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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
WSJ.com

BOOKSHELF | March 21, 2012, 5:59 p.m. ET

A New Nation Tests Its Strength

After winning independence, Americans discovered that sovereignty had to be exercised in order to be real.

By WILLIAM ANTHONY HAY

The Declaration of Independence speaks of America taking its place among "the independent powers of the earth." As it turned out, a few such powers played a role in the American Revolution—think only of France's support for the rebellious colonists. The declaration also speaks of "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind." Those opinions, Eliga H. Gould argues, would direct the course of the young nation after independence. In "Among the Powers of the Earth," Mr. Gould, a history professor at the University of New Hampshire, shows how the dynamics of international relations transformed the Atlantic world as the United States entered it and thereafter helped to define the country itself. His shrewd analysis offers a valuable perspective on American history during a formative era.

Mr. Gould rightly emphasizes the importance of law—both national and international—to sovereignty. He argues that "the drive to be accepted as a treaty-worthy nation in Europe" shaped the early Republic at least as much as republican ideals. The United States accepted the norms of international treaties and diplomatic custom—the obligation to respect the persons and property of foreign subjects, for instance, or to exercise military force within the emerging laws of war. Just as important, the new nation worked to bring the territories it claimed for itself under legal authority. Sovereignty had to be exercised as well as recognized.

Americans pacified and took control of borderlands that had operated according to their own rules—the frontier of the Mississippi Valley, for example. Indians in the lower South and trans-Appalachia lost the autonomy they had long exercised and became dependent nations under the supervision of the new federal government. Slavery gained a legal definition and status that it lacked when British authorities merely tolerated it as a colonial practice, something borrowed from Africa but unknown to common law. The act of defining citizenship excluded Americans who remained loyal to the British crown.

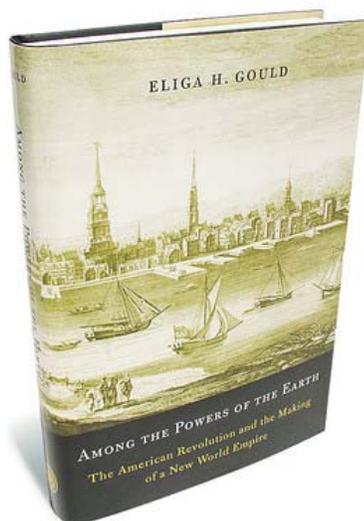
Before America's independence, the imperial Atlantic world had operated as an extension of Europe, in the form of colonies and trading networks. But the terms of governance, Mr. Gould notes, were sometimes weak. Competing local authorities, including those of indigenous peoples, laid claim to rights and jurisdictions, and colonists often acted as a law unto themselves. Even European authorities treated their overseas realms as places where European norms did not always apply. In certain matters, distance gave colonial governments latitude to manage their own affairs.

Starting in the 1750s, however, Britain began to regulate colonial trade more closely and, with various reforms, to tighten its control over the colonies. Americans became more accountable to British treaties in Europe, especially those that defined maritime and commercial law. New England merchants, for example, were asked to pay taxes and to refrain from unlicensed trade with the colonies of other European powers.

The new policy followed a clear logic. Unless Britain enforced the navigation acts (i.e., the laws that governed external trade) and other regulations, it left its New World colonies increasingly connected to the foreign powers with which they traded. A British pamphleteer logically warned that, if the American colonies evaded the navigations acts, they would be "no longer *British Colonies*, but Colonies of the Countries they trade to."

The people within the colonies most affected by such reforms—particularly merchants and ship captains who preferred the looser regulations of the past—resented the emerging system of metropolitan control. They began to lead colonial opposition, and their agitation soon won support from a population angered by the increasing pressure from London. As we know, tensions escalated into open revolt in the 1770s.

John Dickinson warned the Continental Congress that declaring independence would leave Americans strangers amid the "states of the world" and braving "the storm in a skiff of paper." After independence, Americans themselves faced the problems of governance that had prompted Britain's attempts at imperial reform. Despite America's military victory and the formal recognition granted by the 1782 Treaty of Paris, Britain and other European states did not completely accept American sovereignty. The unsettled condition of the new nation



Among the Powers of the Earth

By Eliga H. Gould
(Harvard, 301 pages, \$45)

under the Articles of Confederation raised questions about where sovereignty resided and whether agreements bound the individual states.

Thus foreign policy drove efforts to "secure a more perfect union." John Jay argued that an effective federal government could better meet treaty obligations and thereby secure the rights of sovereignty that would make independence real. In 1787, the Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation. In the next two decades, the United States would assert control over the territories of the Louisiana Purchase and would annex Florida. By exercising its sovereignty, and not just securing its independence, the new nation was able to claim a place among the powers of the earth.

Scholars of European history have long argued for the primacy of foreign affairs in driving state formation and shaping politics. But American observers—scholars and generalists alike—have rarely applied this idea to the history of their own country before 1900. America in its formative stages is usually viewed apart from the international system—as a promised land separated from the rest of the world by two oceans and shaped by its own lofty ideals. But in fact, as Mr. Gould shows, America came into its own only by claiming full membership in the community of nations. Mr. Gould is right to give greater attention to this neglected theme in American history.

Mr. Hay, a historian at Mississippi State University, is the author of "The Whig Revival, 1808-1830."

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