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Admiral Bradley A Fiske and the American Navy

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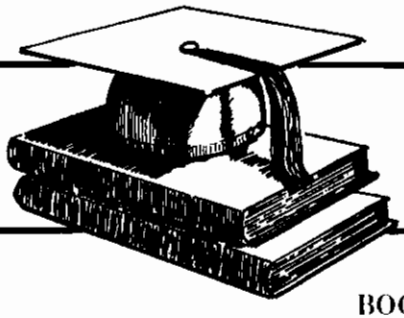

PROFESSIONAL READING

BOOK REVIEWS

Coletta, Paolo E. *Admiral Bradley A. Fiske and the American Navy.* Lawrence: The Regents Press of Kansas, 1979. 306pp.

Whenever thinking back over the long list of flag officers who have served America's Navy, most of us nonspecialists find our knowledge to be very sketchy. We recall a few from the early days of our country, one or two from the Civil War years, Dewey, Luce, and Mahan from the late 19th and early 20th century, several from World War II, and a few of recent years. We remember many details from some careers, highlights from others, perhaps a single incident from some, only the names of a large number, and not even that for a completely neglected group. Of the two latter categories we forget, or never knew, that the contributions of some of them far outweigh those of some whose names we have enshrined. Bradley Fiske was one of those.

Other than a surname on a list, my own awareness of Fiske long was limited to the vague impression that he fit in somewhere between the Spanish-American War and World War I. He was important because he invented the stadimeter by which the 300-yard standard distance between destroyers in column was measured. I learned his first name when serving in the staff of a squadron to which U.S.S. *Fiske* (DD-842) was assigned and learned that there had been an earlier *Fiske* sunk in the Atlantic in 1944. Some years later I commanded the second *Fiske* and, taught by a then-budding but now full-fledged naval historian *qua* naval officer serving in the ship, I learned enough of Fiske to begin to wonder how it was that he has remained so little regarded. He won no wars, but neither did Mahan nor Luce nor Rickover nor Zumwalt; yet his professional writings were as widely read, his technical achievements as applauded, and his organizational battles as controversial.

Fiske will never attain the institutional stature of Decatur or Dewey or Halsey but we no longer need wonder who he was or what he did. Paolo Coletta, a professor at the Naval Academy, has given us an excellent biography, soundly researched and interestingly written, of "a seagoing officer, . . . the greatest inventor of optical and electrical mechanisms ever to serve the navy, . . . [a] progressive who worked to reform naval organization and administration . . . [and] the father of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, of the Naval Research Program, and the National Security Council."

Fiske graduated from the Naval Academy in 1874 and joined the first of a series of ships. He had always been a tinkerer and his newly acquired engineering education gave him foundation for inventing items and developing ideas ranging, in those early years, from mechanical pencils to navigation methods. More often than not he found that his ideas had already been invented and patented or that they were rejected by the bureaus and organizations to whom he sent them, but his flashing

light signaling device was accepted and is still being used. He became interested in electricity and wrote a text on the subject. He designed electrical primers to fire the guns of the new ABC cruisers. His work and suggestions led to electricity going to sea, first for lighting and power for handling ammunition and laying and firing guns, then to mines, torpedoes, telegraphy, telephony, fire control systems and even to electrically driven submarines. Poor gunnery results led him to a consideration of range-finders. Combining the study of optics with his knowledge of electricity resulted in telescopic gunsights and electric range transmitters and indicators. (Some commanding officers resented these improvements inasmuch as increased emphasis on gunnery meant daily drill and that mussed up their decks and paintwork.) Fiske's work on wireless communication between ships worked but its range was too limited to be of any practical value. Practical difficulties also arose with his scheme to connect ships by wired telephone.

Fiske was in Manila Bay with Dewey in 1898 and saw many of his fire control and gunnery devices in action (and also his engine order telegraphs, revolution indicators, rudder angle indicators, and a host of other electrically and optically operated or aided apparatuses he had designed).

He continued with his technical work but had begun to concern himself with questions of administration, organization, and strategy. His gold medal essay for the Naval Institute in 1905 called for a navy general staff, an idea not original with him but for which he became a leading spokesman. Such a staff was essential to the reforms that he and a few like-minded officers saw as necessary to an efficient, effective, powerful navy. Some in the navy (and in the national press) applauded his efforts but Congress was not swayed.

Fiske's professional career was steadily advanced, despite his being called a visionary, impracticable, crank, bookworm, and laboratory officer by some, and after commanding *Tennessee* and *South Dakota* he was assigned to duty with the General Board in 1910. When he took over as head of the war plans section, he was taken aback to find that there were no war plans nor did anyone have the knowledge or means to draft any. Because the Board lacked any statutory authority and was caught in the political crossfire between the Secretary of the Navy and the bureau chiefs, the Board was of little use in developing strategy or fostering reform and Fiske was happy to return to sea as a battleship division commander.

When he returned to Washington in 1913 it was as aide for inspections, one of the four naval aides to the Secretary of the Navy, which positions had been established to "coordinate" the bureaus and to serve as liaison between the Secretary and the General Board. Within a month he was named as Aide for Operations, the senior aide. Shortly thereafter the new Secretary, Josephus Daniels, assumed office and for the 2 years of Fiske's term he and Daniels were the other's Nemesis. Fiske bombarded Daniels with studies and memoranda on organization, administration, preparedness, strategy, and any other matter that caught his attention in order "to educate the Secretary." While he approved a few actions Daniels took, most he considered lunacy. Little wonder that within a half year, Daniels began to try to get Fiske out of operations. The Secretary was particularly opposed to Fiske's views on reorganizing the department, legalizing the aide system, creating a Council of National Defense, naval aviation, general naval preparedness and almost all other military aspects of the Navy. Approximately a fourth of Coletta's book is devoted to Fiske's tenure as Aide for Operations and of his continual squabbles with the Secretary. Although

he had to go behind the Secretary's back to do so, Fiske was finally successful in getting Congress to establish the position of Chief of Naval Operations.

Fiske was obviously in line to be the first CNO and he and others within and without the Navy expected him to be. Daniels confounded everyone. Not only was Fiske not named; Daniels could find no flag officer that suited him and plucked Captain William Benson, Commandant of the Philadelphia Navy Yard, for the position. Fiske retired after 46 years of active duty and spent 26 years in retirement working on his inventions and commenting and consulting on those areas in which he had always had an interest–administration, technology, aviation, and preparedness. His last article was written in 1942 on airpower. One of his last comments on strategic matters was recorded that year, just before he died at age 87. He was asked how long the war would last. His answer, "How the hell would I know?" may have been his first to contain no opinion.

Coletta's biography of Fiske brings the man out of shameful obscurity and adds much to our understanding of the technologic and institutional changes of the "new navy" and of the preparedness struggles that seem always to have afflicted the Navy. The book adds new and welcome pages to naval history and will appeal to a wide variety of interests.

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Godson, Roy and Haseler, Stephen. *'Eurocommunism': Implications for East and West*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1978. 144pp.

The growth in electoral strength of European Communist Parties, particularly in Italy and in France, along with statements by their leaders repudiating Soviet dominance of the Communist movement, has given rise to numerous books and articles in the West attempting to understand Eurocommunism, of which this study is one of the most recent examples. In this short work, Godson and Haseler set out to examine the strength of West European Communist Parties, their domestic programs, and their foreign policies with regard to NATO and the U.S.S.R.

Having examined the electoral strength of the European Communist Parties, the authors conclude that European communism is a minority phenomenon. Nevertheless, they also conclude that if these parties entered governments, the result would be highly damaging to the economy and the security of Western Europe as a whole. The authors appear to assume that if the Communists entered governments at all, they would be the major force in them. Yet, because communism is a minority phenomenon it is much more likely that Communist Parties (CPs) would not become the leaders of governing coalitions but would only control less important ministries. Godson and Haseler imply that once in power the CPs would remain there permanently; they thus overlook the possibility of CPs being thrown out of office at a subsequent election.

Regarding the foreign policies of the European CPs, the authors acknowledge that some party leaders have denounced the U.S.S.R. and have even been supportive of NATO. While they correctly state that some ambiguity exists regarding what they would actually do once in office, they believe that European CPs in power would serve to enhance the interests of the Soviet Union. They do not appear to share the belief of some that part of the growing appeal of Eurocommunism is its decreased dependence on Moscow: that any sudden turn to the U.S.S.R. once in the government would result in a loss of popularity.

While Communist participation in European governments would not be politically beneficial to American