MAKING AMERICAN NAVAL STRATEGY

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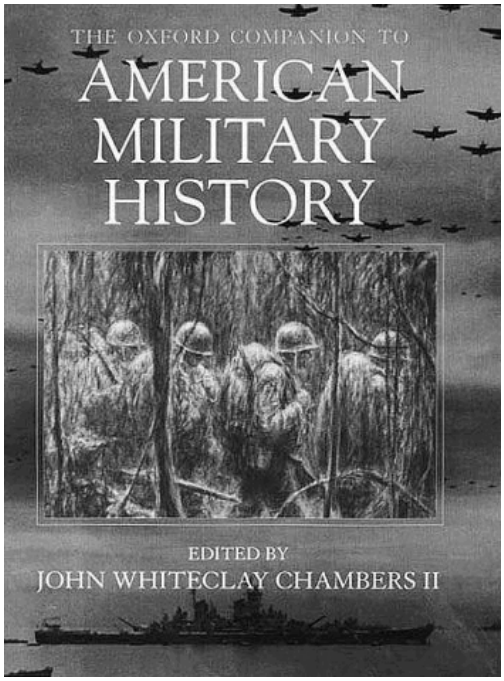
On the surface, Alfred T. Mahan embodies American thinking about the uses of a Navy and the exploitation of the nation's maritime geography. Captain (later Admiral) Mahan, ship commander, historian, and teacher explored earlier wars for their lessons about sea power. He wrote and lectured for his fellow naval officers, found an international hearing among navalists, and gathered a large public audience. His ideas guided the generations who built the navies before and after World War I, and his emphasis on the battle fleet still dominates the American naval culture. Mahan, like Carl von Clausewitz, typifies the strategist we expect to instruct us: a military professional whose rigorous thinking illuminates basic truths about war.



In Mahan's formulation, "strategy decides where to act." Yes, but the American strategic tale transcends the historian's record of admirals and sea fights. With the exception of the pre- and post World War I decades and part of the Pacific War in World War II, the history of American naval strategy is not Mahanian and only intermittently about full-scale war. The makers of strategy have often been civilian officials; their regular problem has been how to use the Navy day to day in peacetime and in small, distant skirmishes. When planning for war they have worked closely with the Army. Invariably, domestic priorities and partisan politics entangle military and naval logic. Why? Because navies are expensive. They take time to build and train. And once built, they last a long time. The fleet cruising on a distant station has been wrestled into place by a struggle among many actors, each favoring a different strategic calculus, few of them ship captains, fewer likely to have foreseen the contingency at hand.

An inattentive strategic culture was visible in our earliest days: "A disposition seems rather to prevail among our citizens to give up all ideas of navigation and naval power and lay themselves consequently on the mercy of foreigners, even for the price of their produce," wrote John Adams from London to Thomas Jefferson in Paris. Exchanging letters between their ambassadorial posts in 1786, a year before the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia, the two future presidents were discussing ways to resolve the threat to American commerce from the pirates of Algiers. Jefferson–later to lead a political party fiercely opposed to a standing navy–proposed an armed naval force. Adams–later as President to shepherd the bill establishing a small peacetime navy–judged that an attack on the Barbary ports was not likely to eradicate the threat. He held that, however unsavory, discussions and tribute payments were the better *modus vivendi.* "I agree in opinion of the wisdom and necessity of a navy for other uses" wrote

Adams, "…[but] I perceive that neither force nor money will be applied."

His skepticism was sound. It was to be fourteen years before Adams, become President, sailed the *USS George Washington* with a "peace offering" to the Dey of Algiers. A year later, with Adams defeated for reelection and the situation worsening, new President Jefferson shifted policies. In a show of force, he dispatched America's first "squadron of observation"–half the decaying naval establishment he had been left by Adams–with instructions to "superintend the safety of our commerce there, and to exercise our seamen in their nautical duties." Jefferson advised the Dey that it was "the first object of our solicitude to cherish peace and friendship with all nations with whom it can be held of terms of equality and reciprocity."

Thus are evident from our earliest days some durable traits: in the political arena, subtle, foresighted thinking by individual leaders, a shallow reservoir of public support, party politics which confuse positions and delay action. Also foreshadowed are a perennial preference for influence by peaceful indirection, for sailing fairly large, well-armed task forces in troubled waters with politically ambiguous instructions to cruise for "observation" and "training," and a preference for operations mounted far from U.S. coasts. Other inclinations rise from the inevitable gap between the politics which create the fleet and the circumstances demanding its use. The construction of flexible, multi-purpose forces is preferred over investment in smaller, single-use systems; the ability to invent winning tactical combinations with the forces at hand is valued above the rote execution of preplanned doctrine.

As Adams cautioned, we should not find too much rigor in these instincts for the use of a Navy and the exploitation of the nation's maritime geography. Inattention more than ingenuity, politics more than policy have husbanded America's naval resources. Frustrating as this intermittent attention may be to navalists, it accords with the national psyche. Save for the anomalous half-Century of the Cold War, American security strategy has been marked by a preference for other, more domestic concerns and by a parallel bias against the apparatus of standing forces, be they military and naval or latterly aerial and space-based. That bias has extended to thinking about the use of force. In over two centuries, the United States has seen only a few theoreticians gain a public audience and they often as propagandists aiming to create popular support for the funding of one kind of military force over another, e.g., General Billy Mitchell's campaign to supplant battleships with bombers. In the assessment of one naval historian, the writings of Mahan himself were "weapons in rough-and-tumble debates between proponents and opponents of naval expansionism, colonialism, and aggressive mercantile capitalism."

Secretaries and assistant secretaries of the navy, occasionally even presidents, have thought about making naval strategy their job. Benjamin Stoddert, Gideon Welles, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Josephus Daniels were among those secretaries or assistants to exercise their office vigorously toward a strategic design. Recently, Secretary John Lehman reprised that role but the Cold War rise of a national security establishment with a strong Secretary of Defense, a *primus inter pares* Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and the National Security Council staff in the White House have seen the political locus of strategy making shift upward from the Navy Department and the process become more leaderless than ever.

Among naval officers Mahan's emphasis on the primacy of the battle fleet helps fuel an enduring belief that the navy is best used independently, that it must be kept separate from the army. Without minimizing inter-service rivalry for funding, the record shows much more Army-Navy—and latterly Air Force-Navy—cooperation than myth would have it. Joint planning has been common and army generals have

sometimes had much useful to say about Navy's employment. Listen to General George Washington during the Revolutionary War: "In any operation, and under all circumstances," he declared, "a decisive naval superiority is to be considered as a fundamental principle and the basis on which every hope of success must ultimately depend." This was not mere theory. Though the rebel's navy never rose much above haphazard operations by individual ships, the course of the Revolutionary War hinged repeatedly on the duel between Washington's army and mobile, sea-borne British forces. Washington climaxed the struggle at Yorktown with the timely aid of a French fleet which blocked the threatening British ships. Stranded, General Charles Cornwallis offered the decisive surrender. Army officers ever since have closely attended their naval flanks, giving rise to a lasting struggle between two different visions of U.S. naval power. A requirement for the nation to go to war has usually found the Army devising ways for the Navy to transport and support land forces while naval officers instinctively incline to blue water schemes to defeat the enemy's navy and interdict his shipping.

Pick up the narrative at the Civil War. President Abraham Lincoln's successful "Anaconda Plan" by which the navy would encircle and help split the Confederacy was advanced very early in the war by Army Commanding General Winfield Scott. The concept drew on Scott's success during the Mexican War when he and accompanying naval commanders innovated a huge amphibious landing at Vera Cruz. At the end of the nineteenth century, Mahan famously pushed the balance the other way with his arguments drawn from history that the central purpose of a navy was to defeat the enemy's navy. Illustrated by Nelson's victory at Trafalgar, a successful sea fight led to "sea control" which delivered a decisive political outcome. Mahan-inspired battle fleets proliferated, but for the United States the Atlantic battles of World War I and World War II were shaped by the priorities of getting troops and supplies to Europe in the face of German submarine attack. As foreseen in years of prior war gaming at the Naval War College, fleet vs. fleet fighting dominated the naval campaigns of World War II in the Pacific. But even in the Pacific, naval operations were also tied closely to the progress of General Douglas MacArthur's island-hopping land forces. The Korean War saw the Navy back in close support of the land war; the Vietnam War drew naval forces into riverine and coastal operations not seen since the Anaconda campaign a hundred years earlier.

At the height of the Cold War in the early and mid-1980s these tendencies to favor "ship vs. land" over "ship vs. ship" strategy reached their apotheosis in the "Maritime Strategy." Devised by naval officers, the Maritime Strategy laid out in considerable detail the expected battles at sea when, at the beginning of a hypothetical World War III, the Navy and its allies would attack the Soviet forces defending the seaward approaches to the USSR homeland. The Strategy made it clear, however, that the purpose of the ocean fighting was to clear the way rapidly for direct naval attacks on the Soviet Union. By doing so, the Strategy argued, naval forces operating far forward on several fronts would both diffuse the Soviet focus on Western Europe and forestall Soviet attempts to repeat World War-style battles for control of the Atlantic logistics lanes. The Strategy delivered two key benefits: extrapolating back from the successful battles it proposed in a future world war, it found its central purpose as a deterrent against the outbreak of that war. And with that portrait of present and future success, the Strategy provided a politically credible template for the budget. Controversial as it was—the Army, especially, doubted that the far forward campaign would indeed safeguard its cross-ocean logistics—the Maritime Strategy was widely influential. U.S. and NATO military planners adopted its concepts until the end

of the Cold War rendered it obsolete, closing what some had called a renaissance in naval strategic thinking.

With both the Soviet Navy and the specter of World War III dissolved, the machinery of strategy making reverted to its habitual, diffused state. Funding for the fleet derived more from domestic politics and traditional preferences for big, flexible units; forward peace support missions, now labeled "operations other than war" resumed their central place in fleet tasking. What did not change was the focus of war planning on the battle of the fleet against the shore. Absent any significant high seas competitor, the post-Cold War naval strategy, titled, "…From the Sea," could, at least *ad interim,* tie its offensive capabilities into multi-service operations ashore and base its defensive requirements on landward threats.

From the pure, Mahanian world of fleet-on-fleet warfare, the U.S. naval profession has marched deeper and deeper into matters of peace and war ashore. Mahan's canonical world of seamanship, marine technology, and tactical competence, which held sway more in myth than history, has given way to a much more complex professional reality. At century's end profound changes in the international geostrategic climate promise to draw naval strategy still further away from self-contained battle plans. Ahead is an even more messy world where international political calculations and the civil, humanitarian dimensions of international security policy are added to domestic political and inter-service dynamics and all is infused with torrents of information. Also ahead is a world of space-based systems, long range aircraft, and remotely controlled devices that invade the Navy's traditional sea space. Reliance on strategy by muddling through in the era ahead—however much that might be the national style—seems unlikely to deliver the coherently designed and effectively deployed forces needed if the Navy is to continue to be central to American security.

[See STRATEGY: NAVAL WARFARE STRATEGY, pages 688-690 in printed volume.]

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