Elephants for Mr. Lincoln: American Civil War-Era Diplomacy in Southeast Asia, William Strobridge & Anita Hibler
Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006, 155 p., index, bibliography

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This curious book, which begins with events in the 1810s, emphasizes Burma and Siam but undervalues other parts of Southeast Asia. The title refers to the offer by the king of Siam to send elephants to the United States to help President Lincoln win the Civil War.

The book rightly discusses commerce, diplomats, and military actions in Southeast Asia. Missionaries are, for unclear reasons, also given prominence; in fact, much of the authors’ information comes from Protestant missionary sources. Explorers and scientific collectors such as William Louis Abbott and William Hornaday are excluded, possibly because their trips to Southeast Asia antedated the American Civil War or because neither of them was interested in Burma or Siam. Moreover, the Wilkes (U.S. Exploring) Expedition of 1836-1842 that visited the Spanish Philippines, Sulu, Borneo, and Singapore is not mentioned. The 1853 visit of Commodore M.C. Perry to Singapore is likewise given short shrift. In a lighter vein, the antics of Claude L. Moses, the American counsel in Brunei in the 1860s, in obtaining a lease of territory for his “American Trading Company of Borneo,” are omitted. The book concludes with the visit of the former president and Civil War victor, Ulysses S. Grant, to Rangoon, Penang, Singapore, Johore, Bangkok, and Saigon in 1879, on his way to Japan.

In order to succeed in early American diplomacy and commerce in Southeast Asia, much needed to be known about trade routes; landfalls for provisioning ships; the nature of entrepôts and their inhabitants; the resources, cultures, politics, and geography of countries; and more. Unfortunately, we learn little about these important factors in Southeast Asia from this book or how Americans succeeded or failed in obtaining such knowledge. We do learn about the activities of Americans in Southeast Asia, mainly merchants and missionaries, but Southeast Asia itself is presented only as a backdrop. Asian activities and viewpoints are largely ignored.

When the American south seceded from the north so that white people could keep their slaves, white American missionaries in Southeast Asia, including those from the northern states, had difficulty in explaining this barbarism of war and slavery to the local “heathens.” The authors report exhaustively in chapters 3 and 4 on the hardships experienced by these missionaries and their anxieties about the war at home. The importance of this information in the context of Southeast Asian history is, however, doubtful.

Chapter 5 presents material of broader interest. The Civil War had repercussions on shipping in Southeast Asia. Before that time, U.S. merchant ships had been numerous in both regional and global trade. Their scarcity during the war meant cargos sat in major Asian ports because of a transport shortage. American presence in world trade declined as its ships were sold to foreigners and Confederate raiders destroyed unarmed U.S. ships at sea, including Asian waters. On land, American commercial interests in Singapore fared better during the war.

Chapter 6 discusses the trials of U.S. consuls in Southeast Asian capitals, given that Washington had little knowledge of the reception and responsibilities of its representatives in the region. Moreover, some of the consuls were inept, or worse.

A few errors might be mentioned: Johore in 1879 had a raja, not a raj (p. 134) and Crawford is spelled Crawfurd (pp. 14, 139).

Despite the strengths in Chapters 5 and 6, this book demonstrates the meager extent of historical study on early American contacts and mishaps in Southeast Asia. While the authors have researched their chosen sector well, the book would have been a more balanced report if they had consulted other references, among them: Ahmad Sharom, “Joseph B. Balestier: the first American Consul in Singapore (1833-1852),” Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Malaysian Branch, 39 (2): 108-122, 1966; and G. Irwin, Nineteenth-century Borneo: A Study in Diplomatic Rivalry, ’s-Gravenhage: Martinus Nijhoff, 1955. Owen Rutter’s The Pirate Wind (London: Hutchinson, 1930; New York: Oxford University Press, 1986) gives a clearer account than does this book (pp. 10-11) of the events in western Sumatra that resulted in U.S. naval ships killing hundreds of “pirates” and burning down entire villages.

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