NOTES ON STRATEGY AND STATESMANKSHIP
by Patrick J. Garrity

Education of an American Diplomat

In December 1816, John Quincy Adams, the U.S. minister to Great Britain, responded to a request from Christopher Hughes, a young American, about how to prepare, and specifically about how to study, for a career in diplomacy. (Hughes had been one of the secretaries to the American Peace Commission in Ghent in 1814, where he had developed a good relationship with Adams.) Adams assumed as a matter of course that Hughes, a College of New Jersey (Princeton) graduate, was familiar with the classic texts—Thucydides, Livy, Tacitus, and the like—in ancient Greek and Latin. He therefore offered a "[l]ist of authors in general, modern history, national law and diplomatic intercourse," which "will more than suffice for eighteen months or two years, reading":

- Robertson’s History of Charles the Fifth and History of America;
- Watson’s History of Phillip the second and Phillip the third;
- Roscoe’s Life of Lorenzo de Medici and Leo the tenth;
- Coxe’s History of the House of Austria;
- Russell’s Letters on Ancient and Modern History;
- Raynal’s History of the East and West Indies;
- Edward’s History of the West Indies;
- Brougham’s Colonial Policy;
- Annual Register from 1758 to 1815;
- Jenkinson’s or Chalmers’s collection of Treaties;
- Smith’s Wealth of Nations;
- Montesquieu’s Spirit of Laws;
- Grotius’ Rights of War and Peace with Barberyac’s Commentary;
- Puffendorf, Law of Nature and Nations with Barberyac’s Commentary;
- Varrel’s Law of Nations;
- Marten’s Summary of the Modern Law of Nations;
- Burlamaqui, Law of Nature and Nations;

Adams explained further:

Many of them will prove by no means attractive. To Smith, Montesquieu, Grotius and Ward, I would recommend your particular attention for the development of the principles which are generally recognized in the intercourse of nations. Vattel is the author most commonly resorted to in practical diplomacy, and his work being written in a popular and easy style is among those that you will find the least tedious in reading. If your object were to form a diplomatic library, the list should be much larger, and would include many books in other languages than the English; several voluminous collections of treaties, particular as well as general histories of the European nations, and numerous dissertations and treatises upon special questions of national law. The enclosed list contains only books of a general nature and all published in Europe which I thought most conforming to your request. They will sufficiently absorb your time for two years.

But as you have a career before you, and do me the favor to consult my opinion, I would suggest to you the utility of preparing your mind for application when you return home to the history, the internal interests, and the external relations of our own country. In the history of the several colonial establishments united together by the war of our independence, you will find the source of the various and in some respects conflicting interests which it is the first duty of an American statesman to conciliate and unite. In the collections of American state papers and the Journals of Congress under the confederation you will find the best key to the interests and rights of our country in her internal administration and in her intercourse with foreign powers. But all the books upon these subjects are to be procured in America, and many of them are not to be found elsewhere.

It should be noted that Adams offered this advice before he reached the pinnacle of his own diplomatic career as secretary of state (1817–1825). But it is unlikely his advice would have changed. We offer here some additional reflections about the intellectual and practical foundations that Adams believed were necessary to serve as an American diplomat.

In 1795, in his first overseas posting, as minister resident to the Netherlands during the Wars of the French Revolution, Adams looked about for role models. He admired particularly the way in which the Portuguese minister, the Chevalier d’Araujo, managed himself. D’Araujo had to walk an especially fine line; he had remained at his post in the French-occupied Netherlands even though his country was still at war with France. At one dinner in which French officials were present, he spoke skilfully on the arts and sciences while using the conversation to introduce political topics through references to the written works of men such as Rousseau and the Abbé Raynal. His clever discourse, Adams thought, was a kind of “armed neutrality”—d’Araujo said certain things which were calculated to be agreeable to a Frenchman, others which were not so. “Perhaps he wants to
obtain the means of getting on foot a negotia-
tion for peace between his country and Spain
with France,” Adams speculated. “Perhaps he
only means to observe as accurately as possible,
and for that purpose aims at establishing a sort
of familiarity with them.”

But when Adams told d’Araujo that he was
studying memoirs of diplomats from decades
or centuries before, the Portuguese Minister
told him he was wasting his time. “Mr. d’Araujo
says we must henceforth not look back to any-
thing that has ever been done heretofore.” The
French Revolution and the resulting conflicts
had changed everything. Adams agreed that “[t]here is no, indeed, the same advantage in pos-
sessing the principles and experience of able neg-
igrations, because the present state of opinions
and of practice require a different theory.” But
he bristled at the suggestion his studies over
the past months had been useless. “At least it
increases the knowledge of history, and gives
lessons of analogy which have some use for ap-
lication to every position of affairs among men.”

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Dams certainly believed it was
necessary to master French, the domi-
nant language of European diplomacy
and society. He was fortunate in having learned
French as a child, when he accompanied his
father, John Adams, to Europe, and served for
a time as his secretary. It was of course advis-
able to acquire the language of one’s particu-
lar residence, if possible. Adams had some ac-
quaintance with Dutch from time spent in
the Netherlands as a young man in the early 1780s,
and quickly picked up sufficient facility to read
Dutch when he came there officially in the mid-
1790s. But reading, rather than speaking, the
native language was the most important thing,
because it revealed the true character of a peo-
ple. An American diplomat should continue his
education by studying the national literature, as
well as continue to read the classics that tran-
sceded time and place.

Adams’s next assignment, as the first U.S.
minister accredited to Prussia, provided op-
portunities to learn about the German culture
and language, with which few Americans were
familiar. “Berlin is said to be the Athens of Ger-
many, both in Learning and Taste, abounding in
Men of Science and Letters,” his father—who
also happened to be president of the United
States—wrote to him about his new posting. As
to official matters, President Adams insisted
that “the great characters and political Systems
in the North of Europe, are not so well under-
stood in your own Country as they ought to be.”
The younger Adams took both matters to heart,
learning German with considerable difficulty,
and not always to his satisfaction, through a tutor.
During lulls in diplomacy, he immersed himself
in modern German literature—notably, Got-
thold Ephraim Lessing, Christian Führchtegott
Gellert, Christoph Martin Wieland, Friedrich
Schiller, and August von Kotzebue. At first Ad-
ams was unimpressed. The Germans seemed to
fail to appreciate that the purpose of literature
was to instill proper morals. As time went on,
however, he began to have a greater appreciation:

The more access I obtain to German lit-
erature, the more I prize it. The flimsy
prejudices of the French and English na-
tions against the German language, have
long blinded them to the excellencies of its
literature, just as the Continental con-
nosseurs deny the excellence of English
painting. Yet in both cases the power of
nature and genius is rapidly breaking
through the mists of prejudice.

He found himself particularly charmed
by Wieland’s epic poem, Oberon. He took it upon
himself to translate it for English-speaking au-
diences (as it turned out, his translation was not
published for some years). He also wrote a se-
ries of letters that recorded his travels further
into central Europe, which was published in
America and England as Letters on Silesia.

In 1799, he ran across a collection of
essays that compared the American to the
French Revolution, with preference decid-
edly going to the former. The author was Fried-
rich von Gentz, a Prussian civil servant and
admirer of the English Constitution who had
previously published a translation of Burke’s
Reflections of the Revolution in France. Gentz
had captured Adams’s basic sense of the matter:
the American Revolution represented a sensible,
moderate defense of well-established rights; the
French Revolution was a flight into utopian fan-
tasy. Thinking them a helpful guide for Ameri-
can diplomacy in this turbulent era, Adams
immediately set out to translate the essays into
English and sent them to his brother Thomas to
arrange publication as a pamphlet in America.
It was published in Philadelphia under the title
The French and American Revolutions Compared.

Gentz later became a close associate of
Klemens von Metternich and a blatant political
and diplomatic reactionary, certainly beyond
what even the tough-minded Adams would have
advised. But that was ultimately a matter for the
Europeans to determine, and Adams had
already come to the conclusion that “Europe is
dead.” American diplomats and citizens should
learn what they could from whatever source—
but not uncritically.

One source of supposed insight into politics
and diplomacy that Adams roundly condemned
was modern German philosophy, which he re-
garded as simply an epigone and popularizer of
the most radical French thought. The head of
this class, Adams decided, was “a certain pro-
fessor Kant of Koningsberg, who passes for
a prodigy of metaphysical depth, because he
writes a jargon that no human being can un-
derstand.” Immanuel Kant, in Adams’s mind,
resorted to esoterism and obfuscation sim-
ply in order to retain his academic post—and
undoubtedly to avoid arrest. But for those well
versed in the writings of the French revolution-
aries there was no mistake Kant’s object. Ad-
ams tried unsuccessfully to obtain and send to
his father an English translation of Kant’s Proj-
et for a Perpetual Peace (as Adams rendered the
title). Adam’s journal gave no indication that
he had plowed through Kant’s principal philo-
osophical works, such as his most famous text,
Critique of Pure Reason. He based his opinion
instead on the views of Kant’s “adepts” whom he
encountered occasionally, and on French trans-
lations of shorter publications by and about the
Prussian philosopher. Adams told his mother
Abigail that through these sources he was only
reinforced in his opinion that Kant espoused
“theoretic madness” fully in line with the intel-
lectual roots of the French Revolution.

The doctrine of the progressive improve-
ment of mankind seems to be a favorite, and as I believe an original opinion of the modern philosophers—Price and Con-
dorcet in their ideas of it have proved at least the weakness of the human mind in its present degree of illumination; but they have not ventured to announce the means by which this improvement is to be ef-
fected. This was reserved for the Prussian
sage. The means are antagonism; the spirit of discord; the perpetual strife which the Creator has ordained to prevail for ever
among men. In consequence of this sys-
tem the warmest admirers of Kant, con-
sider all the horrors of the present time as
glorious steps towards the greatest per-
fec tion of the species, and they seriously
maintain that although the same scenes
of blood and desolation should continue
one two or three centuries longer, they
will be amply repaid by the supreme felici-
ity which a yet later posterity will enjoy,
as the purchase of all this misery. What
such opinions will finally produce I will
not undertake to say, but they promise no
peaceful prospects for the present.

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he bankruptcy of modern con-

tinental European philosophies and the
violence they had caused were surely
major factors in Adams’s recommendation to
the aspiring diplomat Hughes of “the utility of
preparing your mind for application when you return home to the history, the internal interests, and the external relations of our own country.” In his later years, Adams would himself write and speak extensively on these subjects, including major publications on the Constitution, James Madison, and James Monroe (he began a biography of his father, which was eventually completed by his own son, Charles Francis Adams). Adams kept coming back to one particular aspect of American history: the Declaration of Independence. In almost all of his writings on foreign relations, from his first major essays (signed Publicola) in his early 20s through his speeches of opposition to the Mexican-American War in the 1840s, the principles of the Declaration was his cornerstone. His most famous foreign policy pronouncement, made in his July 4, 1821 Oration, included the oft-quoted words: America goes not abroad, in search of monsters to destroy. She is the well-wisher to the freedom and independence of all. She is the champion and vindicator only of her own.

That argument, which is far more complex than a mere epigram suggests, was made after Adams had read the text of the Declaration to an audience assembled in the chamber of the House of Representatives. It came at the end of a lengthy rebuttal of those, particularly in England, who claimed that the United States had contributed nothing to the greater cause of mankind. The greatest rebuttal, Adams argued, was the existence, text, and purpose of the document he had before him.

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