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Jay Sexton. *A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History.* New York: Basic Books, 2018. 256 pp. $28.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-5416-1723-0.

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Jay Sexton's *A Nation Forged by Crisis: A New American History* is a concise book on a massive subject—three centuries of American history, set within a global context. To guide his story, Sexton homes in on the nation's greatest crises: the Revolution and the founding era, the Civil War and the abolition of slavery, and the Great Depression and world wars. He argues that these critical periods and their transformational impacts were caused by, and unfolded under, contingent international contexts. Sexton's narrative is ultimately a triumphant one. He does not, however, let that trend obscure the contexts and contingencies that guided American policy from crisis to crisis.

Three connective threads between the United States and the wider world have driven the nation in and out of major crises and shaped its political identity throughout. The first is national security, mostly defined in relation to European empires. The second is the development of global capitalism; the extent and order of American commercial relations have driven political conflict through three centuries of American history. The third is immigration, "a defining feature of the history of the United States"; the politics of immigration have defined the contours of American foreign relations, and the immigrants themselves "have shaped the culture and politics of their new home just as much as the United States has shaped them" (p. 9). Sexton demonstrates that an international lens on American crises not only clarifies their causes and effects, but also reveals their stakes. America's formative tumults have, on one hand, "catalyzed the rationalization of the political system," and on the other have "perpetuated inequalities and sowed the seeds of future troubles" (pp. 12-13).

The first of Sexton's four chapters examines the American Revolution and the founding era. The American Revolution was a product, he argues, of two contingent imperial factors. The first was the ongoing conflict between Britain and France for North American control, a conflict in which the American British colonies became pawns. The second was the rapid development of the North American colonies, in which "immigration boomed, transatlantic trade dramatically increased, and the aggregate power of British North America multiplied" (p. 16). The American colonies increasingly drew in powerful people, and their capital. In doing so, they developed commercial interests that misaligned with the British Empire's, especially as Britain tried to capitalize on the growth of the North American colonies with increasing desperation. Readers will find in Sexton's work on the Revolution a succinct, accessible overview of the recent "imperial turn" in scholarship on the Revolution.[1]

Sexton's global (and British imperial) lens informs his story of American state-building. The Constitution, according to *A Nation Forged by Crisis,* needed to strike a balance between the republican ideals of the Revolution (suspicious of central powers) and the practical realities of global imperial struggle (necessitating a strong central government). The product was, according to Sexton, a massive success. The Constitution stabilized the American state, which led to economic prosperity at home and on the world stage. It demonstrated "to financial markets that the new republic had the wherewithal and durability to stick around long enough to do business with" (p. 47). The immigration and naturalization schema of the early republic were "liberal" and "volitional" (p. 48). Even the bitter and fractious politics of the early republic, the birthplace of American partisanship, are celebrated in *A Nation Forged by Crisis*. The development of parties "paradoxically strengthened" the new government by giving it "national institutions and political practices" that legitimized the federal government and its authority both domestically and internationally (p. 53).

Sexton concludes the chapter by adopting a wider lens. In the global/imperial framework, the American Revolution represented continuity as much as it represented disruption. The Revolution and the establishment of the United States, Sexton argues, "accelerated" and rendered more efficient "the [ongoing] processes of the settlement of North American and the integration of the booming Atlantic economy" (p. 56). Overall, his treatment of the Revolution and founding era successfully captures the global contexts and contingencies that are too often replaced by inevitably marching progress. This context could, however, be expanded even further. When Sexton's colonists and founders worry about empires, they usually face east, toward the Atlantic. *A Nation Forged by Crisis* sometimes misses the struggles between Native empires, European empires, and the infant American empire in the West that indelibly shaped United States history.

The middle chapters of *A Nation Forged by Crisis* investigate the political turmoil over slavery and the Civil War. In line with his overarching thesis, Sexton asserts that we must understand the sectional conflict in a global context. Central to its character is the fact that it "played out within a moment of world history characterized by the development of global capitalism, ideologically charged political conflict, and revolutionary advances in communications and transportation" (p. 60). His interpretation of the sectional conflict reflects recent work by Steven Hahn, Matthew Karp, Robert May, and others. It was a battle between two competing visions of American empire, one with slavery and one without.[2] "It was no coincidence," Sexton argues, "that the Civil War occurred just when the United States was emerging as a world power." Foreign threats that had bound the sections together through a national interest in security had faded to the background. As foreign policy shifted from inward- to outward-facing, it brought pro- and antislavery imperial visions into conflict. As the United States established its continental domination, Sexton asserts, it learned an age-old imperial mantra: "establishing dominion is easier than consolidating and maintaining it" (pp. 83-84). Despite his primary interest in formal politics and economic structures, Sexton pays careful attention to the critical role of enslaved people in the rise of sectional politics. While the threat of rebellion always loomed, the more modest act of flight from slavery to freedom was momentously impactful on the politics of slavery. Fugitive slaves disrupted the operations of slave society, stoked white Southern fears of rebellion, gave critical fuel to the abolitionist movement, and "ensured that the sectional conflict remained on the national political stage" (p. 96).

A critical feature of the American Civil War, Sexton reminds us, is its international context: crises of nationhood, all the world over. The

French and Spanish imperial debacles of Latin America, the Germany and Italian upheavals over unification, the tumultuous modernizations of Russia and Japan, and the anti-British decolonial struggle in Ireland all formed a puzzle of which the American Civil War was a critical part. However, unlike each of these other conflicts, the American Civil War saw no European imperial intervention. The looming risk of British recognition of the Confederacy provides Sexton's Civil War "Saratoga moment," a contingent cliffhanger dictating the fate of America's future on the world stage. This argument is perhaps overwrought, and the true risk of British intervention of behalf of the Confederacy is perhaps overplayed. Britain bore, as he notes, a host of reasons against legitimating the Confederacy, including ongoing efforts to thwart secessionist movements in Ireland. Sexton could have also noted the British Empire's desire to remain politically distant from slavery.[3]

"The outcome of the Civil War," Sexton argues, "had not only saved the Union and destroyed slavery but also positioned the United States to take full advantage of the late nineteenth-century version of what we now call globalization" (p. 101). The Union victory and simultaneous imperial failures in Latin America sent the message that European powers should leave the hemisphere to the dominion of the stronger-than-ever American state. Thus, they gazed toward Asia and Africa. In this way, the American Civil War inadvertently set into motion a new era of European empire. The emergence of a secure United States from the Civil War also led to an influx of foreign capital and immigrants. By Sexton's telling, the following decades saw sporadic wavering between open liberalism and restrictive nationalism. This flip-flopping could be reframed as a sustained conflict, between the liberal imperatives of capital and the restrictionist imperatives of labor and nativism. Overall, however, Sexton's treatment of America's national and international politics following the war is incredibly useful in that it connects the American Civil War to the course of the long nineteenth century. Too often, the Civil War represents a firm "end" to one chapter of American history and leaves the late nineteenth century without an antecedent, but ***A Nation Forged by Crisis*** provides intellectual avenues for connecting the two.

Sexton's final chapter demonstrates how two centuries of America's growth through crises—of both internal and external origin—had, by the twentieth century, recalibrated the global political order and the United States's ability to respond to international turmoil. The United States was both an actor and a victim in the global tumult of the two world wars. Between relentless colonialism that led to political instability in the Western Hemisphere and the Great Depression, "America did its part to destabilize the international order" (p. 142). By this point in the book, the relationship between global crises and the arc of American history is clear: the United States emerges stronger, but with the "imprint of the foreign threats, international pressures, and demographic changes that had been placed upon it" (p. 143).

In this chapter especially, Sexton identifies a reality of political history that is too often overlooked in broad surveys: policy is the product of conflict and coalition-building, as much or more so than it is of pure ideology. From the New Deal to the Truman Doctrine, Sexton places landmark American agendas in their gritty political contexts. Taken together, however, the policies of the United States in the early and mid-twentieth century were a series of achievements that saw the nation rise to a position of power and then operate effectively from that position. By the Second World War, America's ascendance in global politics had reached fruition, and it changed the nation's relationship with international crises. "The United States was no longer an ally; it now had allies. With national security at stake, this was not someone else's conflict; it was a struggle for core national values, even if mainland America was not under immediate threat of attack" (p. 167).

The United States emerged with "unprecedented production" and "reinvigorated … civic nationalism"—a nation, once again, triumphant in the face of global crisis (pp. 169, 173).

Sexton's conclusion examines the twenty-first century, a period when the only political consensus seems to be that the United States faces an unprecedented crisis. This, Sexton asserts, is the product of historical amnesia. The triumphant arc of American history since 1945 can seem "inevitable," and thus the context of our numerous previous crises is so vital (p. 186). The political discourse of the modern era, then, speaks to the necessity of this book. Sexton does not deny the triumphs of America's history, but asserts that they must be understood for their crises, accidents, and their global contexts. While it should be paired with scholarship that examines the development of the United States "from below," and that is perhaps less celebratory of the development of the American state, ***A Nation Forged by Crisis*** can make a valuable contribution to any American history survey.

Notes

[1]. For more on the neo-imperial turn in Revolutionary War scholarship, see Michael A. McDonnell and David Waldstreicher, "Revolution in the *Quarterly*?: A Historiographical Analysis," ***The William and Mary Quarterly*** 74, no. 4 (2017): 654-59.

[2]. Steven Hahn, ***A Nation without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910*** (New York: Penguin, 2016); Matthew Karp, ***This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy*** (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); and Robert E. May, ***Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America*** (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

[3]. See, for example, Howard Jones, ***Blue and Gray Diplomacy: A History of Union and Confederate Foreign Relations*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).

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