Napoleon's decision to sell Louisiana to the United States in 1803 came as a stunning surprise to most American observers. Although the French had yet to take formal control of the colony from Spain according to the terms of the Treaty of San Ildefonso (1800), Napoleon's interest in extending his rule to the North American heartland was well known. Thus, when Spanish intendant Juan Ventura Morales suspended the American right of deposit at New Orleans in October 1802, angry Americans were convinced that he was acting on Napoleon's orders. The next French move, they believed, would be to close off the Mississippi completely and so gain effective control over the American frontiers. Efforts to vindicate American rights inexorably would draw the new nation into the vortex of European power politics. No one imagined that American negotiators would be able to persuade the French leader to part with New Orleans, much less with his vast new empire west of the river.

Before the Mississippi crisis was so suddenly, and unexpectedly, resolved, the future of the American union itself seemed in jeopardy. Bellicose Federalists urged a preemptive strike to prevent the French from occupying the region. President Jefferson hoped diplomatic maneuvers would defuse the crisis: given the apparently imminent collapse of the Peace of Amiens (1801) and the threat of Anglo-American rapprochement, the financially-strapped French leader might be willing to sell New Orleans or at least offer ironclad assurances of American navigation rights. But relying on the contingencies of European politics entailed high risks, for the failure to secure American rights on the river would be bound to alienate frontier settlers and foster disunionist schemes.

Partisan controversy during the Mississippi crisis of 1803 revived key aspects of the great debate over the future of the union that a quarter century earlier had led to the drafting and ratification of the federal Constitution. Then too Spain's denial of American rights to trade freely on the Mississippi—and John Jay's controversial proposal to renounce those rights in exchange for commercial concessions—had exacerbated intersectional tensions. On both occasions a hostile foreign presence on the western frontier raised the spectre of disunion and threatened the new nation's future population, prosperity, and power.

For the framers of the Constitution, "independence" and "union" were inextricably linked: the American states could not command the respect of old world powers, or avoid the entanglements of old world politics, until they forged a more perfect federal union. In 1803, the prospect of a powerful French colony on the Mississippi revived the founders' anxieties about the loyalty of western settlers, the durability of the union, and the future of republican government in America.

In 1803 the American negotiators Robert R. Livingston and James Monroe announced that with the acquisition of Louisiana "we separate ourselves in a great measure from the European world and its concerns, especially its wars and intrigues." "The bond of our Union will be strengthened," they promised, while "we make ... a great stride to real and substantial independence." At home, an enthusiastic chorus of publicists and orators echoed these themes. Instead of collapsing, the union would grow larger and stronger. "All obstructions are visibly removing," according to Vermonter Orasmus Merrill, as "immense fields" opened to American enterprise. The purchase thus offered "new excitments to union and independence." Under Jefferson's "mild, yet energetic administration," the United States would soon be "the wonder of the world, and more formidable to the irritations of tyranny, than were Chinese walls to Tartar hordes."4

Pervasive anxieties about the survival of the union help explain the extraordinary outburst of patriotic enthusiasm unleashed by the Louisiana Purchase. Celebrations of the vast "prospects of increasing wealth, importance and national strength" opened up by the purchase testified eloquently to the almost claustrophobic sense of encirclement and entanglement that had dominated contemporary discourse. With Louisiana, orators exclaimed, the Americans would surely be the happiest people on earth, while the failure to dislodge Napoleon from the Mississippi would have left them the
most wretched. By dramatically illuminating—and exaggerating—these alternative futures, the Louisiana crisis forced statesmen and publicists to define what was distinctive and therefore worth cherishing about the American experiment in republican government. What did the American Revolution signify in the history of the world?

Old World and New World

While the Louisiana crisis remained unresolved, Republicans acknowledged the union’s vulnerability but argued that the conquest of New Orleans would simply draw “us into the vortex of European politics and perpetual war.” They argued that a war of conquest would dissolve the crucial moral distinction between new world and old that played such a crucial role in American revolutionary ideology. A protracted state of war, David Ramsay later explained, would undermine “our republican forms of government, and [pave] the way for the concentration of power in the hands of an hereditary monarch.” DeWitt Clinton agreed: when “free countries” go to war, “the power which wields the force will rise above the power that expresses the will of the people.” The engorgement of federal executive power would also constitute a “severe shock” to the state governments. “Those stately pillars which support the magnificent dome of our National Government will totter under the increased weight of the superincumbent pressure.”

Federalists dismissed Republican scruples about the deleterious effects of warfare on republican government. Alexander Hamilton insisted that a swift strike against Louisiana was essential to the national interest. A powerful French presence on the Mississippi “threatens the early dismemberment of a large portion of our country: more immediately the safety of all the Southern States; and remotely the independence of the whole union.” A French colony would throw up an “insuperable mound to our future progress,” novelist Charles Brockden Brown warned, spreading “the seeds of faction and rebellion” and inflicting a “fatal wound to the future population, happiness and concord of this new world.” The new nation was particularly vulnerable in the West. Once they had established their control over the Mississippi, explained Senator William Wells of Delaware, the French would “reduce under their influence the fairest portion of our empire.” According to Pennsylvanian James Ross, whose belligerent resolutions provoked controversy in the Senate and throughout the country, the westerners must “make the best bargain they can with the conqueror.” The survival of the union presupposed mutually beneficial, interdependent interests. What then would keep frontier settlers in the union if it was so clearly in their interest to look elsewhere?

Republicans and Federalists agreed that the new nation’s safety would be jeopardized by the French occupation of Louisiana because the authority of the federal government was so weak on the southern and western frontiers. A volatile frontier was less likely to bother the French than to subvert the American union: “let the French be but once settled” along the Florida border, Wells warned the Senate, “and they will have the whole of your Southern States at their mercy. Unhappily,” he need not have reminded his slaveowning colleagues, “there is an invertebrate enemy in the very bosom of those States.” After the purchase had been completed, Congressman Samuel Purviance of North Carolina added the finishing touches to this ghastly scenario. Had the rapacious Napoleon gained control of New Orleans, “the tomahawk of the savage and the knife of the negro would confederate in the league, and there would be no interval of peace.”

The persistence of sectional tensions and party strife exacerbated fears about tenuous loyalties and permeable frontiers. By exploiting divisions among the Americans, the two great European powers would be able to enlist American proxies in their ceaseless struggle for global supremacy. As the French extended their influence in the western settlements, Federalist Senator Gouverneur Morris predicted, the eastern states would tilt towards Britain: “the powerful influence of one nation on one great division of our country, and of another nation on the remainder, will tend to disunite us.”

A strong union, spokesmen for both parties agreed, was the essential condition for American independence. Yet, as Morris suggested, party divisions over how to meet the European threat made the new nation vulnerable to European interference. “We are now the happiest people on earth,” Republican James Jackson of Georgia told the Senate, “and, if united, the force of Europe cannot injure us.” Disunion, it followed, was the greatest disaster that could befall the American people, a “Pandora’s box” that no man could
contemplate "without horror." According to Republican publicist Gideon Granger, disunion meant "jealousies, wars, and the last dregs of human wretchedness." Disunited, America would become the image of Europe, the bloody scene of "perpetual wars" and "dreadful tragedies." 20

The completion of the Louisiana Purchase extricated the Jeffersonians from their dilemma, and their sense of relief was palpable. Instead of a militarized frontier, Marylander Joseph Nicholson exulted, "the wilderness itself will now present an almost insurmountable barrier to any nation that may be inclined to disturb us in that quarter." 21 The purchase "secures us from the danger of ambitious neighbors and consequent wars," North Carolina congressman Joseph Winston told his constituents, and thus "rescues us in a great measure from European connexions and jealousies." 22 "All apprehensions on account of hostile neighbours, either civilized or savage," were miraculously dissipated. 23 The accession of Louisiana constituted "a perpetual guarantee" against further threats to national security in a "quarter, where we were weakest, and on many accounts most vulnerable." The American republics were now "insulated from the rest of the world." 24

Maintaining the distance between new world and old—keeping Europe out of America—was crucial to the Republicans because of their belief in the distinctive character of the American federal republic. In conventional terms the United States was a weak power, perhaps no "power" at all. "We do not strike terror into the nations of Europe," editor William Duane remarked with considerable satisfaction, nor "do we affect the equilibrium of the balance of power." 25 But the union among the American states was growing ever stronger—because of interdependent interests, republican constitutions, and the delegation of sovereign powers to the federal government—and would soon be immune to external threats. The timely French withdrawal from the Mississippi guaranteed that the new nation would not be drawn into a great European power struggle while the union remained imperfect and therefore vulnerable. Americans "ought to be particularly thankful," Orasmus Merrill told a Vermont audience, "that the European Hydra, denominated the Balance of Power," could no longer "extend its baleful influence to the western shores of the Atlantic." 26

The European system, the so-called "balance of power," was the antitype of the American federal union. "The history of that quarter of the world," wrote Kentuckian Allan B. Magruder, provided a "summary of the evils which America has escaped." "Europe is cut up into innumerable independent sovereignties," he explained, "some powerful and others feeble." Given their conflicting interests and disproportionate capabilities, "a balance of power" to prevent strong states from overwhelming the weak was "an object of absolute necessity." Tragically, however, the alliances that supposedly secured the balance instead simply spread the ravages of war, and "all Europe is sometimes then in a blaze at once." The "Gothic policy" of the old world thus guaranteed neither the integrity of states nor the liberties of their subjects.

Once the threat of a powerful and potentially hostile European power on the Mississippi had passed, American horizons again seemed boundless. Echoing the enthusiastic hopes of the Revolutionary generation, Americans could once more hold forth on the westward course of empire. "Never since the commencement of the annals of mankind," exulted "Sylvestris," "did any civilized nation possess so advantageous a position. Never was there a people who had their happiness so much in their own power." 27

David Ramsay, historian of the Revolution, best captured the revived sense of American potency and purpose. If the destinies of new world and old were still linked, the terms were reversed: America would not become Europe, Europe would become America.

The happiness enjoyed under our new system, in this new world, has a direct tendency to regenerate the governments of the old, without the horrors and bloodshed of revolutions... The rulers of the eastern continent, who hold a great part of their fellow-men in bondage, and who are perpetually involving them in wars, will relax in their oppressions... knowing, that our own extended limits afford an ample asylum for the poor of all nations. 28

Ramsay and other celebrants of the Louisiana Purchase fashioned a continental vision of the American future out of the anxieties and forebodings of the Louisiana crisis. Here was a "new and luminous example of pacific and open negotiation," the definitive answer to Federalist war-mongering. 29 Instead of being drawn into European wars, the union of American states would be a model and inspiration for the war-torn "eastern continent." Only by following the Ameri-
can example and establishing “one general republic to concentrate in a point the whole will of society” would it be possible to “destroy those clashing interests and dissimilarities which beget wars.”

Americans projected their hopes onto the vast screen of the new western empire. Dangers to the republic from “clashing interests,” slave revolts, or Indian reprisals were magically transcended—or at least displaced. Instead of imploding and collapsing, the union would expand across the continent. “What is to hinder our extension on the same liberal principles of equal rights,” Ramsay asked, “till we have increased to twenty-seven, thirty-seven, or any other number of states that will conveniently embrace in one happy union, the whole country from the Atlantic to the Pacific ocean, and from the lakes of Canada to the Gulf of Mexico?” Enthusiastic orators promised that a “more natural, more intimate and more permanent Union” would result from the accession of Louisiana. A new spring would be given to American “enterprise,” and the expanding realm of free trade would foster reciprocal and interdependent interests. The ugly divisions glimpsed in the crisis debates would be suppressed. Finally secured in possession of the Mississippi, “the eastern and western people feel a strong reciprocal interest in the prosperity of each other, and a new bond of union is extended between the extremities of the continent.” Through the alchemy of free trade and interdependent interests, unity would emerge from diversity and the great promise of the American Revolution would be redeemed.

Crisis of the Union

Revolutionary Americans had sought to create a new world order. By avoiding “entangling alliances” and negotiating treaties on the basis of commercial reciprocity and free trade, the new nation would inaugurate a new diplomatic system that would extend peace and prosperity throughout the world. With the destruction of Britain’s colonial monopoly, the European states would compete freely for the American trade. As a result, preacher and educator Ezra Stiles told the Connecticut legislature in 1783, “all the European powers will henceforth, from national and commercial interests, naturally become an united and combined guaranty, for the free navigation of the

Atlantick.” This new “commercial system,” including the “maritime nations, on both sides” of the ocean, would “establish the benevolence as well as the opulence of nations, and advance the progress of Society to civil perfection.”

Stiles’s paean to the new nation’s future “Glory and Honour” constituted a virtual catalogue of liberal assumptions about political and economic development. The belief that commercial relations would promote rational and civilized behavior among sovereign states as well as among individuals was a staple of Enlightenment thought. The sovereign’s “savage” impulses toward conquest were curbed by calculations of long-term self-interest deriving from mutually beneficial exchanges. As these advantages became increasingly conspicuous, a “generous and truly liberal system of national connexion” was bound to emerge. Nations would combine, as in the case of the Armed Neutrality of 1780, to “disarm even war itself of hostilities against trade.”

Stiles’s vision of global peace and prosperity was complemented by, and ultimately depended on, optimistic projections of the future development of the new nation’s vast hinterland. “It is probable that within a century from our independence the sun will shine on fifty million of inhabitants in the United States,” he wrote—in what was to prove a remarkably accurate prediction. High rates of reproduction would be enhanced by the influx of useful immigrants attracted by the freedom and opportunity of republican America.

As soon as independence was secured in 1783, friends of the Revolution began to draw flattering contrasts between the “savage state” of European politics and the rapid progress of “political civilization” in the new world. “The establishment of so many free states upon the purest principles of civil and religious liberty,” wrote the Englishman Thomas Day, “affords the most consolatory prospects to every friend of humanity.” As long as the Americans remained true to their republican principles, predicted Thomas Pownall, former royal governor of Massachusetts, “they will become a Nation to whom all Nations will come; a Power whom all the Powers of Europe will court to Civil and Commercial Alliances; A People to whom the Remnants of all ruined Peoples will fly . . . for refuge.” Liberty was the best guarantee of prosperity: “the riches of the sea will pour in upon them; the wealth of Nations must flow in upon them; and they must be a populous and Rich People.”
With a vast continent to settle, the Americans would soon constitute a "world within themselves." But the American world would not be divided among contentious and hostile nations. Instead, wrote Stiles, the "fermentation and communion of nations will doubtless produce something very new, singular, and glorious." The absence of artificial social and political distinctions would foster the "natural" tendency of a free people to pursue harmonious, interdependent interests. Wars of conquest would be superfluous, even when the new empire of liberty challenged the remaining outposts of European rule in America. The irresistible attractions of the American union would inspire wars of liberation in Canada and other neighboring colonies. Britain "may form new settlements," Thomas Paine asserted in 1782 when the Paris peacemakers were still deliberating about the new nation's boundaries, "but they will be for us; they will become part of the United States of America; and that against all her contrivances to prevent it, or without any endeavours of ours to promote it." 

Yet Paine's bold vision betrayed the same anxieties about the future of American republicanism that were to characterize the Louisiana crisis of 1803. With a rapidly growing, land-hungry population, the new nation's need for new lands was apparently boundless. But what if hostile imperial powers did not melt away? What if, to reverse Paine's prediction, American settlers proved less loyal than their foreign counterparts?

The furor over John Jay's offer to forfeit the navigation of the Mississippi in 1786 demonstrated the volatility of westerners' loyalties. If the United States did not secure their economic interests, a Kentuckian warned, "our allegiance will be thrown off, and some other power applied to." Lord Sheffield, the leading British opponent of commercial rapprochement with the former colonies, was convinced that the interests of western settlers would drive them out of the union. He turned Paine on his head: the rage for emigration "to the interior parts of the continent" would retard the economic development of the depopulated eastern states while gaining Britain new customers, if not subjects. In the event, "the authority of the Congress, can never be maintained over those distant and boundless regions, and her nominal subjects will speedily imitate and multiply the examples of independence."

American policy-makers recognized the need to coordinate frontier settlement with the establishment of effective national authority and the extension of transportation links and market relations. They also recognized that claims to "independence" in the new settlements jeopardized the integrity and independence of the union as a whole. Skeptical about the prospects for a natural harmony of interests, congressmen concluded that a durable union depended on the deliberate exercise of power to preserve the new nation's jurisdiction and property rights on the frontiers. The break with Britain was not, by itself, a sufficient guarantee of popular loyalty and enlightenment. The great western hinterland offered the Revolutionaries the opportunity to create and sustain a new world order. At the same time, however, the success of the American experiment was most problematic in scattered frontier settlements where economic and political connections to the union were most tenuous. Paradoxically, the same vast spaces that provided scope for a new and enlightened "empire of liberty"—the antithesis of the old world's bloody balance of power—created conditions under which American republicans were most likely to behave like Europeans, or even to fall under the influence of European powers. In the boundless West, American republicanism would self-destruct. The precocious pursuit of self-interest and the premature assumption of the prerogatives of self-government threatened to unleash centrifugal forces that would destroy the union and Europeanize American politics.

Western policy-makers recognized that the future of the union, and therefore of republican government in America, depended on its capacity to expand. In theory, as the English radical Richard Price told his American friends, there was no limit to the potential size of the union: "peace may be maintained between any number of confederated states." But the increasingly evident "imbecility" of the Confederation Congress, discordant state policies, and rising sectional suspicions suggested that the imperfect union of states under the Articles was much more likely to collapse than expand. Because "no provision is made for enforcing the decisions of Congress," Price warned, the new world would be condemned to recapitulate the unhappy experience of the old.

Proponents of national constitutional reform exploited such predictions by European commentators, hostile and friendly alike. These
writers gave short shrift to the idea that the states’ republican constitutions were a sufficient guarantee of harmonious union: “as you have our vices,” so “you will soon have our politics.”[47] Dean Josiah Tucker was convinced that “clashing interests” would seize control of local governments, whatever their form, thus fostering an endless cycle of “internal Disputes and Quarrels.” With “no Center of Union among them,” it was the Americans’ “fate” to be “A DISUNITED PEOPLE... divided and subdivided into little Commonwealths, or Principalities.”[48]

Advocates of the new federal Constitution agreed that the chief threat to the union was the dangerous and delusive idea of state sovereignty.[49] The exaggerated pretensions of the states subverted Congress’s authority and left the new nation vulnerable to the depredations of foreign powers. As a result, explained Thomas Dawes in the Massachusetts ratifying convention, we may be “independent of each other, but we are slaves to Europe.”[50] Yet even if these continuing external threats could be discounted, the disintegration of the union promised to unleash the “dogs of war.”[51] Without a strong confederation, conflicts of interest among the states would soon escalate into war. “Every state would be a little nation,” John Jay warned his fellow New Yorkers; it would be “jealous of its neighbors, and anxious to strengthen itself by foreign alliances, against its former friends.”[52]

During the ratification controversy, Federalists argued that a “more perfect union” was the only possible means of preventing the imminent Europeanization of American politics. In republics the rights of citizens were secured against their own governments, but republics enjoyed no “natural” security against each other. “If we should be disunited,” wrote Alexander Hamilton, “we should be in a short course of time, in the predicament of the continental powers of Europe—our liberties would be a prey to the means of defending ourselves against the ambition and jealousy of each other.”[53] Far from being the universal solution to all political problems, republicanism—the Revolution’s most precious legacy—was jeopardized by the failure to establish a durable federal alliance among the states.

The interests of sovereign states were necessarily opposed, wherever the “sovereignty” was located. Chronic interstate conflict, which was most notable over boundaries and trade, would weaken the union and prepare the way for future wars. Most ominously, in the absence of an effective federal union discrepancies in state size and power offered irresistible opportunities for the better-situated states to advance their interests at the expense of their weaker neighbors. Each American state must be able to defend itself, warned “Cato,” lest it “expire under the sword of its foes, or sink into submission.”[54] The dilemma, as Hamilton noted, was that such preparations jeopardized the new nation’s independence of old world entanglements as well as republican liberty: threatened with extinction, small states might well look abroad for support.

Constitutional reformers insisted that there was no inherent distinction between the international behavior of republics and that of other polities. The first law of nature was self-preservation: for states this meant that all other considerations, including respect for the rights of other states as well as for the private rights of their own citizens, must give way when their survival was at stake.[65] America’s republican revolution therefore was not in itself an adequate solution to the classic problem of international politics, of how to establish a stable, peaceful, and lawful regime among independent states.

The challenge was to construct a new world order on non-European principles. This meant, as the polemicist Joel Barlow later put it, that the American states would have to be “federalized”—subordinated to a perpetual, constitutional alliance—in order to preserve their republican character.[66] If, instead, the union collapsed and the states took on the attributes of independent sovereignties, the distinction between governors and governed that the Revolutionaries had sought to abolish would remerge with a vengeance. Republican liberty would be the inevitable casualty.

Constitutional reformers argued that republicanism and federalism represented solutions to two logically distinct sets of problems, the organization of power and guarantee of rights within and among states, respectively. Insisting on this distinction, they dismissed the Antifederalists’ contention that voters had to choose between the preservation of republican liberty in the sovereign states and the creation of a powerful, necessarily despotic national government. To the contrary, resolution of the crisis of the union was the essential condition for the survival of republican government in the states.

The crucial conceptual breakthrough in the development of American federalism was the recognition that “state sovereignty”—the monopolization of political power by the state governments—jeop-
ardized republican government as well as the survival of the union. A strong federal alliance would protect the American republics from foreign interference and, no less importantly, from each other, thus securing their republican constitutions from the distorting effects of chronic conflict. Exercising their republican rights, Americans would move and trade freely across state boundaries, thereby strengthening the bonds of union. The vastly extended national domain would sustain the optimal conditions for private enterprise, republican government, and harmonious union among the states.

III

The Federal Republic

Before the ratification of the federal Constitution, nationalist reformers warned that the states' republican constitutions were jeopardized by the deterioration of the union under the Articles of Confederation. The new constitution would preserve the union, the “guarantee clause” in Article 4 specifically promised that the national government would uphold republicanism in the states, securing them against the establishment of monarchical regimes. Prospective new states would have to draft acceptably republican constitutions, approved by Congress, prior to their admission.

The founders' solution to the crisis of the union was predicated on the interdependence of state and national governments. If a durable union depended on the republican character of its member states, they were equally convinced that the states as republics depended on a durable union. The American states were constitutionally compatible, defined in terms of their constitutional limitations, republican state governments were also compatible with an energetic national government.

Under the new dispensation, the states would continue to be the primary locus for republican self-government. But federal supremacy was supposed to guarantee that the corporate interests of state governments would always be subordinate to the rights of the sovereign people and that the states would not arbitrarily interfere with the free movement of trade and people across state boundaries. The American founders thus “established a union of interests and of states,” Joel Barlow wrote. It was this double character of the union that he believed would secure a perpetually peaceful and ever-expanding new world order.

The state governments could not invoke transcendent corporate interests, distinct from the people's, and the federal compact deprived them of coercive sanctions for asserting and enforcing their claims against other states. This circumscribed conception of statehood presupposed a mobile citizenry, not bound by irrevocable, unconditional obligations to particular governments. And if American citizens could move freely from state to state without compromising their rights, there was nothing sacred about any particular state's territorial pretensions. State boundaries were subject to change, just as the limits of the union itself could be extended to embrace new states.

Given the territorial monopoly of the original thirteen states, settlers in distant frontier regions could only hope to enjoy the benefits of reasonably convenient republican self-government if state boundaries could be redrawn. During the Confederation years, when the protracted struggle over conflicting state claims in the West immobilized Congress, the prospects of a jurisdictional settlement that would facilitate the expansion of the union remained extremely doubtful. But the completion of state land cessions, the establishment of a more energetic central government, and the consolidation of federal authority on the western frontiers transformed the new nation's prospects. Remarkably, British writer “Calm Observer” noted in 1794, “the American republics, in various instances, have even parted with territory and people close adjoining, allowing them to become independent states; and have then admitted these offsets to a proportional weight in the general confederacy.”

The expansion of the union began with the admission of Vermont in 1791 and Kentucky in 1792, districts formerly claimed by New York and Virginia respectively. In 1796, after a brief period under federal control, the western region of what had been North Carolina, a hotbed of separatist activity, joined the union as Tennessee.

The promise of statehood was also extended to settlers in the vast trans-Ohio hinterland ceded by New York (1782), Virginia (1784), Massachusetts (1785), and Connecticut (1786). After the resistance of the Ohio Indians was smashed at the Battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, the rapid settlement of the southern part of the territory led to the creation of Ohio (1803), Indiana (1816), and Illinois (1818) under terms set forth in the Northwest Ordinance of 1787. In the south-
west, the Georgia cession of 1802, long delayed and complicated by the Yazoo land scandal, confirmed federal authority in the Mississippi Territory (organized in 1798). Congress governed the region under a modified version of the Northwest Ordinance, eliminating the ban on slavery in Article 6. Once American control was secured and cotton began yielding fabulous profits, settlers poured into the region and Congress created two more new states, Mississippi (1817) and Alabama (1818). Louisianians, promised “incorporation in the union” by Article 7 of the French cession treaty (1803), had gained statehood in 1812.66

For Jeffersonian Republicans, the expansion of the union vindicated the republican principle that states and their governments existed to serve the people, not the other way around. The union was dynamic and expansive precisely because it was voluntary and uncoerced. Settlers in frontier regions were drawn into the union by self-interest, not fear of conquest. As one eastern writer explained, the “prosperity and increasing importance” of the western settlements depended on “the emigration of our youth and the introduction of our capital.”67 Westerners did not need to be reminded, James Jackson of Georgia told the Senate, “that their independence, their rights, their properties, depend . . . on union with their sister States.”68

Contrary to Antifederalist predictions, the states’ renunciation of sovereignty and submission to a perpetual federal alliance did not necessarily lead to the creation of an over-mighty, despotic central government. The very existence of the federal government, not the actual exercise of its potentially extensive powers, secured the states against “war and foreign interference.” As long as peace persisted, the government of the union would remain a “weak fabric,” its latent force only being called forth in the unlikely event of a serious challenge to American independence.69 “The spirit of their Government,” a British admirer concluded, “encourages Commerce, and discourages War.”70

Because the states disclaimed the conventional prerogatives of sovereignties, pretexts for serious conflict among them evaporated, and the new federal government could govern with a light hand. Under the new dispensation, proponents of ratification promised, the delegation of sovereign powers to the central government would eliminate the occasions for their use. And the most significant result of this concentration of power, Vermonter Nathaniel Chipman in-
ing from the union whenever the central government’s authority “becomes oppressive” or even “appears to be so.” “We should not forget,” Barlow concluded, “that the United States are to be held together by interest, not by force.”

The Jeffersonian idea of union implied unconventional conceptions of national power and security. Paradoxically, limitations on governmental power in America constituted the new nation’s ultimate strength. Republican governments that guaranteed property rights and civil liberties—and taxed themselves lightly—fostered the growing wealth and population that would enable the United States to meet any crisis. Within “twenty years,” Virginian George Nicholas promised the Senate in 1803, the growth of population would guarantee American security: “our united force will be such, that no nation at the distance of three thousand miles will be able to contend with us for any object in our neighborhood.”

Three years later Tennessee congressman John Rhea also asked for “twenty years more” of “honorable peace,” after which “the prosperity, happiness and power of the United States of America will remain fixed on a basis not to be moved by the united efforts of nations.”

The creation of new states guaranteed the “zeal and patriotic spirit” of a rapidly growing frontier population. Westerners cherished the union because they participated in the federal government on an equal basis while enjoying the benefits of republican self-government in their states. This is why Napoleon’s efforts to detach the western states would prove unavailing, Kentuckian John Breckinridge assured the Senate in 1803. His people would never willingly exchange “that exalted, that enviable rank of one of the independent States of United America” for the “degraded, dependent condition of a colonial department of a foreign nation.”

By the same logic, the failure to extend republican institutions into new territories would jeopardize the union. “The standard of separation, would ere long be erected,” warned David Ramsay in 1804, if the vast region acquired from France “was to continue to be governed as a dependency on the United States.”

Responsiveness to the political aspirations of frontier communities made good sense to Republican leaders anxious to build the party’s strength. An expansionist policy also promised to promote private enterprise while establishing the foundations of national wealth and power. The prosperity and patriotism of a growing population would secure the new nation’s sovereignty and independence against all threats. For the most enthusiastic expansionists, the rapid addition of new self-governing republics to the American federal union offered a still more edifying spectacle. “Upon this liberal plan of government,” Allan Bowie Magruder exclaimed, “the whole world might be regulated in peace and harmony.”

Because of the principle of state equality—and the absence of a dominant metropolitan core—new states could join the federal alliance without fear of being overwhelmed by powerful neighbors. The security offered to small and weak states by the federal constitution was a major incentive for frontier communities to seek membership in the union, “the ark of their safety.” According to Allan Bowie Magruder, “a remote state of the Union is placed upon the same ground of equality with the one bordering immediately on the seat of empire. In proportion to its strength it has the same weight in the national councils of the Federal Union. Each state has a government of its own, independent of the whole confederate power of the nation.” Outside of the union, each state would be “too weak” and “too small” to secure “its own immediate sovereignty”; in union, “all the qualities of strength, wisdom and virtue, move in one consolidated mass to the accomplishment of every great measure upon which our happiness depends.”

Rhetorical assaults on the balance of power, the “political phantom” that so conspicuously failed to secure the “liberties” of European states, underscored the Americans’ belief in the superiority of their federal system. Rather than contracting and imploding, the union extended the benefits of peace and security by adding new states. American federalism thus represented the antithesis of the European system, where peaceful states were routinely “subjugated and divided between their more warlike neighbours.”

The behavior of the American republics under the Confederation had convinced the framers of the federal constitution that disunion would unleash such forces of state particularism. They did not expect an American balance of power to secure the sovereignty and independence of their separate republics. Instead, they imagined for a disunited America a future very much like Europe’s during the French
Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars. Unchecked by federal obligations, fully sovereign states would exploit their relative advantages: the resulting imbalance of power would provoke a cycle of wars that would only cease when "the arm of tyranny" finally "impose[d] upon us a system of despotism." The wisdom of the framers in constructing a true federal union thus was thrown into sharp relief by Napoleon’s quest for "universal monarchy." "The lamentable picture of European wretchedness would serve as a mirror to explain and prognosticate" America’s "future destiny" if their own union collapsed.\[2\]

< IV >

New States

The survival of the American union did not depend on a balance of power or spontaneous harmony of interests among the states, or on their natural affinity as self-governing republics. To the contrary, the framers of the Constitution insisted, the balance, harmony, and peaceful coexistence of the American republics depended on union. Congress’s policy for governing and distributing the new national domain, set forth in a series of ordinances from 1784 to 1787, anticipated and illuminated this conceptual reversal. The interests of the union would be secured before frontier settlers assumed the prerogatives of self-government and formed new states. Like James Madison and his fellow constitutional reformers, the authors of congressional western policy saw republicanism as a problem, not a panacea: Revolutionary Americans were not naturally virtuous, nor could they always be expected to know where their true interests lay.\[3\]

Western policy-makers sought to guarantee the orderly expansion of the union by circumscribing the scope of political activity on the frontiers. Under the terms of the Northwest Ordinance, Congress governed frontier regions through appointed officials during the formative stages of settlement; settlers only began to govern themselves as their communities gained political maturity and became more fully integrated into the national economy. Only at this point, congressmen concluded, was it safe to assume that the pursuit of private interests was compatible with the public good.

The new system for governing the national domain reflected Congress’s determination to suppress unauthorized separatist move-

ments and uphold the jurisdictional pretensions and property rights of the original states. Even Vermont, the only self-proclaimed new state to survive the Revolutionary era, had to negotiate a settlement with New York before its admission.\[4\] Meanwhile, policy-makers hoped, direct congressional rule in the Northwest Territory would eliminate the conditions that had fostered rudimentary experiments in self-government and statehood applications.

During the waning years of the Confederation, frontier settlers proclaimed their "independence" of the old states in order to defend their settlements from external threats, drive Indians off coveted lands, secure their own (often dubious) titles, and enjoy the benefits of law and order. Separatists had few illusions about the "sovereignty" of their new states. When they called for "the protecting arm of the federal government" and asked Congress to exercise its "paternal guardianship," petitioners acknowledged their political weakness and immaturity.\[5\] Anxious easterners naturally saw portents of inceptive anarchy in these new state movements, but for westerners the inability or unwillingness of the old states to govern effectively created the anarchic conditions that justified appeals to Congress. Self-government was the last resort of vulnerable frontier settlements, or perhaps a threat to wield against unsympathetic and unresponsive easterners, but rarely an end in itself.

The territorial system relieved frontier people of the need to provide for their own security and thus eliminated a primary impulse for political activity. Settlers in the national domain did not at first resist or resent Congress's avowedly "colonial" rule: a strong federal presence was precisely what new state proponents had long demanded. While their numbers remained small and scattered, settlers were content to forgo the benefits—and costs—of self-government and to defer their claims to a place in the union. When territorial citizens did become politically active, the scope of their activity was much more narrowly defined than it had been for separatists during the Revolutionary era. The move toward self-government was inex- tricably linked to full incorporation in the federal polity.\[6\] In 1796 Albert Gallatin of Pennsylvania reassured his fellow congressmen that the initiative taken by residents of the Southwest Territory in constituting themselves as the new state of Tennessee did not jeopardize the union. The new state could not sustain its independence—or look elsewhere for alliance or support—if Congress failed to se
its representatives. Gallatin’s “opinion was that if they were a State, they were at the same time a member of the Union; that they could not exist as a State without being one of the United States.”

As Gallatin’s paradoxical formulation made clear, statehood in America entailed the renunciation of sovereignty and independence. Freed from direct congressional rule, new states submitted to the authority of a federal union in which they now participated as equal members. By directing political energies toward membership in the union, congressional western policy succeeded in countering the centrifugal tendencies so feared by antieXPansionists. Congress asserted its “temporary” authority as long as there were legitimate grounds to question the political competence and loyalties of frontier settlers; relaxation of the territorial regime was then linked to the development of interdependent interests binding new settlements to the union and to a demonstrated capacity for responsible, truly “republican” self-government.

Political development in the national domain thus worked toward integration in the federal polity, not toward assertions of state sovereignty. The federal union offered extraordinary advantages to weak, lightly populated frontier states: membership meant protection against powerful neighbors, disproportionate influence in Congress through an equal vote in the Senate, and the opportunity to bargain for federal largesse while sharing generally in the further exploitation of the national domain. Statehood advocates were inspired as much by awareness of these advantages as by a determination to throw off the “galling yoke” of colonial subordination and enjoy the benefits of local self-government.

The pace of political development in the territories was roughly synchronized with population growth. According to the schedule established by the Northwest Ordinance and extended, with modifications, across the national domain, territorial citizens would be entitled to elect a general assembly “so soon as there shall be five thousand free male inhabitants of full age”; once the free population reached 60,000, they “shall be at liberty to form a permanent constitution” and claim admission to the union. Congress could choose to admit a new state before that threshold had been crossed, however, if persuaded that the people of the territory were willing and able to assume the responsibilities of self-government.

Partisan conflict in the Northwest Territory (Ohio) centered on the question of timing: when would a new state or states join the union, within what boundaries, and on what terms? Republican statehood advocates sought to accelerate development through the final stage of territorial rule; Federalist opponents urged caution. According to an antistatehood meeting at Marietta in 1801, the organization of a new state should be delayed as long as the territory remained a “mixed mass of people, scattered over an immense wilderness, with scarcely a connecting principle.” Republicans retorted that the people of the territory were more than ready to govern themselves, and so “be re-instated into those rights and privileges which they formerly [before leaving their home states] enjoyed as citizens.” Significantly, however, statehood advocates did not challenge the Marietans’ developmental premise: instead, they argued, the very success of their efforts to mobilize opposition to Governor Arthur St. Clair’s territorial regime demonstrated Ohio’s readiness to participate in the affairs of the union.

Ohioans on both sides of the statehood issue accepted the principle that self-government was only feasible and safe after the territory had achieved a sufficient degree of political maturity. The ultimate test of the new state’s political competence was the drafting of an acceptable state constitution and the negotiation of favorable terms of admission. Statehood advocates first had to persuade Congress to authorize an Ohio state constitutional convention. Congress’s enabling act also included a set of propositions to the convention concerning federal property interests in the new state: in exchange for exempting federal lands from state taxes for five years after their sale, Congress offered to dedicate 5 percent of land sales revenue to roadbuilding, reserve one section in each township for schools, and grant Ohio control over the Scioto Salt Springs. These conditions were duly incorporated in the new state constitution. Once the constitution was reviewed and approved, Ohio’s representatives and senators could take their seats in Congress.

Federalist resistance to the Ohio statehood movement illuminated the distinctive character of early American federalism. The same series of acts that constituted new states as political societies also bound them to the federal union. Federalist criticisms were premised on a distinction between these constitutional and federal functions: because of Congress’s interference, the Ohio constitution was not the authentically self-constitutive act of a distinct political society; similarly, Congress had exploited the Republicans’ eagerness for statehood to negotiate “an advantageous treaty . . . before