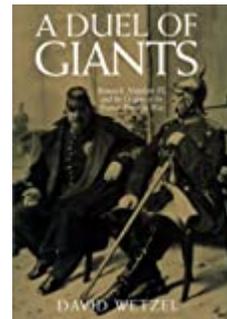




**David Wetzel.** *A Duel of Giants: Bismarck, Napoleon III, and the Origins of the Franco-Prussian War.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001. 244 S. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-299-17490-3.



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## Failed Policies and Called Bluffs

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After many years of limited scholarly interest in the Franco-Prussian War, David Wetzel takes a fresh look at the diplomacy involved in its outbreak. He examines the personalities and motivations of the principal characters involved in this conflict and reveals the human strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies that often play a powerful role in forming state policies. Through an extensive study of European archives, Wetzel presents a thorough account of the events and personalities that drew France and Prussia into a war that would reshape the face of Europe.

Wetzel describes the process by which the fortunes of France and Prussia were reversed in the pre-war years. Though many observers continued to perceive France as the strongest power in Europe, its "liberal empire," led by Emperor Napoleon III and Prime Minister Emile Ollivier, suffered from deep flaws in its governmental and military structures. The government claimed to uphold ministerial responsibility though no concrete plans for this accountability had been established. As a result, Napoleon retained control while Ollivier and the other ministers

suffered from public censure without gaining authority. The emperor's failing health and the ministers' dependence on public support were two weaknesses that inhibited the successful conduct of foreign policy. In addition, France delayed needed military reforms that would have allowed it to counter its adversary across the Rhine. Wetzel reveals that Prussia enjoyed a much more stable position than France did in the pre-war years. It had solidified its position as the leader of the north German states through its victory over Austria in 1866. Though it was still in the process of bringing the states of the North German Confederation up to Prussian standards, particularly in military matters, Prussia enjoyed a stable monarchy with a minister president responsible only to the monarch himself. Further, Prussia boasted a military organization that had led it to victory against the Danes in 1864 and the Austrians in 1866.

It is in these circumstances that the Spanish Revolution of 1868 burst upon the European scene. Wetzel ably navigates the maze of candidates and waves of intrigue that surrounded the search for a monarch for the Spanish throne. He describes the process by which Spanish,

Italian, Portuguese, and German candidates were championed and then rejected. Wetzel highlights the prominent role played by Napoleon III and the French in the selection process.

France determined that it had vital interests at stake in the creation of a new Spanish monarchy. Both the French government and the French public believed that France's prestige had been weakened by the Prussian victory over Austria and the subsequent creation of the North German Confederation. Prussia's efforts to create a united Germany posed a threat to French security and greatness. Recognizing that any future moves by Prussia could lead to conflict, France was anxious to avoid the two-front war that could result if a hostile regime came to power in Spain. Wetzel describes the shady efforts of Napoleon to ensure the selection of a candidate who would pose no threat to French security. He paints a portrait of a man who sends conflicting messages to impede the efforts of the Spanish provisional government to secure any sovereign who would not be friendly to French interests. Ultimately, Napoleon's efforts failed, and the Spanish asked Leopold of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen to assume the Spanish throne.

Wetzel explains that the prospect of having a member of the Prussian royal family as the Spanish monarch was anathema to the French as well as dimly regarded by the head of that family, King William I of Prussia. The Minister President of Prussia, Otto von Bismarck, however, seized on the candidacy as an ideal stroke for Prussian policy. The reasons why Bismarck chose to support Leopold for the Spanish throne have been tirelessly debated by historians. Wetzel analyzes the arguments that Bismarck used the candidacy to unite Germany, to overshadow domestic problems, to prevent the formation of a Catholic league, and to foment rebellion in France. Though he acknowledges the merits of all of these positions, he determines that Bismarck's primary objective was to increase Prussian prestige and to ensure Prussian security in the event of a conflict with France. Wetzel disputes the idea that Bismarck desired a preventive war against France and convincingly argues that Bismarck did not aim to provoke a French war. Instead, Wetzel decides that Bismarck knew that the unification of Germany threatened French interests and could provoke French resistance. Bismarck needed to ensure that if a war with France did occur, Prussia could count on Spain to occupy a portion of the French army. Wetzel argues that Bismarck pushed the candidacy in the hopes that Leopold could be installed on the Spanish throne before France could react, and thus war could be avoided.

When the Spanish parliament was prorogued prematurely without accepting Leopold as Spain's sovereign, Bismarck's plans crumbled, and France conducted a campaign against Leopold's candidacy that would lead to war.

Wetzel's skill in describing the diplomacy that followed is a chief asset of his work. He presents French policy as dominated by the foreign minister, Antoine Agenor, duc de Gramont. With the approval of Napoleon III, the anti-Prussian Gramont pursued an inflammatory policy in which he exacerbated anti-Prussian feeling in the French chamber and the press and called for a rejection of Leopold's candidacy by William I and guarantees that the candidacy would not be renewed. Gramont's efforts stand in sharp contrast to the conciliating efforts of the French minister plenipotentiary to Prussia, Vincent Comte Benedetti. Benedetti attempted to meet Gramont's requirements while mitigating their fiery nature. He conferred with William in order to gain William's renunciation of the candidacy. William, who had never been fond of the candidacy, was happy to see it discontinued. He stipulated, however, that Leopold must first reject it and then he would accept this rejection. When Karl Anton, Leopold's father, withdrew his son from consideration for the Spanish throne, William sent the appropriate approval of this decision.

Gramont and the French parliament were not satisfied with the withdrawal of Leopold's candidacy. French public opinion had been inflamed by Gramont's disclosures to the chamber and the press. The French viewed Leopold's candidacy as evidence of the malevolence of Prussia and cried for stronger action. Gramont felt the pressure of the French cry and believed that a firm stand should be made. He continued his efforts to wrest guarantees from William. His policy was ultimately doomed to failure by its stridency as well as by Bismarck's efforts to temper France's diplomatic success. By altering the infamous Ems telegram, Bismarck further inflamed French and German opinion. Faced with an outraged populace and pressures from military leaders who warned that in order to win a conflict the French army must mobilize immediately, the French government dove headlong into war.

Wetzel admirably recounts the events leading to the Franco-Prussian War in all their drama and suspense. A consummate storyteller, he presents diplomacy not through events alone but through the minds and hearts of the people who participated in them. He adopts a chronological approach that reveals the evolution of

French and Prussian policies as the crisis over the Hohenzollern candidacy developed. Wetzel also employs an engaging writing style that makes his work accessible to both the general public and scholars alike. He combines a mastery of primary sources with discerning insight into the historiography of his subject and analyzes this his-

toriography in an extensive bibliographical essay that is an important starting point for all scholars of his topic. Through solid research and artistic flair, Wetzel describes the failed policies and the called bluffs that led to the Franco-Prussian War.

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