

Jasper M. Trautsch. *The Genesis of America: US Foreign Policy and the Formation of National Identity, 1793-1815.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 328 pp. \$49.99, cloth, ISBN 978-1-108-42824-8.

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One of the oldest, and least accurate, tropes in American history is that “politics stops at the water’s edge.” In reality, the United States has witnessed a level of partisan dissent during each of its conflicts, whether in the actual conduct of the war, the reasons for fighting it, or the means to end it. Granted, the scale and scope of political differences varies, running the gamut from the near secession of the Federalists during the War of 1812 to the near unanimity in the run-up to the Iraq War. And yet, American popular remembrance often overlooks this, instead preferring to mythologize political unity in the face of crisis. Traditional stories of World War II—“The Good War”—focus on Victory Gardens and scrap metal drives, but may paint over a deeper rendering of racial tensions, labor radicalization, and a vocal Republican minority that sought to shape FDR’s policies while refining its ideology of free markets and free labor to fit into the postwar world.

Jasper Trautsch acknowledges the existence of this theme in American history in *The Genesis of America*—and then chooses to both reinforce and complicate it at the same time. He views the partisan divide of the early republican era through a lens of political unity, with both the Federalists and Republicans desiring the same goal: the preservation of the republic and its disentanglement from foreign control. Both parties sought to devel-

op an American nationalism in the wake of the Revolution and the Articles of Confederation experiment, and, as Trautsch notes in the introduction, “the definition of what one is logically depends on the definition of what one is not” (p. 9). This process of “external demarcation” used the Old World, specifically France and England, to outline political differences that made the United States unique in the New.

The parties differed, however, on whom they least resembled. The Federalists blamed the Jacobin French for looking to subvert the rights guaranteed within the republic to spread anarchy across the Atlantic. On the opposite side of the coin, the Republicans saw foreign policy crises as extensions of monarchist England and its desire to reacquire its old colonies through mercantilist control. Each party, in turn, identified the other with its respective foreign boogeyman, a significant factor as we consider the nature of party formation in the era of the early republic. In the process of describing the development of American nationalism, benefiting from the ability to bookend it with uniquely Federalist (Quasi-War) and Republican (War of 1812) conflicts, Trautsch muddies our common perception of party formation in the United States. With each party struggling to define itself against an international Other that it then equated with a partisan opponent,

political divides took on an existential “zero-sum” quality that challenges an assumed vision of gradual party evolution. Further, such a notion helps explain the collapse of the Federalists and the Republican’s veritable one-party rule in the wake of Andrew Jackson’s victory at New Orleans in 1815. This begs the question: When did American political culture actually become comfortable with a two-party system?

For Trautsch, party formation remained “ad hoc coalitions serving the interests of certain constituencies” for most of the late 1780s and early 1790s (p. 43). Clearly generalizations could be made—Federalists as urban, mercantile, and conservative and Republicans as rural, land-based, and egalitarian—but to claim concrete party identity prior 1793 would be a mistake. The process of defining America, he argues, started on the streets of Paris. “It was only the radicalization of the French Revolution and the outbreak of war between Great Britain and France in 1793,” Trautsch writes, “that allowed these ideologies [Federalist and Republican] to mature and to be expressed with rising clarity” (p. 53). Thus, the 1790s, more than just an era of growing partisan wrangling, became a contest to describe American political character.

The Federalists, in power during the decade, arrayed just such character in contrast to the anarchy of the French Revolution. Chaste, conservative, and beholden to the status quo, the United States would endeavor to stay the course and deny Jacobin radicalism a foothold in the New World. They feared that the individual rights guaranteed by the Bill of Rights provided the maneuver space for radicals to subvert the republic, be it through the press, rioting, or coercion. The Republicans, posturing themselves as both Francophilic and anti-administration, provided an unwitting—or potentially witting—fifth column that threatened not just the Federalist vision of the nation, but the entire republican experiment. As Trautsch outlines, the major foreign policy issues of the 1790s,

particularly the Jay Treaty and the Quasi-War, existed on two levels: a disentanglement from French perfidy and a domestic partisan struggle over American identity. The Federalists weaponized such debates, he claims, using the foreign crises of the moment to cudgel the Republicans in the public political space.

The Republicans espoused their own vision of the nation, but struggled during the 1790s to coalesce around a unifying theme. Trautsch points out that the early Republican party, while generally anti-administration, actually represented a “heterogeneous coalition ... of groups with competing interests” (p. 172). Here again, the ability to define the party through a negative correlation to what it was not provided the glue to bind the segments together. Napoleon’s usurpation of the French Revolution and naming of himself emperor left no real examples of republicanism in the Old World. Trautsch argues that the Republicans adhered to the “republican peace theory,” the Enlightenment notion that republics would avoid war due to pressure from their citizenry. Therefore, the problem with the security environment of the early nineteenth century had everything to do with the avarice of monarchies, England chief amongst them. The counterrevolutionaries of the French Revolution and now the primary antagonists in a naval conflict in the Atlantic that saw the capture of American ships and impressment of American sailors, England represented the opposite of what the Republicans saw the United States as—peace-loving, socially mobile, and seeking freedom of trade as a means to expand civility around the globe. Much as the Federalists had done during the 1790s, the Republicans of the 1800s and 1810s defined their domestic political opposition as monarchical revisionists steered by English mercantilist control. By 1812, Trautsch writes, Republicans “hoped that the war would end Britain’s pernicious sway in the U.S. and thereby protect American republicanism”—much

as the Federalists had hoped the decade before about the French (p. 222).

One could argue that, by 1815, the Republican ideology had won out; the collapse of the Federalists meant they would preside over nearly a decade of one-party governance. But Trautsch foregoes such a simplistic narrative. For him, both parties won. Bypassing the partisanship of the nation's first generation, he shows that each party had achieved its macro-level goals by 1815: an independent United States, disentangled from England and France, with a national identity that unified the totality of the citizenry under an identity of "American." It is jarring to think that this was not a given in 1788, or that early American politician questioned the resiliency of the republic's political process. Granted, the end of the First Party System signaled the end of bipartisanship in the near term, but in total, the quest to define the character of the American republic cemented the role of electoral politics in the governance of the nation. It also removed the specter of malign foreign influence from the foreground of political debate. The "zero-sum" partisan conflict that both parties used to characterize the other would not shape the nature of political dialogue to the extent it had before.

For such an intricate thesis, Trautsch handles it with aplomb, adeptly applying nuance to bolster his argument. That makes a few of his missteps particularly striking. His discussion of the Federalists, in particular, falls into well-worn, Jefferson-centric grooves that paint the party as undemocratic and reactionary. Whereas the Republicans believed their ideology, Trautsch appears to argue that the belligerency of the late Washington and Adams administrations represented little more than political theater to consolidate their power. He quotes John Marshall as saying that the failure of the initial American mission to France in 1797 was good in that the threat of war "would discredit the 'French Party' in America" (p. 121). Trautsch begs the question: Did the Federalists really be-

lieve in the tales of French subversion or did they use them simply to discredit the Republicans? To him, they appear to favor the latter. A decade and a half later, the Republicans clearly believed in the sanctity of their purpose, he states, and the conservative and undemocratic Federalists found themselves on the wrong side of history. Trautsch could have extended the nuance and open-mindedness he affords to the Republicans to the other side of the political debate, thus building a stronger understanding of party formation, consolidation, and for the Federalists, extinction.[1]

Such an argument should not dissuade anyone from recognizing the importance of *The Genesis of America*. Trautsch's book should lead to a greater reevaluation not only of the politics of the early American republic but also of the interrelationship between foreign and domestic policies in American political history writ large. Much as Julian Zelizer argues for in his discussion of "new" political history, broadening the scope of political time outside of demarcated presidential administrations reveals inherent characteristics of the American political system.[2] Both parties in the United States' first generation grappled with the postcolonial need to define the nation while also ensuring its survival. What Trautsch shines a light on is how each party used the same method towards this end: defining the nation (and themselves) in opposition to an Other (foreign and domestic). In this way, we understand that the establishment of the United States was contested from its inception, but benefited from unifying themes throughout.

Notes

[1]. For a deserved reassessment of the Federalist Party in American political history, see Doron S. Ben-Atar and Barbara B. Oberg, eds., *Federalists Reconsidered* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2000).

[2]. Julian Zelizer, *Governing America: The Revival of Political History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

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