

**Michael A. Verney. *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early US Republic*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, [www.press.uchicago.edu](http://www.press.uchicago.edu), 2022. vii+300 pp., illustrations, map, notes, index. US \$35.00, paper; ISBN 978-0-226-81992-1. (E-book available.)**

No understanding of American national development during the Early Republic and antebellum period is complete without the acknowledgement of the role played by naval exploration in developing early visions of American global empire. While the United States expanded its territory across the North American continent, it sought to achieve imperial ambitions abroad through US Navy-led exploring expeditions. The republican character of many American citizens did not allow explorationists to embark on the expeditions for the same government-initiated reasons that Europeans had. Rather, explorationists found interest groups within the United States to support their enterprise, transforming a lack of interest in expeditions at the end of the War of 1812 to the funding of voyages much larger than European counterparts by the 1850s.

In *A Great and Rising Nation: Naval Exploration and Global Empire in the Early Republic*, Michael Verney argues that the United States' attempts to fulfil its imperial ambitions during the antebellum period were "neither wholly exceptional nor unexceptional" (6). He also asserts that US imperialism was multidimensional, composed of "republicanism, capitalism, Protestantism, white supremacy, traditional gender roles, and imperial expansion" (7). Interests representing these several dimensions promoted exploring expeditions to different parts of the Pacific, the Middle East, South America, and even into the Arctic Circle. Verney masterfully uses case studies of several US expeditions to demonstrate their use for various imperial ends.

Early attempts to fund the first exploring expedition, which, though boasting both government and private supporters, ultimately lost favour in Congress due to republican fears of such an endeavour strengthening the central government. The explorationists found an unlikely ally in President Andrew Jackson. Though he at first championed fiscal restraint over naval adventures, Jackson adapted the idea of exploration to his own ends, namely expanding US naval influence in regions where Jacksonian capitalism had attempted to break into. The resulting voyage, known as the US Exploring Expedition (1838-42), both communicated American government interest in protecting Jacksonian capitalism (even resorting to racial violence in Fiji to achieve that end) and produced American charts of the Pacific that attempted to "equalize opportunity for working white men and the capitalist investors who supplied them" (72).

Beyond examining the stated goals of the expedition, Verney devotes

significant attention to the popular reaction to the expedition and the careful efforts of explorationists to use it to portray the United States as a rising empire – one capable of matching British and French scientific discoveries. Verney argues that the white American population, settled in a rapidly growing and changing young nation, welcomed the expedition's assurances of American empire with open arms. He shows how the expedition's official narrative played to the racial, class, and national interests of its intended audience through both the process of creating expedition literature, and sources of popular reaction to these narratives. This chapter demonstrates that exploring expeditions did not exist in a vacuum between the Navy Department and Congress, but gained the interest of the American populace, shaping their ideas of the world around them and their place in it.

Though the aforementioned expedition is the most well known in this time period, Verney demonstrates how lesser-known expeditions also reveal much about American attitudes, ambitions, and insecurities toward the world in different ways, accomplishing this brilliantly in his chapter on the US Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea. In addition to the Jacksonians seeking to protect their brand of capitalism, the American evangelical (a term that Verney defines as Conservative Protestant) establishment sought to protect its status from potential foreign and theologically liberal threats to their claims of religious truth. The Dead Sea Expedition, which had attempted to find the ruins of Sodom and Gomorrah, failed in its ultimate objective. Its aftermath highlights the mixed reactions at home that exploring expeditions brought. Namely, Congress seemed disinterested in the expedition's report while evangelicals framed the mission in a positive light.

Verney explores other themes of American empire regarding these expeditions, from the South American expeditions that attempted to secure a future for slavery for white southerners, to attempts at US-British rapprochement in the American search for missing British explorer Sir John Franklin. Using official expedition reports, popular sources reacting to expeditions, and a wealth of historiography, the author demonstrates that exploring expeditions became a vessel in which various antebellum interests competed for political legitimacy. His thorough seventy pages of notes and clear definition of terms makes *A Great and Rising Nation* easy for readers to follow. Verney poses new questions concerning the relationship of American empire, race, religion, gender, and the US Navy, all while including non-American voices in the study of these overseas expeditions. This book would be an excellent addition to the library of any North American, maritime, or global historian.

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