UNITED STATES DIPLOMATIC HISTORY

From Revolution to Empire

VOLUME 1 **TO 1914**

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GERARD CLARFIELD

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Volume 1
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PREFACE

We live during a particularly exciting moment in world affairs. The cold war, America's fixation for more than four decades, has given way to a new and unpredictable international situation. Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union are suffering from grave economic and political problems; a united Germany is predominant in Europe; and Japan has become a global economic power. The Middle East and Africa are aflame. And, as I write, the war in the Persian Gulf has just come to a close, leaving in its wake widespread instability throughout the region.

The American people and their leaders have emerged from this conflict exultant, filled with hubris, and confident, as they have not been since the Vietnam War, that this country can shape the course of world history. Whether that is true is problematic. Notwithstanding the United States's impressive showing in the Gulf War, Washington's position in the world has eroded—along with its once overwhelming economic strength. One thing seems certain, however. We are at one of those moments in world affairs that bears the earmarks of a watershed. All in all, it is a fine moment to take stock, to look back. I hope that students will want to do that and that this volume will help.

It wasn't too long ago (before the proliferation of good, relatively inexpensive paperback books) that students were required to depend upon

a textbook as their main source of information in history courses. These books were by and large extremely thorough, and of course, students received a solid grounding in the major issues. But they also spent a good deal of time unraveling the mysteries surrounding obscure boundary disputes, quarrels over fishing rights, and pelagic sealing controversies, all matters of less than earth-shaking consequence.

As teachers I think we are more sensitive today. We know that a good teaching tool does not need to be, indeed probably should not be, encyclopedic. At the same time I think we are also wise enough to know what should be remembered. My hope is that this book lives up to that standard.

Like all syntheses, this book is based in large part on an extensive reading of the work of others. I have, through the use of notes and the section on supplementary reading, acknowledged many but by no means all of my debts. I would therefore like to take this opportunity to thank those whose names do not appear in these pages but whose work has nevertheless contributed so much to my understanding of our diplomatic history. I would also like to express my profound appreciation to Michael Barnhart of the State University of New York at Stony Brook and to Manfred Jonas of Union College for their careful reading of this work in manuscript and the many helpful suggestions they have offered. I am also deeply grateful to Mrs. Patty Eggleston for her help in preparing the manuscript for publication. Last, but by no means least, I thank my editors, Barbara Reilly, who has been a joy to work with, and Ann Hofstra Grogg, whose extraordinary labors on my behalf have been an enormous asset.

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INTRODUCTION

When I began writing these volumes on the course of United States diplomatic history over the past two-and-a half centuries, I had no particular interpretive axe to grind. Nor do I now. Yet two basic themes do emerge from the narrative. The first of these, which reveals itself quite early, is a persistent contradiction that existed between the political hopes of American policy makers and certain fundamental economic realities.

The idea that the United States should "steer clear" of European political affairs and wars was articulated by John Adams and Thomas Paine as early as 1776, and written indelibly into our history by James Monroe in his famous 1823 doctrine. That was all well and good except that while the United States was seeking what amounted to political isolation, it was at the same time an important member of the international economic community with an ever-increasing stake in world trade. Could America stay politically unentangled while at the same time playing an important role in the global economy? Early policy makers grappled with this dilemma but were confronted with repeated crises and humiliations, the result of attempting to play the role of a neutral trading nation during the wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. Finally, in 1812, James Madison felt he had no option but to fight. The nation's honor, the credibility of the Jeffersonian Republican party, and his own personal political interest required it.

The years that followed the War of 1812, while replete with many problems, saw no repetition of the crises that had plagued the founding fathers. But that was not because succeeding generations had resolved their dilemma. It was simply that the political settlement arranged at the Congress of Vienna in 1815 ushered in a century of relative peace in Europe.

Nonentanglement remained a hallowed tradition, an unquestioned verity for most Americans well into the twentieth century. Yet long before that, the United States had in fact sidled up to and taken a seat at the table where the high-stakes game of international diplomacy was played. In part this dramatic break with tradition was a reflection of the fact that the United States had become a great power and that an increasing number of Americans believed it should act like one. Moreover, the country had reached a point in its economic development when foreign trade, and therefore foreign markets, had become exceptionally important. With England, France, Germany, Russia and Japan expanding through Africa, Asia, and the Pacific, Washington either had to join in the race for empire or risk being left behind, a second-rate power. Given these alternatives and the nationalist as well as economic pressures at work in the United States, it is hardly surprising that Washington resolved its long standing dilemma by abandoning its commitment to nonentanglement.

Expansionism is the second theme that permeates the history of American foreign policy. The Declaration of Independence stands as the first great expansionist document in our national history. Here the revolutionary generation claimed the right, indeed the duty, to throw off despotism and establish a society based on libertarian principles. In the process they changed forever the map of North America, creating a nation that extended from the Atlantic to the Mississippi, from the Great Lakes almost to the Gulf of Mexico.

When, almost thirty years later, Thomas Jefferson violated his own strict constructionist convictions to acquire the Louisiana Purchase, he believed first that he was securing the "empire for liberty" begun in 1776, that this vast area would guarantee America's agrarian future for all time. He also believed that by eliminating France as a neighbor and securing total control over the Mississippi River he was protecting America against the danger of being dragged into future European wars.

The reasons behind the United States's expansionist thrust changed with its geopolitical situation. In 1846, when James K. Polk decided on war with Mexico in order to secure California and the southwest for the United States, rabid expansionists explained this territorial grab in Jeffersonian terms as "expanding the area of freedom." In fact, however, Polk was not motivated by ideological passion. He was the first in a succession of policy makers who thought in terms of acquiring Pacific coast ports and an Isthmian canal in hopes of securing a "passage to India." Such a development, he imagined, would at once lead to the growth of a valuable Pacific trade and be vastly encouraging to the internal economic development of the United States.

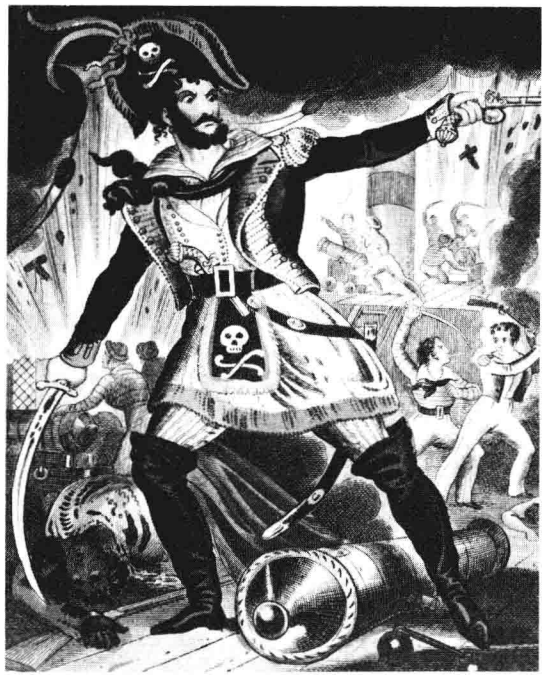
Once Polk had secured ports on the Pacific, the next logical step was to move into the Caribbean and the Pacific. But at that point in time, America's expansionist thrust was blunted first by the sectional controversy and the Civil War, and later by domestic economic and political considerations as well as the fact that the idea of acquiring overseas holdings ran directly contrary to the powerful tradition of nonentanglement. In the aftermath of the war a succession of policy makers dreamed the same dream. Still, no administration developed a clear-cut policy of overseas expansion until Benjamin Harrison entered the White House in 1889. Even then it took another ten years before the vision acquired substance.

In the 1840s, President Polk envisioned what Professor Norman Graebner has called an *Empire on the Pacific* (1955). In 1899, President William McKinley secured an empire *in* the Pacific. His successor, Theodore Roosevelt fulfilled another aspect of the vision when he took the Panama Canal Zone and undertook to transform the Caribbean into an American lake, a process completed by President Woodrow Wilson.

Looking back on this earlier time from the vantage point of the late twentieth century, the basic themes that appear to have dominated America's foreign policy during its rise to great power seem clear enough. There is a danger, however, in thinking that these themes were as obvious to those who made history as they are to those of us who are privileged to look back upon it. Historians attempt to make sense of the past. In the process they decide which evidence is important and which is not. In some ways a historian is like a paleontologist picking over old bones. The bones, as we all know, can be assembled in different ways to create different impressions. So can the facts of history. This book represents my way of looking at the evidence. Readers should understand that and retain a critical perspective.

1

AMERICA'S REVOLUTIONARY DIPLOMACY, 1775–1783



John Paul Jones raided the Irish Coast almost at will during the Revolutionary War. Americans viewed him as a naval hero. It is obvious from this cartoon, however, that the British saw him in an altogether different light.

On the second of July 1776, the Continental Congress, meeting in Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia, approved a resolution offered by Virginia's Richard Henry Lee, "that these United States are, and of a right ought to be free and independent."[1] Two days later, the delegates approved Thomas Jefferson's ringing declaration. It was the beginning of a new era in Western history. The "contagion of liberty" had been loosed, and nothing would ever be quite the same again.

Although for a century and more the thirteen Atlantic coast colonies grew and evolved as parts of the British empire, there had been from the very beginning an almost schizophrenic quality about their attachment to Britain. The colonists had been proud to proclaim themselves "freeborn Englishmen," subjects of the most enlightened nation in Europe. Yet at the same time they saw American society as unique—different from and in an ethical and spiritual sense superior to Old World cultures. It had been so from the very beginning of the American experience. The purpose of the earliest Puritan immigrants, after all, had been to establish a new Godly commonwealth at a time when England seemed to be descending into what they feared might be a permanent state of heresy and corruption. Thus in the spring of 1630, as he stood on the deck of the ship *Arabella* and felt the gentle swell of the sea beneath his feet, John Winthrop explained to his

fellow immigrants that their purpose was to establish a society superior to the one they were leaving behind, "a Citty upon a Hill," a virtuous community that would stand as an example for the rest of humankind to wonder at and emulate.[2]

If the religious fervor of the Puritans was one factor that contributed to the shaping of a unique American character and society, another deserving of mention here was the availability of cheap and virtually limitless expanses of land. This led to the growth of a fundamentally agrarian, socially mobile society in which Europe's rigid class system could not take root.

In the later part of the eighteenth century, a young Frenchman who first crossed the Atlantic to serve with the French army in Canada observed life in this new society. J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur traveled widely in British North America before settling in rural New York. There, in the last decade of the colonial era, he wrote of his delight at witnessing the evolution of a people largely untainted by Europe's corrupt hand. A new sort of person was emerging in America—one who knew nothing of aristocratic pretensions or a repressive clergy but who cherished simple republican principles and enjoyed a bountiful life earned by hard labor on the land.

If Americans took pride in their virtuous society, the other side of the coin was the fear that European corruption would, like some dread contagion, reach across the Atlantic to engulf them. John Dickinson, later a leading Pennsylvania revolutionary, was a student living in London in the early 1750s. Impressed by the grandeur of the great city, he was at the same time appalled by the corruption of British politics. "I think the character of Rome will equally suit this nation," wrote Dickinson, "Easy to be bought, if there was but a purchaser." Many years later, while serving as America's envoy to France, Thomas Jefferson made the same point. He urged James Monroe to join him in Paris not so much to indulge in the pleasures of the Old World as to rejoice in the advantages of the New. "My God! how little do my countrymen know what precious blessings they are in possession of, and which no other people on earth enjoy. The comparison of our governments with those of Europe is like a comparison of heaven and hell."[3]

These feelings, the sense of uniqueness and the fear that too close an association with the nations of the Old World might lead to the destruction of republican virtue in the New, are clearly reflected in the earliest American approach to foreign policy. Thomas Paine, idealist, moralist, and a masterful political essayist, had been in America for less than two years when he published the influential pamphlet *Common Sense* in 1776. Yet he was aware of the importance of these attitudes and used them to argue for both independence and a foreign policy based on the principle of nonentanglement in Europe's political affairs.

Paine focused on the ideological divide that separated Europe, where monarchies held sway, from North America, where a republic was emerging. He argued that war, the scourge of Europe, was a product of monarchy itself—the original sport of kings as it were. But America, where a republican system was taking shape, had no reason for involvement in Europe's dynastic

In 1776 Thomas Paine published *Common Sense*, a pamphlet in which he advocated a foreign policy of political nonentanglement in Europe's political affairs and trade expansion for the United States.

squabbles. Republican governments were by their very nature peace loving. They could not suffer from the princely ambition for conquest and glory since they were or should be concerned with the well-being of the people, and the people's interest was never served by war.

Paine also contended that the "alliance" with England had produced only a succession of wars, none of which had been in America's interest. Once separated from the mother country, he went on, America could live in peace with the other European states that would have no reason to quarrel with an independent North American republic. On the other hand, he warned, "Any submission to, or dependence on, Great Britain tends directly to involve this continent in european [*sic*] wars and quarrels, and set us at variance with nations who would otherwise seek our friendship, and against whom we have neither anger nor complaint." "It is the true interest of America," Paine concluded, "to steer clear of European contentions, which she never can do, while, by her dependence on Britain, she is made the makeweight in the scale of British politics." Paine's views were seconded in the Continental Congress, where the mercurial John Adams warned that America should "avoid all obligations and temptations to take any part in future European wars."[4]

Yet if nonentanglement in Old World politics was a clear priority, powerful forces were at work driving all sections of the new nation into a close economic relationship with Europe. New England's prosperity depended on its continued access to the fisheries of the North Atlantic as well