

H-Diplo

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Robert J. Young. *An American by Degrees: The Extraordinary Lives of French Ambassador Jules Jusserand*. Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009. Pp. xv + 327.

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Reviewed for H-Diplo by **William R. Keylor, Boston University**

Over the past several decades two genres of historical writing have been relegated to the margins of the discipline by the powers-that-be in the profession. The first is biography, dismissed by many as an obsolete relic of an earlier era of historical scholarship when the personal story of an individual was considered a useful means of comprehending the past. The second is diplomatic history, in the narrowest sense of that term, which addresses the thoughts and activities of a government's official representatives abroad. Robert Young, the author of earlier studies of French foreign and defense policies, has unapologetically chosen to buck this trend. He takes as the subject of his latest book the life and career of Jean-Jules Jusserand, a diplomat who represented France in the United States from 1904 to 1925.

Apart from specialists in the history of Franco-American relations during this period, it is unlikely that many historians have even heard of Jusserand, or that those who recognize the name have more than a vague knowledge of his role in representing French interests in

Washington. The paucity of secondary studies in either French or English of the man's career might lead one to question whether that topic was worth the extraordinary effort that the author has devoted to it. But through a combination of exhaustive research in the archives of the French Foreign Ministry and a writing style that can only be described as elegant, Young has effectively disposed of any such objection. The book is a scholarly and literary achievement of the first order that sheds much light not only on the career of this long-serving diplomat but also on the way in which French foreign policy was conducted in the first quarter of the twentieth century.

An underlying theme of the book is the “double life” of this remarkably learned public servant. Fluent in the English language, the holder of a doctorate of letters from the University of Lyon, Jusserand somehow managed to carve out the requisite time amid his hectic diplomatic duties to research and write respectable scholarly studies of Chaucer, Shakespeare, as well as of English literature in general and the English novel in particular. He acquired the reputation as a serious scholar of British and later American literary history, which would earn him the first Pulitzer Prize for the best book of the year (in American history). In recognition of his intellectual achievements he was elected president of the American Historical Association in 1921—only the second foreign national to be elected to that post since the founding of the Association in 1884. A year later, while serving on his government's delegation to the Washington Naval Conference—at which France was engaged in an acrimonious dispute with Britain and the United States over restrictions on land armies and submarines, the ambassador revealed his sense of

priorities by slipping away in mid-conference to preside over the AHA's annual meeting in Saint Louis.

As important as Jusserand's historical and literary endeavors may have been — and Young subjects them to a searching examination — the man's most important contribution was in the field of diplomacy. He steadily ascended the career ladder in the French foreign service — with postings in the Tunisian protectorate, London and Copenhagen — all the while pursuing his intellectual interests in the evening and on weekends. The British capital afforded him the opportunity to live his “double life” to the hilt: He cultivated useful friendships with political figures such as William Gladstone and John Morley, but also developed close relations with literary lions such as Robert Browning, Bret Harte, and Henry James. His marriage to Elise Richards, an American banker's daughter who had been raised in Paris, provided him with a lifelong companion who shared his literary and historical interests while admirably performing her official duties as an ambassador's wife.

On his arrival in Washington D.C. in 1904, Jusserand immediately developed a close personal relationship with President Theodore Roosevelt. The two combined a commitment to personal fitness — the ambassador was an avid tennis player and a vigorous hiker -- a passion for literature, and a fascination with the ins and outs of diplomacy. T.R. exulted to his son Kermit that he had discovered in the new French envoy an “unexpected playmate.” At a farewell luncheon for Roosevelt as he prepared to vacate the White House in 1909, the departing American chief executive remarked that “there was never such a relationship between an ambassador and a president or ruler of a country” as

there had been between Jusserand and himself. The sight of the rambunctious, bombastic T.R. and the diminutive, elegant French envoy swimming nude together in the Potomac must have amused anyone who caught a glimpse of them. After Roosevelt's departure from the White House the 330-pound William Howard Taft was a poor prospect for tennis partner, swimming buddy, and hiking companion of the French ambassador. Jusserand's relationship with Taft had none of the intimacy and mutual affection that had marked his friendship with Roosevelt.

On the level of state-to-state relations, the first half of Jusserand's service in Washington — 1904 to 1914 -- was relatively uneventful. The ambassador discreetly advised Roosevelt during the latter's successful efforts to help defuse Franco-German tension over the Tangier incident in 1905 and then to mediate the war between Japan and France's ally Russia that won him the Nobel Peace Prize. But the bulk of Jusserand's time and energies were devoted to such mundane matters as tariffs and arbitration treaties. It was during the second half of his twenty-year residence in the French embassy that the personal history of France's man in Washington, who had by then become doyen of the diplomatic corps, was enmeshed in the complicated, evolving relationship between his government and the government to which he was accredited. In the first three years of the Great War Jusserand bended his efforts to win sympathy and support for his beleaguered nation's cause in the United States. In this campaign he suffered from a notable disadvantage compared to his German counterpart, Count Johann von Bernstorff, who had a large German-American population at which to direct his appeals and a large Irish-American community that regarded Britain rather than Germany as the number one enemy.

H-Diplo Review Essay

The absence of a substantial Franco-American population impelled the French ambassador to look elsewhere for allies: He chose to cultivate the college-educated, wealthy, Francophile elite in the large East Coast cities that had acquired an admiration for French cultural achievements on leisurely visits to the land of Stendhal, Bizet, and Monet. Better to rely on these upper crust Americans to sing the praises of France than to indulge in the type of blatant propaganda that the German Embassy was conducting. The periodic arrival of *missionaires* dispatched by the French Foreign Ministry to conduct the type of overt propaganda that Jusserand disdained as counterproductive because it would generate resentment in the U.S. elicited blistering complaints from the embassy. The ambassador's penchant for discretion and his reliance on American friends of France to do the embassy's job for it did not sit well with his critics at home. Rumors of his imminent recall regularly appeared in both the French and American press to the end of his career.

During the period of American neutrality, the most valuable U.S. contribution to the French war effort was the provision of loans to the French state by investment banks such as J.P. Morgan and Kuhn Loeb. The sale of French (and British) government bonds on Wall Street supplied the allied purchasing agents in the United States with the dollars required to purchase desperately needed products of American farms, factories, mines, and oil wells. But these lending operations were handled by French treasury officials in New York City, with virtually no input from the embassy in Washington, whose chief knew and cared little about economic matters. This was the first instance of the ambassador and his staff being "out of the loop" with regard to relations between the two countries.

H-Diplo Review Essay

After the United States intervened in the war on the French side in the spring of 1917, Jusserand and his embassy were promptly confronted with stiff competition from a rival French organization in the United States. The French High Commission to the United States, headed by the journalist-statesman (and future prime minister) André Tardieu, was dispatched to Washington to facilitate economic and military cooperation between the two wartime partners. While the size of the Commission grew by leaps and bounds as technical specialists in this or that subject swelled its ranks, Jusserand complained bitterly about the Quai d'Orsay's parsimonious treatment of his embassy, which had a full-time staff of three (compared with the thirty employees of the German embassy who departed with Bernstorff after Wilson broke diplomatic relations with Germany in early 1917).

The Ph.D. from the University of Lyon never established a close personal or even cordial working relationship with the Ph.D. from Princeton in the White House. Jusserand was deeply offended by Wilson's early attempts at mediation during the period of American neutrality and his talk of "peace without victory," which implied a moral equivalence between the two warring coalitions. But once the U.S. got in, the ambassador was pleased by the upsurge of francophilia in the general public symbolized by the declaration by one of General Pershing's aides: "Lafayette, nous voici!" Relations between the two countries would be warmer during the brief period of American belligerency in the Great War than they had been in the past or would be in the future. Young persuasively argues that Jusserand deserves a large share of the credit for nurturing this state of affairs.

H-Diplo Review Essay

The end of the war brought an abrupt end to Franco-American honeymoon. Although Wilson invited Jusserand to accompany him on the *George Washington* to the peace conference in Paris, the president and the envoy did not discuss anything of significance on the transatlantic journey. The ambassador appears to have had no influence on the American president as he repeatedly clashed with French Premier Georges Clemenceau and other French delegates at the conference table over such issues as reparations and the political status of the Rhineland. Worse, Jusserand seems not to have been consulted by his own government during the peace talks, even though no French official had a greater understanding of American attitudes and interests and might have given valuable advice.

On his return to Washington Jusserand worked feverishly to secure senatorial acceptance of the U.S security pledge to defend France against German aggression that Wilson had signed in Paris in exchange for Clemenceau's abandonment of the project for the separation of the Rhineland from Germany. The ambassador privately hinted to Republican senators, many of whom were willing to support the French security treaty, that France was perfectly willing to see the treaty separated from Wilson's much more controversial League of Nations Covenant. But when the ailing, incommunicado American chief executive adamantly insisted on preserving the linkage between the two documents, Jusserand was compelled to sit by helplessly as the French security treaty went down the drain on Capitol Hill with the League Covenant and the Treaty of Versailles.

As the United States retreated from its global commitments in the early 1920s, the image of France in the United States degenerated from that of a loyal wartime partner to that of an

ungrateful, greedy, spendthrift, vengeful, militaristic power bent on crushing the infant German republic with excessive reparation demands and military pressure. Jusserand's attempts to smooth over relations between the two former wartime partners were unsuccessful. Other sources of tension, notably war debts, the Fordney-McCumber Tariff of 1922, and the Prohibition Amendment that excluded French wines from the American market, fed the growing antagonism. When Prime Minister Raymond Poincaré sent French military forces into the Ruhr section of Germany in early 1923 to compel reparation payments in the form of coal deliveries, Washington responded in ways very different from those of the halcyon days of the wartime partnership. President Warren Harding abruptly withdrew the last remaining token of American support for the peace settlement in general and French security in particular, the American military occupation force in the Rhineland. On hearing about the French occupation of the Ruhr, a gravely ill, bitter Wilson exploded to a friend that "I would like to see Germany clean up on France, and I would like to meet Jusserand to tell him that to his face." Amid the mounting denunciations of French militarism in the United States, the ambassador was obliged to cope with explosive accusations in the American press and on the floor of Congress about the "barbaric" treatment of German women by French colonial troops in the Rhineland, allegations that had been fabricated by German propaganda agencies and had great resonance in the Jim Crow south.

The victory of the Cartel des Gauches coalition in the French elections of 1924 brought to power men of the moderate left who were prepared to jettison the hard-line policies of the Poincaré government and pursue a policy of conciliation toward Germany. As part of this

radical transformation of French foreign policy the new center-left government of Premier Edouard Herriot (who also assumed the office of Foreign Minister) embarked on a house-cleaning operation at the Quai d'Orsay that would put several long-serving ambassadors out to pasture. The 69-year old Jusserand was the most notable casualty of this campaign. After effusive expressions of fond farewells from his wide circle of friends in the United States, he returned to his country and divided his time between the family house in the small village of Saint-Haon-le-Châtel near Lyon and an apartment in Paris, where he consulted archives and libraries in the preparation for the memoirs that were uncompleted at his death in 1932. One puts down Young's book with the sense that he has achieved his goal of resurrecting a public figure whose contribution to the relations between the United States and France during a critical period in each country's history has long been forgotten.

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