

BOOK REVIEWS

Selling American Naval Power in the Battleship Era

Paul E. Pedisich. *Congress Buys a Navy: Politics, Economics, and the rise of American Naval Power, 1881-1921.* Annapolis MD: Naval Institute Press. 2016. ISBN: 978-1682470770. Pp. viii, 287. Hardback, \$39.95.

Ryan A. Wadle. *Selling Sea Power: Public Relations and the U.S. Navy, 1917-1941.* Nebraska: University of Oklahoma Press. 2019. ISBN: 978-08-08-16280-5. Pp. xiii, 298. Hardback, \$34.95.

These two books, both based on doctoral theses, offer distinctive approaches to some old questions. Why did the United States decide to build a modern navy in the 1880s, and how did it become a peer competitor for the Royal Navy within three decades?

Older accounts tended to focus on executive action, Presidents and Navy Secretaries, along with other agendas ranging from the strategic and policy arguments of Alfred Thayer Mahan, the overproduction of steel and Steven Topik's *Trade and Gunboats: United States and Brazil in the Age of Empire* (Stanford 1997), which highlighted economic expansion. Paul Pedisich shifts the focus to Congress. Here committees and votes processed executive ambition through the grim reality of partisan politics, shaped by local or regional self-interest, while widespread ideological aversion to big, or indeed any defence, along with private defence industries, limited support for ships in favour of extensive shore bases. Fears that a

Military Industrial Complex could distort government spending long predated the Eisenhower administration.

Working through the annual budget process, Pedisich exposes the backgrounds and agendas of the key players, adding a level of specificity and realism missing from older accounts, many of which were generated or supported by the Navy and its propagandists, a subject that Ryan Wadle addresses. Much of the extant literature celebrates the inevitable rise of American naval power--yet nothing was inevitable. Pedisich's approach emphasises how fundamentally uninterested late nineteenth-century America was in naval power, and the wider world in which it would operate, a reality that endured long after the outbreak of the First World War.

Despite the publicity generated by Mahan and Theodore Roosevelt, the average American was not convinced that their tax dollar should be spent on warships. The need for a Navy was shaped by economic policy. Maintaining very high tariff barriers against British imports suited Republican backing industrialists, but damaged Anglo-American relations. While Democrat President Grover Cleveland's 1888 plan to cut tariffs to benefit the poor, was equally well suited to improving Anglo-American relations, the Navy remained a side issue. Later, at a time when relations were improving, 'Teddy' Roosevelt would support tariff reciprocity with Britain, but his international view was unusual among American Presidents.

Roosevelt's ambitious naval plans were consistently thwarted by Congress, which wilfully created a navy of battleships, without the supporting cruisers and destroyers needed to wage war. In 1917 the US Navy entered the war with three outdated light cruisers, and several large, obsolescent pre-Dreadnought armoured cruisers. The money had been spent on outsize 'pork-barrel' shore establishments, spread across as many states as could find an excuse. These shore establishments tied the votes of state employees to one location, ocean-going cruisers did not. When Brooklyn Navy Yard was enlarged to build battleships, the object was political: the Administration held the local seat. This experience explains why Alfred T. Mahan wondered if a democracy could sustain a large navy in the long term, and why the United States Navy invested so heavily in public relations.

In essence the American Navy was not a strategic necessity, or a vote winner. Most Americans simply didn't care. There was no equivalent to Britain's 'We Want Eight and We Won't Wait' agitation of 1908-09. Both the American press and the American public

remained mute on naval issues. Roosevelt did not get the Navy he wanted, as Congress consistently cut his plans, but he managed to get it to accept the leap in size and cost that followed the Dreadnought revolution of 1906. This was no easy choice, as German uncertainty at the time indicates. When Britain raised the stakes at sea, it hoped other navies would be unable to find the necessary funds.

The election of Woodrow Wilson and his Southern Democrat allies in 1913, replacing the Republicans who favoured Northern industry, exposed the reality of American navalism. Wilson was a Southerner, as were most of his Cabinet, including Navy Secretary Josephus Daniels, along with the new Chief of Naval Operations Admiral William Benson. Benson was appointed over the heads of 30 more senior officers on the basis of regional credentials, partisan loyalty and his lack of Northern elite connections. Neither Daniels, a campaigning teetotal newspaper publisher, nor Wilson had any interest in the Navy other than as a domestic vote winner. The Navy was redeployed to assist South Carolina, and a State funded armour plant was built in West Virginia. In detailing the process, not only does Pedisich highlight the racist segregation policies that Wilson imposed on the Navy, but he also suggests corruption. Navy budgets were trimmed, leaving the fleet undermanned. This hampered Wilsons' attempt to intervene in Mexico. Despite the War in Europe, Wilson cut the Naval Budget in the spring of 1915, enabling the Republican opposition to attack the administration for its overt lack of 'preparedness'. Wilson's administration ignored its own naval advisory body, and reacted against the industrial lobbyists calling for more expenditure.

The dramatic shift to a massive multi-year naval expansion programme in 1916 reflected the impact of British economic warfare on the Southern Cotton Growers, and other Democratic leaning commercial lobbyists who were essential to re-electing the President. Wilson saw battleships as political tools to be used in the interests of American commerce, to bully the British into conceding 'Freedom of the Seas', which would prevent Britain imposing effective economic warfare in future. He did not expect to have to use the ships. The mismatch between the economic interests of a neutral power, and the existential importance of Britain's primary strategic weapon was always going to provoke a reaction. His only rationale for this policy was that it would encourage Germany, which had complained about the blockade, to make peace. Wilson also proposed a League of Nations designed to enshrine American dominance of world trade.

This despite being warned that 'Freedom' was an existential issue for Britain, a unique global seapower state that relied on sea control as its' primary weapon.

Few accounts address the problems that the 1916 programme threw up, lack of suitable slipways, and other construction facilities, which led to rushed work and poor workmanship. Many of these facilities had to be completely rebuilt in the 1930s, while orders for the larger vessels were delayed. Much of the 1916 programme was suspended when America entered the war, only to be revived and extended with another batch of capital ships in 1918, additional weapons to wield at the inevitable peace conference, directed against Britain, the last global power.

However, Wilson's enthusiasm had carried him beyond his domestic support base. When British Prime Minister Lloyd George called Wilson's bluff at Versailles, the President had to back down. Congress rejected his League of Nations on 1 March 1920, and dramatically slowed funding for his fleet. New Republican President Warren Harding preferred disarmament to arms racing, and opened talks with Britain, establishing the basis for the Washington Treaty of 1922. As Pedisich concludes 'the Navy's order of battle continued to rest on the appropriation decisions of 435 representatives and 100 senators in the U.S. Congress' (p. 237). Harding understood, as Wilson had not, that very few of those men had any interest in funding a Navy to compete with that of Britain.

Much more might be derived from this important, if underdeveloped study: not least the obvious point that the 'New' US Navy was voted into existence by sectional interests firmly focussed on terrestrial political advantage, and that naval policy must be examined alongside US tariff policies. A desire to expand the Monroe Doctrine into economic hegemony over the Western Hemisphere prompted the initial impulse to replace the decrepit Civil War fleet of wooden cruisers. Republican reliance on big business favoured high tariffs against imports, and the use of forceful diplomacy to secure new markets tended to encourage tariff concessions. Roosevelt favoured tariff reciprocity. When he pushed for Dreadnoughts in 1908, 'Congress acted with restraint and instead directed its attention to Navy infrastructure, forfeiting the opportunity to strengthen the ability of the Navy to command the seas' (p. 169). The political stand-off between a President with international concerns and a Congress more concerned to secure political support at a local level resulted in a battleship navy without the cruisers and destroyers needed to function at sea, and a bloated

shore footprint, which had very little military value in a war fought thousands of miles from the American coast. For most Americans the navy was a long way away, and few cared. The same situation prevailed in Imperial Germany, as Alfred von Tirpitz ruefully confessed. The key difference was that Imperial diktat could create a whole new navy, while Roosevelt's Presidential aspiration only secured a battlefleet. In neither state did the Navy occupy the central position in the economic and cultural life of the nation that the Royal Navy always took for granted.

Ryan Wadle's study of US Navy public relations overlaps with the Pedisich's text in the critical years 1917-22. The arc of the book, linking American entry into one World War to the next, is dominated by anxiety and suspicion. Wadle's first four chapters examine the evolution of naval public relations, before shifting attention to naval identity, the strategic mission, and technology.

The end of the war in late 1918 and the looming prospect of budget cuts and potentially international disarmament alarmed a naval leadership which had recently been given *carte blanche* to build a massive fleet by a wilfully ignorant President. The Navy's response to this windfall, and the prospect of deep post-war cuts, was self-promotion.

The First World War had not made Americans love the Navy which had very little public recognition for its efforts. Not only did the Army remain the dominant service, but through the Army Air Corps it neatly tied itself to the latest iteration of military modernity. By 1918, aeroplanes had replaced dreadnoughts as the icons of future warfare. Consequently, the Navy's primary inter-war battle was with Army Air Force, with the purpose to block the creation of an RAF-style unified Air Force, a cause heavily promoted by General 'Billy' Mitchell, while a wider campaign was waged to reach a resolutely uninterested public that had no appetite for costly programmes. Congress tended to reflect the national mood.

The Navy's propaganda efforts occasionally bordered on hysteria. Some influential players were obsessed with the notion that Britain was actively campaigning against the US Navy. Notable among them was Captain Dudley Knox, a close confidant of rising star Ernest King, later the wartime Fleet Admiral who was the first head of the new Naval Historical Centre, which was based on British practice. Knox attributed any anti-Navy rhetoric in the press to British spies and was deeply suspicious of British journalists with access to American newspapers. He believed the British were spreading misinformation to prevent America building up to the

Washington Treaty limit, thereby preserving British naval dominance. He and other senior officers saw the Washington Treaty as a defeat for the US, despite being shaped by the Harding Administration. They also criticised the American people for not supporting the fleet. In truth, as Pedisich has shown, Congress limited spending between the wars, because it and the American people more generally, did not want a war with Britain, recognising that the two states had wholly different strategic needs: 'the public showed little enthusiasm for a rivalry with the United Kingdom' (p. 191).

Consequently, when the Navy tried to define a suitably grand strategic mission it met serious opposition from wide sections of a public that saw no need for high levels of defence spending, arms manufacturers, or naval alarmists. The leading proponent of this agenda, radical historian Charles Beard, in his 1931 book *The Navy Defence or Portent?*, urged Americans to demand more information about the purpose of the Navy. His critique of institutional self-interest implied the service had been allowed to expand far beyond what was necessary for American security, serving big business interests, linked to Navy League propaganda and careerist officers. Naval officers, including Dudley Knox, rushed to rebut this powerful polemic. The Navy was saved from more serious criticism by the Great Depression. Franklin D. Roosevelt used the Democratic majority in both Houses to commit 'New Deal' money to warship building because he, like cousin Teddy, was a navalist with experience of wartime naval administration. Another President may have made very different choices about those funds, a less compliant Congress would have blocked the initiative.

Charles Beard had a point: in the 1920s the Navy had used the aeroplane and the airship to generate support across the country, visiting profoundly land-locked mid-Western States, and joining in long-distance air races, and the International Schneider seaplane trophy races that spawned the Spitfire. This costly programme ran alongside the development of carrier-based aviation, which was less easy to showcase in Kansas. Admiral William Moffet's Bureau of Aeronautics defeated 'Billy' Mitchell, saved naval aviation, and expended vast sums propping up the Goodyear Corporation's rigid airship programme. All three American built 'Zeppelins' crashed, two with heavy loss of life, including Moffett, before these propaganda projects were cancelled. The focus shifted to the massive new aircraft carriers *Lexington* and *Saratoga*, which, like all pre 1942 American carriers, carried anti-British names. In the 1930s, naval

aviation became a backdrop for Hollywood films, which included dramatic scenes of dive-bombing attacks. The 1931 film *Hell Divers!* starred Clark Gable, with future Battle of Midway fighter ace John Thach among the real pilots. Anxious not to reveal any secrets, the Navy insisted the films were censored to hide the arrester wires from prying British eyes! While the 1986 film *Top Gun* reworked the formula for another era, Dudley Knox would have been horrified to discover that the director of the ultimate US Navy propaganda film was British!

Public relations techniques were also used to enhance naval recruiting, projecting a very specific image of masculinity, self-improvement and travel that would attract ambitious young white American males. The new message countered older stereotypes of sailors as unsuitable outsiders that threatened the values and morals of a profoundly terrestrial nation. New technology proved a useful hook for publicity, as dreadnoughts were replaced by aviation and submarines, another subject for several Hollywood films. The development of escape apparatus for the crews of sunken submarines, which featured in pre-war films, highlighted the Navy's claim to be technologically advanced and safety conscious. However, cutting edge technology remained dangerous, and casualties tended to dampen the impact of the message. The Navy's best efforts failed to counter the superior allure of the Army and Army Air Corps in the minds of potential recruits.

While Wadle focuses on the question of how effective the naval public relations effort was, there remains a more profound question. Why did the US Navy need to work so hard on its image? The simple answer is that the post-Civil War United States had a limited engagement with the sea, while the 'defence' argument proved strikingly weak until Japan actually attacked in December 1941. Pointing to Britain as a potential opponent backfired, and no other Navy had the ability to reach continental America, let alone attack. While Wadle highlights how the Navy supported big-navy publications like Harold and Margaret Sprout's Mahanian text *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Princeton 1939), and actively suppressed alternative texts that advocated a cruiser navy, like the one that served between 1865 and 1898, he overlooks the funding and output of the United States Naval Institute, and its dedicated navalist press. This press remains the primary source of pro-US Navy literature, is based alongside the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and published Pedisich's book.

It would be useful to know if there was any substance to Dudley Knox's complaint that the British were spying or spreading disinformation. The wartime work of British propaganda (key items written by Julian Corbett) had been successful, and was familiar to many, especially those like Knox, who had spent 1917-18 in London, working alongside the Royal Navy. It is unlikely: the Royal Navy, unlike the United States Navy, remained the dominant service in national and imperial planning, and national identity. It avoided unseemly efforts at self-promotion, and, having invented the aircraft carrier, and shared the plans with the Americans in 1918, it is unlikely had much to learn from them in 1931. Ultimately the US Navy used public relations, itself an American invention, to address a major problem. It had to maintain or advance the image of a service that had little support among the populace, had been effectively demolished after the Civil War, and feared a return to the atrophy and irrelevance of the 1870s. The security of the continental United States did not require a big Navy. It did not depend on imported food, fuel or raw materials, and could easily out-mobilise any sea borne invader. Neither Britain nor Japan had the military manpower to wage war in the Americas. Little wonder then, that Congress did not want to foot the bill, instead diverting money to shore establishments that secured political support for incumbent administrations. The Navy served steel manufacturers, shipbuilders, and big business more generally. It did not resonate with the public. The United States emerged as the world's dominant naval power during the Second World War, but it still viewed the Navy as a means to project military power onto the land. Sea control, the security of commerce and free use of the seas were minor concerns, best left to allies like Britain that depend on the oceans.

These two books will prompt a more incisive enquiry into the origins of the modern US Navy, and should also encourage similar studies of the politics and public relations of other fleets, and in other eras.

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