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H-Diplo Review Essay on **Norman A. Graebner, Richard Dean Burns, and Joseph M. Siracusa. *Foreign Affairs and the Founding Fathers: From Confederation to Constitution, 1776-1787*.** Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011. ISBN: 978-0-313-39826-1 (hardcover, \$37.00).

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Note: The views presented here are my own and do not necessarily reflect those of the U.S. Department of State or the United States Government.

As most students learn in high school and/or college (hopefully), the decade of the 1780s can best be defined as one of controlled chaos, as the 13 colonies, now states, loosely organized themselves under the Articles of Confederation. As the Revolutionary War wound down, the new nation faced an uncertain future. While it finally gained independence from Great Britain, it had to navigate through truly uncharted waters. How could the new nation survive in a world of competing nation-states that controlled the high seas? Could the United States re-establish commercial relations with its former colonial masters, build commercial relations with other European powers, and develop its own infant economy in a mercantilist world? Would it be able to repay its heavy debts without going belly-up? How could the nation convince Great Britain to adhere to the provisions of the Treaty of Paris?

The last of a trilogy devoted to the realist tradition in U.S. diplomatic history, (2008's *Reagan, Bush, Gorbachev: Revisiting the End of the Cold War* and 2010's *America and the Cold War, 1941-1991: A Realist Interpretation*), *Foreign Affairs and the Founding Fathers* is a short, well-written, and engaging narrative that uses the available primary sources to good effect. Based on early essays, lectures, and scholarly articles by the late, and prolific, historian Norman Graebner, this book introduces the reader to the key dilemmas, events, and proposed solutions to the vexing questions noted above.

One word best describes the United States during this time period: weakness. After eight years of war against the world's largest power, the new nation had to recover, pay off its enormous debts to foreign creditors, settle its financial obligations to Britain under the Treaty of Paris, and then build its own economy and commercial structure. It found that all of these were easier said than done. The Founders, in particular John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and

John Jay, rejected Thomas Paine's desire to reform the international order. The idealism of independence, the authors argue, had to be replaced by a hard-headed realism based upon the maintenance of the old-fashioned, conservative order represented by a balance of power that the young republic had no choice but to support.

A short chapter covering the foreign policy of the Revolutionary war correctly notes that the Founders actively engaged in international politics and consistently used the idea of independence to play classic realistic power politics. Neutrality in foreign affairs, the Founders believed, would best preserve their hard-fought independence. Despite their distrust and resentment of Britain, Adams *et al.* refused to align too closely with France. None of the great powers, they argued, could be trusted to subsume their own national interests in order to help the new United States. Shifting alliances, while distasteful to many, were simply the order of the day, and Adams in particular contended that the growing power of America's commercial power would buttress its independent neutrality and balance out America's opponents. (pp. 13-19)

Unfortunately, at the same time, the British decided that even after eight years of war, they were no longer going to play Mr. Nice Guy. Shortly before the signing of the Treaty of Paris, Britain began to double down on its commitment to mercantilism. Adams noted this rising sentiment and continually pressed the Congress to urge the inclusion of a treaty of commerce within the larger peace negotiations. The British, however, refused, and throughout the Confederation period, closed their markets to American goods. The reality of British economic and military strength combined with the weakness of the American economy, which remained colonial in nature, ensured America's status as a second-class member of the international community. France, allied with America during the Revolution, also closed its markets to American goods during the 1780s.

At the same time, the authors note that in the immediate post-Treaty period advocates of a stronger, more centralized government such as Hamilton could not convince the states to band together in this new world. The commitment to independence coexisted with individual states' willingness to move closer to either Britain or France in their commercial endeavors. These "well-established attachments" to London and Paris (some of the states also liked mercantilism, especially the southern states, whose agricultural products were in high demand in Europe), the authors show, "aggravated the new nation's divisions and animosities." (27) The Congress, also divided, "could not counter the jealousy and perversity or to affect a determined course of action." (27) America therefore existed in a state of limbo: the nation was too weak to alter its adversaries' actions, but the states were too wedded to political independence from each other to strengthen themselves.

The authors also demonstrate that the British did not honor key provisions of the Treaty of Paris, in particular refusing to withdraw from their forts on the western and northern frontiers, tarring of Indian tribes, and cutting off access to the vital Mississippi River. London believed that it had good reason to do so; the American states, especially those in the south, refused to release the debts owed to British creditors by American citizens. After the war ended, no central government existed that could compel the individual states to honor the national treaty. This dual embarrassment--the U.S. could not force either the British or its

own citizens to comply with the Treaty--further demonstrated American weakness during this time period. American diplomats, meanwhile, could not convince the individual states, let alone Congress, to retaliate by adopting exclusionary trade practices because Americans were essentially addicted to British finished goods.

Meanwhile, Spain refused to allow access to the southern part of Ol' Man River or the Floridas, and the Barbary pirates continued to seize American ships without penalty. The U.S. had hoped that the European powers, especially France, would send an international force to deal with the issue, but instead the Europeans paid ransoms for the return of their ships. Adams and Jefferson, seeing the writing on the wall and noting that ransoms were cheaper than the cost of not trading, advocated a similar policy which the more idealist diplomats, in particular Benjamin Franklin, believed imprudent. The realists won the argument and congress authorized the payments, but unfortunately, America's inability to project power in the Mediterranean allowed the pirates to continue to seize any ships they wanted.

Although many scholars have assumed that the calls for a stronger central government that resulted in the 1787 Constitutional Convention came about because of concern over the spread of domestic unrest, most notably Shays Rebellion, the authors show that foreign policy concerns actually had more influence. While Hamilton, Jay, and Madison argued with the anti-federalists about the actual mechanics of a stronger central government, everyone agreed that independence without centralization had failed miserably. By 1786, U.S.-British relations had reached a low point, as London refused to leave the western forts because of America's inability to repay its debts. Jay and Adams said that the U.S. had no choice but to honor the terms of the Treaty of Paris because further intransigence "afforded the British an excuse for *their* infractions." (87, emphasis mine) This was classic realism, and buttressed the argument that Congress should control the nation's foreign affairs. The individual states simply could not do whatever they wanted when it came to debt repayment and, by extension, commerce, especially when the American government could not either convince or compel the European to open their markets to American goods. American diplomats' inability to secure more loans from European nations, in particular the Netherlands, to repay their debts to Britain made the problem even more acute, and further exposed the nation's weakness.

When it came to foreign policy, the authors show that the genius of the framers lay in their balancing of practical and philosophical objections to a central government by sharing treaty powers between the executive and legislative branches. While this didn't please all the anti-federalists, the compromise convinced enough delegates to help pass the Constitution in its current form. The debate then shifted to the individual states, and the Federalists embarked on an enormous lobbying effort to remind the states that weakness in foreign affairs would endanger the new republic. James Wilson argued that if the republic could not fix its internal problems, it would "never achieve its proper respect among the world's powers. Hamilton said the weaknesses of the Articles structure were real and could not be separated from foreign weakness. (127)

As I noted above, this is a good, solid introduction to the diplomacy of the Confederation period based on many of the available primary sources. Readers expecting a historiographical discussion of the Confederation period, however, will be disappointed. This is partly due to

the fact that not much has been written about the diplomacy of the era in recent decades, and also the fact that some of Professor Graebner's writings upon which the book is based date back to the 1960s. Diplomatic historians will, as always, learn much from reading this book.

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