

### The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the Civil War

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## Review

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**Doyle, Don H.** *The Cause of All Nations: An International History of the Civil War*. Basic Books, \$29.99 ISBN 9780465029679

### The American Civil War in Its Transnational Dimension

In recent years, scholarship on the transnational history of the American Civil War has increased in scope and significance. Partly following in the footsteps of transnational historians such as Thomas Bender, Ian Tyrrell, and Carl Guarneri, an increasingly larger group of scholars that includes, among others, Timothy Roberts, Caleb McDaniel, and André Fleche has demonstrated clearly the importance of looking at events and developments in the mid-nineteenth-century United States in connection with events and developments in Europe and beyond. One of the many merits of this new transnational scholarship of the Civil War Era is that it fits well with the new transnational approach to world history, best represented by the work of C.A. Bayly, Jürgen Osterhammel, and Sven Beckert, the latter of whom has just published a major book on the global history of cotton in which the transnational economic crisis of cotton production during the American Civil War takes center stage. Don Doyle's *The Cause of All Nations* clearly relates to, and dialogues with, the above scholarship, since it is the first monograph focusing on a transnational treatment of the American Civil War, and, at the same time, an analysis of transatlantic political contacts and diplomacy that complements well Beckert's transnational economic focus on the conflict.

The transnational dimension of *The Cause of All Nations* is evident from the start, as Doyle recounts the familiar story of the Union's offer of a high ranking officer commission to Italian hero Giuseppe Garibaldi – an episode previously investigated by Howard Marraro and Raimondo Luraghi – as a means to frame a sophisticated treatment of the myriad contacts between Europe, Latin America, and the Civil War United States, contacts resulting as much from Union and Confederate diplomatic missions as from European rulers' interests in meddling

in American affairs, or more generally from foreign observers' sympathies for the cause of either side in the war. If it is true that at least the most famous episodes relating to these contacts are well known, it is also true that Doyle has succeeded in recasting them in a new light, both by providing additional detail – as in the case of Napoleon III's designs on Mexico, or with regard to the Confederate attempt to seek recognition from Pope Pius IX – and also by clearly contextualizing them within an Atlantic World of continuous transnational contacts, which relied, among other factors, also on the power of the media and on the rise in importance of an international public opinion. This novel transnational approach has allowed Doyle to provide the most compelling argument, since the 1960s' seminal studies written by David Potter, in support of the view that the American Civil War was "a conflict that mattered greatly to the wider world" (p. 11), as many foreign observers, politicians, and ordinary citizens in Europe and Latin America saw the conflict as a struggle of global significance for the survival of the democratic institutions represented by Abraham Lincoln's Union against the reactionary conservatism of the slaveholders' Confederacy headed by Jefferson Davis.

A great deal of Doyle's book relates in painstaking detail the efforts made by Union and Confederate diplomatic envoys to enlist major European powers, especially Britain and France, to their cause. Far away from the battlefields of the Civil War, "another contest was waged overseas", Doyle explains, since "the Confederacy sought international recognition and alliances to secure independence, and the Union was determined to not let that happen" (p. 3). At the same time, "the Civil War rendered the Monroe doctrine toothless" (p. 8), as European powers saw their chance to intervene in American affairs, first and foremost French Emperor Napoleon III with his designs for imperial control in Mexico. In the first section of his book, Doyle provides a fascinating account of how, in 1861-62, both Union and Confederate diplomats failed to attract foreign support for their respective causes, the former as a result of the narrow minded program of restoration of the Union, the latter as a result of the commitment to slavery, which tainted any claim to national self-determination. Subsequently, Doyle shows how, from the start, foreign observers interpreted the crisis at the heart of "the American question" at the time of the Civil War "within the context of alternating swells of revolutionary hope and reactionary oppression that radiated through the Atlantic world in the Age of Revolution" (p. 85). This was equivalent to attributing to the Civil War a much more universal significance, and Doyle is careful in showing how different ideological positions led to

transnational interpretations of the conflict ranging from conservative to radical. And it was the universal significance of those interpretations that acted like a magnet for immigrants and foreign volunteers, who joined especially Lincoln's side in large numbers, since "taken together, immigrants and the sons of immigrants made up about 43 percent of all Union armed forces" (p.170).

In the final section of his book, Doyle shows the momentous transnational consequences of the enormous change brought by Lincoln's commitment to freeing the southern slaves, from the autumn of 1862, and then finally with the 1 January 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. According to Doyle, the fact that "the North had successfully aligned the causes of Union and Liberty" helped a great deal to polarize "the American question in the public mind abroad into one of slavery against freedom and [to link] that, in turn, to the trial of democracy" (p. 256). As a result, by 1864, the Confederacy had all but lost the diplomatic contest with the Union. In a particularly enlightening coda, Doyle convincingly argues, as David Potter had done fifty years ago, that the Union's victory represented a major triumph for democracy on a global scale and heralded in a "republican Risorgimento" (p. 299), with radical changes that led to the temporary retreat of conservative forces – starting from slavery in Cuba and Brazil – all over the Atlantic World, none the least in neighboring Mexico, with the end of Napoleon III's puppet empire. With *The Cause of All Nations*, Don Doyle has written the definitive transnational account of the American Civil War and at the same time has given much food for thought to both American historians and historians of nineteenth-century Europe on a myriad of possibilities for further exploration of the connections and comparisons between the 1860s Old and New Worlds that he has highlighted in his book.

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