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Honors Prospectus

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## American Public Opinion and Indian Independence

### Introduction

“If your foreign policy...doesn’t have a ground in public opinion, then that foreign policy is not sustainable,” stated the Turkish foreign minister Ahmet Davutoglu in a recent *New York Times* article.<sup>1</sup> This assertion comes in the midst of the momentous outpouring of public activism from citizens of traditionally repressive governments in what has been dubbed the “Arab Spring.” At the same time, however, Davutoglu addresses one of the more complex relationships in American diplomatic history—the relationship between public opinion and U.S. foreign policy. This relationship has evolved dramatically as the United States developed from a fragmented group of former British colonies to an international superpower. In 1898, the United States propelled itself onto the world stage as a nation to be contended with, as it dealt a final blow to the dying Spanish empire. Many historians also mark the war of 1898 as a defining moment when American public opinion first exerted significant influence over U.S. foreign policy.<sup>2</sup> In American public memory, the public outcry at the explosion of the *Maine* and other catalyzing events helped send the nation to war, setting a precedent for future displays of public opinion in the formation of international policy. Notably, the international policies that we remember as being influenced by the voices of American citizens are policies of war.

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<sup>1</sup> Anthony Shadid, “A Successful Diplomat Tries His Hand at Politics,” *New York Times*, June 11, 2011, A7.

<sup>2</sup> Louis Pérez, *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), ix-x.

In my thesis project, I would like to break with tradition and examine the role of American public opinion at a moment of international creation rather than destruction: the formation of the Indian state on August 14, 1947.<sup>3</sup> In the immediate aftermath of World War II, the United States emerged from the wreckage trumpeting ideals of freedom, liberty and democracy, and assumed the moral high ground as the protector of the free world. While Indian nationalists expounded similar principles of the Western liberal tradition throughout their movement, most scholars agree that U.S. policy makers barely reacted to the final culmination of India's 50-year struggle for independence.<sup>4</sup> Ideologically, India's fight for independence was in line with the American postwar moral agenda and yet U.S. policy did not reflect that connection. If U.S. foreign policy is based on public opinion, why didn't Americans care more about the formation of the most populous democracy in the world? Or to rephrase this question, who did advocate American support of Indian independence and why were their voices not heeded? How did they convey their message to U.S. policy makers and their fellow citizens? Ultimately, what kind of impact did these advocates have on the official U.S. foreign policy towards India's independence? In the course of my attempt to answer these questions I hope to gain a more

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<sup>3</sup> The creation of the Indian state was not without destruction, as the partition of India and West and East Pakistan forced 14 million people from their homes, in the largest—and incredibly violent—human migration in recent history. While I acknowledge the catastrophic affects of the Partition, I will not have the space to address this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Gary Hess, *American Encounters India, 1941-1947* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1971); R.C Jauhri, *American Diplomacy and Independence for India* (Bombay, 1970); Norman Palmer, *The United States and India: The Dimensions of Influence* (New York: Praeger, 1984); Eric D. Pullin, "‘Noise and Flutter’: American Propaganda Strategy and Operation in India during World War II," *Diplomatic History* 34, no. 2 (2010): 275-298; M.S. Venkataramani and B. K. Shrivastava, *Roosevelt-Gandhi-Churchill: America and the Last Phase of India's Freedom Struggle* (London, 1983); Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

complete understanding of how individual citizens, often overlooked, play a role in shaping American public opinion and its impact in foreign policy.

### Background

At Dickinson, I have focused most of my studies on American diplomatic history. Last semester, however, I had the opportunity to learn about Indian history, largely for the first time, in my semester abroad in Hyderabad, India. One of the classes I took was a modern Indian history course that focused on the nationalist movement and India's path towards independence. Throughout the duration of my modern history class, my professor only mentioned the United States once—when the U.S. Civil War increased the British demand for cotton in India and thus raised Indian cotton prices. I have to admit, I was surprised that the United States did not seem to play a role in one of the defining moments in Indian history—its fight for, and eventual achievement of, independence. As I looked at my class reading, my surprise deepened. The major texts for the course, all written by prominent Indian scholars, were a combination of general histories and specific analyses that focused in on the period leading up to Indian independence. In these major texts on modern Indian history, from Sekhar Bandyopadhyay's *From Plassey to Partition* (2004) to Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India 1885-1947* (2001) to Bipan Chandra's *India's Struggle for Independence* (1989), the United States received passing, if any, mention. The Indian side of the historiography on the Indo-American relationship devotes a negligible amount of attention to the relationship before the Cold War, especially before the Bandung Conference and India's declaration of non-alignment in 1955. While the work of Indian historians will not be my major source of information on the American reaction to Indian independence, I nonetheless find the lack of scholarship thought provoking. Did the British

really succeed in making Indian independence an inter-empire issue? Do American historians also feel that there was no substantial connection between the United States and a newly emerging India?

### Historiography

Many American scholars agree that the United States began considering India in its foreign policy only after its own entry into the war, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, and the introduction of the Asian theater into World War II.<sup>5</sup> Canadian scholar, Bruce D. Daniels, argues that American leaders only become interested in Asia during times of war.<sup>6</sup> Broad generalizations aside, wartime unrest in India caused by nationalist efforts seemed to gain importance to Americans, now that they were concerned with Japanese war efforts. While Indian nationalism only began to register with the U.S. government in the 1940s, had other Americans already taken notice of the cause expounded by the Indian National Congress since its foundation in 1885? Most Indo-American experts tackle the nature of American recognition of Indian nationalism through analysis of official diplomatic missions and U.S. foreign policy towards Indian independence. President Franklin D. Roosevelt sent two personal emissaries, Louis Jonson and William Phillips, to India during the war, while the India Outpost, a branch of the Office of War Information, was in charge of American propaganda. At the same time, however, average Americans were also intimately concerned with the outcome of the Indian fight for independence. The war marked the first substantial contact between Indians and Americans, as

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<sup>5</sup> Harold Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006); Sarah Ellen Graham, "American Propaganda, the Anglo-American Alliance, and the 'Delicate Question' of Indian Self-Determination," *Diplomatic History* 33, no. 2 (2009): 223-259; Hess, *American Encounters India, 1941-1947* Palmer, *The United States and India*; Pullin, "Noise and Flutter."

<sup>6</sup> Bruce C. Daniels, "American Policy from the Outside Looking In: Indian Historians and U.S. Foreign Policy in Asia," *Canadian Journal of History* 19, no. 2 (1984): 254.

about 100,000 American soldiers were stationed in India over the course of the war to be transferred elsewhere in the region.<sup>7</sup> Though American officials attempted to create policies that would appear sympathetic to the Indian nationalist sentiment while not openly defying their crucial ally in war, the British, was the American public expressing its opinion on Indian independence?

My initial assessment of the historiography of the American reaction to Indian independence is that the question of the American public's role in Indian independence receives little attention. Historians largely refer to the United States or Americans in terms of the U.S. government, and debate the role that President Roosevelt played in the American position on Indian independence. On one extreme, Bimla Prasad claims that Roosevelt's "concern with the India question" accelerated the movement towards independence.<sup>8</sup> In Harold Gould's assessment, though Roosevelt was sympathetic to the Indian fight for freedom, he never developed it beyond a kind of moral support.<sup>9</sup> The most critical view of U.S. policy and Roosevelt's part in Indian independence that I have found is in M.S. Venkataramani's work, *Roosevelt-Gandhi-Churchill: America and the Last Phase of India's Freedom Struggle*, where he describes Roosevelt as a "mute onlooker" who made a few "cosmetic actions for the record," but largely sympathized with Britain's imperialist goals.<sup>10</sup> While the impact of President Roosevelt and U.S. foreign policy is disputed, the role of the American public or the impact of individual citizens on America's support for Indian independence has barely entered into the historiographic equation.

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<sup>7</sup> Palmer, 18.

<sup>8</sup> Qtd. in Palmer, 19.

<sup>9</sup> Gould, 33.

<sup>10</sup> Venkataramani, *Roosevelt-Gandhi-Churchill*.

When Hess describes India's attainment of independence in *America Encounters India*, he writes: "Americans, of course, welcomed the event, and newspapers everywhere gave it front-page coverage."<sup>11</sup> While giving the American public a whole sentence is more than some historians devote to the impact of individual Americans on U.S. policy regarding India's independence, the tone behind this one sentence illustrates how American public opinion is overlooked in the majority of the scholarship. Hess finds it natural that "Americans" (no indication of who these Americans are) would rejoice at Indian independence, though he doesn't elaborate on the reasons for their approval. Hess surveys the history of Indo-American interactions beginning with the 1784 Jay Treaty in *America Encounters India*, so it may be inappropriate to criticize his superficial treatment of the role of the American public. While broad surveys like Hess' are an important part of my research, the main secondary source dealing with the impact of ordinary Americans on the Indian nationalist cause is *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies: The India Lobby in the United States, 1900-1946* (2006). Written by University of Virginia professor Harold Gould, *Sikhs, Swamis, Students, and Spies* analyzes the effects of individuals, the Ghadar Movement, and pro-independence press at creating supporters of Indian independence within the U.S. Framed around revealing the identity of the person who leaked an anti-British letter written by diplomat William Phillips to the *Washington Post*, Gould's work has been key in pointing me towards possible primary sources.

### Execution

As I measure the effects of American public opinion on U.S. foreign policy, I plan to examine the work of those individuals who shaped public opinion, including *The Washington Post* columnist Drew Pearson and president of the India League of America J.J. Singh. Though

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<sup>11</sup> Hess, 181.

my choice of independence activists is not set in stone as I continue to evaluate the available resources, I think that the contrast in the manner of Pearson and Singh's advocacy will provide an interesting case study on how individuals can shape public opinion on issues of American foreign policy. In 1959, Pearson reflected in his diary that the Indian Minister of Information, O.I. Rahman, recognized his contribution to India's independence a full twelve years after the fact.<sup>12</sup> Though sometimes depicted as a muckraker, Pearson exposed corrupt politicians, published ten books, and was a nationally, if not internationally, recognized name. Conversely, one of the more extensive biographies of J.J. Singh I have found is a 23-column profile in *The New Yorker* entitled "One-Man Lobby." Pearson wrote for the leading newspaper in the nation's capital, while Singh's periodical was published by a private, non-profit organization whose purpose was to "interpret India to, and to further Indian causes in, this country [America]."<sup>13</sup> And yet, both Pearson and Singh attempted to influence U.S. public opinion by urging Americans to support India's independence. By studying them side-by-side, I hope to create a nuanced analysis of how public opinion was shaped during this moment in U.S. diplomatic history. My study may even help expand upon the current explanation (or lack thereof) of the role of American public opinion on U.S. policy towards Indian independence, as the study of individuals can add an analytic dimension to the group of people most Indo-American historians only describe as "Americans."

### Sources

Pearson wrote the popular syndicated political newspaper column, "Washington Merry-Go-Round," from the 1930s until his death in 1969, a position from which he could shape public

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<sup>12</sup> Drew Pearson, *Diaries, 1949-1959*, edited by Tyler Abell (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), 565.

<sup>13</sup> Robert Shaplen, "One-Man Lobby," *New Yorker*, March 24, 1951, pg. 35-55.

opinion every day. From 1938 to 1955, Pearson also had a weekly radio program.<sup>14</sup> While principal Pearson biographies, including Oliver Pilat's *Drew Pearson: An Unauthorized Biography* (1973) and Herman Klurfeld's *Behind the Lines: The World of Drew Pearson* (1968), were written soon after Pearson's death, many more recent histories of American journalism also devote chapters to Pearson, such as Donald Ritchie's *Reporting from Washington: A History of the Washington Press Corps* (2005). Finally, though Pearson's personal papers are located at the University of Texas at Austin, his stepson Tyler Abell published a series of Pearson's diaries covering 1949-1959.

While Pearson's voice reached American's across the country, J.J. Singh and pro-independence organizations reached a much more selective audience. Indian-American periodicals began springing up in the early twentieth-century with the emergence of the Ghadar Party, a sub-group of the Indian nationalist movement, on the west coast of North America. The trend continued through the years leading up to India's independence, and with the help of our inter-library loan system I plan to examine two monthly periodicals in depth: New York's *India Today* and Washington, D.C.'s *Voice of India*. The India League of America began publishing *India Today* in 1900, and had the League's president act as editor, a position held by both J.J. Singh and Dr. Anup Singh. The National Committee for India's Freedom published *Voice of India* beginning in 1944 and Dr. Anup Singh also edited this paper. Unlike Pearson, these organizations and their publications had one purpose—to raise American support for Indian independence—and thus will add a further dimension to my study of how advocates of independence attempted to affect public opinion and in turn foreign policy.

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<sup>14</sup> Ann T. Keene, "Pearson, Drew," American National Biography Online, 2000.



I am hoping that the sources that I have mentioned so far will prove to be examples of how Pearson and Singh attempted to influence public opinion. My analysis of the American reaction towards Indian independence will not be based on these types of primary sources alone, however. I hope that balancing Pearson and Singh's writing with other articles in the mainstream press will help illuminate the national inclination towards the issue of Indian independence. I also plan to utilize the findings of the public opinion polls of the era. Though today it is rare to read an article, scholarly or otherwise, without learning the results of a recently conducted opinion survey, many of the frequently quoted polling organizations were not founded until the 1970s or later. For example, Quinnipiac University's polling institute was founded in 1988 as a marketing class project while a leading "fact tank," the Pew Research Center, wasn't founded until 2004.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, as I determine which public opinion polls are relevant to the issue of Indian Independence, Columbia University's online polling reference guide will be an important resource as it can steer me towards print and electronic public opinion sources.<sup>16</sup> Finally, this analysis would not be complete without examining the actual U.S. government policy towards India's independence, and so I will turn to the State Department's published *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States* (FRUS).

### Conclusion

In his critique of the historiography of the Spanish American War, Louis Pérez quipped, "public opinion provides a plausible causal factor without the necessity of explanation or evidence." Pérez nonetheless cites Dorothy Burne Goebel's assessment that, "public opinion

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<sup>15</sup> Juliet Lapidus, "What's with all the Quinnipiac University polls?" *Slate*, 2011 <<http://www.slate.com/id/2202433/>>; Pew Research Center, "About the Center," 2011 <<http://pewresearch.org/about/projects/>>.

<sup>16</sup> Columbia University Libraries, *International Public Opinion Polls: Resources on the Internet and in Print* <<http://library.columbia.edu/indiv/butlref/subj/stats/polls.html>>.

determined foreign policy” in the events leading up to the war, which is the mirror image of Turkish foreign minister Davutoglu’s view that a nation’s foreign policy must be grounded on public opinion.<sup>17</sup> Until recently most believed that newspaper mogul William Randolph Hearst told artist Fredric S. Remington: “you furnish the pictures and I’ll furnish the war.”<sup>18</sup> The context of yellow journalism at the turn of the twentieth-century and Pearson and Singh’s experiences with the press in the years leading up to Indian independence differs significantly: the Spanish-American war led to America’s imperialist control of Puerto Rico, Cuba and the Philippines while India’s independence would end British imperial rule on the subcontinent; Hearst supported war while Pearson and Singh supported freedom; Hearst seemed to influence foreign policy while the U.S. policy makers didn’t appear to react to Pearson and Singh’s public opinion efforts. Yet studying the very different example of Indian independence may help deepen our understanding of the relationship between public opinion and foreign policy in the United States.

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<sup>17</sup> Pérez, 65.

<sup>18</sup> W. Joseph Campbell, *Yellow Journalism: Puncturing the Myths, Defining the Legacies* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.: New York, 2003), 71.