American Identity Crisis, 1789-1815: Foreign affairs and the formation of American National Identity

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Abstract
When the Constitution was drafted in 1789, Americans did not have a sense of national identity. The process toward achieving a national identity was long and fraught with conflict. Some of the most influential events on the United States were foreign affairs. American reactions to these events reveal the gradual coalescence of national identity. The French Revolution was incredibly divisive and Americans defined their political views in relation to it. The wars spawned by it caused Great Britain and France to seize American ships believed to be carrying contraband. The American public took an active role in making its opinions known on specific foreign policy decisions, revealing a growing trend toward democracy and away from the hierarchical world of the Federalists.

The election of 1800 ushered in a new era for the United States. Thomas Jefferson, the leading Republican, promoted continued democratization. Also under his administration can be found the seeds of American expansionism in the Louisiana Purchase. A strong sense of national honor reveals itself through the Barbary Wars and in the United States handling of British impressment and the aftermath of the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair. British insults to American honor would eventually lead to the War of 1812. While not an official war aim, many Americans desired the permanent conquest of Canada, revealing the continued growth of American expansionism. Although many New England Federalists bitterly opposed the war, battlefield victories instilled in Americans a new sense of pride and gave them new heroes to admire. The combined news of the victory at New Orleans and the Peace Treaty at Ghent allowed them to reinvent the War of 1812 as a second American Revolution. As far as they were concerned, their national honor had been insulted, they had sought satisfaction for it, and they had received it. That the United States finally had a sense of national identity—one defined by expansionism, a strong sense of national honor, and increasing democratization—is seen in James Monroe’s visit to New England in 1817.

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The American creed is the keystone of American national identity, but it requires a culture to sustain it. The republican task is to recognize the creed's primacy, the culture's indispensability, and the challenge, which political wisdom alone can answer, to shape a people that can live up to its principles.


Download Report. Charles Kesler. This aspect of American identity has influenced the foreign policy of the United States in its promotion of its values abroad – for example bringing about regime change toward democracy through military intervention. This is exemplified by the assertions by the G.W. Bush Administration that bringing American democracy to the Middle East was a desirable move not only in terms of promoting American values but that these values, due to their exceptional quality, would be panaceas to the region’s issues and loved by its people (Monten, 2005, p. 112). The ethno-racial and cultural aspects of American national identity influence US foreign policy. The formation of American exceptional identities: A three-tier model of the “standard of civilization” in US foreign policy. Napoleon wars and invasions (1789-1815) created a sense of national identity Eastern & Central Europeans started to break away from Austrian/German stranglehold Fascination with folk culture Legends, fairy tales, dances, folk songs Music inspired by history, legends, even... Napoleon wars and invasions (1789-1815) created a sense of national identity PowerPoint Presentation. Czech composer. Traveled abroad, eventually came to America (director of National Conservatory of Music). Spent summers in Spillville, IA. Interest in Negro Spirituals, Native American music. "I am convinced that the future music of this country must be founded on what are called Negro melodies."