

## = Washington Doctrine of Unstable Alliances =

The Washington Doctrine of Unstable Alliances , sometimes called the " caution against entangling alliances " , is a contemporary term used to describe an early realist United States foreign policy guiding its interaction with other nations . According to the policy , the United States should consider external alliances as temporary measures of convenience and freely abandon them when national interest dictates . It has been cited as a rare example of an explicit policy endorsement of what , in international relations , is known as *renversement des alliances* ( " reversal of alliances " ) : a state abandoning an ally for an alliance with a recent enemy , sometimes against the former ally .

The policy was promulgated by Thomas Jefferson in 1801 , in reference to a 1792 address by George Washington . Despite its enduring influence on U.S. foreign @-@ policy discussions , Washington said privately that the view on which his pronouncements were based would probably be irrelevant in 20 years due to a changing geopolitical situation .

## = = Background = =

## = = = Prelude = = =

By 1792 , the end of George Washington 's eighth year as president of the United States , the United States ' strategic position was dire . Interstate rivalries , violent insurrections ( such as the Whiskey Rebellion ) , and solidifying opposition to the national government in the form of the Anti @-@ Federalist Party combined with its dependence on trade with Europe to weaken the new nation . During this time , the country 's increasingly @-@ brittle government was held together almost entirely by Washington 's charismatic authority .

Receiving counsel from Alexander Hamilton , who cautioned the president that " we forget how little we can annoy " , Washington became convinced that the United States could not further antagonize Great Britain ; he feared the possibility of British @-@ imposed commercial isolation , which would precipitate an economic catastrophe that would " overturn the constitution and put into an overwhelming majority the anti @-@ national forces " . At the same time , radical government elements led by Thomas Jefferson had all but declared their support for U.S. aid to the beleaguered French First Republic ( then at war with the United Kingdom ) . The Anglophile Hamilton , Jefferson mused , was " panic @-@ struck if we refuse our breach to every kick which Great Britain may choose to give it " .

In his valedictory Farewell Address , in which Washington announced his decision to step down from the presidency ( due in part to his increasing weariness with public life ) , he included a short passage defending his policy of ignoring French requests for American assistance . In an attempt to keep his remarks apolitical , Washington defended his policy by framing it as generic guidance for the future and did not mention the French by name :

The great rule of conduct for us , in regard to foreign nations , is in extending our commercial relations , to have with them as little political connection as possible . Europe has a set of primary interests , which to us have none , or a very remote relation . Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns . Hence , therefore , it must be unwise in us to implicate ourselves , by artificial ties , in the ordinary vicissitudes of her politics , or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities ... it is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world ; so far , I mean , as we are now at liberty to do it ; for let me not be understood as capable of patronizing infidelity to existing engagements .

However , in private correspondence about his address Washington wrote that the geopolitical situation inspiring his advice would disappear in " not ... probably more than twenty years " .

## = = = Formalization = = =

The rise of Napoleon Bonaparte in France muted the "revolutionary romanticism" of Thomas Jefferson and his Democratic-Republican Party by the time he became president in 1800. Jefferson came to see the war between France and Britain as a battle between the "tyrant of the land" and the "tyrant of the ocean", perceiving each state's military objective as the moral equivalent of the other. (The president was denounced by the 14-year-old William Cullen Bryant, who called him "Napoleon's slave" and a "willing vassal to imperious France".) Jefferson's developing view of international politics led him to observe that the United States should retreat from intercession in European affairs (for which he had been a lukewarm advocate) and pursue a more modest, less committed course. He believed that American commercial power would allow it to pursue an independent course unfettered by conventional diplomacy, writing to a protégé:

The day is within my time as well as yours, when we may say by what laws other nations treat us on the sea. And we will say it. In the meantime, we wish to let every treaty we have drop off without renewal. We call in our diplomatic missions, barely keeping up those to the more important nations.

Outlined by Jefferson in his 1801 inaugural address, the Washington Doctrine of Unstable Alliances asserted that the U.S. should consider its external military alliances temporary arrangements of convenience and freely abandon (or reverse) them as indicated by the national interest. Citing Washington's Farewell Address as his inspiration, Jefferson described the doctrine as "peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations; entangling alliances with none."

The results of this policy during Jefferson's presidency have been generally criticized. According to historian Doron Ben-Atar, "Jefferson gambled [that] commerce could be used as an instrument for forcing the belligerent nations to do America justice and to respect the republic's honor". The Embargo Act of 1807, which virtually sealed the U.S. off from the outside world, has been cited as the most dramatic example of the failure of Jefferson's "inflated assessment" of American power—a failure the president never fully grasped, and which helped lead the nation into the War of 1812.

= = Significance = =

The Washington Doctrine of Unstable Alliances is a rare example of a policy endorsement of what is known in international relations as *renversement des alliances* ("reversal of alliances"): a state abandons an ally for an alliance with a recent enemy, possibly in opposition to the former ally. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact between the Soviet Union and Germany has been cited as an example.

Despite Washington's private view that his advice should only be followed short-term (until the geopolitical situation stabilized), the doctrine has endured as a central argument for American non-interventionism. It would be 165 years after the 1778 Treaty of Alliance with France before the U.S. would negotiate the nation's second permanent military alliance, during World War II. In the interim, the United States engaged in transient alliances of convenience (as with Sweden during the Barbary Wars and the European powers during the Boxer Rebellion). After the U.S. Congress enacted the 1941 Lend-Lease program, Senator Arthur Vandenburg said: "We have torn up 150 years of traditional foreign policy. We have tossed Washington's farewell address into the discard."

According to a critical 1898 New York Times editorial, "The policy ... suggested by Jefferson in his first inaugural address has been so faithfully maintained during the century which has since intervened that many of our people regard it as a policy as fixed as the stars in their courses". American economist Steven Rosefielde noted the doctrine's influence on current U.S. policy: "Our nation seeks coalitions and alliances with other nations for tactical purposes when at war, and reserves our overall strategy-making to ourselves."

= = Misattribution = =

The phrase "entangling alliances," which forms the basis of the Washington Doctrine of Unstable

Alliances , has been misattributed in the popular press to Washington rather than Jefferson . A 2011 post on the conservative website Breitbart was entitled " George Washington Said to Avoid Entangling Alliances " , and the Independent American Party website attributed Jefferson 's " honest friendship with all nations , entangling alliances with none " to Washington .