

Naval War College Review

Volume 49
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 30

1996

Shark of the Confederacy

John M. Taylor

Charles M. Robinson III

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Taylor, John M. and Robinson, Charles M. III (1996) "Shark of the Confederacy," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 4 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss4/30>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

and political interests in Manchuria. In both cases, it is difficult to divine the impact of social groups. The Geneva conference is important for Fanning because its failure created a window of opportunity for peace groups in the United States to motivate elites and educate the public. They seem to have had moderate success, providing some impetus for the Kellogg-Briand Pact. But their influence at London in 1930 was modest. The treaty did not reflect the reductions and consultative pact that peace groups were championing.

Fanning sums up by saying that when arms control succeeded, it was due less to the influence of social groups than to the memory of war or the desire for economy. In the conclusion he reiterates a host of economic, technological, and domestic political factors to account for the early success of arms control and its failure in later years. As a historian, Fanning cannot be faulted for acknowledging the complexity of the process and for offering a rich explanation. But given this, it is perhaps misleading for him to claim to execute a comparable-case strategy with an eye toward discerning the causal impact of the social-group factor. Fanning's great contribution is to provide insight into how these peace groups function. This reviewer would have preferred a more focused analysis that explored more closely what Fanning only mentions in passing in his conclusion, namely, the reasons why peace groups could not translate their awareness of the importance of disarmament into international agreement. This would be of immense policy relevance.

EMILY O. GOLDMAN
University of California, Davis

Robinson, Charles M., III. *Shark of the Confederacy*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1995. 212pp. \$25

To a considerable extent, the story of the Confederacy at sea is that of the CSS *Alabama* and its famous commander, Raphael Semmes. In a period of twenty-two months, the English-built raider traveled some sixty-seven thousand nautical miles without ever touching a Confederate port and accounted for sixty-four of the two-hundred-odd Northern merchantmen destroyed by Confederate raiders.

The *Alabama's* first year at sea was so destructive that it precipitated the sale of many of the nearly five hundred American ships that changed flags in 1862 and 1863. Raphael Semmes, who was energetic, imaginative, and implacably hostile to the North, was probably the ablest commerce raider of the nineteenth century. He skillfully threw off pursuit, sometimes by spreading false information in his ports of call, sometimes by passing off his vessel as a Federal warship. Using captured ships to dispose of his prisoners, Semmes kept the *Alabama* in busy sea lanes, where fresh victims were to be found. Raphael Semmes was the only commander on either side of the U.S. Civil War to fight two battles at sea, and when he sank the *Hatteras* in January 1863 he became the only Confederate captain to defeat an enemy warship in single combat on the high seas.

In *Shark of the Confederacy*, Robinson has provided a short account of the Confederate raider's cruise and eventual defeat at the hands of the USS *Kearsarge*. He provides a good account of the intrigue that surrounded the *Alabama's* construction in the John Laird yards on the Mersey River. The Confederacy had already purchased one cruiser, the *Florida*, in England, and Federal authorities were properly suspicious of the sleek vessel known only as "No. 290." Thanks to

the skillful management of Confederate agent James Bulloch, and no small amount of luck, the Confederates were able to take possession of the *Alabama* just hours before it would have been seized by British authorities.

Although Robinson narrates the destructive cruise that followed in workmanlike fashion, there are curious contradictions. The author is an admirer of the Federal Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, observing that Welles "is generally regarded as the greatest secretary of the navy in history." But it was Welles who directed the inept pursuit of the *Alabama*, leading Semmes to marvel that the U.S. Navy made no serious effort to impede his operations. Nor has the author examined all the implications of Semmes's relations with his crew. The sailors of the *Alabama* were, as Robinson points out, mercenaries, primarily British citizens, including many Irishmen. Yet his statement that Semmes "never had the real power to force the men into total submission" would come as a surprise to the raider's crewmen, who were constantly reminded by their captain that the *Alabama* was a commissioned cruiser, not a privateer. The crew was held under a tight rein indeed.

This book includes solid accounts of the *Alabama*'s two battles, the sinking of the *Hatteras*, and its own defeat off Cherbourg at the hands of the *Kearsarge*. With respect to the latter, Robinson correctly rejects Semmes's claim that the battle was decided by the *Kearsarge*'s protective chains, ascribing his defeat to the *Alabama*'s poor gunnery and defective powder.

The author is cursory, however, in his discussion of why Semmes chose to take on the *Kearsarge* in the first place. Far from not having any other choice, as Robinson suggests, Semmes could have either had his vessel laid up, as he had done earlier with the *Sumter*, or escaped the *Kearsarge* at night, as he had escaped the USS *San Jacinto* at

Martinique. Semmes's decision to fight grew out of his own combative temperament, a belief that the U.S. Navy might have lost its fighting edge, and a conviction that the Federal merchant marine had been so decimated by the Confederate cruisers that there was little game remaining on the high seas.

Shark of the Confederacy is a useful addition to the Civil War bookshelf, but many *Alabama* buffs will prefer Charles G. Summersell's *C.S.S. Alabama: Builder, Captain and Plans* (University of Alabama Press, 1985), an attractive book that includes the original blueprints of the *Alabama*. The illustrations in the Robinson volume, by way of contrast, are of such poor quality as to be at times unrecognizable.

JOHN M. TAYLOR
McLean, Virginia

Glete, Jan. *Navies and Nations: Wars, Navies and State Building in Europe and America, 1500-1860*, Vols. I and II. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1993. (No price given)

The seventeenth century witnessed the emergence and consolidation of powerful nation-states in Europe, most notably France, England, and the United Provinces, but also Sweden, Norway-Denmark, and, late in the century, Russia. Their appearance initiated the sharp upsurge in the size of permanent national military forces that was to be, in general, a continuing feature of subsequent European development. Jan Glete's *Navies and Nations* explores this phenomenon, largely on the basis of comparative quantitative data, as it relates to naval developments in both major and minor Western powers between 1500 and 1850.