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In the early nineteenth century, the United States, a postcolonial nation separated from Great Britain for only a few decades, faced a daunting challenge—earning the respect and approval of the “great powers” in Europe. Many white US citizens wondered how they could repay their perceived intellectual and cultural debt to Europe and raise the status of the United States. In *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early US Republic*, Michael A. Verney considers how US antebellum “explorationists” from the late 1820s to the 1850s sought to court European regard by encouraging and persuading the US public and the federal government to support grand European-style missions of naval exploration.

For this study, Verney carefully selected seven out of seventeen antebellum US naval expeditions, each chosen to highlight different goals: “knowledge, commerce, religion, slavery, and diplomatic prestige” (p. 6). These missions also happened to be the most popular since Verney wanted to study the role of domestic politics in empire building. To craft this study, Verney makes excellent use of the official and unofficial accounts of the expeditions, newspaper articles, government records, and letters. Each chapter deftly profiles explorationists, investigating how they converted various interest groups or learned from their failures. Although each chapter could be read in isolation, the entire book is bound together by clear through lines and the overarching theme of coalition building.

Chapter 1 introduces readers to the ambitious newspaper editor, lecturer, and explorer Jeremiah Reynolds, who spent years attempting to convince Americans to support a national exploring and cartographic expedition to the South Pacific. Reynolds gained powerful allies such as President John Quincy Adams, Secretary of the Navy Samuel Southard, and other elites—primarily congressmen, naval officers, scientists, and sea captains. However, the lure of scientific advancement was insufficient to attract the support needed. In the late 1820s, an era dominated by factionalism, many US citizens opposed national expeditions of exploration, perceiving them as expensive, elitist,
imperial projects that would put too much power in the hands of the federal government. From this failure, explorationists learned to make broader appeals.

Chapter 2 explains how resistant Jacksonian Democrats embraced a voyage of discovery to the Pacific with the United States Exploring Expedition of 1838-42 (popularly known as the “Ex Ex”). Explorationists reframed the proposed expedition as a solution to the problems and anxieties faced by US merchants and captains traversing the Pacific. For antebellum Americans, Pacific economic activities appeared to be threatened by incomplete maps, unruly sailors, and Oceanic Islanders, and an exploring expedition promised to counter these threats.

Chapter 3 tells the story of the Ex Ex following its return to the United States as the commander of the expedition, Lieutenant Charles Wilkes, and others crafted publications, popularizing global imperialism with white middle- and upper-class citizens. This approach was tremendously successful, and many enthusiastically devoured Wilkes’s account and visited the mission’s specimens at the National Gallery. Both experiences “shifted public opinion in favor of federally directed global imperialism” in the 1840s and 1850s (p. 105).

Chapters 4 and 5 explore the addition of conservative Protestant Christians and pro-slavery expansionists to the explorationist coalition. In the mid-nineteenth century, conservative Protestant Christians felt that the United States faced a spiritual crisis caused by multiple threats: an influx of Catholic immigrants, intemperance, westward expansion, and the biblical skepticism of liberal Unitarians. The US Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea of 1847-48 offered an unusual solution. The expedition's commander, Lieutenant William Francis Lynch, motivated primarily by the defense of his faith and national honor, sought to prove that the Bible was “an infallible historical text” and bolster Protestant Christianity (p. 114). Ironically, this overtly Christian expedition relied upon the aid and guidance of Islamic actors, both urban Ottomans and Bedouin Arabs. Chapter 5 moves to 1850s pro-slavery expansionists’ support of South American expeditions as a means to expand Southern slaveholding territory. For these individuals, US settlement in South America promised to resolve multiple issues by opening up fertile land for planting, providing a “safety valve” for the growing enslaved Black population, and skirting the sectional divide caused by westward US expansion. US imperial ambitions in South America were clear to all parties involved.

Chapter 6 sees the culmination of explorationists’ wildest dreams with US-UK rapprochement. In the late 1840s, the famous British explorer Sir John Franklin and his expedition went missing in the Arctic. His wife, Lady Jane Franklin, tirelessly advocated for the organization of rescue missions both by the British Admiralty and foreign powers. Two expeditions were joint private-public ventures combining the financial resources of merchant Henry Grinnell and the personnel of the US Navy. The publications, newspaper articles, and lectures about the expeditions cultivated a sense of Anglo-Saxon racial unity and camaraderie between the United States and Great Britain. For explorationists, the expedition finally garnered much sought-after British praise for US efforts in the Arctic.

A concise, satisfying conclusion, the epilogue considers the fate of explorationism. Verney traces the fracturing of the explorationist coalition down the middle as the Civil War redirected naval personnel and resources. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, there was less of a need for federal naval exploration as European powers increasingly considered the United States a “great power.”

A Great and Rising Nation carefully examines explorationists and their accounts, integrating key analysis of gender, race, and socioeconomic status. For example, many explorationists obsessed over the masculinity of explorers and their expeditions.
Verney argues that Reynolds acquired an appreciation for the brawny masculinity he encountered during his childhood in Ohio, then part of the US frontier. This perhaps translated to his later respect for working-class mariners. Lynch, the commanding officer of the Dead Sea expedition, recruited men that matched his nativist, masculine, and martial vision, shipping “only ‘young, muscular, native-born Americans of sober habits’” (p. 120). Explorer Elisha Kent Kane, who led the second Grinnell expedition to the Arctic, similarly wrote about the masculinity of Sir John Franklin’s would-be rescuers. Verney suggests that Kane’s cultivation of a heroic masculinity perfectly complemented Lady Jane Franklin’s gendered, mediævalist appeal to the British Admiralty, the press, and foreign leaders and explorers for chivalric aid to locate her lost husband. Such points of analysis, simply put, are persuasive and integrally tied to Verney’s central arguments.

Verney also weighs in on a historiographical debate concerning US national identity and where it was forged. His answer is, everywhere: “It was the product of the entire national experience, which was unfolding simultaneously” in the United States, at sea, and abroad (p. 8). Historians such as Dane Morrison, Dael Norwood, Kariann Yokota, and others have similarly probed the ways that US activities abroad were informed domestic experiences (and vice versa), impacted domestic politics, and reflected anxieties about the postcolonial status of the United States. Verney builds upon and makes a valuable contribution to this recent series of interpretations by taking a critical approach to the rich topic of antebellum naval expeditions.

A Great and Rising Nation showcases thorough research, up-to-date historiography, and well-written prose. As a strong work of scholarship with no notable weaknesses, it should easily find a place on the shelves of scholars of maritime history and the early republic. The transnational nature and goals of the expeditions means that scholars in diverse fields may also find individual chapters useful. With compelling prose, gripping anecdotes, and clear ties to the broader themes and narrative of US history, the book could be assigned to students and be read by a broader audience.

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