

The United States' First Global Bureaucrats: Consuls and the Making of the Global American State, 1833-1856

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Panel 60: *Citizens Without Borders: Extraterritoriality, Citizenship, and the Origins of the Global American State, 1815-1860*

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A taped version of the entire talk is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZTe6lb-Lq3g>

A virtual discussion of this panel will also take place on Friday, June 19th at 2:30 PM EST. All SHAFR virtual conference participants are welcome to join at the following link:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/81521224420?pwd=cFdkamRpcXdVQTFQcklJWFNVZVNmZz09>

Meeting ID: 815 2122 4420

Password: Please contact Simeon Simeonov at the email address above to request the password.

Abstract:

On March 2, 1833, U.S. Secretary of State Edward Livingston inaugurated the creation of America's first global bureaucracy. In his comprehensive report on the U.S. consular system, Livingston outlined a detailed reform endeavor that sought to transform "the worst consular system in the world" into a modern foreign policy apparatus, the first such body in U.S. history.

As Livingston's bleak assessment of the state of U.S. consulship suggested, his reform plan was long overdue. For decades, U.S. consuls had complained to the federal government about the lack of salaries, unclear institutional hierarchies, and incompetent instructions from Washington, which hampered their representative duties in foreign countries. To put an end to these grievances, Livingston devised a list of provisions stretching from the outlining of consuls' hierarchical ranks and the mode of their remuneration to the minute matters of standardizing the consular uniform and regulating the manner of correspondence with the federal administration.

Why did Jacksonians, the champions of *laissez-faire* government and the ostensible enemies of a big federal state, advocate the creation of the nation's first global bureaucracy? I argue that the creation of America's first global bureaucracy was a complicated historical phenomenon shaped by *international* processes, such as the establishment of new Latin American governments and a trans-Atlantic movement to reform consular systems, as well as by specific *national* developments, in particular, the Jacksonian war on privilege and the institution of the "spoils system."

It is no coincidence that the Jacksonian movement for consular reform overlapped with the creation of new governments across South and Central America. More than anything else, the rise of these new hemispheric states in the 1820s presented new opportunities for consuls of the North American republic to avail themselves of the new markets and resources of an entire continent. The dated U.S. consular system was simply not up to the task. Such was the business-

like nature of Early Republic consulship that consuls were usually descendants of mercantile elites who financed their operations via the extraction of fees at their stations. The way in which this system operated was highly prejudicial, especially to consuls at ports with low commercial turnover such as those across the southwestern hemisphere.

Facing a consular service practically monopolized by merchants, Jacksonian reformers mounted an uphill battle to introduce a federal agency in which the public good and the “national interest” would not have to compete with the prospect of private gain. A chief policy in their reform arsenal was the “spoils system” by means of which Jacksonians installed their own political protégés in the consular office. Usually conceived as a national phenomenon, the “spoils system” had tremendous repercussions for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy across the globe. It pitted a new class of protégé consuls who championed federal salaries and clear hierarchies as engines for the promotion of an egalitarian, democratic “national character” against an old mercantile elite who regarded competency and affluence as the greatest safeguards of national respectability abroad.

Taken together, the decades-long struggle for consular reform demonstrates the dynamic way in which Jacksonians and their opponents created a modern bureaucratic state on a global scale. The making of the U.S. foreign policy state was not a teleological process akin to that described by Max Weber, that is, a state-making effort shaped entirely by the policies of central reformers seeking to standardize and rationalize state practices. Instead, Jacksonian reform of consulship was a protracted dispute between national citizens who deployed disparate visions of what constituted the “national character,” drew different conclusions from comparing their agency with that of European and Latin American states, and negotiated the way in which the “spoils system” institutionalized partisanship in the making of a global U.S. foreign policy state.

I would be interested in informal networking beyond the panel and connecting with other SHAFR panelists. Due to the scope, periodization, and nature of my research, my paper relates to the themes discussed in Panels 14, 19, 54, 66, 89, and 98. Beyond these connections, I see my paper in conversation with scholarship investigating the intersection of state building, international relations, empire, capitalism and slavery, and diplomatic culture especially in the late colonial and Early Republic and antebellum periods. I would be happy to be in conversation with any SHAFR panelists with similar or related interests.