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# NAVAL STRATEGY IN THE 20TH CENTURY

by

**Professor Raymond G. O'Connor**

When Fleet Adm. Chester W. Nimitz retired as Chief of Naval Operations he submitted to the Secretary of the Navy a paper entitled "The Future Employment of Naval Forces" which he began by quoting the following words of Sir Walter Raleigh: "Whosoever commands the sea, commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade of the world, commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself." Admiral Nimitz then added, "This principle is as true today as when uttered, and its effect will continue as long as ships traverse the seas." In the 5th century B.C., Pericles said, "A great thing in truth is control of the sea," and Themistocles stated, "He who commands the sea has command of everything." We are also told by Thucydides that "Minos [of Crete] is the first to whom tradition ascribes the possession of a navy." The purpose of these initial quotes is to point out that seapower has been considered by historians and statesmen, as well as military authorities, to have been an essential element of national greatness throughout recorded history.

Of course it would not be entirely fair to present only one position on the matter, so at this point, and here only, I shall quote from Sir Halford Mackinder who promoted a land power thesis:

Who rules East Europe  
Commands the Heartland;  
Who rules the Heartland  
Commands the World Island;  
Who rules the World Island  
Commands the World.



Professor Raymond G. O'Connor holds an M.A. from The American University and a Ph.D. from Stanford University, and he attended the University of San Francisco Law School. Retired from

the Navy, Professor O'Connor has served in professorial billets in history at Stanford University, the University of Kansas, the University of Costa Rica, and the University of California at Santa Barbara. In 1965 he was appointed Professor of History and Chairman of the Department of History at Temple University.

As Associate, Historical and Research Organization, Professor O'Connor completed a number of studies for the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. His books include *Perilous Equilibrium*; *Readings in the History of American Military Policy* (editor); *Readings in Twentieth Century History* (coeditor); and *American Defense Policy in Perspective* (editor and coauthor). In addition, he has contributed numerous articles to various periodicals. His current project is *A History of American Foreign Policy, 1921-1941*, which will be volume VI in a seven-volume history of American foreign policy edited by Alexander DeConde.

Professor O'Connor occupied the Ernest J. King Chair of Maritime History at the Naval War College for the academic year 1967-68.

In this lecture I hope to trace the development of naval strategic thought in the 20th century and the naval policies followed by the major nations during the same period. Thus I intend to combine both theory and practice, for ideas, consciously or unconsciously, motivate the actions of men and nations.

The conditions prevailing in the world as the 19th century neared its end

were most suitable for a resurgent interest in naval power. Among the Western nations a "new" imperialism emerged directed toward an exploitation of the vast resources of Asia and Africa. The United States, having occupied all available contiguous territory and producing more industrial and agricultural products than it could consume, justified its overseas venture under various guises such as duty, destiny, dollars, and divinity. Japan, forced from its isolation and feudal structure, adopted Western techniques to develop her economy, her armed forces, and her foreign policies. Moreover, technological advances in ship construction and ordnance had rendered obsolete the older navies. The steel, steam, and rifled gun vessel marked the modern navy and enhanced its value as an instrument of expansion.

At just this time, within the framework of this remarkable juxtaposition of circumstances, an obscure American naval captain began publishing a series of lectures which he had delivered at the Naval War College. Alfred Thayer Mahan was a historian, a geopolitician, and a military analyst. He was steeped in the doctrines of the Swiss strategist Jomini, whose ideas had been taught to future Civil War generals by the elder Mahan, a professor at West Point. Mahan sought insights and lessons in history, including evidence of the crucial role played by seapower--or the lack of it--in deciding the fate of nations.

Strategy, according to Mahan, is all that pertains BEFORE the contact of the fleets, and, in strategy, unlike tactics which changed, certain virtually constant principles could be deduced. The sea, politically and socially, could be regarded as a great highway, and the key to much of the history and policy of nations bordering the sea could be found in three factors: production, shipping, and colonies. He enumerated the "principal conditions affecting the sea power of nations," namely, 1. geographical position; 2. physical con-

formation, including natural products and climate; 3. extent of territory; 4. number of population; 5. character of the people; 6. character of the government, including therein the national institutions. Contending that the rise and fall of modern nations rested upon command of the sea, he believed that ultimately such control rested in a powerful navy, although the components previously mentioned were vital. Mahan took issue with a popular French school of naval strategists known as the *jeune école* which advocated the *guerre de course--commerce* raiding--as a decisive method of waging war. This school understandably had been stimulated by the development of the motor torpedo boat. But Mahan insisted that the primary function of a navy in time of war was the destruction of the enemy forces, which could be accomplished only by a major fleet action. Concentration of force was mandatory, and his admonition to "never divide the fleet" permeated his writings.

It is easy to see in the context of the times why Mahan's message was welcomed by many governments, and why his doctrines were eagerly embraced by the newly arrived "have-not" nations as well as the great powers. "Sea power," he wrote, "is but the handmaid of expansion, its begetter and preserver; it is not itself expansion." Thus he sought to disarm the antiimperialists. "The surest way to maintain peace," he said, "is to occupy a position of menace." So he sought to avoid the "war-monger" label and disarm the pacifists. As for the necessary defense posture, Mahan wrote, "It is not the most probable of dangers but the most formidable that must be selected as measuring the degree of military precaution to be embodied in the military preparations henceforth to be maintained." His primary concern was capability rather than intentions. Mahan also had something to say for the lesser powers. He saw a need for the buildup of the German Fleet

around the turn of the century because of its use as a deterrent to Great Britain. Germany, he said, "needs a navy of such strength that the greatest naval power will not lightly incur hostilities." If Germany wished to pursue a "point of foreign policy to which Great Britain objects" the latter would "be especially cautious in determining the extent to which this policy should be opposed."

The exact amount of influence exerted by Mahan is impossible to determine, but many national policies came to reflect his doctrines, and his works were read and quoted by the leading statesmen of the day. Building programs were tailored to conform with his fleet action concept, and competition in naval construction among the powers kept pace with their competition for influence and empire on the international scene.

Meanwhile, the United States seemed to validate the Mahan thesis when in 1898 its "new Navy" defeated Spain by maritime actions as far afield as the Southwest Pacific and furnished the means of acquiring an island empire. While some authorities believed the Philippines to be an asset both as a colony to be exploited and as an outpost to enhance American influence in the Far East, some felt, as did Theodore Roosevelt later, that these islands were "our heel of Achilles." The Philippines extended the defense perimeter some 7,000 miles, necessitating a change in ship design to provide a greater cruising radius. The naval base acquired in Cuba provided for American dominance in the Caribbean and over the approaches to the contemplated isthmian canal, which Mahan deemed essential.

As for other nations, England emerged from her "splendid isolation" in response to threats to her interests and found her first ally in Japan. At this time there were two schools of naval strategy in Great Britain. The "Blue Water" school, represented by Admiral Lord Fisher's statement in 1904:

The Navy is the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 5th . . . ad infinitum Line of Defence! If the Navy is not supreme, no army, however large, is of the slightest use. It is not *invasion* we have to fear if our Navy is beaten, it's STARVATION!

General Wolsley represented the "Bolt from the Blue" school when in 1896 he declared:

I know nothing that is more liable to disaster and danger than something which floats in the water. We often find in peace and in the calmest weather our best ironclads running into each other. We find great storms dispersing and almost destroying some of the finest fleets that ever sailed. Therefore, it is essentially necessary for this country that it should always have a powerful army, at least sufficiently strong to defend our own shores.

The Anglo-Japanese Alliance of 1902 enabled Britain to withdraw part of her Asiatic forces and deploy them in European waters to counter German and Russian moves. Japan was given a free hand to halt Russian penetration in China, and the decisive victory at Tsushima offered further evidence of Mahan's dictum.

At this point the United States was building against Germany, considered the most likely threat to the Monroe Doctrine. Britain, which in 1889 had adopted the "two-power" standard, in 1909 was forced to settle for a program which called for a 60 percent superiority over the German Navy. Japan was continuing along conventional lines while she began to have problems with the United States, and each nation became concerned over the other. In the meantime the all-big gun "Dreadnaught" vessel came to be universally accepted as the "backbone of the fleet" and made obsolete other battleships. Mahan's "capital ship theory" prevailed among the major naval powers.

Another vessel to make its appearance at this time was the submarine. Still in its early stages of development and propelled by gasoline engines, most strategists, including Mahan, saw its

function primarily for coastal defense or as a part of the fleet. But in 1912 the first American diesel submarine, the U.S.S. *E-1*, was commissioned with Lt. Chester W. Nimitz as commanding officer, and a year later the German Navy had its first diesel boat. As Philip Lundeberg has noted, "It was the adoption of the Diesel engine for surfaced submarine propulsion that transformed the submarine from an accident-prone, short-range, coastal defense auxiliary into an economical high-seas raider." Yet the enormous potential of the submarine for commerce destruction, a vessel that would vindicate the *guerre de course* school, was not apparent when the First World War erupted. The danger of submarine torpedo attack made close blockade of ports impracticable and made more difficult invasion or raids on the enemy seacoast. Fleets were compelled to strengthen their destroyer escort and on occasion to change their anchorage to less desirable but better protected locations. In the Dardanelles campaign, submarines and mines were significant factors in thwarting naval efforts to provide support. And, in spite of Britain's surface naval superiority, German submarines brought England to the verge of paralysis by commerce destruction. Only the belated introduction of the convoy-escort system, aided by American vessels, saved the day.

As for surface action, by 1916 the British Fleet was so weakened by submarine and mine attrition that Jellicoe and Fisher felt that the outcome of an engagement with the German Fleet would be "doubtful." The basic strategy was stated in a memorandum from Admiral Jellicoe to the Admiralty dated 12 April 1916, just 6 weeks before the action at Jutland:

The first axiom appears to me to be that it is the business of the Grand Fleet to nullify any hostile action on the part of the High Sea Fleet; secondly, to cover all surface vessels that are employed, either in protecting our own

trade, or in stopping trade with the enemy; thirdly, to stop invasion, or landing raids . . .

The Battle of Jutland was the major naval encounter of the war, and it has been considered a strategic victory because Britain had maintained its control over the main approaches to the North Sea. But Arthur Marder has pointed out that "a decisive victory would have opened the way into the Baltic for a British squadron," which would have provided for "the opening up of a supply route to the hard-pressed Russians, and so prevented the Revolution of March 1917; the tightening of the blockade by preventing iron ore and other essential war materials from reaching Germany from Sweden; and an amphibious attack on the Pomeranian coast *a la* Lord Fisher." In a brilliant study of submarine warfare during the First World War, Philip Lundeberg has concluded, "It is clear, in any event, that undersea warfare contributed powerfully to the repeated frustration of Britain's peripheral strategy, most precisely in her inability to establish a common maritime front--either in the Baltic or in the Black Sea--with her Eastern ally against Germany." The submarine not only came close to starving England into submission, but it nullified much of the Allied surface superiority and significantly altered the course of the war.

Aircraft development introduced another factor into naval warfare. Employed in antisubmarine efforts, the airplane was also used as a commerce destroyer and as an adjunct to the fighting fleets. The development of the aircraft carrier increased its potentiality in the aforementioned activities and assured the future role of the airplane as a component of the battle fleet. But in spite of these innovations, and regardless of a new school of thought which believed in the primacy of the submarine and the airplane, predominant opinion clung to the battleship as the

basic element of naval power. Submarines and aircraft, it was contended, had not prevented the British Fleet from performing its primary mission of containing the German Fleet, protecting the British Isles from invasion, blockading Germany, destroying Germany merchant vessels, and permitting the American Army to reach France.

The armistice and peace which followed the First World War found the victorious nations confronted with an entirely new set of power relationships. The United States, with the Naval Construction Bill of 1916 directed toward the creation of a navy "second to none," had rejected membership in the League of Nations and was groping for a role in world affairs. Japan had improved her position in the Far East considerably, both militarily and commercially, while Germany and Russia had been eliminated as factors in the power balance in that area. Great Britain regarded both the United States and Japan as rivals for naval supremacy and world trade.

The outcome of this confused state of affairs was the Washington Conference of 1921-22. Convened for the purpose of settling the Far Eastern situation and halting an expensive and alarming naval race, this conference revealed the basic maritime strategies of the major powers. In this and subsequent conferences that took place until 1936, each nation followed conventional doctrine for the most part. The battleship was accepted as the "index of naval power," and ratios were established that limited tonnage for ships displacing more than 10,000 tons and mounting guns over 8 inches, i.e., what were termed "capital ships." In addition, limitations were placed on the construction of aircraft carriers. England, understandably, attempted to have the submarine outlawed, but France led in defeating the move largely on the grounds that it constituted the "poor man's navy." Of course, as a result of

this agreement, building spurred in the unrestricted categories of cruisers, destroyers, and submarines. A conference at Geneva in 1927 failed in large part because the British wanted a great many cruisers, contending that their farflung empire warranted a greater number of these vessels in order to patrol the lengthy sealanes. The United States insisted on parity or equality with Great Britain, and Japan would not accept the same ratio for smaller vessels that she had for capital ships and carriers. In 1930 the London Conference did succeed in establishing agreement among the three major naval powers on the limitation of all classes of warships. Great Britain accepted parity with the United States and reduced the number of cruisers from 70, as at Geneva, to 50. Japan secured parity in submarines and an improved ratio for cruisers and destroyers. France and Italy refused to join in this new agreement for various reasons.

In the meantime, controversy over the role of airpower raged in military and political circles. The airplane was universally accepted as a scout, as an eye of the fleet, and for spotting and reporting the results of gun salvos. The great argument was over its efficacy as a weapon. During the 1920's and 1930's it could be said that airpower was accorded a greater role in the American Navy than it was in the British, more in the Japanese Navy than the American, and more in the Italian Navy than in any other. The annual American fleet problem which first saw the use of the two carriers *Lexington* and *Saratoga* took place in 1929, and this and subsequent war games clearly demonstrated the value of carrier-based planes in launching surprise attacks on land targets, notably Panama, Hawaii, and the West Coast. But at the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor both the United States and Great Britain were committed to the primacy of the big gun ship, were woefully lacking in carriers,

and were pitifully inadequate in anti-submarine vessels.

France and Italy concentrated their efforts on preparing for war in the Mediterranean with shore-based aircraft, heavily gunned high-speed cruisers and destroyers, submarines, and virtually unsinkable battleships. Neither expected to establish control of the area, and Italy's primary objective was to prevent a superior seapower from exercising maximum command of the Mediterranean.

When the European war broke out in 1939, Great Britain expected to employ its overwhelming naval superiority to contain and strangle Germany while keeping open communications with the Continent and overseas sources of men and material. The German Navy employed the defensive-offensive strategy urged by Mahan for an inferior force, and the brilliant Norwegian operation was only one of many embarrassing episodes for the British. During 1940 and 1941 the American Navy was being deployed in a manner designed to aid England and later Russia in the struggle. The fleet remained at Pearl Harbor following the exercises in early 1940 in order to exert pressure on the Japanese Government to refrain from aggression in the Far East and affect the situation in Europe. American ships in Atlantic waters patrolled and escorted convoys, and in May 1941 the President sent major units from the Pacific to bolster British efforts in the Atlantic.

The Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor was an essential element in a grand design. With the American Fleet incapable of contesting Japanese moves, territory would be occupied, bases would be established, and a veritable "fortress area" would be created in the Southwest Pacific. The United States, faced with a huge and time-consuming effort, would eventually agree to a peace settlement giving Japan much of what she wanted. But the Japanese, afflicted with the "victory disease,"

decided to move into the central Pacific and received their major rebuff at Midway. The decision to attack the American Fleet at Pearl Harbor was reached after a good deal of debate, and some authorities believe it was not such a stupid move. Some Japanese leaders, however, felt that the American Fleet should have been induced to enter the Western Pacific and engage the Japanese Fleet under the shelter of its land-based planes, with total destruction virtually assured. When, or whether, the United States would have recovered from such a disaster in order to wage war effectively against Japan, while at the same time providing the effort necessary against Germany, is impossible to determine. Actually, Fleet Admiral Nimitz later noted that it was fortunate the United States did not know of the approach of the Japanese task force toward Hawaii, for Admiral Kimmel would have steamed forth to meet it, and, in Admiral Nimitz's words, "the Japanese would have sunk every one of our ships in deep water," primarily because of superior airpower.

The best brief recapitulation of the naval strategy of World War II is to be found in Samuel Eliot Morison's use of the strategic concept of the "three C's," CONVOY, CONTAIN, and CONJUNCT, which he borrowed from Sir Julian Corbett's work *on England in the Seven Years War*, and which Admiral Morison insists prevails to this day. The convoy and escort of merchant vessels was brought to a high art, although Germany sank over five and a half million tons of Allied shipping. As Stephen Roskill says, "at two periods (at the beginning of 1941, and in the early spring of 1943), the enemy's efforts brought him within what now seems to have been measurable distance of success-as indeed they had in 1917." Methods used to CONTAIN included bottling up the enemy warships or destroying them at their bases. Amphibious or combined operations are de-

fined by the old term CONJUNCT. The effective coordination of these dimensions of naval warfare constituted the overall strategy for victory. Fleet Admiral Halsey has given his assessment of the technological contributions. "If I had to give credit to the instruments and machines that won us the war in the Pacific," he wrote, "I would rank them in this order: submarines first, radar second, planes third, hulldozers fourth." Of course it is men as well as machines that participate in wars and influence their outcome, and decisions, judgments--correct or incorrect--chance, luck, the breaks, all had a role ranging from insignificant to decisive in determining the course of the conflict. "The personal equation," Mahan concluded, "though uncertain . . . , is sure always to be found."

To summarize the role of seapower in this gigantic struggle, control of the Pacific was essential in order to defeat Japan, and control of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean was necessary to defeat Germany and Italy. So without arguing which was the predominant factor in each case, there is no question that without a victory at sea there would have been no victory on land or in the air.

The postwar situation found the United States and Great Britain with huge navies, but the old antagonists against which they had been built were eliminated. Russia, predominantly a land power, posed little perceptible maritime threat even if the euphoria of victory and peace through the United Nations had not existed. The rush to demobilize, the international atmosphere, and fiscal compulsions led to drastic cutbacks in the military programs of the major nations. But two factors soon compelled the United States to modify its leisurely approach to defense: first, drastic changes in weapon technology and delivery systems made the nation immediately vulnerable to attack from overseas; second,

the United States assumed vastly increased political commitments abroad in facing the challenge of Communist aggression. But many felt that airpower had replaced seapower as America's first line of defense, and one air force general expressed a widespread feeling. "To maintain a five-ocean navy to fight a no-ocean opponent," he said, "is a foolish waste of time, men and resources." So the Navy, to avoid being written off as obsolete and in order to compete for a share of the defense budget, emphasized the role of carrier aviation in attacking land targets rather than ships. During the Korean war the Navy "mobile airfields" made a notable contribution and they were accorded "sanctuary" status by the enemy. Also, the Navy revitalized the significance of seapower by instituting a blockade, bombarding land installations from warships, mounting amphibious operations, and providing essential logistics support. The Korean experience demonstrated that control of the sea could be vital in waging limited wars, even against non-naval powers.

During the conflict Admiral Radford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, urged a blockade of China but was unable to secure permission. Whether such action would have had the effect that he and General MacArthur anticipated is an open question, although the Navy was prepared to implement the proposal. In 1954, when the French position at Dienbienphu was in jeopardy, Admiral Radford advocated an air attack by American carrier-based planes to relieve the garrison, but again he was overruled.

The American Navy played a significant part during the cold war, although its actual impact as a deterrent to Communist aggression will not be known until Soviet records become available or Kremlin leaders publish their unexpurgated memoirs. When in 1946 Russian ambitions threatened Iran and the Dardanelles, President Truman



sent the battleship *Missouri* with escorts to Istanbul. As subsequent crises occurred in the Mediterranean the United States revealed its interest through the presence of naval units at critical points, and by 1948 the 6th Fleet had been formed to stabilize the situation in that area. In the Far East the 7th Fleet displayed the flag and brought its influence to bear in peace and war. The experience of limited war and the advent of the nuclear-powered submarine restored the Navy to its previous major role in American defense policy, and when guided missiles appeared the Polaris nuclear submarine provided a moveable and virtually invulnerable launching platform. Great Britain, beset by financial problems and a rapidly shrinking empire, abdicated her position as mistress of the seas. By the 1970's she plans to have no aircraft carrier, no battleship, or even a large cruiser. Her navy will consist of a few dozen frigates, destroyers and escort craft, four Polaris-type submarines, eight nuclear-powered fleet submarines, and about 40 conventional submarines.

But Russia has emerged as a rival to American naval dominance, and her efforts should be viewed in light of the competition on the international scene and the virtual equilibrium prevailing in other dimensions of military activity. The Soviet surface navy is formidable and relatively modern. The huge submarine fleet is being rapidly augmented by faster and quieter nuclear-propelled vessels designed as hunter-killers and missile launchers. The naval air arm is developed and adept at patrolling and antisubmarine work, while minelaying and minesweeping capability far exceeds that of the United States. She has constructed two aircraft carriers for helicopter operations. Her merchant fleet is expanding rapidly, her fishing fleet will soon be the largest in the world, and her oceanographic research activity is extensive.

Certainly the Russians realize that

the sea is probably the most "exploitable" area of the globe, exploitable in a diplomatic as well as a material sense. The Soviets can counter the American presence, which has been predominant, without provoking a drastic reaction. They can demonstrate their sympathy and support for governments by placing their units at the scene in the traditional manner. They have demonstrated most dramatically their ability to pose a challenge to American domination of the sea and influence the behavior of nations. Their peacetime strategy is offensive, probing more vulnerable areas by astute deployments. In the event of war their strategy would doubtless be defensive-offensive as befits a nation with specialized rather than totally balanced forces.

So where does this find naval strategy today? Stephen Roskill emphasizes three elements of seapower. First, what he calls the "strength element," composed of those instruments which operate on, under, and above the sea. These are fundamental and ultimate. Next is the "security element," the bases from which the strength element operates. Finally, the "transport element"—the merchant navy, the ships, the crews, and the yards to build and repair the vessels. In regard to the final element, an article in the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* concluded that "The threat of the Soviet merchant ship as an instrument of decisive military, political, and economic importance is very real and lethal."

One cannot help but be struck by what seems awfully familiar in Roskill's analysis, and it may be worthwhile to revert to the past for a moment. Professor Gerald S. Graham, in his book, *The Politics of Naval Supremacy*, has observed that "In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries seapower was probably most influential when it was least conspicuous. Even in time of peace it functioned as a powerful instrument

of diplomatic action and compulsion." Today seapower is conspicuous without hostilities, and prestige is more important in a shrinking world with mass population involvement, though the principle remains the same. Professor Graham goes on to refer to the "so-called age of Pax Britannica." "It would be wrong," he contends, "to suggest that the Royal Navy imposed a British peace on the world," for "Britain was in no position to seek or to ensure the peace of mankind by means of her fleet." In 1871 the head of the British Government stated that the Royal Navy was almost valueless for any purpose other than the defense of home shores. If capability were not enough, Lord Rosebery told Queen Victoria, "We cannot afford to be the Knight Errant of the World, careering about to redress grievances and help the weak." This, too, sounds familiar, and the limitations of power should be even more apparent in light of present-day consequences.

Yet it is difficult to avoid concluding

that the strategic significance of seapower has increased, most notably in its impact on land warfare. It is now capable of operating inland, with an even greater potential for what is called "blackmail" and for affecting the outcome of wars, either unconventional, limited, or general. In fact, it is likely that seapower is destined to become a more potent force on the international scene as the two major powers compete in various dimensions of activity for what they deem to be their essential interests. Moreover, the versatility of seapower will appeal more to smaller nations as they pursue their objectives in an increasingly volatile world. But naval strategy is a component of military strategy, which is an element of national strategy. The parts are not disparate for they form a continuum, which, if properly designed and manipulated, can provide the maximum security as long as international anarchy prevails.



Granting the same aggregate of force, it is never as great in two hands as in one, because it is not perfectly concentrated.

*Mahan: Naval Strategy, 1911*