

Stéve Sainlaude. Translated by Jessica Edwards. *France and the American Civil War: A Diplomatic History*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2018. \$45 hardcover. ISBN 978-1469649948



In *France and the American Civil War*, Stéve Sainlaude offers a corrective to the dearth of scholarship on French diplomacy during the United States Civil War. Sainlaude, a Professor of History at the University of Paris IV Sorbonne, argues that sharp disagreements between Napoleon III and his ministers defined France's North American policy. Napoleon III, who had appointed the Austrian Habsburg Archduke Maximilian to the throne in Mexico, watched with vested interest as civil war unfolded in the United States. While Napoleon III openly sympathized with the Confederacy, his foreign ministers and diplomats on the ground in North America worked diligently to prevent a full-scale French intervention. Sainlaude persuasively shows that French diplomats dissuaded Napoleon III from officially recognizing the Confederacy and instead focused on securing the French presence in Mexico.

Sainlaude offers a deep reading of the *Correspondances Politiques*, a series of twenty-five volumes of diplomatic and trade reports from French diplomats regarding the United States. These volumes shed new light on how French diplomats operated a campaign to constrain Napoleon III's impulses to officially recognize the Confederacy. Diplomats, such as Edouard Thouvenel and Drouyn de Lhuys, attempted to reason with the emperor, who sought to implement his grand design over North America. Napoleon III desired to dismantle the Monroe Doctrine, use an independent Confederacy as a buffer between Washington and Mexico, and attain Southern support for Maximilian's claim. The emperor viewed Washington as an existential threat to the "Latin" race in North America and sought to check the United States's ceaseless spread of Anglo-Saxon culture.

From the perspective of Paris, the United States Civil War paled in comparison to the larger geo-political struggles concurrently taking place on the Continent and in Mexico. French diplomats looked to London for guidance to see how the British would handle the war of the rebellion. In the wake of the Crimean War, Paris was only interested in intervention if other European powers joined in alliance. When the Palmerston government signaled it would remain neutral, Napoleon III recognized that France would be the lone European power supporting the Confederacy. More importantly, the Civil War also opened vast contradictions in French policy towards North America. Sainlaude suggests that French intervention in Mexico was made possible by secession since a divided United States was incapable of preventing Maximilian's ascension to the throne. Yet, French diplomats feared Richmond's vision of a slave empire in Central America. The contradictory nature of the French situation in Mexico tempered Napoleon III's hawkish tendencies.

For Confederate representatives in Paris, diplomatic recognition was their foremost strategic goal. Napoleon III kept a regular audience with John Slidell, the top Confederate envoy in France and best known for his involvement in the Trent Affair. Slidell quickly attained belligerent status for the Confederacy; however, he struggled to convince Paris of the necessity for diplomatic recognition. In fact, Sainlaude suggests that Confederate representatives undercut their own case for recognition through their rigid adherence to cotton diplomacy. Envisioning armed conflict in North America, European powers stockpiled cotton as well as sought out new markets around the globe. Without a pressing need for Southern cotton, French diplomats, especially Thouvenel, skeptically viewed Confederate attempts to withhold cotton exports while also simultaneously arguing that Confederate

blockade runners could easily bring goods to European markets. French diplomats concluded that cotton diplomacy was a sleight of hand tactic employed to draw France unwillingly into the war. As Confederates torched cotton warehouses in the advance of Sherman's March in 1864, the French determined that only a victorious United States would ensure the return of a steady supply of cotton to Europe.

While French diplomats crafted a clear-eyed assessment of Confederate foreign policy, Napoleon III remained sympathetic to the Confederate cause. Thouvenel and de Lhuys concurred that the United States held strategic advantages over the Confederacy and, barring a collapse in Northern support for the war, the Union would stand. As a result, French ministers worked to convince Napoleon III of the folly of intervention in North America. In fact, Sainlaude argues that "it took all their [French diplomats] talents if not energies to get the emperor to hear reason" (439). French ministers engaged a two-pronged approach to convince the emperor of non-intervention. On one hand, they noted that European realities must be taken into account when dealing with North America. Thouvenel and de Lhuys believed that a strong United States would check British imperial ambitions in North America and ensure an international balance of power. On the other hand, French diplomats suggested to Napoleon III that an independent, expansionist Confederacy posed an existential threat to Maximilian in Mexico. The steady posturing by Thouvenel and de Lhuys eventually won over Napoleon III, who decided European affairs and Mexico were more vital to the French interest.

Despite Sainlaude's deep reading of diplomatic correspondence, he does not offer persuasive answers about the lack of scholarship on Franco-American relations. He cites Lynn Spencer and Warren Case's *The United States and France: Civil War Diplomacy* (1970) as a landmark study in the field. Yet, he fails to explain why a nearly forty year gap in historiography exists between *The United States and France* and *France and the American Civil War*. Sainlaude also



seemingly discounts new scholarship centered on American imperial ambitions in the trans-Mississippi west, which implicitly involved constant interactions with Maximilian's Mexico. Recent work by Steven Hahn shows that Mexico was central to American visions of the post-war future. A more nuanced historiographical argument would have aided Sainlaude in positioning *France and the American Civil War* as a unique corrective.

However, Sainlaude does present historians with a valuable discussion on how diplomats engineered French foreign policy. By decentering the importance of Napoleon III and Confederate leadership in Richmond, Sainlaude suggests that career diplomats wielded considerable power in shaping foreign policy in both France and the Confederacy. Sainlaude's focus on career diplomats raises questions about how other European powers, especially Spain who had not abolished slavery by 1861, interpreted Confederate entreaties for alliance. Moreover, Sainlaude begins a necessary conversation about how diplomats viewed the uncertainty created by secession and how international diplomacy affected the outcomes of the United States Civil War.

James Kopaczewski
Temple University Graduate Student