My subject is the diplomatic factor in American history. This is a natural topic for me to select. I study and teach the subject. My selection of the topic was, however, prompted—provoked, even—by the title of article by the University of Pennsylvania historian Walter McDougall in the Newsletter of the Wachman Center of the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. The article’s title was “War and the Military in American History.” As McDougall notes, “the popular author Geoffrey Perret even titled his American history A Country Made By War (1989).” McDougall comments, “if that is so, then Americans simply must affirm their military and their wars because without them the great nation we inhabit today would not exist.”

You can see how I, as a diplomatic historian, was challenged by this! Where does such an interpretation leave diplomacy—and what I consider to be the strong “diplomatic tradition” in America’s history? Opposite George Washington, and the string of generals who later followed him as President, from Ulysses S. Grant to Dwight D. Eisenhower, there is Benjamin Franklin, America’s “first diplomat”—and his successors. Dr. Ben Franklin, “Doctor of Electricity,” was, as Walter Isaacson rightly recognizes him as, “THE WORLD’S MOST FAMOUS AMERICAN.” The WORLD’s most famous American.
What America’s military leaders sought, and generally achieved, was *victory*, short and sweet. As General Douglas MacArthur later declared, “There is no substitute for victory.” What Franklin and later American diplomats sought, and very often gained, was *agreement*. Such agreement as they achieved was, in most cases, necessarily a compromise. It had to be achieved through the use of reason, reasoned discourse, and reasonable adjustment, in order to find common ground, a shared basis for agreement. Such agreement had a greater chance of being lasting because it involved the assent, the voluntary and expressed assent, of the other side, or sides. For Franklin, as Isaacson rightly has pointed out, compromise was not only a practical but also a moral approach. “Tolerance, humility, and a respect for others required it.”

The centrality of Benjamin Franklin—unique in being the only person to sign the Declaration of Independence of 1776, the Treaty of Paris of 1783, and the Constitution of 1787—in the American National Story cannot be denied. Yet it is George Washington—the Revolution’s Commander-in-Chief—who is today, almost universally, regarded as “the Father of the Country.” Franklin’s fatherly or, perhaps better, grandfatherly role—and the role of diplomacy, and of diplomats—has been eclipsed. It has even been explicitly subordinated.

President Theodore Roosevelt had a very clear view about this—the relative importance of diplomacy and warfare, of the diplomat versus the soldier. In a speech at the National War College he stated flatly: “The diplomat is the servant, not master, of the soldier.”

This issue is a much bigger one than relations between the military and diplomats at particular times and in particular places. It is a question of which has been the dominant tradition in American history over time. Is the dominant tradition that of Franklin, and America’s negotiators at home and abroad? Or is it that of George Washington and other soldiers who have become President of the United States owing to their part in war?

After all, during most of the years of its history the United States has been at peace. America’s wars have generally been episodic, lasting for relatively short periods. The long involvements in Vietnam and Afghanistan have been exceptional in this respect. However, what might be called the “overhang”—the anticipatory as well as the after-the-fact shadows, so to speak—of America’s wars has “covered” much longer periods than the years of actual fighting. We even define *non*-war periods in terms of the wars that came before or after them. The “antebellum” South. “Postwar” reconstruction. The “interwar” period. And, of
course, the “Cold War.” Are we still in the “post-Cold War” now? Or is that phase finally over? Are we still fighting a “global war on terror,” and does that describe our present situation? If not, how do we characterize the period we are in?

Attempts by some of America’s leaders, and even scholars, to give non-warlike and non-militaristic-sounding names to historical periods have generally failed, or at least have been modest successes. I think of Richard Nixon’s, and his adviser Henry Kissinger’s, attempt to establish the term, “Era of Negotiation,” in contrast with the “Era of Confrontation” (i.e., the Cold War), as the name of a new age, in which there would be a “new structure of peace.”

There is relatively little in the nomenclature of American history to suggest that Diplomacy has been a factor, comparable to that of War, in making American history, or even in defining it.

I realized after I selected the topic for my lecture, “The Diplomatic Factor in American History,” how very apt this wording, particularly the choice of the word “factor,” is. A “factor” is that which or one who acts, or does things, drives things. The word “factor,” however, can also refer to a person who acts on behalf of or transacts business for another—an agent, a broker. Merely an agent, some might say. That, some would say, is almost a definition of a diplomat, and a description of diplomacy itself. Brokerage is an intermediate service. A Diplomatic Service. The very name—the Foreign Service of the United States—implies a lesser, subordinate role for it.

One often finds in descriptions of the roles that diplomats play the observation that so and so—an individual diplomat—was “instrumental” in bringing something about. It is hard for an observer to know what that actually means, what part the diplomat really played. For example, the American diplomat Philip Habib was said to have been “instrumental” in bringing about the bombing halt that facilitated the agreement that enabled the United States to leave Vietnam. In order to assess how influential a diplomat’s role really was, one needs to do research on the whole process in which someone like Habib (a singular personality, with rare gifts) was involved. That is, to do diplomatic history, a careful and exacting discipline.

Not all diplomatic involvements are significant historically. Most are not. One cannot always know if the results even of a solemn diplomatic agreement—its formal provisions, its immediate reception, and its implementation—will last, or be
meaningful in the long run. That is why it is important to try to imagine—prospectively if a statesman, and retrospectively as well as prospectively if a historian—the consequences of a diplomatic action or negotiated outcome. The concept of “consequences” includes side-effects as well as direct effects, as these unfold over a longer period of time. Consequences may be unintended as well as intended, and they may be undesirable as well as desirable.

I was very interested to note that at the Harvard Kennedy School recently, the former State Department official Nicholas Burns used this concept in introducing Ambassador Thomas Pickering to speak. Choosing his words carefully, Burns said that Pickering is in his view “the most consequential” American diplomat of our time. This no doubt is partly owing to Thomas Pickering’s having held so many positions—more ambassadorships than anyone in U.S. diplomatic history in fact. It may also be in part because of the highly public role that Ambassador Pickering played when serving as U.S. Permanent Representative on the United Nations Security Council during the Gulf Crisis of 1990-1991. His was indeed a diplomatic tour de force. His very visibility—his individuality, though he was backed by strong political, military, and economic action—made his efforts stand out as a factor.

Even a less obvious and merely “instrumental” role for a diplomat can be influential, sometimes in critical ways. Ambassador Monteagle Stearns, a diplomat’s diplomat, in his book Talking to Strangers: Improving American Diplomacy at Home and Abroad (1996), opened his work by stating bluntly: “Diplomacy is both servant to and master of foreign policy: servant because the diplomat’s role is to carry out the instructions of political policymakers, master because what the diplomat cannot accomplish, policymakers will usually have to do without” (emphasis added).

That is to say, diplomats may be and often are necessary instruments of policy. As “factors” in history, they might not be sufficient causes, or even partially-sufficient causes, and strong enough to make things happen; but they are very often the factors that enable things to happen—that make possible what otherwise would be impossible.

It is to be remembered that diplomacy is conducted primarily outside the United States, beyond the U.S. government’s jurisdiction, in a world of “sovereign and equal states” where often it is only diplomatic action that can achieve anything at all, if the use of military force is impossible or is believed likely to prove unavailing, or simply to be wrong.
I would emphasize that the conduct of diplomacy is not restricted to diplomatic agents—to professional diplomats, including resident ambassadors and special emissaries, often with particular technical competences—who can be diplomatic factors. It can be the principals—the policymakers themselves—who engage in international diplomacy. And, increasingly, they do.


Were the outcomes of these meetings, including the agreements reached, important, historically significant? Here again it is necessary to make a distinction between results achieved by diplomacy and the consequences of diplomatic actions and events. Often the longer-term effects of diplomatic involvement and agreement are unforeseen, however (optimistically or perhaps pessimistically) they may be imagined in advance.

The “diplomatic” wisdom of Benjamin Franklin is highly pertinent here. Franklin was, as I have noted, an advocate and practitioner of compromise, not as an end itself but as a method of achieving consensus—that is, agreement that can endure. Franklin’s sagacity in this respect is perhaps best known in the context of domestic politics. When a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, he personally favored a committee, rather than a single executive, for the U.S. presidency. He also was for a unicameral legislature, with proportional representation. Yet he decisively influenced acceptance of the “great compromise”—with two houses—that formed the Constitution of the United States, which exists to the present day.

This happened partly because Franklin took a long view, which enabled him to imagine himself, and others too, seeing things differently in time. His words to the Convention’s president, George Washington, and his colleagues in the Convention are worth quoting:

“I confess that I do not entirely approve of this Constitution at present, but, Sir, I am not sure that I shall never approve it: For having lived long, I have experienced
many Instances of being oblig’d, by better Information or fuller Consideration, to change Opinions even on important Subjects.”

Franklin went on to say that he doubted “whether any other Convention we can obtain may be able to make a better Constitution: For when you assemble a Number of Men to have the Advantage of their joint Wisdom, you inevitably assemble with those Men all their Prejudices, their Passions, their Errors of Opinion, their local Interests, and their selfish Views. From such an Assembly can a perfect Production be expected? It therefore astonishes me, Sir, to find this System approaching so near to Perfection as it does . . . . Thus I consent, Sir, to this Constitution because I expect no better, and because I am not sure that it is not the best.”

The Franklinian principle of compromise, and related practice of taking the long view, is deeply embedded in American political and diplomatic culture. Thus you later have Henry Clay from Kentucky, leader of the “War Hawks” in Congress, participating alongside John Quincy Adams and Albert Gallatin in Ghent in 1814 in negotiating the treaty with Great Britain that resolved none of the specific issues that brought on the War of 1812 but that laid the basis for what has turned out to be lasting peace between the two English-speaking countries.

Back in the United States, after a period of serving as Secretary of State under President Adams, Clay became the very embodiment of “compromise” in American politics. In February 1833, during the Nullification crisis over the tariff, he rose in the Senate and presented his plan that was founded, he said, on “that great principle of compromise and concession which lies at the bottom of our institutions.” It was true “that my friends do not get all they could wish for; and the gentlemen of the other side do not obtain all they might desire; but both will gain all that in my humble opinion is proper to be given in the present condition of the country.”

The American domestic tradition of compromise has carried over into international diplomacy. Listen to President Franklin Roosevelt speaking before Congress on March 1, 1945, shortly after his return from Yalta. He was reporting on what had been decided there. He explained that some decisions made with the Russians and the British were “going to be made jointly” and therefore would “often be the result of give-and-take compromise. The United States will not always have its way a hundred percent—nor will Russia nor Great Britain. We shall not always have ideal answers—solutions to complicated international problems, even though we are determined continuously to strive toward that ideal.
But I am sure that under the agreements reached at Yalta, there will be a more stable political Europe than ever before.”

President Roosevelt expected the United States Congress to accept what he had brought home. His particular worry was the Senate which soon would be called on to give its advice and consent to a treaty to set up a new “International Security Organization.” International and domestic politics came together. “World peace is not a party question,” he said. “I think that Republicans want peace just as much as Democrats.” This is “our chance” to avoid a repetition of war. “The Conference in the Crimea was a turning point—I hope in our history and therefore in the history of the world,” he declared. The Conference “was a successful effort by the three leading Nations to find a common ground for peace. It ought to spell the end of the system of unilateral action, the exclusive alliances, the spheres of influence, the balances of power, and all the other expedients that have been tried for centuries—and have always failed. We propose to substitute for all these, a universal organization in which all peace-loving Nations will finally have a chance to join.” The United Nations.

The Crimea Conference—Yalta—was presented by President Roosevelt as a “success.” Carefully analyzed from a negotiating perspective, as the political scientist Diane Shaver Clemens has done in her book Yalta, I would agree that it was successful. The immediate and short-term results of the Conference, however, were highly controversial. The most criticized provisions were those relating to Poland, as Roosevelt had anticipated, and also those, for the time being still secret, relating to China. In some circles, Yalta quickly became a by-word for “surrender,” for “appeasement.” And indeed, it could be argued, and was argued, that the United States had acknowledged Russian security interests in Eastern Europe and had also acquiesced in the subjection of the peoples the Eastern European countries to decades of totalitarian oppression, to “slavery.”

Yalta was not, however, a formal peace treaty. It was not yet a definitive settlement. Moreover, the Declaration of Liberated Europe agreed upon at Yalta—by Stalin as well as by Roosevelt and Churchill—committed all three in principle, the Soviet Union as well as the Western powers, to processes that would enable the liberated peoples of Europe “to create democratic institutions of their own choice.”

The Declaration was essentially the same in content as the Helsinki Final Act of 1975, on the basis of which Helsinki “watch” groups were formed to monitor adherence of all the signatories, including the U.S.S.R. The Helsinki documents were signed for the United States by Gerald R. Ford, an unexpected
President, who endured much conservative criticism for doing so. Contrary to the expectation of the Soviet leadership then, the Helsinki Accords gradually became, as the Cold War historian John Lewis Gaddis has pointed out, “a manifesto of the dissident and liberal movement.” If the consequences of Yalta historically were more negative than expected, the consequences of Helsinki historically were more positive than expected.

Again, the consequences of diplomacy cannot always be derived from the results of diplomatic agreement—or, for that matter, from diplomatic disagreement. A major example of the latter phenomenon in more recent diplomatic history was the encounter between President Ronald Reagan and the Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, in Reykjavik, Iceland, in October 1986. “The event was not even supposed to be called a summit; this was to be a ‘meeting,’” Secretary of State George Shultz, who accompanied the President, has explained. “But in the eyes of the world, Reykjavik would become the epitome of the very word ‘summit.’”

At the time, and as was evident from the angry and downcast faces of the Americans and Russians who were there, the Reykjavik meeting was a “failure.” This was mainly because the American side—President Reagan—refused to agree to the restrictions that the Russian side demanded to be placed, on the basis of the 1972 Anti-ballistic Missile Treaty, on development of the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI). “We won’t be seeing each other again,” Gorbachev then was quoted as saying. The “reality of the actual achievements” of Reykjavik, as Shultz has admitted, “never overcame the perception conveyed by the scene of Reagan and Gorbachev parting at Hofdi House and my own depressed appearance.”

Nonetheless, consequences—truly historic ones—flowed from the Reykjavik Summit. The leaders of the two superpowers discussed, seriously, reducing their strategic weapons by half, and even eventually doing away with nuclear weapons altogether. One conceptual “lesson” that Secretary Shultz drew from the Reykjavik experience was that there is “significant value in thinking big.” In the “leader-driven atmosphere” of the isolated meeting in Iceland, he further noted, it was possible to break out of the “bureaucratic stalemate” on a variety of specific, technical issues.

The American side had not known in particular how to approach the Soviet leadership regarding SDI. “There was a lesson here: we should not be afraid to engage out of fear of being outnegotiated,” Shultz has reflected. The nuclear discussion with the Russians, and the expressed willingness of the Soviet side to
include “human rights” on the regular agenda, caused Shultz to think that “we had in fact arrived at an enormous turning point.” Although the nuclear age was a permanent reality and could not be undone, he acknowledged, we could now “at least glimpse a world with far diminished danger from possible nuclear devastation. A better world was possible.”

On the Soviet side, in the mind of Mikhail Gorbachev, there was a similar realization that things fundamentally had changed, despite what he saw as the American effort to “dominate” the USSR through the Strategic Defense Initiative. That is, to achieve a one-sided result, a victory. “I was sincere when I told the President that our meeting could not produce one winner: we would both either win or lose,” Gorbachev recalled. “And still Reykjavik marked a turning-point in world history. It tangibly demonstrated that the world situation could be improved.” In retrospect, Gorbachev saw his meeting with Reagan at Reykjavik as the beginning of the end of the Cold War. It “raised to a new level the Soviet-American dialogue, as indeed it did the whole East-West dialogue.”

These events of high-level, big-issue, wide-scale diplomacy—Yalta, Helsinki, and Reykjavik—were truly consequential. They profoundly influenced the shape of world history as well as of American history.

Is there an overall “lesson” that can be learned from this brief review and analysis of the diplomatic factor—and of some individual diplomat-factors—in American history, in its national and international context?

It would be too simple to say, in placing, as I have done, the factor of diplomacy and diplomats on the same plane as war and the military: “There never was a Good War or a Bad Peace.” Yet this maxim of Ben Franklin’s contains much wisdom. It encapsulates an awareness of the flow of History, and its progress into the Future. As Franklin commented in a letter that he sent from Paris in 1783, when the Treaty of Peace was being concluded with Britain, to his friend Joseph Banks, president of the Royal Society, in London: “I join with you most cordially in rejoicing at the return of Peace.” Of peace, and the best way of achieving it, Franklin concluded: “I hope it will be lasting, and that Mankind will at length, as they call themselves reasonable Creatures, have Reason and Sense enough to settle our Differences without cutting Throats, for, in my opinion, there never was a good War, or a bad Peace.”

Peace, as distinct from the end of War, can only be achieved through Diplomacy.