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The Giants of the Naval War College

John H. Maurer

On 6 October 1884 Secretary of the Navy William Eaton Chandler issued General Order No. 325: "A college is hereby established for an advanced course of professional study to be known as the Naval War College. . . ."¹

More than anyone else, Commodore Stephen Bleecker Luce is to be credited for this important step in the development of the naval profession and the rise of American naval power. After a long and distinguished naval career spanning some forty years of active service, Luce was appalled by America's naval weakness in the era following the Civil War known as the "Dark Ages" of the US Navy. Not only was the fleet in poor material condition, but the service suffered from severe administrative shortcomings and poor leadership. Luce railed against the "crass ignorance" of naval officers in this era, who had neither appreciation for naval history nor background in strategic thought. In contrast to the shocking intellectual deficiencies of naval officers, Luce was impressed by the much firmer grasp that military men appeared to have on the operational principles underlying their profession.

Military officers in the English-speaking world could choose from several readable historical and theoretical studies on land warfare—such as those by Jomini and Hamley—to study the operational art. Moreover, military writers had adapted their studies of operations to the technological changes of the age, such as the introduction of railroads and improvements in weaponry. Luce lamented that naval officers, on the other hand, possessed no authoritative treatises on naval warfare under modern conditions. If the naval profession were ever to progress out of the darkness, Luce believed that it must attempt to develop a science of naval warfare, based on a study of history. It might at first be necessary to borrow from the operational concepts of land warfare, but eventually the study of naval history would yield up the fundamental principles governing conduct of war at sea. "No less a task is proposed," Luce told the secretary of the navy, "than to apply modern scientific methods to the study and raise naval warfare from the empirical

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stage to the dignity of a science." Luce saw the War College as playing the central role in the attempt to create a science of naval warfare and to rebuild American naval power.

With the assistance of Admiral of the Navy David Dixon Porter—one of the great naval leaders of the Civil War—Luce obtained an interview early in 1884 with Secretary Chandler, who readily agreed that a school of advanced study for naval officers should be established. Chandler appointed Luce to head a board charged with making recommendations for the establishment of a war college. This board, which also included Captain William T. Sampson and Commander Caspar F. Goodrich, reported that a war college was an "absolute necessity" for the Navy. After receiving this report, Chandler authorized the establishment of the college at Newport and ordered Luce to be its first president.²

Luce soon found support in his efforts to establish a war college from a cerebral naval officer named Alfred Thayer Mahan, who was then serving off the coast of South America in command of the old steam sloop USS *Wachusett*. Luce and Mahan came to hold practically identical views on the importance of the War College. Mahan defined the purpose of the War College as "the study and development, in a systematic, orderly manner, of the art of war as applied to the sea, or such parts of the land as can be reached from ships." This definition remains an admirable one. In defending the newly established War College against detractors who saw its training as impractical, Mahan likened the development of a navy to building a house. An architect must spend "years of patient study, devoted to mastering the principles of his art as embodied in the experience of his predecessors. Before a brick is laid . . . the complete design—the future house—exists upon paper." Similarly, the construction of the new steel navy required trained officers to draw up a blueprint for naval expansion. In addition to training officers to direct the country's overall naval policy, the War College could provide valuable instruction to those who would hold high operational commands in wartime. To paraphrase Henry Kissinger, Mahan believed that an admiral in *command* of a fleet has no time to study naval history, operational theory, or strategy; he must instead live off the intellectual capital acquired during earlier periods of his career in the service.

In a classic passage of Mahanian rhetoric, which deserves to be quoted at some length, the prophet of sea power admonished fellow naval officers to permit the study of naval history and theory at the War College and not to denigrate its importance: "As the wise man said, 'there is a time for everything under the sun,' and the time for one thing cannot be used as the time for another. That there is time for action, all concede: few consider duly that there is also a time for preparation. To use the time of preparation for preparation is practical, whatever the method; to postpone preparation to the

time for action is not practical. Our new navy is preparing now; it can scarcely be said, as regards its material, to be yet ready. The day of grace is still with us—or with those who shall be the future captains and admirals. There is time yet for study; there is time to imbibe the experiences of the past, to become imbued, steeped, in the eternal principles of war, by the study of its history and the maxims of its master. But the time of preparation will pass; some day the time of action will come. Can an admiral then sit down and re-enforce his intellectual grasp of the problem before him by the study of history, which is simply the study of past experience? Not so; the time of action is upon him.”³

Here, then, was the voice of the prophet, crying out in the bureaucratic wilderness of the Navy Department in that era.

Despite the pleas of Luce and Mahan, the Navy Department and Congress starved the War College of funds. At one point while he was president, Mahan was reduced to requisitioning coal to heat the college without having first obtained departmental approval. To keep the college open, Luce sought to enlist the support of prominent political figures from both parties. Luce paid particular attention to Capitol Hill, where he actively lobbied to have Congress recognize the work of the War College by increasing its appropriations. Lobbying efforts by Luce and other retired officers almost brought about the college’s early demise, however, by antagonizing Secretary of the Navy William C. Whitney. Whitney was furious because, as he put it, “officers have been working behind my back . . . in Congress.” Citing reasons of economy, Whitney moved to assert his authority by consolidating the War College with the Torpedo Station at Newport, which manufactured torpedoes and conducted a training program in their use. Under Whitney’s scheme, the War College was placed under the command of the Commandant of the Torpedo Station. With some justification, Luce complained that “the consolidation was the act of the enemies of the College done with malice aforethought.” Whitney also had Mahan transferred from his duties as president to an assignment as the chairman of a commission to survey sites for a new navy yard on Puget Sound. As Mahan put it: “The Secretary ‘blew his top.’” Both Luce and Mahan believed that the War College could not long survive as a separate institutional entity under the control of the Torpedo Station.

Fortunately, Caspar F. Goodrich, a strong advocate of the college, was then serving as Commandant of the Torpedo Station. Goodrich was able to maintain some activity at the college by ordering the officers at the Torpedo Station to attend lectures. This incident clearly illustrates, however, how tenuous the existence of the War College was during its early years. Yet the advocates of the War College soon recovered from this shock and renewed

their efforts to gain adherents within the service and Congress. Goodrich, a close friend of the secretary, even managed to persuade the hostile Whitney to support appropriations in the Congress to erect a new building for the college. Although the next two secretaries—Benjamin F. Tracy and Hilary A. Herbert—proved to be more supportive than Whitney, the position of the War College within the service remained precarious throughout the 1890s.⁴

Yet it was during these early years of struggle that some of the War College's most distinctive institutional characteristics were formed. At the beginning Luce and Mahan established a lecture format for the course of instruction. During Henry C. Taylor's four-year term as president, the curriculum was expanded to include exercises involving the study of operational problems and war games. Like Luce and Mahan, Taylor believed that the United States must abandon the small-navy attitudes of the past and adopt instead the battle-fleet concept of a great power. To control the operations of a newly created battle fleet, Taylor saw it as a necessity of modern warfare that the Navy create a command structure modeled on that of the German Army. He looked upon Newport as an American naval version of the highly respected *Kriegsakademie* in Berlin, where officers were trained in staff duties and groomed for high command.

The creation of a trained officer corps would be the first step toward the establishment of a general staff for the US Navy. As part of this training, Taylor introduced the examination of operational problems into the curriculum of the War College. In these exercises, officers examined hypothetical wartime situations and wrote studies on the operational problems presented in them. This analysis of operational problems was further enhanced by use of war games. Pioneered by William McCarty Little—the *eminence grise* of the War College for almost thirty years—war games proved to be a remarkable analytic tool, providing students with insights into the dynamics of a naval campaign.⁵

It was also during this early period that Mahan completed his influential histories of sea power. While Mahan had stubbornly fought to keep the War College open during his years as president, his most important contribution to its survival and prestige are the books he wrote while on assignment at Newport. When Mahan received orders for Newport in 1885, he was asked by Luce to prepare lectures on naval history and tactics. Given a free rein by Luce, Mahan spent the next ten months in New York City doing research and writing. The lectures he prepared on naval history would eventually become *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783*. After the enthusiastic response of the officers attending the 1886 lectures—"My own lectures . . . met with a degree of success which surprised me and which still seems to me exaggerated," Mahan recorded—Mahan's wife Elly and Luce both encouraged him to find a publisher. This was not an easy chore, however, as

one publishing house after another rejected the manuscript. At one point in September 1889, after over a year of effort, a despondent Mahan wrote to Luce: "With these efforts I propose giving up . . . I believe the book to be, in the main, good and useful—and am therefore ready to work hard at its proper presentation, if a publisher turns up . . . But I am not willing . . . to go on begging publishers. It both distracts, vexes and hinders me in my other work."

Mahan's perseverance finally paid off when the Boston publishing house of Little, Brown and Company accepted the manuscript. The first American edition of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History 1660-1783* appeared in May 1890 and was immediately acclaimed a classic by reviewers, an accolade it has continued to enjoy to the present day. From another set of lectures prepared for the War College, Mahan completed a sequel that examined the importance of sea power in the great wars of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic era.⁶

Mahan's vision of history—of the rise and fall of empires, of overseas expansion, of intense rivalries between great powers, and of decisive fleet clashes—was compelling in an age that viewed international politics as a Darwinian struggle among states in which only the fittest would survive. After the publication of the volumes that comprise his *The Influence of Sea Power*, Mahan rapidly gained an international reputation, and his dogmas about the primacy of battleships and fleet actions in naval warfare influenced the naval policies of the great powers. The British lionized Mahan—the American who recognized and trumpeted Britain's greatness as a naval power. In Britain, Mahan's books won high acclaim, enjoyed great popularity, and earned him honorary doctoral degrees from Cambridge and Oxford. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany, an avid navalist even before the publication of Mahan's books, devoured the works of the American captain and ordered that translations be placed in the library of every ship in the German fleet. Even in France, the birthplace of the *Jeune Ecole*, Mahan's ideas on sea power gained numerous adherents, and by 1914 the French Navy had adopted a building program that called for a fleet of forty-eight battleships. Mahan's histories were also translated into Japanese and had an important influence on the doctrinal thinking of the Imperial Japanese Navy.

Mahan's message about the importance of naval power in world politics appeared to be confirmed not only by the study of history, but by the diplomatic crises of the 1890s. Already in 1889, and again in 1893, Britain's Parliament approved large defense appropriations—even though this entailed incurring an extraordinary debt—to bring the British battle fleet to the point that it was superior to those of France and Russia combined. Britain brandished its naval superiority during the multicrisis brought about by the conjunction of the Armenian massacres, the Jameson raid, and the

Venezuelan boundary dispute in 1895. Three years later, Britain inflicted a humiliating diplomatic defeat on France during the Fashoda Crisis, whose outcome was widely attributed to Britain's overwhelming naval superiority. After Fashoda, Kaiser Wilhelm exclaimed: "The poor French . . . They have not read their Mahan!"⁷ The same year as Fashoda, Americans appreciated the advantages of a superior navy during the Spanish-American War.

Mahan's renown as a scholar and publicist redounded to the credit of the War College. William McCarty Little called the honorary doctoral degrees Cambridge and Oxford awarded to Mahan "a glorious victory, and all the more bitter must be the pill for those who have sought to pooh-pooh his work."⁸ By demonstrating the historical and theoretical importance of sea power, Mahan in effect offered an extended justification of the value of study at the War College. One of the most important early converts to Mahan and the War College was Secretary of the Navy Hilary A. Herbert. While serving in the Congress as Chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee, Herbert had opposed the initial appropriations for the college. After reading Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon the French Revolution and Empire 1793-1812*, however, Herbert declared that if the War College "produced nothing more than this book it is worth all the expense incurred for it."⁹ In addition, Mahan provided students of naval warfare with a canonical body of works that would serve as the basis for study and debate. While the writings of most naval historians and publicists from the era are now forgotten, Mahan's books have endured and continue to attract a wide audience.

One of Mahan's last major contributions to the work of the War College was providing Rear Admiral Raymond P. Rodgers with a critique of the operational plan drawn up at Newport for a war in the Pacific against Japan. According to the outline prepared by the War College, the American battle fleet would probably not be in the Pacific at the outbreak of hostilities. As a consequence, Japan would quickly overrun America's possessions in the Pacific and might even threaten the West Coast. Once the US battle fleet arrived in the Pacific, however, the United States would go over to the offensive, making a step-by-step advance through the southern islands back to the Philippine archipelago. Mahan was critical of the War College plan. While he agreed that Japan would take advantage of its temporary naval superiority to seize US possessions, Mahan thought it unlikely that the Japanese would attempt to capture Pearl Harbor, let alone attack the West Coast. He also disagreed with the War College plan for a deliberate advance through the Philippines. Such a plan, he believed, would lead to a protracted conflict in which the Japanese would "hold out till the American people weary of the war."

In place of the War College plan, Mahan presented his own scheme for a movement of the American battle fleet, using bases in the Aleutians, to pose a

direct threat to Japan's home waters. Mahan argued that this movement would enable the United States to seize the initiative in the conflict and force the Japanese to abandon whatever gains they had made in the Central Pacific during its initial stages. "I infer, therefore," Mahan wrote, "that a move of the American fleet to Kiska will compel the Japanese Fleet to fall back from Hawaii, and that it will not stop at Guam, but must retreat to home base." The War College, in turn, responded to Mahan's critique of their plan by drawing attention to the immense logistical problems and serious operational risks that would accompany a headlong rush by the American battle fleet from the vicinity of Kiska in the Aleutians to the Ryukyus in Japanese home waters. What would be the likely result, the War College asked, if a collision occurred between the American battle fleet—at the end of a long and vulnerable line of supply, with rapidly dwindling stores of fuel, and without a nearby base—and the main forces of the Imperial Japanese Navy?

Mahan conceded that his scheme carried more risks than the War College plan, but he believed that Danton's exhortation of *de l'audace, de l'audace, et encore de l'audace* "will be found in every great military achievement." Although the views held by both Mahan and the War College now appear old-fashioned, the product of the limitations imposed on strategic thought by the naval technologies and the political dogmas of the era, this debate on Pacific strategy nonetheless makes for fascinating reading. In this exchange, Mahan made an early contribution to what became the principal preoccupation of the War College over the next thirty years—the study of the operational problems facing the United States Navy in a war against Japan.¹⁰

It was not long after Mahan gave his views on Pacific strategy that a new era in the history of the War College began when late in 1911 William L. Rodgers became president. Rodgers was already well acquainted with the War College, having served there earlier in his career as both a student and as an instructor. As a member of the War College staff around the time of the Russo-Japanese War, he had been in the vanguard of the movement within the service calling for the construction of all-big-gun battleships. On his return to the War College in 1911, Rodgers found that an important change had occurred since he had last been there—the establishment of a "long course," which included the requirement that officers study at Newport for a period of at least one year. This important innovation was due in large part to the efforts of William McCarty Little, who had persuaded the chief of the bureau of navigation, Rear Admiral R.F. Nicholson, to send four officers to Newport for the long course. Rodgers, however, was dissatisfied with that number: he wanted the Navy Department to expand the long course to include fifteen officers.

At first, the department ignored Rodgers' request for the assignment of more officers, but with the appointment of Josephus Daniels as secretary of the navy in Woodrow Wilson's administration, the War College had found a

patron in Washington. After visiting Newport in June 1913, Daniels agreed to assign about twenty officers on a regular basis to the long course. Daniels also supported Rodgers' scheme to reorganize the course of study at the college. Under this reorganization, the program of instruction offered an "elementary course" of three weeks duration, a "preparatory course" lasting four months, a long course now known as the "War College Course" (sixteen months duration), and correspondence courses. It was also during Rodgers' tenure that "the applicatory system" became the principal method of instruction at the War College. This pedagogical approach to the study of operational problems had been adapted to naval warfare from German treatises on military tactics by Rodgers, Little, Dudley W. Knox, and other officers at Newport. When coupled with the extensive use that was already being made of war gaming at Newport, the applicatory system emphasized the study of doctrinal and operational aspects of naval warfare.¹¹

The reforms initiated by Rodgers were carried on by William Sowden Sims during his presidency, which began in February 1917 and, after an interruption during the First World War, continued until 1922. During the war Sims was Commander, United States Naval Forces operating in European Waters. From his headquarters in London, Sims played a crucial role in hurrying the dispatch of US naval reinforcements across the Atlantic, in bringing about the introduction of the convoy system for trade protection, in establishing the administrative machinery to maintain US naval forces in Europe, and in promoting cooperation among the countries fighting against Germany. Because of these achievements, Sims brought back with him to the War College the immense prestige accorded to a successful wartime leader.

In Sims the college had also gained as its champion a hardened veteran of many internecine struggles within the service. Before coming to the college as president, Sims had been an outspoken and resourceful advocate for the modernization of the Navy's *materiel* and the reform of its organizational structure. This zealous pursuit of naval reform had put Sims at the center of one dispute after another on questions of naval policy. Two of the more famous controversies involving Sims were his early dispute with the venerable Mahan on the question of battleship design and his running feud during the First World War with the CNO, Admiral W.S. Benson. In these disputes, Sims delighted in discrediting the argument of his opponents. He was to tell Lady Astor: "I always want to cut my opponents' hearts out."¹² As its president, Sims proved to be an equally forceful spokesman for the War College.

Sims had not always looked upon the War College with enthusiasm, however. When he had first been assigned there in 1911 after commanding the battleship USS *Minnesota*, Sims saw the posting to Newport as a setback to his career. Instead of the War College, Sims had set his sights on obtaining a position on the Navy's General Board in Washington. An assignment to the

General Board was out of the question, however, after the storm of controversy Sims provoked in making a speech at a luncheon in London's Guildhall for the sailors of the US battle fleet, which was visiting European waters during the closing months of 1910. In his speech, Sims told the assembled sailors and dignitaries, "If the time ever comes when the British Empire is seriously menaced by an external enemy, it is my opinion that you may count upon every man, every dollar, every drop of blood, of your kindred across the sea." These impolitic remarks earned Sims a public reprimand from President Taft.

It was in the aftermath of this incident that Sims received his assignment to the War College. Despite the consolation offered by friends H.I. Cone and Ridley McLean, who thought that Sims stood a good chance of becoming the next president of the War College, which would automatically make him an *ex officio* member of the General Board, there can be no disguising disappointment at being posted to Newport. To his wife, Sims confided his hope that their stay at the War College would not last long: "It may even be that things [the controversy surrounding the Guildhall speech] will blow over to such an extent that I may get some duty I would like better—something in closer touch with practice and less on the theoretical side."¹³

Once he became involved in the work of the college, however, Sims changed his opinion about the value of studying at Newport. Sims was one of the four officers assigned to take the first long course offered by the college. Surrounded by the able group of officers then assembled at Newport—including Rodgers, Little, Knox, William Veazie Pratt, and Yates Stirling—Sims became immersed in the program. His biographer, Elting E. Morison, records that for the first time Sims read Jomini, Corbett, and Mahan.¹⁴ In addition, Sims' understanding of the dynamics of fleet tactics and the importance of operational doctrine grew enormously as a result of his participation in the college's gaming exercises. While at the War College Sims also wrote an essay, "The Practical Naval Officer," which attempted to demonstrate the practical benefits of studying naval thought.

From this time onward, Sims would forcefully argue that instruction at the War College was an essential prerequisite for high command. After two years at the college, Sims left to take up command of the Atlantic Destroyer Flotilla. He consciously sought to apply the methods of command and theories of naval tactics that he had learned at Newport to the operations of the flotilla. "The torpedo fleet," he wrote on taking command, "could be made an enormous game board—an exceedingly valuable school for trying out all kinds of maneuvers at small expense. There is a lot to be learned. None of us knows very much about it yet. But one thing is sure, and that is that it can only be learned by study combined with *actual manoeuvres* with the Fleet." The result of this blending of theory and practice was a remarkable success. Sims fashioned a superb fighting force during his two years in command of the

flotilla. After leaving the destroyer force, Sims commanded the powerful new battleship USS *Nevada*, and, in February 1917, he returned, at his own request to the War College as its president.

The darkening international scene did not permit him to stay for long at Newport, however. At the end of March, he was summoned to Washington, where he received orders to proceed to London to report on how “America could best cooperate with the Allies in event of war.” With the entry of the United States into the First World War, Sims gradually assumed command over the US naval forces in European waters. Only at the war’s conclusion could Sims again take up his interrupted tour of duty at the War College.¹⁵

Following in the footsteps of W.L. Rodgers, Sims urged the Navy Department to enlarge the War College and to provide it with a complement of officers and some professionally trained civilian support personnel. Sims used his personal influence and powers of persuasion to convince the Navy Department to meet his personnel requirements. Before becoming president, Sims held a lengthy conversation at Newport with Josephus Daniels on this matter. Sims asked Daniels “what he thought was the relative importance of any particular battleship in the Fleet as compared with the War College. ‘Well,’ he said, ‘I think the War College is more important.’ I said, ‘Do you mean that?’ and he said, ‘Yes, I mean it.’ I said, ‘Then when you go back to Washington at least put it on the plane of a battleship; establish a complement for the War College, and then write an order to the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, and tell him to keep the War College filled, even if he has to diminish some unimportant ship’s complement.’” As president of the War College, Sims constantly bombarded the chief of naval operations, Admiral R.E. Coontz, with requests for qualified officers to serve on the teaching staff and as students. Despite the critical shortage of line officers at the time, Sims continued entreaties to Coontz produced the desired effect, and the War College was enlarged to include a total of thirteen officers on the teaching staff and sixty in the student body.¹⁶

Unlike Mahan, Sims had no abiding interest in history—although he did win a Pulitzer prize in history, along with co-author Burton J. Hendrick, for *The Victory at Sea*—and he was not a serious student of world politics. As his Guildhall speech and his close connections with the British Admiralty clearly indicate, Sims was an unabashed Anglophile who gave little serious thought to the role of the United States in the rapidly changing political circumstances of his era. It is therefore not surprising that Sims played next to no part in shaping the recommendations of his staff in London during the closing months of the First World War on the naval terms of the armistice with Germany or on the size of the postwar US fleet. Nor can Sims be considered an innovator in the curriculum or methods of instruction at the War College. Instead, Sims was primarily concerned with the *matériel* aspect of naval warfare and the role played by technological innovation in shaping warship design, the composition of the fleet, and operational doctrine.

In this respect, Sims bears a close resemblance to the two great naval reformers in Britain during the first twenty years of this century—"Jackie" Fisher and Percy Scott. Like Fisher and Scott, Sims campaigned for the introduction of the all-big-gun battleship and, later on, heralded the rise of naval aviation. In Sims' view, one of the most important tasks of the War College was to keep the Navy abreast of the rapid technological changes occurring in naval warfare and to adjust the fleet's operational doctrine to them. He told the students of the War College, "The important question now is as to whether the training we are actually giving our officers in systematic and logical thinking will enable our Navy, not simply to adopt improvements after their value has been proved by foreign navies, but so to utilize our undoubted inventive ability and so promptly to recognize demonstrated facts that we may keep safely in the van of progress."

This abiding concern about providing the fleet with a technological superiority over its potential adversaries largely explains Sims' strident advocacy of naval aviation to the defenders of the battleship. While at the War College, Sims took the lead in studying this complex and controversial question. After game board exercises and discussion with other officers at Newport, Sims concluded that the vulnerability of the battleship to air attack had decisively limited its operational value. Even before the Washington conference on naval limitation effectively halted battleship construction by the United States, Sims wanted to "arrest the building of great battleships and put money into the development of new devices and not wait to see what other countries are doing." Sims was convinced "that an airplane carrier of thirty-five knots and carrying one hundred planes . . . is in reality a capital ship of much greater offensive power than any battleship."

Sims found, of course, that many officers strongly disagreed with his views. To Bradley Fiske, Sims wrote that in "a discussion with the entire staff [of the War College] over the whole matter . . . it was easy to see that the question of the passing of the battleship was not an agreeable one to various members."¹⁷ Despite Sims' wholehearted conversion to naval aviation, the War College retained a decidedly more conservative outlook on operational doctrine during the interwar period. Most officers assigned to Newport continued to look upon the battleship as the dominant weapon in a fleet engagement. While his views on naval aviation failed to gain acceptance at Newport, Sims nonetheless impressed upon the War College the importance of studying the dynamic interaction between technological change and operational doctrine in naval warfare.¹⁸

Although his requests for additional personnel had largely been met by the Navy Department, Sims also wanted to expand the influence of the War College on the formulation of naval policy at the highest levels in Washington and in the battle fleet. Sims was therefore chagrined and outraged when he heard in the spring of 1923 that R.E. Coontz was to be made Commander in

Chief of the US Fleet and that Edward W. Eberle was to become Chief of Naval Operations. In an interview, published on 8 May 1923 by the *Boston Transcript*, Sims blasted Coontz, Eberle, and the Navy Department for not appointing a graduate of the War College to either of these two high commands. "In my opinion," Sims asserted, "the attitude of the Navy Department toward the Navy War College has long been a crime. The appointment of an officer who is not a graduate of the War College to be Commander-in-Chief of the great United States Fleet is a crime against the people of this country and so is the appointment of a non-graduate to the most important position in the Navy, that of Chief of Naval Operations."

Sims meant to attack the favoritism within the department that he saw behind these appointments. Both Coontz and Eberle were classmates of Secretary of the Navy Curtis D. Wilbur at the Naval Academy. "The service is disgusted with the situation," he went on, "disgusted that the old game of service politics is being played. It believes that the best place is a seat next to the dealer in Washington. Personal influence brings greater rewards than War College training." In a letter to Fiske, Sims explained the purpose behind his blunt language. "Do not imagine," he told Fiske, "that my interview in the *Transcript* was anything in the nature of slipping over. It was not only deliberately done, but I overhauled it carefully after it was written up Of course, I have had experience enough in this line to understand that nothing will be accomplished in the immediate future by my blast; but here's betting you it will prevent anything like the present crime in the future."¹⁹

Yet graduates of the War College were already assuming important policymaking positions within the Navy's hierarchy. In spite of Sims' assertions to the contrary, Admiral Eberle had indeed studied at the War College, and, while there, had even prepared a paper, "Policy—Its Relation to War and Preparation for War," which clearly shows his concern about the rising power of Japan and the threat this development posed to the United States in the Pacific. While his stay at the War College in 1913 might only have been a brief one, Eberle used this time to articulate his views about the important security challenges facing the United States. In addition to Eberle, other graduates of the War College were holding some of the most influential positions within the service. The extent of these inroads was pointed out to Sims not long after his public outburst against the Navy Department by his close associate R.R. Belknap. "Since [1920]," Belknap wrote, "the influence of War College trained men in the Navy Department has steadily grown. In the War Plans Division up to May last were six who received their diplomas from you. Admiral Rodgers, Pratt, Schofield, and the President of the War College, on the General Board; the Director of Naval Intelligence and the Attaches in England and France; the last two and the new assistants to the Chief of Naval Operations—all are War College Men." As a consequence of

the efforts by Little, Rodgers, and Sims to increase the number of officers who studied at Newport, the influence of the War College on naval policy continued to grow throughout the interwar period. The path to high command was increasingly seen to pass through the War College, and its graduates—Stark, King, Nimitz, Spruance, Kelly, Turner, and Ingersoll—were to provide the leadership that resulted in the victories of the Second World War.²⁰

In 1945 the United States emerged from the war as the world's leading naval power. The German and Japanese navies had suffered annihilation, while the French, Italian, and Russian fleets had been ruined by heavy war losses. Even Britain's Royal Navy was clearly eclipsed by the enormous wartime expansion of the US Navy. Despite this dramatic shift in the balance of naval power to the advantage of the United States, the rapid changes taking place in international politics and in modern weaponry required more than ever the services that the War College could provide in shaping the future development of the Navy. This requirement was clearly understood by Admiral Nimitz, who became chief of naval operations late in 1945.

Nimitz had himself studied at the War College during Sims' last year as president. "It is my good fortune," Nimitz attested, "to be a member of the Naval War College Senior Class that graduated in June of 1923. Admiral Sims was president, and Departments of Strategy and Tactics were headed by Captain Reginald Belknap and J.M. Reeves—both splendid leaders."²¹ Nimitz placed a high value on the contributions made by the War College during the interwar period in training officers for high command and shaping the Navy's strategic outlook. In Nimitz's view—to paraphrase the statement attributed to the Duke of Wellington about the Battle of Waterloo—the victory over Japan had been won on the game boards of Newport. As chief of naval operations, Nimitz wanted to rebuild the War College and enhance its stature. This task was entrusted to one of the outstanding fleet commanders of the Pacific war, Admiral Raymond A. Spruance.²²

Spruance presents a striking contrast in personality to the fiery Sims. Whereas Sims had been outspoken to the point of recklessness and enjoyed the public limelight, Spruance was withdrawn and an awkward public speaker. As a consequence, Spruance was not well known by the American public despite his wartime achievements. At a Fourth of July ceremony in 1946 held in Newburgh, New York, where Spruance had been ordered to deliver a speech by the secretary of the navy, only two people came to hear the victor of the decisive battles of Midway and the Philippine Sea, and one of those was his wife Margaret.²³ Nor was Spruance known as an innovator during his career in the Navy. Yet he was an inspired choice for the task of rebuilding the War College. He already possessed considerable experience with its curriculum and organization, having served three tours of duty there during the interwar period. Spruance first went to the college as a student in the

senior course during the presidency of William V. Pratt. In the fall of 1931 Spruance returned as a member of the staff, heading the correspondence courses department. Somewhat reluctantly, Spruance served another tour of duty beginning in 1935, which was to last almost three years, at the request of president Edward C. Kalbfus.²⁴ At the end of the Pacific war, Spruance asked to return to the War College in order to end his naval career as its president. With Nimitz's support, Spruance doubled the size of the teaching staff and student body from the levels that had been attained during the interwar period. Spruance also sought to improve the quality of the students by having a formal review board select the officers that were to attend.²⁵

Spruance placed great value on gaming exercises and the examination of operational problems in the curriculum. The purpose of these exercises was not to show that there could be only one solution to any given operational problem, but to sharpen the analytic skills of naval officers in the preparation of operations plans. "I believe that making war is a game that requires cold and careful calculation," Spruance was to observe from his experiences in the Pacific war. "Each operation is different and has to be analyzed and studied in order to prepare the most suitable plans for it." Spruance derided the notion that the successful conduct of naval operations could be reduced to a set of positive prescriptions. "The Naval War College advocates no dogma, nor doctrine, nor any fixed set of rules by which campaigns can be conducted or battles won," Spruance asserted. "There are no such rules. But it can and does endeavor to show that there are certain fundamentals, the understanding of which assists a commander in the orderly thinking and planning necessary to solve a military problem."

In these exercises, Spruance substituted the Soviet Union for Japan, which had dominated the War College's thinking during the preceding thirty years. The emergence of the Soviet Union as the primary antagonist of the United States in the operational problems of the War College happened by default, because no other great power posed much of a threat to America's world leadership. As Spruance put it, the Soviet Union "seemed the logical, and about the only, candidate." While Soviet operational capabilities at sea were slight immediately after the Second World War, Spruance nonetheless did not underestimate the threat posed by Soviet expansion on the Eurasian land mass. According to Spruance, the Navy had an important role to play in containing Soviet power by keeping open the sea lanes of communication between the United States and Western Europe. Spruance also foresaw the eventual growth of Soviet naval power to the point that it could pose a more effective challenge to the naval supremacy of the United States.

Despite his reputation as a conservative surface fleet officer during the interwar period, Spruance directed that the curriculum of the War College emphasize the technological dimension of naval warfare. Spruance was particularly concerned that the college study the role nuclear weapons would

play in future naval operations. He also broadened the curriculum to give more attention to submarine operations, amphibious warfare, logistics, and, of course, naval aviation. Through this welter of change, however, Spruance clung to Mahan's belief in the importance of sea power in international rivalries. "I can see plenty of changes in weapons, methods, and procedures in naval warfare brought about by technical developments," Spruance asserted during his last year as president, "but I can see no change in the future role of our Navy from what it has been for ages past for the navy of a dominant sea power—to gain and exercise the control of the sea that its country requires to win the war, and to prevent its opponent from using the sea for its purposes. This will continue so long as geography makes the United States an insular power and so long as the surface of the sea remains the great highway connecting nations of the world."²⁶

Throughout its hundred-year history, the War College has provided the Navy with a shared set of assumptions and beliefs about the importance of sea power for the security of the United States. The college has also played a critical role in shaping the Navy's strategic outlook and operational doctrine. In a time of rapid political and technological change and of crisis within the service and the country, the tenets of sea power and the methods for refining strategic concepts developed at the War College can serve as a guide to America's naval future. With the rise of Soviet naval power over the past twenty years, the stakes at risk have never been higher. As our fleet is expanded and modernized to regain a margin of superiority over the Soviet Navy and to meet widely scattered political commitments around the globe, the service will continue to depend on the intellectual working capital provided by the War College. To meet the challenges of the future the War College must, as Stansfield Turner put it, "return to our great traditions—to the strategic and historical contributions of men like Mahan: to the tactical and operational studies of men like William Sims."²⁷ The War College is indeed fortunate that its institutional growth has been fostered by the achievements of officers like Luce, Taylor, W.L. Rodgers, Sims, Spruance, and, above all, Mahan.

Notes

1. For an account of the War College's origins and early history, see Ronald Spector, *Professors of War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1977).

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 11-26.

3. A.T. Mahan, *Naval Administration and Warfare* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1908), pp. 217-242.

4. Spector, pp. 50-70.

5. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-87.

6. Robert Seager, *Alfred Thayer Mahan: The Man and His Letters* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977), pp. 162-168, 191-218.

7. Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 206.

8. Seager, p. 296.

9. Spector, p. 62.
10. Seager, pp. 482-489.
11. Spector, pp. 112-129.
12. Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942), pp. 492-493.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 275-300.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 290.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 292-312.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 473-477.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 502-510.
18. On the Naval War College during the interwar period, see Michael Vlahos, *The Blue Sword: The Naval War College and the American Mission, 1919-1941* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1980).
19. Morison, pp. 498-501; Richard W. Turk, "Edward Walter Eberle," *The Chiefs of Naval Operations*, edited by Robert William Love (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), p. 39.
20. Vlahos, pp. 92-94.
21. *Ibid.*, p. 92.
22. See the biography of Spruance by Thomas B. Buell, *The Quiet Warrior: A Biography of Admiral Raymond A. Spruance* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1974).
23. *Ibid.*, p. 391.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 50-54, 70-75.
25. *Ibid.*, pp. 390-391.
26. *Ibid.*, pp. 383-398.
27. Spector, p. 2.

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