Naval War College Review

Volume 70
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 8

2017

American Sea Power and the Obsolescence of Capital Ship Theory

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Recommended Citation

Watts, Robert B. and Ross, Angus (2017) "American Sea Power and the Obsolescence of Capital Ship Theory," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 70 : No. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol70/iss2/8

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BOOK REVIEWS

CAPITAL THINKING

American Sea Power and the Obsolescence of Capital Ship Theory, by Robert B. Watts. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016. 232 pages. $45 (paperback).

Even though this book is arguably not a comprehensive study, it deserves to be read by all naval professionals and anyone with a casual interest in the U.S. Navy and how it historically has defined its mission. I say this up front because, although this review will be critical in some areas, such observations must never be allowed to diminish the intrinsic value of works such as this: advocacy pieces that set out to challenge the prevailing (twentieth-century) naval orthodoxy, with all its emphasis on platforms and technology. This orthodoxy is the proverbial elephant in the room that is rarely challenged in naval circles—and yet it should be. In this reviewer's mind, therefore, it is absolutely healthy for naval professionals to be exposed constantly to such variations in thinking and to be pressed continually to justify their long-standing beliefs, even if only to force a more coherent exposition of the prevailing service position. For this reason alone, authors such as Watts provide immense value to the service.

Watts writes in an engaging and readable style that makes this slim paperback an easy and enjoyable read. The book breaks down naturally into three distinct sections: a short, theoretical analysis of Mahan and his effect on U.S. naval thought a century ago; an examination of how the U.S. Navy has evolved this thinking to meet the momentous events of the twentieth century, specifically the two world wars and the Cold War; and finally a look at how the Navy has fared in the post–Cold War era, a period characterized by increasingly complex irregular conflicts on land. The second section is the largest, forming the backbone of the book and containing a very useful summation of the various iterations of naval thinking and all the official strategic utterances since 1945, right up to the modern-day "air-sea battle." Throughout it all, Watts's premise is that the U.S. Navy, for a variety of bureaucratic and cultural reasons, has remained overinvested in what he calls the "capital ship theory," a focus on high-end, expensive platforms. While these may offer flexibility in a variety of scenarios, they may in fact be something of a liability in this new age of irregular warfare.

Watts himself is eminently qualified for this work. A retired captain in the Coast Guard and an acknowledged author on naval topics, he can call on some thirty years of observing how the services have grappled with the strategic changes in the post-Vietnam era, not to mention his firsthand experience with what some would call the more "irregular" missions of naval life. Not surprisingly, he is at his best in describing the difficulties facing the naval services in the post–September 11th era.

This is not to say there is no awkwardness in the logic Watts employs. For one thing, he is rather nebulous when it comes to the actual meaning of the term "capital ship." In the text he variously refers to battleships and aircraft carriers but also on occasion to "cruisers and destroyers" (p. 110) and, even more specifically, the DDG-51 class (and equivalent) (pp. 120, 171) as being capital ships. While in terms of raw combat power this may be somewhat understandable, this is not a trivial matter in this case. The normally accepted definition of a capital ship would be "one of the largest and most heavily armed ships in a fleet, usually understood to be battleships, battle cruisers, and aircraft carriers," or words to that effect. The problem: including everything from the DDG-51 on up in the definition means there are precious few USN vessels today that are not capital ships! While superficially this may seem to strengthen Watts's case, it actually weakens his argument in a number of important ways. Most obviously, it might be construed that it is the very notion of a "capital" ship, as distinct from any other, that is obsolete in this case, not the U.S. Navy's long adherence to the principles of a theorist writing in an era in which there was a clear distinction. If the capital ship idea is truly dead and the distinction is no longer valid or recognized today, where would Watts's argument be then? It also weakens the assertion he makes later on that other navies have done a better job of letting go of the capital ship than the U.S. Navy. While I can think of a number of navies that have abandoned aircraft carriers and battleships, on account of the expenses involved, very few, I think, have abandoned the DDG or the advanced FFG as the prime movers of global influence. If, using his logic, these are in fact capital ships, then most navies would seem to be following a trajectory remarkably similar to that of the United States. Interestingly too, Watts seems not to include nuclear submarines in this mix, yet I know of at least one navy—the United Kingdom's Royal Navy—that has often equated these vessels to the capital ships of yore on account of their immense power-projection and antifleet capabilities.

The second difficulty is the author's assumption that Mahan's theories on decisive battle and his capital ship theory are synonymous and interchangeable. Mahan, of course, was writing about the preindustrial age and in an era when the only threat to that determinant of naval power, the battleship, was another battleship. Under those circumstances, the possession of the most up-to-date and powerful fleet of battleships that one could afford made a lot of sense, as did the exhortation to keep the fleet concentrated. The advent of the industrial age changed all this, however, in two important ways. First, the extreme mobility conferred on smaller ships by turbine propulsion and the development of new weapons such as the Whitehead torpedo made the battleships vulnerable to smaller platforms that cost a fraction of a battleship's cost. This was perhaps

the first time in naval history when a third-rate navy might threaten the largest fleets in the world effectively. Second, the industrial powers' need for resources and markets on a global scale widened the scope of naval strategic responsibilities immeasurably. This navies were slow to appreciate, but (to cut a long story very short) the likes of Admiral Fisher in Britain with his battle cruiser ideas in 1905 and Admiral Fournier in France with his general-purpose cruisers (*"bon à tout faire"*—able to do anything) a few years earlier slowly but inexorably moved the focus away from a defensive clash of battle fleets around the point of decision toward the use of offensive power-projection fleets around the periphery to ensure protection of these wider strategic interests. This offensive approach was taken up most notably by the carrier power-projection fleets of the U.S. Navy in the post–World War II era. In other words, the "capital ship theory" that the U.S. Navy has held dear through all these years is this offensive power-projection version, not the original Mahanian ideas of a half-century earlier. Watts does not make this distinction clear.

Watts's third discontinuity, which is more of an omission than anything else, is his lack of consideration of network-centric warfare (NCW) as a possible alternative to his capital ship theory. While he mentions the concept very briefly in passing (p. 129), he chooses not to explain that it actually argues against capital ship theory by maintaining that, in this era of reliable and near-instantaneous data sharing, it is the integrity of the network among the various platforms that is vital, not the security of any individual unit attached to it. No one ship needs to have all the "sensors and shooters" in a discrete package if each can draw what it lacks from the others in the network. This again makes it something of an antithesis of capital ship theory, considering the latter's focus on the platforms involved. As such, the NCW concept is worthy of inclusion here, if only to explore why the U.S. Navy supposedly rejected it (although aspects of it have survived in the current "distributed lethality" idea).

In the end, this reviewer was not persuaded by the arguments as presented, but this in no way should be taken as a rejection of the book's core idea itself. Watts's volume is valuable insofar as it encourages the reader to think of alternative organizational strategies for the U.S. Navy; it is, however, incomplete, in that formulating a comprehensive conclusion requires the three objections discussed above to be addressed at some point. The book also does not offer any defense for the generalist position and the many virtues of capable, multipurpose ships across the range of military operations, nor any alternative to this force, which presumably would have to include a larger number of specialist platforms. One hopes this will form a new point of departure for future work in this area.

ANGUS ROSS

Underestimated: Our Not So Peaceful Nuclear Future, by Henry D. Sokolski. 2nd ed. Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Press, 2015. 159 pages. Free.

Henry Sokolski has been a fixture of Washington's nuclear nonproliferation community for several decades and in