BOOK REVIEW ROUNDTABLE:

Raising the Flag

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Table of Contents

1. “Introduction: Raising the Flag,” by Sarah B. Snyder
2. “The Seas of Early American Diplomacy,” by Benjamin Armstrong
3. “Raising the Flag but not Breaking New Ground,” by Nicole M. Phelps
4. “What America’s Earliest Envoys Can Tell Us About Early American Foreign Policy,” by Lawrence A. Peskin
1. Introduction: Raising the Flag

By Sarah B. Snyder

These are bleak times in Foggy Bottom. The Department of State has suffered repeated indignities under the current administration, leading to a hollowing out of its highly trained professional workforce. The president’s first secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, imposed a 16-month hiring freeze on the department.\(^1\) The administration has been slow to fill many key roles, and observers have witnessed widespread departures of career ambassadors, civil servants, and even political appointees. Morale at the State Department has markedly declined during the current administration, according to Partnership for Public Service surveys.\(^2\) The number of Americans seeking to take the Foreign Service Officer Test is at the lowest level in 10 years.\(^3\) Against this backdrop, readers concerned about those charged with carrying out U.S. diplomacy might take some comfort in the agency and autonomy of the envoys depicted in Peter Eicher’s *Raising the Flag: America’s First Envoys in Faraway Lands*. Eicher’s book recounts the many challenges faced by the country’s first diplomats though, in his telling, they nonetheless advanced U.S. interests in many inhospitable places.

Organized chronologically, Eicher’s account sweeps across the globe, demonstrating that, as one of the reviewers, Benjamin Armstrong, puts it, “even in the nation’s first decade of existence, America was engaged across the world.” *Raising the Flag* examines early American envoys in China, the Barbary states, Spanish and French Louisiana, Chile, Argentina, Mexico, Cochin China, Siam, Muscat, the Ottoman Empire, Tahiti, and Japan in the years between independence and the outbreak of the Civil War. These envoys provided consular services to American citizens abroad and pursued the U.S. government’s diplomatic and economic ambitions, in particular, territorial and commercial expansion.

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Book Review Roundtable: Raising the Flag
In assessing Eicher’s *Raising the Flag* for this roundtable, historians Armstrong, Lawrence A. Peskin, and Nicole Phelps praise the author’s writing and storytelling abilities. Each chapter, as Armstrong writes, contains a “well-written and compelling narrative.” Armstrong also commends the book for portraying the breadth of diplomatic engagement under way at the time. Peskin characterizes the book as a “joy to read,” filled with “gripping adventures” and a “rogue’s gallery of early American diplomats.” Armstrong, Peskin, and Phelps identify several contributions the book makes, including demonstrating that the United States was not as isolationist in the late 18th and early 19th centuries as some observers have suggested. The book reveals the agency of early American envoys in geographically and culturally distant posts, while also highlighting the disorganization of the early years of the State Department. Eicher’s depictions emphasize the disparity between the strength of the United States in the Americas with its weaknesses beyond the Western Hemisphere.

Phelps notes that *Raising the Flag* was published in a book series explicitly meant “to increase public knowledge and appreciation of the professionalism of American diplomats and their involvement in world history.” Eicher’s book does reveal the myriad challenges faced by the United States’ first envoys as they served as pioneers for U.S. interests abroad. The chapters often recount the envoy’s work from their own perspectives. In each case, the president, the secretary of state, and Washington more broadly exist only in the distant and remote background. Largely, this was due to the technological limitations of communicating guidance and instructions at that time. With potentially positive implications, Eicher’s account reveals numerous instances in which these envoys had considerable agency as they largely operated independently of Washington. Yet, infrequent contact with other U.S. diplomats also had potentially negative consequences for these early envoys, such as when Thomas Larkin sought to manage James K. Polk’s expansionist aims toward California in the 1840s. The consuls Eicher profiles suffered not only from lack of communication with Washington and their peers but also from the mental and emotional toll of their work. For these early diplomats, isolation, despair, and frequent illness were occupational hazards. They faced political and physical risks as well: Eicher shows how early American envoys could be drawn into their host country’s political and military
battles. These envoys also endured many insults — some due to linguistic and cultural challenges, others due to perceptions of American weakness in these years.

*Raising the Flag* reveals the first 90 years of U.S. diplomacy to be highly fluid in that the country’s territory and envoys were regularly changing. The book also demonstrates the highly personalized nature of early American efforts to engage in foreign relations. For example, David Porter’s highly emotional encounters during his tenure in Constantinople harmed U.S. relations with Great Britain and other countries. Furthermore, Eicher shows the tenuous place of the United States on the European continent and the world in these years. Many of the themes of Eicher’s book will resonate with readers concerned about the challenges U.S. diplomats face today. As Armstrong points out, these early envoys were tasked with addressing the rise of China and negotiating new trade policy, among other issues familiar to contemporary foreign policy actors.

Each reviewer, however, criticizes certain aspects of the book. The weaknesses center on the degree to which the account is analytical versus anecdotal, the author’s engagement with the existing literature, the author’s use of sources, the selection of the envoys, and the author’s consideration of issues of identity. Before delving into these issues in greater detail, I’ll note that Eicher is a retired foreign service officer. It would have been interesting to hear a similar perspective in these reviews.

Armstrong wishes there had been more analysis within each of Eicher’s individual chapters as well as across the book as a whole, which would have enabled Eicher to advance a broader argument about early U.S. diplomacy and diplomats. Instead, in Armstrong’s view, Eicher leaves readers with a “sequence of enlightening and entertaining stories.” Similarly, Phelps sees *Raising the Flag* as a collection of anecdotes rather than an analytical history of the early days of U.S. diplomacy.

Relatedly, all of the reviewers note Eicher’s lack of engagement with the existing literature that intersects with his book. Peskin criticizes Eicher’s “disregard of recent scholarly literature,” which, in his view, would have enhanced rather than weighed down *Raising the Flag*. Armstrong similarly emphasizes ways in which Eicher could have drawn upon naval history — Armstrong’s area of expertise — more fruitfully.
Armstrong asserts that *Raising the Flag* is based on “solid research.” Yet, Eicher is inconsistent in the deftness with which he treats his sources. He utilizes Samuel Shaw’s diplomatic correspondence well but in other instances drifts toward merely recounting these diplomats’ travelogues without any critical analysis. Peskin criticizes Eicher for what he terms his “tunnel vision” with regard to primary sources, i.e., the extensive diaries and correspondences upon which the accounts are based. In Peskin’s view, Eicher’s “lack of critical distance” renders some of his chapters overly laudatory and flat. For Peskin, a more nuanced portrayal would have revealed the degree to which some of these diplomats were “irritable, petty, and vituperative.”

Eicher’s book is structured such that each chapter is organized around an envoy and the post in which he served (yes, they were all men). Phelps is frustrated that Eicher did not explain his method of selecting the envoys he profiled, while Peskin suggests Eicher’s selection may have been driven by the available sources. Regardless of the reason, greater openness about the author’s decisions would have aided our understanding of these envoys as representative or not of the broader community of American diplomats at the time.

In questioning Eicher’s choices, Phelps contends that early American diplomats in Texas and Hawaii warranted his attention. Her broader argument regarding selection is that *Raising the Flag* would have benefited from the inclusion of an envoy serving in a European capital. These envoys’ diaries and correspondence reveal much about the politics and societies of their postings. For Phelps, an American representative in Europe would have offered an important comparison in order to assess how early American ideas about race and culture shaped their perceptions. *Raising the Flag* would also have benefited from comparing how different the struggles of early American diplomats were, in terms of communication, negotiation, and effectiveness, from other diplomats of the time.

Surprisingly, given the alien places in which these early envoys found themselves, Eicher pays very little attention to issues of race, gender, or religion. Peskin and Phelps note that these early envoys subscribe to clear ideas of American exceptionalism, which Eicher could have foregrounded more explicitly. For Phelps, Eicher needed to explore these diplomats’ uncritical beliefs that U.S. social customs and diplomatic practices were superior to those
they encountered in their postings. In her view, Eicher’s lack of attention to identity — whether national, racial, or gender — fatally weakens this book, rendering it not much more than a collection of engaging anecdotes.

Despite the book’s shortcomings, each of the reviewers emphasize that there remains much to be gained from reading Raising the Flag, with Armstrong noting that the book’s contributions “commend [it] to various audiences” and Peskin asserting that it will serve as a “stimulus to further scholarship.”

Eicher’s book shows how far the U.S. foreign service has progressed from its early years: The contrast to the department’s modern-day professionalized and diverse workforce is striking. His account also, at least implicitly, reveals how U.S. power in the world has evolved. And readers of Raising the Flag can see for themselves how changes in technology have facilitated the work of U.S. diplomats in subsequent years. Those frustrated with foreign policy delivered via tweet will perhaps even discover nostalgia for the slow pace with which missives from Washington traveled to these early envoys.


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Book Review Roundtable: Raising the Flag
2. The Seas of Early American Diplomacy

By Benjamin Armstrong

On the morning of May 9, 1804, James Leander Cathcart climbed to the deck of the USS Constitution from a small harbor boat. The 44-gun frigate and flagship of the U.S. Mediterranean Squadron was anchored at Naples after arriving the night before. Cathcart asked the officer of the deck for Commodore Edward Preble, the officer leading the American war against the North African sultanate of Tripoli. Cathcart had been the U.S. consul at Tripoli, but once the Tripolitan leader Pasha Yousef Karamanli declared war he moved to the Mediterranean city of Livorno. Known to the British and Americans as Leghorn, Cathcart served there as the American naval agent. In that role, he supported Preble’s ships by helping to find supplies and shot and powder, and conducted diplomatic negotiations with the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, the independent kingdom where Livorno was located (which consisted of the island of Sicily and the bottom third of the Italian Peninsula).

Preble had brought the Constitution away from its combat patrols off the Maghreb in order to meet with the prime minister of the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. Cathcart joined the flagship to help Preble with the negotiations, which he had arranged in order to obtain the kingdom’s support for the war. The U.S. Navy was less than a decade old, and Congress had not provided Preble with the small combatants and gunboats he needed for the coastal offensive he was planning against Tripoli. Preble had come north to see if he could negotiate assistance from Sir John Acton, the Englishman who served as King Ferdinand’s minister, and from the king himself.

After reviewing the plan together, the commodore and the diplomat took one of the Constitution’s boats ashore for the meeting with Acton. Preble’s diary records that they were “favorably received,” and after less than a week of negotiations and waiting, King
Ferdinand agreed to loan the American squadron six gunboats, their equipment and guns, and a detachment of sailors to help man them.  

The Kingdom of the Two Sicilies technically had been in a formal state of war with Tripoli for several years, but unlike the Americans they had conducted no significant operations against it. Cathcart laid the groundwork to gain King Ferdinand’s assistance, and then accompanied the commodore on his naval diplomacy mission to the court. Following the negotiations, Preble sailed once again for the North African coast to prepare for the assault on Tripoli, which would span the rest of the summer, and Cathcart returned to his rented office in Livorno to coordinate movement of the gunboats south and to continue his work supporting the American naval war.

The fascinating life and diplomatic career of James Leander Cathcart is one of the stories from the early days of American foreign affairs that Peter D. Eicher examines in his recent book *Raising the Flag: America’s First Envoys in Faraway Lands.* Ranging from the earliest moments of the American Republic through the antebellum era, Eicher offers readers at look at the diplomats who worked overseas to advance U.S. interests. In his introduction, Eicher tells the reader that “[t]his book brings together some of the little-known stories of the first Americans to raise our flag officially in distant lands.” The book does an admirable job of illustrating the breadth of America’s diplomatic engagement in a century that historians like Henry Kissinger have labelled as “isolationist.” It also gives modern readers an understanding of the lives that early diplomats led and the challenges they faced.

**A Glimpse of America’s Role in the World**

*Raising the Flag* is broken into nine chapters, each of which details the diplomatic career of a different State Department representative in a different foreign land. These individuals came from varied backgrounds: Military officers, veterans, academics, merchants, and

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6 Eicher, *Raising the Flag*, xi.

politicians all served as representatives of the U.S. government at different points in the decades before the Civil War. The geographical diversity of their missions illustrates the extent of American engagement with the world and in international politics and trade. From China to the Maghreb, South and Central America to the Ottoman Empire, America’s interests were global even in the antebellum era.

The subject of the first chapter hooks 21st-century readers immediately: Samuel Shaw and the first American diplomatic and commercial efforts in China. Shaw was a veteran of the American Revolution who sailed east to make his fortune and stayed in China to promote his new nation’s economic and political interests. Echoing Michael Green’s recent history of American relations in the Pacific, the chapter on Shaw illustrates that the intertwining of diplomacy and economics has been central to American-Chinese relations since the very beginning — although modern discussions of the “rise” of China often remark on the intermingling of American economic and diplomatic commitments in the Pacific as if this were a new development or a particular result of globalization and our still relatively new century. 

Eicher’s description of the living conditions and relationships between the westerners in the trade settlement of Canton, and of how the Chinese perceived the arrival of the Americans, offer fascinating insights into the United States and its place in the world. Even in the nation’s first decade of existence, America was engaged across the globe and was playing the role of interlocutor and broker of free and fair trade among competing powers.

Two chapters in particular serve to remind readers of the two-headed nature of American policy throughout much of the 19th century, when free trade and neutrality dominated America’s approach abroad, but an imperial outlook, based in what would become known as “manifest destiny,” drove decisions related to North America. In the first chapter, Eicher tells the story of Daniel Clark’s diplomatic mission to New Orleans and his involvement with the transfer of power after the Louisiana Purchase. In the second, the author details Thomas Larkin and William Leidesdorff’s mission to Upper California before and during the

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Mexican War. Here we see how the diplomats, who claimed to have a purely economic focus like those representatives sent further from America’s borders, became involved in much more, including local politics and coercive attempts to expand American territory. ¹⁰ Eicher’s narratives give nuance and detail to the duality of U.S. foreign policy: decidedly anti-imperial in Europe, the Pacific, and South America, but clearly bent on territorial acquisition on America’s own borders.

**What Does It Mean?**

Unfortunately, the author does not explicitly scrutinize the contradictions that these case studies introduce. Each chapter offers a well-written and compelling narrative of the diplomats’ personal history and their professional efforts on behalf of their nation, and is based on solid research including diary entries and both published and archival primary sources. However, Eicher does little to analyze these case studies for the reader. Other than occasionally pointing out details shared by some of his protagonists or their actions, there is no clear effort to compare or contrast the missions conducted by such a diverse cast of characters. Likewise, little connection is made to the foreign policy agendas of the nation’s leaders in Washington D.C. at the time, and explanations of the changing views of America’s role in the wider world across the antebellum period are lacking. This leaves readers with a sequence of enlightening and entertaining stories from early American diplomacy, but with little insight from either the history or the author’s long and distinguished career as a foreign service officer to help understand the significance of the events described in such detail.

Naples harbor in the early summer of 1804, when Cathcart and Preble were engaged in naval diplomacy, illustrates another complication for *Raising the Flag*. The chapter on diplomacy in North Africa skips over Cathcart’s work as Naval Agent and the support he gave to the Mediterranean Squadron. Eicher’s narratives include the appearance of many naval officers, but the characterization of them tends to be practical or tactical. Eicher casts them as combat focused warfighters or bus drivers simply moving diplomats from one place to another. Or, in the case of Matthew Perry, as “gunboat” diplomats who used only the

strength of their ships and threats of power. To highlight the vital work of Townsend Harris, the closing chapter on Japan dismisses Perry and the months that he studied what was known of Japanese culture and his elaborate negotiating strategy that took place over nearly an entire year in order to achieve the initial opening of Japan.\footnote{The book would also have been better served with a closer edit of nautical and maritime terminology, where several minor but noticeable mistakes are made.}

It is almost impossible to disassociate early American diplomatic history from early American naval history. Yet, Raising the Flag does just that, nearly ignoring the maritime elements of early American diplomacy. Practical necessity forced U.S. State Department representatives around the world to work hand-in-hand with the naval officers whose ships were deployed to the seas surrounding their posting. Sometimes, like in Cathcart’s case, they held positions as both diplomatic agents and naval agents. This was a cooperative and collaborative relationship out of necessity. David Long’s encyclopedic The Gold Braid and Foreign Relations demonstrates that for every example of tension or hostility between naval commanders and diplomats there are many others where diplomats and sailors either worked together or supported one another throughout the 19th century.\footnote{David F. Long, Gold Braid and Foreign Relations: Diplomatic Activities of U.S. Naval Officers, 1798-1883 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988).} This relationship, and the naval professional’s responsibilities as a diplomat and executor of American foreign affairs as much as a combatant, remains an under-studied part of American history. Unfortunately, it also tends to be an under-examined part of the 21st century as well.\footnote{Kevin Rowlands, Naval Diplomacy for the 21st Century: A Model for the Post-Cold War Global Order (London: Routledge, 2018), 1–7.}

Yet, despite this critique, Raising the Flag offers readers something that they are hard pressed to find anywhere else: a well-written and historically detailed survey of the practical elements — one might say the tactical execution — of early American diplomacy. In doing so, this book makes three important contributions that recommend it to readers. First, it is a valuable addition to the literature on the history of foreign relations. Second, it is an important effort to offer modern foreign service officers a way to understand their own heritage and a long view of the service that they provide to their nation. And finally, the stories collected in this volume help demonstrate the vibrancy of the history of American
diplomacy to American citizens and readers around the world. Any one of these contributions would commend this book to various audiences. Taken together, they make *Raising the Flag* an essential addition to the shelves of anyone interested in American foreign affairs.

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### 3. Raising the Flag but not Breaking New Ground

*By Nicole M. Phelps*

One of the endorsements on the back of *Raising the Flag* calls the book “mandatory reading for diplomatic history buffs.” If you are such a person — that is, a general reader, rather than an academic historian — then Peter Eicher’s book is indeed likely to appeal. Its greatest strength lies in its documentation of the presence of U.S. officials and private American citizens in the Pacific world and Africa prior to the U.S. Civil War, belying the
traditional narrative of U.S. isolationism in that period. Readers seeking an analysis of the significance of those missions, however, will need to look to other scholarship.

Eicher’s book is part of the Diplomats and Diplomacy series published by the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training, and Diplomats and Consular Officers Retired, Inc. The authors are all active or retired foreign relations personnel. Eicher himself retired from the political track of the U.S. Foreign Service after a career serving at numerous posts around the globe. The stated goal of the book series is “to increase public knowledge and appreciation of the professionalism of American diplomats and their involvement in world history.” *Raising the Flag* clearly engages that mission directly, surveying early U.S. diplomatic missions to China, the Barbary States (especially today’s Algeria and Tunisia), New Orleans, Argentina, Chile, Mexico, Cochin China (Vietnam), Siam (Thailand), Muscat (Oman and Tanzania’s Zanzibar), the Ottoman Empire, Tahiti, California, and Japan.

Eicher draws primarily on official despatches, travel writing, and personal memoirs produced by the diplomats themselves, providing anecdotal and biographic accounts of these Americans living overseas. In addition to Department of State personnel, the U.S. Navy features largely, and Eicher highlights the considerable autonomy U.S. officials enjoyed abroad because of slow communication between them and their Washington-based employers. His strongest praise is reserved for Townsend Harris and Henry C. J. Heusken, the State Department officials who negotiated the 1858 U.S.-Japanese Treaty of Amity and Commerce after months of social isolation and without the assistance of the U.S. Navy. Unlike other cases discussed in the book, there was no pressing practical problem that needed to be resolved via negotiation, making the diplomatic feat of Harris and Heusken all the more spectacular.

The public awareness and “appreciation” mission of the book series typically results in books that have a less-than-comfortable relationship with academic history, though, as an academic historian, I always think the books in the series are worth engaging. In a few cases, such as William Morgan’s *Pacific Gibraltar*, authors directly engage with academic and popular historiography to advance new scholarly arguments about their subjects. More often, however, the utility of the books from this series for scholars derives from the fact that they are the first book-length treatment of a particular subject — Charles Kennedy’s *The American Consul* serves as an example — or because they capture the personal
experiences of diplomatic personnel, such as in Margaret Bender’s *Foreign at Home and Away: Foreign-Born Wives in the U.S. Foreign Service*, which is based on oral history interviews.\(^{14}\) Unfortunately, Eicher’s *Raising the Flag* doesn’t really do any of these things. It is anecdotal, rather than analytical, and, as the figures in the book are long dead, interviews were not an option. The book does, however, provide a single-volume collection of stories of the first official U.S. contacts with governments in a wide range of geographic locations rather than require readers to look separately at the literature on U.S. relations with each particular country.

**Uncharted Territory**

The primary audience for *Raising the Flag* may be well satisfied with Eicher’s narrative, but for an academic historian of 19th-century diplomacy, the book would be improved by greater engagement with scholarship on the broader historical context in which U.S. officials lived and acted. There are several different ways that they could be brought into that context. Perhaps most narrowly, one could compare these “envoys in faraway lands” to representatives in the apparently nearby lands of Europe, Canada, and the Caribbean. (One also wonders why Texas and Hawaii weren’t discussed in the book, as they were at least as “faraway” as New Orleans was in 1803.) Are the people posted “nearby” fundamentally different from those posted “faraway”? If so, in what ways? Do they have different professional, socioeconomic, political, or cultural backgrounds? One might also extend the comparison to employees of the federal government more generally. Are the attributes of State Department officials posted abroad unique to men in their position, or are they consistent with officials in the Customs Service, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and the U.S. Marshals at the time?

In Eicher’s book, most of the U.S. officials have a firm sense of American greatness that contributes to their dislike of protocols in “faraway” courts that emphasized social hierarchy. What of European monarchical court protocols? Did the “faraway” officials react so differently from their colleagues posted in Europe? If so, what were the differences, and

what accounts for them? In some cases — Cochin China and Siam, for example — U.S. officials were repulsed by local protocols that saw high-ranking officials on their hands and knees before their rulers. Eicher provides direct evidence that, at times, the officers were frustrated or even bored with diplomatic protocols that prevented them from carrying out their missions quickly. In these cases, readers can see their commitment to American republican government and the forms of social equality that government facilitated. However, at the same time, U.S. officials were also often disposed to insist upon their own personal rank and that of the United States more generally, quickly taking offense if they perceived themselves to have been slighted. And while they complained about court and diplomatic protocol, U.S. officials appear to have been perfectly content with the naval ceremonial cannon salutes in which the number of shots was tied directly to the honoree’s rank.

In all of these cases, what is fundamentally at stake is honor, and that raises questions about masculinity and race. How did these U.S. officials fit with contemporary ideas about honor, masculinity, and race? The scholarship about such issues in the United States as a whole and within regional, class, and racial subsets is extensive. By engaging with works such as Joanne Freeman’s Affairs of Honor, Amy Greenberg’s Manifest Manhood and the Antebellum American Empire, and Matthew Raffety’s The Republic Afloat, among numerous others, we could begin to more effectively understand these officials’ actions.15 One might also ask why they were so often unable to realize and accept that what was normal at home was not the way things were done in other contexts. Given the importance of a few individuals in laying the foundations of U.S. relations with other countries, the beliefs and experiences about interpersonal relationships that these men brought with them are of particular importance.

Eicher frequently mentions that U.S. officials gave gifts to foreign leaders to aid the negotiating process. Putting this gift-giving in “faraway” lands into the broader context of diplomatic gift-giving would be fruitful. To the best of my knowledge, the literature on American diplomatic gift-giving in European countries is sparse, in contrast to the well-

developed literature on gift-giving in the context of Native American treaty negotiations. When giving gifts in “faraway” lands, were U.S. officials drawing on their diplomatic experiences with Native Americans? Or was there a convergence between Native American and European practices? If gift-giving between Americans and Europeans was fundamentally different than gift-giving between Americans and Native Americans, what would it say about American ideas of race if they chose to deploy Native American practices in the “faraway” lands of Asia and Africa?

Eicher also frequently mentions gold watches and jewelry as gifts. More research into where the U.S. government procured such items would be welcome. Were they purchased from Europe, indicating an American cultural dependence on Europe, or was there a well-developed U.S. industry, such that the gifts could be characterized as true examples of American riches and ingenuity? If there was a U.S. industry, was there a particular watchmaker or jeweler who had a contract with the government, and how did official patronage shape the development of that industry? Answering these questions would help to illuminate the development of the market for luxury goods and the potentially controversial role of the U.S. government in that development.

Finally, one wonders about how these U.S. officials’ sense of time and uncertainty related to that of their compatriots at home. Eicher is certainly right to point out that these officials had considerable flexibility to act independently because they could not rely on information or instruction from home to arrive in a timely manner. But it was not just U.S. personnel overseas who had to wait a long time for information to reach them, though their situation was indeed extreme. Back in the United States, Americans had to deal with similar uncertainty, especially if they lived at a far remove from major coastal or riverine ports. How did Americans at home in this period make decisions about their lives and businesses, knowing that information that could totally upend their plans might arrive at any moment? Were they culturally conditioned to develop contingency plans? Were they basically comfortable with this reality, or did it produce anxiety? Were they relatively more reckless than Americans today, knowing that official reprimand would be late in arriving, if it ever did?

Finally, how did U.S. officials abroad maintain their sense of what was properly “American” after so long abroad? When they explained the operation of the U.S. government to their hosts, or complained about slights to their American honor, how did they know that their information accurately reflected contemporary practices at home? By using definitions of “American” that may have been out of date, did U.S. diplomatic action overseas act as a conservative force on American national identity and politics, obliging Americans at home as well as foreign governments to continue engaging with those older norms?

In sum, connecting the accounts of early U.S. diplomatic missions to the extensive scholarly literature on U.S. diplomacy and American culture would increase *Raising the Flag*’s utility for scholars and for classroom use. The book does have the potential to spur scholars on to further inquiry, both in terms of of specific questions whose answers could be found in the archives and in creating a synthesis of American diplomatic activity in the decades before the U.S. Civil War. Eicher’s primary goal for the book, however, is to raise awareness of early U.S. diplomatic involvement in the wider world — and especially in the Pacific — and for the general reader, it serves its purpose admirably.

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4. What America’s Earliest Envoys Can Tell Us About Early American Foreign Policy

By Lawrence A. Peskin

Peter Eicher’s intent in *Raising the Flag* is to tell the stories of the first generation of antebellum American “envoys” (agents, consuls, consul generals, ministers, and others) in ports ranging from Monterrey to Guangzhou.17 He does so extremely well, and the product is a joy to read. However, his lack of attention to the issues that concern academic historians who study America’s relation to the wider world during this period will disappoint specialists.

Each of the chapters, arranged chronologically, provides a narrative of the arrival and activities of the earliest American representatives in a particular place, and is organized around the biography of one or more envoys. Eicher, a retired U.S. foreign service officer, has done an excellent job of picking an interesting, wide ranging selection of places and characters. His prose is always clear and accessible, keeping the reader’s interest and telling the story of a number of gripping adventures, often in exotic locales such as Tahiti, Vietnam (Cochin China), and Istanbul. While it certainly has its faults, *Raising the Flag*’s greatest strength is bringing to life this rogue’s gallery of early American diplomats that, while often familiar to specialists, will be new and exciting to more general readers.

A welcome additional dimension is the number of characters who make multiple appearances: Joel Poinsett appears both as an envoy to Latin America and as patron to David Porter, America’s first resident envoy to the Ottoman Empire, while Porter appears in chapters on Tripoli as well as Istanbul. Belgian-born Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout serves both as the first American consul in Tahiti and a French consul in Monterrey. These multiple appearances add continuity to the narrative and also provide a sense of the relatively small-scale world of the early State Department. Unfortunately, the lack of an index will make it hard for casual readers to trace these connections.

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Those who specialize in this era will probably be annoyed by the book’s disregard of recent scholarly literature. For example, Samuel Shaw, first American consul to China and the subject of the first chapter, has also recently received extensive discussion in Dane A. Morrison’s book, *True Yankees: The South Seas and the Discovery of American Identity.*\(^\text{18}\) James Cathcart and William Eaton, consuls to Tripoli and Tunis respectively, have received an enormous amount of attention in a number of recent studies on American relations with the so-called Barbary States.\(^\text{19}\) The story of Townsend Harris and the opening of Japan, the subject of the last chapter, has been told multiple times, perhaps most notably in Walter LaFeber’s *The Clash: U.S.-Japanese Relations Throughout History*, which describes Harris’s adventures in some detail.

Ignoring the scholarly literature may well have allowed Eicher to focus in on the stories of these remarkable individuals without what some may view as pedantic distractions. However, engaging with the scholarship could also have added significant dimensions to these stories. For example, the literature on U.S.-Chinese trade — in particular, James Fichter’s *So Great a Proffit: How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism,* — has recently emphasized the importance of Latin American silver in early U.S.-Chinese trade, an international dimension that Eicher ignores. Similarly, the vast literature on U.S.-Barbary relations has brought to the fore the issue of American orientalism, which would fit well with Eicher’s broader theme of American interventionism and would deepen both the chapter on Tripoli and on Turkey.

Eicher sometimes has similar tunnel vision where primary sources are concerned. Many of the characters seem to have been selected because they published rich accounts of their experiences abroad, including Samuel Shaw, James Cathcart, Joel Poinsett, Edmund Roberts, David Porter, and Townsend Harris. Eicher does, in some cases, also make good use of the amazingly rich and underutilized U.S. State Department consular despatches

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(the spelling of which he normalizes to “dispatches”). However, where published books are available, he tends to rely nearly exclusively on them, which, while contributing to a more seamless narrative line, can also lead to a lack of critical distance.

For example, Eicher’s discussion of James Cathcart relies heavily on a narrative of his life published decades later by Cathcart’s granddaughter based on a manuscript written by Cathcart himself. Not surprisingly, this is a pretty laudatory and self-serving source. Cathcart’s correspondence with others, as well as his portrayal in recent scholarly literature, makes very clear that he was a loose cannon and an often contentious and unpleasant personality. These negative aspects do not really penetrate into Eicher’s account. Similarly, though Eicher does use some State Department correspondence from William Eaton, he puts a great deal of weight on Cornelius Felton’s admiring 1902 biography, which contains a selection of letters, but ignores Eaton’s personal papers, which paint a picture of a much more irritable, petty, and vituperative character than we see in Raising the Flag.

Raising the Flag is not intended as a deeply analytical study. But Eicher does cite several themes that he believes are addressed by his narratives. These include “the extent to which commerce drove the initial American outreach to many countries,” competition with Great Britain, American expansion, increased naval power, and “the firm American conviction that representative democracy is the best form of government.”

It’s hard to blame Eicher for not developing these themes. Raising the Flag would be a very different project had he done so, and possibly not for the better. The question of America’s position in the world at this time is intimidating and difficult despite, or perhaps because of, the growing number of monographs on this topic that have started to emerge in the last decade or so. The difficulty lies, of course, in the very broad nature of the question and the relative lack of literature, particularly synthetic literature, addressing it in the four decades before 2000, a period during which diplomatic history and international relations fell out of

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20 Eicher, Raising the Flag, xv.
favor, particularly with early Americanists. Even today, there is no good institutional history of the early State Department, let alone the consular service.

But, perhaps more daunting, is the intimidating nature of the sources. The State Department records for the antebellum period are so voluminous that no single scholar could possibly read even a small fraction of them. The consular despatches alone, which Eicher uses in most of his chapters, fill dozens of large floor to ceiling microfilm cabinets at the National Archives II facility in College Park, MD. No one could possibly make sense of all this material, and any real synthesis will probably have to rest on future publications of specialized monographs.

What Narratives Can Tell Us About the Past

Considering the range of locations and types of situations that Eicher covers, it might be valuable to try to consider what his work tells us as a whole about the international context of early U.S. history and to identify some of the more important and potentially useful analytical points that could be pulled from Eicher’s narrative.

Although Eicher does not list it as one of his themes, one issue that comes through remarkably clearly is the disorganization of the early State Department. The fact that Eicher essentially has to invent the term “envoy” to identify the first American representatives in these places reflects the complete lack of systematization of a State Department that sent consuls to some places, and agents, vice-consuls, general consuls, or ministers to others without any apparent criteria. For example, Eicher notes that while the State Department listed Joel Poinsett as a “special diplomatic agent,” he described himself as an “agent for seamen and commerce.” Beyond that, the fact that many of Eicher’s characters were never sent by the State Department but, like Samuel Shaw in China and Daniel Clark in New Orleans, just happened to volunteer their services after arriving in a location, further underlines the lack of a systematic approach. Finally, envoy after envoy in Eicher’s accounts bemoans the State Department’s lack of response to their communications, with some even waiting years for word from Washington. No wonder these envoys regularly acted on their own authority rather than on directions from their superiors.

22 Eicher, *Raising the Flag*, 105.
The picture of American expansion and intervention that emerges from *Raising the Flag* is more complex than Eicher’s introduction suggests. Several chapters, particularly those taking place in North and South America, portray envoys who actively attempted to expand American power. This is perhaps most true of Joel Poinsett, special agent to Buenos Aires, Chile, and Peru and later minister plenipotentiary to Mexico. Eicher titles this chapter “Inventing Interventionism,” due to Poinsett’s active role in encouraging revolution and independence in all of these places. Similarly, Daniel Clark, American vice-consul to New Orleans, and Thomas Larkin, consul to Monterrey, took aggressive action to ensure American control of Louisiana and California.

Yet, many of Eicher’s other characters, particularly those located outside the Americas, seem to exemplify American weakness rather than a spirit of intervention. Eicher makes much of Edmund Roberts’ commercial treaties with Siam and Muscat as “symbolic of a change in the direction of American foreign policy toward a more activist approach,” yet a close reading of Roberts’ interactions with these countries suggests that their rulers mostly were just happy to have a treaty with the United States as an alternative to trade with the more overpowering French and British empires, and, as Eicher also shows, Roberts failed miserably in Cochin China (modern day Vietnam).

Similarly, commercial treaties with Japan and Tahiti also could be seen as efforts by those countries to find a safe alternative to the great powers of the day. In Tahiti in particular, Eicher notes that, “Unlike the Americans, other powers showed little reluctance to intervene politically in the islands.” In the Ottoman empire, David Porter, treating his job more or less as a sinecure, showed absolutely no interest in reporting on geopolitical developments let alone encouraging intervention. In China, Shaw depended on assistance from the French even to find his way to Guangzhou. What all of this suggests is that, outside of the Americas, the United States remained quite impotent. Envoys focused on establishing trade where possible but had little interest in or ability to intimidate the foreign officials with whom they interacted.

If most envoys had little incentive or wherewithal to intervene, Eicher’s narratives do demonstrate that they were already becoming American exceptionalists, who viewed other

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23 Eicher, *Raising the Flag*, 165.
countries’ governments with republican disdain. Shaw found that the Chinese were subject to “every species of oppression.”\textsuperscript{25} Roberts concluded that the government of Cochin China was “thoroughly despotic” and its emperor “an ignorant, bloody savage.”\textsuperscript{26} Although many aspects of Japanese culture impressed him, Harris found the government to be “a rigid despotism, with inflexible laws.”\textsuperscript{27} These hints suggest that where America was weakest, its representatives became most critical of foreign “despotism,” a relationship that certainly bears further investigation.

For scholars, perhaps the greatest contribution of Eicher’s work could be as a stimulus to further scholarship. We need many more focused monographs on the people who “raised the flag,” monographs that ask questions such as: “How did early envoys shape American exceptionalism and imperialism?”; “What effect did State Department disorganization have on American foreign policy?”; and “Was there a connection between early commercial diplomacy and later interventionist behavior?” Doubtless, there are many more questions to be asked and answered and many more characters to be discovered or re-discovered in a field that has been woefully understudied until very recently.

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\textsuperscript{25} Eicher, \textit{Raising the Flag}, 27.
\textsuperscript{26} Eicher, \textit{Raising the Flag}, 154.
\textsuperscript{27} Eicher, \textit{Raising the Flag}, 318.