

Fry, Joseph A. *Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relations in the Civil War Era*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2019. 241 pp. ISBN 978 – 0813177120.

Joseph A. Fry, a historian of the American South and U.S. foreign relations, blends biography and diplomacy in this recent synthesis on the Civil War era. He focuses on President Abraham Lincoln and Secretary of State Henry Seward, describing them as “a pair of exceedingly talented, complex, alpha personalities [who] forged a highly productive alliance.” (2) They agreed that preserving the Union was fundamental to the republican experiment and America’s territorial integrity. In their view, the future of democracy and America’s role in the world depended on safeguarding these concepts. The author argues that the two men “implemented a most successful foreign policy that was critical to the victory over the South.” (190)

Surveying Lincoln and Seward’s background, Fry then reviews the principal diplomatic dilemmas of the United States between 1861 and 1869 across five chronological chapters. Astute comments about their leadership dot an otherwise familiar narrative. While the secretary oversaw the daily activities of foreign relations, the president asserted his authority in decision-making. Despite this hierarchy, each man conceded to the other when presented with a stronger case on an issue. The author also highlights several missteps. Seward unsuccessfully called for a “foreign crisis” (41) to draw the seceded states back into the Union, an idea that the author regards as irresponsible because it would have likely benefited the Rebels. He criticizes the duo for originally defining the Northern war goal as the preservation of the Union, since this prevented Europeans from understanding that secession was an act in defense of slavery. Moreover, their depiction of the Civil War as an internal issue was unconvincing, because the Federal blockade signified an ongoing conflict according to international law.

Fry rightly emphasizes the link between domestic affairs and foreign relations, observing that a lack of Northern victories in mid-1862 “left the nation vulnerable to European intervention.” (83) Seward pointed to a surge of recruitment to persuade observers of Northern resolve, and used the Homestead Act to attract immigrants in hopes that they might enlist. The author praises the president and secretary for their public diplomacy efforts; Lincoln’s final Emancipation



Proclamation, for instance, underscored the relationship between preserving the Union and freedom. Battlefield successes as well as a growth in military and manufacturing capability gave the North a diplomatic edge after mid-1863.

The two men ably handled British and French interference, which included shipbuilding for the Rebels and circumventing the blockade. Seward used “a form of ‘brinkmanship’” (52) that gave would-be interventionists pause, as he threatened to end communications with them or respond with force. These outbursts grew less common over time, and the secretary actually earned the confidence of his foreign counterparts. He eased relations by, for example, urging Union naval commanders on blockade duty to exercise restraint toward neutral vessels. The author stresses that Lincoln and Seward’s cautious though firm approach ended European aid to the Confederacy and Rebel attacks from Canada, ultimately preventing intervention in the conflict.

According to Fry, the two men had a consistent approach to foreign relations, and the president’s rejection of a Confederate armistice reflected their unchanged goal of “making all considerations secondary to restoration of the Union.” (150) Lincoln and Seward embraced policies that enabled white settlement at the expense of Native Americans, though the secretary pursued a more elaborate vision during his subsequent tenure under President Andrew Johnson. He secured the purchase of Alaska and called for both commercial expansion and the spread of American power across the globe to uplift other populations. This represented “not only a road map but an ideology” (185) for the early twentieth-century U.S. empire. Seward was even effective in opposing plans to fight the French in Mexico, worried that such actions would exacerbate the situation and that withdrawal of U.S. troops would be difficult.

In this book, Fry has accomplished his objective of writing an approachable text for college students and the public. He avoids historiographic debates and overly detailed descriptions that will not interest the general

reader, instead providing sufficient background information on the Civil War to be suitable as standalone reading in a survey course. Popular audiences typically think of America's bloodiest conflict in strictly domestic terms, but the author demonstrates that Lincoln and Seward reckoned with the actions of other countries throughout the conflict. Noting the limited success of Confederate diplomacy, Fry explains that the impact of the cotton shortage was insufficient to force European recognition of Southern independence. France and Great Britain had diversified economies, profitable relations with the Union, and other affairs that occupied their attention more than this conflict.

Admittedly, there are drawbacks to *Lincoln, Seward, and US Foreign Relations in the Civil War*. Fry does not strike new ground methodologically in a story largely focused on leaders and diplomats. Despite the frequent mention of Europe, he concentrates mostly on France and Great Britain. This decision is understandable considering the attention those countries receive in the literature, but a clarifying statement in this vein would have been helpful. A more extensive discussion of Southern foreign policy could have brought the successes and failures of Union efforts into sharper relief. Finally, the chapter addressing Seward's time as secretary under Johnson seems slightly out of place in a book mostly devoted to the Civil War. This is a well-sourced work barring such limitations, as Fry draws on secondary literature ranging from the early twentieth century up to the present day. It is a timely and persuasive introduction to the growing body of foreign relations scholarship on the Civil War.

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