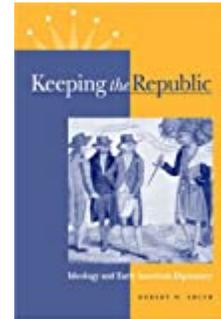




Robert W. Smith. *Keeping the Republic: Ideology and Early American Diplomacy.* DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2004. x + 196 pp. \$38.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87580-326-5.



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Four Founders, Republican Ideology, and American Foreign Policy

Robert W. Smith's *Keeping the Republic* makes four founding fathers, John Adams, Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison, the focus of a book which studies how republican thought shaped early American foreign policy. He finds that the four initially agreed that preserving the republic required it to abjure entanglements in European affairs, that its foreign policy would have to adhere to republican principles and be capable of preserving the new nation in a hostile non-republican world, and that its people would have to be virtuous (pp. 3-4). All four men were well versed in Greek, Roman, and more contemporary republican writers. From this formative mass, Smith identifies and defines three variant forms of republican virtue (classical, Whig, and yeoman), and explains their various implications with regard to commerce and the employment of military power when manipulation of commerce failed to achieve diplomatic objectives. He then proceeds to consider which brand or brands of republican virtue the four Americans espoused as they played important roles in various diplomatic milestones: the Model Treaty, post-war negotiations about navigation of the Mississippi, the

Constitution, the French Revolution, the Quasi-War with France, the Louisiana Purchase, and the War of 1812.

Adams and Hamilton, he finds, began with the classical militaristic variety of virtue, which demanded a morally strong people capable of sacrificing imported luxuries and ready to resort to arms. Convinced that Americans showed little interest in lives of permanent austerity, both men migrated to Whig virtue, which depended on the rule of law, a balanced government, and keeping America out of European wars and away from corrupting foreign influences. In the crises created by the French Revolution and Napoleon, they adopted means and policies best described as republican *realpolitik*. Jefferson and Madison, as is well known, preferred the yeoman strain of virtue that was founded on and flowed from an agrarian economy. They were determined, at all costs, to avoid war, which brought in its train armies, navies, taxes, and increases in executive power that inevitably destroyed liberty and republican government; and they retained an abiding faith in the power of American commerce to achieve their objectives. Showing how and un-

der what circumstances Adams and Hamilton adapted their republican principles while Jefferson and Madison remained stubborn adherents to the yeoman variety is the core of Smith's book.

Left unexplained is Smith's title and his decision to structure a discussion of republican ideology and foreign policy around these four men. How are they and not others the only men worthy to be designated "keepers" of the republic? Why prefer Adams and Hamilton, with their "republican realpolitik," over Thomas Paine, whose commitment to republican ideology is beyond doubt and who did as much to popularize it and set the new nation on a republican path as any man? Why omit Benjamin Franklin, surely the most prominent figure in shaping and implementing American diplomacy in its formative moments? Is there insufficient evidence in his writings about republican thought? Does Smith agree with Adams that Franklin's diplomacy was insufficiently republican (p. 29)? An explanation might have helped the reader determine what is gained and what is lost by these decisions.

This brings us to another effective omission, the Continental Congress, which vigorously debated diplomatic and commercial issues in its first two sessions, made policy decisions, and instructed its diplomatic emissaries. For all its weaknesses, it was more responsible for setting the course of early American foreign policy than any of these men taken as individuals, but it figures in the narrative primarily as the stage upon which the chosen protagonists play their parts and not as an entity that deserves consideration in its own right. This suggests an even more fundamental question: can the framework which Smith has chosen, that of episodes viewed by and through these four actors, bear the weight of the task he assigns himself, detailing how republican thought informed American foreign policy? Can it leave us with a broad coherent sense of ideological and policy development?

Inevitably, restraints on American commerce and western expansion fed demands for a more effective republic. Smith follows the current historical consensus by portraying Jefferson and Madison as tenaciously clinging to a yeoman vision of the American republic that was agrarian, Francophile (until the advent of Napoleon), ambivalent about merchants and the carrying trade, hostile to manufacturing, and convinced that republicanism would prevail because it was more perfect than monarchy. Echoing Thomas Paine, the Virginians stressed Europe's dependence on American foodstuffs and be-

lieved they could overcome foreign threats by manipulating access to American exports and her demand for manufactured imports. Desirous of avoiding anything that might threaten the republic, they ventured into the larger world only to secure access to markets for American produce. Believing that republics were likely to degenerate in war, they espoused its avoidance at almost any cost and refused to prepare for it because even this would encourage the growth of a tyrannical executive. Abjuring all means of coercion more powerful than commerce and hastily summoned militias, they bungled along, believing anything told to them by the French government that seemed to validate their positions. Blessed by success against all odds, they added the Louisiana territory and West Florida. When confronted by the commercial warfare waged by Britain and France against neutral powers, they were left to hope that the rightness of their principles would prevail. When they did not, Madison virtually tore apart the republic he was endeavoring to preserve as he moved it toward a war with Britain that he did not want, and from which the nation could gain little and lose a great deal.

It is impossible, when considering Jefferson's and Madison's performances during this twenty-five year period, to believe that they were ruled by anything but ideology. Smith makes a convincing if not novel case that it seems to have prevented them from learning anything about how to conduct diplomacy. Their stubborn refusal to believe that anything but American trade would be needed to bring England and France to heel is vividly portrayed, but enough has already been said by other historians about yeoman virtue and its shortcomings. Set against such a stellar republican performance, it is difficult to give Adams and Hamilton equally high grades.

Smith concludes that "republican ideology exercised control over the making of foreign policy as it did over domestic policy." He rejects the suggestion, offered previously by Felix Gilbert, James Hutson, and Paul Varg, that the four "keepers" can be divided into realists and idealists, arguing instead that they were all at times both realists and idealists, that all three strains of republicanism sometimes reached the same conclusion though they traveled different paths (pp. 138-139). Why, then, describe Adams's and Hamilton's policies as "republican realpolitik?" A case can be made that the similarities are more often based on circumstances than ideas, that the variations in theories may be more significant than they appear to Smith.

Although Smith's book is narrower in scope than its

title suggests, and although its structure tends to obscure a larger, better articulated vision of early American foreign policy, students will find this work a thoughtful exposition of the writings of the four principals as well as of the earlier republican writers whom they certainly read. There is, however, one final and serious impediment to its usefulness: it is very difficult to trace the development of ideas and positions because the index serves such searches so poorly, for which the publisher, not Smith, is probably responsible. This is an intellectual history, but concepts can be accessed only through the subject entry on the four “keepers,” and those are slim at best and inaccurate at worst. I found myself frequently compelled to

search my own detailed notes to trace the development of the concepts Smith described. If readers lose the thread of his argument, the index may indeed be the cause. An example may suffice to illustrate the problem. Although Adams chose naval power as an instrument of American diplomacy and defense, once he abandoned his faith in the power of American commerce, there is no entry or sub-entry on “navy” that leads a reader to this discussion. There is further irony in the fact that Smith’s discussion of Adams’s decision to use the navy to counter French aggression during the Quasi War, is indexed as “Adams, John: and army” (pp. 94-95). A casual reference to George W. Bush, however, gets an entry.

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