

David W Fletcher, Spring 2002

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JOHN M. BELOHLAVEK'S "LET THE EAGLE SOAR!"
THE FOREIGN POLICY OF ANDREW JACKSON

In "*Let the Eagle Soar!*" *The Foreign Policy of Andrew Jackson*¹, John M. Belohlavek argues that the traditional view of a Jacksonian America dominated by domestic concerns has created a lacunae in scholarly research of Jackson's foreign policy and a lack of appreciation for his interest and active role in America's international situation. Belohlavek believes the picture of Jackson acting as a "parochial executive" through his Secretary of State in the "post-Monroe Doctrine" era of the early nineteenth century does not do justice to clear evidence of Jackson's involvement. The agrarian values of Jeffersonian republicanism, he feels, found their restoration in the emphases on popular rule clearly adopted by the statesman from Tennessee. This agrees with the fact that Jackson generally sought a pragmatic rather than an ideological solution to the challenges of the nation. Jackson accommodated these "old" republican ideas to America's new dynamic growth in agriculture and commerce. Further, the president helped to stabilize divisive domestic disputes—Indian removal, banking and internal improvements, and nullification of the tariff—by the advocacy of "an aggressive, bold, and imaginative foreign policy." Through "diplomatic missions, treaties with various foreign nations, and revitalization of the American navy," he promoted international commerce, respect for America's national honor, and territorial

¹Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985 (328 pages, introduction, two maps, four appendices, notes, bibliography, and index).

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expansion. And, by seeking to control the continent to the Pacific Ocean, Old Hickory practiced his brand of “Manifest Destiny” long before the phrase itself became popular [1-2].

Jackson, without doubt, came into power at a very opportune time for American advancement internationally. Belohlavek notes that after the Treaty of Ghent brought an end to the War of 1812, “the American eagle—freed from the diplomatic and economic constraints of the Napoleonic Wars—began to soar.” The economy skyrocketed with frenzied activity in exports and imports, and eventually cooled down as a result of the Panic of 1819 and the hefty protectionist tariff. After a decade of stagnation, Jackson led the way in the 1830s toward a revival of American commerce. He reduced the tariff and resolved key trade disputes with Great Britain and other European nations. Serious attempts to open new markets in Latin America, the Middle East, and the Far East netted scant success in comparison with the bulk of trade with Britain, France, and other countries on the Continent. Nevertheless, Jackson’s role in promoting American interests in international trade “through his steadfast pursuit of commercial treaties and ancillary development of the diplomatic and consular corps” proved substantial [3-6]. The Panic of 1837 arguable erased the economic gains that Jackson’s administration had achieved. But Belohlavek surmises that the president’s dubious banking policy did not diminish his contributions to expand and reform the consular service, to utilize diplomacy as a way to effect economic advantage, and to link “agricultural wealth and naval might” to the national goals of self-sufficiency and territorial expansion. Jackson, Belohlavek asserts, was “the missing

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ingredient . . . a chief executive with the popular, political, and legislative support to embrace the worldwide destiny of a growing America” [7-8].

To a large degree, Jackson continued the vision of an imperial America “in the tradition of James Madison’s *Federalist* No. 10, George Washington’s Farewell Address, and the Monroe Doctrine” (17). But he significantly fashioned the country’s foreign policy, just as he promoted a “hard-hitting and forceful domestic policy” (251), according to his own “iron will.”² Belohlavek nicely shows the successes as well as lackluster outcomes of Jackson’s very personal, hands-on management of the country’s diplomacy. In military fashion, the old general gladly assumed “both the strength and responsibility of the presidency and its role as a coequal branch of government” (25) to draw up and advance his foreign policies. The cabinet itself, a “revolving door” and “not a democracy” according to Belohlavek, met formally only sixteen times in eight years, six of which to discuss foreign affairs (26). Eugene McCormac surmised that “General Jackson dominated everything so completely that it is not easy to determine the attitude or influence of any member of the cabinet” (27). He personally approved all appointments to the State Department—consuls, ministers, and special executive agents—and was more than willing “to accept the responsibility for the flexing of American muscle” (39). Jackson eventually “began to outstrip Congress and the courts in the race for power and prestige because of the

² “His foreign programs often presented a mirror image of his domestic policies. In each he appears headstrong, impetuous, brash, and uncompromising. Yet this same man possessed tact, patience, and finesse. His moods were mercurial. Jackson was an emotional but intelligent man. Sometimes the outbursts were simply fusillades fired for effect, sometimes not” (252).

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nation's increasing role in world affairs" (38). But the results can only be measured positively (with the exceptions perhaps of isolation from South American countries and of course soured U.S.-Mexican relations over Texas).

Belohlavek details Jackson's diplomatic efforts with the European scene, France, the Mediterranean world, the Asian challenge, South America, and Mexico and Central America. Successes included reparations treaties with Naples, Portugal, and Denmark; commercial pacts with Great Britain, Russia, and Turkey; the French payment of old post-Napoleonic claims; limited agreements with Spain especially over Cuba; positive relations with the Barbary States; and the establishment of a "foot in the door" in the Far East. But in regards to the Western Hemisphere, which "Jackson viewed . . . paternally and (like Monroe) hoped for the establishment of democratic governments that would provide the blessings of liberty and tranquillity" (256), there was disappointment. The bitter fruit of restrained intervention in Central and South America produced only unrealized commercial treaties with Mexico, Chile, Venezuela, and Peru-Bolivia and the collapse of relations with Mexico over Texas. To his credit, Jackson averted open conflict so that "the nation involved itself in no foreign wars during his two terms" (257). Indeed, "Andrew Jackson formulated and exercised the most expansive and aggressive foreign policy between the presidencies of Thomas Jefferson and James K. Polk. In so doing, he developed the power of the chief executive beyond the horizon of domestic affairs for which he is usually credited, and helped to lay the foundations for the more dynamic diplomatic actions of the modern presidency" (257).

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In a compelling way, Belohlavek's "*Let the Eagle Soar!*" illuminates this interaction between Jackson's personality, his conflictive moods, his extensive staff of diplomats, and his goals as the chief executive of the nation toward the growth of international commerce and respectability of America's status as a world power. He portrays this intricate, delicate, and oftentimes complex picture superbly. Whether or not he offers convincing support for Jackson's expansive role in American foreign affairs from the time of the early republic to the Civil War can be left for the experts to judge.