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Review Essay: At Last: Due Attention to Privateers—"Rebels at Sea: Privateering in the American Revolution," "The Untold War at Sea: America's Revolutionary Privateers"

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REVIEW ESSAY

AT LAST DUE ATTENTION TO PRIVATEERS

Anna Matilde Bassoli and Michael Romero

Rebels at Sea: Privateering in the American Revolution, by Eric Jay Dolin. New York: Liveright, 2022. 352 pages. \$32.50.

The Untold War at Sea: America's Revolutionary Privateers, by Kylie A. Hulbert. Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 2022. 240 pages. \$29.95.

Eric Jay Dolin has published prolifically on topics ranging across piracy, hurricanes, the fur and whaling industries, early Sino-American relations, and more. His latest book, *Rebels at Sea*, not only succeeds in telling a compelling story but also fills a noticeable gap in the historiography of the American Revolution.

Much existing scholarship tends to oversimplify American privateering as “licensed piracy” or simply a sideshow to the exploits of the Continental Navy. *Privateering*—the government-authorized raiding of enemy commerce by non-military vessels—was an accepted wartime practice throughout much of the age of sail. By the time of the outbreak of the American War of Independence, international conventions on privateering essentially had been codified; clear regulations described what prizes could be taken and how prisoners were to be treated, and privateer owners were required to post significant sums of money as security against the misconduct of their crews. While there were exceptions on both sides during the war, most privateersmen behaved honorably. Hardly a sideshow, American privateering demonstrably had far more of an impact on the

war effort than the young Continental Navy itself. In Dolin’s words, “American privateersmen took the maritime fight to the British and made them bleed” (p. xviii).

That bleeding took the form of countless British merchantmen captured; their cargoes included

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gunpowder and military supplies (desperately needed by Continental forces), trade goods, specie, and enslaved persons. These captures resulted in ever-increasing insurance rates for British shippers and war weariness among the British public. Exportation of sugar from the Caribbean slowed to give convoys time to form, and the number of new slaving ventures launched was reduced—all while Royal Navy assets were diverted from other stations to protect major trade routes. In Europe, support given to American privateers helped speed France's entry into the conflict. Over the course of the Revolution, American privateersmen variously languished on uneventful cruises, fought British warships and privateers, took prizes, were overcome by wind and weather, and endured captivity, and Dolin's book skillfully brings all these aspects of the Revolutionary War privateersman's experience to life.

Dolin also draws the reader into the many contemporary questions surrounding privateering in the 1770s. Was it wise for the rebelling colonies to issue privateer commissions? International law of the time granted that power to sovereign nations; sending out privateers could be construed as a premature declaration of independence. If the British treated captured American mariners as privateersmen instead of rebels or pirates, that could be taken as a tacit recognition of American sovereignty. There also were ethical questions to consider; with the Continental Army and Navy chronically short of manpower, was someone who went to sea specifically to profit from the capture of enemy commerce motivated by patriotism, or by greed? There were patriots who thought privateering a detestable practice, and others who thought patriotism and profit were not mutually exclusive. Whatever the question being pondered, Dolin presents multiple points of view expressed by members of the Continental Congress, foreign diplomats, merchants, and common sailors. *Rebels at Sea* does not shy away from presenting the American Revolution in all its complexity.

At the beginning of the war, privateering was encouraged at the local and pseudonational levels. Elbridge Gerry used Massachusetts's original charter calling on the colony to defend itself against the enemies of the mother country as justification for commissioning privateers; he suggested that Lord North's administration was an enemy to the colonies and Crown alike, so vessels sailing under the auspices of Parliament were fair game (pp. 12–13). When the Continental Congress finally authorized privateering in March 1776, blank commissions were sent to the individual colonies to be filled out and distributed as needed. Tens of thousands of American mariners took to the waves and quickly had a profound impact on British shipping. By February 1778, Parliament calculated that over five hundred vessels had fallen victim to the Americans, for a loss of some £2.6 million, or over a billion of today's dollars (p. 162). The *guerre de course* carried out by American privateers (with occasional assistance from

the Continental Navy) made the cost of holding on to the colonies prohibitively expensive for Great Britain, "in a manner which [Britain's] hardiest enemies had never ventured on in our most arduous contentions with foreigners" (p. 103).

Dolin tells a compelling story well. *Rebels at Sea* is a resounding success; in that sense it embodies everything a popular history should be. The material is presented in a way that can be read and enjoyed easily. Strategically placed asterisks define terms that might be unfamiliar to laypeople. Relevant images (portraits, engravings of events, period documents, etc.) are peppered throughout the book for added context. Well-organized chapters present the narrative in easily digestible sections, and the text is not broken up by traditional footnotes. At the same time, the rigorous nature of Dolin's research is evident, and it should satisfy the most demanding of academics. In so doing, *Rebels at Sea* challenges popular ideas of Revolutionary War privateering.

MICHAEL ROMERO

In contemporary scholarship, military outsourcing generally is understood as the employment of private contracting companies in military operations on the ground. Because of contractors' involvement in the world's most-recent conflicts, scholars often forget to trace the history of military outsourcing and its development in different operational settings. One of the most notorious forms of contracting in naval history was privateering. This established practice was based on a close interrelation between governments and private investors and became a prominent feature of maritime warfare, especially during the Revolutionary War. In her new book, historian Kylie A. Hulbert describes how privateers truly were the unsung—until now—heroes of the American Revolution.

The Untold War at Sea begins from a relatively simple yet crucial premise. The traditional narrative of the American Revolution, focused as it is on the endeavors of the Continental Army and Navy and the militias, vastly eclipses the fundamental role of privateering in ensuring victory for the thirteen colonies (p. 3). In the late eighteenth century, *privateering* was a common naval practice whose purpose was to hinder the enemy's use of maritime supply routes through attacks on commercial shipping. At its core, privateering was a private entrepreneurial activity in which investors outfitted vessels and entrusted experienced sea captains to take to the high seas to collect prizes under the authority of commissions conferred by governments.

However, during the Revolutionary War *privateering* took on a different connotation. Although the practice remained essentially a business opportunity, for this particular war effort privateering took on a patriotic coloration, becoming another way to fight for independence. Hulbert's volume focuses on this particular face of privateering. Hulbert brings the perspective of privateers and their motivations to join the fight into the spotlight, and in so doing introduces two crucial considerations to the historical debate. First is the role of privateering in the war effort and the actual geographical scope of the American Revolution; second is how the record of the Continental Congress's ambiguous behavior and indecisive support allowed the revolutionary narrative to ignore, for a long time, the crucial contribution made by privateers (pp. 3–4).

The first implication of Hulbert's research has a distinctive political and strategic nature. Because privateers engaged enemy shipping on the Atlantic Ocean when Britain dominated the world's seas, their war view was completely different from that characteristic of the battlefields on which the Continental Army strove. Their activities, indeed, knew no established borders. Possession of the *letter of marque*—the authorization that enabled them to collect prizes on behalf of the Continental Congress—meant that privateers could conduct their “warfare business” virtually anywhere there was British cargo to seize. American privateers exploited this condition, pushing the war beyond the borders of the thirteen colonies themselves, indeed right into the English Channel.

This expansion, however, came with significant political challenges for the Americans, and sometimes personal costs for the privateers. American privateers carried out their raiding activities in a world in which their nationality was yet to be recognized. This lack of international status for American privateers became the focus of complex interconnections between these maritime entrepreneurs and their representatives abroad, owing to the delicate balance the new republic had to maintain with other European powers (p. 66).

This uncertainty in which privateers regularly had to operate forms the bridge between the two primary historical considerations that Hulbert highlights. Given the gray area in which privateers conducted their activities, the institutional support they received from the Continental Congress often was insufficient. The provisions Congress enacted established a legislative framework within which privateers were supposed to act, yet it did not reflect the actual rules of engagement practiced on the high seas, among other ambiguities. This consistent lack of understanding is the subject of the book's final two chapters, which present the complex shoreside process that operated behind revolutionary privateering at sea. It constitutes an engaging investigation into the legislative and judicial hurdles that privateers faced once they came ashore.

From issuing commissions to creating a court system that could award prizes, the Continental Congress on the one hand and the separate colonies' governing institutions on the other engaged in a constant power struggle—a battle whose basic nature continues to form one of the most crucial and divisive issues in American politics today (p. 102). As Hulbert discusses in chapters 4 and 5, privateers' most significant challenges involved passage of their cases through the courts. Although the court system was supposed to provide order to the intricate and tricky process of awarding ownership of captured prizes, it became a battleground where privateers' interests became subject to the power struggle between colonies and Congress.

A significant effect of the years-long fights that privateers had to endure to claim their prizes was that this changed how public opinion perceived them, to the point of sullyng their popular image and casting them out of the public memory. Because the business of prize collection remained so unclear, privateers became associated with the economic exploitation of a war that most colonists believed was too important to lose. Ultimately, antagonism from the civilian and military leaderships and popular misconceptions about the motivation for privateers' activities overshadowed their actual service and the patriotism that largely lay behind their enterprises, resulting in lasting damage to the memory of their contribution to the war effort.

If readers wish to broaden their horizons between the past, present, and prospects of military outsourcing, *The Untold War at Sea* is the ideal volume to read. Hulbert's meticulous work combines depth of analysis with engaging storytelling—an accomplishment that one should be able to ask from any well-written historical book, but that few deliver.

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