



**Christian J. Maisch, “The Falkland/Malvinas Islands Clash of 1831-32: U.S. and British Diplomacy in the South Atlantic,” *Diplomatic History*, Vol. 24, No. 2 (Spring 2000): 185-209.**

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US foreign relations in the 19th century remain among the most understudied aspect of the field. This problem particularly affects inter-American affairs, where the United States played a key role essentially from the time of independence. Christian Maisch’s fine article on the triangular relationship between the United States, Great Britain, and Argentina and the British colonization of the Falkland/Malvinas Islands helps fill in some of the gaps in the historiography of the period.

Maisch frames his analysis around the question of whether the United States prompted the British to seize the islands, either through entering into some sort of conspiracy with the British or by unwittingly forcing London’s hand. He dispenses with the first option rather quickly, and successfully. The second issue consumes the bulk of his attention.

Maisch, who has written on this subject in the past, begins with a fairly detailed discussion of the contested claims of sovereignty for the islands, a fascinating story of the vagaries of international diplomacy that the author recaps succinctly. The islands nonetheless remained essentially under the firm control of no country until 1820, when Argentina took formal possession. The United States did not enter the picture until 1831, when it protested Argentine restrictions on U.S. fishing activities in the area. The death of the U.S. minister (a surprisingly common occurrence in this era of U.S. diplomacy) placed the responsibility for dealing with Argentine protectionism in the hands of Consul George Slacum, who eschewed negotiations and quickly called for military support. The consul found his position fortified by Commandant Silas Duncan, of the *Lexington*, who proved similarly aggressive in pressing American claims. While Slacum consulted with British diplomats about a joint Anglo-American response, Maisch argues that nothing ever came of these plans-somewhat typically, Slacum appears to have just been ruminating about possibilities rather than presenting a serious option. While his overture did nothing to improve the U.S. position, his activities did infuriate the Argentines, who suspended discussions with U.S. representatives. The arrival of Francis Baylies, the new U.S. minister (to replace the late Forbes), did not improve the situation. If anything, Baylies proved even more high-handed than was Slacum, consistently rejecting Argentine pleas to settle the matter by arbitration and, without authorization, supporting a rather weak British legal claim to the island. Maisch suggests, however, that while U.S. actions might have influenced the timing of the British decision to occupy the islands, they probably did not affect the actual decision itself.

This article’s solid research base and well-stated argument made me wish Maisch had been a little more ambitious in framing his conclusions. Three issues of broader interest to historians of U.S. foreign relations come to mind. Dexter Perkins’s three-volume study of the Monroe

Doctrine suggested that the Falklands/Malvinas issue formed one event that suggested the relatively delayed implementation of the doctrine. As Maisch notes, however, more recent scholars, notably John Belohlavek, have implicitly challenged Perkins's viewpoint by arguing that—at least in the Jackson administration—the United States did pursue a bellicose foreign policy that aimed to limit European influence in the Western Hemisphere. Maisch seems to come down on the side of Belohlavek in this dispute, observing, for instance, that the kind of aggressive approach that Slacum and Duncan offered was characteristic of Andrew Jackson's approach to hemispheric affairs. Given that point, can historians of the topic draw broader conclusions from Maisch's article about the ideology of early inter-American relations? Or should we view this as an isolated episode, important for laying the foundations of future U.S.-Argentine and British-Argentine hostility but not necessarily relevant to other developments at the time in the hemisphere?

Second, even if the Falklands/Malvinas crisis does not have broader implications in understanding the U.S. approach to the 19th century hemisphere, what does it say about the way in which U.S. foreign policy was made? In Maisch's portrayal, Forbes and especially Slacum possessed a good deal of leeway to act as they pleased, and frequently did so. Nor were they the only such diplomats of this era to so exceed their instructions—Joel Poinsett in Mexico and Chile, Elijah Hise and others in Central America come to mind. Just how much freedom of action did U.S. diplomats in the South Atlantic possess? How freely could they exceed their instructions? Should historians treat them as agents or developers of U.S. policy in the region? And what of the activities of naval commandants? That the U.S. government neither openly endorsed nor disowned Slacum's actions only makes this issue harder to address.

And finally, Maisch's article raises some interesting question about the international environment in the Atlantic coast of South America. The Argentines, unsurprisingly, come across as the wronged party in this tale, but also appear—especially Governor Vernet—as somewhat ineffective in dealing with their potential foes. Did Argentine diplomats perceive a difference between U.S. and British goals in the region, and, if so, did they seek to exploit it? If not, why not? Did they see the United States as having any legitimate function in their international relations? Did any ill will from the British intervention in Buenos Aires survive, and color Argentine policy? Similarly, with the British, had their view of the U.S. as a potential ally or rival changed from the time of Canning's offer to Monroe of a joint declaration to prevent European recolonization of the hemisphere?

In short, this article, as in any good one, raises a host of interesting issues even as it proves its central arguments.

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