SPICE, ICE, AND PIRATES: EARLY U.S TIES TO INDONESIA

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Bumbu, es batu, dan peperangan di lautan: hubungan Indonesia-Amerika di tahun 1860an. Sejak terbukanya pelabuhan-pelabuhan di kawasan Asia Tenggara, yang diawali dengan dibukanya pelabuhan Batavia, sekarang Jakarta pada tahun 1796, kapal-kapal dagang dari pantai timur benua Amerika berdagang di perairan Indonesia, yang dahulu dikuasai oleh pemerintah Hindia Belanda. Komoditas utama yang diangkut adalah es-es batu yang dihasilkan dari sebuah perusahaan di Massachusetts, The Tudor Ice House. Secara rutin 2 atau 3 kapal dari perusahaan ini menjual es-es batu ke Batavia untuk memasok bar-bar orang-orang Belanda. Dalam masa perang Budak, kapal-kapal dari Union (dari bagian utara yang anti perbudakan) harus bertempur dengan kapal-kapal Confederacy (dari bagian selatan yang pro perbudakan) di selat Sunda. Kapal-kapal ini mengangkut lada dan telah dicatat sebanyak hampir 100 kapal orang Utara ditenggelamkan di perairan Selat Sunda oleh kapal-kapal orang Selatan, Alabama, Florida, Georgia. Kapal-kapal orang utara umumnya kapal-kapal dagang biasa yang tidak dilengkapi oleh persenjataan. Seorang kapten orang Selatan, Raphael Semmes, menerima bekas-bekas budak kulit hitam sebagai awak kapalnya dan ia tidak memperlakukan para eks-budak tersebut sebagai tawanan atau sebagai budak. Kapal-kapal dagang Amerika telah beroperasi di perairan Hindia Belanda/ Indonesia sejak tahun 1860an dan keterlibatan ini berlaku pada masa-masa berikutnya, khususnya pada Perang Dunia I dan II dalam perdagangan dan pada bidang-bidang lainnya seperti pendidikan, militer dan hubungan diplomatik.

In the National Archives in Washington, DC there is a letter from a Siamese king to President Lincoln offering some white elephants to help him fight and win the rebellion in the US. Since his offer arrived after the conclusion of the Civil War, elephants were not needed in the war effort. But this raised some intriguing questions. Why was the Siamese king interested in a war half a world away and how did he even know about it? How widespread were American contacts in Southeast Asia? Did the American Civil War have any meaning in the Dutch colony of Java?

Let's consider the elephant offer a bit more. Many Americans have been introduced to the exotic East, especially Siam of the nineteenth century, through the popular Broadway play *The King and I* based on Anna and the King of Siam, a book written shortly after the end of World War II as well as after Indonesia became a nation. In both, the widowed Anna Leouwens is hired by the Siamese king to teach his numerous offspring and the children of the court. What is widely known comprises only a small part of early US links with Southeast Asia. This royal tutor was not alone. Wives of American missionaries who also taught in mission schools aided her education efforts by teaching Siamese royalty as

well as importing books, school supplies and even a Singer sewing machine during the US Civil War when inflation was rampant and basic commodities in short supply. Yet it still seems highly unlikely that even a grateful king would offer to part with his warrior elephants for a strange war being waged in a distant land based solely on the educational efforts of a few women. Indeed, in addition to the work of missionaries, merchants and diplomats began to build US ties in the Southeast Asian region. These three types of early representatives of America not only established but also maintained ties with Siam, Indonesia, and other Southeast Asian places particularly during the Civil War period that is the focus of this tale.

At times the work of these three differing groups — merchants, diplomats, and missionaries — overlapped. Prior to the war the merchant who also did consular duties was a common sight. For example, when Joseph Balestir an American merchant in Singapore became the first American consul there, his wife had a bell made by Paul Revere, her father, rung nightly to remind American sailors that their liberty on the streets of Singapore was ended and to return to their ships before the curfew. In Bangkok the enterprising Reverend Dr. Daniel Beach Bradley who preached, practiced medicine, and ran a publishing house would also be the interpreter for American envoys, such as Edmund Roberts who negotiated the "Treaty of Commerce and Amity" with the Siamese king in 1833. As a translator the American missionary Dr. Bradley played a key role in this first commercial treaty with any Asian nation. Usually missionaries could ill afford to spend the added time and expense needed to represent the United States through consular work, but some did reluctantly. In 1856 due to the specific request of the King of Siam the Rev. Stephen Mattoon agreed to be the US Consul in Bangkok.

In contrast to Siam, American missionaries and consuls did not play large roles in the Dutch colony of Indonesia, but merchants did. Dutch Batavia was the first of the Southeast Asian ports opened in 1796 by enterprising ship captains and supercargoes from New England. Ice and spices were two of the first products that the United States exchanged with Indonesia. Sumatran traders did a booming business of exporting pepper to America while early sea captains trying to find a foothold in Asian trade began to carry huge blocks of ice from New England ponds to the tropics. Soon well-positioned Yankees tripled Java's coffee exports after the U.S. Congress lifted an import ban on this commodity. However, this growing trade dwindled during the war years. Trade on American vessels plummeted throughout Southeast Asia in 1861. In 1859 there were 80 ships flying American flags in Singapore, but by October of 1861 only two were spotted. The South quickly prohibited the export of agricultural products, such as cotton, from any but seceded state's ports, and the North retaliated by raising tariffs on coffee, sugar, hemp, and cigars. Fears that Britain would enter the conflict on the side of the Confederacy unsettled the markets that were suffering from a shortage of coin and the demand by the United States that customs duties be paid in coin, not paperback. Merchant spirits were further dampened with the reality of Confederate raiders who plied the Asian waters. Some merchants struggled to survive by operating under a foreign flag or selling their vessels to England. In contrast to this bleak picture both the Tudor Ice House that exported ice from Massachusetts to Singapore and later to Java as well as the American Rice Mill in Thailand maintained operations during the war. Another bright part of this trade picture

was that Southeast Asia continued to export tin and coffee to the United States and increased production of tobacco, rice, cotton, and sugar for Europeans as well as Californians.

Let's consider the ice business a bit more. Frederick Tudor of Massachusetts simply sold ice anywhere he perceived a market, not excluding the tropics. Two ice laden ships docked at Singapore in 1859. Editorialized the *Singapore Straits Times*, "no nation but the American" could conceive of shipping ice 14,000 miles from a Massachusetts pond to Singapore, and place Tudor's 21 inch square, frozen blocks, "within the power of every man on the Equator to become a stranger to swimming butter, lukewarm drinking water, and tough joints of beef from the slaughter house."[1] Tudor's Singapore facility consisted of an ice storage house and a "Cold Drink Shop," Stocked with 30 – 40,000 pounds of ice at times, Tudor sold ice for three cents a pound at Singapore. To increase business in the Cold Drink Shop, Tudor sent a soda apparatus by express in November 1861 and frequently added such delicacies as grapes, cheese, and apples to the ice cargo.[2]

Much as Singapore appreciated Tudor ice, lack of a dependable supply caused grumbling and competition from a locally controlled ice making machine venture. Tudor countered by proclaiming the "intention of the Company to keep up an uninterrupted supply for the future," and sending a new manager.[3]

Two ice ships arrived in 1862, two more in 1863, and a third in March 1864. But Singaporeans, able "again to enjoy our cool drinks," noticed a less cordial atmosphere at the icehouse. Tudor restricted business to but two hours a day and placed a five-pound minimum purchase on ice, with no explanation. After an ice ship arrived in October 1864, shop hours increased to five hours daily, but this was offset in public favor by "cash only" minimum purchases of 5, 8 and 10 pounds. Because Tudor lost $2,559 on this voyage, prices were again in 1864 raised on existing stock; as a result Tudor priced itself out of the increasingly competitive market.

In contrast, the Dutch offered "a liberal bounty" for every cargo of ice brought to Java. One Java merchant approached the American house of Paine Strecker and offered $60 a ton for American ice providing they could assure four shipments a year, each of 500 tons of ice. Tudor decided to enter the Batavia market and sent an agent who sold $51,500 pounds of ice.[4] But no Tudor ice ship followed in 1862. But Tudor did make a $16,600 profit on its Batavia account for the year 1864 and sent two more ice ships to Java before the close of the Civil War. A New England traveler to Java, amazed to find Massachusetts ice utilized to cool jars of well water for drinking, recounted, "that, thus, the cold of our temperate zone is made to allay the heat of the tropics."[5]

For both the ice houses on Java and the American consuls in Batavia, the war years was marked by a high turnover. Of all the Southeast Asian places, Batavia had the highest turnover rate for the years 1861-1865. Five different consuls served at Batavia while three consuls served at Manila, Bangkok, Singapore, and Penang respectively. In addition to their regular duties, these wartime consuls dealt with Southern privateers and arranged relief for destitute seamen as well as passage home for stranded officers and seamen. And busy these consuls were with the destruction wrecked by a lone Confederate privateer *Alabama* under the able direction of Captain Raphael Semmes. The Union naval vessel

Wyoming under the leadership of Captain David McDougal scurried around trying to thwart the *Alabama*'s path of destruction in the Sunda Strait between the Dutch-held islands of Java and Sumatra, a natural passage for all shipping between Asia, Europe, and America. Until sunk off of the coast of France in 1864, this Southern privateer claimed 69 vessels in a short year by combining speed with economy of operation and employing hit and run tactics against unarmed merchant ships. Two other Confederate cruisers, namely the *Florida* and *Georgia*, also added to the dangers of plying these waters and the work of the consuls. The *Florida* continued to burn and sink Yankee bottoms, 38 all told, until captured by a Federal warship also in October 1864. A few incidents will demonstrate how crafty and successful the *Alabama* was in disrupting American shipping in Asian waters during the American Civil War and the role that merchant consuls played.[6]

Even before the Confederate privateer reached these Asian waters and in a rare display of interdepartmental cooperation at the Washington level, the State Department sought intelligence from U.S. consuls about Confederate warships. From Batavia, Consul Pels described the situation. After Dutch officials at Caribbean ports proved lackadaisical in handling Confederate ships, the Netherlands government, according to Pels, delivered instructions for colonial officers to be more careful on the arrival of rebel ships. Pels obtained an agreement from his fellow Dutch in Batavia that should any Confederate vessel be sighted in the Sunda Strait, the harbormaster in Anjer, West Java would "telegraph me at once." Armed with specific intelligence, Pels could then notify any Federal ships of the danger to American merchant shipping. After only two weeks local Dutch authorities rescinded their agreement with Pels. Allowing Anjer's harbor master to telegraph Confederate ship sightings to Pels in his position as American consul violated Dutch orders for the "strictest neutrality" in the Civil War. Undeterred, Pels arranged for a close friend at Anjer to rapidly relay any information to him about confederate ships.[7]

While McDougal and the balky *Wyoming* were in Batavia on October 28 for machinery repairs,[8] Semmes, in fact, approached the Sunda Strait from the Indian Ocean on October 28, complaining that his cabin temperature reached 82 degrees F. Under false colors he had boarded two neutral ships and learned that McDougal had positioned the *Wyoming* at Anjer. Semmes recorded, "This is the first time I have found a pass guarded by the enemy, but the *Wyoming* being a good match, I have resolved to give her battle." Still, Semmes intended to stay on the legally constituted high seas, avoiding any violation of Dutch neutrality. In terms of speed Semmes had a distinct advantage. McDougal's ship reached a speed of eleven knots only when the engines functioned properly, an uncommon occurrence, compared to the *Alabama*'s thirteen knots.[9]

The *Wyoming* steamed west from Anjer, in a "hurry" on November 10 to check out a false sighting of the *Alabama* at Christmas Island, 200 miles South of Java. Almost simultaneously the *Alabama* entered the Sunda Strait heading in the opposite direction. Semmes had collected intelligence by boarding a French ship and then a Dutch ship to learn that on October 29 the *Wyoming* had been anchored at Batavia. An English shipmaster told Semmes that he had seen an American merchantman, the *Winged Racer*, two days earlier. Shortly thereafter, the Confederates spotted sail, put on steam, and chased. Two ships responded with

English colors. The third flew no colors until the *Alabama* fired a warning shot whereupon the American flag went up. Semmes had trapped the *Amanda* with sugar and hemp from Manila for Europe. Semmes disregarded a certificate from Manila's English vice consul attesting that "Ken and Co., British subjects, owned the cargo." He took off the *Amanda*'s complement, provisions, sails, and cordage, then burned the vessel.[10]

On November 8, Semmes anchored a mile from Flat Point at the extreme tip of Sumatra. Remaining at anchor until 4 a.m. on November 10, the *Alabama* chased a clipper, fired a blank shot, which brought out American colors. The raiders boarded the previously sought *Winged Racer* bearing the sugar of Peele, Hubbell & Co. from Manila for New York. Semmes placed the *Winged Racer*'s captain, wife, and child on a passing English ship, which agreed to transport them to Anjer. The American crew "at their own request" took their ship's boats to make for safety on their own, and added the *Amanda*'s sailors to the boats. Semmes then, "Fired the ship"![11]

The combined ships crews successfully made their way to Java, appearing at Consul Pels' office on November 12. With no money of their own or local agent for the ship's owners, Pels categorized the Americans as destitute seamen so he could expend U. S. government funds for their relief. He arranged passage for two officers and two seamen from Batavia to Boston at $160 each, an "exceedingly cheap rate." Pels sent most of the crews to Singapore where they stood a "little better chance" to book passage for America. Pells then sent a telegram to Anjer for McDougal, plus a warning on the *Alabama* to twenty-two U. S. consuls at ports in Asia and Australia. He confessed to the State Department that regardless of his citizenship, "I sincerely hope that the *Alabama* may be captured."[12]

On November 11, the *Alabama* let down steam to conserve coal. Semmes discerned another merchant ship's passing. He audaciously showed U.S. colors and got the Stars and Stripes in reply. The *Alabama* changed its flag to Confederate colors. A gun signal ordered the sailor to halt. It was the *Contest* that earlier had proclaimed its ability to outrun the *Alabama*. The *Contest* ran successfully from the *Alabama* for an hour and a half until a favoring wind died. The raiders boarded the *Contest*, removed the crew, and burned her. Semmes decided to hold the *Alabama* in the Java Sea for a few days rather than risk interception by the *Wyoming*. Semmes kept the *Contest* crew on deck, under guard, but allowed to sleep. One complete watch of the *Contest* had reason to feel great apprehension. They were African Americans and competent seamen who had had separate quarters from whites in the forecastle, but now were in the hands of the Confederacy. Some of them, "runaway slaves," expected to be, "drawn, hung, and quartered." In Semmes legal opinion, he "never regarded them as prisoners of war." They would be released like the rest of the crew "without putting them on parole." Semmes placed the whole *Contest* complement on a British ship. The British captain and crew treated the guests "with the greatest kindness" and brought them to Batavia on November 28, 1863.[13]

The *Alabama* had disrupted American shipping the Sunda Strait by burning three US vessels in one short week while McDougal who had been sent to stop this carnage was fruitlessly searching near Christmas Island. For the next six months the Confederate vessel successfully outwitted the slower Yankee ship that

continually pulled into various Asian ports for engine repairs and continued to wreck havoc in these Asian waters until at last captured off of the coast of France in June 1864.

Thus, ended the destructive work of the *Alabama*, but the work of merchants, consuls, and, in some places, missionaries continued. These US representatives maintained fragile trade, education, military, and diplomatic ties challenged by the U.S. Civil War. How US relations evolved and were challenged again during the two world wars of the 20th century is yet another diplomatic chapter on ever revolving relations with Indonesian and other Southeast Asian nations.

[1] *Singapore Straits Times*, 16 July, 1 Oct. 1859; Robert Sobel and David B. Sicilia, *The Entrepreneurs: An American Adventure* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1986), 65-71.

[2] Journal A, vol. 1: 18, 29, Tudor Ice Company Collection, Baker Library. Harvard Business School (hereafter cited as Tudor Collection); Wallace, 19-21.

[3] Journal A, vol. 1, p. 191, Tudor Collection; *Singapore Straits Times*, 10, 17 Aug., 14, 21 Dec., 1861, 15 Feb., 26 Apr., 3 May 1862.

[4] Journal A, vol. 1: 255, Tudor Collection; Paine Stricker & Co. to Reed, 7 Feb. 1860; 14 Mar., 14 June 1861, Reed Papers; *Singapore Straits Times*, 23 July 1859.

[5] Perkins to Reed, 28 Apr. 1863; Anthon to Reed, 23 June, 11 Oct. 1863, Reed Papers; Journal A, vol. 1, pp. 336, 339, 405, 434, 452, Tudor Collection; Bickmore, *Travels*, 31.

[6] Wyman to Peirce, 12 June 1863, Peirce Papers.

[7] Pels to Seward, 28 Feb., 14 Mar. 29 Apr.1863, Despatches from Batavia; Rush and Woods, *Official Records*, 2:128.

[8] Rush and Woods, *Official Records*, 2: 493; Pels to Seward, 14 Oct. 1863, Despatches from Batavia.

[9] Rush and Woods, *Official Records*, 2:777-778.

[10] Rush and Woods, *Official Records*, 2:778-779; Semmes, *Memoirs*, 688.

[11] Rush and Woods, *Official Records*, 2:779-80; US Consul Batavia Public announcement, 14 Nov. 1863, Despatches from Batavia; Semmes, *Memoirs*, 688.

[12] Pels to Seward, 14 Nov.1863, Batavia; The *Wing Racer*'s carpenter volunteered for the US navy and boarded the *Wyoming*.

[13] *Official Records*, 2: 780-82; Journal of clipper ship *Contest*, 11 May 1863, MA 656-1963C, Phillips Library at Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.; *Official Records* 2: 561-62; Semmes, *Memoirs*, 279, 693-94.

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