The Evil Necessity

Common-place sat down with Denver Brunsman to ask him about his 2013 book *The Evil Necessity: British Naval Impressment in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic World* and the impact that pressing sailors into service had on Britain's age of naval supremacy.

The book's title, The Evil Necessity*, captures the ambivalence felt by most British imperialists about naval impressment. Why was the institution and practice so fraught?*

One argument of my book is that British statesmen in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries made a conscious decision to pursue a particular form of maritime empire. The idea had appeal for a host of reasons, not least

ideological, for it allowed Britons to square their pursuit of empire with their self-identification with liberty (a system of thought neatly traced by David Armitage in his *Ideological Origins of the British Empire*). The problem with a maritime empire—and any form of empire, really—is that it required (and requires) enormous amounts of labor. In other words, there is no such thing as empire "on the cheap": it's just a matter of who pays. Slavery was the primary form of forced labor that made economic production within the early British Empire possible. But impressment was also necessary for providing the maritime labor needed to defend and extend the imperial realm in times of war.

Into the early nineteenth century, pressing (predominantly) white sailors into naval service was far more controversial than enslaving Africans. A wide variety of pamphlets, cartoons, ballads, and other cultural mediums in the British Atlantic world attacked impressment for violating the principles of British liberty. I was surprised by how much this discourse reached and influenced the upper levels of the British state. Although there were certainly callous admirals and other government officials who simply dismissed the critiques of impressment, the majority could see the hypocrisy of building a self-proclaimed empire of liberty on the backs of impressed seamen. As an early example, in 1669 the famed diarist and naval administrator Samuel Pepys prepared notes for a meeting with James, Duke of York, the future King James II, who was then England's Lord High Admiral: "Impressing of men and its management considerable, first as it is a charge to the King, secondly, as it reflects on the reputation of the service abroad." To solve the problem, Pepys proposed ending impressment. James agreed, and the navy stopped taking men, but only briefly. By Pepys's retirement in 1689, the English navy had started to expand impressment across space (to the Western Hemisphere) and time (for the full duration of wars, rather than the original term of a fighting season).

Unfortunately, the trend continued. Rather than reform the Royal Navy's manning system, later British statesmen and legal authorities justified it to themselves and, they hoped, the broader public by partaking in the same discourse of liberty as its critics. The basic reasoning went that impressment might temporarily violate the individual liberty of the British seaman, but it was necessary in times of emergency (or "necessity") for safeguarding the greater liberty of Britain and its colonial territories. British statesmen further defended impressment in the name of liberty against more bureaucratic conscription schemes, especially the French *inscription maritime*.

I came up with the title of "Evil Necessity" having sworn that the phrase was used repeatedly by British officials. In fact, when I went back through the sources, I discovered that they used "evil" and "necessity" frequently, often in the same works, but never (as far as I can tell) together as "evil necessity." Still, I decided that the phrase best captured how early British imperialists came to reconcile the practice of impressment with liberty in the eighteenth century.

Do you see yourself correcting or repairing the reputation, whether among

historians or general readers, of impressment?

When I began the study, the topic of impressment had an extremely polarized historiography. One side featured British naval historians, most prominently N.A.M Rodger, who saw little wrong with impressment; it was a way of life for early modern British seafarers. The other side consisted largely of American social historians, led first by Jesse Lemisch and then by Marcus Rediker, who emphasized the misery and devastating toll of impressment and the seafaring life more generally. I found much to admire in the work of historians on both sides of the debate, and Lemisch and Rediker have been very generous to me. But my primary goal was to understand how impressment worked, not to settle once and for all the question of "how bad was it?" Instead, the question guiding my work has been "if impressment was so bad, why was the British navy so good?" My answer, not to give away the exciting conclusion of the book, is that impressment was that bad and the British navy was that good. Atlantic mariners despised the British press gang and did everything humanly possible to avoid capture. Hence, impressment was hardly an accepted way of life. Yet, once captured, sailors performed admirably aboard British naval vessels. Facing both the system of British naval discipline and the dangerous natural conditions of the high seas, they had little choice. But I argue there is more to it—that for reasons of professional pride and manhood, brotherhood with their crewmates, and self-interest broadly defined, impressed sailors contributed immensely to the success of the eighteenth-century Royal Navy.

This success was not by accident. I contend that mariners differed from every other large group of forced laborers in the British Atlantic in a key respect: they were not selected for their class, beliefs, ethnicity, or skin color but rather for their particular skill set—the ability to "hand, reef, and steer" sailing vessels. No doubt class contributed heavily to impressment; it is hard to imagine the same outcome befalling a more affluent or politically connected group. But class was not determinative in naval impressment as it was in, say, army impressment. The British navy sought skilled seafarers, and for this reason the majority of impressments always took place at sea.

I fear that some readers, particularly in the academy, will misinterpret my effort to understand impressment as an apology for the practice. I purposely try to conceal my personal feelings to avoid interfering with my analysis. But there should be no doubt that I consider the entire enterprise, however successful, a travesty that with some creative policymaking could and should have been avoided.

What are some of the most compelling comparisons, contrasts and/or intersections between impressment and the other, most extreme form of forced labor in the British Atlantic World, slavery?

Slavery is absolutely fundamental to understanding impressment in the eighteenth-century British Atlantic. This conclusion, as much as any other, opened exciting lines of inquiry and analysis in my research. First, in terms

of numbers, impressment was the second most common form of forced labor in the eighteenth-century British Empire. As I stress in the book, it was a distant second and never approached the horrors of slavery. Impressed seamen received wages (although not always on time), adequate food and clothing, and freedoms unknown to slaves. Most important, a term of naval impressment ended at the close of any given war—it was not permanent and hereditary. Yet, "slave" was the rhetorical term of choice used by impressed mariners and critics of impressment to describe the condition of being impressed. I think, as with American revolutionaries opposing British policies in the 1760s and 1770s, slavery provided the most powerful rhetorical comparison because it was the most horrible condition imaginable by whites. In my research, I discovered cases of enslaved men fleeing to the British navy to escape their masters—in essence, seeking freedom in impressment. There is no more profound evidence that impressment was a "step up" from slavery along the spectrum of freedom and unfreedom in the Atlantic world.

You confront the issue of sailors' agency and resistance—two important concepts in historical scholarship. How is your approach novel?

I had to confront the concept of agency in trying to understand how impressment functioned and why impressed sailors seemed to work to the fullest of their abilities on British warships. In so much historical writing—good historical writing —various oppressed and subaltern peoples only have agency when committing acts of resistance. There is no consideration if and when subjects of oppressive conditions might make a conscious choice to not resist—that is, to behave in a manner that might be beneficial to their oppressors. Obviously, these are complex issues that require great sensitivity, especially for scholars living by comparison in extreme comfort. I found a way forward by reading deeply in the literature on slavery. I was especially influenced by the extraordinary work of Walter Johnson, who has argued persuasively that we deny historical actors their full humanity if we do not consider the entire range of their actions, including decisions that might surprise or even disappoint us.

For a variety of reasons, relating to gender, economics, professionalism, and self-preservation, a majority of impressed seamen made the Royal Navy the supreme fighting force—on land or sea—of its time. I did not want to deny the agency of individual sailors in that achievement; the available evidence suggests that they took considerable pride in British naval supremacy. At the same time, to a man, nearly all the same seamen would not pass up particular opportunities to desert. Both things—resistance and compliance—could be true at the same time. The novelty of my contribution lies in applying this broader concept of agency to impressed sailors, but my approach is akin to that of other scholars who attempt to recover the full humanity of historical actors facing incredibly difficult circumstances. Whether in studies of slavery, impressment, or colonization of the Americas, scholars are increasingly realizing that the categories of resistance and accommodation present a false dichotomy of human behavior.

The Evil Necessity *is a history with nearly global reach within the framework of the British Empire, and you conducted research in an impressive range of collections. What was your favorite archive, archival experience or discovery?*

There are so many. Historians' lives today are generally so tame compared to the events that we study. I was able to live out some of my own wanderlust through studying early modern sailors and visiting archives throughout the U.S., U.K., and Canada. I cherish those experiences and meeting with so many of my friends and family in different locations, which I recount in one of the longer Acknowledgment sections that you will ever see. As for research finds, it is hard to beat discovering notes by George III in his own hand from 1770 at the British Library (originally, his library) on the 1743 legal decision *Rex v. Broadfoot*. The case was the most significant legal defense of impressment ever issued in Britain, and George III expressed his agreement by copying entire passages of the decision word-for-word. Around the same time, Benjamin Franklin was also in London reading the same decision. Not surprisingly, he came to the opposite conclusion of George III, determining that impressment unfairly violated seamen's liberties. Franklin recorded his thoughts on the margin of a pamphlet version of the legal case; the marginalia are reprinted in vol. 35 of the *Franklin Papers*. One of the only ways to make the practice fairer, according to Franklin, was to impress various British elites, including judges, navy officers, and the king! I love that story and use it in the Epilogue to frame the different responses to impressment by Americans and Britons in the revolutionary Atlantic.

The book's final paragraph references several paradoxes at the heart of impressment, ones that have trans-historical resonance, and claims that "the centrality of impressment to Britain's self-fashioned empire of liberty raised difficult questions that are still relevant." Does your book help illuminate any contemporary (and perhaps paradoxical) issues in particular?

As any good history class teaches, historians cannot entirely escape the times and places in which they research and write. And I confess: *The Evil Necessity* is undoubtedly a product of the post-9/11 world (although it was first conceived as a dissertation topic prior to 9/11). It is hard not to see analogies between the eighteenth-century British Empire and the current global imperial reach of the United States. In both cases, the state/empire in question professed values (sincerely, I believe) that it violated in order to protect those very values. As the ongoing debate over the U.S. national security apparatus suggests, it is a potentially slippery slope once states begin to trade on their values for a perceived greater good.

The other obvious analogy is to the human cost of empire, both domestically and for conquered populations. One reason that impressment continued at high rates for more than a century is that it was out of sight and therefore out of mind for most of the British population. Likewise, approximately 0.45 percent of the U.S. population has carried the burden of the country's foreign policy as military personnel since 9/11. I have great admiration for these men and

women—so great that I joined the U.S. Army Reserves as an infantryman during the researching and writing of my book (I have since completed my enlistment, without being sent overseas).

It is hard to know the exact solution to these different issues. The American ideal of an all-volunteer force, for instance, was born in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a reaction against European conscription systems, particularly impressment. Trading volunteers for conscripts today would violate one set of historical national values, freedom and volunteerism, for another, fairness and democracy. As historians, perhaps we cannot provide many specific answers. Yet, ideally we can raise the relevant issues and questions that contribute to more informed, historically aware policy decisions.

Further Reading

Readers interested in British notions of liberty should see David Armitage, *Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (New York, 2000). For Samuel Pepys' comments on impressment, see Pepys, "Notes from My Discourse to His Royal Highness Tomorrow May 14th, 1669 about the Practice of Impressing Men as It Is Now Managed," in *Samuel Pepys and the Second Dutch War: Pepys's Navy White Book and Brooke House Papers*, ed. Robert Latham (London, 1995).