



THE LITTORAL WORLD

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The role of seapower in nurturing American security and prosperity has long been exaggerated, if not wholly misrepresented. Throughout the nineteenth century, the nation's first generations of leaders exhibited a healthy skepticism toward free trade and the maritime hegemony of the British Empire. By focusing on domination of the country's littoral space during the Civil War, the U.S. Navy succeeded in shielding the Union from European interference. It was not the assumption of the British mantle that safeguarded the nation; rather, U.S. preeminence was secured by rejection of maritime overreach. Strong anti-British tariffs and industrial protectionism were the cornerstones of sustained commercial growth and genuine national independence. The unique problem with seapower, even in the contemporary period, is how easily we can glorify it. We love the sea, and mighty ships, and we tend to flaunt what we love, but this relationship has no place in a grand strategy that acknowledges the limited historical contribution of free trade to the American economy

1 'Free Trade' and the Global Status-quo Dilemma

The climax of the nineteenth century movement for free trade was undoubtedly English Radical parliamentarian Richard Cobden's success in persuading Imperial France to abandon its protectionist system in favor of an open trade agreement with Great Britain in 1860. This, he argued, would do more to stabilize frayed relations between the two powers than any other diplomatic act since their temporary—and now distant—alliance against the Russian Empire during the Crimean War (1853-1856). Emperor Napoleon III agreed; he hoped the agreement like nothing else would demonstrate his good intentions to the 'shop-keeping' English, even as both sides raced to build seagoing ironclads and Britain frantically set about fortifying its dockyards. Prime Minister Lord Palmerston, however, hardly forgave the French their naval and imperial ambitions. Mutual prosperity was also strategically undesirable. "Free Trade enriches & strengthens the Nation which adopts it," he wrote to Lord John Russell, the foreign secretary, "and the richer & stronger France becomes the more dangerous will she be as a neighbor unless she sees & knows that we cannot be attacked with a chance of easy Success."¹

A commitment to global maritime trade and defense was, even then, double-edged. "Thou knowest that all my fortunes are at sea," states Antonio in Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*,² reflecting both the enormous economic potential and the vulnerability of investments upon the often treacherous sea. British Professor Geoffrey Till quotes Antonio in concluding his textbook study, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century*, emphasizing the wealth borne upon the waves, and highlighting its multiplication under conditions of unrelenting globalization.³ That same process has generated a gradual convergence of private enterprises and state-centric interests, creating new systemic considerations such as the stability of the global market and global finance. The choice confronting today's leading naval powers — especially the United States — is how to balance competitive national needs against cooperative ones shared with other members of a global community. At present, this dilemma has been resolved by assigning America's navy the role of protecting and preserving the status-quo order on the assumption that open markets are in everyone's interests; as affirmed in the Victorian 'Free Trade' mantra preached by Cobden and John Bright's 'Manchester School' of economics.

¹February 5, 1860, Palmerston to Russell, Russell Papers, British National Archives (Kew), PRO 30-22: 21.

²Act 1, Scene 1.

³First printed by Routledge in 2004 and now in its third edition (2013).

From the first steps on its path toward economic prosperity, however, the United States was never reliant on far-ranging seapower. When the U.S. Naval Institute was founded in 1873, not a decade had passed since Rear-Admiral John Worden, soon to be its second president, had commanded the U.S.S. *Monitor* during the fateful Battle of Hampton Roads of March 1862.⁴ In the intervening years, the Civil War ended with Union victory, slavery was abolished, and the U.S. Navy swelled to over 600 warships, including 82 ironclads built and building — the world’s largest, most powerful naval force purpose-built to fight in coastal waters. The Royal Navy might have floated a stronger core of battleships-of-the-line, capable of fighting the next Battle of Trafalgar (1805) on the high seas, but the Union Navy was far more effective in brown waters. The monitors forfeited blue-water range for maximum concentration of tactical capabilities — heavy guns and thicker iron armor. Beyond enforcing the continental blockade of the Confederacy, it had participated in coastal assaults and combined operations with Union Army forces. Equally important was the U.S. Navy’s strategic role in coastal defense against European blue-water navies—more than a match on the high seas, but vulnerable near the American coast.

But by 1873, American seapower had clearly decayed and reverted to its pre-war capabilities, as much as American national ambition had introverted. Commodore Foxhall Parker complained in the first issue of the Institute’s *Proceedings* (1874) how the navy could not perform fleet maneuvers. For one, there was no ‘fleet.’ The monitors were the only armored combatants to speak of in an age of iron, and they dragged the rest of the formation down to 4.5 knots. The remainder of the navy, composed of wooden steamships, were armed with antiquated 9-inch Dahlgren smoothbores—outclassed and outranged by the Royal Navy’s heavier, rifled, and shell-projecting guns. Only the use of spar-torpedoes might spare the country painful embarrassment. “And in truth, what reliance could be placed upon our torpedo system afloat for either offence or defense?”⁵ American men-of-war would be shot to hell by modern (i.e., European) ironclads before they could even get their clumsy torpedoes close enough to their targets. Parker could only express his hope that “the great Republic will awaken from her lethargy ere long, and once more put her strength upon the deep.”⁶

But as Craig Symonds warned in 1982, an “overcommitment to seapower can be as dangerous a policy decision as an undercommitment.” “A good case can be made,” he wrote, “that the American policy of virtually ignoring the country’s maritime frontiers in the two decades after Appomattox was a reasonable one.”⁷ In the end, America’s continental development, from reconstruction to railroads, allowed it to trump the European empires as they spiraled into the great collision of the First World War. In both global conflicts of the twentieth

⁴Admiral David Dixon Porter was the Institute’s first president, in 1873, succeeded by Worden the following year.

⁵Foxhall A. Parker, “Our Fleet Maneuvers in the Bay of Florida, and the Navy of the Future,” *Proceedings* 1, no. 8 (Dec. 1874): 163-178. Rear-Admiral C. R. P. Rodgers was “loath to believe that maximum speed of any fleet of the United States navy is only four and a half knots,” having commanded several of the vessels himself before the exercise. Chief-Engineer Charles Baker noted the poor performance was due to worn-out boilers on many of the vessels at the time.

⁶Parker, “Our Fleet Maneuvers.” According to Adrian Cook, during the Civil War “750 ships, representing a total burthen of 481,332 tons” were transferred to foreign flags, namely Britain’s, because of the roving threat posed by British-built commerce raiders such as the C.S.S. *Alabama*. “In 1860 two-thirds of the commerce of New York was carried in American bottoms, but by 1863 three-quarters of it came in foreign ships”; see Cook, *The Alabama Claims: American Politics and Anglo-American Relations, 1865-1872* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975), 15. That Americans were willing to settle for \$15.5 million in gold from Britain in 1872 ‘for damages’ had more to do with the fact that “America needed more foreign investment. The shortage of risk capital at home guaranteed good relations with Europe, especially England,” see page 241.

⁷Craig L. Symonds, “The Yankee Mariner, Seventeenth to Twentieth Centuries,” in *The Yankee Mariner & Seapower: America’s Challenge of Ocean Space*, ed. Joyce J. Bartell (Los Angeles: University of Southern California Press, 1982), 29-46.

century the industrial resources of the United States allowed it to swing the military balance of power in its favor.

2 The Monroe Doctrine vs. ‘Imperial Defense’

Symonds – and Palmerston’s – sentiments echoed not only the concerns of Alexander Hamilton in the latter 18th-century but also those of early 19th-century American protectionists like Henry Clay and Henry Charles Carey who saw free trade as nothing more than economic vassalage to the Bank of England and an informal (far more insidious) British Empire. If Clay and Carey were correct and early globalization efforts went hand-in-hand with British naval supremacy, then controversial nation-building measures like the Morrill Tariff — enacted during the Secession Crisis of 1860-1—are what saved Abraham Lincoln’s conception of the United States as “the last, best hope of earth.”⁸ Indeed, in aligning with the British the new Confederate States’ Constitution (Article 1, Section 8) specified “no duties or taxes on importations from foreign nations be laid to promote or foster any branch of industry” in the strictly slave-grown, cotton-exporting business of the South.

The myth today, propagated by arch-imperialist Winston Churchill among others, is that the Monroe Doctrine was “safeguarded” by the Royal Navy throughout the nineteenth century because America had no navy to speak of.⁹ Who else would keep Old World monarchists from re-establishing their colonial empires in the New World? But the United States never shared Churchill’s interpretation of the relationship; indeed, in 1823 Secretary of State John Quincy Adams first rejected the offer of British ‘protection’ in the sense used by British Foreign Secretary George Canning. “It would be more candid, as well as more dignified, to avow our principles explicitly to Russia and France,” he stressed to Monroe’s cabinet, “than to come in as a cock-boat in the wake of the British man-of-war.”¹⁰

It is a misguided belief that maritime trade has always aligned historically with democracy; “maritime dominion” has never been correlated with the “triumph of the free world,” as some naval enthusiasts claim today.¹¹ This purported relationship ignores mid-Victorian British

⁸From his December 1, 1862, Annual Message to Congress.

⁹See for example, Winston S. Churchill, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples*, 4 vols., *The Great Democracies* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1958) 4: 29-30. Churchill was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1953 just as he was completing his final volumes. He was 79. Churchill had already asserted the notion in the House of Commons on 8 March, 1948: “From Trafalgar onwards, for more than 100 years Britannia ruled the waves. There was a great measure of peace, the freedom of the seas was maintained, the slave trade was extirpated, the Monroe Doctrine of the United States found its sanction in British naval power — and that has been pretty well recognised on the other side of the Atlantic — and in those happy days the cost was about £10 million a year,” *Hansard*, Vol. 448, cc803-981. Ten years later M.P. Sir Joseph Percival William Mallalieu echoed, “It is absolute folly for us to have it [the hydrogen bomb] and I am not impressed with the argument that by giving it up we should increase our dependence on the United States. The United States has been dependent on us for the best part of a century — dependent on the Royal Navy. It was an American President who propounded the Monroe Doctrine, but it was the Royal Navy which maintained it and the fact that America was dependent upon us did not notably stunt her growth in the 19th century,” March 4, 1958, *Hansard*, Vol. 583, cc978-1127. If any agent established the theory in the historical literature (which Churchill would have drawn upon) it was likely British historian Harold Temperley, in his reverential biography of George Canning; see *Foreign Policy of George Canning 1822-1827* (London: G. Bell & Sons, Ltd., 1925), 124.

¹⁰November 7, 1823, in Charles Francis Adams, ed., *Memoirs of John Quincy Adams: Comprising Portions of His Diary from 1795 to 1848*, 12 vols. (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1875), 6: 179. Monroe’s subsequent address to Congress (December 2) announcing the new America foreign policy doctrine was likewise drafted by Adams, who had already noted two years earlier Britain’s standing policy of “willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike” the United States, (entry dated January 31, 1821, *Memoirs*, 5: 261).

¹¹See for example, Peter Padfield, *Maritime Dominion and the Triumph of the Free World: Naval Cam-*

contempt of democracy — especially in the form of the United States *republic* which attacked the notion of privilege by birth, for one. It also fails to give credit to those stubborn American tariffs which defied Britain's free trade system yet helped strengthen the Union's independence from British naval 'protection' and fostered self-reliance in a critical hour of need. American nationalism and its novel conception of freedom had more to do with universal ideals than universal profits. The United States rose to world power almost in spite of British naval supremacy, not because of it.

"Why, do you not *know* that we have a claim to the mouth of the Columbia River?" exclaimed Lord Stratford Canning¹² to John Quincy Adams in 1821. "I do not *know*," replied Adams, "what you claim nor what you do not claim. You claim India; you claim Africa; you claim—." "Perhaps," cut the British ambassador sardonically, "a piece of the moon." "No," said Adams coolly, "I have not heard that you claim exclusively any part of the moon; but there is not a spot on *this* habitable globe that I could affirm you do not claim; and there is none which you may not claim with as much color of right as you can have to Columbia River or its mouth."¹³

Only the rise of the Union Navy during the Civil War, not the good will of the Royal Navy, ensured that a new front in the conflict did not emerge in Mexico (against France), the Dominican Republic (against Spain), or Canada (against Britain). The European states could not successfully project their maritime power against a distant continental power to effect lasting changes on the map; coastal ironclads served American purposes well by threatening to cut-off the Gulf of Mexico and the St. Lawrence River from overseas reinforcements, for example. In addressing a British military commission's report on the defense of Canada in the event of an Anglo-American war, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Liberal leader William Gladstone observed that the military factors favoring Britain during the *Trent* Affair of 1861-2 no longer prevailed by 1864: "before the Americans had shown what they could achieve in the way of rapid multiplication of iron-clad vessels, not of high sailing qualities, but such as, creeping along the coast into the St. Lawrence, might be found, when there, too numerous for us to deal with by the sea-going iron ships we should have to send across the Atlantic."¹⁴ Better that Canada be cut loose from imperial protection, rapidly evaporating in the face of the newly iron-clad Monroe Doctrine, and Britain allow such colonies "to ascend to the condition of free communities." Thus the Canadian Confederation was born in 1867, and the Colonial Naval Defence Act, which effectively created the royal navies of both Canada and Australia, was passed in 1865.¹⁵

paigns that Shaped the Modern World 1852-2001 (London: John Murray, 2009), an expansion of his more modestly titled but no less deterministic *Maritime Power and the Struggle for Freedom: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World 1788-1857* (London: John Murray, 2003) and *Maritime Supremacy and the Opening of the Western Mind: Naval Campaigns that Shaped the Modern World, 1588-1782* (London: John Murray, 1999). Padfield attempts to square the circle of the rise of America as a continental power during the Civil War era by calling the Northern States "maritime" and the South "territorial" or continentally militaristic; Padfield, *Maritime Dominion*, 33.

¹²George Canning's cousin.

¹³Adams, *Memoirs*, 5: 251-252. See also Harlow Giles Unger, *John Quincy Adams* (Boston: De Capo Press, 2012), 202-203.

¹⁴On July 12, 1864; see William Gladstone, *Defence of Canada*, "Confidential," in MS 62, Palmerston Papers, University of Southampton, "Broadlands Papers, 1862-1865," CAB/183-193.

¹⁵See for example the work by R.U.S.I. analyst Damian P. O'Connor, in *Imperial Defence and the Commitment to Empire 1860-1886* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing: 2014).

3 National Chauvinism, National Isolationism

‘Naval supremacy’ can be an exercise in chauvinism, nothing more: how big we are, how righteous, how unique we are in human history. This is evident in the British attitude toward naval power in the nineteenth century, and remains evident in the present construction of the Royal Navy’s largest-ever ships, the two *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers. Prime Minister David Cameron justified them as “an investment in British security, British prosperity and our place in the world, transforming our ability to project power globally, whether independently or with our allies.”¹⁶ Coincidentally, as HMS *Queen Elizabeth* was being assembled in Rosyth (Fife), the Scottish referendum on independence from the United Kingdom was gearing up, awkwardly stranding the Royal Navy’s 65,000-tonne flagship in the midst of stand-off between devolution and nationalism. The naming ceremony of the man-of-war was hyped by the media as a potent symbol of British national identity, part of the ‘Better Together’ campaign. The Royal Marine band, replete with white pith helmets, helped supply the patriotic fanfare along with the presence of the 88-year-old Queen.¹⁷ The coincidence highlighted the true threat to modern Britain and the incidental value of material seapower in an age of fracturing identities.

Do not confuse ends and means — as naval historians often do. Nations tend to keep their mouths shut when truly great, rather than spout off about how great they are, or used to be, or ought to be. This process of self-delusion is how figures such as Alfred Thayer Mahan and, particularly, Sir John Knox Laughton made their mark on the ‘historical profession.’ As Roger Knight observed in his review of *The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Tradition* (2000), Laughton deeply ‘influenced’ Mahan.¹⁸ In 1874, six months before Parker bemoaned the lack of American strength ‘upon the deep’ before the U.S. Naval Institute, Laughton addressed the Royal United Service Institute on “The Scientific Study of Naval History,” objecting to the “idea that the history of the past contains no practical lessons for the future, and is therefore merely a useless branch of scholarship, [which] daily gathers strength.” British maritime nostalgia and the romance of the sea could not be allowed to challenge the proper goal of naval history: to magnify the necessity of seapower. In this way the navy becomes ever more central to national growth and greatness, not less. “Laughton’s main purpose,” Donald Schurman perceived in 1965, “was to maintain and improve the Royal Navy as an efficient instrument of war.”¹⁹

4 Conclusion

The U.S. navy must also learn from its history — the true history of littoral dominance that sustained its independence. That history is consistent with a historically grounded strategy of leading by example, rather than through aggrandizement upon the high seas. The United

¹⁶Emphasis added.

¹⁷See for example Severin Carrell, ‘Supercarrier made in Britain hailed as flagship for Better Together campaign’, *The Guardian* (online), July 4, 2014, available from <http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/04/hms-elizabeth-naming-ceremony-hailed-pro-union-occasion>. HMS *Queen Elizabeth* was launched in July 2014; the Scottish Independence vote took place two months later with only 55.3% voting to remain part of the U.K.

¹⁸Roger Knight, *Reviews in History*, no. 94 (Feb. 2000); Andrew D. Lambert, *The Foundations of Naval History: John Knox Laughton, the Royal Navy and the Historical Tradition* (London: Chatham Publishing, 1998); see <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/>.

¹⁹John K. Laughton, ‘The Scientific Study of Naval History,’ *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 18, no. 79, (1875): 508-527; D. M. Schurman, *The Education of a Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (London: Cassell, 1965), 98.

States is poised to radically redefine what seapower means in relation to its own history, rejecting the tired ‘naval history’ cadences of status-quo or decline. Decline is a red herring. America’s fortunes are now so thoroughly intertwined with the global maritime economy — the global community — that nothing short of World War III, of mutual annihilation, could arrest this process of all-or-nothing interdependence. Because of this new interdependence, it rests not upon the shoulders of the U.S. Navy alone to preserve the maritime commons, despite the exhortations of naval romanticists and wayward historians.

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