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## "THINGS DONE BY HALVES"

### Observations from America's First Great-Power Competition

*Benjamin F. Armstrong*

The return of great-power friction and competition to the world's oceans has initiated a good deal of self-reflection in naval and maritime circles. The U.S. Navy, in particular, has begun to reassess how it approaches the tactical and operational questions of establishing sea control during wartime. At the same time, the Royal Navy (RN) seeks to understand how Britain's departure from the European Union will change its role in world affairs, and Japan continues to adjust its defense policies and the norms of its naval involvement in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. These are just a few of the shifting dynamics among the United States and its maritime allies.

A great deal of the official U.S. response to the developing power dynamics of the twenty-first century is focused on capability for conventional, or nation-state, warfare. Yet, concurrently with calls for developing greater lethality and greater high-end naval capability, observers have identified a second challenge: maritime conflict outside the boundaries of peer combat, or short of the threshold of high-end warfare.

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By looking to the maritime past and scuttling the idea that somehow the "gray zones" of today have initiated something unique to our contemporary world, naval forces will be better prepared to address the challenges presented by maritime security, naval irregular warfare, and great-power friction on the world's oceans. In particular, an examination of America's first postindependence conflict, the Quasi War with

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France, illuminates key questions for strategists and planners considering the interactions among great powers.

Our contemporary *National Defense Strategy* assures readers that the world has entered an era of renewed “great-power competition.” Unfortunately, much of the strategic and national-security writing that has adopted the phrase then immediately turns the discussion to the ability to conduct or deter peer-combat operations. Over centuries, however, maritime conflict short of declared war or open hostilities has been a fundamental part of the competition and maneuvering among powerful nations. Rather than looking only at our immediate past, or at most at the history of the post–world war era, strategists must open their aperture to a wider understanding of how the international dynamics of earlier eras might inform what *great-power competition* means for military and naval forces beyond *great-power war*. For the purposes of this article, debates over the theoretical and definitional constructions of *gray zone*, *hybrid*, *asymmetric*, and other labels are less important than seeking to understand how this history can inform our understanding of the present and our thinking about the future.<sup>1</sup>

Concepts surrounding the advancement of *hybrid war* or conflict in the *gray zones*—or whichever contemporary buzzword is a strategist’s or planner’s favorite—have developed from Russian activity in the Black Sea region and Chinese activity in the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup> Much of the writing implies that modern Russian, Chinese, and Iranian efforts have introduced something new to the maritime world. Admiral James G. Stavridis has written that “the fundamental idea of hybrid warfare is to find the space short of clear-cut military action with direct and recognizable tactical, operational, and strategic impact.”<sup>3</sup> He suggests that the maritime versions of these conflicts will be conducted in the coastal or littoral regions of the world and will involve both naval “gray-hull” warships and civilian vessels. Other commentators have pointed out that the mixing of law-enforcement responsibilities with more-traditional naval missions complicates the situation for naval planners who think in Mahanian terms of decisive sea battles or Corbett-inspired bombardment and power projection ashore.<sup>4</sup> Despite the fact that some identify these hybrid or gray-zone conflicts and competition as a particularly complicated and somewhat unprecedented change to the maritime world, they actually are nothing new to naval history.

The very beginning of the history of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps is as good a place as any to take up an examination of unconventional conflicts, irregular operations, and great-power competition. The conflict between the United States and France from 1798 to 1800 was, after all, a maritime conflict, caused by great-power friction, that remained short of declared war. It led the U.S. Congress to form the Department of the Navy and to outfit and deploy U.S. warships for the first time. Originally known as “the war with France,” the conflict became

known more commonly in the twentieth century as the Quasi War, and the new nomenclature suggested its unusual and unconventional nature.<sup>5</sup> By looking back on the U.S. Navy's first conflict—an undeclared war that occurred in the gray area between peace and war, but resulted in both combat among nations and fighting against nonstate groups in a hybrid manner—observations emerge that may help today's strategists and planners examine our modern challenges. Understanding the long history of American involvement in maritime operations short of declared war will lead to better-informed questions to help us understand our contemporary challenges, and will help us develop twenty-first-century approaches.

### A WAR THAT WAS NOT A WAR

Today, the history of the Quasi War is largely unknown to naval planners and national-security professionals. It also lacks a wide body of literature from academics and historians themselves. The Barbary Wars of early American history have attracted a cottage industry of recent publishing on the topic, from academics to Fox News hosts—even sportswriters. The bicentennial of the War of 1812 also brought a wealth of recent scholarship on that declared war. In contrast, in the past half century there has been only a single book about the U.S. Navy and the Quasi War: Michael Palmer's excellent *Stoddert's War*. As a result, returning to the historical primary sources, alongside the work of Palmer and older and related scholarship, can offer a useful and generally unfamiliar case study for the twenty-first century.

The French Revolution was an enormous event in world history, with effects that rippled across oceans. In the still-infant United States, the uprising that overthrew and executed Louis XVI created both international and domestic political problems. Britain's reinitiation, in the aftermath of the Revolution, of its intermittent eighteenth-century wars with France put the United States in the middle. The revolutionary government (known as the Directory) demanded that the United States fulfill its responsibility to France, in accordance with the alliance that had helped Americans win their own independence. However, President George Washington did not want the two great powers of Europe—each of which had constituencies and supporters in the United States—pulling the young nation into a war it could not afford, economically or politically. Instead, Washington followed a circuitous line of diplomatic reasoning to escape the alliance that had helped ensure his own victory at Yorktown. His administration, claiming that the country's treaty had been with the recently guillotined Louis, explained that the alliance had died with the king, and that as a result the United States had no responsibility to support revolutionary France.<sup>6</sup>

The U.S. government tried to walk the fine line of neutrality, while at the same time American merchant traders set sail to carry supplies to both sides in the

conflict. American merchants knew that when great powers were at war they could make high profits carrying cargoes under a neutral flag.

The Directory, however, also realized Americans' profit motives. Following Washington's declaration of neutrality, the French abrogated the 1778 treaty with the United States. In doing so, it went beyond simply ending the alliance, also repudiating the treaty's support for the American belief that "free ships make free goods." This uniquely American ideal claimed that a neutral flag protected a ship from seizure regardless of whether the ship's cargo constituted contraband of war. Instead, France returned to the traditional interpretation of maritime law, which believed that the destination of the cargo was what mattered in determining whether it was contraband and legal to seize, not who was carrying it.<sup>7</sup>

The 1794 commercial treaty between United States and Great Britain, which became known as the Jay Treaty, was seen as yet one more insult to the French, who interpreted it as an effort by the Americans to assist the British enemy. The French accused American merchants of allying themselves with London, and privateers and warships sailing under the tricolor opened up a campaign of *guerre de course* (commerce raiding) against American ships in the Caribbean and western Atlantic.<sup>8</sup> In June 1797, Secretary of State Timothy Pickering would report to Congress that French privateers and cruisers had captured 316 American ships during the previous year.<sup>9</sup>

After the election of 1796, Washington turned over the presidency to John Adams. In an attempt to negotiate a solution, the new administration sent a diplomatic mission to Paris. Instead of a diplomatic success, the negotiators came back with a story of solicitation of bribes and other covert dealings in what American newspapers called the XYZ Affair.<sup>10</sup>

President Adams and Congress began putting the United States on a war footing.<sup>11</sup> American political leaders authorized the final outfitting and deployment of the U.S. Navy's first three frigates. They appropriated funds to finish building the second group of three frigates, whose construction an earlier Congress had halted to save money, in 1794. They authorized the president to buy or build a dozen small warships, of twenty-two guns or fewer. And finally, the legislature formed the Department of the Navy, under the leadership of the newly created Secretary of the Navy, to administer and lead naval operations against French depredations.<sup>12</sup> However, Congress did not pass a declaration of war. The forces began to deploy in the summer of 1798, in what President Adams and Congress both considered a defensive measure. Between Congress's first authorization for combat operations—ordering U.S. warships to engage armed French vessels in the early summer of 1798—and the Convention of 1800—which ended the conflict in September of that year—the U.S. Navy deployed dozens of warships into the Caribbean and western Atlantic.

#### FOUR OBSERVATIONS

In today's maritime and military concepts and jargon, those ships' mission can be described quite accurately as carrying on a maritime hybrid conflict brought on by great-power competition. Studying the records of the nascent American naval force to examine how the ships operated during the Quasi War yields four observations about the experience and how the Navy and its leaders approached the conflict.

The remainder of this article will examine those four observations rather than continue a chronological retelling of the story of the war.<sup>13</sup> These observations can help inform our understanding of how naval forces interact within the alleged "gray zones" and offer a starting point for considering hybrid maritime conflict in today's era of great-power competition.

##### *Presence Matters*

Initially, the American warships deployed in 1798 patrolled only the nation's coastlines, but it was only a matter of weeks before Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert realized that these operations were insufficient—French ships were attacking American merchant ships not only on the coast but also far from their own shores.<sup>14</sup> The French had established a privateering base, with supplies and a court for adjudicating prizes, on their colonial island of Guadeloupe in the Lesser Antilles.<sup>15</sup>

With Adams's approval, Stoddert deployed the first small squadrons of warships into the Caribbean. Under the command of captains who were elevated to the largely honorary title of commodore while in command of multiship squadrons, these units patrolled the common transit routes, convoyed American merchant ships when they could gather them, and discovered and captured French privateers. The first cruises were relatively successful, especially for a naval service that had existed for only a matter of months. However, after several months of continuous operations the ships required maintenance and supplies, so commodores and their squadrons began returning home—whereupon the French privateers surged back out of the safe havens they had found to renew their attacks.<sup>16</sup>

Despite how it appears when you draw a straight line on a map from the United States to the Caribbean, the Navy was operating far from home. Because of the prevailing winds and currents, in the age of sail a ship leaving Chesapeake Bay had to sail east into the Atlantic to find the winds that would allow it to tack back to the southwest toward the Caribbean. This route resulted in a passage that sometimes took American warships almost as long to get to the West Indies as it took them to reach Europe.

When reports of the renewed French attacks reached American newspapers, Stoddert and his commodores quickly realized that dealing with an adversary that

was using both state naval forces and privateers required constant presence.<sup>17</sup> The squadrons appeared to work well when they were on station. However, the Navy could not wait for the first squadron to make it home before deploying a second. The gap in presence allowed privateering attacks to surge and the admiralty court at Guadeloupe to fill with cases as General Edme É. B. Desfourneaux, the French governor, issued more commissions for privateers and reinvigorated the *guerre de course*.<sup>18</sup>

So Stoddert worked with President Adams to design a rotational deployment model for American squadrons. The secretary planned to order multiple squadrons to cover different parts of the Caribbean, and almost immediately he began preparing the new squadrons needed to replace them. Stoddert then issued the original commodore orders that forbade them to leave their stations until relief arrived.<sup>19</sup>

The American experience in the Quasi War revealed that in a hybrid conflict physical presence and patrolling constituted an important part of addressing the ebb and flow of the threat. The occasional appearance of a warship, to prove the simple possibility of presence, was insufficient; the number and types of adversary efforts quickly adapted to a strategy that left the seas uncontested, or at least unpatrolled. The resulting solution was the U.S. Navy's first use of rotational deployments—a method that has become a hallmark of modern global operations. In the Quasi War, for the Navy to remain operationally and strategically effective, the secretary had to ask, “How do I maintain regular, physical presence?”

### *Multiple Adversaries*

When the U.S. Navy initiated operations in the Caribbean in the summer of 1798, its leaders knew they would be facing at least two different adversaries.

**The French Navy.** France's navy had a small but capable presence in the West Indies to patrol the country's colonies and protect its trade. This force, at different points in the conflict, included several frigates, such as *L'Insurgente*, *Volontaire*, and *La Vengeance*. They were roughly equivalent in capability to the American frigates, although each ship was of slightly different size and had a slightly different armament. These vessels represented a conventional threat, and one that Americans had designed and armed their larger warships to be able to handle.<sup>20</sup>

**French Privateers.** But in addition to the French naval adversary were the French privateers. Varying widely in size, these ships deployed from French colonies in the Western Hemisphere to prey mostly on unprotected merchant ships from both the United States and Great Britain. Guadeloupe, located in the heart of the West Indies, was a primary base of operations.

The first privateer captured by an American warship was a typical example of the threat. In the summer of 1798, the American naval ship *Delaware*, a



twenty-gun converted merchantman commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur Sr., confronted *La Croyable* off the coast of New Jersey. After a brief exchange of gunfire the French surrendered, because they thought their opponent was a British warship.<sup>21</sup> The privateer was relatively small, with a schooner rig and a total burden of approximately one hundred tons. Armed with a dozen small (six-pound) guns, it was strong enough to overtake any merchant ship, but the captain knew he would have a hard fight against a warship.<sup>22</sup>

The rig and size of *La Croyable*, which generally matched the type built in the United States known as Baltimore clippers, became familiar throughout the nineteenth-century Caribbean as commerce raiders, not only as licensed privateers, with government-issued commissions, but also as pirates, engaged in maritime crime.<sup>23</sup> These French privateers attacked hundreds of American ships, although exact numbers are hard to come by. In 1827, Henry Clay collected the records of 444 ships that were taken as prizes and brought into French ports, yet that total does not include an unknown number that simply were robbed of supplies, sunk, or burned without a French legal proceeding.<sup>24</sup> The line between privateer and pirate could be blurry.

***Insurgents.*** Congress authorized combat operations against any armed French vessel, whether a warship or a privateer. Yet as the American commodores began operating throughout the West Indies, they discovered that there were other adversaries as well. In 1791, following news of the revolution in France, a slave revolt and black insurgency had erupted in the colony of Saint Domingue (known today as Haiti). Between 1791 and 1804, when Haiti declared its independence from France, its island was in a near-constant state of civil war and violence.<sup>25</sup> American merchants wanted to trade with the island, but the instability made it difficult. The involvement of American merchants, despite initial government claims of neutrality in the island's fighting, and the fact that Haiti was still ostensibly French pulled the U.S. Navy into the surrounding waters and embroiled its ships in the local fighting. Aligning themselves with the revolutionary François-Dominique Toussaint-Louverture (who sometimes returned his allegiance to France), American naval forces found themselves involved in operations against other factions both ashore and in the littorals around the island. Forces loyal to André Rigaud, who claimed to be fighting for France against Toussaint-Louverture, launched raiding attacks from shore with small boats on the southern coast of the island. Sometimes they sailed under the tricolor of France and sometimes under the red banner commonly flown by pirates in the West Indies. American warships found themselves in combat with both flags.<sup>26</sup>

***Other Threats.*** In the closing year of the conflict other threats popped up as well. The Spanish colonies of Cuba and Puerto Rico began to involve themselves in the



turmoil in Caribbean waters. The United States, France, Great Britain, and local revolutionary forces all were pursuing their own agendas, and Spanish authorities did not want to be left out. Reports of Spanish privateering and pirate bases began to reach the American commanders, so they deployed ships along the Cuban coast to patrol against the new threat.<sup>27</sup>

Thus, the commodores who commanded the American squadrons during the Quasi War did not have the luxury of contending with a single naval adversary. The French navy certainly posed the greatest danger in ship-versus-ship combat, but French privateers perpetrated the bulk of the attacks on American shipping and were the most important target of American operations. Yet despite the clear congressional direction toward French forces, the commodores and leaders in Washington could not ignore the civil war raging in Haiti, the insecurity it caused in the maritime world, and the threats of other great powers entering the fray. Initially, it seemed clear that America's adversary was "the French," but as the conflict developed and introduced other threats American leaders had to ask the question "Who are our adversaries, and what do they really want?" if they were to come up with operationally and strategically effective plans.

#### *Keeping an Eye on Allies and Partners*

U.S. naval forces discovered that they had numerous adversaries in the Caribbean. However, they also could count on a number of potential partners in their conflict with revolutionary France.

*Toussaint-Louverture.* While the Haitian leader appeared to present more demands than offers of assistance, Toussaint-Louverture and his forces regularly shared information and intelligence with American naval commanders and diplomats. The civil war raged in Haiti among groups that at various times received backing from British, Spanish, French royalist, and Directory forces. At the start of the conflict between the United States and France, Toussaint-Louverture had pushed back effectively against British and Spanish attempts to gain control of Haiti. President Adams saw the opportunity to reestablish the profitable commercial connections that Americans had had with the island previously while encouraging Toussaint-Louverture to maintain the separation between his territory and the government in Paris. The Americans, the British, and Toussaint-Louverture signed a secret three-way alliance in June 1798, just as the first American warships deployed into the Caribbean.<sup>28</sup>

The relationship with Toussaint-Louverture and Haiti was a conflicted one for the Americans. The fighting on the island, and with it the possibility that France would lose control of its most valuable colony in the Western Hemisphere, was clearly a positive development for American interests. The territory that

Toussaint-Louverture held at Cap-Français (now Cap Haitien) and Port-au-Prince offered places for American ships to obtain supplies such as food and fresh water. And American merchants made sure the Navy and politicians understood the future commercial benefits.<sup>29</sup>

But the Haitian Revolution also was a movement that started with a slave revolt. The racial politics of the era created massive fear that the revolution in Haiti would lead to unrest within the slave populations of states such as Georgia and the Carolinas. This fear was not unwarranted, since a Haitian veteran eventually would play a role in the "German Coast Uprising" in Louisiana in 1811.<sup>30</sup> There also was a more desperate concern: that the French might launch an invasion of the Southern American states using black troops, with the goal of fomenting a full-fledged slave revolution.<sup>31</sup> Yet despite the concerns of politicians and Southerners back home, American naval commanders in the Caribbean realized that even an imperfect partnership could be beneficial, so they continued to work with Toussaint-Louverture and his army.

**Britain.** The most powerful partner with which the United States worked during the Quasi War was the world's dominant naval power: Great Britain. There still were plenty of bad feelings between the two nations, which had gone their separate ways barely more than a decade prior. Yet both were fighting revolutionary France, and many of their interests in the Caribbean appeared to coincide, as witnessed by the joint secret pact with Toussaint-Louverture. During the first summer of American operations, Secretary Stoddert and Vice Admiral George Vandeput, who commanded British naval forces on the North America station, created a shared set of codes and signals that allowed American and British captains to communicate and coordinate their efforts.<sup>32</sup> At the start, the partnership appeared to be a solid one, as the Navy Department distributed the signal book and the commodores became aware of the common cause in Haiti. American merchant ships sometimes sailed in convoys under British protection, and the two nations' warships passed intelligence to one another.<sup>33</sup>

However, it was not long before the relationship began turning sour, at least occasionally. In the middle of November 1798, the American sloop of war *Baltimore* (twenty-four guns) was escorting a convoy of merchant ships along the north coast of Cuba toward Havana. As the convoy neared its destination lookouts called out several sail on the horizon, and a squadron of British warships approached. The squadron's flagship, the ship of the line HMS *Carnatic*, hailed Captain Isaac Phillips aboard *Baltimore*. Commodore John Loring asked him to come aboard the British ship to consult, and the American officer crossed in a boat. Phillips then was surprised when Loring refused to acknowledge his papers and instead ordered a press-gang aboard *Baltimore* and the other ships

of the convoy. The Royal Navy removed fifty-five seamen from the ships who they alleged were British subjects. Although about half eventually were returned, when the British sailed off they left Phillips impotent and embarrassed. Not long after, Secretary Stoddert relieved him of command.<sup>34</sup>

Cooperation and conflict ebbed and flowed between the Americans and the British throughout the war. Washington continued to receive reports of British assistance to American merchants, and the passing of intelligence between warships remained a regular occurrence.<sup>35</sup> However, there continued to be occasions on which the interests of the two nations diverged, including incidents of impressment and the occasional capture of American merchant vessels.<sup>36</sup>

One of the most dramatic examples occurred on the island of Curaçao, a Dutch colony, in the closing month of the conflict. In September 1800, French forces launched an invasion of Curaçao by landing over a thousand troops, who marched on the primary town, Willemstad. The port did heavy trade with American merchants, and there were many American ships in the harbor as the French approached.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. warships *Merrimack* and *Patapsco* arrived to help protect American interests, and the British sent the frigate *HMS Nereide* to ensure that the French did not take control of the island. The Dutch initially appeared ready to concede to the French, but with the arrival of the Anglo-American naval forces and the subsequent landing of marines and sailors to strengthen the defenses, they stood to fight the French attack. The two smaller American ships positioned themselves so their guns could support the town's small fortifications, and the combined force successfully repulsed the attack, leading the French to withdraw from the island.<sup>38</sup>

After the end of the combined defense, the American ships reembarked their Marines and sailors and set off to patrol around the island to try to capture some of the retreating French ships. While the Americans were gone, Captain Frederick Watkins landed British forces and annexed the town for Great Britain. He placed seven American ships in quarantine under British control, took custody of all the gold and cash of the American merchants in Willemstad, and sent orders for RN ships to seize all American vessels in nearby waters. Watkins's perception of British interests appeared to outweigh both his promise to the American captains that he would protect American merchants and any appreciation for the American contribution to the recent joint defense of the island.<sup>39</sup>

Alliances and partnerships are always a complicated part of military and naval operations. In maritime conflicts short of declared war, awareness of the motives and intentions of friends can be just as important as understanding adversaries. Because these conflicts rarely appear existential, and because they remain below many nations' threshold of what they consider *war*, members of defensive

alliances can be conflicted over their responsibilities to one another. The result is that while multiple nations may become involved in the same conflict, they do it for mixed reasons and with mixed rules of engagement. This may result in a situation counterproductive to American interests.

In the Quasi War, Secretary Stoddert and his commodores discovered that the partnership with Toussaint-Louverture produced both operational and political limitations, alongside its local benefits. They also experienced a complex relationship with the Royal Navy in the West Indies. As a result, during the Quasi War American leaders repeatedly had to ask the question "What are my partner's motives, and do we have the same goals?"

### *The Role of Fleet Architecture*

Congress founded the Department of the Navy to manage, organize, and command the Navy for the Quasi War with France. In the opening month of the conflict, the House and the Senate began authorizing the funds to build up the fleet. They started with finishing the fitting out and commissioning of the first three frigates, funding the completion of the second three frigates (whose construction had been suspended to save money), and appropriating funds to build or buy a dozen ships of up to twenty-two guns each. The Navy also took command of the cutters of the Revenue Service, reflagging them as warships. The department aimed to obtain converted merchant ships that were on the larger size and could carry around that limit (twenty-two guns). Examples are *Delaware* and *Baltimore*, which the Navy generally classified as sloops of war. These were the first ships deployed.<sup>40</sup>

What the commodores quickly discovered once they were on station, however, was that larger ships with deep drafts had operational limitations. The squadrons had to complete much of their required patrolling in archipelagic waters—the littorals and shallows of the Caribbean. The privateers that made up the vast majority of the French threat tended to have shallow drafts and fast schooner rigs, which made them maneuverable and harder to chase with a big, square-rigged warship. Instead of squadrons made up of a handful of large, strong ships, with an overwhelming firepower of thirty-six to forty-four guns, the commodores discovered that in their hybrid conflict they needed larger numbers of smaller combatants.

Two of the warships purpose-built for the Quasi War demonstrated the value of small combatants both in combat and in patrol and presence work. Built in Baltimore, the schooners *Experiment* and *Enterprise* put to sea in 1799. Approximately eighty-five feet long, with a draft of just nine feet and a small armament of twelve six-pound guns, *Experiment* first sailed with the squadron of Commodore Silas Talbot in the waters around Haiti.<sup>41</sup> Generally the same size and with the same capabilities as the privateers it hunted but with a trained crew, *Experiment* made more captures than any other ship deployed that year. Henry Spencer built

*Enterprise* on lines similar to those of its sister ship, and the second schooner deployed a month after *Experiment*. In the ship's first year of operations, its crew captured eight privateers and recaptured eleven American ships that the French had attacked and taken. These two small ships appeared more operationally effective than most of the frigates in the conflict. Commanded by aggressive young officers, they quickly made reputations for themselves, and the name *Enterprise* would enter American naval lore.<sup>42</sup>

The commodores realized they had a problem with the architecture of their squadrons. They simply did not have enough small combatants to patrol their areas of responsibility properly. To address the problem, many of them began using ships they had captured as American warships. This solution was a relatively common practice of navies in the age of sail. For example, British captains regularly purchased ships they had captured back from prize courts and called them "tenders" for their larger vessels. Placing a favorite junior officer in command with a handful of sailors from the larger ship, commanders deployed the tenders to patrol the littorals where the larger ship could not reach.<sup>43</sup>

American commodores such as Silas Talbot and Thomas Truxtun began using this method to augment their forces. In early 1799, within days of *Constellation's* defeat of the larger French frigate *L'Insurgente*, Truxtun and his men also captured the privateers *Le Diligente* and *L'Union* off Guadeloupe. Truxtun took *L'Union* into American service and manned and deployed it as a tender to hunt more privateers.<sup>44</sup> Talbot followed the same path in the spring of 1800 when the Americans captured the French sloop *L'Ampherite*. Talbot renamed the small ship *Amphitheatre* and placed it under the command of a young Lieutenant David Porter, with orders that suspicious vessels "may be stop'd, and examined strictly, and brought to the *Constitution* if she is near to be found."<sup>45</sup> Talbot also used the American smuggler *Sally*, which his boats had captured along the beach on the north coast of Hispaniola, as a raider to attack the privateer *Sandwich* in the harbor of Puerto Plata.<sup>46</sup>

The American commanders in the Quasi War discovered that a balanced architecture for their squadrons, including a range of capabilities in their ships, was important for prosecuting an irregular campaign successfully. This is not to claim that big warships, with the ability to conduct conventional naval battles, were unnecessary; on the contrary, Truxtun and *Constellation's* battles with the French frigates *L'Insurgente* and *Vengeance* demonstrated that units deployed for hybrid conflicts must be able to participate in high-end naval combat when threatened.

However, the administration back in Washington was not happy with the commodores' practice, and none of the tenders operated for more than a couple of months.<sup>47</sup> But the success of purpose-built small combatants such as *Experiment* and *Enterprise* and the commanders' desperate use of captured

vessels as tenders to expand the low-end capability of their squadrons suggest that in hybrid conflict a balanced force is vital to efficient operations.

### CONSIDERING QUASI WARS

In his report to Secretary Stoddert on *Constellation's* victory over *L'Insurgente*, Thomas Truxtun lamented the complex character of the operations he was leading. He wrote, "The french Captain tells me, I have caused a War with France, if so I am glad of it, for I detest Things being done by Halves."<sup>48</sup> Maritime great-power competition is complicated, rarely conforming to the popular image of great naval battles and other decisive moments on the sea. Despite many officers' dislike of the circumstances, the very first U.S. armed conflict following independence was a maritime hybrid conflict conducted with a backdrop of great-power competition in the Caribbean. Close examination of the records of the conflict demonstrates a number of parallels and similarities to the challenges that have been identified in the study of irregular or hybrid conflicts and gray-zone operations in the twenty-first century. In their study of these similarities, today's scholars, policy makers, and planners can start with four observations that might help guide their questions about modern maritime insecurity and complexity.

The leaders of the early American navy discovered the necessity for presence as an operating principle in maritime hybrid conflicts. Benjamin Stoddert, with President Adams's concurrence, developed the first use of rotational deployments and other efforts to maintain physical presence. In the modern world, there is a temptation to view the virtual presence of air- and subsurface-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance platforms as providing a technological solution for the twenty-first century. Yet the physical presence of surface combatants is likely to be just as important as it was two centuries ago, because it provides the maritime equivalent of what strategist Rear Admiral Joseph C. Wylie Jr., USN, described as "the man on the scene with the gun."<sup>49</sup> The *possibility* of a ship arriving and the actual physical *presence* of one already operating in theater affect the adversary's operational planning in fundamentally different ways. Virtual presence denotes actual absence.

The U.S. Navy struggles with this challenge in the twenty-first century. The occasional presence of American warships in the waters of the South China Sea sends important messages—but so does the absence of presence between those visits. In maritime regions that share many of the hallmarks of hybrid conflicts of the past, such as the Baltic or the South China Sea, regular naval presence has been hard to maintain; instead, episodic exercises and occasional patrols have become standard. Strategists considering regions that have the potential to escalate into hybrid or quasi wars may benefit from considering the same issues regarding the maintenance of regular presence that Secretary Stoddert addressed.



Early American naval leaders also discovered that hybrid conflicts usually offer up multiple adversaries. These adversaries typically have differing motives for their involvement in the conflict and employ different tactics or operating concepts. Planners must work actively to understand these differences if they are to prepare operations effectively. If they appreciate these divergences as a fundamental part of the maritime challenge, they even can use them as an opportunity. Recent developments of Yemeni rebels deploying coastal-defense missiles raise these kinds of concerns. It is unclear whether the group that fired on USS *Mason* (DDG 87) and other American ships in October 2016 did so with the full knowledge of its proxy supporters.<sup>50</sup> In the Quasi War, the French privateers frequently were more aggressive than the warships, and this complicated some of the Directory's efforts to resolve the conflict. The government in Paris eventually recalled General Desfourneaux, the French governor at Guadeloupe, for being too antagonistic and aggressive toward the Americans. The maritime militias the People's Republic of China has developed have the potential to impose similar complications on their alleged supporters and commanders.<sup>51</sup> There is potential that the militias, operating under the assumption that People's Liberation Army Navy forces will support them, will become more aggressive than their government expects, and they may place China in an untenable position. American and allied planners must understand not only that this possibility exists but also how to identify it when it happens.

Likewise, partners and allies constitute a complicated element of hybrid conflicts. Just as with potential adversaries, most partners bring their own goals and their own limitations to a conflict. These sometimes will make cooperation difficult, and even may be counterproductive to American interests. This will be particularly true when neither side sees an existential challenge, but instead perceives a slow "salami slicing." Balancing the differing interests of partners and allies will require just as much attention as understanding the motives of and differences among adversaries. U.S. interests already have experienced this challenge in recent years with the developments in the Philippines. Asking explicit questions about the interests of potential partners also raises important considerations about other nations, such as India or Vietnam, whose interests appear on the surface to match those of the United States but may not connect at a deeper political level. This truism may seem obvious when one reads it in an academic journal, but strategists and planners sometimes overlook it when they work from an American-centric view of the world and the country's challenges, as issues of rules of engagement, caveats, and relationships from Afghanistan have shown.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, the force architecture that commanders employ in the gray zone requires a hard examination of the capabilities available and the best way to balance the force employed. Large, powerful warships offer important deterrent



effects and address the challenges of survivability and force protection. However, they also tend to be inefficient and operationally limited when engaged in missions that fall short of war between major powers or ship-on-ship battles. Likewise, their expense results in smaller numbers, which adds to the presence challenge. Early American naval leaders were forced to recognize that small combatants are a vital part of the mix needed to address the myriad capabilities that hybrid adversaries may deploy. The large, forty-four-gun superfrigates such as *Constitution* were superior in a fight with other warships and eminently survivable; however, they had significant operational and acquisition limitations. Recent discussions of force architecture and fleet design in the U.S. Navy have focused on the big numbers—a 350-ship fleet, and how many large, powerful, guided-missile destroyers and globe-spanning aircraft carriers should be included.<sup>53</sup> But if the U.S. Navy is going to prepare itself for the hybrid maritime conflicts of the future, it should remember the experience of the quasi wars of the past and recognize the insistent need for small combatants as a fundamental part of a balanced fleet.

In his *Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority* Admiral John M. Richardson suggests that today's challenges "will require us to reexamine our approaches in every aspect of our operations," but he immediately goes on to remind sailors that "as we change in many areas, it is important to remember that there will also be constants." The Chief of Naval Operations wrote that the best way to identify these constants and to balance them against the ever-changing character of conflict is to "[b]egin problem definition by studying history."<sup>54</sup> While this call to historical context and wisdom appears fresh and new, Professor Andrew Lambert has written that the very founding of the academic discipline of naval history was "driven by the requirements of naval education, doctrinal development, and strategic reflection."<sup>55</sup> It is natural that, to understand our present, we should return to the maritime past.<sup>56</sup>

History provides an important starting point for the examination of these kinds of challenges in the modern day. The suggestion that twenty-first-century threats are unprecedented or that consideration of them cannot be informed by experience does not stand up to critical scrutiny. However, it also is important to understand that there are limitations to historical analogy and the use of historical study in military strategy. Modern planners, policy makers, and naval officers will not find "school solutions" or easy answers derived from the study of America's first maritime hybrid war. Instead, the observations that can be made from studying history may help refine the questions asked and the assumptions made, so as to develop better the underlying principles of a strategy or operational concept. As Alfred Thayer Mahan himself wrote, "The instruction derived from the past must be supplemented by a particularized study of the indications of

the future.”<sup>57</sup> The character of war is ever changing, even if parallels continue to resonate, and historical study offers us ways to build frames of reference, context, and background knowledge.

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#### NOTES

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