

Book Reviews

International Journal
2014, Vol. 69(3) 452–466
© The Author(s) 2014
Reprints and permissions:
sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0020702014539242
ijx.sagepub.com


Eliga H Gould

Among the powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the making of a new world empire

Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012. 344 pp., \$45.00 (cloth)

ISBN 978–0–6740–4608–5

Reviewed by: Simon Miles, University of Texas at Austin

Americans have long struggled to determine the relationship between international law and US foreign and defence policy. The detention facility at Guantanamo Bay and the practice of targeted killings by unmanned aerial vehicles continue to arouse international opposition at a time when the United States is still in a position to define international legal norms. Eliga Gould's *Among the Powers of the Earth* demonstrates that, in the distant past, Washington did not enjoy such a position of international power and legitimacy; European powers defined such norms, and in so doing circumscribed US policy, both foreign and domestic. It would be more accurate, Gould demonstrates, "to say that the Revolution enabled Americans to make the history that other people were prepared to let them make" (13).

Among the Powers of the Earth is an account of the United States' early engagement with the laws and customs of Europe as it pursued its own national independence, both legally (i.e., from Britain) and practically in international relations. Gould takes a long view of this process, tracing it from the 1756–1763 Seven Years' War to the promulgation of the 1823 Monroe Doctrine. The University of New Hampshire academic is one of a growing group of historians and political scientists who are eschewing the post-1945 focus in the study of US foreign relations and turning their attention to the early Republic. In so doing, they not only enhance our understanding of this frequently neglected period of US history but also illuminate the historical roots of contemporary policy issues and surviving traditions and myths.

Gould's central argument is that early US leaders were motivated by a desire to be seen as "treaty-worthy" by the European powers (12). The international legal norms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries depended upon leaders agreeing that their governments would recognize the rights and freedoms of other European states. To be treaty-worthy, leaders had to both participate diplomatically in developing the legal ecosystem of treaties and prove themselves capable of enforcing the provisions of treaties they signed. In return, treaty-worthy states could

expect that others would respect their borders, trade rights, and the rights of their citizens worldwide (24–25).

This focus on legal history and the concept of treaty-worthiness as a means of understanding the United States' initial engagement with the world is both innovative and illuminating. Gould, however, overstates his case in suggesting that his focus provides the most valuable lens through which to view early US history. Though legal history is important, economic questions also deserve consideration in assessing the extent of US international agency and the degree to which other powers constrained US sovereignty. In the relationship with Britain, for example, the resource-rich Americans enjoyed disproportionate leverage and autonomy by virtue of their trading power.

The roots of the American Revolution, Gould argues, can be found in the Seven Years' War. The spread of European conflict to North America compelled Britain to reduce the autonomy of its subjects in the colonies, consolidate central control, and extend European legal norms and treaty rights to North America (107). The Revolution did little to check the forces drawing the United States more fully into Europe's orbit. In fact, the creation of a fledgling republic required deepening US interaction with Europe in pursuit of treaty-worthiness, the ultimate guarantor of national independence. "The revolutionaries' emphasis on peace through treaty-worthiness," Gould argues, "explains why Americans ultimately opted for a national union that could represent the 'one people' in the Declaration of Independence over a looser association" (11). A recognized need to improve relations with the nations of Europe, which could come only from a strong national government capable of guaranteeing treaties with other powers, prompted the 1787 Constitutional Convention and shaped its final product (130–131). This process of becoming treaty-worthy did not conclude until the first Seminole War left the United States as the only sovereign power in eastern North America. The ensuing promulgation of the Monroe Doctrine served as notice that peace had definitively come to the Americas. The US pursuit of treaty-worthiness, and thereby true independence, had come to a successful conclusion (209–212).

Gould also devotes two chapters to the practice of slavery and its justifications according to European treaty law. While this account addresses an overall dearth of work linking the practice of slavery to US foreign policy, these chapters are not integrated into the book's broader focus on America's pursuit of recognition as a peer by the nations of Europe. Furthermore, African-American participation in the process of US independence is confined to examples centred on individuals whose experiences, Gould concedes, were "anything but typical" (146). His treatment of First Nations is similarly narrow: their agency does not extend far beyond playing one great power off against another (209).

Despite these shortcomings, Gould makes an important contribution to the historiography of US foreign relations, for which he received the 2012 SHEAR Book Prize from the Society for Historians of the Early American Republic. He makes a compelling, if not entirely free-standing, case that the American independence movement depended on the states of Europe for recognition and therefore had

to conform to the norms of Europe's established powers in order to be deemed treaty-worthy (113). Gould also illustrates the tenuous nature of US independence during the Republic's early phase. Since US leaders only partly controlled their destiny, the country's effort to be counted among the powers of the earth did not come to fruition until 1823, a much later conclusion to the independence movement than most would conventionally cite (4). Much of Gould's analysis challenges generally accepted interpretations of US history, especially the myth that in 1776 the United States began to make its own history. This book will appeal to those interested in legal and diplomatic history, as well as anyone seeking to understand the United States' complex relationship with international legal norms today.