler allegiance and secure its borders—two significant aspects of the federal-state debate.

**Ideological Considerations**

Diplomacy was not only a serious policy option because of its utility for national politicians attempting to subjugate the states to the national government, it was also an outgrowth of deep ideological underpinnings. Statecraft was considered a humane method of pacifying the wild Indians in order to convert them into American farmers. Moralistic national politicians seriously believed that the western tribes could be brought to see the righteousness of the United States’ cause through diplomatic persuasion.

The natural superiority of the enlightened white male was so ingrained in eighteenth century Anglo-American culture that it was hardly noteworthy and rarely discussed on principle. Rather, it was inherently buried within every discussion related to the Indians. In his May 1791 instructions to Pickering on the peace council with the Six Nations, Knox implored the commissioner to treat the Iroquois with justice and humanity. pickup

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76 Henry Knox to Timothy Pickering, May 2, 1791, in *Pickering Papers*, 60:2.
relationship clear to the Six Nations chiefs and warriors at the 1791 council, rhetorically asking them: “Can a father expect more kindness for his children than is there expected by the United States towards you?” Intended to demonstrate America’s vested interest in the well-being of the Iroquois, Pickering’s paternal metaphor got to the heart of national politicians’ Indian philosophy: at best they were dutiful children who needed direction and supervision and at worst, dangerous and wild Calibans who had to learn obedience.

The innate racism of early American diplomacy was, for many influential politicians, based in religion. Benjamin Lincoln expressed a widely held view when he described the American agricultural lifestyle as an extension of divine directive literally spoken from the Judeo-Christian God to the biblical patriarchs. He could not fathom that the Indians were intended to “be suffered to live by hunting lands capable of improvement, and which would support more people under a state of cultivation.” Like many religious Protestants, Lincoln viewed human existence as a teleological evolution; the hunter-gatherer life of the American Indian was simply a primitive form of humanity, which would either advance to agriculture or “dwindle and moulder away.” This conclusion was validated by a divine command to “be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it.” God’s final injunction, to “subdue” the earth, served as the textual foundation for Lincoln’s belief in the “important and natural object” of agricultural enterprise and, by extension, the righteousness of the American state. Herein lay the religious basis of the widespread conviction that America was, by nature, far superior to its Indian neighbors.

77 Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, July 13, 1791, in ibid, 60:100.
78 Benjamin Lincoln journal, July 4, 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10:42.
80 Major secondary sources on religion in colonial and post-colonial America include Patricia Bonomi, Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986); Derek Davis, Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent (Oxford: Oxford
Americans did not consider themselves unique in this regard. Their European cousins held a place of equal status above the Indian natives. Of utmost concern, therefore, was the geographic proximity of British forts to Indian villages, which put their traders, agents, and other operatives in close contact with the Iroquois and western tribes. With Great Lake-Mississippi portages as its ultimate goal, Britain sought to establish an Indian buffer state between the United States and Canada or to gain access to the strategically invaluable river by conquest. American officials were suspicious, if not fully cognizant of these designs and became increasingly uneasy about British-Indian relations. Inherent to this nervousness was the conviction that Indians, as a naturally inferior race, could undoubtedly be manipulated by the white men with whom they were in the most frequent contact. As Pickering prepared for his mission into Ohio country, McClure complained to the diplomat that the western Indians “have been corrupted by their intercourse with vicious neighbors, and are probably the willing instruments of the most execrable white men existing on the face of the earth.” The easily “corrupted” Indians were mere “instruments” of naturally superior white men—in this instance McClure refers to Lieutenant Governor of Upper Canada John Graves Simcoe and his cohort.

This is not to say, as some historians have concluded, that American statesmen did not understand Iroquois or western Indian aspirations. Rather, they were confident in the ability of whichever white men were in most regular contact with the Indians to hold sway over them. British officials had been fairly successful in gaining the trust and support of the western Indians and many of the northernmost Iroquois communities. Red Jacket stood apart from many of the

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References:

82 Benjamin Lincoln, “Why Treaty was unsuccessful according to Lincoln,” 1793, in *Lincoln Papers*, 10:151-159.
83 David McClure to Timothy Pickering, October 1, 1792, in *Pickering Papers*, 32:112.
84 Prucha, *American Indian Policy in the Formative Years*, 43.
Benjamin Lincoln’s August 13, 1793 rendering of the signature page from the western Indians’ final communication to the American commissioners at Sandusky. This is exemplary of the meticulous records that Lincoln and Timothy Pickering kept of each day’s events, conversations, and documents. It also demonstrates the stark contrast between the federal officials and their Indian counterparts who signed the tribes’ animal symbols in place of signatures. (Benjamin Lincoln journal, August 7, 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10.55)
chiefs who attended the summer 1791 meeting of Six Nations chiefs in his forceful aggravation of the American commissioner. Responding to questions about Iroquois loyalty, the Seneca chief replied that “we live nearest to [the British] and that is the reason that we learned most that way.” It was clear to the US government that British wilderness outposts gave them an advantage over the cumbersome American missions from Philadelphia. British meddling was blamed as the primary culprit for the lackluster results in attempting to coerce many of the Iroquois villages and western tribes.

Despite major disputes over the allegiance of frontier Indian tribes, a tenuous goodwill existed between British and American officials. A shared belief in the natural superiority of white men made mutual respect possible when diplomatic disagreement, and even open hostility, was unavoidable. The inviolability of this racial bond was deeply ingrained in the Anglo-American psyche. Upon discovering white men in Indian war regalia after the Battle of Fallen Timbers, shocked American soldiers furiously hung four captured traders. This breach of etiquette was the exception to an unwritten rule: both governments generally understood that to fight alongside Indians was beneath white men. When the US commission to the western Indians entered Upper Canada, British Lieutenant Governor Simcoe did not hesitate to open his spacious facilities at Navy Hall to the Americans. As he worked tirelessly to exacerbate their attempts to achieve peace, Simcoe treated the commissioners with politeness and hospitality. The unspoken link between civilized white men meeting in potentially hostile Indian territory was a consequence of their self-proclaimed dominance over the Indians.

Therefore, Pickering expressed his disappointment and exasperation when writing to Knox about vicious lies that British agents spread about the commissioner’s intentions towards

86 Taylor, The Divided Ground, 287.
87 Benjamin Lincoln journal, May 25, 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10:66.
the Iroquois. He asserted that such schemes were “beneath the dignity of the British Government,” a government for whom he had an inherent respect as fellow white men and assumed as much of their representatives towards American officials.\textsuperscript{88} During his mission to the Six Nations, Pickering was blunt in his condemnation of the British. He warned the chiefs to be wary of white men who “endeavor to persuade you to engage in the war, and by misrepresentations and lies prevail on some.”\textsuperscript{89} Although not always officially endorsed by Simcoe, British agents spread malicious reports about American intentions. These ranged from the tame—rumors of general insincerity on the part of United States peace convoys—to outlandish tales of poisoned alcohol and smallpox-infected gifts.\textsuperscript{90} It was unsurprising that after the failed negotiation with the western Indians at Sandusky, Randolph disparagingly postulated about “hostile interposition” by British representatives, “although there was no facts which could with certainty charge the government itself.”\textsuperscript{91} Lincoln was not so diplomatic, asserting that the biggest obstacle to peace had been “British polities and influence.”\textsuperscript{92} These statements—representative of the general feeling among many national politicians—contain twin assumptions: British officials, as the western Indians’ dominant white acquaintances, were able to deeply influence their judgment; and the United States was guiltless for this failure of diplomacy because it was unable to garner the strongest sway over the Indians among the white nations. The philosophy of Indian inferiority that dominated American politics not only denigrated their means of livelihood, but assumed that their reasoning was at the whim of whichever group of white men maintained the most regular contact with a given tribe.

\textsuperscript{88} Timothy Pickering to Henry Knox, August 10, 1791, in Pickering Papers, 60:118.
\textsuperscript{89} Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, April 17, 1791, in ibid, 60:56.
\textsuperscript{90} Timothy Pickering to Henry Knox, August 10, 1791, in ibid, 60:117.
\textsuperscript{91} Beverley Randolph to Timothy Pickering, October 4, 1793, in ibid , 59:227.
\textsuperscript{92} Benjamin Lincoln, “Why Treaty was unsuccessful according to Lincoln,” 1793, in Lincoln Papers, 10:151-159.
This belief provided the ideological basis for a movement to civilize the Indians, one of the mainstays of American diplomacy towards the Iroquois and western tribes during the early 1790s. Knox was particularly drawn to the concept of educating the Iroquois and then, if successful, extending the consecrated project westward. He hoped that instead of exterminating fellow human beings through military triumph, America would impart “our knowledge of cultivation and the arts to the aboriginals of the country, by which the source of future life and happiness had been preserved and extended.”  

Well-meaning Americans like Knox candidly hoped to provide Indians with the same skill set that enabled white men to subdue the earth. Newly educated and refined Iroquois would be less susceptible to British trickery and would soon come to see the righteousness of the American cause. Diplomacy with the intention of civilizing the Indians could skirt future conflict in what had already been a costly and cumbersome war, opening the mid-Atlantic region to untold settlement. Therefore, diplomatic missions with the aim of civilizing the Indians gained traction with Knox and Jefferson in particular.

Pickering joined this movement after it had already grown in prominence. He sensed that acculturation not only offered the Indians an alternative to extinction but also provided the federal government with a peaceful solution to the western war. Once civilized, he reasoned, the Iroquois would no longer require vast tracts of hunting grounds and would become increasingly willing to part with their idle lands. Within the cabinet he found a sympathetic ear in Knox, who urged Washington to support plans for civilizing the Six Nations. Pickering and Knox, among

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93 Henry Knox on the Southern Indians, July 7, 1789, in American State Papers: Indian Affairs, 52-54.
95 Clarfield, Timothy Pickering and the American Republic, 121-122.
others, were able to convince the president that civilizing the Indians would pay major dividends and could prevent future conflict. In January 1791, Pickering rationalized the plan to Washington, telling him that the Indians “will find their extensive hunting grounds unnecessary; and will then readily listen to a proposition to sell a part of them, for the purpose of procuring, for every family, domestic animals & instruments of husbandry.”

By the summer of 1791, preparations were in progress to establish a schooling system in the major Iroquois villages, which Pickering believed would “soon fix inviolably the attachment of the Six Nations to the United States.” Many of the Iroquois chiefs—hoping to gain proficiency in the language and livelihood of a people with whom they would undoubtedly come into increasing contact—were enthusiastic about the plan. Several Oneida villages quickly endorsed Pickering’s proposal with the encouragement of Good Peter who attributed past Indian failures to “our want of knowledge of the ways of white people.”

Although the civilizing scheme was pilot tested among smaller Iroquois villages allied with the United States, it was carried out with the intent of expansion through diplomatic gestures to more volatile tribes that were more greatly influenced by the British. In his journey to the council of the western Indians on behalf of the federal government, Aupaumut explained to the gathered chiefs why the Americans were successful, well-clothed, and multiplied rapidly. He urged the Ohio country Indians to become farmers, blacksmiths, and carpenters, stressing that continual survival would depend upon their willingness to “quit some of your ancient customs, and adopt some of the ways of the white people.” Guided by an enduring faith in their own superiority and the belief that their schemes would elicit support from otherwise hostile tribes,

97 Timothy Pickering to Henry Knox, August 10, 1791, in Pickering Papers, 60:117.
98 Timothy Pickering transcription of Good Peter narrative of Indian land transactions, April 5, 1792, in ibid, 60:135.
99 Hendrick Aupaumut speech to western Indians, August 20, 1791, in Pickering Papers, 59:84.
American officials launched a campaign to civilize the Indians through a series of diplomatic channels. This effort continued even after the western Indians’ devastating defeat at Fallen Timbers. Its importance, therefore, should not be relegated to that of a side project that was only given credence in the wake of several depleting military losses.

In addition to decreasing British influence among certain tribes and shrinking their land usage, civilizing the Indians had the potential to bode well for a nation obsessed with its legacy and sensitized by the principles of liberty and justice upon which it was founded. Knox in particular believed that the powerful and proud United States could achieve an orderly advance westward through humane Indian policy. He reported to Washington in June 1789 that even with the requisite military capabilities:

> It is presumable that a nation solicitous of establishing its character on the broad basis of justice, would not only hesitate at, but reject every proposition to benefit itself, by the injury of any neighboring community, however contemptible and weak it might be, either with respect to its manners or power.

Agitated over the thought of how American actions would appear to posterity, Knox placed faith in cautious expansion while simultaneously convincing the Indians of its merit. As the commissioners began to plan for the envoy to the western Indians, Knox corresponded with Wayne, whose army sat battle-ready at Fort Washington. He urged caution, suggesting to the aggressive general’s displeasure that war would be the tool of last resort rather than the preferred policy option. “If our modes of population and War destroy the tribes,” Knox explained to Wayne, “the disinterested part of mankind and posterity will be apt to class the effect of our Conduct and that of the Spaniards in Mexico and Peru together.”

The leaders of the new republic, with visions of inheriting the ancient republican tradition, wanted to clearly set

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100 Jones, License for Empire, 180.
themselves apart from the brutal empires of Europe from which their ancestors emigrated. Diplomacy with the intent to civilize provided this opportunity and was therefore seriously considered by the Washington administration.

Even after their failure to agree on a new boundary with the Ohio country Indians, the commissioners fought to preserve American dignity. Before returning to Philadelphia, they wrote a letter of regret to the assembled chiefs in mid-August 1793 that emphasized “the upright and liberal views of the United States” and trusted that “impartial judges will not attribute the continuance of the war to them.”

Pickering fully understood that the “further effusion of blood” would not cast America in a positive light to the international community or its own citizens.

Statecraft, considered to be a viable option for placating the western tribes, was largely infused with the desire to introduce civilization among the Indians through agriculture and education. This satisfied the ideological underpinnings of white superiority, carried the potential to make a war of expansion unnecessary by decreasing both British influence and Indian lands, and would save the American reputation from the tarnish accompanied by military conquest of native people. Washington expressed hope for this policy option during his third annual message to Congress. He understood the dual advantage of a civilizing scheme, asserting that a philanthropic diplomacy towards the Indians “would be as honorable to the national character as conformable to the dictates of sound policy.”

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103 Commissioners to the Northwest Indians to the confederate council at Sandusky, August 16, 1793, in Pickering Papers, 59:208.
104 Timothy Pickering to Israel Chapin, May 14, 1792, in ibid, 59:22.
Portrait of Timothy Pickering by James Barton Longacre based on an oil painting by Gilbert Joseph, 1834.

Portrait of Benjamin Lincoln by Charles Willson Peale, 1784.
Pragmatic Considerations

In addition to its place within the federal-state debate and ideological foundations, diplomacy towards the Indians was a formidable option for the national government because of the Washington administration’s appreciation for pragmatic policy. Not only was war a considerable expense, but the vague intentions of the bitter British army that maintained outposts in territory ceded to the US, an Indian confederacy confident that they would receive support from Britain, and the unreliability of a French ally embroiled in internal conflict all forced the federal government to consider the secondary implications of any military engagement with the Indians. In contrast, diplomacy offered the possibility of resolving disputes with the western tribes without the potential of costly war that could include fighting against British regulars. For this reason, national politicians placed significant weight in the possibility that diplomacy would solve the frontier crisis with the western Indians.

In the spring of 1794 prospects for peace with the western Indian tribes were bleak. An ostentatious commission to the western Indians had failed and Wayne’s army eagerly waited for authorization from Knox in Philadelphia to engage an assortment of primarily Delaware, Shawnee, and Miami warriors. Rumors of Iroquois complacency and even open participation in the Indian confederacy—a widespread concern and rationale for diplomatic missions since the 1780s—were commonplace. Based upon the accurate assessment of their meddling in US-Indian relations, the exceptional fear of open British military participation in a plot to destabilize the republic reached an unprecedented level. Simcoe’s subversive conduct towards the Sandusky commission was interpreted as a sign of looming conflict. This concern had some merit as Simcoe envisioned a strengthened British army in North America that could thrust its power
deep into the continent, halting US expansion and smothering the new republic. This excitement was aggravated by the publication of an offhanded speech made by Quebec Governor Lord Dorchester, Guy Carleton to the Seven Nations of Canada, which claimed that war between the United States and Great Britain was imminent. For justification, he asserted that American violations had invalidated the Treaty of Paris. Pickering’s reaction, although overly apocalyptic, represented the sentiments of an eminent Federalist and the American perhaps best versed in the intricacies of British-Indian relations:

The spirit of the speech does so far as to annihilate the States and to reduce them again to British Provinces. For if the pretended breach, on our part, of the treaty of peace with Great Britain has destroyed the boundary line therein agreed on, it must also have vacated every other article of the treaty and we must be considered by her no longer as Independent States.

Echoing the innate, yet persistent anxiety of the new government, Pickering believed that a pattern of exacerbating British actions—stubborn refusal to comply with the supposed evacuation of its forts within American territory; reported interference with federal attempts to make peace with the western Indians and maintain Iroquois relations; and the recent House of Lords resolution to sequester all British debts in the United States as an indemnity against the wrongful seizure of its vessels—were part of a grander scheme. Dorchester’s speech seemingly verified Pickering’s worst fears. British agents, directed by the King, were planning to “command the whole Indian Force, from Canada to Florida…in breaking up our back settlements” as the initial act of a war to restore the states to their colonial origins.

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106 Taylor, The Divided Ground, 269.
108 Wright, Britain and the American Frontier, 90.
Although intensified by the appearance of Dorchester’s speech in print, wild accounts of a military alliance with the belligerent tribes aimed against the United States were frequent throughout the early 1790s. The Department of War often enlisted the aid of citizens knowledgeable in Indian customs and languages to report on British contact with the hostile western Indians. One such emissary recounted a June 1793 conversation between Simcoe and an Ohio Mohican village as told to him by a warrior who was present at the meeting. According to his source, the governor said that if the Mohican tribe was attacked, the British “were justifiable in assisting them” as allies of the Indians.\textsuperscript{111} On his trip to the council fire of the western tribes, Aupaumut found a general confidence in the willingness of British agents and traders to protect Indian interests and provide military assistance if necessary.\textsuperscript{112} Like their western counterparts, many Iroquois chiefs also harbored the belief that Britain would come to their aid. Brant, courted by the Washington administration throughout the decade, played a cunning game by informing British officials of his American contacts. Seeking the assurance of overt British support, he led a delegation of chiefs to Quebec during the summer of 1791 that failed in pressing Dorchester for troop to fight the Americans.\textsuperscript{113} The hostile tribes were exploited as convenient facilitators of British policy. Most local authorities, key members of the ministry, and members of the royal family agreed that Canadian security depended upon the retention of forts, free navigation of the Mississippi, and maintaining Indian friendship.\textsuperscript{114} By continually dangling the prospect of military assistance, Britain preserved an affable relationship with the Indians without committing to their defense.

\textsuperscript{111} Timothy Pickering transcription of John Heckewelder’s information for the Commissioners to the Northwest Indians, June 23, 1793, in Pickering Papers, 59:184.
\textsuperscript{112} Hendrick Aupaumut account of envoy to the western Indians, July-September 1791, in Pickering Papers, 59:8.
\textsuperscript{113} Isabel Thompson Kelsay, Joseph Brant, 1743-1807, Man of Two Worlds, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1984), 446-448.
\textsuperscript{114} Wright, Britain and the American Frontier, 72-74.
Meanwhile, the federal government was spooked by a stream of reports suggesting otherwise. Despite indirect assurances to the United States that most inhabitants of Quebec as well as Upper and Lower Canada “never would join savages against Christians,” many Indian warriors were convinced that military support was guaranteed. An American agent in Ohio spoke to several Delaware warriors who spoke confidently that “the time may soon arrive when the British will send their young men” to fight alongside the western tribes. Loyalists did not hide their discontent with the treaty line established at the war’s close and were openly pleased with the failure of the government’s summer 1793 commissioner to the western Indians. By implying a relationship between devious British action and Indian claims of open alliance, it was easy for the imaginative citizen to conclude that Britain was actually considering a military offensive against the American frontier.

This was exacerbated by the sudden collapse of the French monarchy and the proclamation of a republic in its place. Louis XVI had been a strategically vital friend to the new United States. With the major waterways outside of American control—Spain operated the Mississippi River and southern coast and Great Britain’s posts were advantageously positioned throughout the Great Lakes—France had provided a strong counterbalance, helping guard against the potential intimidation of economic and territorial interests in trans-Appalachia. Rumors of Britain entering the Indian conflict, already at a point of intensity, were further facilitated by the ultimate fall of the Bourbon dynasty in August 1792. Those Americans who viewed France as insurance against latent British antagonism believed that the primary guarantor of this tenuous peace was now gone. The western Indians were blunt with Aupaumut, musing to him that American success in the Revolutionary War was dependent upon French intervention.

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That intervention no longer a reliable defensive tool, they reasoned that “the next time they [are] at war with the Americans the English [will] whip them.”

Diplomacy was an important instrument that the government used to cope with a western Indian confederacy that openly tried to garner military support from its British benefactors. A skirmish with Britain, however minor, could devastate national morale and put the frontier into jeopardy. It also carried the risk of endangering American economic security. The European conflict was a fight that the Washington administration wisely looked to avoid as it tried to advance economic interests while maintaining its neutrality. In April 1791, William Knox wrote to his brother Henry about distressing affairs in Europe from his diplomatic post in Dublin. The bulk of his letter, however, contained detailed instructions on how to preserve transatlantic shipping lines without becoming bogged down in the war. Maintaining the continual growth of national trade was centrally important to federal leaders. The United States certainly wanted an immediate end to an Indian war that undercut the value of land and put the settler movement at risk. This clash, however, paled in comparison to the existential crisis that would result from military conflict with any of its European neighbors. In 1793, Henry Knox wrote a weary letter to governors in which he expressed serious concern with the hostile state of Europe:

Hitherto the miseries produced by the contending powers have happily not been extended to us. But how long this will continue the case, may depend upon circumstances which we may neither be able to foresee nor control.

Knox, like many veterans of the revolution now serving in the government, dreaded the possibility of another drawn out conflict with the British. Dorchester and Simcoe—the two most

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118 Henry Knox draft letter to governors about improving defense, January 1793, in ibid, 55:133.

Despite their frustration with this underhanded action and firm insistence on the surrender of British border posts, federal leaders understood that hasty or aggressive use of a national army along the western frontier could devastate already unstable Anglo-American relations. Although certainly fueled by exaggerated Indian claims of military partnership and the rash words of North American British officials over-asserting their power to make policy, the Washington cabinet could only endeavor to distinguish between true signals and sheer noise in a world of imperfect information. The result—trepidatious diplomatic gesturing towards the British-influenced Iroquois and hostile western tribes—was partially the consequence of pragmatic calculation. The ambiguity of American international standing in the early 1790s and the possibility of renewed war against George III made soft power an attractive policy option. With uncertainty as to the direction and scope of a British response to decisive American military engagement of the western Indians, diplomacy was a prudent policy choice.

Preserving the neutrality of the disparate Iroquois—many of whom had vague intentions or worse, were openly receptive to western tribe recruitment efforts—was essential to this pragmatic statecraft. Wyandot and Delaware warriors sighted in Seneca villages on the New York-Pennsylvania border during the spring of 1791 raised immediate concerns about the Six Nations collaborating with the openly hostile Indians.\footnote{Henry Knox to George Wash, Mar 27, 1791 and Apr 10, 1791, in Washington Papers-PS, 8:10-11, 56-59.} Federal leaders took seriously the possibility that thousands of Indians with British support might be unleashed on the northwest frontier.\footnote{George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, Apr 4, 1791, in ibid, 8:34-35.} To placate the Iroquois, most of whom were receptive to American gifts and gestures,
Knox constructed a series of diplomatic missions that would treat them as a more cohesive entity than was actually the case. By using sympathetic chiefs to counteract the impetuosity of a few rogue advocates of alliance with the western Indians, the friendship of the entire Six Nations would be made certain.\(^{122}\) In relaying to Pickering the objective of diplomatic interaction with the Iroquois council, Knox considered the possibility that they would “not only abstain from joining the enemy, but that they manifest their friendship by sending their young warriors to join our army.”\(^{123}\) The enlistment of Six Nation warriors to Wayne’s army was a pipedream that Pickering never even mentioned seriously to the chiefs for fear of endangering the far more important task of securing their neutral friendship. It did, however, demonstrate the strategic weight that the Washington cabinet attached to the Iroquois.

Pickering hoped to convince the chiefs that to oppose the United States in their dispute with the western Indians would be “folly and madness.”\(^{124}\) His argument was matter-of-fact, stressing the sheer potential size of a fully manned American army, the addition of new states, and the upward population trends of the republic. Playing the realist, Pickering instructed the Six Nations chiefs and warriors assembled at the 1791 council that the government would like to have faith in the gracious oration of the Iroquois, but “to gain that confidence your words and actions must be open and sincere.”\(^{125}\) Federal leaders never believed that they would be able to sincerely trust Six Nation intentions, but gaining an assurance of their temporary placidity was vital to a \textit{realpolitik} strategy aimed at avoiding total war. The diplomatic streak of Indian policy during the early 1790s allowed the United States the flexibility of treading lightly towards the European powers and Indian factions. This policy approach enabled Pickering and other

\(^{122}\) Taylor, \textit{The Divided Ground}, 249-253.
\(^{124}\) Timothy Pickering speech to Six Nations, July 13, 1791, in \textit{ibid}, 60:100.
\(^{125}\) Ibid.
American diplomats to the Indians to guarantee Iroquois neutrality and to cautiously protect frontier interests in the face of suspect British goals.

As historians have noted, the practical aspect of the federal government’s decision to conduct diplomacy towards the Indians was also indicative of the enormous costs associated with training and then maintaining a national army, which had already miserably failed to break the western Indian confederacy in several battles. Their confidence in the American military depleted after these embarrassing defeats, politicians worried about the seemingly infinite expenses of conducting a war against the Indian confederacy. Like many members of the political elite, nationally connected Federalist Samuel Huntington placed faith in the “wisdom of Congress” to “devise some mode to prevent an expensive war.”\textsuperscript{126} These men looked to the federal government to regulate a peaceful westward expansion, obtain British posts by negotiation, and open trade with the currently belligerent Indian tribes. The monetary cost of war increased support for Knox’s diplomatic strategy. After the failure of the commission to the western Indians and the training of Wayne’s army, most shared Randolph’s conviction that peace, although desirable, could not be achieved until the Indians “feel the full force of the American Army and the United States.”\textsuperscript{127}

This should not, however, diminish the sincerity of the Washington administration’s belief that statecraft towards the western Indians and Six Nations carried major practical benefits making it a serious policy option for the federal government. Diplomacy carried the potential to simultaneously create a firm peace with Britain, neutralize the Iroquois, and open trade relations with the western Indians on American terms. Soft power, the Washington cabinet and many

\textsuperscript{126} Samuel Huntington to Roger Sherman, February 24, 1792, in Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.

\textsuperscript{127} Beverley Randolph to Timothy Pickering, March 15, 1794, in Pickering Papers, 59:263.
national politicians reasoned, could create this reality and “be a great saving of blood and
treasure.”¹²⁸

Conclusion

The dominant narrative of Indian affairs during the early 1790s is heavily influenced by
the well-known outcome of America’s westward advance—removal, displacement, and
obliteration of native tribes that stood in its path. It is easy to transpose the hostility and war that
eventually came to characterize Indian policy back to this early time when the national
government was new and still experimenting in its strategy towards the Indians. This conclusion,
however, is overly simplistic, dismissing key factors that made statecraft an important aspect of
the Washington administration’s evolving policy concerning the Indian tribes that resided within
territory claimed by the United States. The period following the ratification of the Constitution
must be examined in its own right and logic without assuming what follows. Doing so, it
becomes apparent that national politicians did not simply consider diplomatic communication
with Indians as a temporary measure intended to placate belligerent tribes when a national army
could not be quickly assembled to forcibly enact American interests. The federal government’s
relationship to the Indians was not foreordained.

The series of diplomatic gestures made towards the belligerent western confederacy and
Six Nations during the early 1790s represent a genuine and sustained effort to resolve territorial
disputes without military force. An administration with the goals of consolidating federal power,
promoting an ideology of white superiority and its own righteousness, and cognizant of the real
stakes of armed confrontation, found in diplomacy a strategy that simultaneously promoted its

¹²⁸ Samuel Huntington to Roger Sherman, January 10, 1792, in Miscellaneous Bound Manuscripts, Massachusetts
Historical Society, Boston, Massachusetts.
interests in each of these areas. Despite the eventual failure of soft power to make warfare against the Indian tribes unnecessary, statecraft was taken seriously as a central component of a budding American foreign policy.

Military action, far from a foregone conclusion, was one of many potential policy options as Knox and Washington laid the foundations for an intricate and adaptable strategic approach to relations with other countries. Indian diplomacy during the early 1790s was real foreign diplomacy, although not in any modern sense. Using the limited means at its disposal—a farrago of nationally connected federal and state officials, seemingly allied chiefs, and paid informants living on the frontier—the Washington administration pieced together what amounted to a diplomatic corps of intelligence officers, translators, cultural attachés, and skilled negotiators. Gritty, prone to error, and lacking the formal legitimacy of today’s State Department, this precursor to the permanent diplomatic mission was a genuine, if inexperienced and overly optimistic effort to achieve foreign policy objectives through sustained statecraft.

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Bibliographical Essay

My interest in the foundations of American diplomatic tradition began by reading Robert Kagan’s assessment of US foreign policy since before the Revolutionary War, Dangerous Nation. Driving the book is Kagan’s argument that the United States was always a player on the international stage, foreign and domestic politics perpetually intertwined. In the chapter “Liberalism and Expansion” he discusses how a strengthened national executive under the Constitution ratified in 1789 began to experiment with new powers and responsibilities. I was both fascinated by and wary of Kagan’s assertion that national politicians like George Washington, John Jay, and Henry Knox believed that continental dominance was predetermined and Indian conquest inevitable. I thought back to a New York Times op-ed from July 19, 2003 that I was assigned as AP US History reading. In it Professor Mary Beth Norton contends that then-Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld incorrectly draws a comparison between the chaos and confusion that characterized post-revolutionary Iraq and America in the fifteen years after achieving independence. I wanted to further explore widespread assumptions about early national foreign policy to better understand the roots of American statecraft and power.

In consultation with Professor Joanne Freeman I chose to narrow my focus to Indian relations—an area of American policy under the new government with a smaller, more manageable secondary literature than other foreign policy topics. In order to gain a basic understanding of the major events and individuals involved in US policy towards the Indians I read Divided Ground, Alan Taylor’s comprehensive and meticulously researched survey of the northern borderland following the revolution. I was especially interested in his depiction of strategy towards Indian tribes immediately following the ratification of the new Constitution. This was not only because a strengthened government had new powers in executing Indian policy, but it was also a period during which Indians and frontier settlers came into regular contact and the power of the national army was not assumed. Taylor convincingly argues that diplomatic gestures towards the western tribes were not taken seriously by national politicians.

After reading several other seminal works on Indian policy during the first years of the new government—Francis Paul Prucha’s American Indian Policy in the Formative Years, Reginald Horsman’s Expansion and American Indian Policy, and Dorothy V. Jones’s License for Empire—I found that most historians agree that diplomacy, although attempted throughout the early 1790s, was never a serious consideration for the federal government. Each of these works relied on the assumption that diplomatic acts were only conducted to distract the Indian chiefs from the military objectives of Indian strategy. They dismiss the attempts of Timothy Pickering, the primary American commissioner to the Indians during the Washington administration who was involved in most major envoys to northwest Indian tribes and councils during the early republic.

Interested in the brief period from 1791-1794 during which diplomacy was a major tool for dealing with the western tribes, I found Pickering’s complete papers on microfilm at Yale. Before examining Pickering’s compiled documents, I read Gerard H. Clarfield’s definitive biography of the statesman, Timothy Pickering and the American Republic. The war veteran believed deeply in the righteousness of the American cause and its duty to protect and educate the Indian tribes that resided within its claimed territory. I spent a month sifting through his
correspondences and journals, gaining a better sense of his relationship with Henry Knox, participation in policy formation, and role as a commissioner to various tribes. Particularly helpful were Pickering’s journals that thoroughly recorded day-to-day speeches, documents, and events during the often weeks-long treaties.

Before proceeding to other primary sources, I had to better understand the reasons that motivated westward expansion. Andrew Cayton’s “Radicals in the ‘Western World,’” David Lehman’s “The End of the Iroquois Mystique,” and Alan Taylor’s “A Kind of Warr” were central to my insight into the economic and ideological factors that drove Americans to settle the frontier. These sources also helped me to better appreciate the role of the national government in promoting this movement.

I soon realized that any essay on Indian policy during the Washington administration would require me to read the relevant papers of Henry Knox, War Secretary and perhaps the chief architect of the government’s strategy for relating to the tribes. The most complete collection of Knox documents is available on microfilm at the Massachusetts Historical Society, which also happens to have originals of the much smaller, yet period significant collection, Henry Knox Papers II. Armed with the goal of scrutinizing the relevant documents in each of these collections, I spent a week in Boston examining these primary sources. An inclusive index of both collections made locating Knox documents relating to Indian policy a relatively easy task. His papers contained an excellent record of correspondences with American generals stationed at the frontier, letters to and from Pickering, edits on presidential speeches, and communication to state governors. More than any other figure during the period, Knox was involved in Indian policy at all levels.

Also available at the historical society are the originals and microform copies of Benjamin Lincoln’s papers. The retired general served alongside Pickering as a commissioner to the western Indians in the significant 1793 mission to Sandusky. I found that Lincoln had a perspective on the rationale for diplomacy towards the Indians that was unique from many federal leaders. His interest in cultivating the frontier was well-documented in a more than 100-page journal from his time as an American representative to the belligerent tribes. In addition, I read through all relevant Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and George Washington papers as well so as not to miss any communications between national policymakers concerning Indian affairs. Particularly beneficial to my research were the digitalized American State Papers, which contain all legislative and executive documents between 1789 and 1838. These primary sources provided me with a rich and wide-ranging picture of national politicians’ motivations, concerns, and goals in dealing with the seemingly neutral Six Nations and openly hostile western Indian confederacy.

To better grasp some of the more specific assumptions that underlay early national politicians’ opinions and beliefs I read a number of secondary sources that, although not directly related to Indian affairs, address the culture of national political during this era. Bernard Sheehan’s Seeds of Extinction was essential to my understanding of how an ideology of US supremacy drove Indian policy. Sheehan’s description of the consensus of white Americans’ conception of the Indian during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries demonstrates how philanthropists thought that they could successfully civilize the Indians. In The Founding Fathers and the Place
of Religion in America, Frank Lambert further discusses the ideological underpinnings of Indian policy. He carefully explains the Protestant moral values that early Americans thought to be harmonious with fundamental laws expressed in the Constitution. These works provided me with a strong base of understanding for the beliefs that affected policymaking during the early years of the federal government.