

1984

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Recommended Citation

Hattendorf, John B. (1984) "Luce's Idea of the Naval War College," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 37 : No. 5 , Article 6.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol37/iss5/6>

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Luce's Idea of the Naval War College

John B. Hattendorf

A century ago, Rear Admiral Stephen B. Luce wrote a number of vigorous articles to explain his views on naval education and to define the purpose and character of the Naval War College. He clearly started his ideas in a manner which was readily understood by the men of his time.¹ While Luce's ideas are acknowledged by naval historians as the basic impetus behind the War College, his expression of them may seem out of date to naval officers today, immersed as they are in a quite different intellectual climate and a changed Navy. Scattered through the range of his articles, Luce's ideas require interpretation and explanation in terms of modern conditions, if they are to be understood more widely and acted upon effectively.

Luce's central and basic idea about the Naval War College is his belief that a naval officer does something more than just perform a job. He carries out his work as a highly educated, trained specialist who operates within a clearly defined area, with established procedures and ethical standards; further, he uses a highly developed body of theoretical knowledge relating to his field, and has a strong feeling of group identity and shared knowledge with others who perform similar work. In short, a naval officer is a professional, who, like a doctor, a lawyer, or an educator, should have both advanced education and recognized credentials which certify his achievement toward mastering the progressive levels of understanding for his chosen career.²

In developing this idea, Luce was aware, as we are today, that a Navy requires many different types of expertise and many different specialists. Ordnance, astronomy, engineering, languages, oceanography, chemistry, and physics suggest the range of skills which are used. The Navy comprises a cross section of modern industry and shares these skills with the nation as a whole, while the universities and colleges of the land cater effectively for education in these shared fields.

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The one single area which was missing in the range of education and training, both necessary and available for a naval officer in Luce's time, was education in the elements which made the Navy a distinctive profession. There was no place where a naval officer could study a unique, highly developed body of theoretical knowledge which differentiated his occupation from others.³

From time immemorial, naval officers had learned their profession on the quarter deck and through experience of war itself. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, naval academies were established as a means of preparing young officers to take up their first, practical duties in the sea service. These important schools laid the keel upon which professional knowledge could be built, but since they concentrated on the basics they could, through necessity, provide only a glimpse and the occasional display of the erudition and knowledge needed for a master of the art.⁴

In the 1880s the United States had just entered the period when rapid technological change had a continuing and direct effect on the character of its Navy. The development of steam and electrical engineering, the screw propeller, the rifled gun and the study of interior and exterior ballistics, together with the use of iron and then steel, provided a new fabric for sea power—spurring rapid and continued change in ship design, engineering, armor and weapons.⁵ These developments rapidly altered the physical character of navies while, at the same time, demanding new types of special expertise. It was the beginning of the present situation in American naval history, in which new equipment becomes obsolescent almost as soon as it is put to sea.

If one can say that there is an American way of warfare, it can be found in American reliance on technology and the application of new inventions to practical ends. At the end of the twentieth century we are only just beginning to understand the ways in which technology affects our behavior, in addition to increasing our capabilities. Yet at these very early stages, Luce and his perceptive colleagues could see that technological developments were drawing naval officers away from studying the central purpose of the naval profession and into subservient areas of knowledge.⁶ A century later, one can see even more clearly that technology has a momentum and logic of its own. When pursued only for the sake of its own development, it may not necessarily provide results which are immediately useful or even properly applicable to the naval profession.⁷

Although naval professionals have nothing to gain from restricting technological development, surely their central interest should be in technologies which have a direct usefulness to their profession. For this reason, Luce believed that the most important education a naval officer received was that which developed his understanding of the purpose, character, use, and nature of navies. Moreover, those who strive to reach the

highest levels of the naval profession should make professional thought, rather than a technical or academic subject, their principal intellectual concern.⁸ Most importantly, if naval officers made the highest theoretical aspects of their own profession the object of their primary intellectual interest, they would tend to refine their practical efforts in a way which would focus their work and improve results. Luce believed that if naval officers were educated in theory which pertained to the naval profession after they had gained professional experience, but before they took up the highest naval responsibilities, then the Navy could reverse the process by which technology tends to create its own environment and its own set of conditions. The objective, as Luce saw it, is to ensure that naval officers, not their equipment, are the controlling factors in war at sea.

For Luce, the highest aspect of the naval profession was the study of the art of warfare. This, he believed, was properly divided into several branches. In descending order of importance, they were statesmanship, strategy, tactics, and logistics. The study of diplomacy, or statesmanship in its relationship to war, was so important to Luce's concept of education that he believed it needed, "to attain any degree of proficiency, such an amount of careful reading as to leave little leisure for extra professional studies."⁹

During the past one hundred years, students of naval and military affairs have emphasized that there is a key relationship between armed force and statesmanship in times of peace, as well as in war. While the ultimate purpose of armed force is to be capable of successful operations in war, the relationship of armed force to the broadest aspects of national security cannot be ignored. Within the naval officer's concern in the area of statesmanship lies the thought of armed force as a peacetime deterrent and as an extension of national policy short of war. Moreover, such broad gauged thinking also requires an appreciation of the limitations of armed force as well as the stresses, liabilities, and dangers which accompany it.

Below the all important study of statesmanship and its relationship to armed force, Luce placed *strategy*, the comprehensive direction of power to control situations and areas to attain broad objectives; and *tactics*, the employment of specific forces and weapons to attain strategic objectives. These, in turn are followed by *logistics*, the creation and sustained support of weapons and forces to be tactically employed to attain strategic objectives.¹⁰

These are the fundamental areas which together comprise the highest elements of professional naval thought. In order for naval officers to command effectively, all these areas need to be in harmony and to reflect even broader aspects of national interests, values, and economics. This, Luce believed, can be done only when a commander has first been given an education at a college dedicated to the broadest perspectives in professional thought.

The Naval War College was Luce's answer to this need. He dedicated it to improving the quality of analysis among naval officers and to providing a

sound basis for decisions in command, but its tangible product was designed to be a core of line officers who can function effectively in command and in staff management positions with a clear understanding of their profession.

When Luce first thought about a naval war college, there were no books or studies about the theoretical character of a navy. One of his main objectives in establishing the college was to have its faculty create the philosophical and theoretical literature which related the basic elements of warfare to the naval profession. The essence of this body of literature could then guide practical application.

In order to create the fundamental underpinning for professional thought, Luce turned to the study of naval history as a key source. He believed that from historical knowledge, officers could begin to generalize about the nature of navies and thereby provide the groundwork for professional thought. But, he warned, if this study is to be profitable, one has to be able to identify historical material which can be analyzed and reasoned upon with advantage. Here Luce admonished officers to think broadly and to range freely over the centuries, noting particularly that Thucydides, and other ancient writers, had much valuable insight even for our technologically advanced culture.¹¹

In order to stimulate a profitable examination of naval history, Luce proposed that it be undertaken by those with an intimate knowledge of current practice and the broadest theoretical aspects of the art of warfare. Simultaneously, Luce suggested using the conclusions drawn from army history in a comparative way, as a guide to formulating naval theory. The basic ideas in military studies are often directly applicable to the art of naval warfare, Luce believed, but for them to be understood and characterized properly, they needed to be reformulated and modified after a detailed, thorough investigation of a wide ranging study of naval actions.

From a study of detailed cases in naval affairs, new naval generalization can be established through inductive thinking. After generalizations are established through inductive reasoning; that is, by proceeding from particulars to generalization, the process can then be reversed, through deductive reasoning, by applying the generalizations as a guide to the particulars in the present and the future.¹²

When Luce contemplated this method of approach, he was applying some of the advanced thinking of his own time. Today, when we read his own words, they seem out of date. Certainly, historians who were then only just establishing themselves within universities, have now altered their view of generalization. Few today would follow the thinking of Luce's time that historical generalization provided laws of human action just as scientific investigation created laws of the physical universe. Despite this change in thinking, Luce's fundamental idea remains sound, but needs restatement in modern terms. The study of history contains many wide ranging facets which

go beyond that which directly concerns the naval profession. Yet, Luce's basic point, that the process of historical understanding is a key element in the development of naval thought, remains valid. This is true because historical study fosters the ability to evaluate evidence and to formulate views based on that evidence. Its very essence is a warning against dogmatism on the one hand, and oversimplification, on the other. Luce understood that historical study trains the naval officer to apply concepts to problem areas, and that it teaches him how to evaluate a mass of facts. In this process, Luce stressed the need to develop the skills of analysis and criticism about human situations when there is no "right answer" and where one must reach conclusions based on informed judgment, in circumstances involving chance and affected by differing values and diverse understanding.

The naval officer who has studied history knows that similar events which occur in different historical settings may well lead to different results. He has had practice in careful and in-depth examinations of individual cases, followed by a comparison of them, so that he easily distinguishes between unique and general aspects, while at the same time avoiding an all inclusive dogma which stands above human action. In dealing with the relationship between the unique and the general, Luce's emphasis on historical study was intended to provide naval officers with an insight into the process of human activity, illuminating its nature by underscoring the importance of multiplicity where many look for singleness of purpose, stressing the complex interrelationships which specialization tends to overlook, and not least, reminding them of the human condition.¹³

When applied to a thorough study of naval warfare, Luce wanted historical study to enlarge the area of an individual naval officer's experience by teaching him about the broad interaction between circumstances and conditions in their effect upon men, ships and fleets, as well as about the nature, character, purpose, and limitations of navies. The lessons are not straightforward, didactic precepts or codified instructions for action, but a sound knowledge of the history of any naval situation or problem illuminates its nature and thereby assists in making present decisions. Historical knowledge solidifies our understanding of the present, suggesting guidelines for the future.¹⁴

Increasingly in our time, knowledge has become specialized and fragmented. Both modern naval officers and academics suffer from the same disease that afflicts society in general. But the experience of World War II has emphasized that the intellectual needs of the Navy lie across many disciplines. Certainly, the highest area of the naval profession involves the insights of an entire range of social scientists, including sociologists, international lawyers, economists and political scientists. In addition, historical analysis of naval problems can benefit from the insights produced in these disciplines while still preserving its own characteristics in inquiring how navies work.

Historical study can be a corrective to the narrowness of specialization and, therefore, is particularly valuable in focusing on the highest area of professional thought in the armed forces. Its application to navies involves a complex process by which one must first create a description of what occurred, then analyze it, compare and contrast it to fundamental theoretical ideas, examine it in relation to other similar experiences, and refine the fundamental theory with the generalizations which emerge. In the end, one may use the generalizations as guidelines in operational planning, establishing planning procedures and taking action.¹⁵

It was this process which Luce set as the work of Alfred Thayer Mahan and the basis for creating a theoretical literature for the naval profession. Mahan's work succeeded in formulating some basic concepts.¹⁶ Sir Julian Corbett, later, modified and refined them on the basis of his own historical research to establish the classic statement of traditional naval theory in his *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*.¹⁷

Instead of continuing the process which Luce conceived, most naval writers since Mahan and Corbett have been content to be critics, rather than creators, of theory. In recent years, Mahan has become the whipping boy. He has been properly criticized for the inaccuracy of his research, the limitations of his conclusions, the narrowness of his historical focus, and his failure to understand technology.¹⁸ The critics have made plain the cracks in Mahan's theory, but they have failed to agree on how to proceed in theoretical work. Following Luce, this writer believes that the Navy's most urgent intellectual need is the further development of sound theory. At the centennial of the Naval War College, there would be no more appropriate way to affirm the college's dedication to its original purpose—and to honor Luce—than to emphasize theoretical study, using modern views of historical research and generalization as tools to assist in the development of professional naval thought.

Once perceptions from actual experience have been established, then they can provide a useful basis from which to speculate on what can be possible, predict what might be probable, and judge what is desirable. The process must be a continuing one which tries to relate growing experience to improving perception, it is not a search for simple rules, but a quest for understanding.

Luce closely linked to the broad understanding of statesmanship, policy, strategy, and the broad function of navies, the need to investigate and to improve understanding in the additional elements which comprise the highest aspect of professional thought: tactics and logistics. As strategy is interwoven in the great issues of state that guide it, so an understanding of strategy is essential to and intertwined within logistics and tactics. Luce emphasized that none of the elements can be entirely separated or omitted if an officer is to be educated in his profession.¹⁹ The concept of comprehensive control of armed

force blends these areas into focus, showing the various elements as gradients of a single concept which forms the essence of the best professional thinking in high command.

Both tactics and logistics are practical matters which involve the direct employment of equipment. Whatever its conception, any military operation is a blend of the two, tactics being the immediate employment of forces to attain strategic objects, and logistics, the provision of the physical resources for tactics to employ. Although practical in nature and dependent upon new technology, both tactics and logistics require a theoretical underpinning that provides a basic understanding upon which action can be taken. Far from being an unnecessary abstraction for practical naval officers, an understanding of theory in these areas sheds light on problems and provides guidelines for responsible executives who must attempt to make optimum decisions faced with chance, a variety of possible solutions, and limited resources.

While theory is an important consideration and must be carefully developed at the Naval War College, Luce believed that the link between theory and practice is a key element which deserved equal attention at the War College. "War," he wrote, "is no time for experimentation."²¹ "That 'war is the best school of war,' is one of those dangerous and delusive sayings that contain just enough truth to secure currency: he who waits for war to learn his profession often acquired his knowledge at a frightful cost of human life."²²

For this reason, Luce promoted naval war gaming and encouraged the experimental use by the fleet of tactics and logistics concepts developed by the Naval War College. Peacetime is the proper time to explore and to experiment with new methods and concepts in order to be prepared when war comes.

In order to cultivate the highest aspects of the naval profession, Luce believed that the college should remain exclusively an educational institution. Its purpose should be to provide a place for extended and in-depth study. Its focus should be to prepare officers to help create policy, develop strategy, and to use tactics and logistics when in command.

After the British Naval War Course was established on the model already existing in Newport, Julian Corbett pointed out the difference between an institution which educated officers and one which was involved in the creating of actual policy. "The proper college will assist everyone and interfere with none." Corbett wrote, "It will be doing no more than providing a laboratory where the lost art of war can be recovered and where officers destined for high command can learn it. There, too, all that is best in naval thought will be gathered in fresh from the sea and spun into threads which the Admiralty and the Committee of Defense can handle with confidence and weave into the fabric of our policy."²⁴ Agreeing with

Corbett, Luce emphasized his remark that "No attempt should be made to turn the war course into anything like an authoritative General Staff."²⁵

The work of the Naval War College is educational, not executive. It should form no part of the working structure of the Navy Department, Luce believed, but it should supply the insights and educate the officers who command and direct it. "The college devotes itself to the study of naval history, naval strategy and tactics, the law of nations, and *academic discussions* of all conceivable types of naval problems of war." In short, Luce believed, "it supplies the alumni from which to select officers competent to command our fleets as well as those able to solve correctly the *actual* problems with which a naval general staff is bound to be confronted."²⁶

The idea of the Naval War College creates the vision of an academic and educational establishment which is the home of theory, and the center of scholarship, original research, and in-depth thinking for the naval profession in the United States. The history of the college's first century demonstrates that Luce's vision cannot be called into reality without taking into account the factors which characterize an educational institution while at the same time recognizing the practical character of professional work in the Navy.

First, the college needs effective teachers who are highly qualified, able to apply their expertise to the naval profession and true teaching scholars who can honestly say of themselves what Loup de Ferrieres wrote in the 9th century to Charles the Bald: "I desire to teach what I have learned and am daily learning."²⁷

Second, it requires that the students who attend be those who have among them the future leaders and responsible officials who will hold the highest positions, and therefore, will exercise their knowledge of the highest aspects of professional thought.

Third, as a profession, the Navy must recognize the difference in character of mind which typifies the teaching scholar and the decisive leader. Those with a deeply contemplative and reflective character of mind rarely have the decisive characteristics and immediate insights which denote the best combat leaders. The college exists, not merely to reproduce the reflective mind, but primarily to promote an interaction and an exchange of thought between reflective and decisive minds.

Professionals should be aware that decisive thinkers, if given a choice, might well prefer to ignore reflective thought. They ignore it at their peril, abandoning knowledge for guesswork. Therefore, the idea of the Naval War College is to provide education in the highest aspects of thinking about navies and naval warfare to the small and selected group of professionals who will one day be the decision makers in high command and confront directly naval problems in the context of national and international considerations.

Notes

1. A bibliography of Luce's writings, along with commentary and excerpts, may be found in John D. Hayes and John B. Hattendorf, eds., *The Writings of Stephen B. Luce* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1975).
2. This idea is an assumption which runs throughout Luce's thought from his earliest writing (see *ibid.*, p. 162) and it is particularly expanded upon in *ibid.*, chapter III.
3. "Report of the Board on a Post Graduate Course" in 48th Congress, 2d Session, Senate Executive Doc. No. 68. "Letter from the Secretary of the Navy reporting . . . the steps taken by him to establish an advanced course of instruction of naval officers at Coasters Harbor Island, Rhode Island."
4. Remarks of Commodore Luce in *Inauguration of the Perry Statue, September 10, A.D. 1885* (Newport, RI: John P. Sanborn, 1885), pp. 42-43.
5. Bernard Brodie, *Sea Power in the Machine Age* (New York: Greenwood Press Reprint, 1969), pp. 149-167.
6. S.B. Luce, "On The Study of Naval Warfare as a Science," reprinted in Hayes and Hattendorf, eds., pp. 65-66.
7. Elting E. Morison, *Men, Machines and Modern Times* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1966), p. 211.
8. S.B. Luce, "An Address . . . 1903," reprinted in Hayes and Hattendorf, eds., pp. 38-40.
9. Luce was directly following Jomini. See Luce, "United States Naval War College," *The United Service*, v. xii, no. 1, January 1885, p. 80-81. The list is abbreviated here. Luce saw Jomini's two forms of tactics merging together and the study of fortification interesting only as an object of naval attack.
10. *Ibid.* The modern and precise definitions of strategy, tactics and logistics are from Henry E. Eccles, *Military Concepts and Philosophy* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1965), p. 69.
11. S.B. Luce, "Tactics and History," in Hayes and Hattendorf, pp. 74-75.
12. S.B. Luce, "On The Strategy of Naval Warfare as a Science," in Hayes and Hattendorf, p. 53.
13. E.H. Carr, *What is History* (New York: Knopf, 1962), pp. 79-84. G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1967), pp. 38-39.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
15. Eccles, pp. 21-28.
16. Don Schurman, "Mahan Revisited," *Kungl. Krigsvetenskapskademiens Bihäfte—Militärhistorisk Tidskrift* (1982), pp. 29-43.
17. On Corbett, see D.M. Schurman, *Julian S. Corbett 1854-1922; Historian of British Maritime Policy from Drake to Jellicoe* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1981) and *The Education of A Navy: The Development of British Naval Strategic Thought, 1867-1914* (Malabar, Fla.: Robert E. Krieger, 1984), reprint of 1965 edition.
18. For a more detailed discussion of these points, see my "Some Concepts in American Naval Strategic Thought, 1940-1970," in Joyce Bartell, ed., *The Yankee Mariner and Sea Power* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1982), pp. 93-107; and "American Thinking on Naval Strategy, 1945-80" in Geoffrey Till, *Maritime Strategy in the Nuclear Age* (London: Macmillan, 1982), pp. 58-68.
19. Eccles, p. 45.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 26-27.
21. S.B. Luce, "The U.S. Naval War College," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, v. xxxvi, no. 3, 1910, p. 685. See also Hayes and Hattendorf, pp. 230-32.
22. S.B. Luce, "An Address . . . 1903," Hayes and Hattendorf, p. 40.
23. Luce, "The U.S. Naval War College," pp. 687-688, 694.
24. *Ibid.*, p. 687. Quoting Corbett, "Naval War Course II," *The Times*, Tuesday, 5 June 1906, p. 6.
25. *Ibid.*
26. S.B. Luce, "On The True Relations between the Department of the Navy and the Naval War College," *U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, v. xxxvii, no. 1, 1911, p. 86.
27. Quoted in Jacques Barzun, *The American University: How it Runs, Where it is Going* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 252.

