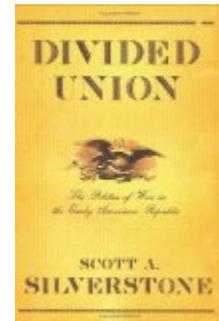


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Scott A. Silverstone. *Divided Union: The Politics of War in the Early American Republic*. Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2004. vii + 278 pp. \$42.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8014-4230-8.

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## Republican Virtue and Foreign Affairs in the Early Republic

Scott Silverstone, an assistant professor of Political Science at the United States Military Academy, has written an intriguing and conceptually informative book about the relationship between a republican frame of government and foreign policy, more particularly the propensity of republics to engage in war. He believes that republics do indeed tend to be less warlike, because the war-making power is fragmented among the branches of government (separation of powers) and the executive is much more limited in the scope of his (someday, her) activity. In the American case, Silverstone especially points to the impact of federalism as a limitation on the capacity of the United States to engage in war; the extended republic, with its vast diversity of interests, enables sectional views to obtain representation in Congress and acts as a brake on warlike ambitions. To show the validity of his view, Silverstone goes through a number of American foreign policy questions from 1790 to 1860. He gives us an unusual and interesting view of foreign affairs of the early republic, and his conclusions merit careful consideration; however, in a strange and unusual way, he also brings to the fore some distinct methodological questions.

Silverstone commences by examining a battle among political scientists to determine the factors influencing the foreign policy decisions. One group speaks of the way domestic politics shapes foreign policy, while another school proposes that power imbalances in international relations are the only relevant determinant. Silverstone sides with those seeking to emphasize the role

of domestic considerations in foreign policy. The author then lays out a theory arguing that republics tend more to a pacifist foreign policy than a bellicose one. He asserts that James Madison, John Jay, and Alexander Hamilton enunciated this view in *The Federalist Papers*. While conceding that the Constitution supposedly places foreign policy in the hands of the executive, Silverstone points out the limitations on such power: Congress controls the purse-strings, a two-thirds vote of the Senate is required to ratify any treaty, the President has to be aware of political support (later, party support) in Congress, and the war-making power is lodged in Congress. Executives could factor in these considerations either before hand, thus tempering their instincts, or they would have to deal with consequences afterward if they ignored congressional influence.

Key to Silverstone's treatment of foreign policy in early American history is not merely the fact that the nation was a republic, but that it was a federal republic, one that incorporated a multitude of interests. This multitude of interests fed into Congress and made sure that an active opposition existed on virtually all foreign policy questions and worked as a brake on movements toward international conflict. Thus, the Madisonian framework not only made it difficult for majorities to attack minorities (the famous property rights concern of Madison), but it also weakened the ability of an executive to pursue a war-prone foreign policy. Silverstone's elaboration of the theory is thorough and complete, though a little tedious.

Then comes Silverstone's application of the theory to American historical experience up to the time of the Civil War. Here, Silverstone departs somewhat from the standard historical treatments, because he asks not only the question of why conflict or a policy of belligerence arose, but adds to his list inquiries as to how conflicts were avoided. Thus we have the obvious questions for a book treating early American foreign policy: how the United States got involved in the War of 1812, how the United States obtained Florida, how the United States absorbed Texas, how the country fell into war with Mexico, how the nation settled the Oregon boundary with Great Britain, and how the United States took the Gadsden purchase area. But he includes in his discussion other questions that often historians only hint at: why did the nation not go to war in 1807 after the Chesapeake-Leopard affair, why did Madison's attempt to win Florida by military incursion fail, why did the nation not go to war with Great Britain over the Oregon boundary line, why did the country not absorb all of Mexico, why did the United States not grab Cuba, why did the United States not go to war with Mexico a second time in 1853 or 1859? Historians have given answers to most of these questions, but Silverstone brings them all together and offers one basic principle: all these foreign policy dilemmas can be solved by looking at the federal structure of power that eviscerated the ability of the president to do what he wished. Basically, each foreign policy crisis evoked different responses from the sections composing the United States (the federalism aspect), and the powers in Congress stopped the president from behaving arbitrarily.

Specialists will want to consult this book for the foreign policy episodes that arise in their time period, but this reviewer does not intend to go through each crisis (fourteen are examined); a few examples should suffice. Silverstone argues that the country was ready to go to war after the Chesapeake-Leopard Affair and so was Thomas Jefferson (a point that will cause me to revise my American history survey notes), but the country was stopped by the New England bloc who profited so greatly from wartime shipping. Ultimately, war came in 1812 not so much by decisive action as by deception. The eager War Hawks in Congress passed a war resolution at the end of the congressional session when most of the New England representatives had departed for home—the case of the missing federalism. In the instance of the Oregon boundary dispute, Silverstone insists that James K. Polk was ready for and wanted war; he was held back from his imperialist adventure because southerners (federal-

ism at work) wanted to avoid war, and forced Polk to retreat and accept a more deliberative and pacifist bargaining position. The Mexican War occurred because Polk cheated the federal system by initiating military action in the disputed land between Texas and Mexico without congressional oversight. Then, when Mexico collapsed under U.S. military assault, the nation had the chance to absorb all of Mexico—an opportunity which other nations would have immediately seized. But the opposition to the war, especially the rise of antislavery sentiment in the North, persuaded Polk that such a maneuver would have been catastrophic, and thus he accepted a peace treaty with Mexico that he did not favor. In an interesting discussion of the Gadsden Purchase, Silverstone argues that Pierce had ample justification to go to war against Mexico again, but fear of stoking the fires of sectionalism led him to back down, and his fear arose from the federal nature of the country.

This book merits the attention of historians. Although historians probably would ascribe most of Silverstone's interpretation to sectionalism pure and simple, I think Silverstone is probably more precise in stressing the federal structure of political power as the proper way to approach the subject. At the least, he proposes a mechanism that covers a considerable stretch of time, differing conditions, and different countries.

Some questions, however, inevitably arise. It is not clear that the basic reason for the inhibitions on executive power come from federalism as much as from a republican form of government. So long as power is divided among branches of government and so long as voters can voice their concerns through representation, an executive would have trouble pursuing a wholly independent foreign policy. Extension of the nation and incorporation of more interests—that is, the federal principle—might complicate matters, but the essential weakening of the executive had already been accomplished by the frame of government. In this vein, however, it would have been worthwhile if Silverstone had compared the U.S. experience with a country that had a powerful executive—maybe Spain, Prussia, or Russia. It would be assumed that all leaders would try to evaluate situations in terms of domestic tranquility, regardless of whether not representative government existed, and thus a comparison would be far more conclusive as to the theory being offered.

In dealing with the crises outlined in his book, Silverstone ultimately determines that sectional interests drove representatives to help or hinder the president's

foreign policy. In the earlier decades, regional self-interest weighed more prominently than did party affiliation. Yet Silverstone persists in stressing regional self-interest over any other type of loyalty. By the 1840s, the Second Party System was in full vigor, approaching the zenith of its power over individuals. Scholars of congressional party voting and state legislative voting—Joel Silbey, William G. Shade, and Thomas B. Alexander, among others, all of whom Silverstone cites—have laid out clearly the partisan nature of congressional voting; party affiliation dominated the way representatives and senators voted until the Wilmot Proviso appeared. One cannot help but wonder if, on foreign policy, party affiliation broke down into regional interests, as Silverstone asserts. An analysis using standard roll-call voting techniques comparing regional position versus party affiliation on foreign policy issues versus domestic issues is distinctly needed here.

One last feature of the book demands a comment, and this feature offers a dilemma for historians, for it is both a compliment and a reprimand. Scott Silverstone is a political scientist, probably connected to the Political Development school. In case a background is needed for readers of this list, Political Development is basically an historical approach to political science questions; it is a combination of political theory and historical research. Some of the names of those in this school are Richard Franklin Bensel, Elizabeth Sanders, David Robertson, Gretchen Ritter, and Jacob Hacker. From my reading, they all have one methodology in common: they rely heavily on historians from the 1920s to the 1950s—when “old-fashioned” political history ruled the history profession. People in Political Development have found the “old” political history vitally informative. After introducing a few tables or two, they then often rely on these older histories to inform their narratives and analysis. Frequently there is a lack of what historians call “primary sources,” and often the quotations Political Development scholars use come from the old secondary works they have read. At times, I have been utterly astounded at the source material these histories have been based on.

And Scott Silverstone has, on this account, certainly astounded me. Except for *The Federalist Papers* and collected writings of Madison, Jefferson, and Polk, among

others, the book is bare of primary sources. He does not even consult congressional sources; his roll call votes in Congress on foreign policy issues come from secondary sources, not from congressional ones. And he names historians who have been out of style for over six decades. He cites secondary sources dating from the 1920s and 1930s; certainly it has been a long time for me to see, in recent literature, someone who quotes Samuel Eliot Morison. None of this is to imply that Silverstone has not consulted the recent literature, and he certainly is abreast of the political science studies in his area. But it is something of a shock to see the “oldies,” but apparently still “goodies,” being taken so seriously by other people in a different discipline.

Thus we come to the paradox. On the one hand, historians should take some pride in the fact that our histories, even the dated ones, have covered their topics so well that scholars from other fields feel quite comfortable in relying upon them, rather than revisiting the primary sources; that scholars from other fields have so much faith in the accuracy and comprehensiveness of our work that it can be relied upon almost completely. That is one powerful and flattering compliment. On the other hand, it leaves us in the position of approving historical works that are not grounded in primary sources, the main methodological task of our discipline. I am not certain what my appropriate reaction should be. Because Silverstone is in Political Science, I think I can overlook the history professions’ requirements and graciously accept the compliment; but if a graduate student in history tried to operate this way, his or her dissertation would be “dead on arrival.”

The methodological dispute aside, Silverstone’s work raises an inevitable question. He wisely stopped his analysis in 1860. But supposedly the Constitution operated in the post-World War II era, and that era has seen no lack of wars, military adventurism, and presidential dominance of foreign policy. Does this mean that the United States has finally run out of virtue and that the Republic is no more? This type of mental meandering is almost impossible to avoid given Silverstone’s theory and presentation. Regardless, scholars of the early republic and especially those interested in foreign policy will find Scott Silverstone’s work an informative and enjoyable read.

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