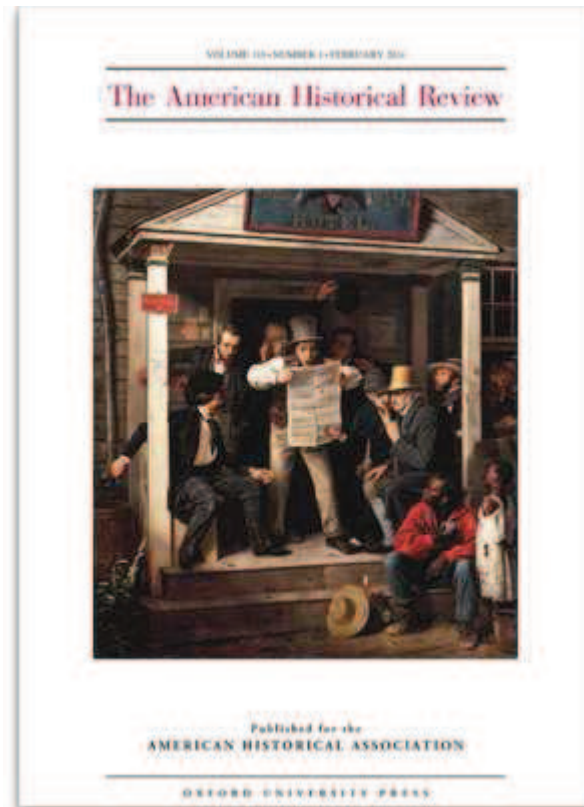


---

# The American Historical Review

---



The *American Historical Review* (AHR) is the official publication of the American Historical Association (AHA). The AHA was founded in 1884 and chartered by Congress in 1889 to serve the interests of the entire discipline of history. Aligning with the AHA's mission, the *AHR* has been the journal of record for the historical profession in the United States since 1895—the only journal that brings together scholarship from every major field of historical study. The *AHR* is unparalleled in its efforts to choose articles that are new in content and interpretation and that make a contribution to historical knowledge. The journal also publishes approximately one thousand book reviews per year, surveying and reporting the most important contemporary historical scholarship in the discipline.

**STÈVE SAINLAUDE. *La France et la Confédération sudiste (1861–1865): La question de la reconnaissance diplomatique pendant la guerre de Sécession.***

**STÈVE SAINLAUDE. *Le gouvernement impérial et la guerre de Sécession (1861–1865): L'action diplomatique***

David Wetzel

University of California, Berkeley

These two books are, to come to the point, blockbusters—path-breaking, fascinating analyses of French policy during the time of the American Civil War (1861 to 1865). Each overflows with important revisionist theses. The mastery of many of the materials treated, the boldness of statement, the freshness and directness of style, and the subtle undertone of much of the argument—all these are the hallmarks of Stève Sainlaude's scholarship.

The first volume is addressed to an examination of the outstanding policies pursued by imperial France: how its neutrality should be maintained (and indeed whether it was wise to do so); the manifold attempts made by the government to mediate an end to the conflict; and, finally (and by far the most important), the personal initiatives pursued by Napoleon III. Sainlaude examines each of these initiatives in turn and attempts to identify the reasons for their failure. All were misconceived, shortsighted, and deleterious in the highest degree to the development of coherent diplomacy. But beyond that, and perhaps more important still, they floundered because of the profound and appalling personal deficiencies of the principal figure involved. Thus, "It was impossible to understand the intentions of the sovereign because one of the overriding features of his personality was indecisiveness. The right hand never knew what the left was doing. All the contradictions of the Emperor may be found in the paradoxical formulation delivered by [his foreign minister] the brilliant Edouard Thouvenel: 'His resolution was his hesitancy'" (p. 117). Sainlaude presents Napoleon III as a dreamer, a man of plans and visions who could analyze with great refinement the complicated play of forces in French political life but who was singularly unable, particularly in these years, to master the less familiar subtleties of Civil War diplomacy. Sainlaude brings this point home at every turn with great force and insight and much lively atmospheric detail: in the recognition of southern belligerency; in the manifold negotiations over the Declaration of Paris; in the various problems to which the northern blockade of the southern ports gave rise; in the efforts to find solutions produced by Richmond's decision to place an embargo on cotton; in the tortured twists and turns that marked the Trent and Roebuck affairs; and in the various questions arising from the cessation of hostilities. Sainlaude's story is, at bottom, the story of the strivings, bewilderments, and above all, the failures that marked Napoleon's policy throughout the American Civil War.

Sainlaude's second book is longer and even more compelling, and thus deserves a more extensive discussion than the first. The book examines four critical elements in the relations between France and the Confederate States during the Civil War period: the attempt by the Confederates to gain recognition by the French government and the various means employed by officials at Richmond to do so; the obstacles that stood in the way of southern success; the factors that, in Sainlaude's view, made the conflict fundamentally a lopsided one; and the attempts of Napoleon III's government to place a candidate (the Habsburg

prince, Maximilian I) on the throne of Mexico and the implications of that attempt for relations between Richmond and Paris.

The underlying theme, which unifies the book, is the way in which the Confederates systematically deluded themselves about the strength of their power and their ability to affect events in France. A particularly striking example of this was their decision to embargo cotton in the belief that an embargo would produce maladjustments so grievous to the French economy as to force the government into recognizing their independence. Behind this decision lay the failure of the Confederate authorities to realize that the industrial revolution and the upheavals that attended it had worked a basic change in the situation of France, turning its economy from a primarily agricultural to an industrial one. But Confederate policy had a defect that proved even more basic and fatal. In Sainlaude's words, "The sole way for [France] to get more cotton was not to recognize the government of the rebel states, but to make them stop fighting" (p. 219).

There was, moreover, a second factor that worked against the South: powerful journalists, newspapers, the outstanding literary figures of the day, organizations and societies of one kind or another, and business and commercial leaders who saw the North and its leaders as more enlightened, more humane, and more in keeping with the spirit of the age. Added to these were people motivated by their deep-seated hatred of slavery, by their sense of history, and particularly by the longstanding friendship between the United States and France that dated back to the American Revolution, and by their desire to encourage the development of American sea power as a counterweight to that of Great Britain.

A third factor was at work as well: the confused and self-defeating style of Confederate leaders who pleaded the southern cause on the other side of the Atlantic. These included men such as John Slidell who were disposed to entertain misconceptions so fundamental and so contradictory to the central, well-known routines established in the European political protocols of the day as to disqualify them from being taken seriously on the very causes they so ardently sought to advance. In Sainlaude's words: "Compared to those of the North, ignorant of the intricacies of diplomacy, the representatives of the Davis government often grossly miscalculated" (p. 86).

Space does not permit a listing of all their misconceptions, but two were fundamental. The first and most important one was that they could never bring themselves to understand that for France the Civil War was never much more than a sideshow compared to the great dramas on the European continent in which the government was then embroiled. These included the multitude of problems produced by the aftermath of the wars of Italian unification and the crisis of relations with Prussia brought about by the Polish revolt, to say nothing of the coming struggle for mastery between Prussia and Austria over the fate of Germany's future. "As a consequence," Sainlaude writes, "the recognition of the Confederation was far from being a monomania of Anglo-French diplomacy" (p. 146). Nor could the Confederates ever rid themselves of their obsession with the notion that France and Great Britain were two sides of the same coin when the reverse was the truth. Lord Palmerston, the British prime minister, disliked and distrusted Napoleon III for betraying Britain in the Crimean War and making a peace with Russia that he viewed as unsatisfactory and premature. He positively loathed Napoleon's taking of Nice and Savoy in March 1860,

which he condemned as an act of extortion from Italy. And how could Palmerston, justly proud as he was of his reputation as the defiant champion of British interests in every corner of the world, ever forget his duel with Thouvenel? The duel, fought while Thouvenel was the French minister at Athens in 1850, was so fierce that it almost resulted in a war between the two powers. By 1863, after the Union victory at Gettysburg, the Confederate government recognized that the game, at least in Britain, was not worth the candle. The last hope of the Confederacy for obtaining European support now rested with Napoleon and his need for an ally in his Mexican venture.

Throughout the crucial period of that venture, from 1864 to 1865, the Confederates pressed frantically for recognition in return for their support of the French project in Mexico. Given the immense French investment of money and men in the Mexican affair, which Napoleon undertook to appease Catholics critical of his Italian policy (a point deserving of more emphasis than Sainlaude gives it), Confederate hopes for French support, indeed intervention, on their side were plausible. As Sainlaude shows, though, such hopes were ultimately misplaced as they ignored fundamental questions of geography. If the South won the war, there was no guarantee against expansion in Mexico's direction: "The French government ... understood that the independence of the South would lead inevitably to a recovery of its own version of 'manifest destiny,' this time to the detriment of what remained of Mexican territory" (p. 219). The Richmond authorities saw themselves not as conducting a great and noble experiment, but as fulfilling a predetermined destiny. From this it was only a short step to the belief that they had inherited the Old Testament concept of a chosen race.

Sainlaude's judgments are all the more impressive because of the documentation upon which they rest. He has mastered an overwhelming, indeed almost unmanageable abundance of source material, much of it in the files of the French Foreign Ministry. And yet his work, though unavoidably involving a high degree of specialization, is not such that it will surpass the patience and curiosity of the lay reader. It will be of value not only as a work of reference but also as one of great intellectual reach. That is no mean achievement.