Was James G. Blaine a Great Secretary of State?


The diplomatic and political record of James G. Blaine is not easy to assess. It has never been. Blaine’s contemporaries had trouble comprehending such a complex and dynamic politician. Friends, foes, admirers, and rivals found themselves charmed, amazed, outraged, and bewildered. Now, more than a century after his death, Blaine remains something of an enigma to diplomatic historians, as David Healy’s masterful study of Blaine’s diplomacy in Latin America demonstrates. Healy seeks to determine if James G. Blaine belongs among those makers of United States foreign policy who made a difference, and, if so, just what difference he made in the area of U.S. relations with Latin America.

For several reasons, these questions are not easy to answer. To begin with, Blaine was perhaps the most popular, provocative, and controversial American politician of the Gilded Age. Admired by his loyal followers as the “Plumed Knight” of the Republican party, he was seen as a moderate “Half-Breed” who built consensus amidst reform-minded “Mugwumps” and old-line stalwarts. Others viewed him as a “Jingo Jim,” “The Continental Liar from the State of Maine,” and a corrupt compromiser who opposed reform. Republican Carl Shurz, who served with Blaine in Congress, observed, “It would be a terrible thing to teach our young men that such a record [as Blaine’s] does not disqualify a man for the highest honors and trusts of the Republic.” Nevertheless, Blaine’s considerable political skills enabled him to serve as a highly effective speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives and an influential U.S. senator. A perennial contender for the Republican party’s presidential nomination (in 1876, 1880, 1888, and 1892), he secured the Republican nomination in 1884 and, in New York, came within a few thousand votes of defeating Democrat Grover Cleveland for the presidency. However, except for his two tenures as secretary of state, separated by almost a full decade, Blaine was never in a posi-

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tion to direct national policy; and, despite his notable presence in the national political arena, he showed precious little interest in foreign affairs and none at all in Latin America, except while in the office of secretary of state. In addition, evaluating Blaine’s contributions as secretary of state is problematic because his two separated tenures were incomplete, due to circumstances beyond his control.

Blaine always remained more a politician than a diplomat, and Healy notes that in two tenures as secretary of state, Blaine was “not an ordinary cabinet member” (p. 2). As the leader of the Republican party and a “perennial presidential prospect,” Healy argues, Blaine “was never merely head of the State Department . . . but a chieftain with whom his presidential superiors had to come to terms” (p. 2). With the agreeable Garfield, Blaine assumed a prominent role in the cabinet and appeared to serve as “prime minister.” Clearly, he was “the president’s confidant and advisor” (p. 17). The two men quickly developed a close personal relationship, and Blaine, with a “free rein, and with the president’s full support,” moved swiftly to seize “the opportunity to pursue a more active and vigorous foreign policy than his predecessors” (p. 17). Neither Garfield nor Blaine had any significant background in foreign affairs, yet both seemed to understand that by 1880, Latin America had become important commercially to the United States. Blaine immediately made Latin-American relations the focus of his diplomacy, and boldly advanced an ambitious agenda that included efforts to increase trade through reciprocity agreements, the active participation of the United States in efforts to bring about the peaceful resolution of intra-American conflicts, and the implementation of measures to remove European influence in the Western Hemisphere. Healy devotes a full chapter to the Mexico-Guatemala dispute and two chapters to the War of the Pacific, providing as thorough an examination of the American diplomatic record on these incidents as exists anywhere. Considering an inter-ocean canal as essential to the interests of the United States, Blaine quickly initiated efforts to assert claims for a dominant position on the Isthmus of Panama. Blaine’s diplomatic notes to the British on the canal issue argued that such a project was more vital to the interests of the United States than to Great Britain and compared the situation to Suez, where the British held control. Here, Healy shares the view of most historians on this subject, concluding that Blaine did not expect the British to abandon the advantages they held in the Clayton-Bulwer Treaty and agree with the U.S. position; rather, he was “attempting both to educate them and to deliver a warning for the future” (p. 53).

To prevent further warfare among the states of the Western Hemisphere, Blaine envisioned a “congress of American republics” to be held in Washington, D.C., in 1882. But Blaine’s scheme for a pan-American meeting never came to fruition. On 2 July 1881, President Garfield was mortally wounded by an assassin’s bullet. His successor, Chester A. Arthur, had no use for Blaine. Arthur was a protégé of one of Blaine’s fiercest enemies, Senator Roscoe Conkling of
New York, Blaine had once referred to the New York senator as “a grandiloquent swell with a turkey-gobbler strut.” Such rhetoric on the floor of the Senate was extraordinary, and not forgotten. Arthur ignored his secretary of state and ultimately withdrew the invitations for the Pan-American conference Blaine had envisioned. Blaine would have welcomed the opportunity to remain at the helm of the State Department, but as he confided to diplomat John W. Foster, “He [Arthur] never asked me to stay—how can I remain?”

Following a seven-year hiatus from public office, during which he wrote his congressional memoirs, ran unsuccessfully for the presidency, and traveled abroad, Blaine returned to head the State Department, but under a much different relationship than he had enjoyed with Garfield. While he sensed that the new Republican president-elect was hesitant to appoint him, Blaine eagerly accepted Benjamin Harrison’s reluctant call to serve as his secretary of state. Healy observes that Harrison had no choice but to appoint Blaine, who had campaigned vigorously for the Republican ticket in 1888; but the dour Harrison knew Blaine’s style and anticipated being overshadowed by the popular politician who many believed had dominated the brief administration of Garfield.

Harrison, it turned out, had no cause to worry. Although Blaine’s enthusiasm for the grand stage of national politics and his ambitions for an expanded United States’ role in world affairs remained strong, his health had declined to the point where his presence in the Harrison cabinet soon became almost inconsequential. Nevertheless, Blaine started the new tenure in his familiar style. Once again, he viewed a Pan-American initiative as an essential component in a vision of a “Spirited Diplomacy” endorsed by the president. This time, the conference came off largely as planned. All Latin-American nations save the Dominican Republic accepted invitations to meet in Washington in October 1890. With a sense of pride and accomplishment, Blaine presided over a largely business- and trade-dominated agenda that culminated in a six-week tour for the Latin-American delegates of the emerging industrial centers of the United States. Although the tangible results of the First Pan-American Conference were modest, resulting only in the establishment of a Bureau of American Republics and the creation of a precedent for a series of future pan-American meetings, Blaine had at least overcome Latin-American skepticism regarding U.S. intentions and the disinterest of the U.S. Congress. This was no mean accomplishment in either case, and Healy awards Blaine high marks for effort.

Healy’s two chapters on the Chilean crisis of 1891–1892 provide a richly detailed narrative of the international diplomacy and White House maneuvering that surrounded the final unhappy episode of Blaine’s career. While the State

Department labored to secure reciprocal trade agreements with Latin-American countries, sought naval bases in the Caribbean, and oversaw the early stages of a growing crisis with Chile, Blaine was beset by severe health problems and daunting family tragedies. Two of his adult children died in 1891, and another became involved in an extraordinarily unpleasant and public divorce proceeding. Suffering from fatigue and Bright’s disease, Blaine was away from Washington for five months during the formative stages of the only war-threatening international imbroglio to develop during his time as secretary of state. During Blaine’s prolonged absence, the Chilean crisis was managed by Harrison, with the assistance of Navy Secretary Benjamin Tracy and seasoned diplomat Foster. By the time Blaine returned to Washington, he viewed Harrison’s hard line towards Chile and the president’s blunt rhetoric as threatening to the spirit of pan-Americanism. Up to this point, Harrison and Blaine had worked in an effective, if awkward, partnership in which both men “agreed on the essentials of foreign policy, differing mainly on style and tone of its implementation” (p. 205). The Chilean crisis ended this working relationship, and Blaine realized that his effectiveness as secretary of state was at an end. He resigned on 4 June 1892, and watched with apparent ambivalence as a Blaine “boom” at the Republic party’s convention dissipated a few weeks later.

Does Blaine belong among those foreign policy-makers who made a difference? If so, it is clearly in Latin America, where, more than anywhere else, his mark would be set. Healy concludes that, despite Blaine’s unfamiliarity with foreign affairs and the Latin-American region, its culture and politics, he engaged in “diplomatic activism” (p. 250) and that, once he was placed in the office of secretary of state, his “ideas crystallized with remarkable speed” (p. 250). Healy argues that Blaine’s foreign policies and his vision for the nation’s future focused the United States on the Western hemisphere, and agrees with the consensus of most diplomatic historians that Blaine was ahead of his time in seeking closer ties to Latin America and in laying the groundwork for twentieth-century initiatives.3 But does envisioning alone qualify one for inclusion among the nation’s most significant secretaries of state?

Blaine would make a superb subject for a study in counterfactual history. What if the dynamic Blaine had served in a Garfield cabinet for a full four years? Or eight years? Had Blaine served a full eight years, would he have overshadowed other nineteenth-century secretaries of state, such as Hamilton Fish and even William Seward? Could the pan-American movement have been advanced? How would relations with Britain have evolved over United States insistence on control of an inter-ocean canal across the Isthmus of Panama?

3. Edward P. Crapol, James G. Blaine: Architect of Empire (Wilmington, DE, 2000), is a recent study that supports the view of Blaine as a secretary of state with vision and ambition, but points to relatively modest achievements during his tenures as head of the Department of State.
How different might have been the diplomacy of the “awkward years” of Arthur and Grover Cleveland? Had Blaine just had more time, would historians, such as Healy, view him as more than a visionary ahead of his time or a harbinger of things to come?