In *A Great and Rising Nation*, Michael A. Verney argues that to understand the United States' imperialist impulses in the antebellum period, we must pay closer attention to the activities of the US Navy, particularly the navy's exploration expeditions from the 1830s to 1850s. Navy explorations, Verney contends, helped to bolster the United States' aspirations to being a great power without the requisite military and diplomatic buildup that had corrupted its European counterparts. The United States tried to use knowledge and science as a way to gain credibility in the European community, establishing an empire of knowledge in far-flung regions of the world. In each chapter, Verney argues that explorers appealed to varied facets of white, middle- or upper-class anxieties and interests to execute a number of expeditions funded in part or in whole by the federal government under the auspices of the US Navy.

Chapter 1 addresses how men like Jeremiah Reynolds tried to convince white Americans to support an empire of knowledge, cultivating relationships with many elite members of society to fund his expeditions to the Pacific. He had to convince commercial, naval, and government interests to turn away from their concerns about imperialism and toward the good that might result from exploration.

Though Reynolds himself was not extremely successful, as chapter 2 demonstrates, the groundwork he laid bore fruit in the US Exploring Expedition of 1838-42. The expedition illuminated to men like President Andrew Jackson the value of an empire of commerce; thus, despite its tremendous scientific accomplishments, the expedition, Verney notes, was “a voyage for capitalism first, natural history second” (p. 69). Securing the seas for commerce turned out to be a compelling argument for naval exploration.

In chapter 3, perhaps the most interesting chapter of the book, Verney argues that the success of naval exploration hinged significantly on public relations; how explorers, specifically those involved in the US Exploring Expedition, talked...
about themselves matters. The publication of scientific volumes allowed members of the expedition to control the narrative and assert national and racial dominance over the places and people the expedition surveyed, as well as over the European powers who were doing their own explorations. This flurry of publication helped to change the tide from skepticism over American state-sponsored exploration to full-throated support.

In chapter 4, Verney turns to one of the more bizarre expeditions in the antebellum period: the state-supported expedition to survey the Dead Sea. He argues that we have to understand this expedition in the context of evangelical fervor as well as empire. As officials in the government saw threats to Christianity mapped onto threats to the nation, they were eager to learn more about the roots of Christianity and perhaps even prove, definitively, that the Bible was a historically accurate document. However, ironically, the expedition relied heavily on the support of Muslim locals, not just for labor but also for help in interpreting the findings the expedition made.

If the Dead Sea expedition was primarily about the ideology of an American empire, the pro-slavery expeditions discussed in chapter 5 were purely practical: southern enslavers who were concerned about revolts by enslaved people and the need for virgin land suddenly became interested in exploration when such men as Matthew Fontaine Maury proposed the idea of finding suitable land in the Amazon for the expansion of slavery. Maury selected Brazil as the ideal location, and the naval lieutenant William Lewis Herndon who went on the expedition came back with great news: the Amazon was exactly the right kind of place to expand into. But in both this expedition and the subsequent Rio de la Plata expedition, the American explorers failed to consider a key factor, namely, that the countries of South America might not want the United States to encroach on their territory. So despite the success of the expeditions, the end goal was never achieved.

In chapter 6, the author argues for exploration as a tool for successful foreign relations, presented in terms of chivalry and medieval manhood. When Sir John Franklin went missing on an expedition to the Arctic, both American and British explorers rallied to the cause of finding him, in part at the encouragement of Lady Franklin. Americans saw their participation in the search for Franklin as a sign of “civilizational maturity,” putting them on par with the British (p. 176). In an era of strained relations between the United States and Great Britain, the two Grinnell expeditions allowed the two nations to work toward the same goal and perhaps even smooth over some of the conflicts elsewhere. Even though the Grinnell expeditions were a public-private partnership, they were seen as a nationalistic project, and the navy supplied ten of seventeen members of the second expedition. But none of the expeditions of this era found Franklin.

Whether through the solidification of religious beliefs, the ability to know the world fully through science, or the enactment of medieval fantasies of white manhood, all of the explorations of the antebellum period, Verney argues, point to a single idea: the establishment of white, middle- or upper-class American identity. He takes care to explicate all the ways these expeditions would not have been possible without the intervention of non-white actors, however. And in the end, this age of exploration came to an end when the United States entered into the Civil War, which changed almost everything about how the United States saw its place in the world.

*Great and Rising Nation* is an important addition to the scholarship of the antebellum navy, especially the period between 1830 and 1860, which has been sorely underexplored. Each chapter is clearly intended to be able to stand largely on its own, making it an ideal candidate for assigning portions in undergraduate or gradu-
ate classes. Despite this structure, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, and the reader will be richly repaid by reading the whole work and considering its many facets as a unit.

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