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Michael A. Verney. "The Universal Yankee Nation': Proslavery Exploration in South America, 1850–1860." *Diplomatic History* 44:2 (April 2020): 337–364. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/dh/dhz067>.

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Michael A. Verney's article is an exciting contribution to a growing wave of scholarship that gives new focus to the international and hemispheric dimensions of the antebellum United States, the sectional crisis, and the origins of the American Civil War. Analyzing U.S. Navy expeditions to the Amazon River and Rio de la Plata in the 1850s, Verney argues that U.S. proslavery foreign policy reached as far South as Argentina, and that flirtation with imperial expansion into South America was a serious, substantive federal government policy enjoying popular support, rather than "a passing fancy for proslavery elites" (338).

Though proslavery and white supremacist sentiment enjoyed currency throughout the Americas in the 1850s, Verney argues that U.S. policymakers did not envision their hemispheric proslavery efforts as international collaborations among equals. Whatever their professed intentions of friendly, collaborative development, U.S. policymakers and Naval commanders saw both South American expeditions in nakedly imperial terms as hopes for U.S. slavery's further continental expansion appeared increasingly threatened after the Mexican-American war.

Verney draws on the official, public claims of U.S. politicians and diplomats and contrasts them with the private correspondences of those same figures to reveal the diplomatic sleight-of-hand and genuine intrigue at play for figures like U.S. Navy Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury, a pioneer in the field of Oceanography and the chief architect of the U.S. Navy's plan to prepare the Amazon region for annexation. This analysis of both the Amazon and Rio de la Plata expeditions amply supports Verney's second core argument, "that naval imperialists sought to disguise their intentions in ways that would appeal to their South American hosts" (339).

Intellectual history plays a key role in this work, as Verney skillfully teases out the varied forms that white supremacist ideology took throughout the Americas, and how the racist visions of the future that were promoted by elites in the U.S., Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina, and Bolivia overlapped, contradicted each other, and tensely coexisted. Brazilian elites, for example, believed that "whitening"—the literal lightening of the national population through encouraging European immigration and intermarriage—was a key to national development, which made U.S. dreams of white U.S. citizens settling and developing the Amazon River Basin at least superficially appealing (345). But the U.S. vision of a "whitened" and "settled" Amazonia carried with it a contempt for the imagined indolence of Latin American creole elites, and a thinly-veiled confidence that superior Anglo-Saxon specimens emigrating from the U.S. would not just accelerate national development, but pave the way for annexation (348-349).

In both visions of whitening and development, the perceived necessity of black enslaved workers was a contradiction that provoked little anxiety or comment from elite thinkers. Quotations pulled from Maury's record of the Amazon expedition provide a fascinating glimpse into the mind of a slaveholding man of science. Unsurprising is Maury's conviction that only enslaved African workers, under white domination, were physically capable of performing heavy agricultural labor in the

tropical region. More unexpected is Maury's belief that jerky made from local manatees could provide a cheap, abundant food source for enslaved workers (349).

Boosters of the U.S. Navy's 1853 expedition to the Rio de la Plata, commanded by Lieutenant Thomas Jefferson Page, couched its proslavery goals in the language of science, commerce, and mutually beneficial national development, just as Maury had in his Amazon expedition. Verney points to the intriguing fact that this expedition, perhaps because its leaders more successfully masked their intentions, enjoyed the support of many ostensibly anti-slavery Northerners, particularly merchants (354). Verney leaves open the question of why anti-slavery businessmen threw their support behind a proslavery expedition, though he gestures broadly at some possibilities, including Northern industry's inextricability from American slavery. The article's source base—largely official U.S. government documents and private correspondences of U.S. policymakers and government agents¹—is ill suited to answering this question, but scholars interested in the extensive economic relations connecting the Northern and Southern United States should take note and consider probing this topic further.

A solid base of secondary literature supports Verney's efforts to outline the "powerful international trends" that shaped U.S. aspirations and their reception in Latin America (364).² There is little reason to doubt Verney's contention that Latin American elites sought close relations with the U.S. while remaining largely skeptical of their northern neighbor's intentions. And Verney amply supports his claim that U.S. arrogance and the expansionist precedent of its aggressive war of conquest against Mexico doomed the dream of a U.S.-led South American empire of slavery. Page's outrageous imperiousness and aggression in the Rio de la Plata expedition –and the certainty that this alienated potential Paraguayan collaborators – is clear from his own writings. A thorough analysis of Latin American elites' investment in national development and their skepticism of the U.S. as a partner, however, will require a different primary source base, one that uses documents produced by Latin American elites in order to even more thoroughly incorporate those powerful international trends into this story. Verney's article makes for an excellent foundation for these future studies.

Like other recent works on the U.S. Sectional Crisis, Verney's article argues that antebellum Northern and Southern interests were intertwined and that slaveholders had a near-stranglehold on the levers of power in the U.S. federal government before 1860. It builds on the work of scholars like Matthew Karp, who explored the proslavery focus of antebellum U.S. foreign policy and the global ambitions of slaveholders, and Daniel Rood, who analyzed the intellectual networks and forward-looking technological innovations of slaveholders in a "Greater Caribbean" stretching from Virginia to Brazil.³ And like these and other recent works, it resurrects the question of how and why the American Civil War occurred.⁴ An intriguing possibility raised here is that Latin American resistance to U.S. expansionism closed off another safety-valve for U.S. slaveholder anxieties. Verney thus points the way towards valuable new studies of diplomacy in the

¹ As in William Lewis Herndon and Lardner Gibbon, *Exploration of the Valley of the Amazon: Made Under Direction of the Navy Department*, 2 vols. (Washington D.C.: Robert Armstrong, 1853-1854), and Matthew Fontaine Maury to William Lewis Herndon, April 20, 1850, reprinted in Donald Marquand Dozer, "Matthew Fontaine Maury's Letter of Instruction to William Lewis Herndon," *The Hispanic American Historical Review* 28:2 (1948): 212-228.

² Such as Jeffrey Lesser, *Immigration, Ethnicity, and National Identity in Brazil, 1808 to the Present* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018); Daniel Rood, *The Reinvention of Atlantic Slavery: Technology, Labor, Race, and Capitalism in the Greater Caribbean* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁴ Such as Thavolia Glymph, *The Women's Fight: the Civil War's Battles for Home, Freedom, and Nation* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2020), and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2017).

Americas, and asks us to reconsider how Latin American elites and policymakers understood and shaped their relationship to the United States.

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