

France and the American Civil War, A Diplomatic History

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Review

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Sainlaude, Stéve, *France and the American Civil War, A Diplomatic History*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2019. HARDCOVER. \$45.00 ISBN 9781469649948. pp. 304

Stéve Sainlaude, associate professor of history at the University of Paris IV Sorbonne, provides an in depth look at the American Civil War from the French perspective. He challenges many older interpretations by American historians concerning France's motives during the conflict. He focusses on how Napoleon III, his diplomats, people and press viewed the possibility of French intervention. A key factor in the study concerns France's occupation of Mexico as part of the emperor's "Grand Design" to win national glory, regain international influence, protect monarchical and imperial regimes, and save the Catholic Latin Race from worldwide Anglo-Saxon domination. The author maintains that Napoleon III's occupation of Mexico would have been impossible without the South's secession and that initially the emperor believed an independent Confederacy would be the last barrier that could block Yankee domination of Latin America.

Sainlaude makes use of heretofore overlooked archival sources; especially the roughly 1,000 pages of dispatches from French consuls in various American cities and correspondence between the Quai d'Orsay (French Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and its embassy in Washington, to challenge older beliefs about France's decisions. He organizes his work into three parts of three chapters each; the first part explores the French position concerning the contending parties in America, Napoleon III's involvement, and the relationship between France and Great Britain. Part II covers the myths and realities of how France viewed the South, the impact, or lack thereof, of Southern slavery on French thinking, and Napoleon III's "Grand Design." The final part explores how an independent South would have affected France long term.

One of the main points stressed is that French intervention in support of the South was not, in contrast to earlier interpretations, dependent on British cooperation. Sainlaude maintains that the emperor, in an effort to return France to the glory days of his uncle, had begun to regularly oppose British foreign policy in Syria, Europe and most notably in Mexico. He also

shows us that Southern slavery was, unlike in Britain, not an impediment for Napoleon III, his ministers, or the French population when it came to supporting the Confederacy. They questioned Northern abolitionists' calls for freeing the South's slave population en masse as irresponsible and blamed them for inflaming Southern opinion. The French viewed Lincoln as a "greater defender of the Union than of abolition, they were convinced that slavery was not one of the war's fundamental issues." (109)

Sainlaude finds that Napoleon III, along with many educated Frenchmen, both liberal and conservative, felt that the South had a right to leave the Union and disapproved of the North's coercive methods. They believed that the North reacted so quickly and aggressively against secession because it feared losing what amounted to a colony. The French felt that the war was certainly not about slavery, rather it was about a greedy North that feared an independent free trade South; and thus the average French person "showed little interest in the Civil War." (84-86) The French (and British) also found it odd that Lincoln's government considered it an intervention in American affairs when European powers granted the Confederacy belligerent status. Edouard Thouvenel, head of the Quai d'Orsay, asked had not the United States been born of revolution, and as the British pointed out when Spain's colonies had revolted "had not the Americans argued that the existence of civil war entitled the respective parties to the rights of war?," and was not the North granting the rights of a belligerent to the South when it exchanged prisoners and declared a blockade? (17)

During the early years of the fighting Napoleon III wanted to go further than his ministers and directly aid the Confederates by supplying warships and joining with Britain to break the blockade or bring about an end to hostilities through French diplomacy. The latter failed because the North rejected all offers of mediation, the former because the heads of the Quai d'Orsay, Thouvenel and his successor Edouard Drouyn de Lhuys, countered the emperor's plans when they altered or failed to send his proposals for joint intervention to the English. The emperor eventually learned of the resistance and went around his ministers, but this only confused the British. Later when the emperor saw to the secret building of six warships for the South, French officials leaked the information and he backpedaled due to Northern protests. Sainlaude maintains that Napoleon III failed to get his way due to his limited diplomatic abilities; he finds that the emperor lacked analytical depth, which left his ideas often confused and impracticable; and that he procrastinated constantly and thus struggled to sustain a course of action.

Sainlaude also finds that besides the hostility of the French ministers, the South did not receive French aid because it "had not rallied the right players to its cause," and sent the wrong men to France to pursue its Latin strategy; (87) like John Slidell, who he sees as an inexperienced schemer quick to get carried away. He maintains that the Southerners appeared to be playing a malicious double game, they wanted French help, but if they won independence they would attempt to expand southward and thus threaten the reconstitution of a Gallic empire in America. French diplomats "saw the men the South had chosen to lead its destiny and its diplomacy as staunch expansionists." (124)

Another factor that the author maintains prevented France from supporting the Confederacy was that Southern secession hurt the French economy much less than suspected. The French only used one-sixth of the cotton required by the British textile industry and only ten percent of the French working population was dependent on Southern cotton. Napoleon III's government was able to alleviate the initial pinch by moving workers to other industries and by 1863 Anglo-Indian cotton began to satisfy European needs. Sainlaude finds that the emperor, in spite of all his sympathy for the South, came to realize that if France acted alone to support the Confederacy, its trade with the North would be destroyed, which would be worse than just the loss of cotton imports. France needed Northern wheat and other products more than cotton, thus it would be better for France if the United States stayed intact.

Sainlaude concludes that Napoleon III came to realize "that the U.S. should be united to counterbalance England," and that an independent Confederacy created without England would be "doubly counterproductive" because it would focus the North's wrath on France (and Mexico) and thus strengthen Britain's position in the world. Britain's maritime supremacy would allow it to benefit most from secession, an independent South would "restore England in the land from which French ancestors had driven the English out." (67) He maintains that French policy toward the North had thus "become a contradiction," Southern secession had allowed France to occupy Mexico, but once in control there, the French dared not directly side with the Confederacy for fear the North would intervene south of the Rio Grande. (182)

Though Sainlaude makes a number of thought-provoking points concerning French views of the war, he seems to exhibit an anti-Southern bias at times; he hurts his overall argument when he assumes that everyone shares his belief that the South was only fighting to defend slavery and that an independent Confederacy definitely intended to create a large slave empire in Central and

South America. He cites those few voices who conjectured that Southerners would try to expand if they won independence, but no convincing justification for that assertion is detailed. It seems implausible that any well-informed player then would really believe that a South, which struggled so hard to even maintain its land borders and with a tiny navy could, after a long bankrupting war, expand a slave empire through Mexico and the Caribbean in the face of an unconquered North and a powerful France and Britain. It has been well established that slavery was dying in the South before the war and that even had the Confederacy gained some form of independence, the institution would scarcely have revived its prewar vigor or survived any great period of time.

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