

## Rogue Diplomats

Many of America's most significant political, economic, territorial, and geostrategic accomplishments from 1776 to the present day came about because a U.S. diplomat disobeyed orders. The magnificent terms granted to the infant republic by Britain at the close of the American Revolution, the bloodless acquisition of France's massive Louisiana territory in 1803, the procurement of an even vaster expanse of land from Mexico forty years later, the preservation of the Anglo-American "special relationship" during World War I—these and other milestones in the history of U.S. geopolitics derived in large part from the refusal of ambassadors, ministers, and envoys to heed the instructions given to them by their superiors back home. Historians have neglected this pattern of insubordination—until now. *Rogue Diplomats* makes a seminal contribution to scholarship on U.S. geopolitics and provides a provocative response to the question that has vexed so many diplomatic historians: is there a distinctively "American" foreign policy?

SETH JACOBS is Professor of History at Boston College and the author of *The Universe Unraveling: American Foreign Policy in Cold War Laos* (2012), *Cold War Mandarin: Ngo Dinh Diem and the Origins of America's War in Vietnam, 1950–1963* (2006), and *America's Miracle Man in Vietnam: Ngo Dinh Diem, Religion, Race, and U.S. Intervention in Southeast Asia, 1950–1957* (2004).

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# Rogue Diplomats

*The Proud Tradition of Disobedience  
in American Foreign Policy*

SETH JACOBS

*Boston College*



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*For Panda and Phie*

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## Acknowledgments

I often tell people that I teach for free. Boston College, I say, pays me to grade papers and attend faculty meetings. The lectures, seminars, and colloquia are on the house. It's no joke. Teaching is my passion, and I never feel more alive than when I'm in the classroom. That's why I don't take sabbaticals, and why I won't retire while there's breath in me.

Yet, ironically, this is the first of my books to grow out of a course. I've been offering a survey of United States foreign relations for two decades, and around six years ago I began to notice that students sat up a little straighter, listened a bit more attentively, when the discussion turned to episodes in which American diplomats disobeyed orders. This was especially the case when we talked about how the peace commission charged with ending America's Revolutionary War defied the Continental Congress by circumventing the court of Louis XVI, and how Nicholas Trist hammered out the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo with Mexico despite being fired – not once but twice – by President James K. Polk. Students laughed in amazement when I quoted from John Adams's shockingly blunt letters to Congress explaining why he and his fellow commissioners had betrayed the government that had sustained the Revolution since Lexington. Citations from Trist's tornadic correspondence from the field drew gasps and, on one occasion, applause. (Trist, drama queen that he was, would've appreciated that.) Since student enthusiasm is infectious, I yielded to my performer's instinct and started devoting more class time to those two geopolitical milestones. It didn't take long for a student to point out to me that the Louisiana Purchase had to rank alongside them as an example of U.S. envoys disregarding instructions and steering American foreign policy down a path contrary to that sanctioned by the

White House and State Department. Maybe Robert Livingston and James Monroe weren't as deliciously quotable as Adams and Trist, the student observed, but what they brought off in the spring of 1803 was pretty damn audacious. So, of course, the Purchase began receiving greater attention in class as well.

Eventually, as BC's bright students are wont to do, a young woman posed a challenging question: "Did other nations have this problem with their diplomats?"

I couldn't answer. I also found it noteworthy that she used the word *problem* when, by just about everyone's assessment, the United States obtained favorable results in the Revolution, the Purchase, and the Mexican War. In any event, I posted her question on H-Diplo, H-Net's network for diplomatic historians, and the responses came flooding in from scholars who specialized in the foreign policies of other countries. With a few minor deviations, it was a chorus of no's: not only do non-American diplomats *not* have a similar record of rebelliousness, but the mere notion of, say, a mid-nineteenth-century Russian envoy doing what Trist did was preposterous. He would've been likelier to flap his arms and fly to Pluto.

More detailed and far-reaching conversations followed, as I picked my colleagues' brains via telephone and email and at the yearly conference of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations. It gradually dawned on me that American diplomatic indiscipline was a much more recurrent phenomenon than I'd imagined, that it persisted well past the 1840s, and that historians had, for the most part, ignored it. Sure, they sometimes spiced up their texts with accounts of John Jay dashing his pipe into the fireplace as he announced his refusal to follow Congress's commands in 1782, but no one had attempted a systematic analysis of why American diplomats were so insubordinate and what the effects of that defiance had been on the United States's ascendancy to global power. There was, in other words, a lacuna in the literature. I determined to fill it. Friends and co-workers kicked around potential titles – an early favorite, believe it or not, was *Diplomats Behaving Badly* – and we settled on *Rogue Diplomats* as most sweeping and succinct.

Fortunately, Cambridge University Press found the project promising. My first heartfelt thanks must therefore go to senior editor Deborah Gershenowitz and the two anonymous reviewers she enlisted to review my book proposal. I'm also grateful to Lien-Hang Nguyen and Paul Thomas Chamberlin for including *Rogue Diplomats* in their U.S. Foreign Relations series. In a foretaste of the good luck that graced the book from



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the beginning, I received word that Cambridge was going to offer me a contract just minutes before delivering my “promotion talk” to the BC History Department. The glad tidings sent me into that typically nightmarish ordeal with the wind at my back and doubtless contributed to my becoming a full professor. A propitious start!

Research took longer than anticipated, largely because I failed to consider the fact that, for the first time in my career, I’d be working with handwritten archival sources. Trist, thank goodness, had exquisite penmanship, but the same cannot be said for the majority of policymakers whose chicken scratches I had to decipher. (Yes, Mr. Livingston, I’m talking about *you*.) That skull-splitting chore was leavened by the good cheer and professionalism of the staffs at the Library of Congress and National Archives I and II, to whom I extend my gratitude.

I’m also indebted to the archivists at the Eisenhower and Kennedy Presidential Libraries, chief among them Steve Plotkin, who has worked with me on no fewer than three books and served as a mentor to many of my undergraduate and graduate students. If you’ve got to spend hours sounding the depths of Joseph P. Kennedy’s fetid psyche, it helps to have an encyclopedically knowledgeable hail-fellow-well-met like Steve as your guide.

Harvard’s Widener Library proved a gold mine, not only of published materials – books, magazines, newspapers, and government transcripts – but of unpublished diaries, correspondence, and other documents that, in many cases, I wasn’t even aware existed until I ran across them by serendipity. I passed so many days at Widener roaming the stacks that Harvard would’ve been justified in charging me rent. The same was true, to a lesser extent, of Yale’s Sterling Library, which has the priceless Edward M. House Papers and a crew of knowledgeable, enthusiastic administrators eager to hunt down whatever a researcher requests.

Indeed, throughout my multiyear journey exploring the history of U.S. rogue diplomacy, the librarians and archivists with whom I dealt were, without exception, superb. Thanks to them all.

When the manuscript was finally complete, it passed into the hands of some of the ablest people it’s been my privilege to work with. I refer in particular to Cynthia Col, my ever-patient and unfailingly meticulous indexer; Rosemary Morlin, my copy-editor, whose lynx-eyed inspection of the text ensured stylistic consistency throughout (and who caught me in several whopping errors of fact that would’ve caused great embarrassment had they been allowed to stand uncorrected); Rachel Blaifeder, senior editorial assistant, who, alongside Deborah, invested immense

talent, time, and energy in determining how to market a hefty, methodologically old-fashioned monograph like *Rogue Diplomats* to audiences both lay and academic; and Stephanie Taylor, the content manager, who oversaw the book's progress through production with a laudable mix of rigor and bonhomie. Cambridge's reputation for giving its authors – and their work – first-class treatment is well deserved. Hopefully, *Rogue Diplomats* won't be the only book I publish with this press.

I moreover acknowledge with appreciation the guidance and assistance of Rabia Akhtar, Alessandro Antonello, Stephen Azzi, Joseph Blady, Mark Bradley, James Cameron, Ted Cogan, Frank Costigliola, Charles Giovanni Vanzan Coutinho, Andy DeRoach, Rogério de Souza Farias, George Egerton, Robin Fleming, Sinan Kunalalp, Sung-Yoon Lee, Kevin Levin, Diane Labrosse, Peter Layton, Fred Logevall, Lynn Lysterly, Patrick Maney, Asa McKercher, Edwin Moise, Nina Monafo, James O'Toole, Andrew Preston, Marinko Raos, Gideon Remez, Heather Cox Richardson, Simon Rofe, Andrew Rotter, Joseph Siracusa, Mark Stout, Ken Weisbrode, and Joe Wippl.

To those kind individuals whom I've inadvertently neglected to mention by name: apologies for the oversight and thank you for your comments, criticisms, corrections, and suggestions. *Rogue Diplomats* is a better work because you contributed to its growth. All errors and omissions herein are entirely my own.

This book is dedicated to my children, Miranda and Phie, the two most important people in my life. Work on the manuscript overlapped with their graduation from high school and abandonment of “the nest” (indeed, Panda began grad study before the book hit the shelves), and it's been a wondrous, humbling experience to see them grow into such brilliant, gracious, and strong adults committed to bringing a measure of compassion and justice to a world badly in need of both. My many, and grievous, parental missteps notwithstanding, my kids have always been the source of my greatest joy.