

## THE INFLUENCE OF MAHAN UPON SEA POWER

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**Kenneth J. Hagan.** *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power*. New York: Free Press, 1991. xiii + 434 pp. Photographs, bibliographic essay, and index. \$27.95.

Too often teachers of history, even politically engaged historians, avoid lectures or discussions on naval strategy because it is viewed as too technical, too trivial or too *évènementielle* for class discussion. This self-disenfranchisement has slowed the free flow of discourse required to make the nation's foreign policy more effective and efficient. The nation suffers when the discussion and planning of national security is consigned to military professionals up until the moment of a crisis, at which point it is challenged. Rather, intelligent educational efforts need to be made more broadly to create a working consensus on foreign policy. Recently certain books have broadened the discourse, but until *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* we still lacked a solid comprehensive historical discussion of America's relationship to sea power.<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth J. Hagan brings an impressive background into this book. His monograph on gunboat diplomacy was among the first efforts since the advent of Alfred Thayer Mahan to show the effectiveness of a traditional non-battleship-oriented navy. Hagan's subsequent work examined the role of the nation's military and naval forces in the creation of foreign policy. Additionally, as a retired captain in the U.S. Naval Reserve, and as a professor of history, museum director of and archivist at the Naval Academy, Hagan is keenly aware of the navy's received wisdom—its sources and shortcomings. All this Hagan puts to exceptionally good use.

*This People's Navy* draws on the author's extensive background to provide an introduction to the ways in which technology, personalities, and especially doctrine have shaped American naval policy. Surprisingly few efforts have been made in the twentieth century to summarize and analyze the entire history of these phenomena. The best previous efforts, those by Dudley Knox or Harold and Margaret Sprout, however, were written in the 1930s distinctly to support increased naval appropriations, especially for ships of the line. In

the notable exception to this agenda, *A Navy Second to None: The Development of Modern Naval Policy* (1940), George Davis presented a timely argument against overreliance upon battleships. Hagan picks up where Davis left off, arguing not necessarily for a more expensive navy but for one better suited to the purposes of a nation of America's geopolitical situation, as a continental and generally *status quo* power.

Hagan aligns his argument against the big-gun navy orientation typified and propagated by Mahan. As Hagan notes, Mahan used history to argue for an empire built upon "a peculiarly British strategy centered on very large warships designed to fight fleet engagements against concentrations of similar enemy fleets, a strategy the French call *guerre d'escadre*" (p. xi). This theory, since the publication of *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History* in 1890, has been used by "Blue Water" or extreme navalists seeking justification for great ships. Indeed, the "Gun Club" as they came to be called, exaggerated even Mahan's faith in the battleships. They did this by selectively emphasizing particular aspects of his political and historical arguments.

Mahan himself wrote distinctly on these two planes: historical and political. Mahan's historical perspectives concentrated on the ascendancy of the British Empire and particularly the role of the Royal Navy in its creation and maintenance. His political agenda was the increase of American sea power and a concomitant empire. Paul Kennedy's *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (1976; 1983), among other works, has countered Mahan's historical argument that ships-of-the-line created the British Empire. Kennedy challenged Mahan's argument by demonstrating the multiplicity of contributing factors. As Kennedy noted, the British had also used their small army (and indeed their Indian Army) with considerable effectiveness, while their deft diplomacy balanced the military threats of the continental powers.

*This People's Navy* takes the second tack, attacking Mahan's overt political agenda and raking him for the intellectually stifling and politically endangering effects of his works. Hagan does not go so far as to claim that battleships were irrelevant to the American fleet, but he does demonstrate that a *guerre de course* had generally proven sufficient for America's defense needs. This strategy was based on a traditional continental navy "designed to hit and run, to attack enemy merchant vessels and small warships and flee if faced with a stronger naval opponent" (p. xi). The *guerre d'escadre*, on the other hand, frequently involved America in a counterproductive tangle with the European powers.

*This People's Navy* is organized chronologically, allotting a chapter for each generation to debate over the proper shape of American sea power. As such, the subtitle is really more appropriate for the book. The title itself reflects more of the book's mission, rather than any theme, for Hagan actually devotes little

space to the relationship between the people and the navy. Beyond the title, the organization of the book is clear and the writing engaging. When employing technical phrases, Hagan laudably defines them for the lay reader.

Hagan establishes his discourse of conflicting strategies in his discussion of the Revolutionary Era navy, tendering it the validating title "The American Way of War at Sea." Here Hagan takes on Mahan the historian. The heroes of these stories were those who pursued a *guerre de course*, not those who sought naval superiority over Britain. He applauds John Paul Jones, who "contended that the small Continental Navy should be used to raid the enemy's coast, stir up the population, and politically force a partial withdrawal of the Royal Navy" (p. 15). Hagan saves even warmer praise for Gustavus Conyngham who "captured or destroyed more than thirty British merchantmen" (p. 16). This officer understood the strengths inherent to America's unique geopolitical situation. After losing his commission, Conyngham set out again as "what he had been in spirit all along, a privateer, and as such Conyngham was even more typically American than was John Paul Jones as a continental navy officer. [For . . .] privateering was an ancient and honorable way to fight at sea" (p. 16). Here Hagan enters the battle against the long-hegemonic school of navalist historians who have scourged commerce-raiding strategy as dishonorable, ineffective, and un-American.

Privateers took approximately 600 prizes worth about \$18 million during the Revolution. They garnered needed supplies for American armies, disrupted Britain's resupply of its armies, drove up insurance rates for British shipping, and undercut popular support for the war in the mother country. [p. 17]

In contrast, the Royal Navy, with its overwhelming fleet strength, lost the crucial campaign at Yorktown-Virginia Capes, for which "Mahan contrived the explanation that in North America the British foolishly divided their naval forces and thus unwittingly squandered their control of the sea. That thesis ignored the reality that at Virginia Capes the French navy itself was divided into the two fleets" (p. 19). Furthermore, successful sea power required joint land-sea operations: "Ignored also is the shining truth that victory at Yorktown resulted from the combination of . . . two types of forces, one military and the other naval" (p. 20). Here Hagan shows the origins and successes of America's traditional naval strategy in combination with land forces against the *guerre d'escadre* and details its success throughout the nineteenth century.

Hagan reminds us that overwhelming fleets failed to give the British victory in 1815, while American commerce raiders had considerable success. Again during the Civil War, in which the South took the traditional American strategy while the North controlled the sea, the U.S. Navy was successful alone in only one operation against the Confederacy's land establishment—at New

Orleans—while Confederate raiders decimated Union oceanic commerce. Only in the War of 1898 did American battle fleets achieve decisive victories.

The Mahan disciples bound the navy to battleships from 1898 to 1941. The first generation wholly of the "new navy," these one-time "Young Turks" soon became the establishment, replete with a crusty mentality and belief that their methods could tolerate little improvement. Hagan tenders "The Admirals" little mercy for refusing to integrate the increasingly important elements of air and underwater warfare into defense strategy. Much of his interwar discussion centers on this intellectual ossification. His concise discussion of the Second World War focuses on the shift in orthodoxy as battleships were replaced by a new received wisdom—air power.

In World War I, American battleships had proven to be of only marginal use against the German commerce raiders. America was brought into the Second World War at a time at which battleships were most vulnerable to air attack—another important if not universally applicable argument against them. The successful naval operations during the Cuban Missile Crisis reflect the small ships on picket duty, not the great fleet ships—the attack carriers. *This People's Navy* sustains this argument through each chapter.

The chronological organization around the theme of contending strategies, however, leads Hagan into dangerous waters after 1964. By dividing the history of the navy into periods of ascendance of either of two strategies, Hagan forces the ships of the Cold War into awkward models. Carrier fleets, while in some ways resembling ships-of-the-line, also appear to combine many of the advantages of the commerce raiding strategy with nuclear deterrence. Despite this foible, the paradigm is one well worth examining.

Hagan demonstrates the continuing relevance of his two *guerres* in his discussion of the contrast between Elmo Zumwalt and John Lehman. To do so, he portrays Zumwalt as a traditionalist Chief of Naval Operations (1970–74), whose "high-low" strategy would have incorporated large and small carriers, the former for nuclear deterrence and the latter to control sea lanes of communication. Free of his two *guerres* paradigm, Hagan might have seen pictured Zumwalt's response as merely bringing "flexible response" to naval construction. Instead Zumwalt's setbacks characterize him as a victim of the military-industrial complex and the admirals' insatiable need for capital ships.

On the other hand, John Lehman, the most recent unreconstructed Mahanian to run the navy, fought for Ronald Reagan's 600-ship navy with a call to bring a surface war to the Soviet Union. Hagan represents Lehman as having made the navy so widely committed as to incite crises, implying his culpability in the various Reagan-initiated naval incidents in the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf. Thus the Zumwalt-Lehman question presents another facet in the ongoing debate over American sea power.

For a history extending from the building of a navy in 1775 to the naval

build-up of 1990, Hagan has surveyed sources wide and far, and one only wishes that he would have provided footnotes for those who wish to follow. *This People's Navy* offers an extensive and up-to-date bibliographical essay of books and some important articles and should prove most useful for further investigations, but does not amend for the lack of citations.

Correctly, Hagan's story focuses on Mahan, whose works or influence appear in nearly every chapter. But of equal importance are the other characters or groups whom Hagan resurrects for historical memory. As we have seen, Hagan rescues heroes of the early navy, those once prominent in the American pantheon. How many historians could now recollect that James Lawrence said, "Don't Give Up the Ship," let alone the circumstances (p. 85)? Hagan depicts the circumstances under which naval officers spoke the words which thrilled the nineteenth-century nation. These are essential not only to understanding American naval history, but the culture in which they resounded and include: "I have not yet begun to fight," "Blood is thicker than water," "Damn the torpedoes! Full steam ahead" and "You may fire when you are ready, Gridley." It is here, however, that Hagan misses an opportunity, for the ex post facto cultural resonance of these officers—heroes not only to little boys in sailor suits, but to their parents as well—goes far toward explaining why the *guerre d'escadre* ultimately triumphed over the *guerre de course*. Hagan missed the occasion to discuss the relationships between the people and the navy—propaganda, patriotism, and navalism. His explanation, consequently, could be more developed.

As well as resuscitating nineteenth-century heroes, Hagan rightly reemphasizes the importance of Robert W. Shufeldt, who traversed the globe with commissions from both the Navy and State Departments to foster trade and security. But by the early 1880s Shufeldt represented the dwindling number of officers who believed in the tradition of free trade in peace and a commerce raiding strategy in war. Hagan clearly sides with Shufeldt and his predecessors as, at very least, a lesson for today's navy. In these bright pictures, however, Hagan darkens the contrast of his discussion of the leaders of the post-1983 navy.

*This People's Navy* provides a clear, interesting, and thought-provoking introduction to the history of American sea power and should be read by all historians of the United States. With probity and breadth, Hagan documents two hundred years of bureaucracy, strategy, and adventure, all within a concise and particularly relevant argument. This book will provide the standard interpretation for a long time to come.

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*edition of An Admiral's Yarn: The Autobiography of Harris Laning. He is currently at work on the politics of American foreign policy in the Progressive Era*

1 A list of the most useful of these books would include: Paul M. Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987); James Chace and Caleb Carr, *America Invulnerable: The Quest for Absolute Security from 1812 to Star Wars* (1988); and Harold Koh, *The National Security Constitution* (1990). Even Peter Paret's indispensable anthology, *The Makers of Modern Strategy* (1986), renders insufficient background for naval strategy discussions.