

Early American Foreign Relations: Opportunities and Challenges

In 1980, Charles Maier delivered a jeremiad titled "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in which he gloomily asserted the, to him, somnolent state of the field.¹ Maier's essay evoked support, protest, and a good deal of self-examination by diplomatic historians. Indeed, so much has been written along these lines since 1980 – so many new approaches have been suggested and developed – that in 1992 Michael Hunt felt emboldened to declare that the "long crisis" in diplomatic history was "coming to closure."²

Hunt may be correct, or perhaps only slightly optimistic, but it is notable that virtually all of the progress he mentions has been made in studies of America's recent past. Similarly, the contributors to Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson's *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations*, a work designed to encourage the use of new approaches, almost never find it possible to illustrate their arguments by referring to work on the early years of the nation.³ Moreover, very few dissertations on the early period appear in the annual listings.

There are, of course, some striking new works on that period, but they are rare. This relative dearth is regrettable, among other things, because, in the early years, foreign policy was perhaps more important for the union's future than at any other time until the twentieth century and because, too, so much pathbreaking work with respect to those years has been done in areas closely related to diplomatic history.

Much of the work of the first generation of American diplomatic historians dealt with the years from the Revolution to the 1820s. Often based on extensive

1. Charles S. Maier, "Marking Time: The Historiography of International Relations," in *The Past Before Us: Contemporary Historical Writing in the United States*, ed. Michael Kammen (Ithaca, 1980), 355–87. Maier also included useful suggestions for improvement.

2. Michael H. Hunt, "The Long Crisis in U.S. Diplomatic History: Coming to Closure," *Diplomatic History* 16 (Winter 1992): 115–40. Whether this progress translated into broader recognition by other historians is, at best, problematic. John Gaddis is surely correct in maintaining that diplomatic historians are often viewed as filling "something like the evolutionary niche filled by the crocodile, the armadillo, and the cockroach, . . . still rather primitive and, for that reason, not very interesting." John Lewis Gaddis, "New Conceptual Approaches to the Study of American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 14 (Summer 1990): 406.

3. Michael J. Hogan and Thomas G. Paterson, eds., *Explaining the History of American Foreign Relations* (New York, 1991).

multiarchival research, these studies still deserve reading. But they also deserve revision, both to incorporate new, broadening approaches and to eliminate the nationalistic tone common to many of them. Sometimes, but not often, this has been profitably done. Thus, to give but one example, Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution*, published in 1935, was corrected fifty years later by Jonathan Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution*.⁴ Dull shows what one would scarcely suspect after reading Bemis: that the American war was almost a sideshow in a much larger contest centered in Europe. He also subjects the Americans to much more critical scrutiny than his predecessor. Bemis still provides us with detail essential to the understanding of American policy, but Dull's contributions have merit.

Other large areas have been neglected. A prominent example is the Spanish-American relationship in the early national period. In 1927 and 1934, Arthur P. Whitaker published two able studies covering the years from 1783 to 1803.⁵ They remain our first reliance, although Whitaker virtually ignored the role of Native Americans in the frontier areas and also the ideological impulses behind American aggressiveness. Every generation, it has been said, needs to write its "own" history, incorporating new insights, even when the ground has been deeply harrowed.

Revising Bemis or Whitaker of course requires multiarchival research, doing what is today often called "international history." Michael Hunt has correctly observed that calls for international history, as opposed to the history merely of the foreign policy of a single nation, are "the academic equivalent of a rain dance."⁶ Hunt may be correct, but too little rain has recently fallen. While foreign archives have been used regarding some major topics in the early national period, many remain virtually untouched. And too frequently in the past – this was especially true of the first generation – multiarchival research has meant total concentration on official policymaking in other countries. To phrase this comparatively, whereas studies of the American side of international relations have been broadened and deepened, the same has not often been true of investigations of those nations with which the United States interacted.

Take, for example, early relations with Latin America, where again we have too little modern work, virtually all of it concentrating solely on the U.S. end of the relationship. We have learned, for example, about American ambivalence toward the Latin Americans but very little about Latin American views of the United States. John J. Johnson, *A Hemisphere Apart*, is a very suggestive beginning, but Johnson begins his account at 1815 and, because he covers a vast canvas,

4. Samuel Flagg Bemis, *The Diplomacy of the American Revolution* (New York, 1935); Jonathan R. Dull, *A Diplomatic History of the American Revolution* (New Haven, 1985).

5. Arthur P. Whitaker, *The Spanish-American Frontier, 1783–1795* (New York, 1927); idem, *The Mississippi Question, 1795–1803* (New York, 1934).

6. Michael H. Hunt, "Internationalizing U.S. Diplomatic History: A Practical Agenda," *Diplomatic History* 15 (Winter 1991): 1–11.

cannot provide great detail.⁷ Similarly useful are some of the writings of Peggy Liss, for example, her *Atlantic Empires*.⁸

Doron Ben-Atar and Jay Gitlin, in essays accompanying this one, show how profitable extended multiarchival research can be. So, too, in a particularly ambitious way, does David Hancock, *Citizens of the World*, a fine study of London merchants and the growth of an Atlantic economy in the eighteenth century.⁹ Although Hancock's relative neglect of government activity does not make his book a perfect model for diplomatic historians, it does suggest a fresh approach to international relationships.

Such an approach would approximate, although perhaps it could not equal the complexity of, the corporatist one so often employed recently in dealing with later times. Corporatism is, to many, a somewhat amorphous concept, but it suggests a broadening of concern beyond the offices of state to give greater than the traditional attention to interest groups of all kinds, perhaps primarily economic ones but others as well. One could profitably explore for the United States the sort of thing explored by Hancock, adding diplomatic history of a more traditional sort, thus providing deeper accounts than we have generally received. Even a casual reading of, say, the early pages of Paul Varg's *New England and Foreign Relations* will suggest specific topics.¹⁰ In general, deeper investigations of the very extensive Anglo-American and Franco-American nongovernmental contracts, with attention to their influence on policy, would be rewarding.

Until now, despite the current emphasis on cultural history, students of early American diplomacy have paid too little attention to its possible contribution to their field. Twenty years ago, Lawrence Kaplan and Morrell Heald published a pioneering work, *Culture and Diplomacy*.¹¹ Only three of the twelve chapters, written by Kaplan, dealt with the early period. All are very acute, but they also are suggestive rather than comprehensive and necessarily do not incorporate conceptual approaches developed since that time. Few scholars have followed along this path. But culture is critically important, helping to frame ideology and in turn diplomacy itself. Real interests are of course vital engines of policy, but a nation's culture creates an often distorting prism through which those interests are seen. Racism is an obvious example, and indeed has attracted some interest from historians, but there are many other examples of the prism at work. Max Savelle's old work, *The Origins of American Diplomacy*, pioneering for its time, cries for replacement because of the recent deepening of cultural

7. John J. Johnson, *A Hemisphere Apart: The Foundations of United States Policy toward Latin America* (Baltimore, 1990).

8. Peggy Liss, *Atlantic Empires: The Network of Trade and Revolution, 1713-1826* (Baltimore, 1983).

9. David Hancock, *Citizens of the World: London Merchants and the Integration of the British Atlantic Community, 1735-1785* (New York, 1995).

10. Paul A. Varg, *New England and Foreign Relations, 1789-1850* (Hanover, NH, 1983).

11. Morrell Heald and Lawrence S. Kaplan, *Culture and Diplomacy: The American Experience* (Westport, CT, 1977).

history.¹² And the work of Akira Iriye suggests how especially rewarding the cultural approach can be when it is employed to illuminate both sides of an international relationship, the American and the foreign.¹³

Closely allied is the theme of republicanism, for many years probably the predominant interest of historians of the young nation and its domestic development. The concept is elusive and much debated, but no one would deny its importance. For the most part, diplomatic historians have, surprisingly, been untouched by it. Many years ago, even before the concept had been fully developed, Roger H. Brown explored the relationship between republicanism and the War of 1812 in a fine book,¹⁴ but a portion of Steven Watts's *The Republic Reborn*, which employs new and deeper approaches, more clearly establishes the war as a key episode in the solidification of American republicanism.¹⁵ In a slightly older book, *The Elusive Republic*, Drew McCoy stresses the relationship between republicanism and policies of free trade and territorial expansion.¹⁶ Yet both Watts and McCoy, as well as others in their vein, essentially look inward; foreign relations are a concern only insofar as they illuminate domestic developments. Diplomatic historians might well devote their energies to studies of the entire picture.

Nor is the War of 1812 the only topic deserving new attention as a result of the republican approach. For many years, historians repeated more or less the same clichés when they described American reactions to European developments from the French Revolution to the fall of Napoleon. In a recent book that incorporates new approaches, David B. Davis showed just how hackneyed some of our views had become.¹⁷ But because it is both suggestive and brief, Davis's work opens the way to a fertile field of inquiry. Joseph Shulim, *The Old Dominion and Napoleon Bonaparte*, showed long ago how useful local studies of opinion might be,¹⁸ but a contemporary historian would approach the subject in a much more complex fashion. Besides local studies, attention might be given, for example, to Federalist divisions, which are far more complex than usually recognized, or the almost unexplored, and therefore unexplained, Clintonian Republicans.

Leading personalities also deserve reexamination. One would have thought that little new could be written about Thomas Jefferson, but in less than twenty years at least four books have reshaped our picture of the Virginian and his

12. Max Savelle, *The Origins of American Diplomacy: The International History of Anglo-America, 1492-1763* (New York, 1967).

13. For a statement of his views see Akira Iriye, "Culture and International History," in Hogan and Paterson, eds., *Explaining*, 214-25.

14. Roger H. Brown, *The Republic in Peril: 1812* (New York, 1964).

15. Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of Liberal America, 1790-1820* (Baltimore, 1987).

16. Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, 1980).

17. David B. Davis, *Revolutions* (Cambridge, MA, 1990).

18. Joseph I. Shulim, *The Old Dominion and Napoleon Bonaparte* (New York, 1952).

foreign policy.¹⁹ If such is the case with the man who is probably the most written about of the Founding Fathers, surely there are many opportunities for innovative biographical treatments of other important figures.

Although J. C. A. Stagg, writing in 1983, offered new conclusions on aspects of James Madison's diplomatic activities, no modern, full-scale treatment exists.²⁰ The now almost forgotten debate between Felix Gilbert and James Hutson over John Adams needs reexamination in light of newer intellectual concepts.²¹ The even older studies of Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton by Gerald Stourzh, valuable though they are, similarly deserve updating.²² What can be done is suggested if not fully developed by Greg Russell's *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy*, vastly different in approach than Samuel Flagg Bemis's magisterial biography, and by David Fitzsimons's prize-winning article, a good "advertisement" for his forthcoming full-length study of Thomas Paine.²³

Finally, Native Americans might be brought much more fully into the history of diplomacy. Up to now, scholars "have had a difficult time defining the Indians as either an internal or an external group, with the result that 'Indians have been largely ignored as a factor in American diplomatic history.'" ²⁴ Even the most comprehensive textbooks seldom insert more than an unconnected paragraph or two on tribal-white relations.

Recently, however, William Weeks and others have argued that Indian-American relations indeed *are* diplomacy, essentially the same as relations with foreign countries; after all, the tribes were denominated "nations," and until after the Civil War treaties were negotiated with them.²⁵ In this view, the Trail

19. Reginald Stuart, *The Half-Way Pacifist: Thomas Jefferson's View of War* (Toronto, 1978); Burton Spivak, *Jefferson's English Crisis: Commerce, Embargo, and the Republican Revolution* (Charlottesville, 1979); Robert W. Tucker and David C. Hendrickson, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1990); Doron Ben-Atar, *The Origins of Jeffersonian Commercial Policy and Diplomacy* (New York, 1993).

Joseph J. Ellis, *American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson* (New York, 1997), a superb accomplishment, has little to say on Jefferson's diplomacy.

20. J. C. A. Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War: Politics, Diplomacy, and Warfare in the Early Republic, 1783-1830* (Princeton, 1983), chaps. 1 and 2.

21. Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1961); James H. Hutson, "Intellectual Foundations of Early American Diplomacy," *Diplomatic History* 1 (Winter 1977): 1-19. Although Hutson is usually considered to have been the "winner" in this debate, the new emphasis on republicanism and the distinctiveness of American modes of thought suggest that reexamination is in order.

22. Gerald Stourzh, *Benjamin Franklin and American Foreign Policy* (Chicago, 1954); idem, *Alexander Hamilton and the Idea of Republican Government* (Stanford, 1970).

23. Greg Russell, *John Quincy Adams and the Public Virtues of Diplomacy* (Columbia, MO, 1995); Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundation of American Foreign Policy* (New York, 1949); David M. Fitzsimons, "Tom Paine's New World Order: Idealistic Internationalism in the Ideology of Early American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 19 (Fall 1995): 569-82.

24. Kinley J. Brauer, "The Great American Desert Revisited: Recent Literature and Prospects for the Study of American Foreign Relations, 1815-61," *Diplomatic History* 13 (Summer 1989): 407.

25. William E. Weeks, "New Directions in the Study of Early American Foreign Relations," *Diplomatic History* 17 (Winter 1993): 93.

of Tears and the Black Hawk War are part of American diplomatic history. While it is true that the drive against Native Americans was an integral part of the story of American expansion, and while it is also true that American views of them are part of a larger picture of national racism, many will not be willing to go as far as Weeks and those who think as he does.²⁶

All can agree, however, that Native Americans have too often been given, at best, a marginal, oversimplified role in treatments of the United States's relationship with European powers and Mexico. A recent book, Richard White's *The Middle Ground*, has shown how profitably the tribes can be made full actors in the story of white rivalries.²⁷ As suggested earlier, such an approach, applied in detail to Spanish-American relations, would undoubtedly result in major revisions of Arthur Whitaker's conclusions. Quite possibly, too, we would learn a good deal from a broader examination of the Indian role than is included in Julius W. Pratt's *Expansionists of 1812*.²⁸

Fashions in history come and go. Although we often suffer today from the intolerance of our peers, American diplomatic history is as vital and lively today as it has been for many years. That a large preponderance of the outstanding new work has dealt with recent times is a fact beyond challenge. But it is also beyond challenge that, perhaps because of comparative neglect, the early national period offers extremely attractive opportunities for research.

26. Among other things, the Native American nations were not, of course, allowed to have relations, at least open ones, with foreign powers. Chief Justice Marshall described them as "domestic dependent nations" in *Cherokee Nation v. Georgia* in 1831; this seems an accurate, if insensitive, characterization.

27. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York, 1991).

28. Julius W. Pratt, *Expansionists of 1812* (New York, 1925).