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Chris Tudda. "A Messiah that Will Never Come': A New Look at Saratoga, Independence, and Revolutionary War Diplomacy." *Diplomatic History* 32:5 (November 2008): 779-810. DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00730.x. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.2008.00730.x>.

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Reviewed by **Matt J. Schumann**, Eastern Michigan University

Reviewed by **William E. Weeks**, University of California, San Diego

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To serve on a conference panel and then to see one of the papers from that panel in print is a distinct privilege, even if the paper is not one's own. Such is the case with Chris Tudda's paper on the international significance of the Saratoga campaign, which he presented to the Annual Meeting of the Society for Historians of American Foreign Relations earlier this year.¹ Based on an impressive array of research, Tudda's remarks on American "triangular diplomacy" and French intervention *before* the Saratoga campaign caused a small stir among panel attendees in Columbus, and they promise to do the same in print.

Tudda opens by discussing three nearly-simultaneous events, and subtly illustrating the almost absurd correlation between Lord North's reconciliation proposal, the Olive-Branch Petition and the Lexington-Concord campaign in 1775 (782-785). The wording of the two proposals meshed poorly with actions on the ground, on both sides, and Tudda aptly summarizes the approach to open war by 1776. This was not just a matter of Bunker Hill and American preparations to invade British Canada, or of British precursors to the Long Island campaign, but also of both sides acting in the diplomatic world, long before

¹ Chris Tudda, "A Messiah that Will Never Come: American Independence, British Reconciliation Efforts, and the Franco-American Alliance," presented at the SHAFR Annual Meeting, Columbus, Ohio, Saturday 28 June 2008. From the same panel, see Matt Schumann, "North American Initiatives, Euro-Atlantic Relations and the Outbreak of the Seven Years War, 1752-1756."

the official declaration, as though American independence was an accomplished fact (785-788).

Convinced that Britain would only accept absolute submission from the rebellious colonies, one American leader after another—from John and Samuel Adams to Ben Franklin to George Washington—became convinced that a proper declaration of independence was appropriate (788-791), and diplomacy with France was merely a natural outgrowth. Even before the declaration, Tudta notes, the Continental Congress authorized American diplomats to appear in European courts, and to seek partnerships and alliances as though they were already an independent power. The central point of Tudta's argument lies in the converse of this reality, however: that so long as the War of Independence continued, and perhaps beyond, the nascent United States could use the threat of reconciliation with Britain—a threat that Britain validated almost continuously—to manipulate other European powers (791).

Tudta notes that for years beforehand, the French cabinet had already supported the American bid for independence, not least because of their own rivalry with Britain. Capitalizing on Anglo-French tensions, American commissioners Silas Deane, Franklin and Charles Lee were positioned ideally to manipulate French counsels, and to move toward a more open, independent Franco-American relationship as events progressed in 1776 (794-797). It was not so simple, however, as the French learned of Franklin listening to British proposals, while the Dutch stopped short of open support for the American cause. This allowed the Americans to deal, at least in principle, from a position of strength, noting that their loyalties might at any time be returned to the British—and thus once more against France and Spain. The Bourbon courts, therefore, while continuing to walk the tightrope of neutrality, felt increasing pressure to join the war yet remained aware of the Americans' reliance upon them (799-801).

Americans often see the victory at Saratoga as helping to confirm their independence, but it also made diplomatic waves in Europe. The British, now acting through Lord Richmond, made renewed pleas for peace, while the French cabinet led by the Comte de Vergennes saw increasing need for intervention on the American side before threats could be made good of bringing the war to an end (801-805). In essence, these dealings confirmed the American position of strength, such that both French and British diplomats wooed the American commissioners. Under the weight of American threats that reconciliation with Britain remained a real possibility—threats that British emissaries did nothing to diminish—France became the first European state to recognize U.S. independence on 6 February 1778, with the Treaty of Amity and Commerce.

British counsels, however, continued ironically to strengthen the American position in Paris by seeking ever more expansive means by which to conciliate the one-time colonies. Implicit in the ideas behind the Carlisle commission was a fundamental restructuring of Britain's Atlantic empire, with distinct possibilities for keeping the Continental Congress, American representation in Parliament, and operating conditions of unrestricted trade for

American commerce. British words in Paris and eventually in Philadelphia matched poorly with their actions elsewhere, rendering this attempt at reconciliation no more meaningful than its predecessors, and only advancing the way toward open war with France (806-810).

Tudda's mastery of the details is considerable, not least the American position which gained in strength as independence moved from being a political necessity in metropolitan-colonial relations to a key negotiating point with both Britain and the Bourbon powers. This was not merely a function of growing strength and skill in the military arm of the American rebellion, but also of Britain's lack of creativity in dealing with the rebellious colonies.² Thus the British operated within a narrowly-circumscribed set of ideas about how to handle the Americans, though their desires for reconciliation were probably genuine. Meanwhile, their proposals, their military difficulties and their atrocities on the ground allowed their enemies, ironically, to negotiate from a position of strength, at first in France but later among the Spanish and Dutch. So long as the proposals kept coming, Tudda notes, American diplomats had the opportunity to play both sides to the middle, and to extract the greatest amount of concessions from both.

For the reader of Tudda's article, only two caveats are in order, and only minor ones at that. First, this is a diplomatic history, so anyone looking for land and naval campaigns may do well to look elsewhere. Tudda may have done well, however, to seek some correlation between British military fortunes and the dates of their various overtures, whether with the bloodying at Bunker Hill, the repulsion of the American attempt on Canada, or the Howe brothers' successes in New York and Philadelphia.³ Second, while Tudda clearly has a good grasp of printed primary sources, European historians of this era well know that there is no substitute for detailed work in the archives.⁴ Further work in the British National Archives (NA, formerly PRO), the French Archive du Ministère des Affaires Étrangères (AMAE), and among the Gage and Germain Papers in the Clements Library in Ann Arbor, Michigan, would probably strengthen his case. These caveats, however, merely suggest how much more work there is to be done on sharpening the details of Tudda's argument. His analysis of triangular diplomacy and interaction with the

² See e.g. Charles M. Andrews, *The Colonial Background of the American Revolution* (Yale, 1924); John Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed* (Michigan, 1990), especially chapter 3, "The Spectrum of Imperial Possibilities: Henry Ellis and Thomas Pownall, 1763-1775," pp.43-80.

³ On the year 1776, see David McCullough, *1776* (New York, 2005). For operations and politics in general, see *inter alia* Don Higginbotham, *The War of American Independence: Military Attitudes, Policies and Practice, 1763-1789* (New York, 1971); Christopher Hibbert, *Redcoats and Rebels: The War for America, 1770-1781* (London, 1990).

⁴ Among Prussian historians of this era, for example, the *Politisches Correspondenz Friedrichs des Grossen*, J.D.E. Preuss, et. al., eds. (46 vols., Berlin, 1879-1939) only presents half of the Galitzin affair in 1762—the other half of the puzzle is in the St. Petersburg Archives—and Prussian espionage correspondence, despite several series in the Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Dahlem Dorf, Berlin), does not appear at all in printed sources.

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European states system at the very dawn of American international consciousness stands on its own, and is very much of interest without any further modification.

Matt Schumann is co-author with Karl Schweizer of *The Seven Years War: A Transatlantic History* (2008) which is the subject of a forthcoming H-Diplo Roundtable.

Review by **William E. Weeks**, University of California, San Diego

In the most recent issue, the editors of *Diplomatic History* ask “is there anything as old-fashioned as political biography?” Possibly, yes—a multi-archival, elites-eye only view of early American diplomacy. State Department historian Chris Tudda has produced such a work. It contains no bottom-up view of matters, does not engage in any gendered analysis, refrains from taking the cultural turn, and insofar as it examines the story from the non-U.S. perspective, does not do so to the near-total exclusion of documents from the American side. In short, “A Messiah that Will Never Come”: A New Look at Saratoga, Independence, and Revolutionary War Diplomacy” is a highly traditional piece of diplomatic history that, notwithstanding its failure to conform to current academic fashions, places the beginnings of U.S. diplomacy in a somewhat sharper perspective. Extensively researched and densely argued, “A Messiah that Will Never Come” repays the close scrutiny required of the reader with an enlarged understanding of the beginnings of American diplomacy and with valuable lessons for students of any era of American foreign relations.

The author’s stated purpose is to diminish the significance of the Battle of Saratoga as a key factor in the creation of the Franco-American alliance. Tudda argues that “Saratoga did not significantly affect the diplomacy of the war, because the Americans’ commitment to independence became the central tenet of a diplomatic consciousness that had been developing since early 1775. . .” Tudda also claims that the battle did not “change the behavior of the European powers.” (780, 781) I am not persuaded by his attempt to minimize the significance of Saratoga, as I will try to explain later. What the author does accomplish, in my view, is to recast American revolutionary diplomacy in a distinctly modern light, highlighting how the geographic position and immense potential power of the United States made it a key makeweight in the balance of power from the start. This is a stark contrast to the more traditional notion that the nascent U.S. was a “pipsqueak republic” largely irrelevant to European politics. Tudda details how the U.S., even prior to declaring its independence, was “dealing from a position of strength” owing to an awareness of its latent power and the distinct advantages of its position vis- à-vis Great Britain and France.

Tudda suggests that by avoiding the role of the supplicant in dire need, the U.S. was able to implement a form of “triangular diplomacy” that sought to position itself closer to both Great Britain and France than those two nations were to each other. American diplomats counted on the unmitigated Anglo-French hostility to create a space where the U.S could play the two nations off against one another without the fear that they might unite against them. The term “triangular diplomacy” evokes memories of Nixon and Kissinger’s Cold War strategies of the late 60s and early 70s, a parallel likely in the author’s mind as well, given the fact that the contributor’s note indicates he currently is writing a book on US-Chinese relations during the first Nixon administration.

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As Tudta makes clear, British duplicity and faithlessness made reconciliation with the colonies nearly impossible. London's ham-handed efforts at reconciliation so antagonized the Continental Congress as to make a reunion less, not more, likely. At the same time, Tudta demonstrates that it was Congress' unyielding determination to gain independence that proved critical in getting the U.S. what it wanted. The Congress refused to allow British offers to undermine unity while effectively keeping the fear of reconciliation very much alive in the minds of the French, in retrospect a remarkable trick. Great Britain's increasingly desperate efforts at reconciliation only served to make the French nervous that a deal was imminent, a perception artfully cultivated in the minds of French diplomats by both Franklin and the British. Holding steadfast for independence even in the face of tempting offers of reunion turned out to be the key.

One of the most useful aspects of the article is how it documents the perception (ultimately proven correct) of the enormous latent power of an independent United States and its key role as a balancer in the international struggle for supremacy. Tudta notes that Congress perceived that independence "would guarantee future wealth far beyond anything the people could have imagine." (808) This perception of the nation's future power and importance was shared by the French: "Increasingly important to their calculations, however, was an unwillingness to anger the United States. . . .with their abundant natural resources, naturally increasing population, their capacity for agricultural production, and domestic manufactures seemingly limitless, and their willingness to use these resources to achieve their own ends, the American people were 'a rising people.'" (800) Regarding a possible Franco-American alliance, he asserts "the desire for a relationship clearly was not one-sided." Tudta also observes how leading opponents of independence John Dickinson and John Livingston shared the perception of the colonies' future strength: they doubted the likelihood of obtaining French aid because they feared that France would "be jealous of that rising power which would one day certainly strip them of all their American possessions." (791) Perhaps the most significant point the author makes is how all parties understood the latent power and future importance of the U.S. was something to contend for.

Tudta challenges the notion most famously advanced by Felix Gilbert that the Model Treaty constituted a "departure from diplomatic practice of the time:" The author places it squarely within the norms of the age: "In fact, the treaty demonstrates the founders' desire to participate in the international system of the time and play France and Britain off against one another." (792)

Quibble number 1: The piece is misnamed. The phrase "A Messiah that will never come" is drawn from a letter from John Adams, referring to his expectation that British reconciliation efforts (the "messiah") were doomed to failure. The phrase is peripheral to the main concerns of the article; the author seems to agree, consigning reference to it to a note. The question remains, why use it in the title?

Quibble number 2: Tudra has done much to reinforce the view of American revolutionary diplomacy as both purposeful and effective. I am, however, not persuaded by his thesis that the Battle of Saratoga was of marginal importance to the diplomacy of the time, that in terms of the French it “merely put a public face on an unofficial collaborative relationship. . .” [781] Although the author makes a strong case that the battle was not the sufficient precipitating factor in the Franco-American alliance, it seems to me it should still be deemed a necessary factor in creation of the alliance. To deny that minimal influence, one runs the risk of underemphasizing the military facts on the ground at the time. Saratoga certainly encouraged both the French and the Americans of the viability of the revolution. To suggest a counterfactual, can one imagine a Franco-American alliance had Saratoga been an American defeat of a magnitude comparable to the victory that was achieved? No, not really. Saratoga remains important, if no longer the “game changer” (to use contemporary parlance) it often has been thought to be.

Early American diplomacy retains a somewhat hard to believe aspect. An ad hoc committee of splendid amateurs and would-be revolutionaries played the two greatest powers on Earth against one another to maximum advantage, confident that the intensity of their rivalry would provide them the leverage needed to realize their outsized ambitions of an independent nation. Perhaps it was their status as foreign policy amateurs that allowed American diplomats to best understand the correlation of forces and desires of 1770s world politics. The miracle (one of them at least) is that Anglo-French espionage did not unmask the elaborate kabuki that they performed. It is both a classic tale of realpolitik and a textbook example of how a smaller state can turn a position of weakness into a position of power by injecting itself into a larger controversy and holding steadfast to its goals. Shocking though it may be to some scholars, “A Messiah that will Never Come” shows how a traditional approach to American diplomatic history can still prove illuminating.

William E. Weeks is author of *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (1992), *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to Civil War* (1996), and his work explores the relationship between American nationalism and American imperialism.

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