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Estandart Reyau d'a Cheneralísma, prencipal bandera carlista d'a primera guerra bordada por María Francisca de Braganza em 1833 Royal Standard of the General in Chief, main Carlist flag of the First War embroidered by Maria Francisca de Braganza in 1833). Wikimedia Commons

Interests over Affinities: U.S. Geopolitics and the Italian Revolutions of 1848–49

di LUCA CONIGLIO

ABSTRACT: This article examines the response of the United States to the Italian revolutions of 1848–49 through a strategic and geopolitical lens. While public opinion and the press often displayed enthusiasm for the Italian cause, the official posture of Washington remained firmly anchored in neutrality. Drawing on consular reports, diplomatic correspondence and American newspapers, the study highlights the persistent dichotomy between popular sympathy and the realpolitik of statecraft. Particular attention is devoted to the symbolic and political weight of the Roman Republic, which generated an unprecedented debate in the American public sphere but ultimately confirmed the primacy of hemispheric priorities and domestic balances over transatlantic affinities. The analysis underscores that, in mid-nineteenth-century American foreign policy, commercial access rather than ideological entanglement guided the approach to the Italian quadrant, revealing how U.S. geopolitical logic systematically subordinated republican affinities to strategic interests.

KEYWORDS: UNITED STATES FOREIGN POLICY; 1848; ITALIAN STATES; ROMAN REPUBLIC; GEOPOLITICS..

Preface

“**R**evolution in Sicily”¹. So headlined the *New York Daily Tribune* of February 17, 1848, under the editorship of Horace Greeley, the most influential journalist and *opinion maker* of his time². With this bold title, American readers were introduced to the eruption of revolutionary unrest

1 *The New York Daily Tribune*, February 17, 1848, Source: Library of Congress, Chronicling America.

2 Robert C. WILLIAMS *Horace Greeley: Champion of American Freedom*, New York and London, NYU Press, New York, 2006, (digital ed.) cit. p. 125.

in Sicily, an event that would soon prove to be only the first in a cascading series of uprisings across the European continent. From Paris to Berlin, from Vienna to Venice and across all the major Italian pre-unification-states, 1848 marked the dramatic outbreak of what would later be known as the “European Peoples’ Spring.” In the Italian peninsula, all the major political entities, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the Papal States, Tuscany, Kingdom of Sardinia and Venice saw, in different ways and with different times, the rise and often the fall of revolutionary or constitutional experiments.

Yet 1848 was not just a European year. It was also, in many ways, a defining moment in the geopolitical consolidation of the United States. That same year witnessed the conclusion of the Mexican American War and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which added over 525,000 square miles to the American territory, encompassing all or parts of present-day California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming. With this acquisition, America fulfilled its “Manifest Destiny” to span the continent from coast to coast³. But that same ideological drive, made in equal parts of republican idealism, messianic visions and strategic ambition, faced a challenge in Europe: how should the United States respond to revolutions that seemed to mirror some of its own founding myths, but that also threatened to destabilize the global balance of power? In particular, American elites feared the most radical implications of proto-proletarian revolutions, especially those that threatened sacred dogmas such as the right to private property. Vice President John C. Calhoun, one of the dominant political figures of his time, a staunch defender of slavery and of states’ rights, bluntly warned:

“The most dangerous of all forms of government is a government of the poor over the rich—one which will involve confiscation, a redistribution of property.”⁴

This article explores the strategic and geopolitical posture of the United States toward the revolutionary regimes of 1848, with a particular focus on the Italian case. It seeks to understand why the U.S. stopped short of diplomatic recognition or tangible support, despite evident ideological sympathy. What factors, domestic, diplomatic, commercial and strategic, shaped the choices of Washington pol-

3 Anders STEPHANON, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansion and the Empire of Right*, New York, Hill and Wang Critical Issues, 1995, cit. p. 5.

4 John C. CALHOUN, cit. in ROSS M. LENCE (ed.), *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1992, p. 280.

icymakers? Why did the Sicilian, Roman, Venetian and other Italian revolutionary experiments, unlike the French Second Republic, fail to elicit formal recognition from the United States?

The goal is not merely to retrace diplomatic events, but to interrogate the underlying strategic logic of American foreign policy at the end of the so-called “Age of Revolutions.”⁵

The Strategic Horizon of the United States, 1830–1850

The three decades that in Europe run from the Congress of Vienna to the Revolutions of 1848 coincided, in the United States, with a period of exceptional transformation. At the close of the devastating War of 1812 against Great Britain, the American republican experiment had, in the eyes of contemporaries, survived by a near miracle. After that brush with national apocalypse began a period that turned a strategically fragile young republic, pressed against the eastern seaboard and vulnerable to European interference, into a continental colossus with clear, ambitious and relentlessly pursued geopolitical objectives, often draped in a mantle of messianic idealism⁶. As Daniel Walker Howe has shown in his remarkable work, the crucial enabling conditions were also technological and infrastructural:



Fig. 1. Horace Greely between circa 1860 and circa 1865 (restored). National Archives at College Park. War Department. Office of the Chief Signal Officer. Wiki Commons.

5 This historical period was characterized by the Atlantic revolutionary cycle beginning with the American and French Revolutions and extending through the European upheavals of 1848. See David ARMITAGE and Sanjay SUBARHMANYAM (eds.), *The Age of Revolutions in Global Context, c. 1760–1840*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

6 See Alan TAYLOR, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, & Indian Allies*, New York, Knopf, 2010; Donald R. HICKEY *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, Urbana, University of Illinois Press, 2012.

steam navigation for both internal and oceanic navigation, the railroad and the telegraph invented by Samuel L. Morse shrank distances, synchronized markets and bound together an expanding polity⁷. These same innovations narrowed the Atlantic, intensifying transoceanic information flows precisely when Europe was entering a new cycle of upheaval⁸.

Territorial expansion and internal consolidation advanced hand in hand. By the mid-1840s Washington had annexed Texas (1845), settled the Oregon boundary with Britain alongside the very well-known 49° parallel (1846) and, after a short but brutal war for which the US had long sought a *casus belli*, imposed the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo on Mexico (1848), acquiring a vast transcontinental empire. That arc of policy was justified not merely as *raison d'État*, but as a providential mandate. In 1845 John L. O'Sullivan famously proclaimed it was America's "*manifest destiny to overspread the continent allotted by Providence for the free development of our yearly multiplying millions.*"⁹ Yet the same decade witnessed a more austere language of limits and discipline: James K. Polk, the expansionist Democrat who presided over the Mexican War, repeatedly expressed that sympathy for liberty abroad which would remain a constant in American strategy to this day but, in that specific case, with a pledge of non-intervention. "*While the people of the United States have been the sincere friends of freedom everywhere,*" he told Congress at the close of 1848, "*it is our settled policy not to interfere in the domestic concerns of other nations.*"¹⁰

In strategic terms, the Monroe Doctrine remained the keystone. Announced in 1823 to deter renewed European colonization and intervention in the Americas, its central propositions, such as no new European colonies, political systems in the New World distinct from those of the Old one; U.S. abstention from Europe-

7 Daniel Walker HOWE, *What Hath God Wrought: The Transformation of America, 1815–1848*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2007, p. 5.

8 See Luca CONIGLIO, *Risorgimento transnazionale. Esulato e circolazione delle culture politiche tra Stati italiani e Stati Uniti d'America (1815–1861)*, Rome, Università di Roma "Tor Vergata," 2018, pp. 5–47.

9 John L. O'SULLIVAN, "Annexation," *United States Magazine and Democratic Review* 17, July–August 1845: 5–10, New York, *United States Magazine and Democratic Review*, 1845. Also quoted in STEPHANSON, *Manifest Destiny*, cit. p. 12.

10 James K. POLK, Annual Message to Congress, December 5th, 1848, in James D. RICHARDSON, (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 4, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1897, pp. 641–652.

an wars, framed Washington's worldview through mid-century. James Monroe's core sentence, "*the American continents, by the free and independent condition which they have assumed and maintain, are henceforth not to be considered as subjects for future colonization by any European powers,*" captured both a defensive perimeter and an aspirational sphere of influence¹¹. Under John Quincy Adams' exacting diplomacy and, later, Polk's more activist posture, the Doctrine evolved from a passive shield into a more assertive instrument of hemispheric primacy, informal where possible through commercial and naval presence, coercive where necessary, for example by asserting a "no-transfer" principle against perceived European excessive influence¹². It was undoubtedly a decisive period in the process of geopolitical construction of the American superpower.

The British Empire loomed large in these calculations: London remained America's indispensable commercial partner and, still, the dominant naval power, but also a rival along the Pacific Northwest due to disputes along the future Canadian border, in the Caribbean, and on the high seas, especially as the Royal Navy's antislavery patrols and global policing crushed against American shipping, considered a vital priority in Washington¹³. France was read with a different lens: after February 1848, U.S. policymakers swiftly recognized the Second Republic, both because France's revolution retained a republican patina and a high symbolic value, but also because Paris remained a continental counterweight to Britain. Austria, by contrast, figured mostly as Metternich's metropole of reaction, a power with moral and diplomatic weight in Italy but little direct leverage in the Western Hemisphere, which made public sympathy for Italian liberals relatively low-cost for Washington¹⁴.

11 James MONROE, Seventh Annual Message to Congress, December 2, 1823, in RICHARDSON (ed.), *Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. 2, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1896, pp. 206–214.

12 See Jay SEXTON, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America*, New York, Hill and Wang, 2011; See also Ernest R. MAY, *The Making of the Monroe Doctrine*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1975.

13 Eliga H. GOULD *Among the Powers of the Earth: The American Revolution and the Making of a New World Empire*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2012, pp., 196–214; Robert E. MAY, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 5–57.

14 Daniele FIORENTINO, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d'Italia, 1848–1901*, Roma, Gangemi, 2014, pp. 13–34; Axel KORNER, *America in Italy: The United States in the Political Thought and Imagination of the Risorgimento, 1763–1865*, Princeton, Princeton Uni-

These external perceptions sat on top of a hierarchy of priorities that remained remarkably consistent and which, still in today's world, represent priorities within the American imperial construct: hemispheric security first; uninterrupted transatlantic commerce to defend at all costs, second, what US founding father Benjamin Franklin defined as "*Free ships make free goods*¹⁵"; only then, selective projection of naval power along key routes such as the Mexican Gulf/Caribbean Sea, the Pacific approaches such as the Kingdom of Hawaii, already considered strategic by Washington as President Polk's successor, Zachary Taylor, addressed in 1849.

The position of the Sandwich Islands with reference to the territory of the United States on the Pacific, the success of our persevering and benevolent citizens who have repaired to that remote quarter in Christianizing the natives and inducing them to adopt a system of government and laws suited to their capacity and wants, and the use made by our numerous whale ships of the harbors of the islands as places of resort for obtaining refreshments and repairs all combine to render their destiny peculiarly interesting to us¹⁶.

The U.S. Navy of the 1840s was still modest by European standards, but steam adoption, squadron basing and a global merchant marine, from whaling to the California trade, multiplied its reach. The technological revolution was very important even in this regard: steam shortened warning times; telegraphic relays within North America made policymaking quicker; and an expanding penny press circulation nationalized foreign-policy debates¹⁷. In that media ecosystem, Euro-

versity Press, 2017, pp. 114-162. Sympathy for the Italian and Hungarian causes, and more generally for the independence and liberation aspirations of the territories under Habsburg rule, was fostered by the presence of many exiles in the United States in those years. For the Italians see Luca CONIGLIO, *Risorgimento transatlantico: gli esuli e la promozione dell'Unità nazionale italiana negli Stati Uniti* in "Altreitalie", n.64, 2022, pp. 21-54.

15 Simeon E. BALDWIN, *Franklin and the Rule of Free Ships, Free Goods*, in *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society*, vol. 25, Worcester, American Antiquarian Society, 1915, p. 347. "*It is agreed that the goods of an enemy shall be free, when found under a neutral flag; and that free ships shall make free goods*". Howard R. MARRARO *Relazioni fra l'Italia e gli Stati Uniti*, Roma, Edizioni dell'Ateneo, 1954, p. 29.

16 Zachary TAYLOR, *First Annual Message*, December 4th, 1849, RICHARDSON (ed.), *A Compilation of the Messages and Papers of the Presidents*, vol. V, 1896-99, cit. p. 17. Quoted also in John M. VAN DYKE, *Who Owns the Crown Lands of Hawai'i?*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2009, p. 155.

17 Frank Luther MOTT, *American Journalism, A History of Newspapers in the United States through 250 years: 1690 to 1940*, Volume I, New York, The Macmillan Company, 1944, p. 216; HOWE, *What Hath God Wrought*, p. 234.

pean revolutions were read through American myths and anxieties: they were mirrors of 1776 when they vindicated constitutionalism, markets and national self-determination¹⁸, but they were specters when they appeared to license social leveling or threaten property. As John C. Calhoun warned in his *Disquisition on Government*, an unchecked numerical majority could slide toward “confiscation” and the “plunder of the rich by the poor,” the most dangerous form of power because it was cloaked in the forms of popular sovereignty¹⁹.

Against that backdrop, the U.S. government response to Europe’s 1848 uprisings was neither indifference nor crusade, but calibrated sympathy, often in contrast with the warm welcome given by a part of American society, witnessed by the enthusiasm in the newspapers²⁰. Recognition and full diplomatic engagement were extended where stability and interest plausibly aligned, for example in the case of the French Second Republic. But more radical or precarious experiments such as the Roman Republic or Sicilian Constitution of 1848, elicited rhetorical warmth but no formal recognition. The logic was not solely ideological; it was prudential. A precipitous American endorsement of insurgent regimes risked entanglement with Britain and France, jeopardized commerce and contradicted the very neutrality that undergirded the Monroe settlement. Policymakers paid close attention to the European balance: a France veering too far left could unsettle markets and an Austria crushing Italy by force would inflame U.S. opinion but hardly justify risking a naval confrontation. Consequently, Britain opportunistically extending its reach in the Caribbean or Central America posed more immediate challenges than events in the Roman Forum²¹.

Finally, the Western Hemisphere remained Washington’s first theater. The United States had recognized the new Latin American republics in the early

18 Paola GEMME, *Domesticating Foreign Struggles: The Italian Risorgimento and Antebellum American Identity*, Athens, The University of Georgia Press, 2005, p. 43.

19 John C. CALHOUN, *A Disquisition on Government*, in Ross M. LENCE, ed. *Union and Liberty: The Political Philosophy of John C. Calhoun*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1992, pp. 28–31.

20 MARRARO, *American opinion on the unification of Italy: 1846–1861*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1932, p. 5.

21 George C. HERRING, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 160–186; FIORENTINO, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Risorgimento d’Italia*, pp. 31–44.

1820s and sought trade, influence and increasingly, to its Pacific shores²². The same “destiny” that trained American eyes westward shaped how European upheavals were ranked: inspiring and instructive, yes, but secondary to a continental project in full stride. In this light, mid-century American exceptionalism was not a mere rhetoric of election. It was a strategic grammar, parsing where ideals could be professed loudly and where interests required restraint.

*Public Opinion and the European Revolutions of 1848:
The American Divide*

On March 18, 1848, *The New York Herald* featured an unusual front-page illustration²³: a jockey, crouched low over a galloping horse, racing across the page, symbolizing the speed with which the latest “intelligence” from Europe had reached American shores aboard the steamship *Cambria*, one of the many who crossed the Atlantic at that time. This symbolized how steam navigation and the telegraph had transformed the transatlantic circulation not only of men and goods, but also of political information. In a matter of days, rather than weeks, the dramatic toppling of Louis-Philippe and the proclamation of the French Second Republic became known in cities and towns across the United States, igniting political debate and public excitement from New England to New Orleans²⁴.

While the principles guiding American foreign policy, as discussed in the previous section, suggested caution and non-intervention, a significant portion of the U.S. society responded to the European upheavals with fervent enthusiasm. Many Americans interpreted the events in Paris as part of the same historical arc that had produced their own independence in 1776, seeing in them the vindication of republican ideals against monarchy. This “republican mirroring” between America and France has been a central theme in the so-called transnational history, a field which has emphasized the deep interconnections of Atlantic political cultures. In the last two decades, this historiographical approach has flourished,

22 Lester D. LANGLEY, *The Americas in the Age of Revolution, 1750–1850*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1996, pp. 229–254; SEXTON, *The Monroe Doctrine*, pp. 83–104.

23 *The New York Herald*, New York (NY), March 18, 1848. Source: Library of Congress, *Chronicling America*.

24 *The Daily Crescent*, New Orleans (LA), March 27, 1848. Source: Library of Congress, *Chronicling America*.

underscoring how ideas, people and political repertoires moved across national boundaries, shaping events in both Europe and the Americas²⁵.

The sense of revolutionary fraternity was not merely abstract. In major urban centers along the Eastern seaboard, mass meetings and rallies celebrated the victories of European insurgents. Marathon marches, democratic ribbons and celebratory banquets sprang up as expressions of transatlantic fraternity. Citizens adorned themselves with revolutionary cockades, while Protestant ministers preached prophecies of nearing liberation. Mexican War veterans, along with Irish and German immigrants that during that period began to arrive in abundance, organized public meetings to raise funds and collect arms for the European insurgents²⁶. New York, Boston, and Philadelphia not only hosted these public gatherings but also welcomed a considerable number of 1848 exiles, including many Italians. As I have shown elsewhere, the Italian political refugees, though unable to alter Washington's strategic posture of neutrality by any means, played a notable role in shaping American public opinion. Through speeches, articles on major American newspapers and active participation in civic life, they fostered a climate of sympathy for the Italian cause, especially among reformist and liberal circles²⁷.

For many Americans, the revolutions symbolized a vindication of democratic ideals abroad, a worldwide triumph of the "American Anglo-Saxon" based republican government. These aspirations found their most assertive political expression in the *Young America* movement, a political current within the Democratic Party emerged in late 1830s, made not only of politicians, but also of major American intellectual figures such as William Cullen Bryant, Hermann Melville

25 See Pierre-Yves SAUNIER, *Transnational History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013; Aki-ira IRIYE and Pierre-Yves SAUNIER (eds.), *The Palgrave Dictionary of Transnational History*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009; Luca CODIGNOLA BO, *Blurred Nationalities across the North Atlantic. Traders, Priests, and Their Kin Travelling between North America and the Italian Peninsula, 1763-1846*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2019. Specifically on Italian transnationalism see Maurizio ISABELLA, *Risorgimento in Exile: Italian Émigrés and the Liberal International in the Post-Napoleonic Era*, London, Oxford University Press, 2009.

26 Larry J. REYNOLDS, *European Revolutions and the American Literary Renaissance* New Haven, Yale University Press, 1988, pp. 98, 99.

27 CONIGLIO, *Risorgimento Transatlantico*, pp. 29, 30.

and Nathaniel Hawthorne²⁸. This political movement enjoyed considerable support within an American society that was rapidly expanding westward, animated by a deep conviction in the exceptional character of Anglo-Saxon republicanism of mid-19th-century America. In the *Democratic Review*, the journal he directed and which for more than two decades served as the principal organ of Young America, John L. O'Sullivan, the theorist of Manifest Destiny, praised the courage of Giuseppe Mazzini's Giovine Italia, from which the Young Americans even borrowed their name²⁹.

Among the several secret societies which have succeeded each other during the last ten years, the Giovine Italia, or Young Italy stands the most prominent. Strong in its convictions, fearless of consequences, and unheeding the rage of a tyranny it despised while it abhorred, this Society alone has made a public declaration of faith, and proclaimed in open and unequivocal language the principles on which it has taken its stand, and on which and by which it has determined to begin and carry out its mission of Italian regeneration³⁰.

Horace Greeley, unquestionably the most important journalist of his age, commanded an extraordinary influence through the *New York Tribune*, whose circulation reached not only the metropolis of New York City but also the most remote rural communities of the state. He had an acute sense of public mood and, for this reason, although he openly endorsed most of the European revolutions, including that of Paris, he always kept a measured distance from the Young America movement and sharply criticized its calls for intervention in Europe. In short, while he shared some of the movement's foreign policy aspirations, Greeley never turned the *Tribune* into a party organ, preferring to preserve its independence as a newspaper rather than bind it to partisan machinery³¹. As he wrote in early March 1848, "*We rejoice in every extension of Liberty, at home or abroad, but let us not be hurried into rash adventures which may compromise our own Republic*"³².

28 Yonatan EYAL, *The Young American Movement and the Transformation of the Democratic Party, 1828-1861*, New York, Oxford University Press, New York, 2007, pp. 45-48.

29 Edward L. WIDMER, *Young America, the flowering of democracy in New York City*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 5; Joseph ROSSI, *The Image of America in Mazzini's Writings*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1954, pp. 20, 21.

30 *The Democratic Review*, Volume 9, issue 39, September 1841, p. 242, in "American Memory", The Library of Congress.

31 *The New York Daily Tribune*, February 27th, 1848. Source: Library of Congress, Chronicling America.

32 *Ivi*, March 3rd, 1848.

This line of “enthusiasm, moral support, but no further” was confirmed even more decisively by the Paris correspondent of James Gordon Bennett’s *New York Herald*, the main rival of the *Tribune* and a paper traditionally inclined toward greater caution in foreign affairs. The Herald’s reporting made explicit a leit-motif of American geopolitical thinking toward Europe in the mid-nineteenth century: not only the official prudence of Washington’s foreign policy, but also the widespread fear among many Americans of the radical currents unleashed by continental upheavals³³. The Herald’s dispatches from Paris portrayed the revolutionary crowds less as noble patriots than as a threatening force, highlighting the risks of social disorder and degeneration. One report described the scene in alarmist terms:

The mob, excited and ferocious, filled the streets of Paris, and for days it seemed as if society itself was dissolved. Respectable citizens trembled, fearing that an unbridled populace could not long govern a great nation³⁴.

Such rhetoric was a warning about the menacing nature of popular masses suddenly elevated to power. Even the most ardent admirers of the French and Italian patriots recoiled from any hint of “social revolution” that might undermine private property and social stability. This American commitment to private property and social stability was bound with an ethnocultural hierarchy that placed Anglo Saxon Protestants at the apex and regarded other groups, to different extents depending on the race, as inherently less capable of sustaining republican institutions³⁵. This racialized framework influenced both popular discourse and official attitudes toward the upheavals in Europe and perfectly exemplifies the deep ambivalence with which American observers, even those sympathetic to Europe’s constitutional movements, observed the events of 1848.

If such prejudices were present in the French case, they were sharpened in the Italian one. A further dimension of this ambivalence lay in the racial and

33 This fear was not unique to the United States, but a widespread concern also shared by broad segments of the French population. See Geoffrey ELLIS, “The Revolution of 1848–1849 in France,” in *The Revolutions in Europe, 1848–1849: From Reform to Reaction*, edited by R. J. W. EVANS and Hartmut POGGE VON STRANDMANN, Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 50.

34 The *New York Herald*, New York, April 3, 1848, Source: Chronicling America, Library of Congress.

35 Marco MARIANO, *L’America nell’«Occidente»*. *Storia della dottrina Monroe (1823-1963)*, Roma, Carocci, 2013, p. 69; See also Reginald HORSMAN, *Race and Manifest Destiny: The Origins of American Racial Anglo-Saxonism* Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1981.

cultural prejudices that Americans projected onto Southern Europe. As William J. Connell has shown, such stereotypes long predated the great wave of Italian immigration in the late nineteenth century³⁶. Already in the 1840s, Italian exiles experienced firsthand the widespread notion that Italians were a “Latin” people, hot-blooded, intemperate and, ultimately, incapable of adapting to the rigor and efficiency of Anglo Saxon republicanism³⁷. Washington Irving, in his widely circulated tales, had famously characterized Italy as a place of “picturesque ruins and dangerous banditti,” imagery that conveyed both fascination, fear and disgust, reinforcing the idea of an impulsive, unstable southern European people³⁸. This perception intersected another powerful prejudice: anti-Catholicism. At a moment when hundreds of thousands of Irish Catholics were arriving on U.S. shores, Catholicism was frequently cast as incompatible with the principles of the American republic³⁹.

These cultural and religious prejudices made Americans even more careful of supporting Italian republican experiments. While public sympathy for the Italian cause was real and often vocal, it existed alongside a widespread belief that Italy’s social and political conditions rendered it unready for the “Anglo-American” model of liberty. This tension between popular enthusiasm (but also prejudice) and governmental caution would shape U.S. responses to the Italian revolutions.

Italy and the Limits of American Revolutionary Sympathy (1848–1849)

If one wishes to analyze the geopolitical response of Washington to the Italian Revolutions of 1848–49, we must immediately come to terms with what at first sight may appear as a contradiction, but which, when placed in the broader framework of America’s long-term strategy, reveals itself to be rather consistent. On one hand, it is beyond dispute that, in both quantitative and qualitative terms, commercial ties between the United States and the Italian peninsula expanded

36 William J. CONNELL, *Darker aspects of Italian American Prehistory*, in W. J. CONNELL e F. GARDAPHE’ (eds.) *Anti-Italianism. Essays on a Prejudice*, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2010, (digital ed.), pp. 11, 12.

37 CONIGLIO, *Risorgimento transnazionale*, pp. 32-34.

38 Washington IRVING, *The Italian Banditti* (in *The Crayon Miscellany*, vol. 3), Philadelphia, Carey, Lea, & Blanchard, 1835, pp. 105–110.

39 James M. O’TOOLE, *The Faithful: A History of Catholics in America*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2008, pp. 63–70.

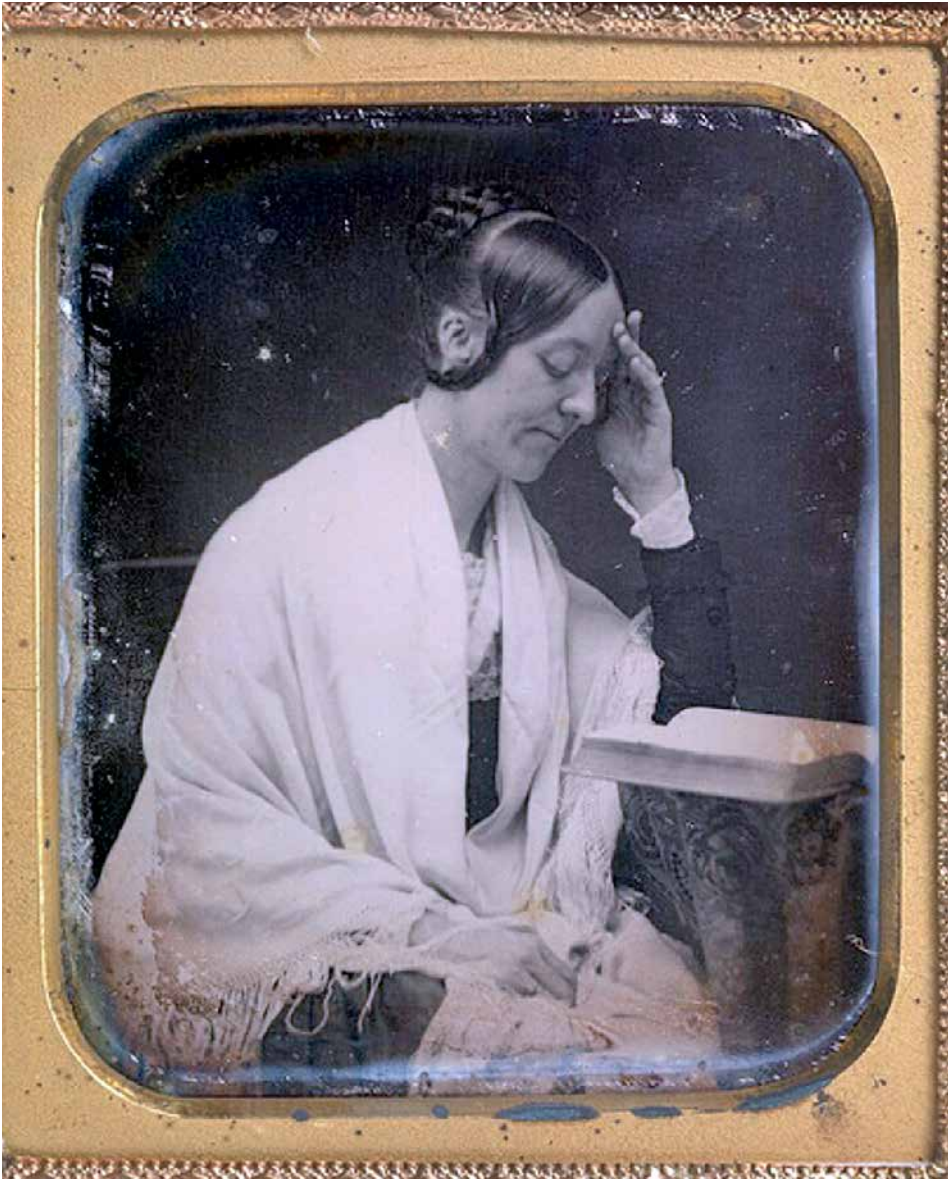


Fig. 2. Margaret Fuller Ossoli (1810-1850) by John Plumbe, Jr., 1846, sixth-plate daguerreotype, from the National Portrait Gallery which explicitly released this digital image under the CC0 license. CC0). She was an American journalist, editor, critic, translator, and women's rights advocate associated with the American transcendentalism movement. She was the first American female war correspondent from the Republican Rome under French siege.

markedly during the 1830s and 1840s. All the principal ports of the Peninsula such as Genoa, Livorno, Palermo and, to a lesser extent, Naples, witnessed a visible increase in exchanges with US vessels and a consistent presence of American diplomatic facilities. Also at the institutional level, significant treaties of navigation were concluded with the two most important pre-unitary states: the Kingdom of Sardinia (1838) and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies (1845)⁴⁰. Their merchant fleets, though by no means comparable to the great maritime powers of Europe, nonetheless operated actively across the Atlantic. The Sardinian consul in New York, Angelo Garibaldi, confirmed this trend, noting the

“increasing movement of American vessels toward our Tyrrhenian ports” and emphasizing the opportunities generated by the stability of Leghorn and the discipline of Genoa, while at the same time stressing that Washington would remain firm in safeguarding neutrality in European affairs”⁴¹.

On the other hand, despite these tangible ties, the Mediterranean as a whole and the Italian States in particular, never ascended to the rank of a strategic theatre for Washington. France, by contrast, was of a very different order of importance because, beyond commerce, there was something more: the fall of the July Monarchy and the birth of the Second Republic reverberated across the Atlantic with both symbolic and practical weight, given the long Franco-American entanglement from the era of independence onward and Paris’s past role as a decisive colonial power in the North American theatre. By contrast, Italian upheavals were largely read in Washington as regional events, confined within a balance-of-power game dominated by Vienna and Paris, important to monitor, certainly, but never an arena in which the United States ought to play, beyond vigilant consular observation and the protection of commerce and citizens⁴².

40 Regarding diplomatic and commercial relations between the U.S. and the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the mid-nineteenth century, see S. M. CICCIO’, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Regno delle Due Sicilie nell’Ottocento. Relazioni commerciali, culturali e diplomatiche*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2020, pp. 45–63. As regards the relations between the Kingdom of Sardinia and the United States see Marco MARIANO and Duccio SACCHI, *La costruzione della rete consolare sarda nelle Americhe, 1815-1860*, in “ANNALI DELLA FONDAZIONE LUIGI EINAUDI” N. XL, 2008, pp. 327-343 for the section about the U.S.

41 Archivio del Ministero degli Affari Esteri (AME), Consolati – New York, “Relazioni del console Angelo Garibaldi, 1848–1849,” b. 2, f. 13, February 25th, 1849. About the consular activities of Angelo Garibaldi, see also Marco MARIANO, “Trade, Liners, Treaties. Piedmontese Consuls in the Long Atlantic, 1819–1838,” in *Nuevo Mundo Mundos Nuevos*, 2012.

42 HERRING, *From Colony to Superpower*, pp. 188-196; Timothy M. ROBERTS (ed.), *Distant*

In this context, and this is a point that deserves emphasis because it recurs in almost every contemporary file, another persistent dichotomy marked American conduct. On the ground, in the various Italian pre-unification States, several U.S. representatives acted with an ardor and a personal involvement that sometimes raced ahead of politics. In Venice, U.S. consul William A. Sparks congratulated the newborn Repubblica di San Marco and forwarded the proclamation of 28 March with sympathetic commentary, an unmistakable moral endorsement which Venetian authorities and Daniele Manin himself, read as the salute of a “great Republic” across the ocean⁴³.

In Rome, U.S. *chargé d'affaire* Nicholas Brown attended the opening rites of the Roman Constituent Assembly in full diplomatic uniform and reported to Secretary of State James Buchanan on the order and discipline with which Roman citizens were constructing their republic, a particularly delicate theme for Americans of the time, even for the most ardent Republicans, who were invariably haunted by the specter of European revolutions turning too radical⁴⁴. Brown's dispatches and, more cautiously, those of his successor Lewis Cass Jr., the son of Lewis Cass Sr., who had only recently lost the presidential race to Zachary Taylor, clearly conveyed their frustration with the coldness and rigid *Realpolitik* applied by Washington toward the Roman Republic of 1848–49⁴⁵. In their view, as in that of many Americans who avidly read the impassioned reports of *New York Tribune* correspondent Margaret Fuller from the Eternal City, this republican experiment was worthy of Washington's support⁴⁶.

Revolutions: 1848 and the Challenge to American Exceptionalism, Charlottesville, University of Virginia Press, 2009, pp. 1–15.

43 Washington, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Dispatches from U.S. Consuls in Venice, Italy, 1830–1906, W. A. Sparks to the Secretary of State, Venice, March 28th, 1848.

44 Nicholas BROWN, dispatches to Secretary of State James Buchanan, February–April 1849, in *Nicholas Brown and the Roman Revolution of 1848*, Providence, Brown University – Bologna, 1088press, 2019 (digital ed.), pp. 45–78.

45 Daniele FIORENTINO, *Il Governo degli Stati Uniti e la Repubblica romana del 1849*, in Sara ANTONELLI, Daniele FIORENTINO, Giuseppe MONSAGRATI (eds.), *Gli Stati Uniti e la Repubblica romana del 1849*, Roma, Gangemi, 2000, p. 91; FIORENTINO (ed.), *I diplomatici americani a Roma: i dispaggi di Lewis Cass jr. e Nicholas Brown*, in *Ivi*, p. 259. See also MARRARO, *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy*, pp. 33–38.

46 See Larry J. REYNOLDS, Susan BELASCO SMITH, (eds.), *Margaret Fuller, These sad but glorious days, Dispatches from Europe, 1846–1850*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1991.

A similar scenario unfolded in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Equally telling is the conduct of the numerous American *chargés d'affaires* and consuls then stationed across the southern Kingdom, who often struggled to maintain the impartiality expected of their office and the strict neutrality demanded by Washington. More than once they allowed their personal sympathies to surface, occasionally overstepping their mandate and creating no small measure of embarrassment for the State Department⁴⁷. It is nonetheless telling that even those officials who, overall, displayed sympathy toward the republican experiments of the Italian regimes such as John Rowan, U.S. *chargé* at Naples, were not immune to the deep-seated Anglo Saxon cultural skepticism so widespread among the American public. As Rowan bluntly remarked,

“the Italians are too accustomed to despotic and dictatorial governments, and incapable of understanding the principles that hold together our own Republic, above all its republican foundations”⁴⁸.

Although not the principal factor, there is little doubt that this pervasive American skepticism toward Italian culture and, indeed, toward the very “Italian race”, a prejudice absent in the case of the French upheavals, contributed to reinforcing Washington’s posture of strict neutrality and non-interference in the European hemisphere. It was precisely this mindset that guided the U.S. State Department’s approach to the Italian revolutions of 1848, regardless of the partisan orientation of those in power⁴⁹. The line was constant: strict neutrality, no recognition of transitory Italian regimes, and no friction with France or Austria over an Italian question that Americans regarded as innately European and far from being the most important among the European issues themselves.

This geopolitical attitude and this difference in dealing with France and Italian States is particularly visible in the case of Rome. When France intervened twice, in 1849, to militarily crush the Roman experiment, the United States showed the flag, the USS *Constitution* shuttled among La Spezia, Livorno, Naples, even Gaeta (where Captain Gwinn welcomed on board Pope Pious IX and King Ferdinand II of Naples), avoiding any step that might be construed as opposition to

47 CICCIO’, *Gli Stati Uniti e il Regno delle Due Sicilie nell’Ottocento*, p. 141.

48 Howard R. MARRARO, “John Rowan’s Mission to the Two Sicilies (1848–1850),” *The Catholic Historical Review*, 30 (1944–45), Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, pp. 152–170, cit., p. 163.

49 HERRING, *From Colony to Superpower*, pp. 190–193.

Paris⁵⁰. The French Second Republic was recognized at once in 1848, the Italian revolutionary authorities were not. The choice, however disappointing to certain American circles⁵¹, was coherent: sympathy for constitutionalism, yes; European entanglement, no, especially in the case of second-rate powers such as the Italian states, moreover, inhabited by populations considered ethnically and culturally not up to the American republican model.

A parallel tension appeared, in mirror image, from the Italian side on American soil. Many reports preserved in the Torino Archive record how Italian consuls in the United States registered, with some satisfaction, the breadth of American public sympathy (mass meetings, generous subscriptions, flags intertwined) but, simultaneously, the coolness of official posture⁵². A Sardinian consular report from New York (1848–49) notes, in terms almost lapidary, that the U.S. Government “guarded neutrality as a matter of principle,” mindful of commerce and of “the European equilibrium⁵³.” In California, where the corsican Leonetto Cipriani would soon serve as Sardinian consul (1852–1855), correspondence and memoirs echo the same triad, admiration, fundraising, prudence, already visible in 1848–49 among Italian circles on the Eastern seaboard⁵⁴. Read together with the American files, these Italian voices sharpen the point: popular enthusiasm could be loud, but statecraft remained restrained.

That restraint did not stem from indifference but from strategy. The Americans were not building their continental empire through prudent diplomacy alone. Far from it. As Daniel Walker Howe convincingly argues, the mid-century United States was perfectly willing to use force or coercive diplomacy in other contexts, especially within its own hemisphere⁵⁵. This practice was, indeed, so common

50 Howard R. MARRARO, “Spezia: An American Naval Base, 1848–68,” *Military Affairs*, 7/4. 1943, Lawrence, Society for Military History, pp. 215–224.

51 Sara ANTONELLI, “E’ questo che fa la mia America”: *Il giornalismo di Margaret Fuller*, in *Gli Stati Uniti e la Repubblica romana del 1849*, p. 139.

52 Archivio di Stato di Torino (AST), Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Consolati – New York: “Mosso a Ministero degli Esteri”, b.2, n. 13, November 4th, 1848.

53 *Ivi*, n.7, February 25th, 1849.

54 Leonetto CIPRIANI, *Memorie/Avventure della mia vita*, Vol. II (1849–1871), L. MONDINI (ed.), Bologna, Zanichelli, 1934, pp. 40–51; See also Nidia DANIELON VASOLU, *Federico Biesta e Leonetto Cipriani: Due Italiani Del Risorgimento e Il Miraggio di Favolose Ricchezze Nelle Terre Americane del Pacifico*, Firenze, Leo S. Olshki, 1990.

55 Daniel Walker HOWE, Timothy M. MOBERTS, “The United States and the Revolutions of

that it had its own name: the so-called *filibustering*: private American adventurers who, without any formal authorization from the federal government, mounted armed expeditions into Latin American states to meddle in their domestic politics, seeking personal gain, commercial concessions, or territorial advantage, sometimes with the tacit indulgence of local U.S. officials or sympathetic politicians, but rarely as an acknowledged instrument of Washington's policy⁵⁶. Their raids, routinely condemned under the Neutrality Acts of 1818, expose how mid-century expansionist impulses could overflow beyond the Monroe Doctrine's defensive rhetoric which, in practice, functioned as shield and lever in the Americas and as a boundary, beyond the Atlantic. And, to grasp the mindset of the time and the extent of popular enthusiasm for the projection of American power, it suffices to recall that such filibustering expeditions were generally not denounced but rather celebrated in much of the U.S. press as feats of heroism and entrepreneurial vigor⁵⁷.

But the Italian Peninsula, by virtue of its cultural depth, its geographical location, and its modest weight in the hierarchy of American geopolitical interests, was of an altogether different order compared to the Caribbean and Central America, where Anglo Saxon filibusters operated with impunity, rarely incurring, at least in the majority of cases, the wrath of Europe's colonial empires. In Italy the posture had to be far more cautious: prudence was required, and above all the safeguarding of commercial ties. A pattern emerges which, though nuanced across the various regional states of the peninsula, is unmistakably recurrent in the American approach. Particularly appreciated in Washington was the Piedmontese case, as the monarchy of Savoy appeared a constitutional power at once solid and measured, liberal-leaning yet not prone to the dangerous excesses of radical social revolution. It is no coincidence that, a few years later, Sardinia-Piedmont would find in Washington a precious diplomatic ally for the broader project of

1848", in *The Revolutions in Europe*, pp. 167-168.

56 About filibustering see also Robert E. MAY, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering in Antebellum America*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 2002; Amy S. GREENBERG, *Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005, pp. 95-140.

57 Tom CHAFFIN, *Fatal Glory: Narciso López and the First Clandestine U.S. War against Cuba*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003, pp. 144-146. One of the major supporters of "filibustering", not coincidentally, was John O'Sullivan, theorist of the Manifest Destiny.

Italian unification⁵⁸.

Consular correspondence from Liguria consistently emphasized the continuity of commerce, the discipline imposed upon Genoa's port even in the midst of mobilization, and the regularity of dues, a triad of signals that reassured Washington precisely because they promised predictability and averted the specter of social radicalism⁵⁹. The concession of La Spezia port in June 1848, a coal depot quietly granted to the U.S. Navy, belongs to the same logic: modest in appearance, but geopolitically eloquent of a constitutional monarchy regarded as serious, stable, and compatible with American operating needs.

Tuscany, viewed above all through the harbor of Livorno, functioned as a hinge of U.S. trade. Here too, the free-port culture mattered far more than the vicissitudes of Florentine cabinets: consular reports and merchant correspondence dwelt on quarantine rules, brokerage fees, and port charges; constitutional turmoil in Florence entered those files only insofar as it threatened the neutrality of the roadstead or the regularity of dues. Attempts to formalize a bilateral treaty stalled, but the de facto embedding of U.S. commercial networks into the Tuscan port's economy made Livorno, in American eyes, a "reliable gateway," provided that war and revolution did not spill into maritime insecurity⁶⁰.

Venice, perhaps more than any other Italian city, drew both romantic admiration and anxious dispatches. As we have seen, consul William A. Sparks wrote with warmth during the siege, forwarding proclamations and congratulatory notes⁶¹; yet his reports also underlined blockades and the fragility of Adriatic shipping, which American merchants and insurers read with the cold pragmatism of those who must move cargo. After the Austrian reconquest, consular correspondence lamented that the abolition of the free-port status throttled the lagoon's commerce. The report of 1 July 1850, signed by Ebenkofler, secretary to the late consul, concluded starkly that Venice had "*entirely declined... in point of fact,*

58 FIORENTINO, *Gli Stati Uniti e l'Unità d'Italia*, pp. 27–33.

59 AST, Consolati, Genova, "Relazioni 1848–1849" b.2 n.7, May 15th, 1848.

60 Simone DI GIACOMO, *Dall'Atlantico al Mediterraneo. I rapporti commerciali e diplomatici tra gli Stati Uniti e Livorno (1831–1860)*, Soveria Mannelli, Rubbettino, 2004, pp., 103–140; See also David A. DAVIS, *Merchants and Reform in Livorno, 1814–1868*, Berkeley–Los Angeles, University of California Press, 1991, pp. 142–150.

61 MARRARO, *American Opinion on the Unification of Italy*, pp. 30–36.

*commerce is null*⁶². For American observers, this was, if nothing else, an economic reason to prefer Italian liberalization to Habsburg protectionism: freer polities tended to be more open polities.

Further south there was the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which provided the first spark of Europe's '48 at Palermo. News reached New York with remarkable speed in the steamship intelligence columns, and the penny press indulged its appetite for melodrama and constitutional rhetoric. Yet American policy never translated sympathy into recognition. Files from Naples revolve almost obsessively around indemnities, neutrality during bombardments, and the safety of U.S. ships at Palermo and Messina⁶³. The leitmotif is unmistakable: commerce first, ideology second. Contemporary scholarship coincides with this reading and even when American editors praised Sicilian constitutionalism, they did so while reminding readers that the Bourbon question remained, in substance, an affair among European powers.⁶⁴

In this landscape, Rome constituted not merely another Italian case but, to contemporaries on both shores of the Atlantic, a category apart, precisely because it condensed in a single *topos* a density of universal meanings that overflowed national and even continental frames⁶⁵. As Camillo Cavour would argue a few years later in the celebrated speech on making Rome the capital, "only Rome" possessed a history "universal," touching "the moral position of Italy in the world," and this universality resonated very powerfully in the American public opinion⁶⁶.

On one side stood the Roman republican idiom, senate, capitol, fasces, the eagle, long since carved into the lexicon of U.S. public life and even into the phys-

62 NARA, *Despatches from U.S. Consuls in Venice*, roll 2, 1st July 1850.

63 Archivio di Stato di Napoli (ASN) Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Consolati, Napoli, b.4, n.13, June 30th 1848. See also, CICCIO', *Gli Stati Uniti e il Regno delle Due Sicilie nell'Ottocento*, pp. 91–108.

64 Howard R. MARRARO, "John Rowan's Mission to the Two Sicilies (1848–1850)," *The Catholic Historical Review*, 30 (1944–45), Washington, The Catholic University of America Press, pp. 152–170.

65 Peter R. D'AGOSTINO, *Rome in America, Transnational catholic ideology from Risorgimento to Fascism*, Chapel Hill and London, University of North Carolina Press, 2004, p. 7.

66 Camillo CAVOUR, "Roma capitale," speech to the Parliament of the Kingdom of Italy, 25 March 1861, in *Discorsi parlamentari*, Roma, Tipografia della Camera, 1863; English ed. in C. W. ELIOT (ed.), *The World's Famous Orations*, vol. VII, *Italy (Camillo Benso di Cavour)*, New York, Funk & Wagnalls, 1906.

ionomy of its public architecture⁶⁷; on the other hand, the character of the pope was a sovereign who united temporal rule and spiritual headship in open contrast with the American settlement of religion and liberty. A very big deal for most Americans. As Alexis de Tocqueville had noticed during his period in America, the vitality of religion in the United States rested on its separation from government and to see papal cabinet overthrown and Pius IX in exile meant, inevitably, to touch deep chords in Protestant pulpits and party newspapers alike⁶⁸. And to make things even more complicated and entangled, there was one of the most important factors to keep in mind when analyzing any geopolitical context: demography. In the very months of the Roman Republic, hundreds of thousands of Catholic immigrants, especially Irish, were entering the American polity⁶⁹. Compared to their numerically insignificant Catholic predecessors, the Irish were not only numerous, but much more attached to the figure of the Pope, forcing parties and editors to negotiate anew the boundaries of American civic belonging⁷⁰. It is in this sense that the Roman crisis, far more than the Tuscan or Venetian, became what we would now call a transatlantic media event, saturating sermons, editorials, pamphlets, and town-hall meetings and producing a debate so sustained that subsequent scholarship, ranging from classic syntheses to more recent reinterpretations, including the present author's doctoral dissertation, has returned to it as a crucial test of American political culture in the age of 1848⁷¹. Even the diplomats of the Italian states operating in the United States at the time were aware of how heated the debate on the Roman Republic had become and often wrote about it to their governments in Italy⁷².

Placed against this matrix of symbols, faith, and domestic arithmetic, the geo-

67 See CALDER LOTH, *Palladio's influence in America*, Richmond, Virginia Department of Historic resources, Richmond, 2008 (digital ed.); CARL J. RICHARD, *The Founders and the Classics: Greece, Rome, and the American Enlightenment*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 1994.

68 ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE, *Democracy in America*, vol. I, New York, A. S. Barnes & Co., 1862 (orig. 1835–40), p. 63.

69 O'TOOLE, *The Faithful*, p. 54.

70 *Ivi*, p. 86.

71 See ANTONELLI, FIORENTINO, MONSAGRATI. *Gli Americani e la Repubblica romana* (eds.); CONIGLIO, *Risorgimento Transnazionale*, pp. 145, 172; D'AGOSTINO, *Rome in America*, pp. 19–53; MARRARO, *American Public Opinion*.

72 ASN, Ministero degli Affari Esteri, Consolati – b. 6 n. 21 - Washington, December 8th, 1849

political logic that guided Washington appears, if anything, coherent. Reports from American representatives on the Tiber but also from Italian diplomats in the US, recorded with evident satisfaction the civility of Roman public order and the breadth of American sympathy, mass meetings, subscriptions, yet none of this sufficed to tilt the recognition calculus⁷³. To extend formal recognition across the Atlantic, on an issue that impinged directly upon France and Austria and, at home, upon the still-delicate incorporation of Catholic electorates, would have meant stepping beyond that mental boundary which we mentioned before, that at the time separated hemispheric activism from European restraint. Thus, even at the climax of rhetorical solidarity, sympathy did not translate into state action: no recognition, no guarantees, no embroilment with Paris over Rome; the posture remained that of strict pragmatism.

The geo-economic logic is plain enough. American merchants and officials preferred an Italy that was politically freer because it tended to be commercially more open: Livorno's stability mattered; Genoa's predictability mattered; Venice's free-port regime mattered, until it vanished. Yet these preferences, however real, did not amount to a *casus belli*.

In 1848–49, the United States prioritized hemispheric security and continental consolidation; it recognized the French Republic swiftly because France was a major power with which the U.S. already had dense symbolic and practical ties; it withheld recognition from Italian revolutionary regimes because they were fragile, regional and embedded in European power struggles where American leverage was slight and the risks of entanglement high. What emerges, then, from the Italian quadrant is a consistent strategic posture that we might call calibrated sympathy: on the ground, consuls and chargés sometimes pushed the moral edge, mirroring the fervor of American public opinion; in Washington, presidents and secretaries held the line of neutrality, letting ships, consuls, ports, and coal do the quiet work of presence while keeping clear of Europe's wars. If the French Second Republic could be recognized without jeopardy, the Italian revolutions could not. And if American ideology inclined toward the revolutions' liberal promises, American geopolitics, hemispheric priorities, limits of European leverage, domestic sectarian arithmetic, prevailed: in 1848–49, interests trumped affinities.

73 Ivi, Consolati – b. 2 n. 9 - New York, June 18th, 1848.

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