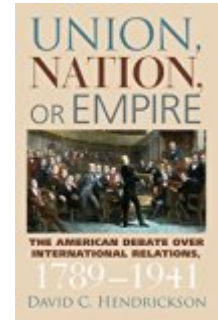


David C. Hendrickson. *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2009. xvi + 478 pp. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1632-9.



Reviewed by John Kane

Published on H-Diplo (December, 2009)

Commissioned by Christopher L. Ball (DePaul University)

In the late nineteenth century, John Hay famously summed up American foreign policy as a combination of the Monroe Doctrine and the Golden Rule. The latter expressed the nation's benevolently pacific intentions toward the rest of the world; the former asserted a determination to exclude the dangerous and despotic powers of Old Europe from the American hemisphere in order to preserve the experiments in republican government proceeding there. American policy aimed at keeping Europe out of the Americas and the United States out of European quarrels that might drag the young nation into war. War was feared because it would inevitably lead to the militarization of society, burdensome taxation, and a centralization of power—in a word, to tyranny—and the end of America's exemplary mission to show that free government was possible.

From the very foundation of the United States, Americans had argued that their foreign policy must, like their form of government, be different from that of the nations of Europe, whose relations they saw as governed by aggressive am-

bition, deceit, and willful disregard of the civilized rules of international law. So long as Europe remained unreformed, however, political distance supported by geographical isolation seemed the safest bet. But if the settled foreign policy of the United States for much of its history was mere isolationism (more accurately non-entanglement in foreign alliances, a policy first enunciated by George Washington in his farewell address), then one might expect there would not be much historical debate to examine.

David Hendrickson's new book is dedicated to showing this was far from the case. Having identified in an earlier work a "unionist paradigm" at the center of the American understanding of government (p. xii), he here extends his analysis across a swathe of history to reveal how the debates over the nature, success, and survival of the American union were deeply informed by theories of international relations. At the heart of these debates, says Hendrickson, was an insistent question: "Who are we?"—that is to say, what kind of nation is America (p. 21)? Specifically, is it a

selfish nation, an empire bent on domination, or a model of peaceful internationalism? Critics and friends have given different answers to this. America has been accused of fostering an intense and selfish nationalism which, by expressing itself in aggressive economic and geographical expansion, morphed into a form of imperialism. Yet American nationalism is peculiar in insisting, unlike the *Herrenvolk* variety, on the liberty of individuals under the rule of law; and if it is an empire it is one curiously attached to an anti-imperialist ideology, and that wanted to be, if anything, an "empire of liberty" (p. 18). Hendrickson admits the importance in American history of both nation and empire, characterized by egoism and domination respectively, but the "interpretive conundrum" of his book involves the mutual relationship between these and a third concept, union, which encouraged a more internationalist outlook (p. 21).

Hendrickson's central argument is that the distinctive American union always had an internationalist dimension because it was constructed on a "federative principle" of the kind influentially outlined by Montesquieu (p. 10). A genuine federation, according to this principle, was neither an empire nor a simple civic society, but rather an "assemblage of societies" large enough to provide security for all while yet preserving the individuality and independence of each (p. 70). It occupied a space of moderation between anarchy and discord on the one hand, and subordination and tyranny on the other. The keys to maintaining such a community of states were governance under agreed law and free trade. The former guaranteed mutual non-interference in one another's affairs; the latter bound the interests of each to all and thus promoted cooperation rather than discord.

Absent an overarching law respected by all, or the amicable bonds created by mutual trade, the interests of states were bound to conflict, leading inevitably to defensive or offensive wars and

the destruction of peaceful enterprise and individual liberty. This, as Americans saw it, was the great negative lesson of European history. Hendrickson quotes Unitarian minister William Ellery Channing's remark that "'the great good of the union'" was that "'it preserves relations of peace among communities, which, if broken into separate nations, would be arrayed against one another in perpetual, merciless, and ruinous war. It indeed contributes to our defence against foreign states, but still more it defends us from one another'" (pp. 129-130). And if the pattern of peaceful federative union could be extended to the international sphere, the problem of war might be solved altogether, a hope that Americans would try to realize when they got the chance. Woodrow Wilson, most notably, looked to his League of Nations to nurture a "community of power" under which law rather than force would become the ruling principle of international relations, while the encouragement of free government and the growth of trade would supply the connective tissue to ensure the interdependence and prosperity of self-determining states (p. 369).

Yet if, as Hendrickson says, the United States was "an international system in embryo," it was unfortunately "no more exempt from the specter of war than any other system of states" (p. 221). Indeed, the great fear that haunted the republic in its first seven decades was that the union would founder in the clash of sectional differences, above all on the difference constituted by Southern slavery, fragmenting into sovereign states that would repeat on the American continent the hostile pattern of European relations.

A signal virtue of this book lies in its vivid depiction of the desperate precariousness of the first union as it lurched from one sectional crisis to another, patched up but never mended by astute diplomacy and a series of compromises. The issue crystallized into one between Northern nationalists like Henry Clay—who insisted that the Constitution was the creation of the American people, not the states, and that a majority of the people

must govern, from which principle "'there is or can be no appeal but to the sword'"--and Southern states' righters like John Calhoun--who argued that it was a "concurrent majority" that mattered, and that the central principle of the Constitution was the checking or veto power it gave the states against central government "despotism" (pp. 124-125). With recurring crises caused by territorial expansion and the consequent conflict over whether new states should be slave or free, the issue finally exploded in civil war (a war that perhaps confounds the modern theory that democracies do not fight one another).

Northern victory consolidated the union once and for all and forged a genuine American nationalism that would endure, but it was an achievement of conquest by a central government with vastly expanded powers, one that would henceforth be hegemonic in North America. Yet the union had been preserved and its old federal relations were soon completely resumed. John Fiske could therefore lecture in 1885 that it stood as an example to Europe of the virtues of a federative system and also provided an internationalist pattern for a future world community of states, each of which would surrender some portion of its sovereignty to a common authority to preserve the peace of all.

Fiske's prescriptions applied only to "civilized" states, however, and not to the "barbarians" in various corners of the globe that Europeans were busy "civilizing" with gunboats and dum-dum bullets (p. x). In the era of European imperialism and colonialism--construed as a new form of internationalism--it was perhaps not surprising that a vigorously nationalistic and industrially burgeoning United States should be tempted, after the heady success of a brief war of liberation against Spain in Cuba, to also take the imperialist path in the Philippines. Was this an aberration in American foreign policy or a fulfillment of its natural trajectory? Hendrickson debates the issue with other historians and notes the mix of mo-

tives, selfish and idealistic, that informed the episode, and the confluence of nationalist, imperialist, and internationalist streams within it. But formal imperialism raised a predictable storm of protest from old anti-imperialists, only briefly enthused the general public, and in the long run proved hardly satisfactory in terms of costs and benefits even to its keenest advocates. So who finally won this great debate over imperialism? Given that the United States retained the Philippines, and that the Supreme Court had affirmed the constitutionality of the acquisition, Hendrickson concludes that it was something of a draw. But he quotes George Hoar for a last word on the anti-imperialist side: "'We changed the Monroe Doctrine from a doctrine of eternal righteousness and justice, resting on the consent of the governed, to a doctrine of brutal selfishness looking only to our own advantage.... We converted a war of glory to a war of shame'" (p. 289).

It is another virtue of this book, incidentally, that it provides so many fine quotes from American protagonists over the centuries. Another comes from Hamilton Holt, editor of the *Independent*, who argued that the outbreak of the Great War in 1914 demonstrated the need for a Federation of the World for which the United States was the model: "The United States is the world in miniature. The United States is the greatest league of peace known to history. The United States is a demonstration to the world that all races and peoples of the earth can live in peace under one form of government, and its chief value to civilization is a demonstration of what this form of government is" (pp. 293-294). Yet Wilson's attempt to create an international league at the war's end caused a major clash between the nationalist and internationalist strains of American thought, at the ultimate expense of the latter (and Wilson's insistence on national self-determination for League of Nations members was ironically blamed for helping unleash the rash of rabid na-

tionalisms that destroyed any spirit of international cooperation in postwar Europe).

Hendrickson does not object to describing Wilson's failed effort as an attempt to project "American domestic values" on the international system, as other historians have done, so long as it be remembered that domestic values and national ideals "were derivative of the thought and experience concerning federal union, which was at its inception also an experiment in international cooperation" (p. 330). But the league had none of the powers conferred on the federal government of the United States in 1787 and was thus destined to repeat the fate of America under the Articles of Confederation, which was to raise expectations without providing the means to meet them. Even had America not finally rejected membership, the league was destined to be little more than an impotent talking shop of nations.

Hendrickson traces the confused strains of nationalism, internationalism, and imperialism in United States policy in the 1920s before the Great Depression evoked a defensive economic nationalism that made matters worse and led to the de facto "isolationism" of the 1930s. But isolationism grew increasingly strained as the storm clouds of war gathered once again in Europe and Japan set about carving out an empire of its own in Asia. Americans realized they had a vital stake in the outcome of the European war particularly, but after the experience of the first Great War were desperate to avoid all-out involvement. But Hitlerism was the negation of everything American internationalism stood for, and the threat of a Nazi-dominated Europe seemed to thrust America into a form of isolationism it had never wanted. America came to realize, as Gerald W. Johnson later wrote, that "'our own safety is indissolubly linked with the safety of all free peoples, and that ours cannot be assured without assuring that of others'" (pp. 362-363). The "ghost of Wilson" thus rose again as American thinkers and statesmen, after Pearl Harbor, reconsidered America's future role

in maintaining world order, even while worrying about the domestic consequences of doing so (p. 369).

Hendrickson notes that the leadership role in a constitutional partnership of free nations to establish peace and ward off either anarchy or despotism fell naturally on the United States. He concludes that "the American political tradition, far from representing an obstacle to clear thinking about international relations, conferred decided advantages in that task. The United States, far from being the least prepared to preside over the creation of a peaceful world order, was the best prepared" (p. 373).

This is an excellent book, rich in incident and analysis, that pursues its theme steadfastly, evenhandedly, and for the most part convincingly. By exploring the centrality of union to Americans' understanding of their political experience, it reveals why that experience had such resonance in and for the wider world even at times when the United States seemed most eager to be disconnected from it. The book presumes some knowledge of the sweep of American history but rewards reading by anyone with an interest in that history and especially in America's role in the world. Terminating with American entry into World War II in November 1941, it presumably sets the scene for a further volume that traces the debates over union, nation, or empire (the "indissoluble trinity" [p. 361]) in the postwar period, when the United States assumed the mantle of leader of the free world.

(128)

(pp. 273-276)

(p. 275)

every

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-diplo>

Citation: John Kane. Review of Hendrickson, David C. *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941*. H-Diplo, H-Net Reviews. December, 2009.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=24592>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.