

Chained to History: Slavery and U.S. Foreign Relations to 1865

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Review

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Brady, Stephen J. *Chained to History: Slavery and U.S. Foreign Relations to 1865*. Cornell University Press, 2022. HARDCOVER, \$39.95. ISBN 9781501761058 pp. 235

With *Chained to History*, Stephen Brady makes a signal contribution to nineteenth-century history: producing a comprehensive, well-written, and authoritative one-volume account of the impact of Black slavery on early U.S. statecraft. The book's most important accomplishment is synthetic, and its account of American foreign relations draws regularly from Don Fehrenbacher's *The Slaveholding Republic* (2001), from Matthew Karp's *This Vast Southern Empire* (2016), and from a handful of other existing scholarly works. The book's breadth and the clarity of its interpretations and exposition make it a natural choice for teaching undergraduate or graduate students. There is also material tucked away in several sections that will be of use to fellow specialists who can rely on Brady's primary research into relatively obscure aspects of his chosen topic.

As an author, Brady does not pick many historiographical fights and is transparent in what he draws from the most reputable scholarship. For the most part, he follows the findings of those whom he relies on, and the result is a familiar recounting of the proslavery tilt of U.S. policymaking before the Lincoln administration took the reins of government in 1861. As the book proceeds across time and ranges across multiple sites, it conveys how slavery and emancipation intruded on U.S. policymaking and produced domestic political fissures. The interests of the master class tended to be the key factor, whether their mixture of greed and anxiety drove matters or whether these were curbed from doing so. The sequence is persuasive and sure-footed and reads a bit like the notes that might have been compiled in the "first half" of a diplomatic history survey: Jay's Treaty, Haitian Independence (followed by its global pariah status), the de-colonizing republics of the former Spanish Empire, the founding of Liberia, the diplomacy of a British-led campaign for suppression of the African slave trade, the expansionist move to annex Texas (which led to success) and Cuba (never achieved).

Brady draws from the idioms of diplomatic history in charting the transformation of an early U.S. attachment to a “unilateral” policy (the main proponent of which was John Quincy Adams) to a more engaged posture with the “great powers” of the age. In the book’s Civil War era concluding section, he makes good on several asides to detail the efforts of Secretary of State William Seward to shift course away from the overtly proslavery measures pursued by his predecessors. That coverage features the ongoing U.S. consideration of mass Black deportation, a theme others have explored in more depth. Only with the Republican Party’s ascent was U.S. policymaking “unchained” from associations that had diminished a slaveholding republic’s “soft power” attempts to present itself as a beacon of progress and liberty.

A good deal of the book’s primary research relies on documents produced by policymakers acting in their capacity as U.S. state actors. Relatively scant attention is given to those working outside the realm of governance and the transnational networks pursuing antislavery measures never quite come into focus. Working in a “foreign policy” mode also explains the lack of engagement with the work of Seymour Drescher, Rebecca Scott, or the late Christopher Schmidt-Nowara. The attention such scholars give to the global expanse of emancipation would have enhanced the book’s discussion of several topics and could have placed the Spanish world—and the dynamics between the metropolitan and Cuban and Puerto Rican slavery—as an important parallel case to that of the United States. This is more of a missed opportunity than a critical flaw, however.

Of special note is the book’s linguistic range, which was evident in Brady’s earlier work on German-U.S. Cold War materials. If some of the French and Spanish sources dot other English narratives of slavery-related statecraft, his reliance on Dutch, German, and Russian language-sources is distinctive. What we are offered here is a useful guide (in footnotes not replicated in an English-exclusive “Bibliographic Essay” that was probably due to editorial constraints and audience) to critical interpretive contributions by non-Anglophone scholars and collections of non-English documents rarely consulted by Americanists. Across these, Brady provides his own translations (aided, he notes in the book, by his colleagues). He does the same when he mines commentary about America featured in the Russian-language *Sainte- Sankt- Peterburgskie Vedomosti* and Pushkin’s *Sovremennik*. That may be the most notable contribution of all and promises to shift how we think about Civil-War era U.S.-Russian relations and the

centrality, there and elsewhere, of how the toppling of slavery was a consequence of America's war against the separatist Confederacy.

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