

The Powerless Diplomacy of the Abbé Correia da Serra

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José Francisco Correia da Serra (1751-1823) was a true representative of the Portuguese Enlightenment, a man of varied scientific interests and strong liberal ideas. As Portugal's Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States from 1816 to 1820, his protests against the use of American ports by privateers preying on Portuguese commerce and shipping interests went unheeded in Washington despite his connections to the political and intellectual circles in the U.S. capital at the time. It is my contention in this paper that they proved ineffective against the underlying principles of the Monroe Doctrine, not yet *de facto* declared, but which were to define U.S. foreign policy towards Latin America in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. They are also a reflection of how national interest often overrides questions of legal justice in international relations. Although Correia da Serra, or simply the "Abbé", was best known as a botanist in intellectual circles in Europe, he was also interested in geology, natural philosophy, history, and politics, as his writings attest. Educated in Italy, where his family had taken up residence while he was still a young man, he returned to Portugal in 1777, two years after having received his holy orders.¹ A member of many European scientific societies, he was, together with the second Duke of Lafões (1719-1806), the driving force behind the founding of the Lisbon Academy of Sciences, of which he was Secretary, before being forced to leave Portugal in 1795 for reasons

¹ José Francisco Correia da Serra was born in Serpa, Portugal. At the age of six he moved to Italy with his parents, Luis Dias Correia, who was a doctor, and Francisca Luisa de Serra. It is interesting to note that Correia da Serra, who died aged seventy two, lived in Portugal twenty-six years only.

which remain unclear to this day. It is thought, though, that these may have been related to his political views and his possible connections with free-masonry.² What we know is that he embarked for England in a rather hasty manner, under a different family name (“Porto”), leaving behind all his books and private papers. Nevertheless, while in England, he was appointed Counselor of the Portuguese Legation, a post which he held for a short period of time. Following his dismissal from it in 1802, Correia da Serra went on to Paris, where he stayed until his departure to the United States. Correia da Serra belongs to that group of Portuguese intellectuals known as “*estrangeirados*”, a term with a somewhat negative connotation, and which refers to those Portuguese intellectuals that were forced to live abroad during the late 1700s on account of their political and scientific views, and whose allegiance to Portugal was then put into question. Correia da Serra’s exile both in London and Paris allowed him to establish a scientific reputation among European scholars of the time.³ His religious

² It has been suggested that he may have been a member of a free-masonry lodge set up in Portugal in 1794, named “*Virtute I*”, together with the Duque de Lafões, David Humphreys, the American minister in Portugal at the time, Thomas Hickling, the American vice-consul in the Azores, as well as the Abbé himself. Cf. Michael Teague, *Abade José Correia da Serra — Documentos do seu Arquivo*, trad. Manuela Rocha (Lisboa: Fundação Luso-Americana para o Desenvolvimento, 1977), 63. This may have come to the attention of Diogo Inácio de Pina Manique, the all-powerful Police Superintendent of the Court and Realm.

³ For this essay, I have relied extensively on two major sources of primary materials: the correspondence exchanged between Correia da Serra and Portuguese and American government officials while he held his diplomatic post in Washington, as well as his personal letters to prominent Americans, compiled by Léon Bourdon in his book, *José Corrêa da Serra — Ambassadeur du Royaume-Uni de Portugal et Brésil a Washington, 1816-1820*, Paris: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1975; and also the compilation of documents made by Richard Beale Davis in his book *The Abbé Corrêa in America, 1812-1820 — The Contributions of the Diplomat and Natural Philosopher to the Foundations of Our National Life*, with a Preface by Gordon S. Brown and an afterword by Léon Bourdon, Providence, Rhode Island: Gávea-Brown, 1993 [1955]. For a recent scientific biography of Correia da Serra, see Ana Simões, Maria Paula Diogo e Ana Carneiro, *Cidadão do Mundo — Uma Biografia Científica do Abade Correia Serra*. Porto: Porto Editora, 2006.

feelings were probably never particularly strong (he celebrated very few masses during his life time) and he may have used the Church to protect himself from reactionary and anti-intellectual forces in Portuguese society, as he seems to have been much more inclined to the world of science than to that of God.

Correia da Serra's association with European scholarly circles does not seem to have helped him much in dealing with political pressure, as he had to flee from Portugal a second time in 1811. On this occasion, he chose the United States of America, no doubt because he was an admirer of the liberal ideas associated with the founding of the American republic. Carrying with him letters of introduction from well-known European and American intellectuals, some of whom he had met during his Parisian exile, such as Joel Barlow, David Warden, Alexander von Humboldt and the Marquis of Lafayette, he arrived in Norfolk, Virginia, on February 21, 1812. From there he went on to Washington, where, using Barlow's letter of introduction, he met President James Madison, as well as Albert Gallatin, his Secretary of the Treasury. With the help of Gallatin he wrote a letter introducing himself to former President Thomas Jefferson, with whom he was to develop a close relationship. Correia da Serra's first visit to Monticello took place in the summer of 1813, and he immediately caused a strong impression on the former American President. In a letter written to Caspar Wistar, physician and anatomist, as well as professor at the University of Pennsylvania, dated August 17, 1813, Jefferson had this to say about Correia da Serra: "I found him what you had described in every respect; certainly the greatest collection, and best digest of science in books, men, and things that I have ever met with; and with these the most amiable and engaging character".⁴ During his American sojourn, Correia da Serra was a frequent visitor to Monticello as he clearly shared with Jefferson political and scientific interests. They are credited, for instance, with having sketched out a plan whereby the United States and Portugal would divide the New World into two areas of influence, one under the control of the

⁴ http://wiki.monticello.org/mediawiki/index.php/Jos%C3%A9_Correia_da_Serra (accessed April 28, 2010).

U.S. and the other of Portugal, a reborn nation, now with its capital in Rio de Janeiro.⁵ Jefferson's "American System", as the project was called, involved the separation of the Americas from European influence. In a letter sent to President Madison, dated 10 July 1816, for instance, the Abbé described the plan in these terms: "Our nations are now in fact both American powers, and will always be the two paramount ones, each in his part of the new continent" (Serra *apud* Davis 202). But John Quincy Adams, who headed the State Department in the administration of Monroe at the time, was not convinced, as this would certainly weaken America's ambitions in the New World. It is rather doubtful (and unrealistic) to think that this grand idea of an American System to be established between Portugal and the United States, with its centers of power in Rio and Washington, respectively, could ever be implemented, as it did not reflect the geopolitical realities of the time. In scope, this plan would have almost amounted to a new Tordesilhas Treaty.

Correia da Serra set up residence in Philadelphia, the country's most important cultural and political centre at the time, awaiting his (eventual) nomination as Portugal's diplomatic representative to the United States. There, he was actively involved in the American Philosophical Society and the American Academy of Natural Sciences, under whose auspices he published a number of articles.⁶ He was chosen to represent the United Kingdom of Portugal, Brazil and the Algarves in 1816, during the administration of James Madison, a post which he held until 1820.⁷ Appointed by

⁵ At the time of the French Invasions, the Portuguese Crown had been forced to move to Brazil in 1807 so as to secure the political independence of the country. This meant, in effect, that between 1815 and 1821 Portugal and Brazil formed a United Kingdom, a Luso-Brazilian empire.

⁶ In this context, two are especially relevant: "General Considerations Upon the Past and Future State of Europe", published in *American Review of History and Politics*, 4 (1812), 354-6; and, "Observations and Conjectures on the formation and nature of the soil of Kentucky", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, Philadelphia, 1811. While in the U.S., Correia da Serra visited the states of Virginia, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, North and South Carolina.

⁷ Cipriano Ribeiro Freire (1749-1824) was Portugal's first diplomatic representative in the young republic, first in Philadelphia and then in Washington.

King D. João VI at the suggestion of the Conde da Barca, António de Araújo e Azevedo (1754-1817), Minister of War and Foreign Affairs, also a man of varied learned pursuits, Correia da Serra faced a number of difficulties in trying to defend Portuguese interests in the American capital due to the activities associated with privateering and the independence movements in South America, most notably Brazil. Taking advantage of the revolutionary spirit in that part of the globe, Americans with commercial activities in that part of the continent were supporting the anti-colonial movements that had been emerging there.

The first diplomatic issue Correia da Serra had to deal with involved the activity of privateers, vessels which were being fitted out with American crews in American ports to prey on Portuguese and Spanish commerce. Privateering, the practice of using private armed vessels commissioned by governments to attack warships and seize or plunder merchant ships was common in times of war or conflict.⁸ The American privateers were operating mostly from the port of Baltimore, often with the complacency of authorities, even though it was an illegal activity. Correia da Serra protested against the activity to James Madison's Secretary of State, James Monroe, arguing that their activity represented a violation of international law.

Lasting an entire decade, between 1815 and 1825, the activity of these privateers proved difficult for American government officials to stem. In an attempt to control their actions, and perhaps to give foreign nations an indication that it disapproved of it, Congress approved in 1817 "An Act more effectually to preserve the neutral relations of the United States", better known as the "Neutrality Act", prohibiting "cruising under commission of any colony, district, or people" (Davis 57).⁹ It is not clear whether the Abbé had any input into the discussion and adoption of this

⁸ During the War of 1812, commissions of letters of marque and reprisal were issued by the Secretary of State at the time, James Monroe, to private armed vessels, allowing them to cruise against enemies of the U.S.

⁹ It is interesting to note that the American government had faced similar difficulties during the War of 1812. It filed its own complaints against the British government, whose navy had impressed American sailors and used private vessels in its military activities in a similar way against the U.S.

legislation through his political contacts in Washington. However, in his book *The Abbé Corrêa in America, 1812-1820* (1993 [1955]), Richard Beale Davis maintains that Correia da Serra played a determining part in its definition due to his close association with John Quincy Adams (1767-1848), who was Secretary of State at the time (56).

In early 1817, already in charge of his post, Correia da Serra faced the major challenge of his diplomatic career. In March of that year a republic had been proclaimed in Pernambuco, Recife, which aimed to create an independent state in Brazil, modeled on the American republic. It was a regional separatist movement comprised of large landowners and slaveholders who opposed the central government in Rio. Envoys were sent abroad to seek international recognition for this separatist revolt, and possibly, it was believed, to buy weapons and ammunition. On May 15 of that year, António Gonçalves da Cruz arrived in Washington to get U.S. support for the rebel state. In order to stem the rebellion, Correia da Serra was told by Portuguese officials to inform the American government that both the coast of Pernambuco as well as its port were henceforth blocked to all shipping.

The Abbé worked hard in Washington to prevent the recognition of this republic by the U.S. government and to foil the plan of its leaders to gather support for their cause in American territory. He sent two notes to the State Department (May 13 and May 20, 1817), addressed to Acting Secretary Richard Rush on the issue. In the first of these Correia da Serra expressed his fear that the insurgents might receive support from “the greedy and immoral part of your commercial citizens, particularly in Baltimore and New York [...]”, opinionating that the recent law passed by Congress in its last session might not be sufficient to stop the unlawful activity of these citizens due to “the lukewarm acts of some of the U.S. officers in the seaports [...]” (Serra *apud* Bourdon 269). In the second of these diplomatic notes, Correia da Serra uses a stronger language to describe the rebellion, which he characterizes as follows:

These conspirators, without being capable of alledging (*sic*) in their publications any particular griefs (*sic*), being even obliged by force of truth to praise the Sovereign against whose authority they revolt, have corrupted the garrison of the city and put themselves in the exercise of sovereignty, compelling

the unarmed population (amongst whom thousands I am sure remain in their hearts attached to their Sovereign) to the necessity of silently submitting to these self-created masters as every inhabitant of Algiers is forced by the soldier to submit to a new dey (*sic*). (Serra *apud* Bourdon 277)

Though admitting that he possessed little information, the Abbé still felt that “greater perfidies” were sure to emerge in the future, asking, namely, what would have happened if Shay’s rebellion had succeeded. Rush’s replies to both of these notes were polite, but short. Essentially, he informed Correia da Serra that he had forwarded this information to the President. There is evidence to suggest that both President Monroe and his Secretary were unsympathetic to Correia da Serra’s diplomatic plight. In one of his letters to Madison (May 16, 1817), Monroe stated his views on the Abbé in very clear terms: “He partakes strongly of the anti-revolutionary feeling on the subject, more than is strictly consistent with his liberal and philanthropical character” (Monroe *apud* Bourdon 270).

America’s more radical press welcomed the emergence of the liberation movements in Central and South America, and the Pernambuco Rebellion was no exception. Newspapers such as the *Georgetown Messenger*, the *National Intelligencer*, or even the *Boston Patriot*, all included in their pages words of support for the rebels and their causes, hoping that they would succeed in setting up democratic governments in the newly-freed territories. One of these papers, the *National Intelligencer*, even described the political organization of the new republic of Pernambuco in one of its issues, with its provisional government made up of a council board and a five-member executive, its flag and constitution, which was to be drawn up soon, as well as details on its recently-formed regular army of 15,000 men and militia of 40,000 men. Naturally, in these articles Europe’s colonial powers are invariably presented as despotic and tyrannical, without any concerns for the needs and aspirations of the settlers of their colonial possessions. Their colorful political language, rhetorical for the most part, was designed to appeal to the sentiment of American readers, as we can gather from the tone of these words by the editor of the *National Intelligencer*: “Thus the New World is destined by all bounteous Providence as an asylum for the persecuted of all nations and the residence of that

noblest of all productions, a free and independent race of men” (qtd. in Bourdon 273).

The articles in the American press on the subject of the Pernambuco Rebellion complicated matters for Correia da Serra, who, in order to defend the Portuguese position, was forced to publish an official notification in the *National Intelligencer* (May 22, 1817) informing the general public that the port of Pernambuco and its coast were blockaded by war ships, thus advising American ships not to sail there. This almost caused him a serious diplomatic incident: Correia da Serra did not possess official confirmation of this from the government in Rio and had failed to notify the American government first. Asked by Rush to explain what the current situation in Pernambuco was, the Abbé struggled to find a justification for his act. The excuse he gave to Rush, who remained unconvinced, was that he in fact had not received the information officially, but that he could guarantee the American government that was the case, assuming personal responsibility for revealing it publically. The truth is that on this matter Correia da Serra could not rely on his social and political connections to solve his diplomatic imbroglio. John Adams, one of the most senior of American public men, who on numerous occasions had expressed his admiration for the Abbé, wrote in one of his letters to Jefferson (May 26, 1817) that he had received the “Pernambuco ambassador” and that he thoroughly sympathized with his cause, adding: “As Bonaparte says, the Age of Reason is not ended, nothing can totally extinguish or eclipse the light which has been shed abroad by the press” (qtd. in Bourdon 285). What chances did Correia da Serra have of advancing the interests of his government if one of the patriarchs of the American political nation was siding with the rebels? Very few, indeed.

America’s radical press criticized the activity of Portuguese and Spanish diplomats for using the American press to defend the positions of their governments by presenting a negative image of the rebels and their causes. The editor of the *Aurora*, for instance, writes in one issue that “[...] it is a most embarrassing situation to see the presses of the country every where engaged in the palliation or vindication of Spain, or, which is worse, in corrupt array against a people struggling against the most degrading despotism [...]” (qtd. in Bourdon 343). Correia da Serra used the *National Intelligencer* to put forth the position of Portugal, less hostile than the more radical *Aurora*, whose editor says in one of his pieces that he is

familiar with “the Lusitanian abbe’s triks” (qtd. in Bourdon 343).¹⁰

The *Aurora* was deeply hostile to the Portuguese position on its pages, arguing that the Portuguese minister should be expelled for overstepping his functions. In its January 15, 1818 edition, it printed a translation of the letter which Correia da Serra had sent to James Monroe, then U.S. Secretary of State, two years before, complaining about the activity of privateers, mostly against Spanish ships, as the Portuguese ships had not been targeted yet. By engaging in a kind of preemptive diplomacy, Correia da Serra clearly felt that this was bound to happen sooner or later. In that letter, Correia da Serra pointed out the existence of insufficiencies in American law to deal with the problem, which, in his view, was contrary to the law of nations, writing that “only the promulgation of laws to the effect can justify this nation to the civilized world” (Serra *apud* Bourdon 348). The terms of the letter were particularly strong, namely when Correia da Serra suggests that the American Congress should enact effective legislation against the privateers, reminding Monroe that during the War of 1812 the Portuguese king had declared its neutrality even though its oldest ally was involved. The *Aurora* regarded all of this as a “gross insolence”, on the part of Correia da Serra, i.e. this “attempt to dictate new laws, often disparaging those laws against which he has avowedly no reason to complain” (qtd. in Bourdon 344).

In its January 18, 1818 edition, the *Aurora* continued to attack the Abbé, unquestionably a man of great scientific qualities and privileged access to “political society”, in their words, accusing him of acting in a dual function, that of priest and politician. For the editor of the *Aurora* it was inconceivable that a man of liberal ideas, a philosopher as well as a scientist, should oppose the emancipation of the peoples of South America. In his view, Correia da Serra was the agent of a despotic system, maybe even a spy, clearly a defender of the feudal institutions of Europe, none of which existed in America. In America there are no lords or barons and citizens enjoy freedom (“the unfortunate blacks excepted”), according to the editor of the *Aurora*. It is true that the radical press had always been quick in

¹⁰ He wrote this in the December 13, 1817 issue, where he criticizes the Abbé and a certain Mr. Walsh, also well known for his anti-republican writings.

condemning monarchical Europe for its presence in the New World, but neither *The Baltimore Patriot* nor *The Democratic Press*, two other radical papers, were as critical of the Abbé. In fact, the editor of *The Democratic Press* came out in defense of Correia da Serra saying that there were inaccuracies in the translation of the Abbé's letter to Monroe.

Despite the positive coverage the Pernambuco rebellion received in the more radical American press, the movement failed, subdued by the Portuguese navy forces. In effect, the blockade lasted a mere thirty days, and on June 20, the Portuguese navy retook control of the town. The rebellion itself had lasted from March 7, 1817 to July 1, 1817. The affair proved to be the most challenging for Correia da Serra as a diplomat and might have had very serious consequences for the Abbé had the American government decided to push the matter further. He came close to being declared a *persona non grata* over his conduct in the Pernambuco affair.

In the meantime, privateering continued, with the American government clearly unable to put a stop to it. In yet another attempt to influence public opinion, the Abbé made his views on the activity of the privateers known in an anonymous one-hundred page pamphlet entitled *An Appeal to the Government and Congress of the United States against the depredations committed by American privateers on the commerce of nations at peace with us*. The pamphlet appeared in the press in early December, 1819, as American courts persisted in handing down lenient sentences on privateering captains, sometimes even overstepping earlier court decisions. Although anonymous, it was clearly written by him, as confirmed in a letter Correia da Serra sent to Vilanova Portugal, the Portuguese Minister for Foreign Affairs, in which he refers to a "small book that I am secretly writing [...]" (Serra *apud* Davis 357).¹¹ In it, Correia da Serra listed the grievances of his government against the Baltimore and New York privateers, insisting that this was a clear violation of international law, unacceptable between friendly nations. To strengthen his case, Correia da Serra included excerpts of news on the activity of the privateers, which had been published in American papers. Correia da Serra hoped this document would persuade

¹¹ Correia da Serra signed the document as "an American Citizen"; it was printed for the Booksellers, New York, 1819.

the American government to act more forcefully. By this time, it is calculated that approximately thirty privateers had succeeded in capturing one hundred Portuguese merchant vessels. The dissemination of this pamphlet may have been a major mistake. It is believed that this displeased President Monroe, who, together with his Secretary of State, John Quincy Adams, entirely agreed on what should constitute the foreign policy of the U.S. vis-à-vis European colonial powers with interests on the American continent. Correia da Serra had clearly overstepped the boundaries of his diplomatic post, confusing his two positions, that of diplomat and of philosopher. Léon Bourdon argues, on the other hand, that the *Appeal* might have led James Monroe to decide to include in his Message to Congress a reference to the subject, advocating stronger legal dispositions against the activity of privateers (360).

Without even realizing it, the Abbé Correia had been on a collision path with what became one of the underlying principles of American foreign policy in the years and decades that followed. The Monroe Doctrine, first clearly expounded in the 1820s, embodied the idea that it was not only the mission of the United States, but also its “manifest destiny”, to assume a prominent role in the affairs of the New World. Delivered to Congress by President James Monroe in his Annual Message, on December 2, 1823, it aimed to protect American republics from further European colonization and to establish for the United States an area of political influence on that side of the Atlantic. In it, President Monroe had stated:

We owe it, therefore, to candor and to the amicable relations existing between the United States and those Powers [European Powers], to declare, that we should consider any attempt on their part to extend their system to any portion of this hemisphere, as dangerous to our peace and safety.¹²

The doctrine was a response of the U.S. government to Metternich’s reactionary Holy Alliance, afraid that this Alliance would succeed in bringing Spain’s rebellious colonies back into its domination. It was thus

¹² *Annals of Congress*, Senate, 18th Congress, 1st Session, p. 22. <http://memory.loc.gov/cgi-bin/ampage?collId=llac&fileName=041/llac041.db&recNum=7> (accessed March 30, 2010).

designed to exclude European powers from the New World at a time when they were attempting to reassert control over their New World possessions. By supporting the desire of these colonies to liberate themselves from their colonial masters, the United States was in effect preventing the latter from a more direct involvement in the affairs of the New World, assuming the role of guardian (“protector”) of the Americas. Moreover, it also meant that the original American project of revolution could be applied to the whole continent, with the United States guiding and fostering the birth of new nations there. As American power grew, U.S. Presidents used the doctrine not only to justify the commercial and territorial expansion of the country, but also as an important element of its foreign affairs policy. Although it bears the name of James Monroe, the doctrine had been formulated to a large extent by John Quincy Adams, his Secretary of State.

The notion of “manifest destiny” is one that cannot be dissociated from the Monroe Doctrine, precisely because one of its main tenets is the idea that Providence had charged the United States with the mission of saving and/or regenerating other nations. It is a notion that permeates the whole history of the United States and it can be traced back to the ideas the Puritan settlers brought with them to the New World, namely, this grand design to set up in that part of the world communities that should be models of spiritual and political organisation for other nations to follow.¹³ As the Puritans identified themselves with biblical models to build a special place, the creation of this model nation for the world became part of what was deemed America’s exceptional nature, contributing to the creation of a mythical vision of America. This rather nationalistic vision of the country’s special destiny implied, in a certain way, that the lessons of history, in particular European history, did not apply to America, that the foundation of the country had corresponded to a “sacred-secular *project*” of major historical importance (Stephanson 28). Deborah L. Madsen’s words, in her

¹³ The term “manifest destiny” itself, which only surfaced a few decades later, is attributed to John O’Sullivan, co-founder and editor of the *Democratic Review*. O’Sullivan was a supporter of the Jacksonian movement and used the term regularly in his editorials. For further details, see Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People* (London: Orion Books, Ltd., 1998), 379 ff.

book *American Exceptionalism* (1998), are particularly illuminating in this respect:

The history of America is a history of redemption – of individuals as well as of the nation itself – and this commitment to America as an exceptional nation is reflected in the way the lives of public leaders have been written as continuing the spiritual biography of America, as the nation and its people works towards the salvation of all humankind. (14)

In the chapters of Henry Adams's, grandchild of John Quincy Adams, multi-volume *History of the United States during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison* (1889-1891), we can find this historian's views of what was at stake geopolitically for the United States in the earlier part of the nineteenth century. The crumbling of the Spanish empire in the Americas had made room for the United States and Britain to get a hold of some of its territories, as Adams writes in the volumes of his *History* covering the administrations of James Madison: "England and the United States, like two vultures, hovered over the expiring empire, snatching at the morsels they most coveted [...]" (213). For him, the ensuing legislation approved by Congress in effect meant that "after October 1803, every President, past or to come, had the right to march the army or send the navy of the United States at any time to occupy not only West Florida, but also Texas and Oregon, as far North as the North Pole itself, since they claimed it all, except the Russian possessions, as part of the Louisiana purchase, with more reason than they claimed West Florida" (224). The truth is that the conclusion of the war of 1812 accelerated the feeling of nationality among Americans, since before that time it was still unclear in the minds of many whether the United States would survive as a single political unit. This whole process represented a "triumph of human progress" the world had never seen, quite possibly "the difference between Europe and America", Adams asserts (1333).

Naturally, two nations which were particularly targeted by the rising political and economic influence of the United States in the New World were precisely Catholic Spain and Portugal, whose extensive colonial possessions in the New World ran counter to the U.S. desire to bring Central and South America under its political and economic aegis. Their

ongoing presence in the New World jeopardized America's desire for hemispheric hegemony. It is in this context that we must assess the diplomatic efforts of the Abbé Correia da Serra to convince the administration of President Madison to put a stop to the activity of the New York and Baltimore privateers and to persuade American officials not to support Brazilian independence. Clearly, Correia da Serra had failed to understand the pragmatic reach of U.S. policy when it came to defining the country's strategic interests in the New World. For, as far as the projection of America's power in South America was concerned, even former President Jefferson agreed with his successors. In a letter to the Abbé, quite near his date of departure, this is quite evident:

nothing [*sic*] is so important as that America shall separate herself from the systems of Europe, & establish one of her own. our [*sic*] circumstances, our pursuits, our interests are distinct. the [*sic*] principles of our policy should be so also. All entanglements with that quarter of the globe should be avoided if we mean that peace & justice shall be the polar stars of the american [*sic*] societies. (qtd. in Davis 298-9)

As time went by, it seems that the Abbé became ever more disappointed with the excessive materialism of Americans, who for the sake of profit, he believed, were willing to turn a blind eye on the above-mentioned privateers. American courts continued to give out lenient sentences and even to release some of the violators of the Neutrality Act which had been enacted under Madison. The Abbé confessed his disappointment with the acquisitive spirit of democratic society in a letter to an English friend:

i'm [*sic*] tired of five years of this laborious mission, and most heartily tired of democratic society. Rational Liberty can be fully enjoyed under other forms, do not believe half of what is said in Europe of this country, and of what they most ostentatiously publish and say themselves. They have the vanity of believing it all, but except in eagerness for money . . . , they are not yet comparable to ripe European nations, and they are not less rotten. (Serra *apud* Davis 74)

In spite of the praise learned Americans of the time bestowed on the Abbé, the times were difficult for his diplomacy. American public opinion was

not sympathetic to Old World monarchies, and in general the country regarded as a positive thing the independence movements throughout Latin America. There was support for these revolutionary movements because they embodied the type of aspirations colonial America had felt, too. Thus, it was particularly difficult to enforce the neutrality legislation approved by Congress to punish the privateers who were fitting out ships with American crews and to prevent Latin American revolutionaries from gathering support in the United States for their independence movements. Furthermore, the political and economic forces at work within American society at the time were too strong. The desire for more and more land to be farmed and settled, which the Louisiana Purchase had not quenched, had been a constant one since the founding of the Republic. The diplomatic activity of Correia da Serra was powerless in the face of the dynamics which were present in American society in the earlier part of the nineteenth century, and for these reasons his diplomatic activity was unsuccessful.

The fact is that the United States recognized Brazil's independence in 1822, only a few months after it had been declared. Richard Beale Davis's closing words in the section of his book where he discusses the Abbé's diplomatic efforts in the U.S. sum up the conundrum most aptly: "It is safe to say that whatever he might have done as minister, his cause would have been lost. Right in itself, it stood athwart the destiny of the hemisphere – and man's greed" (62). Had Davis added the word "manifest" to his closing statement and he would have fully encapsulated the nature of the difficulties faced by Correia da Serra, who, without even having realized it, had been confronted with one of the most powerful principles that were to guide American foreign policy for the next century and maybe even to this day.

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the diplomatic activity of the Abbé Correia da Serra (1751-1823), the first Portuguese Minister Plenipotentiary to the United States, in connection with the use of American ports by privateers preying on Portugal's commerce with Brazil, its South American colony. Despite his connections to the political and intellectual circles in the United States capital at the time, and the justness of Portuguese grievances against the American government in this matter, Correia da Serra's remonstrance went unheeded in Washington, as they collided with the underlying principles of its foreign policy towards Latin America in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The so-called Monroe Doctrine implied that the original American project of revolution could be applied to the whole continent and that it was the "manifest destiny" of the United States to assume the role of guardian of the Americas. American public opinion and its more radical press were not sympathetic to Old World monarchies, and so it was particularly difficult for Correia da Serra to prevent Brazilian revolutionaries from gathering support in the United States for their independence movement and for the American government to enforce the neutrality legislation approved by Congress to punish the activity of privateers.

KEYWORDS

American Privateering, Monroe Doctrine, Portuguese-American Diplomacy

RESUMO

Este artigo examina a actividade diplomática do Abade Correia da Serra (1751-1823), aquele que foi o primeiro Ministro Plenipotenciário de Portugal junto dos Estados Unidos da América, no que respeita à utilização de portos americanos por navios-corsário deste país, e cuja actividade afectava fortemente o comércio entre Portugal e a sua colónia sul-americana, o Brasil. Apesar da proximidade de Correia da Serra aos círculos políticos e intelectuais existentes na capital americana de então, bem como da justeza das queixas de Portugal contra o governo americano

quanto a estas matérias, os seus protestos diplomáticos não surtiram grande efeito em Washington, na medida em que colidiam com os princípios subjacentes à política externa dos Estados Unidos para a América Latina no primeiro quartel do século dezanove. A chamada *Monroe Doctrine* aventava que projecto de americano de revolução poder-se-ia estender a todo o continente americano e que era o “destino manifesto” dos Estados Unidos assumir o papel de guardião das Américas. A opinião pública americana, bem como a sua imprensa mais radical não nutriam grande simpatia pelas monarquias do Velho Mundo. Assim sendo, tornou-se particularmente difícil para Correia da Serra evitar que os revolucionários brasileiros, por exemplo, reunissem apoio nos Estados Unidos para o seu movimento independentista, ou mesmo que o governo americano conseguisse aplicar a legislação de neutralidade aprovada pelo Congresso com vista a punir a actividade dos navios-corsário.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Diplomacia Luso-Americana, Doutrina Monroe, Navios-corsário Americanos
