

Introduction

Many of the most important political, economic, territorial, and geo-strategic triumphs enjoyed by the United States during its first two hundred years of national existence came about because an American diplomat disobeyed orders. The spectacularly generous terms granted the fledgling republic by Great Britain after the Revolutionary War, the acquisition of half a continent via the Louisiana Purchase, the seizure of a larger expanse of land from Mexico in 1848, the preservation of Anglo-American ties in the years leading up to U.S. cobelligerency in World War I – these and other watersheds in the history of American foreign relations derived in great part from the refusal of ambassadors, envoys, and other diplomatic agents to follow the instructions given them by their superiors back home.

And when I say “disobeyed,” I mean *disobeyed*. American diplomats did not misunderstand their orders or fail to receive them. They struck out on courses that they knew were contrary to Washington’s wishes but that they felt were in the best interest of their country. In nearly every instance, with one infamous exception, they were right. America profited from their insubordination.

This pattern of defiance has, as a rule, been neglected by scholars, who either address it anecdotally or ignore it altogether. Such inattention is surprising given the contrast between America’s record and that of other nations. British, French, German, Japanese, and Russian diplomats almost never displayed comparable refractoriness. The idea of doing so would have struck them as absurd, if not suicidal. Yet Washington’s foreign representatives habitually stepped out of line. A generalized inquiry into the causes and consequences of this behavior is essential,

for it goes to the heart of one of the weightiest issues a diplomatic historian can tackle: Is there a distinctive “American” foreign policy?

Some scholars say no, that the United States behaves like any great power in the international arena. Others argue to the contrary that there are certain episodes – notably the Wilsonian crusade to make the world safe for democracy in World War I and the later, ill-contrived interventions in Vietnam and Iraq – that do not conform to the dictates of realpolitik and that grew out of idiosyncratic strains in American culture like evangelism, racism, or hubris. This debate has raged for decades and shows no sign of waning, but disputants have thus far failed to address the vital dimension of *protocol*, of permissible, even conceivable, self-direction on the part of the diplomat. When Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Molotov attended the 1947 Paris conference to coordinate plans for a European recovery program, he refused to answer the most innocuous questions without first telephoning Moscow for guidance, and although his plight constituted an extreme case of bureaucratic subjugation, it was more representative of the strictures under which most diplomats operated than the extraordinary latitude granted to – or, rather, assumed by – U.S. statesmen like Benjamin Franklin, James Monroe, and their successors. No non-American diplomat ever responded to a notice of dismissal the way envoy Nicholas Trist did when President James K. Polk fired him in October 1847. Trist, then negotiating with a moderate Mexican faction to end America’s first major military intervention abroad, flung down the president’s dispatch and announced his intention to finish what he had started. The result was the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, whereby Mexico relinquished all claims to Texas north of the Rio Grande and ceded an imperial domain that ultimately formed the states of California, Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada, Utah, and parts of Colorado and Wyoming. American diplomats have always been a disobedient lot, to the immense good fortune of the United States.¹

What accounts for this perennial contrariness? The answer lies in the attitude toward professional diplomacy expressed by the Founding Fathers and translated by them and their descendants into the apparatus

¹ For Molotov in Paris, see D. F. Fleming, *The Cold War and Its Origins, 1917–1960* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1961), 1:480. In fairness to the foreign minister, he sometimes managed to rise above the obsequiousness so evident at this conference. He was never insubordinate, though. Self-preservation dictated that all civil and military officials in Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union bend over backwards to avoid crossing the boss. See Geoffrey Roberts, *Molotov: Stalin’s Cold Warrior* (Washington, D.C.: Potomac Books, 2012), 15–18, 96–98, 129–130.

through which foreign policy is conducted. Novelist John Dos Passos famously observed that “rejection of Europe is what America is all about,” and one European institution Americans rejected during much of their nation’s history was Old-World geopolitics. They felt that republican institutions were incompatible with diplomacy and that foreign intercourse made people effete, aristocratic, and unproductive – in a word, un-American. The Continental Congress went so far as to pass a resolution limiting U.S. diplomats’ tenure abroad to no more than three years. A longer enlistment, they believed, would endanger the diplomats’ integrity. Secretary of State John Quincy Adams endorsed this policy in the early 1800s, writing the U.S. minister to Sweden, “Americans... should for their own sake, as well as for that of their country, make no long residences in a public capacity at the courts of Europe.” The “air of those regions,” Adams declared, was “so unfriendly to American constitutions that they always require after a few years to be renovated by the wholesome republican atmosphere of their own country.”²

Adams’s sentiments were not unique to the early national period. The first five or six generations of Americans viewed diplomacy with suspicion and distaste. Complaints about its corrupting effects abound in the congressional record. In 1834, during Martin Van Buren’s presidency, a southern legislator insisted that diplomacy “spoil[ed] the good republicans we send abroad,” that U.S. diplomats came home “with their heads as full of kings, queens, and knaves as a pack of cards,” and that the “brilliant, gaudy, laced, jeweled, and plumed finery” of foreign courts was “unsuited to an agricultural, distant, peaceful people.” A quarter-century later, Representative Jabez Curry of Alabama said of the U.S. diplomatic corps, “Here is the evil, the fungus, the excrescence, a pinchbeck imitation of the pomp and pageantry of royalty, and we should put the knife to it and cut it out.” Thirty years after that, New York Senator William Robinson called diplomacy “an ulcer on the body of republicanism” and demanded that the “fops,” “profligates,” “snobs,” and “dandies of our diplomacy” be “quarantined as we quarantine foreign rags through fear of cholera” upon reentry to America. Their “offensive and polluting influences,” Robinson proclaimed, left “a stench in the nostrils

² Dos Passos cited in Lou Cannon and Carl M. Cannon, *Reagan’s Disciple: George W. Bush’s Troubled Quest for a Presidential Legacy* (New York: Public Affairs, 2007), 109; Adams to Hughes, 22 June 1818, *Writings of John Quincy Adams*, Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1916), 6:357. Ironically, Adams himself served for longer periods of time as minister to Britain, Russia, and Prussia without need of such cultural delousing.

of the American people.” This association of diplomacy with contamination persisted in the halls of Congress until the early twentieth century, and to a considerable extent beyond then.³

Not only did Americans find diplomacy repugnant; they also believed it was unnecessary, a luxury. In their view, European nations employed diplomats to calm mutual jealousies, work out complicated defensive pacts, calibrate and re-calibrate the balance of power, agree on whose grand-nephew got to control the Duchy of Pomerania, and so on. But Americans did not concern themselves with such nonsense. Why, then, did they need representatives overseas? To facilitate commerce? No befrilled plenipotentiary was necessary for that. “If we want to do any business abroad,” Connecticut Senator Chauncey Goodrich wrote Treasury Secretary Oliver Wolcott in 1794, “give some good fellow a letter of attorney and let him do it.” That neatly summed up the American view. Most nineteenth- and early twentieth-century U.S. politicians believed that their country’s interaction with the rest of the world would always be predominantly commercial in nature. When they wrote and spoke about foreign policy, they wrote and spoke in economic terms. None of the activities that people in other nations identified with geopolitics – forging or maintaining alliances, avoiding or limiting wars, annexing or surrendering territory – struck Americans as important. These were Old-World issues, the kind of decadent, tradition-bound entanglements the Founding Fathers had fought a revolution to escape. The United States needed Europe as a market for its goods and as a provider of other goods, but few Americans saw any reason to create a European-style professional diplomatic service on their side of the Atlantic.⁴

³ Speech by Representative Warren R. Davis of South Carolina, 30 April 1834, *Register of Debates in Congress* (Washington, D.C.: Gales and Seaton, 1835), 10:3879–3880; speech by Representative Jabez Curry of Alabama, 27 January 1859, *Congressional Globe* (Washington, D.C.: John C. Rives, 1860), 35:593; speech by Senator William E. Robinson of New York, 10 January 1885, *Congressional Record* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1885), 16:613–615.

⁴ Goodrich to Wolcott, 10 March 1784, *Memoirs of the Administrations of Washington and Adams Collected from the Papers of Oliver Wolcott*, George Gibbs, ed. (New York: Printed for the Subscribers, 1846), 1:131. Representative Champ Clark of Missouri made the same case over a century later, with the United States standing on the threshold of world power. “It would be better really to withdraw the entire diplomatic corps,” Clark mused, “and then, when we need a representative at a foreign court, whenever we have need for anyone to attend to these delicate duties, . . . pick out a man of the highest capacity in this country” and “send him there.” Speech by Representative James Beauchamp Clark of Missouri, 18 April 1908, *Congressional Record* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1908), 42:4926. At least Clark’s expression “*these delicate duties*” could

American diplomacy was therefore an amateur affair from the Declaration of Independence to the Jazz Era. Whereas candidates for diplomatic work in Europe and elsewhere had to pass competitive examinations, entered their countries' services at the lowest grade, were promoted on a merit basis, and continued practicing statecraft in some capacity until reaching retirement age, American diplomats were, on balance, novices. There were no formal qualifications for diplomatic jobs in the United States, no criteria by which to judge an applicant's competence. A man could receive senatorial confirmation as a diplomat without knowing the language of the nation to which he was assigned or understanding anything of its history and customs. He usually took up his post late in life after having distinguished himself in another field. In many cases, he was appointed for a single task, like negotiating a treaty, and he expected to return home after completing it. Certainly, he did not view diplomacy as a career. The spoils system, a constant feature of American politics after 1828, ensured that few diplomatic positions carried tenures longer than that of the administration in power, and even after the campaign for civil service reform exempted a range of government jobs from partisan considerations, U.S. diplomacy remained spoils-ridden. Tellingly, this did not disturb most Americans. Although they could work up enthusiasm about other efforts to make the American economic or political system more efficient – antitrust laws, income taxes, women's suffrage, the initiative, referendum, and recall – diplomacy left them unmoved. Well into the twentieth century, it was purely fortuitous if a U.S. diplomat possessed the experience and talent to discharge his duties.⁵

One thing he did have to possess, however, was an independent income. Americans' antipathy toward professional statecraft, and concomitant doubts about its utility, led Congress to starve America's diplomatic institutions of funding, with the result that only wealthy men, men whose principal means of support lay in the private sector, or men intending to serve for a short time could accept foreign appointments. For eighty years after the Declaration of Independence, American ministers scarcely drew salaries. They also received little in the way of expense accounts, being expected to pay out of pocket for housing, food,

be construed to encompass matters of war and peace, not just economic affairs. That went above the mental ceiling of most Americans of his day.

⁵ William Barnes and John Heath Morgan, *The Foreign Service of the United States: Origins, Development, and Functions* (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, Historical Office, Bureau of Public Affairs, 1961), 68, 80, 89–90, 105–106, 125, 132–133.

transportation, clerical help, and entertainment. Thomas Jefferson went bankrupt as a result of his diplomatic outlays while U.S. representative to France. John C. Calhoun declined offers to assume the top diplomatic post in Paris – not because he did not want the assignment, he explained, but because he could not afford it. The same conditions obtained during Woodrow Wilson’s administration, when Charles Eliot, former president of Harvard, and Richard Olney, former secretary of state, refused diplomatic appointments on financial grounds. Congressional parsimony ironically led to the United States developing a first line of defense more high-caste than that fielded by Britain, France, or Spain.⁶

This had momentous consequences. America’s diplomats did not feel as beholden to the government they served as did representatives of other countries. The rich and prominent American lawyers, soldiers, politicians, journalists, educators, or businessmen who lent prestige to an administration by performing important diplomatic duties often concluded that their principal obligation was to their country rather than to the president. They therefore ignored directives that, in their view, ran counter to the national interest. For example, the U.S. commission that hammered out an end to America’s Quasi-War with France in 1800 disregarded John Adams’s insistence that they demand compensation for seized American ships because they decided that the United States would have to drop its financial claims against Paris if there was to be peace. Similarly, when Henry Clay, John Quincy Adams, and Albert Gallatin confronted an inflexible British delegation at Ghent toward the close of the War of 1812, they declined to insist that London stop impressing sailors from American vessels on the high seas, even though James Madison had made abandonment of this policy the sine qua non of any agreement.⁷

U.S. diplomats became even more brazen after Andrew Jackson introduced the practice of rotation in office, for obvious reasons. A campaign contributor or ward heeler who received his ministership as a patronage

⁶ For Jefferson’s financial straits, see Merrill D. Peterson, *Thomas Jefferson and the New Nation: A Biography* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 302. For Calhoun’s, see Charles M. Wiltse, *John C. Calhoun: Nationalist, 1782–1828* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1944), 200. For Eliot’s and Olney’s, see Warren Frederick Ilchman, *Professional Diplomacy in the United States* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 121.

⁷ For the U.S. commission’s indiscipline while crafting the Convention of 1800, see Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi-War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797–1801* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1966), 247–256. For Clay, Adams, and Gallatin at Ghent, see Bradford Perkins, *Castlereagh and Adams: England and the United States, 1812–1823* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1964), 50–53.

plum when his party took power was likely to assume that the president owed *him*, not the other way around, and to interpret presidential instructions as friendly suggestions from a peer rather than orders from the commander in chief. Thus when Jackson fired Minister to Mexico Anthony Butler in 1834, Butler took no notice of the recall order and remained at his post for two more years, repeatedly attempting to purchase Texas despite having no authority to do so. Elijah Hise, sent to Central America by James K. Polk in the late 1840s to negotiate commercial treaties with Guatemala and El Salvador, instead signed a treaty with Nicaragua giving the United States the right to construct a canal or railway through that republic's territory, an act that grossly exceeded his instructions. William Brent, Polk's representative in Buenos Aires, offered to mediate a dispute between Argentina and Paraguay even though Secretary of State James Buchanan told him numerous times that this was not administration policy. Neither Butler, Hise, or Brent had any thought of making diplomacy a life's work, and this liberated them from executive control to an extent undreamt of in the foreign services of other nations, where, according to a nineteenth-century British commissioner, "We consider ourselves as little more than pens in the hands of the government at home." America's amateur diplomats had a more expansive understanding of their function.⁸

Victory in the Spanish-American War established the United States as a world power and led progressive legislators and muckraking journalists to call for the professionalization of American statecraft. In a representative piece in the *North American Review*, Edward Bourne demanded that the United States do "what England, Holland, France, and Germany are doing for their colonial and diplomatic services" by instituting a "regular system of preparation" free of the "blight of spoils" in which candidates mastered "such subjects as colonial problems, administrative law, civil law, comparative religions, [and] ethnology." Bourne further prescribed "permanency of tenure" and a salary sufficient for the diplomat's

⁸ For Butler's ministership, see Quinton Curtis Lamar, "A Diplomatic Disaster: The Mexican Mission of Anthony Butler, 1829–1834," *The Americas* 45 (July 1988): 1–17. For Hise's, see David Shavit, *The United States in Latin America: A Historical Dictionary* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1992), 165; T. Ray Shurbutt, *United States-Latin American Relations, 1800–1850: The Formative Generations* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1991), 35, 41–43. For Brent's, see Graham H. Stuart, *The Department of State: A History of Its Organization, Procedure, and Personnel* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 107. British diplomat cited in Thomas A. Bailey, *A Diplomatic History of the American People*, Seventh Edition (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1964), 43.

“comfortable support.” But Bourne recognized that congressional and public opinion was not favorable for such reforms. “We lack not only trained men,” he lamented, “but the belief that training is necessary.” At a moment when Americans were exulting in the triumph of their state-of-the-art navy, the product of a modern building program that enjoyed overwhelming popular support, U.S. diplomacy had changed little since Jackson’s day. It was still ad hoc, part-time, and dependent on partisan considerations. And Americans, by and large, did not care. They might grumble when they read articles in *Harper’s Weekly* or the *Forum* inveighing against “the white-spat brigade” who represented the United States overseas, but the subject never engaged their attention for long. As far as most Americans were concerned, if a few bored bluebloods and party hacks wanted to debauch themselves at foreign courts, there was no harm in giving them the opportunity, provided they more or less paid their own way. After all, it was not as though they were doing anything important.⁹

Congress finally took some steps toward placing diplomacy on a career footing after the outbreak of the Great War. That conflict imposed overwhelming demands on the staffs of every U.S. legation or embassy in Europe: among other things, officials had to ensure the relief, protection, and transportation of American citizens caught in the path of hostilities, respond to a deluge of inquiries from home regarding the welfare and whereabouts of loved ones, and carry out widespread reporting and intelligence work. America’s foreign affairs establishment proved altogether inadequate to these challenges. Legislators, shaken for the moment out of their indifference, passed the 1915 Stone-Flood Act, which extended the merit principle of the Civil Service (Pendleton) Act of 1883 to the diplomatic service, mandated qualifying examinations for appointment, and set up a board of examiners to evaluate candidates. It also provided for promotion within the service on the basis of demonstrated skill. Postwar distresses, mostly of an economic nature, prompted Congress to pass a supplementary bill in 1924. The Rogers Act consolidated the diplomatic and consular branches into a single foreign service, established a school in the Department of State for the instruction of candidates who passed the qualifying exam, authorized

⁹ Edward Gaylord Bourne, “A Trained Colonial Civil Service,” *North American Review* 169 (October 1899): 528–535. Warren Frederick Ilchman notes that the greatest obstacles to reform in America’s diplomatic service at the dawn of the twentieth century were “the silence of Congress” and “public apathy.” Ilchman, *Professional Diplomacy*, 64.

higher salary scales, and made provisions for retirement and disability. American diplomacy had, at long last, seemingly become professionalized and specialized.¹⁰

This was an illusion. Salaries for diplomats on the various levels of seniority were inferior to the amounts paid to officers of an equivalent rank in other countries. As before, anyone who wanted the privilege of serving the United States abroad had to be a wealthy man willing to dip into his private fortune. The exam system hardly guaranteed a level playing field either, as candidates had to go to Washington, D.C. to take their exams and remain in the city for at least two weeks, the usual gap between the written and oral sections. (It was sometimes longer.) Many aspiring diplomats found the travel costs beyond their means. Those who managed to scrape together enough money to cover train fare and lodging had, of course, to pass the exam, a much easier task for the scion of a rich, politically connected family than for a lower- or middle-class man. For one thing, the written part emphasized knowledge of international law, economics, and political science, subjects that only men who had been educated in exclusive private schools and colleges were likely to have studied. It was also organized into a short-answer format that tested recall more than intelligence; moneyed candidates could afford to attend one of several “cram-schools” specializing in the rote memorization of responses to likely questions. As for the oral half, examiners evaluated candidates on the basis of such vague but clearly classist categories as “disposition,” “discretion,” “judgment,” “polish,” and “address.” Given these factors, it was not difficult for the diplomatic branch of the newly minted U.S. Foreign Service to preserve its patrician cliquishness.¹¹

More importantly, promotion by merit stopped below the level of minister or ambassador. Diplomatic officers of the highest rank could still be appointed for reasons other than demonstrated competence over a long tenure of service. They could, that is, still be amateurs, and many of them were. For example, three years after the Rogers Act passed, during a

¹⁰ Barnes and Morgan, *Foreign Service*, 188–210; J. Robert Moskin, *American Statecraft: The Story of the U.S. Foreign Service* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2013), 245–281, 345–352; Robert D. Schulzinger, *The Making of the Diplomatic Mind: The Training, Outlook, and Style of United States Foreign Service Officers, 1908–1931* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1975), 68–78.

¹¹ Barnes and Morgan, *Foreign Service*, 233–234; Lawrence E. Gelfand, “Towards a Merit System for the American Diplomatic Service, 1900–1930,” *Irish Studies in International Affairs* 2 (1988): 54–57; Ilchman, *Professional Diplomacy*, 91, 97, 117, 167–170.

period of tension between the United States and Mexico, President Calvin Coolidge nominated his former Amherst College classmate Dwight Morrow to be ambassador to Mexico City. Morrow had donated handsomely to Coolidge's 1924 presidential campaign, but he had no diplomatic experience, spoke no Spanish, and was a partner in the House of Morgan – scarcely a profession likely to endear him to the ultra-liberal Mexican president, Plutarco Calles. Yet Morrow's nomination did not stir a ripple of protest and he received speedy Senate confirmation. Americans remained blasé about diplomacy, in contrast to other professions, like, say, the military. It is hard to imagine the American people or their representatives in Congress tolerating the practice of four-star generals or admirals being chosen from the ranks of campaign contributors. Diplomacy, however, still occupied a marginal, out-of-the-way place in the American popular imagination.¹²

Another bill intended to professionalize U.S. statecraft, the 1931 Moses-Linthicum Act, removed some of the barriers keeping non-wealthy Americans out and overhauled the examination process to a degree, but its effects were minimal. The Great Depression restricted government expenditures so severely that those salaries that the act increased on paper were in fact cut or abolished. Washington's "cram-schools" adjusted to fit the new exam, and the men who passed continued to be disproportionately affluent. (Over half graduated from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton.) Also, the act retained the principle of stopping the promotional ladder below the highest level. Career men might be appointed ambassadors if the country in question was not deemed significant, or if it was such a

¹² Donald R. McCoy, *Calvin Coolidge: The Quiet President* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988), 102–105, 109, 111, 114. Morrow's amateurism did not prevent him from being an effective ambassador. Indeed – in keeping with the theme of this book – it may have been an asset, as he brought a freshness in perspective to the job that allowed him to make such small but symbolically significant gestures as changing the sign outside his workplace to read "United States Embassy" instead of "American Embassy." He also got his future son-in-law, Charles Lindbergh, who had just completed a solo flight across the Atlantic, to fly from Washington to Mexico City as a sign of U.S. goodwill. More substantively, Morrow persuaded President Calles to conciliate American oilmen whose subsoil properties the Mexican government had expropriated. Calles ultimately accepted the terms of the so-called Bucarelli agreement, whereby foreign companies that had begun working their properties before 1917 could retain ownership. Contemporaries viewed Morrow's ambassadorship as a success, and that verdict has been sustained by most historians. See for example Richard Melzer, "The Ambassador Simpatico: Dwight Morrow in Mexico, 1927–1930" in *Ambassadors in Foreign Policy: The Influence of Individuals on U.S.-Latin American Policy*, C. Neale Ronning and Albert P. Vannucci, eds. (New York: Praeger, 1987), 1–27.