"There are two important lines of human endeavor in which men are forbidden even to allude to their success," John Hay told the governor of New York state, the mayor-elect of New York City, and members of the chamber of commerce: "affairs of the heart and diplomatic affairs. In doing so, one not only commits a vulgarity which transcends all questions of taste, but makes all future success impossible."

As the laughter subsided, Hay added: "But if we are not permitted to boast of what we have done, we can at least say a word about what we have tried to do."

According to John Taliaferro, a former senior editor at Newsweek and the author of biographies of Charles Russell and Edgar Rice Burroughs, Hay had a lot to boast about. Private secretary to Abraham Lincoln, author (with John Nicolay) of a 10-volume biography of the 16th president, and a novel, "The Breadwinners," Hay served as Secretary of State to William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt. He issued two "Open Door" notes, calling on Western powers to guarantee equal access to China's markets and respect for its territorial integrity and negotiated treaties that made possible the construction of the Panama Canal.

Beautifully written, with abundant details about affairs of the heart and diplomacy, "All the Great Prizes" is a valentine to its subject, long on narrative and short on analysis. The potency of John Singer Sargent's portrait of Hay, Taliaferro writes, "comes not only from the intensity of the light but also from its economy, for it spends itself in only two places: Hay's confident, guileless and persuasive gaze and his fine-boned right hand - his writing hand - which emerges from the gloom of his tailored sleeve like an Elgin marble." In 1904, Taliaferro adds, approvingly, "it was widely accepted that no man alive embodied the half century of Republican tradition, values, and vision more thoroughly and more honorably ..."

Hay did, indeed, make major contributions to the foreign policy of the United States at the turn of the 20th century. And Taliaferro effectively refutes Theodore Roosevelt's claim that his Secretary of State was a "figurehead," incapable of carrying out "big things."

The biography, however, does not fully capture this complex man. "The Breadwinners," for example, is best understood not "as a cautionary tale of labor unrest," but, historian Walter LaFeber indicates, "as one of the bitterest attacks ever made on the labor movement, especially the movement's foreign members." Content to acknowledge that "it went without saying that the Open Door swung one way only," Taliaferro does not say enough about the ways in which the policy served America's need for commercial and religious markets.
That said, John Hay, who hasn't been the subject of a full-scale biography since 1934, was a gentleman, a skilled architect of the "new American empire" and the foremost statesman of his era. As he himself wrote about a Mississippi River man, "He seen his duty, a dead-sure thing, - and he went for it thar and then." Original Print Headline: Presidential aide focus of biography

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ALL THE GREAT PRIZES: THE LIFE OF JOHN HAY, FROM LINCOLN TO ROOSEVELT

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