

2016

## The Struggle for Sea Power: A Naval History of the American Revolution

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### Recommended Citation

McCranie, Kevin D. and Willis, Sam (2016) "The Struggle for Sea Power: A Naval History of the American Revolution," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 69 : No. 4 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol69/iss4/19>

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blatant human rights violations if all are “American vital interests”? Yes, it can be done—but the argument is less clear.

Martel’s final principle is that the nation must strengthen alliances and partnerships to promote shared responsibilities effectively to solve global problems. Recognizing that American power is limited, Martel counsels against temptations toward either American overreach or American withdrawal on key global and regional problems.

Martel applies these principles to “current” foreign policy issues to illustrate their utility; the inevitable drawback to such relevance is the danger of “shelf life” interest, i.e., how long will readers care about or even recall foreign policy specifics from 2014? Conversely, some topics that seem important at the time of this writing (e.g., violent Wahhabism, Russian aggressiveness) receive little attention.

A weakness of generalized, historically centered summaries of policy decisions is the tendency to see, in retrospect, clear choices and definite paths, but to underestimate the uncertainty and angst that decision makers suffered. By contrast, specific case studies (e.g., the Cuban missile crisis, Vietnam, the 2003 Iraq war, the 2008 economic crisis) always show the confusion and fear. Martel’s sweeping review gives surprisingly little attention to the fact that nearly all grand strategy decisions are made while under risk or amid uncertainty by those who are fraught with anxiety and apprehension, and constitute gambles on guesses rather than calm choices about how best to balance good principles and achieve optimal outcomes. Martel—who certainly understood the policy-making process—might have replied that the

purpose of his final book was to advise policy makers and scholars on how such decisions should be made, rather than to describe how they will feel while doing so. But readers might have benefited from at least an acknowledgment of this apprehension, the way Bill Martel used to offer a cheerful but sympathetic smile to friends and students struggling with problems he had posed to us.

The date of this book’s release—12 January 2015—was the day its author died at the age of fifty-nine after a yearlong battle with leukemia. Bill Martel was for ten years a professor of international security studies at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (where he received the James L. Paddock award for teaching excellence) and an adjunct electives professor at the Naval War College. Previously, he had taught in the College’s National Security Decision Making Department for half a dozen years, following a similar period as founding director of the Air Force’s Center for Strategy and Technology at the Air War College. He also had served as an adviser to the National Security Council and the Romney 2012 presidential campaign. This reviewer was one of his many colleagues and students who counted themselves blessed by his friendship.

THOMAS GRASSEY



*The Struggle for Sea Power: A Naval History of the American Revolution*, by Sam Willis. New York: W. W. Norton, 2016. 608 pages. \$35 (Kindle \$16.05).

Sam Willis describes (p. 5) the war for American independence as “the most

intriguing naval story in history.” To support this contention, Willis has written a book aimed primarily at a general audience and based on a narrative approach, first chronicling the maritime conflict between Britain and its rebellious American colonies, then addressing the ensuing global maritime war.

Although the book is written as a chronological narrative, Willis identifies five underlying themes that knit the maritime story of the war into a broadly defined seapower thesis.

The first theme involves the author’s assertion (p. 5) “that sea power can exist without navies.” Although lacking Britain’s established naval infrastructure, the colonists, Willis argues, still developed and exploited sea power. This theme dominates the text during the early years of the war, but regrettably becomes but a minor story line after the French entry.

The second theme argues (p. 6) that naval historians generally “make a false distinction between” saltwater and freshwater navies in places such as Lake Champlain. Willis claims that contemporaries made no such distinction. Certainly, Willis is correct to point out similarities between the types, but the differences are more significant than Willis admits, particularly in the instruments used and the obstacles faced. Even more than the first theme, this one is episodic and hardly merits being elevated to a theme.

Willis’s third theme focuses on the global nature of the war. Willis clearly demonstrates that much more was at stake than the independence of thirteen of Britain’s North American colonies. This theme is addressed quite effectively after 1778 through a traditional narrative of naval operations.

The global nature of the war meant that numerous campaigns occurred simultaneously, and events in one region influenced what occurred elsewhere.

This is Willis’s fourth theme. Willis provides insightful commentary on such interactions when explaining fleet movements and campaigns, but devotes too little attention to the decision making in London and Paris. To understand truly the interaction among theaters, Willis needed to explain more effectively how leaders in Paris, London, and Madrid prioritized among competing options. For example, Willis fails to grasp the nuances of Britain’s strategic position, including the calculus used in determining the distribution of fleets between home and foreign waters, and particularly the essential role of Gibraltar in Britain’s strategic architecture.

The fifth and final theme is the most far-reaching. It addresses how sea power affected the broader war—whether through diplomacy, campaigns on land, the politics of the states involved, or particularly the decisions of the military and political leadership. “As always,” Willis maintains (p. 292), “the impact of sea power must be measured in more ways than one.”

Willis aptly argues that sea power was a significant element in the American Revolution that should not be overlooked. It influenced events from the war’s origin to its end. Yet although he often supports his arguments with a high degree of skill, the book fails to entirely meet its potential. Willis is not the first to address sea power and its relation to this war, but he does not place his thesis into the context of previous works on the subject. This is particularly glaring with regard to Alfred Thayer Mahan.

Willis cites only Mahan's book on the American Revolution; he does not cite *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, Mahan's most significant work and the one that put the term "sea power" into widespread use. Considering that Willis has written a book about sea power and even uses (p. 6) the phrase "the influence of sea power," the omission is evident. Although Willis defines sea power more broadly than does Mahan, many of *The Influence of Sea Power's* themes echo powerfully in his work. Like Willis, Mahan considers the global maritime war spawned by the struggle for American independence to be the most intriguing of naval wars.

The second, related weakness involves the quality of the scholarship. Although Willis uses archival and published primary sources, he often relies on other historians. This is particularly true regarding memorable quotations from those who were present. Rather than

consistently consulting original sources for both the accuracy and the historical context of the quotes, Willis relies on the legwork of previous historians.

Overall, Willis has written an intriguing appraisal of sea power in the American Revolution. It is a sweeping narrative that benefits greatly from Willis's eloquence as a writer and his superb ability to tell a story. However, the book is not without its weaknesses. Some of the author's themes require development, the source base could be strengthened, and Willis needed to develop stronger links between naval operations and the decision making by those at the highest positions in government. The book is on its surest ground in the early chapters when addressing the development of American sea power, and later in the text when recounting major naval operations.

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