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Introduction

From the inception of the republic to the Civil War, a particular set of circumstances drove early U.S. diplomacy.

First, consistent with President George Washington's farewell precept of "no entangling alliances," the United States eschewed political involvement—at least nominally—in the affairs of foreign states. Instead, it focused on furthering legitimate American commerce abroad. Legitimacy was interpreted in favor of American merchants, shipmasters, and supercargoes (officers in charge of cargo) and their desires, of course. Foreigners who frustrated such purposes, or appeared to do so, were by definition suspect.

There were exceptions to this American golden rule, mainly in Latin America after the enunciation of the Monroe Doctrine in 1823 and, separately, in the form of an inexorable, underlying American compulsion toward continental expansion in North America. These, however, could somehow always be subsumed in a self-righteous public and official avowal of U.S. disinterest in the affairs of Europe and an abnegation of any national desire for extracontinental territorial expansion, except perhaps for Cuba.

Beginning in the 1830s, facilitating American Protestant missionary activities abroad became an added U.S. policy objective. Reluctantly undertaken, particularly by the navy, the task was forced on the State Department by the effective lobbying activities of Protestant missionary boards in this country. American missionaries abroad often invoked treaty provisos, where such existed, guaranteeing legitimate pursuit of American commerce or most-favored-nation arrangements, whichever best suited their particular situation.

Far-fetched though American missionaries' treaty interpretations might sometimes be, few officials in Washington were prepared to challenge them. Missionaries could usually muster some congressional support, even if it was uninformed. Nor did American missionaries hesitate to demand consular support, and even on occasion U.S. naval support, for their activities abroad. Resident American missionaries were often as assertive—at times more so—as visiting American ship captains could be. It is surprising that they so frequently had the influence they did in Washington, especially since their proselytizing successes abroad were almost universally nil. The nation still prided itself on its self-proclaimed Christian purposes.

Second, even as the U.S. government grandly proclaimed disinterest in the political affairs of foreign states, it was not loath to use its navy in the pursuit and protection of its commercial objectives. Nascent "gunboat diplomacy" was often a feature of U.S. diplomatic efforts, and the country's naval officers frequently acted as surrogate diplomats in negotiating arrangements with foreign governments. Having the support of ships' guns at their backs tended to facilitate getting what they wanted, but it did not always lead to enduring success.

Third, again in order to demonstrate political noninvolvement in foreign affairs, incipient U.S. diplomacy was conducted for many years on the cheap. The nation's diplomatic representatives, whether resident or itinerant, were customarily given the lowest feasible diplomatic ranks. Invariably, too, they were underfunded in terms of personal salaries, staffs, representation expenses, contingent expenses for expected presents to foreign leaders, and so on.

In the eyes of Congress, diplomacy might be a requisite adjunct of independence, but it was nevertheless held in low esteem. Successive administrations had to reckon with the likelihood of consistently inadequate financial appropriations to achieve the nation's foreign policy objectives. Prying money for effective diplomacy from Congress was not an easy task, and most administrations were unwilling to invest much effort in unloosening congressional purse strings for diplomatic needs.

Fourth, in contrast to their modern-day successors who receive instructions from their home offices daily, early American diplomats and consuls had to perform their duties largely on their own. Communications, long dependent entirely on sailing vessels, were excruciatingly slow. It might take six months or more, for example, for a message from the State Department to reach its itinerant diplomatic representative or its consuls in Southeast Asia, and dispatches to Washington took just as long. The occasional instructions they did receive were usually general in nature and represented parameters within which they had to work. Thus, much depended on the judgment and the skill of these representatives. Whatever they did, they had to reckon with the likelihood of some criticism from home.

Europe and Latin America, including the West Indies, were the geographic areas of prime concern to the fledgling United States. To be sure, American merchantmen and whalers visited countries east of the Cape of Good Hope and in the Pacific long before the United States evinced official interest there. The U.S. flag, in the symbolic form of treaties and consulates abroad, tended to follow American trade rather than the other way around, as British tradition asserted.

In pursuit of mercantile objectives, American consuls and commercial agents for years outnumbered diplomats. Generally speaking, they were merchant consuls appointed by the State Department, but they retained their associations with commercial principals at home. Their loyalties were understandably divided between private and official responsibilities. Since private trade secured their livelihoods, small wonder that their consular duties often took second place and were sometimes used to further personal and company interests. The system was organically flawed and lent itself to abuse (which eventually spelled its demise). Unless they were naval officers, itinerant and temporary U.S. diplomats were usually also drawn from this merchant strata.

Edmund Q. Roberts, the subject of this study, labored in this diplomatic milieu. A merchant from Portsmouth, New Hampshire, who once had been reasonably prosperous but had fallen on hard times, he used family connections to obtain a consulship in British Guiana (now the independent nation of Guyana), which he never took up, and then, years later, a roving diplomatic assignment as commissioner and subsequently as a special agent.

In his diplomatic capacity, he was tasked with ascertaining the terms on which American merchantmen might be received in various Indian Ocean and Southeast Asian polities and, if possible, negotiating commercial treaties with those states. An earlier private venture to Zanzibar (which had been marginal from a commercial point of view) and his subsequent efforts in Washington to promote a treaty with the ruler of Muscat and Oman (who also had suzerainty over much of East Africa) were contingent factors in his designation. Even more so was the support of a New Hampshire senator, Levi Woodbury, who, fortuitously for Roberts, became secretary of the navy at exactly the right time.

Roberts pioneered U.S. diplomatic dialogue—as opposed to consular relationships—with a limited number of states in the Indian Ocean and Southeast Asia. He succeeded in negotiating the first U.S. commercial treaties with the ruler of Muscat and Oman and with the king of Siam (Thailand), although he was unable to conclude a treaty with Cochin China, as Vietnam was then called. After having exchanged treaty ratification documents with both Muscat and Siam, Roberts died of dysentery in Macao and was buried there. Hence, his contemplated attempt to open Japan never materialized, and it would be left to Commodore Matthew Perry to do so twenty years later.

This study is not intended as a biography of Edmund Roberts. Rather, its purpose is to disinter his memory and to illuminate selective aspects of his life—mainly, but not exclusively, his venture into American diplomacy "East of Suez" (the Asia-Pacific region). As a businessman, he can hardly be judged a success; as a widower and father of eight young daughters, his constant absences, whatever their justification, were regrettable; as a temporary U.S. diplomat, however, he deserves praise.

His experiences in Southeast Asia, in particular, were instructive. The State Department gained valuable procedural and protocol lessons from Roberts's reports, which it used in good stead with later U.S. diplomatic missions to Indian Ocean states and the Far East. The federal government discovered that, while the nation might preen itself on being a democracy, one that disdainfully rejected royal and imperial procedures and practices, its representatives had to conform to at least some of the traditional customs of the East in dealing with those distant and culturally different lands. Those practices, no matter how unpalatable and expensive , were essential to success. Perry's arrival in Japan, for example, combined costly pomp and circumstance with a threat of force.

Moreover, Roberts's experiences in Cochin China and Siam demonstrated the formidable linguistic difficulties confronting U.S. diplomats charged with negotiating treaties with Asia-Pacific countries. Problems of translation were omnipresent and serious. The texts of treaties rendered in multiple languages by foreign translators might understandably be obscure or ambiguous in some instances, yet diverse language recensions—i.e., critical revisions—to resolve ambiguities introduced uncertainty about which text would prevail in the event of disagreement. Future problems seemed assured.

Finally, the concept of time, so important to Americans then as well as now, had a totally different meaning for Asians, as Roberts and his successors would regularly discover. Asians would not be hurried.

Roberts's diplomatic efforts, limited though they were, set the stage for future U.S. diplomacy in Southeast Asia and the Pacific Ocean region. They revealed, sometimes graphically, what American diplomats in the East could expect to encounter. His American diplomatic successors, though they might not know it, benefited from his experiences and from the State Department's growing understanding of what effective American diplomacy in the East required. Gradually, clearer diplomatic and procedural instructions came to be written.

Not only did Americans need to learn the stylistic requirements of effective diplomacy in these distant regions; equally important, they needed to gain a more detailed geographical knowledge of these as yet poorly known areas. Roberts and his colleagues, not to mention those elements of the U.S. government that sponsored his two missions, suffered from the prevailing limited American geographical knowledge of regions beyond the Cape of Good Hope. For navigational and anchorage data, U.S. government officials, naval officers, and American shipmasters in the early 1800s relied on several English collections of maps and portolan (navigation) charts, first published in 1784 and periodically reissued with additions into the 1830s. Most widely known were *East-India Pilot* and its companion text, *Oriental Navigator*; and *The India Director, or, Directions for Sailing to and from the East Indies, China, Japan, Australia, and the Interjacent Ports of Africa and South America,* by James Horsburgh. Both publications were prepared by employees of the British East India Company. Initially based on the explorations of Jean Baptiste Nicolas Denis d'Après de Mannevillette, an indefatigable French maritime cartographer of the eighteenth century, these periodically published editions distilled evolving Western geographical knowledge of those remote areas. Nevertheless, useful though their revised charts were for general purposes, particularly for rudimentary harbor and pilotage information, they were sadly imprecise on provincial and political delineations.

This was especially true with respect to present-day Vietnam, where early European cartographers regularly failed to distinguish between Annam (now central Vietnam) and Cochin China (southern Vietnam). Instead, they applied the latter term indiscriminately to both the southern and central regions of that country. The Portuguese had first dubbed these regions of Southeast Asia as Cochin China in contradistinction to the seventeenth-century Portuguese foothold of Cochin on the Malabar coast of the Indian subcontinent. Subsequent European mappers unquestioningly adopted this all-embracing nomenclature.

Although Europeans used the appellation "Cochin China," the indigenous populations of these regions generally did not. Rather, Cochin China and its neighboring area of Annam to the north were loosely and collectively designated locally as Annam, after the dominant Annamese-speaking population. (Horsburgh claimed that the Chinese called Cochin China "Onam.") Within this broad area, there were at various times as many as twenty-two provincial subdivisions, extending in the early nineteenth century from the southernmost point on the Gulf of Siam, at approximately latitude 9°N, as far northward as latitude 17°N, where Tonkin commenced. The northernmost limits were extended as far as latitude 19°N, and even slightly beyond, in Emperor Gia Long's period (1802–1820), as he subdued and incorporated contiguous parts of Tonkin in his directly administered domains. Areas in the far north and south were entrusted to often fractious, semiautonomous, royally appointed viceroys.

The collective area designated as Annam or Cochin China had its own subdivisions. A map that John Walker prepared for the East India Company on the basis of a detailed report from English envoy John Crawfurd, listed the provinces from north to south: Kamboja (literally Cambodia, but including at the time the fortified city of Saigon), Bin-thuon (Binh Thuong), Nha-trang, Phu Yen, Qui-nhon, Quang-ai, Quang-nan, and Hué. Other European travelers recorded somewhat different prefectural designations, including the term "Lower Cochin China" for the southernmost parts of the country. Some referred to "Cochin China Proper" when writing of present-day central Vietnam, or Annam. Generally speaking, however, both Europeans and Americans used the term "Cochin China" for this entire area. Its people were generically designated Annamese or Cochin Chinese, regardless of ethnic or linguistic differences.

Edmund Roberts employed this imprecise nomenclature, as had his English predecessors such as Crawfurd and the British traveler John Barrow, who in 1806 visited parts of Annam—which he specifically called "Cochinchina." In his posthumously published memoir of his first visit to the spacious trivillage anchorage of Shundai (Xuan-dai, according to Horsburgh), Vung-chao and Vung Lam in Phu Yen Province, Roberts referred to the area as "Cochin-China." In the same vein, he described Turan Bay (now Da Nang Bay), farther to the north, as "on the northern coast of Cochin-China." The USS *Peacock*'s surgeon, W. S. W. Ruschenberger, who represented Roberts in meetings with various Vietnamese officials in Turan (Da Nang) when the American envoy was seriously ill in 1836, entitled his description of that part of his life "Sketches in Cochin-China" in his memoir. In fact, of course, Roberts and his colleagues were in Annam during their two visits to Vietnam, not in "Cochin China." The commander of the USS *Peacock* had Horsburgh's charts aboard and relied heavily on them. So did Roberts.

The failure of early nineteenth-century European and U.S. visitors to distinguish clearly between Cochin China and Annam may well be surprising to a generation of Americans who painfully learned the provincial separations of that heterogeneous country during the Vietnam War in the 1960s and 1970s. But geographical designations alter over time, and we need to be tolerant of what may seem to be the geographical lapses, inaccuracies, and inconsistencies of an earlier period.

Because Roberts is the subject of this book, I have adopted his nomenclature. Thus, with apologies to modern Vietnam specialists, I use "Cochin China" and "Annam" interchangeably in those parts of this chronicle that relate to Roberts's two visits to present-day Vietnam. Similarly, the terms "Cochin Chinese" and "Annamese" refer to the peoples of these regions. Roberts and his American and European contemporaries would have understood these designations as essentially synonymous. The Wade-Giles romanization system was used for place names in Roberts's period; I've added the modern Pinyin designation parenthetically after the first mention of locations rendered in Wade-Giles.