

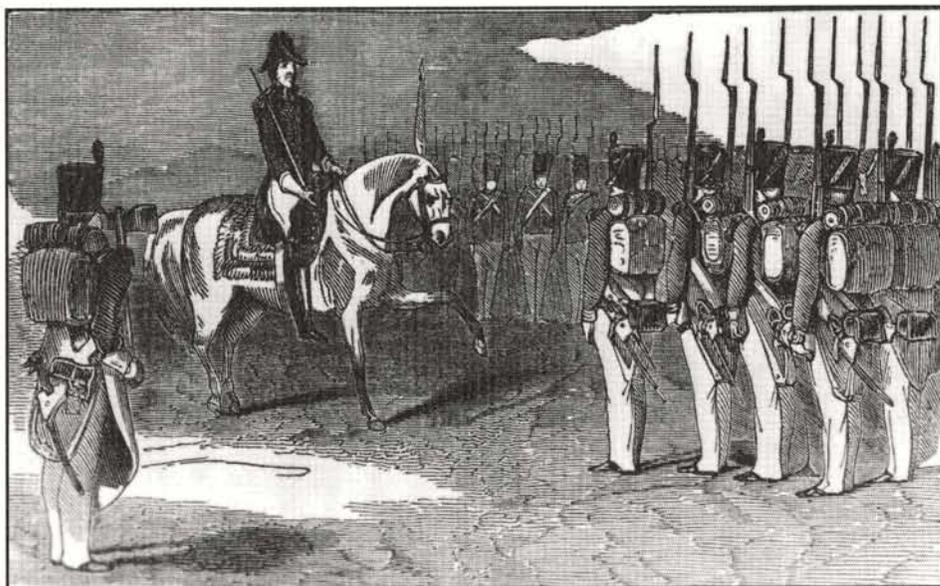
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2009 Catherine Prescott Lecture

The Seminole Controversy Revisited: A New Look At Andrew Jackson's 1818 Florida Campaign

by Daniel Feller

Americans began their experiment in self-government with the notion that republics naturally love peace and monarchies naturally love war. As Thomas Paine explained in *Common Sense*, wars began when “crowned ruffians” attacked their neighbors—or their own subjects—in pursuit of personal wealth, power, or glory. “In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings; the consequence of which was there were no wars; it is the pride of kings which throw mankind into confusion.” Since the people at large were naturally peace-loving, republics would fight only in self-defense. Not by coincidence, said Paine, had Holland enjoyed more peace in the century since it threw off its king than any of its monarchical European neighbors. Yoked to Great Britain, America had been embroiled in almost continuous war with imperial France and Spain. Sever the link and inaugurate a republic, and she would be at peace with all mankind.¹

Daniel Feller is Betty Lynn Hendrickson Professor of History and Editor/Director of *The Papers of Andrew Jackson* at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville.

1. *Sense*, in *Thomas Paine: Collected Writings*, ed. Eric Foner (New York: Library of America, 1995), 20, 12.

The authors of the United States Constitution did not, like Paine, envision a future free from conflict; but they did insert safeguards to ensure that the country's leaders could not go, king-like, launching military adventures on their own hook and for their own private reasons. The Constitution carefully subordinated the armed forces to a civilian executive and made him in turn responsible to an elected legislature. While the president was to be commander in chief, only Congress could declare war, and only Congress could provide the sinews of war through its powers of taxation and appropriation. All revenue bills had to originate in the House of Representatives, elected directly by the people. Further, a specific constitutional provision barred appropriations "to raise and support Armies" from running longer than two years, so that each successive Congress would have to decide the matter anew. In America, only the people themselves, the proper arbiters of the nation's destiny, would be the ultimate judges of when it was to make war.

The new republic's Atlantic buffer against the leading military powers rendered it relatively (though in the early years not completely) secure from foreign invasion. This happy conjunction of principle and geography reinforced the conviction that the United States was indeed something new under the sun. Americans would not foment wars because the United States, being a different kind of country, would conduct its foreign relations differently—and better—than other countries, especially monarchies. Americans bearing the torch of republicanism would lead the world toward a new order of international relations in which commerce would supplant alliances, and arbitration replace war. These sunny hopes permeated early American diplomacy, producing, among other ventures, the Model Treaty of 1776 and President Thomas Jefferson's experiments in peaceful coercion.²

Today such halcyon projections seem the naive effusions of a bygone time, rendered obsolete by modern circumstances. As everyone knows, the United States has fought many armed conflicts over the last half-century and more, even though no formal declaration of war has passed Congress since 1941. Americans have become reconciled to the fact of more or less perpetual,

2. Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1961).

