Review

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The history of America’s Civil War, with rare exception, has been told within a tight national narrative. The historian David Potter once remarked that the Civil War remained the subject of “some of our worst navel-gazing” and that most historians were perfectly happy to portray the war as “a conflict all our own, as American as apple pie.”¹

Allan Nevins, one of the great Civil War historians of the centennial era, touted the importance of diplomacy and foreign public opinion: “No battle, not Gettysburg, not the Wilderness, was more important than the contest waged in the diplomatic arena and the forum of public opinion.” The “future of the world as we know it,” he wrote, hinged on events overseas.²

But most historians, with the exception of a small band of diplomatic scholars, have largely ignored the international context of America’s Civil War in favor of debates over the causation of the war or, since the 1960s, the war as prelude to America’s reluctant reckoning with slavery and race. There were several provocative attempts to break out of the nation-bound narrative of the war, many of them coming from outside the academy. Philip Van Doren Stern, a historian and successful popular writer, came out with *When the Guns Roared: World Aspects of the American Civil War* in 1965. It was a big, well-researched, and lively account that situated the North-South conflict within a vast web of international power struggles. A Hungarian refugee, journalist, and author of *Lincoln and the Emperors*, A. R. Tyrner-Tyrnauer, put his language skills to good use researching hitherto unexplored European archives to grasp, as no one had before, the collaboration among European empires to take advantage of the American crisis.

Jay Monaghan, a renowned Lincoln bibliographer and writer, first published *Diplomat in Carpet Slippers: Abraham Lincoln Deals with Foreign Affairs* in 1945, which went through several editions and is still in print. His was an enthusiastic account of Lincoln’s unexpectedly savvy role in foreign affairs that played to Lincoln idolatry, often at the expense of Lincoln’s secretary of state, William Seward.3

Seward, it is fair to say, earned his reputation for intemperate speech (and drinking, for that matter). We see him repeatedly waving his “perpetual cigar” and telling astonished diplomats and journalists that he will “wrap the world in flame” if any European power dare lend aid to the rebellion. Even at the time, it was never clear just how much of his blustering was contrived and purposeful. Norman Ferris, one of Seward’s most able defenders, argued in this journal that Seward’s reputation as a reckless war monger and usurper of power originated with jealous rivals, including fellow cabinet member Gideon Welles, Massachusetts senator Charles Sumner, and other rivals who resented Seward’s influence in the Lincoln administration. A spate of excellent books dealing with Seward and his foreign policy, by Ferris, John Taylor, Howard Jones, and Walter Stahr, has tried to correct this early impression of Seward, but it persists, perhaps because of our enduring admiration for Lincoln—the American everyman who comes to Washington and bests those who underestimated him. Seward, the New Yorker, educated, well-traveled, experienced, with all his worldly airs, presents an irresistible foil for the untutored provincial and preternaturally sagacious Old Abe. Doris Kearns Goodwin’s *Team of Rivals* kept the tradition alive with vivid portrayals of Seward’s jealous resentment of Lincoln. Amanda Foreman’s account of Anglo-American aspects of the war probably owed its title, *World on Fire*, to Seward and, of course, her book includes vivid reminders of Seward’s numerous Anglophobic outbursts.4


Kevin Peraino brings fresh purpose and sophisticated insight on foreign policy to his fascinating study of Lincoln and the world. His story focuses on the “making of a statesman,” the transformation of a provincial western politician into a savvy president who, with little preparation and no formal education, learned much of what he had to know about foreign affairs on the job. Peraino sees the Civil War as the “dawn of American power,” and he makes a good case for that. This is a smart, incisive, and beautifully written book that everyone with an interest in Lincoln and the Civil War will want to read. It takes us beyond the familiar biographic accounts of Lincoln to view him from a fresh angle. More important, this book illuminates the meaning of the war for the development of America as a world power, and it does so in a measured, intelligent manner that is free of Sewardian bombast. The author comes to his subject from a distinguished career in journalism as a foreign affairs reporter for Newsweek. His citations demonstrate a thorough mastery of the scholarship on Lincoln and nineteenth-century world affairs.

Peraino organizes the book around Lincoln and five adversaries, or challengers, a device that works better in some cases than in others. He begins with “Lincoln vs. Herndon,” which tells the story of his law partner in Springfield with whom he disagreed on the war with Mexico. Peraino uses this fleeting episode as a device to examine young Lincoln’s early awareness of foreign affairs and what became a core commitment to the peaceful expansion of American commercial power rather than military conquest.

When he turns to “Lincoln vs. Seward,” which is necessarily the heart of his case for Lincoln as a statesman, Peraino naturally draws on the story of Seward’s April 1, 1861, memorandum to the newly installed president, “Some Thoughts for the President,” as he titled his missive, called for an aggressive confrontation with Spain and France in answer to Spain’s incursion in Santo Domingo and France’s apparent collaboration. Seward invited the president to give him enormous power over foreign and domestic policy. This episode has played an essential role in the familiar portrayal of Seward as an overreaching rival who underestimates the inexperienced president, and the usual premise is that Seward wanted to “wag the dog” by trumping up an unjustified foreign war as a “panacea” that would reunite the country. Peraino does little to soften the image of Seward as an “impulsive,” hard-drinking, reckless man whom Lincoln had to “rein in” (68, 116). But the author also recognizes the method of Seward’s madness. Lord Lyons, the British ambassador to Washington, actually worried that Seward might be cracking under the strain of the secession crisis. It
seems clear, however, that Seward understood the effect his blustering comments would have, and he was glad to let European powers worry that he just might be willing to actually light the world on fire, perhaps storm into Canada or plunge into the Caribbean and seize European possessions.

Peraino also wisely recognizes that Lincoln and Seward, despite all their earlier rivalry, quickly developed a good working relationship and soon a warm friendship. “Each acted as the other’s ‘sober second thought’” on policy decisions, he writes, quoting the historian George Bancroft. Whatever differences existed between them on particular tactics, they shared a common vision for America.

Though the president chose not to pick a fight with Spain or France in April 1861, he did not otherwise rein in Seward. From April 1 forward, Seward pursued a hard-power foreign policy with no substantial interference from the president. More important, Seward was right to anticipate that European powers would take full advantage of the power vacuum America’s secession crisis had created, which would soon become evident in the European invasion of Mexico at the end of the year. The foreign policy Peraino describes in subsequent chapters dealing with the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, and the French emperor, Napoleon III, was directed by William Seward, in close collaboration with the president he served.

At the core of that foreign policy was the Union goal to cut off the rebel states from all foreign commerce and to swiftly build a powerful naval force capable of enforcing the blockade and intimidating European powers. Absolutely central to Union foreign policy were Seward’s firm and sometimes blustering threats that, if any European power dared to recognize the “so-called Confederacy” or lend aid to the rebellion in any way, the United States would “wrap the world in flames.” It will “become a war of continents,” Seward wrote to his London envoy, “a war of the world.” In case any foreign leaders failed to get the point, Seward had the diplomatic correspondence for the year published along with the president’s annual message to Congress for all the world to see.5

Seward’s personality was complicated but, as Peraino shows, his foreign policy was effective. He gives Lincoln credit for recognizing in his secretary of state not an adversary but an indispensable

collaborator who, despite several important differences over tactics, shared a common vision of America’s long-term interests and the necessity of maintaining the Union to achieve those interests.

Peraino then turns to three of Lincoln’s adversaries abroad, beginning with Lord Palmerston. He focuses on the international crisis that nearly brought war between Britain and the United States after an impetuous Union navy commander abducted and imprisoned Confederate envoys John Slidell and James Mason aboard a British mail ship named the *Trent*. The British press immediately took this as an insult to the British flag, and numerous outraged editorials soon brought public indignation to a boil in December 1861. Negotiations centered on the two envoys imprisoned at Fort Warren, near Boston, and the Palmerston government demanded that the United States release the two men or face war with Britain. The truth is that neither nation stood to gain or lose much by this confrontation; it was an affair of honor of no real strategic significance to either side. But for Peraino, this is another learning experience for Lincoln, one that helped him distinguish real national interests from short-term irritation over legal squabbles and affairs of honor.

We see Seward during the *Trent* crisis drinking, waving his cigar, and bellowing about wrapping the world in flames, apparently after considerable drink at a party attended by members of the Washington diplomatic corps. But it was Seward, at the crucial Christmas Day cabinet meeting, who made the case for releasing the men and avoiding war. Lincoln abandoned his preference for standing firm because, as he later admitted, he was unable to “make an argument that would satisfy my own mind.” Peraino suggests that Lincoln let Seward win the hand, but the president later admitted that he found the concession to Britain a “pretty bitter pill to swallow.” Both Lincoln and Seward realized that international law was on Britain’s side and that war with Britain would be disastrous to the Union cause, not least because it would push Britain into the arms of the Confederacy. Once news of Slidell and Mason’s release was known in Britain, the crisis subsided immediately, and leaders of both countries came away with a bracing reminder of the dangers of hard-power diplomacy.

Karl Marx, the next challenger in Peraino’s lineup, was not truly an adversary of Lincoln but, as a journalist for the *New York Tribune*, had a lot to say about the president. Peraino informs us that Lincoln was an avid reader of Horace Greeley’s *Tribune* and that he certainly would have come across Marx’s columns between 1851 and early 1862. Marx immediately recognized the American conflict as a crucial battle in the history of class warfare. As he saw it, in the New World a feudalistic
slaveholding class was taking its last stand against the bourgeoisie’s free-labor capitalism. Marx knew which side he was on. “The first grand war of contemporaneous history is the American war,” he told Tribune readers; the “highest form of popular self-government till now realized is giving battle to the meanest and most shameless form of man’s enslaving recorded in the annals of history.”

Greeley, apparently irritated by Marx’s revolutionary fulminations, fired him in early 1862. Though Marx continued writing on the American war for the European press, often with brilliant insights, it is unlikely that his writings made any direct impression on the president. Peraino’s organizing theme of Lincoln taking on challengers leads him to cast Marx as Lincoln’s adversary, primarily over the slavery question, but this may mislead readers into thinking they disagreed on the fundamentals. Marx, of course, embraced the revolutionary destruction of slavery and the slaveholding class. That was the very purpose of the war in his scheme of history. Marx openly admired Lincoln, the “single-minded son of the working class,” for leading “his country through the matchless struggle for the rescue of an enchained race and the reconstruction of a social world.” Unlike most of the European press, Marx even applauded the Emancipation Proclamation, precisely because Lincoln cleverly veiled its revolutionary essence in prosaic legal verbiage. Some “claim to be ‘fighting for an idea,’ when it is for them a matter of square feet of land,” he wrote for a Vienna journal. “Lincoln, even when he is motivated by, an idea, talks about ‘square feet.’” His proclamations “are intended to look like, routine summonses sent by a lawyer to the lawyer of the opposing party.” But “the manifesto abolishing slavery,” Marx continued, “is the most important document in American history since the establishment of the Union.”

Peraino shares Marx’s clever understanding of Lincoln as a moral man who opposed slavery on principle but was also a political realist led by logic and events to proclaim emancipation in the national interest. The author shows that Lincoln recognized the public diplomacy value of his emancipation decree, as he illustrates with the president’s well-publicized open letter to the workers of Manchester, England, in January 1863. By this time, hundreds of pro-Union public meetings were taking place across Britain, and Lincoln applauded their support as welcome reassurance “of the inherent power of truth and the ultimate and universal triumph of justice, humanity, and freedom” (218).

6. All of Marx’s writings on the American Civil War are conveniently located online at Marxists.org.
Most readers will be less familiar with Napoleon III, the nephew of the more famous Napoleon I. Napoleon La Petite, as Victor Hugo derisively labeled him, was ambitious to revive his uncle’s legacy and to restore the “Latin race” to its proper role of leadership, in the Americas as well as Europe, under the tutelage of the French. Marx cruelly described Napoleon III as “clumsily cunning, knavishly naïve, doltishly sublime... a cleverly stupid anachronism, a world-historic piece of buffoonery” (223). But self-deluded buffoons can make dangerous heads of state, as the world would learn.

Increasingly convinced that the American Civil War was going to be a protracted conflict, in autumn 1861 Napoleon III launched his Grand Design for the Americas, which began with the invasion of Mexico. French forces would occupy the country, topple the elected republican regime led by Benito Juárez, and install the Hapsburg archduke Maximilian as emperor of Mexico. Napoleon III’s goal was to regenerate Mexico—to make it the center of a vast Latin Catholic empire that would eventually subsume all of the troubled Spanish American republics and ally with the Empire of Brazil. With the United States distracted, the Monroe Doctrine was a dead letter. Napoleon III’s success depended not only on a prolonged civil war in the United States but also the creation of a sympathetic buffer state in the South.

Fearing that any move against France would throw that country into the embrace of the Confederacy, Lincoln and Seward decided to swallow yet another bitter pill. They did nothing to stop the French or aid the embattled Juáristas. Union victory over the Confederacy, they decided, would do more to discourage the Mexican venture than any diplomatic protest, and this proved wise policy. The Union’s victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg came within days after the French takeover of Mexico City in 1863. In April 1864, just before Maximilian arrived in Mexico, Congress passed a resolution denouncing Maximilian’s regime and invoking the Monroe Doctrine. Lincoln’s reelection later that year all but assured the Union’s victory. Toward the end of the war, there was much talk of united veterans of the Union and Confederate armies invading Mexico to overthrow Maximilian, a conciliatory crusade that would act as something of a postwar inversion of Seward’s notorious “foreign war panacea.” It did no harm to let Napoleon III and Maximilian worry what might happen to the United States’ neighbors once it was finished with its “family quarrel.” But Lincoln thought “there has been war enough,” and he gave no encouragement to those calling for action against Maximilian. Napoleon III foresaw defeat and withdrew French forces, eventually leaving
Maximilian to face the end of this experiment in monarchy in front of a Mexican firing squad.

In the closing chapter, “Lincoln vs. Lincoln,” Peraino takes the story beyond the war to the rise of America as a world power by following the career of John Hay, Lincoln’s private secretary at the White House, who served Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. Hay presided over U.S. foreign policy during the Spanish American War—that “splendid little war,” as Hay described it—that witnessed a disturbing turn toward U.S. imperialism. Peraino seems unsure as to whether Hay betrayed or fulfilled the foreign policy of his almost fatherlike mentor, President Lincoln, but it seems clear from Peraino’s own reading of Lincoln that he believed fervently in America as an example to the world and, because of that, abhorred imperialism as a fundamental contradiction to the principle of government by the people.

This book does not seek to overturn or even challenge existing interpretations of Lincoln or Civil War diplomacy, but it enlarges our understanding of both. It makes good use of existing scholarship and delves into essential primary sources to tell a new story of Lincoln’s growth as a statesman rather than as a politician.