

A Call to Revolution:

A Roundtable on Early U.S. Foreign Relations

The authors in this roundtable urge historians of U.S. foreign relations to show renewed interest in the revolutionary and early national eras. They argue that the formation of the early republic was, first and foremost, an event in international history. European entry into the Western Hemisphere – with the expansion of trade in an increasingly globalized economy, the introduction of firearms and implements of all sorts, the dispersal of contagions, and the pressure to enlarge hunting grounds for fur and skins – affected ongoing struggles for power among native inhabitants and among European states. New networks of alliances became possible for groups on both sides of the Atlantic, and out of these complex and shifting international relationships, “Americans” constructed ideologies of national identity, created a new “nation” through a union of states, and envisioned a new world order – a *novus ordo seclorum* – based upon principles of federalism and liberal capitalism.

Echoing some of the themes of earlier articles in *Diplomatic History* by Kinley Brauer and William Weeks and of a recent symposium in the *Journal of the Early Republic*, the essays here lament the paucity of current scholarship in early U.S. foreign relations and suggest new directions and fresh questions.¹ In reflecting on these essays and other work on the history of the early republic, however, it seems that the perceived paucity is actually a problem of packaging and labeling. Much of the recent scholarship in this period is being done by people who call themselves something other than historians of foreign relations but nonetheless relates to issues that are central to international affairs: issues related to national identity; to boundaries (what constitute “national” boundaries when one is dealing with both imperial and indigenous forms of political organization?); and to representation (both in the political sense of who repre-

1. Kinley Brauer, “The Great American Desert Revisited: Recent Literature and Prospects for the Study of American Foreign Relations, 1815–61,” *Diplomatic History* 13 (Summer 1989): 395–417; William Earl Weeks, “New Directions in the Study of Early American Foreign Relations,” *ibid.* 17 (Winter 1993): 73–96; “Foreign Relations in the Early Republic: Essays from a SHEAR Symposium,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (Winter 1994): 453–95, which includes contributions by Lawrence S. Kaplan, Bradford Perkins, Kinley Brauer, John M. Belohlavek, and William Earl Weeks. New interest in this field may be stimulated by the recent publication of a new documentary collection, *The Emerging Nation: A Documentary History of the Foreign Relations of the United States under the Articles of Confederation* (Washington, 1996).

sents whom in negotiations and intercultural relationships and also in the broader sense of how representations of self, group, nation, and “other” structure understandings of public affairs). Mirroring the American nation itself in this early period, the boundaries among subfields dealing with this era are particularly fluid, ill-defined, and overlapping.

Collectively, this roundtable suggests a reorientation in what constitutes the field of early U.S. foreign relations. Examining the implications of each of the following essays may help to illuminate this reorientation.

Peter Onuf argues that the “republican synthesis,” which has dominated scholarship about the revolutionary era for the past generation, has steered attention away from issues concerning the international and geopolitical context. He contends that concerns with shaping global systems preoccupied the thinking of the American revolutionaries, who were cosmopolitan students of the Enlightenment. He thus calls for a kind of reinvigorated “imperial school” of revolutionary-era studies and sees diplomatic historians as the most appropriate group to help undertake the task of situating America’s “more perfect union” – its federal system – within the international context of imperial constitutional thought. Extending the theme he developed in *Federal Union, Modern World*, Onuf calls attention to the American federal experiment as “a kind of embryonic world order.” The Constitution was a “treaty” confederating the states; it left open the possibility of others joining. Federalism was not just a domestic order but a potential world system – a world system set free from the mercantilism and monarchy of empires past.² The truly revolutionary nature of the Revolution, Onuf implies, can thus be understood only in the context of international history. He urges diplomatic historians to reclaim and reexamine the revolutionary vision that provided the foundations for American internationalist thought by positing world orders as constituted within leagues and other kinds of collectivities.

Although Onuf does not here fully develop the idea, his emphasis on *federalism* suggests the expansionist impulses inherent in the revolutionary vision of a new world order. If thirteen diverse states could form a single federation, why should others not enroll or be annexed? The union could be enlarged by “treaty,” which, as Onuf points out, was simply a variant of a “constitution.” William Earl Weeks has argued, in *Building the Continental Empire*, that “empire was . . . the chief motive for the creation of a union of states.” Conversely, Onuf implies that constitutional union also provided the discursive vehicle for an ever enlarging New World empire.³

2. Peter Onuf and Nicholas Onuf, *Federal Union, Modern World: The Law of Nations in an Age of Revolutions, 1776–1814* (Madison, 1993).

3. William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago, 1996), ix. Frederick W. Marks III, *Independence on Trial: Foreign Affairs and the Making of the Constitution* (Baton Rouge, 1973) also argues that foreign policy concerns provided the primary impetus for the establishment of a strong union.

Jay Gitlin's essay, which integrates accounts of western settlement into the intricacies of imperial diplomacy, also explores connections between expansionism and treaties. He recommends that Indian treaties, which provided the means of organizing the relationships between the federal government and the nation's peripheries, be brought within the purview of U.S. diplomatic history. To be sure, treaties could be mechanisms of national expansion – “licenses for empire,” in Dorothy Jones's apt phrase.⁴ But, in addition, Gitlin shows how they also provided engines of nation-formation both for whites (as treaties elevated the power of the federal government as the single treaty maker) and for Indians (as treaties gave legitimacy to the representatives of the idea of a coherent Indian “nation”).

In most recent works associated with the “new” western history, of course, the “frontier” no longer connotes a line of outermost Anglo-American settlement but a “cultural contact zone” of fluid boundaries and contested terrain. Frontiers are presented as lands of confusion in which lines of both ethnicity and nationality blur. They are international zones, yet their experiences do not follow clear models or typologies: the many different European players (United States, England, France, Spain, Russia), the large variety of Indian groups and factions, and the changing historic time and geographic location of contacts all mix into various particularized manifestations of a frontier (that is, international) experience. As Gregory Nobles writes, a “‘frontier’ is a region in which no culture, group, or government can claim effective control or hegemony over others.”⁵

In fact, much recent scholarship has emphasized the similarities among many of the multiethnic communities on the borderlands between Indian and white settlement. The mobility of traders, guides, and craftsmen mixed populations, and interethnic liaisons created ethnically diverse populations that many scholars now see as quintessentially American, rather than as aberrant to a white American norm.⁶ Imperial and revolutionary wars may have often worked to clarify lines and borders – making more clear-cut those who were allies and enemies and forcing a dichotomy of two opposing camps. Richard White and Gregory Evans Dowd have shown how the Revolution and its aftermath wreaked destruction on Indian communities, which were charged with being agents of British power and oppression, and rendered them “enemies.”⁷ But, as Colin Calloway points out, dissent from this dichotomy also persisted. Just as many colonists remained loyal to England, so there were also

4. Dorothy V. Jones, *License for Empire: Colonialism by Treaty in Early America* (Chicago, 1982).

5. Gregory H. Nobles, *American Frontiers: Cultural Encounters and Continental Conquest* (New York, 1997), xii. See also William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992).

6. Gary B. Nash, “The Hidden History of Mestizo America,” *Journal of American History* 82 (December 1995): 941–64.

7. Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650–1815* (New York, 1991); Gregory Evans Dowd, *A Spirited Resistance: The North American Indian Struggle for Unity, 1745–1815* (Baltimore, 1992).

“patriot” Indians and many who advised neutrality as a way of preserving their settlements from the ravages of war.⁸ Before, during, and after the Revolution, the dynamic tension between “middle-ground” mixing and “nation-building” separation continually shaped frontier experiences and loyalties.

Within this dynamic tension between mixing and separation, according to Gitlin, treaties could work to make boundaries clearer and help convert territory of uncertain status into “private properties.” Therefore, the two hundred or more Indian treaties concluded in less than fifty years served economic, political, and cultural functions that were important in constituting and defending the new nation and in defining and clarifying the status of nearby others. Treaty negotiations present more complexities than simple victimization; Gitlin shows how skillful Indian leaders, such as the Miamis’ Chief Richardville, could maximize economic advantages for themselves while also helping to constitute attributes of a Miami Nation. Gitlin calls for a more nuanced treatment of treaties as negotiations among unstable “nations” that were, themselves, always being reshaped through negotiation.

Ultimately, however, treaties were part of the process by which frontier areas were “closed,” as decisive hegemonies gained control. The “closing” of frontiers, as Gregory Nobles points out, took place through conquest and colonization – highly political processes of military, economic, and cultural domination. Anders Stephanson’s recent thoughtful analysis of manifest destiny skillfully examines the ways in which various religious and scientific discourses about inevitable futures once disguised this process of imperial intervention and incorporation.⁹

I would enlarge upon Stephanson’s insights to suggest that these processes of conquest are still often masked by the disciplinary structures that place “frontier” history as a subdivision of “domestic” rather than of “international” history. By ignoring scholarship in western and frontier history, as though U.S. international relations primarily faced toward the Atlantic Ocean, some historians of foreign relations have inscribed the discourses of manifest destiny into the deep structures of their investigations. Bradford Perkins’s otherwise masterful synthesis of early American foreign relations for the four-volume *Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, for example, virtually ignores diplomacy with any nations that were not European and discusses America’s western boundaries almost completely as a byproduct of diplomacy with Europe.¹⁰ On the other hand, both Stephanson’s *Manifest Destiny* and Weeks’s *Building the Continental Empire* look westward and critique the concept of manifest destiny, but they use little of the scholarship on “frontiers” by the

8. Colin G. Calloway, *The American Revolution in Indian Country: Crisis and Diversity in Native American Communities* (New York, 1995).

9. Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right* (New York, 1995).

10. Bradford Perkins, *The Cambridge History of American Foreign Relations*, vol. 1, *The Creation of a Republican Empire, 1776–1865* (New York, 1993).

“new” western historians. By contrast, Nobles’s *American Frontiers* primarily invokes traditions in western history but virtually ignores the foreign relations literature on expansionism. Gitlin’s essay, by building bridges between the “new” western history and an expanded vision of U.S. foreign relations, implicitly repudiates those vestiges of manifest destiny that still inhabit the traditions of historical writing in the United States.

Like Onuf and Gitlin, Doron Ben-Atar also studies the creation of a national identity within an international setting. He brings yet another angle of vision. Nationalism within this diverse new territory, he suggests, could not be constructed from references to a common past or to exclusive ethnic traditions. He uses Benjamin Franklin as a case study to show how national identity was shaped especially within the discourses of foreign policy. As a diplomat abroad, Franklin developed a broad view of the uniqueness of the American nation. He reversed his earlier dislike for non-English immigrants and came to embrace America’s ethnic diversity as a strength. He also began to promote nationalistic economic programs of commercial and industrial development that might help bind together the fragmented ex-colonies. If national identity and cohesion came, in part, from constructing “difference” along the frontier, so too did they arise within the context of relations with Europe and, in Franklin’s case, refracted through the distance of his European vantage point.

Ben-Atar’s work joins other recent investigations that pose J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur’s classic question, “What is the American?” and then approach the question in new ways: less to identify stable attributes of a presumed “national character” than to explore an on-going cultural process of invention and imagination that seeks to enforce both inclusion and exclusion from the group. “What is the American?” also asks “What is *not* the American?” and both questions raise collateral issues of subjectivity (Who has the power to name?) and of reception (Who accepts, resists, or alters the terms of that power?). Political theorists such as Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, and Eric Hobsbawm have stimulated much exciting work on the construction of national identity, and there is a growing body of scholarship, focusing on this era, that comes out of the subdisciplines of both cultural history and foreign relations.¹¹ Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, Eve Kornfeld, Amy Kaplan, Holly Brear, Jan Lewis, Catherine Allgor, Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, and others have done suggestive work on race and gender in the creation of nationhood; Jay Fliegelman, David Waldstreicher, Steven Watts, and others have studied the role of public ritual and historical memory.¹² The early part of Ben-Atar’s essay points to uniting

11. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford, 1983); Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London, 1983); Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition* (New York, 1983).

12. Caroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Dis-Covering the Subject of the ‘Great Constitutional Discussion,’ 1786–1789,” *Journal of American History* 79 (December 1992): 841–73; Eve Kornfeld, “Encountering ‘the Other’: American Intellectuals and Indians in the 1790s,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 52 (April 1995): 287–314; Amy Kaplan and Donald F. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism*

these kinds of questions about cultural construction with histories of foreign relations. Historians should problematize the concept of nation before thoughtlessly invoking it.

Ben-Atar also, however, joins the formation of cultural identity to an economic program. Historians of the early republic have long stressed the commercial impetus behind the new nation's international policies. John Belohlavek, Kinley Brauer, Norman Graebner, Walter LaFeber, Drew McCoy, and others have placed market opportunities near the center of the process of continental expansion. Moreover, Joyce Appleby, David Fitzsimons, Felix Gilbert, and William Weeks have examined the hold that notions of liberalism and open trading spheres came to have over U.S. policy as it faced survival in a world dominated by European mercantilism.¹³ Ben-Atar argues that Franklin combined both faith in an economic liberalism that might create a North Atlantic economy and fervor for a program of economic nationalism that might promote a "balanced neo-mercantilist political economy." He shows how Franklin sought to entice skilled artisans to immigrate to America and smuggle out their new technology.

Whereas Onuf, Gitlin, and Ben-Atar each illustrate some specific new directions for the field, Bradford Perkins, the preeminent diplomatic historian of this era, provides a commentary that surveys many different opportunities for study. Perkins makes valuable suggestions for further work that might build upon or revise classic studies and proposes some broader conceptualizations as well. Specifically, he urges more work on themes such as relations with Spain

(Durham, NC, 1993); Holly Beachley Brear, *Inherit the Alamo: Myth and Ritual at an American Shrine* (Austin, 1995); Jan Lewis, "of every age sex & condition": The Representation of Women in the Constitution," *Journal of the Early Republic* 15 (Fall 1995): 359–88; Catherine Allgor, "Louisa Catherine Adams in Russia," *Diplomatic History* 21 (Winter 1997): 15–43; Marie-Jeanne Rossignol, *Le ferment nationaliste: Aux origines de la politique extérieure des États-Unis, 1789–1812* (Paris, 1994); Jay Fliegelman, *Declaring Independence: Jefferson, Natural Language, and the Culture of Performance* (Stanford, 1993); David Waldstreicher, "Rites of Rebellion, Rites of Assent: Celebrations, Print Culture, and the Origins of American Nationalism," *Journal of American History* 82 (June 1995): 37–61; Steven Watts, *The Republic Reborn: War and the Making of a Liberal America, 1790–1820* (Baltimore, 1987).

13. John Belohlavek, "Let the Eagle Soar"! *The Foreign Policy of Andrew Jackson* (Lincoln, NE, 1985) and "Economic Interest Groups and the Formation of Foreign Policy in the Early Republic," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (Winter 1994): 476–84; Kinley Brauer, "1821–1860: Economics and the Diplomacy of American Expansion," in *Economics and World Power: An Assessment of American Diplomacy since 1789*, ed. William H. Becker and Samuel F. Wells, Jr. (New York, 1984); Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York, 1955); Walter LaFeber, ed., *John Quincy Adams and American Continental Empire: Letters, Papers, and Speeches* (Chicago, 1965); Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, 1980); Richard Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1960); Joyce O. Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, MA, 1992); 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; Felix Gilbert, *To the Farewell Address: Ideas of Early American Foreign Policy* (Princeton, 1961); William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington, KY, 1992) and "American Nationalism, American Imperialism: An Interpretation of United States Political Economy, 1789–1861," *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (Winter 1994): 485–95.

and Spanish-America; nongovernmental international business contacts (on the model of David Hancock's work); republicanism (on the model of Steven Watts's book); biographies of major figures (such as Fitzsimons's work on Thomas Paine); and interactions with American Indians. Through this overview, Perkins reminds readers that "in the early years, foreign policy was perhaps more important for the union's future than at any other time until the twentieth century."

These essays serve as reminders that the early United States was not an isolated and insulated place but one deeply enmeshed in international affairs.¹⁴ Neither was it a well defined "nation," but rather a protean entity that could only derive its changing definition – both spatially and culturally – from its relationship with others. Both the U.S. Constitution and subsequent continental treaties were *diplomatic* events, as were the very processes of the formation of "national" identities on the North American continent. The colonial wars, the Revolution, and westward expansion were episodes in *international* history.

The call to revolution in the writing of early American diplomatic history, then, marks not so much a departure from or a rupture with the past but rather a reorientation and a rearrangement of disciplinary boundaries. As exemplified in these essays, this call might have the following particulars:

1. The federal system and many of the goals of the Founding Fathers emerged within the context of ideas about international order: that is, how diverse states can effectively bind together a common destiny through mutual compacts and federation.

2. Unless manifest destiny is to be assumed, rather than interrogated, westward expansion and borderlands history must be construed as international, rather than purely domestic, history.

3. The imagined community called the "American nation" is not an essence to be assumed but a process of construction, made up through changing technologies of inclusion and exclusion, to be analyzed historically.

4. Debates over domestic economic organization were simultaneously debates over foreign policy and vice versa.

5. A wide variety of international actors and issues, whether they were formally governmental or not, played a part in foreign relations from the very outset of U.S. history.

This roundtable suggests the broadening of foreign relations scholarship beyond a focus on formal transatlantic diplomacy into an examination of the cultural and economic discourses that shaped an American nationalism and helped construct a wide variety of contests over issues of boundaries and representation. Historians of the revolutionary and early national periods, no matter what subfield claims them (western, frontier, borderlands, economic, or

14. For suggestive geographical studies see John A. Agnew, *The United States in the World-Economy: A Regional Geography* (New York, 1987) and D. W. Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History*, 2 vols. (New Haven, 1986).

cultural history), routinely consider the new nation within an international and multicultural context. It makes little sense for historians of U.S. foreign relations to define the history of America's international involvements so narrowly as to marginalize and exclude this scholarship. If there seems to be a paucity of work in early American diplomatic history, it arises from the overly narrow definition of the subdiscipline itself. Doses of boundary transgression, academic cross-dressing, and even some territorial expansion can assist the call to revolution and renewal in the study of early U.S. foreign relations.