

## Article REVIEW

**Rafe Blaufarb.** “The Western Question: The Geopolitics of Latin American Independence.” *The American Historical Review* 112:3 (June 2007): 742-763.

Reviewed by **Dustin Walcher**, University of Dayton  
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When the field of the history of U.S. foreign relations was still young, the diplomacy of Latin American independence emerged as a critical issue in the historiography. Times have changed, and the field’s practitioners (myself included) have for the most part embarked upon research agendas that ask questions of the more recent past. It is therefore a welcome development to see Rafe Blaufarb buck that larger trend and skillfully recast the struggles for Spanish American independence in light of the new international history.

Blaufarb argues that the demise of Spanish power in the Americas constituted a “Western Question” of similar significance to the “Eastern Question” that emerged from the political and economic decline of the Ottoman Empire. He finds that geopolitical rivalry between France, Great Britain, Russia, and the United States decisively affected the process of Spanish imperial decline. The Atlantic powers were concerned with “how the conflict [in Spanish America] would affect the geopolitical order” (747). They “jockeyed for position, spinning webs of intrigue designed to snare the spoils of Spanish imperial collapse and thwart the schemes of their rivals” (761). In pursuit of those objectives, Britain obstructed the continental powers from assisting the Spanish war effort and the United States “gave moral and material support to the insurgents – as well as sanctuary from which to mount their attacks” (761). Foreign adventurers fought on all sides in pursuit of their individual (as opposed to national) interests.

Although statesmen command much of Blaufarb’s attention, his analysis of non-state actors emerges as the most original aspect of the narrative. Blaufarb specifically examines “[t]he activities of the foreign revolutionaries, mercenaries, spies, and freebooters who lurked in the back alleys of Latin American independence,” and directs the profession toward “a transnational diplomatic history ‘from below’ in which states figure as just one among several types of actors” (743). The approach is consciously modeled upon Matthew Connelly’s work on French decolonization in Algeria. Consequently, “The Western Question” illustrates the rich potential for fresh insights that exists when scholars apply the methods of the new international history to questions outside of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew Connelly, *A Diplomatic Revolution: Algeria’s Fight for Independence and the Origins of the Post-Cold War Era* (New York, 2002). See also Rafe Blaufarb, *Bonapartists in the Borderlands: French Exiles and Refugees on the Gulf Coast, 1815–1835* (Tuscaloosa, AL, 2005).

“The Western Question” is well-grounded in a historiography that dates back to the early twentieth century, and serves to remind us of just how much history we may have collectively forgotten (how many of us, after all, have consulted the 1928 volume of *Florida Historical Quarterly*). Blaufarb draws from a multilingual literature that includes works published in English, French, and Spanish, in addition to an impressive assortment of published primary sources. Yet the article’s greatest value lies less in revealing a previously unknown narrative than it does in its ability to reframe the history of Spanish imperial decline – in part – as an international process. In so doing, it simultaneously calls upon historians of Spanish America to recognize the important role that foreign powers played throughout the wars for independence and defines new research opportunities for scholars of international and transnational history.

While there is much to admire in “The Western Question,” some of Blaufarb’s claims are overdrawn. He argues that British opposition accounts for the delay in U.S. recognition of the breakaway Spanish American republics (755). However, the U.S. position can better be explained by the Monroe administration’s ongoing boundary negotiations with Spain than it can by British warnings alone. While Blaufarb’s contention that Spanish American independence has been neglected in the international history literature stands up well when tested against the scholarship of the past few generations, his extensive footnotes demonstrate that earlier generations of diplomatic and international historians were deeply interested in the effect of Latin American independence on the international system, the role of the great powers, and the origins of the Monroe Doctrine (742-743).

In a different vein, it is unclear why Blaufarb omits the geopolitical ramifications of Brazilian independence from his definition of the Western Question. Napoleon’s invasion of the Iberian Peninsula set events in motion that led to independence in both Spanish America and Portuguese Brazil. As in the Spanish case, Portuguese imperial decline provided other powers – most notably Great Britain – with the opportunity to fill a vacuum. In light of the similar issues at stake, Brazil’s omission seems artificial.

Finally, Blaufarb’s narrow chronological definition of the Western Question – beginning with Napoleon’s invasion of Spain and ending with Spanish recognition of colonial independence – is inadequate. If, as Blaufarb argues, the Western Question was driven by the desire of rival powers to access the spoils of Spanish America, and fear that a competing power might instead monopolize those spoils, then the Western Question was far from settled in the 1820s. Blaufarb is certainly aware of subsequent European machinations in Latin American affairs. However, he argues that:

[t]he support of Britain and France for Texas independence, their joint pressure on behalf of Mexico during its war with the United States, disputes over possible canal sites in Central America, Anglo-French flirtation with the Confederacy, and French intervention in Mexico during the 1860s should all be seen in this light: as European efforts to block the expansion of the United States across North America, or, failing that, to create a counterweight to its power. (762-763)

Although a European policy of containment targeted toward the United States helps to account for continued European interest in the Americas, such a monocausal explanation oversimplifies a series of complex and multidimensional issues and overstates the relative power and geopolitical importance of the United States in the nineteenth century. Such an oversimplification is out of character with the rest of the article. Moreover, as Brian Hamnett argues, between c. 1770 and c. 1870 Latin America transitioned from colonies into nation states gradually.<sup>2</sup> At the moment of independence, such basic questions as borders and the composition of political institutions remained unsettled, and largely remained so until approximately the 1870s. By similarly defining the chronological bounds of the Western Question from 1808 through the late nineteenth century, Blaufarb could more effectively reveal the region's role in the "geopolitical realignment [of] the post-Napoleonic world" (743). Indeed, the Western Question has the potential to be of greater significance, over a far more expansive time period, than Blaufarb suggests.

These differences should not obscure the overall importance of "The Western Question." I am grateful to Blaufarb for reincorporating international and transnational actors into the history of Spanish American independence. He is correct; for too long scholars of international and diplomatic history have overlooked the significance of Spanish imperial collapse. The new international history promises to shed fresh insights on the story and "The Western Question" will be foundational to those who wish to join Blaufarb in taking up the challenge.

**Dustin Walcher** is a Lecturer in the Department of History at the University of Dayton. A specialist in the history of U.S. foreign relations and the history of the Americas, he completed his Ph.D. in 2007 at the Ohio State University.

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*Commissioned for H-Diplo by Jonathan Reed Winkler, Wright State University*

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<sup>2</sup> Brian R. Hamnett, "Process and Pattern: A Re-Examination of the Ibero-American Independence Movements, 1808-1826," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 29:2 (May, 1997), 279-328.