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## MARITIME COMMERCE WARFARE

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### The Coercive Response of the Weak?

*Douglas C. Peifer*

“Maritime commerce warfare” has a distinctly dated whiff. The great Anglo-American naval theorists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—the Colomb brothers, Alfred Thayer Mahan, and Julian Corbett—all dismissed it as an indecisive strategy of the weak. Imperial Germany’s turn to unrestricted submarine warfare in 1917 failed to achieve its political purpose, instead bringing the United States into the war just as war weariness and revolution threatened to undermine the Entente’s military effectiveness. In the Second World War, both Germany and the United States used the submarine with deadly effectiveness against the maritime supply lines of their enemies, but even the more effective of their campaigns—that of the U.S. Navy in the Pacific—seemed outdated and unnecessary once the atomic bomb made Giulio Douhet’s vision of directly attacking the enemy’s industry and civilian population a reality. The accelerating pace of technological change after the Second World War suggested that any war between superpowers might swiftly escalate beyond the conventional stage; the U.S. and Soviet navies accordingly paid a great deal of attention

to the nuclear balance of terror, to deterrence, and to finding, fixing, and destroying military assets.

Commerce warfare and commerce protection by this time seemed secondary concerns, receiving serious attention only in the context of securing tankers and the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz following the Iranian Revolution. The Persian Gulf “tanker war” of the mid-1980s forced the U.S. Navy to resuscitate its proficiency in convoy protection, mine warfare, and the challenges

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of securing local command of the seas. But the challenge posed by Iranian and Iraqi forces was local, littoral, and limited. Broadly speaking, maritime commerce warfare seemed a distant threat, as irrelevant and outdated as the practice from which it had evolved, piracy.

Yet as has become clear, unlikely threats and outdated practices rear their ugly heads when the situation favors them. During the Cold War, piracy had seemed on its way to oblivion, but in Africa the suspension of superpower rivalry, coupled with the collapse of client state authority in Somalia, made the practice both viable and attractive to warlords and clans in the Horn of Africa. In the same manner, the proliferation of antiaccess and area-denial weapons, coupled with the rise of China, may give new life to such maritime practices as distant blockade or maritime interdiction. The prospect of responding to naval clashes in the South China Sea with deep strikes into the Chinese interior to dismantle its dense radar, missile, and air-defense networks seems reasonable only to those willing to escalate tension over maritime exclusive economic zones to the level of major theater war with a nuclear power.<sup>1</sup> Yet the idea that China would respond to the imposition of a distant blockade or the interdiction of oil flows by de-escalating the situation seems sanguine at best. Historically, weaker naval powers unable to contest command of the seas have not simply resigned themselves to maintaining “fleets in being” while suffering the slow indignities of naval blockade. Instead, they have resorted to what the French termed *guerre de course*, the Germans *Handelskrieg*, and the British “commerce warfare.”<sup>2</sup>

This article examines the evolution—and the conceptual links to the present—of the theory and practice of commerce warfare from the seventeenth century to the eve of World War I. This era, often termed the “age of limited war,” may in many ways more closely reflect the diffuse distribution of power likely to prevail in the twenty-first century than the bipolar distribution that marked the years from 1945 through the 1980s. Furthermore, belligerents of the age of limited war seldom aimed for the total overthrow or unconditional surrender of opposing powers, instead using force and coercion to tilt the distribution of power and resources in their own favor. A rich blend of the theory and practice of commerce warfare evolved, using concepts of limited war and coercion centuries before Thomas Schelling, Alexander George, or Lawrence Freedman endowed such words as “coercion,” “compellence,” and “forceful persuasion” with particular social-scientific meaning.<sup>3</sup>

The classical tools of maritime coercion, blockade and the interdiction of trade, have been used on numerous occasions over the past decades, from United Nations–authorized controls on Iraqi imports and arms embargoes on the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in the 1990s to the maritime exclusion zone established north of Libya by UN Security Council Resolution 1973 in March

2011. The cost to the U.S. Navy and the international community of enforcing these blockades and maritime controls was minimal, since none of the targeted nations could contest American command of the sea. Other nations subjected to blockades and embargoes, nations weaker than their enemies yet powerful and determined enough to have options, have been loath simply to accept the costs of naval inferiority. The classic response of the weak to blockade and interdiction has been *guerre de course*, commerce warfare.

### GUERRE DE COURSE IN THE AGE OF SAIL

Targets of commerce warfare—such as Britain in both world wars, the Union in the Civil War, and the Spaniards in the early modern era—frequently described the concerted attacks on their merchant ships by U-boats, Confederate raiders, and English sea dogs, respectively, as nothing more than organized piracy. This charge touched on a sensitive matter: the historical connection among commerce warfare, privateering, and piracy. Commerce warfare was for centuries sustained and made possible by privateers—that is, private individuals authorized by the state to seize enemy shipping in exchange for a portion of the spoils, more politely known as “prize money.” In order to understand the outrage caused by Germany’s use of its U-boats during the world wars, one must understand the similarity and differences between unrestricted submarine warfare and its precedent, the naval strategy of *guerre de course* developed by the French in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as an alternative to fleet warfare, or *guerre d’escadre*.

A strategy of the weak, *guerre de course* rested on small, swift frigates, schooners, and other sailing vessels that attacked enemy merchant shipping while avoiding enemy ships of the line. One of its advantages was that the campaign could be outsourced to private interests, which, in exchange for government-issued “letters of marque” authorizing them to seize and sell enemy merchant ships and cargo, would outfit privateer ships at their own expense. The distinction between privateering and piracy—a state-sanctioned method of warfare as opposed to a criminal enterprise conducted for private gain—is important in law and theory. Yet the historical record suggests that the distinction was murky in practice. *Guerre de course*, a strategy that aimed to raise the costs of war to the enemy while lowering them for oneself, had much in common with piracy during the early modern period, when weak state bureaucracies and overstressed treasuries compelled nations to delegate the use of naval force to private contractors.

The distinction between pirates and privateers has been particularly nebulous along the fault lines of civilizations and empires. In the Mediterranean Sea, the Knights of Malta sustained their outpost on that island in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through charitable contributions and the seizure of Muslim shipping. Their Muslim antagonists in North Africa—the rulers of Algiers, Tunis,

and Tripoli—supported and profited from slave raids and the seizure of Christian shipping for over five hundred years, a practice suppressed only in the early nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Initially, the distinction between pirate and privateer was equally nebulous in northern European waters and the Atlantic. In the Baltic, German freebooters like Klaus Störtebeker (1360–ca. 1401) served as entrepreneurs during times of war, supplying the Nordic monarchies with ships, men, and supplies, and in peacetime were freebooting pirates, preying on Hanseatic shipping.<sup>5</sup> In the English Channel and along the Atlantic coastline, the English and French crowns encouraged their followers to raid enemy towns and seize shipping in wartime, activities that persisted with little interference after hostilities officially ceased. The English crown first began to issue letters of reprisal in the thirteenth century, authorizing those who had suffered from foreign piracy to seek redress by force. Theoretically limiting seizure of ships and goods to losses suffered, in effect these letters sanctioned piracy so long as it was directed at powers with which England was at war.

Letters of reprisal and “of marque” (the French term) stimulated and protected English, French, and Scottish piratical ventures against one another during the late Middle Ages; the coastal communities of Devon, Cornwall, and the southwestern counties in England, as well as Brittany in France, became intimately involved in both sanctioned commerce raiding and privately initiated piracy. When merchants pressed charges of piracy in court, more often than not they found that local officials protected those who ignored the restrictions of the royal letters of reprisal. This was hardly surprising, as piratical ventures were the preserve not of desperate outlaws but of commercial enterprises supported and sustained by local knights, dignitaries, and officials. During the reign of Henry VI, the Duke of Exeter, Admiral of England, was one of many who profited from investments in piracy.<sup>6</sup> Occasionally, the English and French crowns intervened to suppress overzealous freebooters, reminding coastal communities to refrain from seizing and plundering the ships of allies or neutrals.<sup>7</sup> But these instances of royal intervention were few and sporadic. The dispersed nature of power during the medieval period rendered attempts to distinguish, through the issuance of letters of reprisal and marque, between authorized naval commerce warfare and freebooting piracy more theoretical than real.

The weakness of the central state persisted through the early modern period in Europe and in the overseas colonial outposts and holdings of Portugal, Spain, the Netherlands, France, and England. Once again, the boundaries between maritime commerce warfare and piracy were nebulous. Huguenot and Dutch rebels led the way in attacking Spanish trade and treasure fleets in the sixteenth century; Protestant Dutch “sea beggars” (*Watergeuzen* in Dutch) openly sold booty from captured Spanish ships in English ports during the early days of the

Dutch rebellion.<sup>8</sup> English seafarers such as Sir John Hawkins and Sir Francis Drake, observing the weakness of the Spanish navy, undertook ventures in slave trading and piracy that resulted in handsome profits for the investors (including Elizabeth I) who helped fund these expeditions. With the coming of open warfare between England and Spain in the 1580s, Hawkins—as a rear admiral, treasurer of the Royal Navy, and confidant of the queen—advised Elizabeth that “the hurt that our State should seek to do him [Philip II of Spain] is to intercept his treasures, whereby we shall cut his sinews and make war upon him with his money.”<sup>9</sup>

This explicit strategy of cutting off the flow of silver from the New World to Spain tantalized English, Dutch, and Huguenot seamen throughout the seventeenth century. But intercepting Spanish treasure fleets proved difficult in practice. Piet Heyn, commanding a fleet of Dutch West India Company ships, in 1628 captured sixteen Spanish ships loaded with over eleven million guilders in silver and gold, but the feat was not repeated for decades.<sup>10</sup> Far more prevalent were depredations on the less-well-protected merchant ships of Spain, Portugal, and their dependencies. Commerce warfare and naval raids were essential elements of naval warfare from the mid-sixteenth century into the seventeenth, more frequent than the fleet actions of the period. Commerce warfare reflected the mercantilist spirit and thinking of the time, leading Sir Michael Howard in his seminal study of war in European history to characterize the wars of the period as “wars of the merchants.”<sup>11</sup> Naval war during the mercantilist era was unabashedly about the seizure and destruction of enemy commerce and the defense and promotion of one’s own trade. The monarchs and the few republics (the Dutch Republic, Venice) of Europe controlled and directed these early campaigns of commerce destruction only loosely, still forced by their own weakness to rely on private ventures authorized by letters of reprisal and *marque*.

By the mid-seventeenth century, however, the state mechanisms of the United Provinces, England, and France had matured sufficiently that each of these powers could create, support, control, and administer state navies. The Anglo-Dutch Wars of the seventeenth centuries, as well as the wars of Louis XIV, pitted fleets against fleets without abandoning long-established patterns of commerce destruction.

In his historical examination of the struggle between French and Anglo-Dutch sea power in the final decade of the seventeenth century, Alfred Thayer Mahan conceded that “at no time has war against commerce been conducted on a larger scale and with greater results than during this period,” with “the distress caused to commerce wrought by the [French] privateers . . . a large factor in bringing the sea nations to wish for peace.”<sup>12</sup> Mahan nonetheless assessed Louis XIV’s decision to abandon fleet action (*guerre d’escadre*) in favor of commerce warfare (*guerre de course*) midway through the nine-year-long War of the League of Augsburg

(1688–97) as a strategic mistake of the first order. Mahan and British naval theorists were drawn to the conflict of this era among the Netherlands, England, and France for maritime supremacy because the struggle could be understood in terms of a narrative linking state navies and fleet construction to national greatness, power, and prosperity.

During Louis XIV's early reign, as the narrative goes, farsighted Frenchmen like Jean-Baptiste Colbert and his eldest son, the marquis de Seignelay, patiently laid the foundations of French sea power. They built up the infrastructure necessary to support a great navy, establishing the French naval ports of Toulon, Brest, and Rochefort; they encouraged French commerce and colonies; they organized the bureaucracy to support and fund a state navy; and they invested in the French fleet, enabling it to defeat a combined Anglo-Dutch fleet in 1690 and temporarily control the Channel. The English and Dutch, by way of contrast, neglected their navies prior to the outbreak of war, and only strenuous efforts after its onset, aided by French timidity, staved off disaster. Per the Mahanian narrative, had France invested more fully its efforts, energy, and treasury in naval power rather than squandering its wealth fighting land campaigns in Germany, the Netherlands, and elsewhere, it might have gained the global dominance it sought.

Naval power—explicitly naval power that commanded the seas—provided the Dutch and English with the wealth and resources to wage and fund a protracted war against Louis XIV, while Bourbon France grew increasingly exhausted. According to the Mahanian orthodoxy, when France gave up its quest for command of the sea—that is, when it abandoned a naval strategy of *guerre d'escadre* in favor of *guerre de course*—it practically sealed its own fate. Then or later, whether in the reign of Louis XIV, under the revolutionary government of the 1790s, or under Napoleon, French resort to commerce warfare and privateering over fleet action reflected failure to perceive the essential connection between naval power and commerce. As Mahan put it, prolonged “control of the strategic centres of commerce” required a powerful navy able to fight for and then defend command of the sea. Weaker powers might be compelled by circumstances to resort to commerce warfare, but even then they needed to support their privateers with “squadron warfare, and by divisions of ships-of-the-line; which, forcing the enemy to unite his forces, permit the cruisers to make fortunate attempts upon his trade.”<sup>13</sup>

The Mahanian, or navalist, interpretation of Britain's triumph over France—a teleological analysis of Anglo-French conflict from Louis XIV to Napoleon—rests on shaky foundations. It downplays the role of continental commitments and the fiscal realities of the period. Louis XIV simply did not have the financial means to maintain a fleet of sufficient size to operate against the combined English and Dutch fleets while simultaneously waging a land war against a coalition

that included the Holy Roman Empire, Austria, Spain, Savoy, and numerous other lesser states alongside the Netherlands and England. His successors—whether in the Seven Years' War, in the revolutionary period, or in the person of Napoleon—likewise faced continental threats and commitments that put constraints on the size of the French navy. Furthermore, Mahan's characterization of *guerre de course* as strategically ineffective ignores how technology, organization, and culture rendered "command of the sea" ephemeral at best during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. During the era of Vauban and Louis XIV, fleet warfare was a seasonal activity, which made commerce raiding more effective and blockading less ineffective, strategically speaking, than they would be in the late eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth. Owing to the poor sea-keeping qualities of the ships of the line, fleet operations largely ceased with the onset of dangerous fall and winter weather, resuming only in late spring. Navies did not have the capability to maintain close blockades in the meantime, rendering "command of the seas" temporary and passing. Merchant ships, though subject to the same weather conditions, could and did operate well into the winter months. Mahan's assertion that powerful fleets could establish "command of the seas" and drive the enemy's flag from them through interdiction and blockade simply did not apply during this era. *Guerre de course* presented a viable alternative to blockades enforced by a fleet that "commanded the seas."<sup>14</sup>

If one can trace the essentials of commerce warfare as practice and policy in assorted statements by medieval kings, Elizabethan freebooters, and early-modern Dutch captains, the logic of commerce warfare as a strategy was fully developed only in the seventeenth century, when the French coined the term "*guerre de course*." Louis XIV's master military architect Sébastien Le Prestre, seigneur de Vauban, composed the first thorough, fully developed analysis of the potential and opportunity costs of fleet-versus-commerce warfare at a time when France was fighting both England and the Dutch Republic. Vauban, knowing that France could not afford to wage war on land while simultaneously taking on both the English and Dutch navies, recommended that Louis reduce the size of the fleet from ninety to forty-five ships of the line, shrink his Mediterranean galley fleet, and disband a number of marine infantry companies.<sup>15</sup> In a memorandum entitled *Mémoire sur la course* (November 1693) he laid out his reasoning, arguing that France should shift away from a high-cost strategy of directly confronting the sea power of England and the Netherlands, toward a low-cost strategy of attacking their economic underpinnings.<sup>16</sup>

Vauban asserted that the enormously expensive battle fleet had been unable to secure peace on French terms. The English and Dutch navies had been able to recover fairly quickly from their defeat at the outset of the conflict, and France's military operations on the continent had become ever more costly. Given these

realities, Vauban held, Louis and France should largely abandon the chimera of crushing the combined Dutch and English fleets and instead adopt the more moderate and cost-effective naval strategy of commerce warfare. French privateers, if properly encouraged by tax policy, could attack the source of Anglo-Dutch power directly, by waging a privately funded war on English and Dutch merchant shipping. The French crown, Vauban charged, had heretofore been shortsighted in its relationship with the owners (*armateurs*), captains, and crews of privateering ships, levying unreasonable charges and allowing prize courts to take months to dispose of seizures and distribute the proceeds among the captors.

In the future, Vauban advised, the state should assist privateers, by speeding up prize-court proceedings, lowering taxes and charges levied on vessels seized, and supporting privateer operations as appropriate with small squadrons that would, while avoiding fleet action, divert and dissipate Anglo-Dutch naval power. Commerce raiding had been neglected in a vain quest for naval dominance:

The advantages of this kingdom's position have not yet been fully realized; nor have the good results that commerce-raiding can produce, if properly managed; and moreover up to now people have had an exaggerated idea of the value of a battle fleet, which has completely failed to live up to the hopes that the king placed on it, and which in all probability will never live up to them so long as the present coalition lasts, because all the appearances indicate that the enemy will always be stronger than we are at sea.<sup>17</sup>

The port of Brest, according to Vauban, was “placed as though God had made it expressly for the purpose of the destruction of these two nations. The most skillful policy is the shaking of the buttresses of the League by means of a subtle and widespread form of war.”<sup>18</sup> The French navy should henceforth focus on squadron attacks on enemy convoys, and the crown should make every effort to stimulate and encourage privately funded commerce warfare.

Privately funded commerce warfare had numerous advantages over royally funded fleet warfare, but as a stand-alone strategy it had shortcomings. Most attractive to Louis XIV and later French leaders who embraced *guerre de course* was the argument that it represented an option for waging war at sea without costly building programs. By encouraging and stimulating private initiative with the promise that individuals operating under letters of marque might legitimately seize and sell for profit enemy ships, goods, and equipment, the state was able to shift the costs of naval warfare. Wealthy entrepreneurs pooled resources to raise the funds to buy ships, provision them, and recruit officers and crews who were lured by the promise of high pay and shares of the profits. These private endeavors varied in scale, from locally organized Channel coast *chaloupes*—“glorified rowing-boats” that carried “a handful of men with a pop-gun or two by way of armament”—to squadrons of half a dozen ships of the line and frigates owned

or leased by such wealthy *armateurs* as André, marquis de Nesmond, and Bernard Desjean, baron de Pointis, who sold shares in their privateering ventures to French aristocrats and merchants.<sup>19</sup>

By 1695, Louis XIV had little choice. France had built an impressive sixty-three ships of the line of the first, second, and third rates between 1688 and 1695, but the Anglo-Dutch coalition had launched sixty-seven (twenty-one English, forty-six Dutch).<sup>20</sup> France did not have the resources to compete with Europe's leading maritime powers and a mighty coalition on land at the same time. Given these realities, *guerre de course* was the only realistic option available to Louis short of ceding the maritime domain to his opponents. During the struggle French privateers captured or ransomed over four thousand ships of the nations allied against France, generating more than a hundred million livres of income for the crown, via the "Admiral's tenth" levy on prizes.<sup>21</sup> Marine insurance rates for English and Dutch shipping doubled and tripled.

By 1697, however, both France and its antagonists had exhausted themselves. England and the United Provinces had thwarted Louis's ambition by funding a continental coalition that checked his armies, but Louis for his part had placed tremendous pressure on his maritime opponents' sources of strength, their merchant shipping and trade. Mahan, generally critical of commerce destruction as a strategy, concedes that in this instance *guerre de course* played a major role in persuading England and the Dutch Republic to settle for a compromise peace. A leading scholar on the naval dimension of the War of the League of Augsburg asserts that Mahan in his fixation on fleet combat failed to grasp the effectiveness of alternative strategies. *Guerre de course*, far from a misguided application of French naval resources, was "admirably suited to conditions governing warfare at the end of the seventeenth century, when attrition strategy was in the ascendant, and states habitually employed mercenary armies and auxiliary forces to augment their limited capacity to wage war."<sup>22</sup> A noted scholar of grand strategy echoes these sentiments and concludes that "under certain circumstances a *guerre de course* strategy was not to be scorned."<sup>23</sup>

Neither the Sun King's successors, his ministers of the marine, nor the officers of "La Royale" (the French navy) were in the years to come content to cede naval supremacy to Britain without a contest. Throughout the eighteenth century, France continued to engage in fleet actions against the Royal Navy, occasionally holding its own (Minorca in 1756), more frequently suffering a drubbing (Lagos and Quiberon Bay in 1759, the battle of the Saintes in 1782), and on rare occasion driving off the British (the battle of the Virginia Capes, 1781). French dreams of restoring the Stuart monarchy in Britain, supporting Jacobite risings in Scotland, and pursuing colonial ambitions in Canada, the Caribbean, and India all rested on the ability to protect sea lines of communication and project

power amphibiously. Again and again, French maritime ambitions were crushed by the power of the Royal Navy, with only the Virginia Capes action translating into strategic success of the first order—decisive support for the American revolutionary cause.

In general, the inability of the French navy, accordingly, to sustain France's colonial ambitions, let alone an invasion of the British Isles, drove the French to employ privateers and commerce raiders in all their wars against Britain, and they in turn exacted a heavy toll on British shipping. But over the long haul, the results of Vauban's concept of attacking the buttresses of British power fell short of expectation. During the War of the Austrian Succession (1740–48), for example, French and Spanish privateers seized over three thousand British merchant ships, but at the close of the war Britain's merchant fleet was both larger and more dominant than it had been at the outset.<sup>24</sup>

The ultimate test of the strategic effectiveness of preindustrial *guerre de course* occurred during the conflict between Britain and revolutionary, later Napoleonic, France. The French navy attempted to confront the Royal Navy shortly after the disruptions of the Revolution, only to be defeated in the Atlantic (the First of June, 1794) and the Mediterranean (the battle of the Nile, 1798). Following his ascent to power, Napoleon attempted to exploit his alliance with Spain to create a combined Franco-Spanish fleet that could contest British sea power, only to see this grand design crushed at Trafalgar (1805). Throughout this period France employed privateers and frigates to attack British commerce as a complement to its fleet maneuvers, but following Trafalgar *guerre de course* became France's sole tool for offensive naval action against Britain. French privateers seized some eleven thousand British merchant ships during the revolutionary and Napoleonic wars, driving up insurance rates.<sup>25</sup> Isolated naval squadrons joined in the assault against British shipping. Yet slowly, through seizure or blockade, Britain closed down privateer dens, as the Royal Navy tracked down and sank the remnants of the French navy. In early 1806 the small French squadron operating in the Caribbean was destroyed; by 1810 Britain and its allies had subdued or captured all French holdings in the area. In the Indian Ocean, French warships and privateers operating out of Réunion and Mauritius continued to harass British shipping, but by December of that year both outposts had fallen.

Britain coped with France's *guerre de course* by adopting in 1793 a global system of convoys, making them compulsory for merchant shipping by the Convoy Acts of 1798 and 1803. The system proved more than adequate to the threat. Between 1793 and 1815 British merchant losses were only about 2 percent; losses in the English Channel were even lower. The system imposed delays and inconvenience on merchant shipping, and convoys were forced to proceed at the speed of the slowest ship. Yet by depriving French privateers of isolated targets and forcing

them to risk combat with well-armed escort vessels, the system undermined the economic incentive for privateering. The number of French seamen captured by Britain provides a sense of the effectiveness of the convoy system: some forty-two thousand French privateersmen were captured by the British during the 1790s, with twenty-seven thousand French seamen held as captives by Britain at the close of the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>26</sup>

Yet faith in the effectiveness of commerce warfare as a coercive strategy had not yet ebbed when Napoleon decisively defeated Austria and Prussia in 1805 and 1806. Napoleon sought to escalate the scope of commerce warfare, issuing the Berlin and Milan Decrees of November 1806 and December 1807, respectively, banning the importation of British goods by France, its dependencies, or its allies. The Continental System, an economic embargo that in theory stretched from Russia to Spain and from the tip of Norway to the foot of Italy, took economic warfare to a new level. It sought to impoverish Britain by denying it outlets for its products and sought to drain Britain's coffers by requiring it to pay for any imports with bullion.<sup>27</sup> The Berlin and Milan Decrees were extremely unpopular with Napoleon's Dutch, Danish, and German allies, and they proved impossible to enforce. Smuggling became rampant, and trade declined. Spain and Russia ceased observing the embargo, and once that happened, enforcing the decree in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and Marseille made no sense unless those two nations could be enticed or coerced back into the fold of the Continental System. Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign and developments in Spain soon showed that this was beyond France's power.

Britain responded to the Berlin Decree with its own Orders in Council declaring all French ports under blockade and demanding that neutral shipping submit to British controls. The United States objected to both the French and British measures and placed an embargo on exports to both. The Orders in Council, searches of American merchant vessels and forcible impressments of sailors deemed British subjects, and frontier issues drove the United States to declare war on Britain in 1812. The U.S. Navy was minuscule compared to the Royal Navy, but its superbly designed frigates, particularly the forty-four-gun *Constitution*, *President*, and *United States*, could outgun equivalent British frigates. In a series of engagements during 1812 the Americans shocked and surprised the British by winning several ship-to-ship engagements. Yet by 1813 the British had met the challenge. The Americans, much like the French, turned to commerce warfare and privateering in the face of superior British naval strength.

Mahan and others have concluded that French and American commerce raiding in this period was more irritant than real threat. Yet practiced in conjunction with the Continental System and American trade embargoes, its costs to Britain were high. An authoritative scholar asserts that

the commercial warfare of the French and the Americans brought the country [Britain] closer to an economic crisis in 1808 and 1811–12 than at any time in the two decades of war. . . . Vast stocks of manufactures piled up outside [British] factories. The London docks filled to overflowing with colonial produce. The supply of naval stores dropped off alarmingly, despite the British exploitation of the forests of the Empire as a substitute. Bankruptcies of firms rapidly increased. Unemployment and the rising cost of bread produced a spate of riots. The gap between the government's revenue and expenditures was widening alarmingly. Napoleon's overrunning of the Baltic saw hundreds of British vessels captured in that sea. An adverse trade balance caused the pound to depreciate.<sup>28</sup>

Nonetheless, Britain showed far more resilience than the French proponents of commerce warfare had anticipated, and the strategy of *guerre de course* proved inadequate in itself to drive Britain to the peace table during the age of sail. French privateers and frigates might cause insurance rates to soar in London, and embargoes might idle British factories, but neither could protect French colonies or convey French armies to England itself. *Guerre de course* and commerce warfare enabled France to impose costs on Britain despite the Royal Navy's command of the sea, but its effectiveness as a strategy to coerce Britain into accepting French continental hegemony was disappointing.

### NEW RESTRICTIONS, CAPABILITIES, AND CONCEPTS

Following the Napoleonic Wars, Europe enjoyed over a generation of respite from major interstate warfare. At the fringes of the continent, Russia and Turkey fought one another in Bulgaria, and in 1830 and 1848 uprisings and revolutions convulsed Europe as a whole. From a naval-warfare perspective, assessing future trends proved remarkably difficult in this period of rapidly advancing technology coupled with relative tranquility. On the technological side, the second and third quarters of the nineteenth century saw such rapid change that a ship might be obsolete before it was commissioned. In 1837 the French navy adopted explosive shells, the value of which was clearly demonstrated by the Russian victory over the Turks at Sinope in 1853.<sup>29</sup> The superiority of the propeller over the paddle wheel was established in an odd "tug-of-war" competition sponsored by the British Admiralty in 1845, during which the propeller-driven *Rattler* proved superior to the paddle-driven *Alecto* in both speed and power.<sup>30</sup> The French ironclad frigate *La Gloire* (1859) and the British all-iron battleship *Warrior* (1860) heralded the shift from wooden to iron hulls.

One invention succeeded another at such a bewildering pace that observers hardly knew what to make of the situation. The lessons to be learned were not nearly as clear to contemporaries as they might later have appeared, particularly whether *guerre de course* remained a viable strategy of the weak or whether steam

power and the telegraph had rendered it outdated.<sup>31</sup> The next major interstate war, the Crimean War of 1853–56, aligned Europe's major naval powers, Britain and France, alongside the Ottoman Empire and the kingdom of Sardinia against the Russian Empire. Having no need to resort to *guerre de course* against Russia's paltry coastal trade and able to blockade its seaports with impunity, the two maritime powers had every reason to limit the impact of the Crimean War on global trade. At the outset Britain and France agreed to respect the rights of neutral vessels and goods, declaring that they would refrain from authorizing privateers. Following the war, at the urging of the French foreign minister, Count Walewski, they sought to make their mutual agreement general and permanent, persuading all the belligerents of the Crimean War to adhere to a declaration that would place permanent limits on the conduct of naval warfare.

The Declaration of Paris, adopted on 16 April 1856, spelled the end of *guerre de course* as it had been waged since the age of Drake and Hawkins. The plenipotentiaries pledged that henceforth

1. Privateering is and remains abolished
2. The neutral flag covers enemy's goods, with the exception of contraband of war
3. Neutral goods, with the exception of contraband of war, are not liable to capture under the enemy's flag
4. Blockades, in order to be binding, must be effective, that is to say, maintained by a force sufficient really to prevent access to the coast of the enemy.<sup>32</sup>

The Declaration of Paris entailed concessions from the various lesser naval powers that had entered into the agreement—chiefly France, Russia, Austria, and Prussia—as well as from Britain, whose naval dominance was overwhelming by midcentury. The inferior powers renounced one of the main advantages of *guerre de course*—the outsourcing of naval warfare to private entrepreneurs willing to bear the costs of equipping commerce raiders—in exchange for the sanctioned seizure of enemy property. Given the development of steam power, this concession was less remarkable than it might appear. By midcentury steam power was on the verge of breaking the tyranny of wind and weather. Soon superior navies would be able to enforce blockades in weather fair and foul, making it more difficult for privateers to slip out of blockaded ports and, even more to the point, making it improbable that captured vessels could be brought safely into friendly ports for disposition by prize courts. Technology had transformed the economics of *guerre de course*: the costs of constructing commerce raiders seemed likely to increase, while the likelihood of profits seemed certain to decline.

Nonetheless, given Britain's vulnerability to commerce warfare, the renunciation of privateering was a major concession by France and the weaker naval

powers; it meant that any future campaigns of *guerre de course* would be under the direct control of the state. The privateer captain and crew—entrepreneurs and private contractors motivated at least in part by the lure of gain—would be replaced by naval officers and enlisted personnel operating as representatives of the state. Naval warfare would henceforth distinguish more clearly between those who used violence for private gain and those who did so for *raison d'état*, as politics asserted its dominance over profits as the sole legitimate reason for naval force. The state might use force to secure trade and ensure prosperity, but the privateer who served the state while pursuing his own economic interests would no longer be granted the status of legitimate combatant. Vestiges of the incentive system that had fueled commerce warfare persisted into the twentieth century, such as prize money, but the logic for capturing rather than destroying merchant shipping whenever possible would henceforth rest on ethical rather than economic grounds.

France and the weaker naval powers were willing to abandon privateering in large part because Britain agreed to recognize the claim that free ships made free goods—that is, that the neutral flag covered all goods on board a ship, with the exception of formally specified contraband.<sup>33</sup> Previously, Britain had asserted the right to seize and confiscate enemy goods carried aboard neutral vessels and insisted that all goods carried by enemy vessels were subject to confiscation regardless of ownership. Britain's policy had been a major irritant to neutral shippers during the French revolutionary and Napoleonic periods, and its acknowledgment that the flag of a neutral carrier covered both neutral and enemy goods was a major concession—subject, of course, to the definition of the exempted category of contraband.

Lastly, the principle of the Declaration of Paris that blockades had to be effective to be legally binding under international law addressed recent concerns over “paper blockades,” like those imposed following Spain's expulsion from South America by various successor states that declared blockades against each other while lacking any ability to enforce them. Europe's major states now served notice that they would pay no heed to these fictitious blockades and would insist on the right to continue trading with states under blockade if the blockade was more theoretical than real.

In all these ways, the principles of the Declaration of Paris rendered economic and commerce warfare highly problematic. Inferior naval powers pledged to abandon the traditional mainstay of *guerre de course*, privateering. Superior naval powers agreed to limit sharply the effectiveness of trade interdiction. By rights, in the future inferior naval powers would be able both to send (under neutral flag) and to receive all goods short of contraband. Furthermore, neutral powers

shipping noncontraband goods on enemy-flagged merchants would be able to expect restitution or compensation for goods seized.<sup>34</sup>

The United States, possessing the world's second-largest merchant fleet yet lacking a commensurate navy, did not sign the Declaration of Paris. Spain, Mexico, and Venezuela likewise refused to subscribe. All four held that the convention would put them at a disadvantage if compelled to wage war against nations with powerful, standing navies. The logic of the American position was that abolishing privateering would rob the United States, which possessed no great navy that could compete with those of Europe, of one of its most effective maritime instruments of power, while the concessions made by Britain hinged entirely on the dubious distinction between contraband and noncontraband goods.<sup>35</sup> The American reservations stemmed from weakness and conservatism, reflecting the perspective of an inferior naval power that had twice confronted overwhelming British sea power. Ironically, five years after the Declaration of Paris the U.S. Navy found itself hunting down Confederate raiders and privateers.

The American Civil War served as a test of whether a strategy of *guerre de course* was sustainable in the age of steam. On 12 April 1861 Confederate batteries on Morris Island in the harbor of Charleston, South Carolina, transformed a political confrontation into an armed rebellion by firing the opening shots of the Civil War against Fort Sumter, held by a Federal garrison. Three days later, Abraham Lincoln responded by calling seventy-five thousand state militia into Federal service, prompting Virginia, North Carolina, Arkansas, and Tennessee to secede from the Union.<sup>36</sup> On 17 April, President Jefferson Davis of the newly declared Confederate States of America escalated the conflict by inviting "all those who may desire, by service in private-armed vessels on the high seas, to aid this Government in resisting so wanton and wicked an aggression, to make application for commissions or letters of marque and reprisal to be issued under the seal of these Confederate States."<sup>37</sup> Davis had instinctively resorted to the sole offensive naval strategy available to the weak. Commerce warfare had served the rebellious American colonies well in the War of Independence against Britain and had vexed Britain sorely in the renewed conflict of 1812–15.

Lincoln responded to the Confederate call for privateers by declaring that "if any person, under the pretended authority of said States" molested "a vessel of the United States, or the persons or cargo on board her," such persons would be treated as pirates.<sup>38</sup> The U.S. government sought to garner international support for this policy by offering to accept unconditionally the provisions of the Declaration of Paris that had abolished privateering (an offer the British secretary of state rejected as too naked a reversal of declared American policy). The United States, which so recently had reserved to itself the right to employ privateers in the event

of war, now faced the prospect of Confederate privateers bent on wreaking havoc on its own merchant shipping.

While Union threats to hang Confederate privateers as pirates were never implemented, the threat reflected the fear, even hysteria, engendered by Confederate letters of marque and reprisal.<sup>39</sup> A sense of panic in the North was matched by an overly optimistic sense of expectation in the South. The Confederacy issued some thirty letters of marque and reprisal, with applications coming in from almost every Confederate port on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. Shipowners in New Orleans, Louisiana, and Charleston proved particularly keen to profit from the opportunity. Initially, privateering appeared to be a cost-effective way to strike at the Union; privateers captured between fifty and sixty Union merchants within the first five months of the war.<sup>40</sup> Yet within a year, the heady assessments dissipated, as reality set in.<sup>41</sup> Three factors served to render the bite of Confederate privateering far less dangerous than its bark.

First, and perhaps most importantly, the leading European powers—including Spain (still master of Cuba at that time)—closed their ports as venues for the sale and disposition of prize vessels and cargoes. Privateers would have to send their prizes back to the Confederacy for disposition. Second, though at the start of the war the blockade was largely a “paper” one, the risks quickly became apparent with the loss in 1861 of such privateers as the schooner *Savannah* in June, the cutter *Beauregard* in July, and the brig *Jefferson Davis* in August. Southern entrepreneurs turned to more lucrative ventures like outfitting blockade-runners or supplying equipment to the infant Confederate navy. Lastly, the Union blockade gradually became a material reality. The loss of New Orleans in April 1862 deprived the Confederacy of its largest port and numerous shipyards. The Union blockade was never able to interdict blockade-running completely, but it clamped down on Confederate ports one by one. Even privateers fortunate enough to evade Union warships and get to sea faced what became an impossible task—sending seized merchant ships into Confederate ports. To do that, the prize crews sent on board had to sail them (few oceangoing merchant vessels were equipped with steam power) past steam-driven Union warships. The likelihood of performing this feat grew steadily dimmer over the course of the war.

The failure of privateering to inflict significant harm on Northern shipping led the Confederacy to pursue a more direct expedient. It purchased, armed, and took under direct control screw (i.e., propeller-driven) steamships such as CSS *Sumter*, which before the war had been a merchant steamer. It also acquired new vessels designed for waging a war against Union commerce, but given its resource limitations and inadequate shipbuilding capacity, the Confederacy had to turn to foreign shipyards. Ingeniously, it placed orders in British shipyards for specially built cruisers, installed guns after delivery, and commissioned them as

Confederate warships. CSS *Alabama* (Captain Raphael Semmes), *Shenandoah* (Captain James Waddell), and *Florida* (Lieutenants John Maffitt, then Charles Manigault Morris) are perhaps the best known of these Confederate raiders. *Alabama* took sixty-six Union merchant ships, *Shenandoah* devastated the Northern whaling fleet in the Pacific (thirty-two whalers burned, six seized), and *Florida* accounted for thirty-seven prizes.<sup>42</sup>

The impact of these raiders was dramatic. Equipped with both sail and steam power in an era when most oceanic shipping, as noted, relied solely on sail, these cruisers could swiftly catch fleeing merchant ships when the traditional tactics of deception and guile failed. Their armament proved more than sufficient to intimidate merchant ships, while their speed allowed them to evade more heavily armed but slower Union warships. Insurance rates in the North skyrocketed, and Northern shippers flocked to transfer their registries to foreign flags. One hundred twenty-six owners transferred their registries in 1861, 135 in 1862, and 348 in 1863.<sup>43</sup> Equally encouraging from a Southern perspective, the Union was forced to divert numerous warships from blockade and coastal operations to generally fruitless hunts for raiders. In an age before transoceanic cables linked Europe to North America and London to India, Australia, and elsewhere, Confederate raiders could use the vastness of the oceans as a sanctuary and avenue of escape. They were most vulnerable when replenishing coal and bringing supplies on board, or when too many crewmen had been sent away in prize crews.

Semmes, Waddell, Maffitt, and other Confederate naval officers waged a more ruthless *guerre de course* than their privateer brethren, because they were free from the imperative of turning a profit. These Confederate captains sank most of their prizes, helping themselves to supplies of food and fuel before setting captured ships aflame. Yet they did so while observing the conventions of humanity. The Confederates would signal vessels to heave to and then board and search them, bringing officers and crews on board the raider before sinking the unfortunate merchantmen or whaling ships. The captured crews would be periodically transferred to prizes, which the prize crews were directed to sail to the nearest neutral harbor. The logic and aim of commerce warfare changed, but the conventions remained the same: merchant and whaling ships were more often destroyed rather than seized, but their crews were not sent to the bottom with them. They were brought on board, treated humanely as noncombatants, and released as soon as operationally feasible.

The overall impact of the Confederate war against Union shipping was mixed. On the one hand, fewer than two dozen Confederate commerce raiders sank more Union shipping than did all the Confederate gunboats, ironclads, and naval batteries combined. Union maritime insurance rates doubled and tripled, causing a flight to foreign flags. Dozens of Union warships were diverted to search for

and destroy a handful of raiders. At the start of the war, a number of prize ships and their cargoes were brought into Confederate ports for sale and disposition. Yet the Confederate *guerre de course* had little impact on the course or outcome of the war. It did not prevent the Union from enforcing a blockade that became ever more effective. It did not prevent the North from launching amphibious attacks when and where it desired. It did not bring foreign intervention. Most significantly, it had little if any impact on Union manufacturing and agriculture; Northern factories and armament plants were not dependent on imports of coal, iron ore, oil, or fertilizer. Most naval observers would have concurred with the later assessment of a young Union naval officer who had participated in the blockade of the South, one Alfred Thayer Mahan. Mahan's judgment, published some twenty-five years later and drawing on both personal experience in blockading and the study of naval warfare over the last two hundred years, was that "commerce-destroying by independent cruisers depends upon wide dissemination of force. Commerce-destroying through control of a strategic centre by a great fleet depends on concentration of force. Regarded as a primary, not as a secondary, operation, the former is condemned, the latter justified, by the experience of centuries."<sup>44</sup>

### THE JEUNE ÉCOLE AND THE RADICALIZATION OF *GUERRE DE COURSE*

The pace of technological change continued to accelerate after the American Civil War, soon rendering the lessons of that conflict less than clear to naval strategists. New competitors joined Britain, France, and Russia in the naval race. Whereas even in 1883 Britain's battleship total was greater than that of the next three strongest navies, by 1904 Britain had been forced to abandon even its traditional "two-power standard."<sup>45</sup> The refinement or introduction of the torpedo, the torpedo boat, the destroyer, the mine, the turbine engine, the submarine, the "all-big-gun" battleship (*Dreadnought*, 1906), and the aircraft resulted in a bewildering array of platforms and weapons.<sup>46</sup> Debates raged over the effectiveness of these new weapons, their employment, and their roles in the fleet. The lessons learned from centuries of naval warfare under sail seemed obsolete.

This atmosphere of rapid change increased tension between two schools of naval thought. One asserted that navies should be organized as fleets, with as their primary duty the destruction of the enemy's fleet. The other argued that technology offered new opportunities for the direct destruction of the enemy's commerce. The latter pointed to the success of Confederate commerce raiders and extrapolated that a larger, better-supported array of raiders would indeed have a strategic effect if employed against a nation dependent on the import and export of goods. The two schools envisioned very different sorts of navies, with

radical implications for naval construction programs, organization, and personnel policies. These arguments over strategic concepts were not mere theoretical wrangles but rather clashes of fundamentally different conceptions of how new technologies were altering the framework of sea power.

The French explored more seriously than any other nationality the implications of technological change for an inferior naval power. Initially, much of their thinking revolved around the proposition that new technologies might allow a numerically inferior naval power to confront British naval superiority directly. In 1822, Henri-Joseph Paixhans, inventor of the shell-firing naval gun, speculated that by investing in a combination of steam power and explosive shells the French navy might acquire a “sudden and decisive” qualitative edge over Britain. In the 1840s the prince de Joinville, commander of the French navy, talked of using steam power, should war break out, to wage “the most audacious war of aggression” against the Royal Navy. But by the 1860s most French naval strategists shifted from thinking about how to use technology to confront the Royal Navy toward how to wage *guerre de course* more effectively.<sup>47</sup>

Louis Antoine Richild Grivel, a well-connected captain in the French navy, presented, in his *De la guerre maritime avant et depuis les nouvelles inventions* (1869), perhaps the most thoughtful analysis of how technology had opened new naval options. France, argued Grivel, needed to recognize that its naval strategy very much hinged on which adversary it faced. In a confrontation with the German Confederation, France should be prepared to wage *la grande guerre* of fleet action and squadron warfare. But in a confrontation with Britain, Grivel argued, a strategy aimed at fleet action made no sense. Given Britain’s numerical lead in warships and the strength of its industry, the prospects for building a fleet that could rival the Royal Navy were nil. Instead, if France became involved in a war with Britain it should wage a war of cruisers that it could if necessary sustain indefinitely.<sup>48</sup> He held that in practice a protracted campaign based on *guerre de course* would probably be unnecessary:

It is, moreover, more than probable that our perseverance would never be submitted in such a case to a test of such long duration.—Just through the rise of the insurance rates on the London Exchange, two or three years of well-directed cruisers [*sic*] would suffice to take away the customers of the enemy’s merchant flag, that is to say, dry up the principal source of the national wealth!—The result: a commercial and financial distress that would with scarce delay wear out this phalanx of wise and calculating minds who have always directed the affairs of England.<sup>49</sup>

Grivel was not an isolated voice in postulating that *guerre de course* remained a viable strategy for the future despite the limitations of the Declaration of Paris. Carefully and judiciously, Grivel argued that *guerre de course* was the only viable

naval strategy for confronting Britain specifically but that France needed to retain its battleships, as it could indeed aim for command of the sea if confronted by weaker naval powers. Likewise, he noted that the declaration had not outlawed commerce warfare per se, only privateering. The Confederacy had waged a vigorous war against Union commerce even after the demise of its privateers, with its commissioned, specially designed cruisers. France too might wage a *guerre de course* within the bounds of international law by employing cruisers of its navy, manned by professional French naval officers and sailors.

The *Jeune École* (or “new school”), which succeeded Grivel, presented a more radical vision.<sup>50</sup> Centered on Admiral Théophile Aube and the journalist Gabriel Charmes, the school challenged orthodoxy and advocated an unfettered embrace of *guerre de course* utilizing the latest technologies. Aube argued that the traditional notion of command of the sea had lost much of its validity, because it was underpinned by two notions—the naval battle and the naval blockade—whose futures were now open to question. Aube, citing as an example the 1866 battle of Lissa (the first major naval engagement to involve ironclads), argued that technology had made the pitched naval battle equally devastating to victor and vanquished and therefore no longer decisive. Arguing from the experience of the American Civil War, he predicted that the modern steam engine would make the naval blockade impossible to maintain: high-speed blockade-runners would be able to slip past blockading ships using night, fog, or diversions as cover.<sup>51</sup>

The conclusion to be drawn was that the battleship no longer could ensure command of the sea, and thereby served no vital purpose.<sup>52</sup> The *Jeune École* decried the enormous expense of the battleship, accompanied by decreased speed and maneuverability, resulting from attempts to incorporate the latest developments in gunnery, armor, propulsion, and other weapons (torpedoes, rams) in one platform. In contrast to Grivel, who had conceded that French battleships would play important roles against continental opponents, *Jeune École* advocates dismissed the battleship as such. Grivel had argued that “France remains in the presence of two strategies perfectly distinct and radically opposed in their means and in their consequences:—Fleet warfare or cruiser warfare.”<sup>53</sup> The *Jeune École* tended to dismiss entirely the former and overpromise the potentialities of the latter. The *Jeune École* held that the French navy should abandon its fascination with battleships and instead build large numbers of specialty ships, specifically cruisers, torpedo boats, high-speed ram boats, monitors, and gunboats.

These vessels were to be employed in a coordinated manner that would first provide defense, then break an enemy blockade, and then proceed offensively.<sup>54</sup> Fortified ports and naval bases were to be built in France and its colonies as shelters and strongpoints at the outbreak of war. Monitors and gunboats were to

supplement the fixed defenses. Unable to capture French ports, the enemy would establish a blockade. It was at this point that swift and numerous torpedo boats and ram ships would use low visibility and surprise to attack and inflict unacceptable losses on the superior enemy force. Once the enemy was forced to abandon the blockade, cruisers and torpedo boats would begin the offensive phase of the campaign. Cruisers were to use their superior speed to devastate the enemy's commerce while avoiding lumbering, heavily armored battleships. Torpedo boats and fast gunships would continue to wear down the enemy fleet through pinprick attacks, simultaneously confusing and demoralizing the enemy through raids on his coast, ports, and lines of communications.<sup>55</sup> Aube put it as follows:

If the enemy is England, there is no doubt of the objective: Try to ruin her trade, to harass the weak points of her *territoire maritime* and by surprise actions put pressure on some of her important colonies in order to separate them from England. The maritime stake is immensely greater for England than for us. The blows that England can direct at our colonies or trade are immeasurably less important than the other way around. The role of our cruisers will therefore be: Harass the enemy by all means, hunt à *outrance* her merchant ships, fall upon them like a bird of prey.<sup>56</sup>

The French navy grappled with the problem of how one might wage cruiser warfare while still abiding by the conventions of international law. In 1874, Aube—then idled because of his republican sympathies—wrote an article objecting to the Declaration of Paris, claiming that France had given up one of its most effective tools, the right to issue letters of marque and employ privateers. In 1885, shortly before being appointed minister of the navy, Aube elaborated on his conception of how commerce warfare would be waged with the newest technologies—the torpedo boat and the torpedo:

In the days when . . . in theory the laws of war were accepted by even the most rebellious spirits[,] . . . how was maritime war practiced? . . . A captured ship was taken to the nearest port if it was worth it, otherwise the captor took aboard its crew and the prize was sunk. Humanity was saved—and also safe were the laws of war. Tomorrow, war breaks out; an autonomous torpedo boat—two officers, a dozen men—meets one of these liners carrying a cargo richer than that of the richest galleons of Spain and a crew and passengers of many hundreds; will the torpedo boat signify to the captain of the liner that it is there, that it is watching him, that it could sink him, and that consequently it makes him prisoner—him, his crew, his passengers of many hundreds—in a word that he has platonically been made a prize and should proceed to the nearest French port? To this declaration . . . the captain of the liner would respond with a well-aimed shell that would send to the bottom the torpedo boat, its crew, and its chivalrous captain, and tranquilly he would continue on his momentarily interrupted voyage. Therefore, the torpedo boat would follow from afar, invisible [to] the liner it

has met; and, once night has fallen, perfectly silently and tranquilly it will send into the abyss liner, cargo, passengers; and his soul will not only rest but fully satisfied, the captain of the torpedo boat will continue his cruise.<sup>57</sup>

Aube explained his detached disregard of international law to his readers by asserting that “war is the negation of law. . . . It is the recourse to force—the ruler of the world—of an entire people in the incessant and universal struggle for existence. Everything is therefore not only permissible but legitimate against the enemy.”<sup>58</sup> How widely Aube’s ruthless vision was shared within the French navy is uncertain. In 1897 the commander in chief of the Northern Fleet sent his draft instructions for commerce raiding in the event of war with Germany to Aube’s successor at the Ministry of the Navy. The orders directed captains to “seek to hurt the enemy commerce as much as possible, while adhering to international law and the laws of humanity. The prizes you have taken shall be destroyed after you have removed all usable goods and you have been able to disembark the crew.”<sup>59</sup>

The ideas of Aube and his followers provoked a storm of controversy both at home and abroad, with keen supporters and critics of his ideas engaging in heated debates.<sup>60</sup> His vigorous embrace of new technology pleased many who felt that the old admirals were unresponsive and unimaginative, and it appealed also to those opposed to the horrendous expenses of a battle-fleet navy. The ideas of the *Jeune École* “split the French Navy wide open,” creating “incredible confusion” in the service during the period 1871 to 1900.<sup>61</sup> In exercises, the torpedo boats, gunboats, and monitors that were now the mainstay of its strategy failed to live up to expectations, unable to intercept convoys at sea.<sup>62</sup> Various critics, such as Admiral Siméon Bourgeois, attacked the movement for its open disregard of international law: “The advent of the torpedo . . . has in no way changed international treaties, the law of nations, or the moral laws which govern the world.”<sup>63</sup>

Following Franco-British rapprochement and the development of the *Entente Cordiale* in 1904, French interest in commerce warfare declined. On the eve of the First World War, few naval thinkers anticipated its revival using the new technology of the U-boat. In Germany, the powerful state secretary of the Navy Office, Alfred von Tirpitz, firmly focused the Imperial Navy on building a battle fleet that might someday threaten Britain’s command of the sea. In June 1897 Tirpitz declared, “Commerce raiding and transatlantic war against England is so hopeless, because of the shortage of bases on our side and the superfluity on England’s side, that we must ignore this type of war against England in our plans for the constitution of our fleet. Our fleet must be so constructed that it can unfold its greatest military potential between Heligoland and the Thames.”<sup>64</sup>

The British—whether policy makers like Lord Fisher or such theorists as the Colomb brothers or Julian Corbett—proved much more attuned to the connection between naval power, trade, and economic survival. Yet while Fisher was

fascinated with the submarine, he viewed it primarily as a threat to the fleet. He and others failed to perceive that it would enable attacks against merchant shipping on a scale unprecedented.<sup>65</sup> Concerning the future of attacks against British trade, Corbett, the nation's foremost naval thinker, cautioned in 1911 that "there is no part of strategy where historical deduction is more difficult or more liable to error," owing to profound technological, economic, and legal changes since the age of sail.<sup>66</sup> Nevertheless, he ventured the prediction that modern developments would render commerce warfare more problematic.

Three developments shaped his assessment. First, Corbett held that the abolition of privateering would make commerce raiding less destructive in the future: "Difficult as it is to arrive at exact statistics of commerce destruction in the old wars, one thing seems certain—that the bulk of captures, which were reckoned in hundreds and sometimes even in thousands, were due to the action of privateers."<sup>67</sup> While a state might commission its own commerce raiders, as had the Confederacy, they presumably would be fewer in number than the swarms of privateers that operated in the heyday of *guerre de course*. Second, the shift from sail to coal would make it impractical to embark prize crews on seized vessels, whereas, although Jeune École proponents had suggested simply sinking ships vice seizing them, Corbett briskly objected that "no Power will incur the odium of sinking a prize with all hands, and their removal to the captor's ship takes time." Lastly, wireless communications had changed the environment to the disadvantage of commerce raiders. Merchant ships could report the presence of enemy raiders, allowing other merchant vessels to take evasive action even as friendly warships took up the chase. Corbett concluded that "on the whole, then, it would appear that in so far as modern developments affect the problem [of commerce warfare], they certainly render pelagic operations far more difficult and uncertain than they used to be."<sup>68</sup>

### REPEATING CORBETT'S ERROR?

Julian Corbett remains one of the keenest and most incisive theorists of naval power, whose insights and concepts remain essential to discussions of command of the sea, types of sea control, and naval power's ability to limit and isolate warfare. Yet his assessment that legal and technological developments would make commerce warfare in the near future unlikely proved grievously wrong. When the next war between great powers broke out in 1914, both Britain and Germany soon resorted to maritime economic warfare: Britain declared the entire North Sea a war zone in November 1914, and Germany declared on 1 February 1915 a zone around the British Isles within which all shipping was subject to unrestricted U-boat attack. American protests following the sinking of *Lusitania* and *Arabic* in May and August 1915, respectively, forced a suspension of unrestricted

U-boat warfare, but the operational advantages proved irresistible to the German navy and government. At the Pless Conference in January 1917, the imperial government decided to resume unrestricted submarine warfare even at the cost of U.S. entry into the conflict. The decision proved a strategic blunder of the first order, but the U-boat campaign exacted a terrible cost. By war's end, over 12.5 million tons of allied and neutral shipping had been sent to the bottom by Germany's primitive U-boats.<sup>69</sup>

Corbett's 1911 misdiagnosis of the future threat of commerce warfare underscores the difficulty, even for brilliant thinkers, of predicting the future forms of war. War, as Clausewitz pointed out and Corbett realized, has a way of escalating in unpredictable manners, and both British and German naval officers were surprised at the effectiveness of the U-boat against merchant shipping. Maritime escalation in the form of the British blockade elicited the traditional response of the weaker side, *guerre de course*, using new platforms and technologies unavailable during its previous iteration under the *Jeune École*. Today and in the future, blockades and maritime controls—recently a largely cost-free endeavor, as applied against such insignificant naval powers as Iraq, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Libya—may likewise elicit counter-escalation rather than meek compliance. At this writing, much attention is being given to the challenge of keeping the Strait of Hormuz open should tensions escalate with Iran. Yet we would do well to consider that coercion and escalation in the maritime sphere entail more than an exclusive focus on the challenge posed by antiaccess/area-denial networks. Better equipped and more determined adversaries may respond to future blockades and shipping controls by countering these tools of coercion with the coercive response of the weak, maritime commerce warfare. The theory and logic of this strategy of the weak have a venerable ancestry, and we would do well not to repeat Corbett's error of assuming that legal, economic, and technological developments have rendered future recourse to maritime commerce warfare unlikely and ineffective.

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#### NOTES

The views expressed in this article belong solely to the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy of the U.S. government, the Department of Defense, or the Air War College.

1. For a critique of the dismantling and degrading component of AirSea Battle in the context of antiaccess/area-denial in the South China Sea, see the author's "China, the German

Analogy, and the New AirSea Operational Concept," *Orbis* 55, no. 1 (Winter 2011), pp. 114–31. For a broader discussion of the U.S. strategic pivot to Asia, which this author endorses, see Jeffrey Bader, *Obama and China's Rise: An Insider Account of America's Asia Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 2012), and Martin Indyk et al., *Bending History: Barack Obama's Foreign*

- Policy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2012).
2. For broad analyses of maritime commerce warfare, see Nicholas Tracy, *Attack on Maritime Trade* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1991), and Patrick Crowhurst, *The Defence of British Trade 1689–1815* (Folkestone, U.K.: Dawson, 1977).
  3. For an overview of the overlapping and contested meanings of terms such as “coercion,” “coercive diplomacy,” “compellence,” “military coercion,” “coercive military strategy,” and “strategic coercion,” see Patrick C. Bratton, “When Is Coercion Successful? And Why Can’t We Agree on It?,” *Naval War College Review* 58, no. 3 (Summer 2005), pp. 99–120. The key texts include Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 2008); Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman, *The Dynamics of Coercion* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002); Alexander George, *Forceful Persuasion: Coercive Diplomacy as an Alternative to War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Institute of Peace, 1991); Lawrence Freedman, *Strategic Coercion: Concepts and Cases* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1998); and Stephen J. Cimbala, *Coercive Military Strategy* (College Station: Texas A&M Univ. Press, 1998).
  4. For a discussion of gunboat diplomacy, see Douglas Peifer, “Riskfree Coercion? Technological Disparity and Coercive Diplomacy,” *European Security* 18, no. 1, special edition (March 2009), pp. 7–31.
  5. Matthias Puhle, *Die Vitalienbrüder: Klaus Störtebeker und die Seeräuber der Hansezeit* (Frankfurt, Ger.: Campus Verlag, 1992).
  6. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Safeguard of the Sea: A Naval History of Britain, 660–1649*, 1st American ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), p. 149. For a broader discussion of naval power in the Middle Ages, see the excellent collection edited by John B. Hattendorf and Richard W. Unger, *War at Sea in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, Warfare in History* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, U.K.: Boydell, 2003).
  7. See, for example, instructions from Edward I to the Cinque Ports, or agreements between England and France during the truce period of 1408–10 in John B. Hattendorf, “Maritime Conflict,” in *The Laws of War: Constraints on Warfare in the Western World*, ed. Michael Eliot Howard, George J. Andreopoulos, and Mark R. Shulman (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 100–101.
  8. Rodger, *Safeguard of the Sea*, pp. 202–203.
  9. Herbert W. Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power* (Oxford, U.K.: Clarendon, 1946), p. 9.
  10. Michael Eliot Howard, *War in European History* (London: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 45.
  11. *Ibid.*, chap. 3, “The Wars of the Merchants,” pp. 38–53.
  12. A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890; repr. Gretna, La.: Pelican, 2003), pp. 193–94.
  13. Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center, 1997). See pp. 46–47 for a balanced assessment of Mahan’s take on commerce warfare.
  14. Mahan’s critical assessment of *guerre de course* is developed at the close of chapters 2, 4, and 14 of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*. Mahan asserted, “It is not the taking of individual ships or convoys, be they few or many, that strikes down the money power of a nation; it is the possession of that overbearing power on the sea which drives the enemy’s flag from it, or allows it to appear only as a fugitive; and which, by controlling the great common, closes the highways by which commerce moves to and from the enemy’s shores. This overbearing power can only be exercised by great navies.” While Corbett developed the concept of “command of the sea” more fully, Mahan used the term in his classic interchangeably with “overbearing power on the sea” and “supremacy of the ocean.” See Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, pp. 133–38, 247, 341, 398, 461, and 538–39. For the best refutation of Mahan’s argument, see Geoffrey Symcox, *The Crisis of French Sea Power, 1688–1697: From the Guerre d’Escadre to the Guerre de Course*, Archives Internationales d’Histoire des Idées (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1974), p. 73.
  15. Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power*, p. 179.
  16. Vauban was by no means ignorant of maritime affairs, having nourished a

- long-standing interest in commerce warfare and privateering. At the time the memo was prepared, Vauban held a naval commission as commander of the naval fortifications at Brest and its dependencies. See Symcox, *Crisis of French Sea Power*, p. 177.
17. See *ibid.*, pp. 182–85, for an analysis of Vauban’s memorandum. The Vauban quote is from p. 183.
  18. Richmond, *Statesmen and Sea Power*, pp. 65, 76. Note that Jean Bart had urged a similar policy as early as 1689; given his lack of pedigree and influence at court, however, his advice carried less weight than that of Vauban.
  19. See Symcox, *Crisis of French Sea Power*, pp. 187–220, for the best analysis to date of the organization of privateering during the War of the League of Augsburg.
  20. I restrict myself to first-, second-, and third-rate ships of the line. The disparity becomes even greater if one includes fourth and fifth rates. See *ibid.*, app. 2, pp. 236–37, for a full table of ships launched.
  21. *Ibid.*, p. 226; Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery* (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1983), pp. 84–85.
  22. Symcox, *Crisis of French Sea Power*, p. 228.
  23. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 79.
  24. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
  25. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–32.
  26. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649–1816* (New York: Norton, 2004), pp. 559–60.
  27. *Ibid.*, pp. 551–52.
  28. Kennedy, *Rise and Fall of British Naval Mastery*, p. 144.
  29. John Keegan, *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare* (New York: Viking, 1989), p. 98.
  30. Rolf Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea: Naval Strategic Thought, the Ideology of Sea Power, and the Tirpitz Plan, 1875–1914*, Studies in Central European Histories (Boston: Brill Academic, 2002), pp. 26–29; Tom Hartman, *The Guinness Book of Ships and Shipping Facts & Feats* (Enfield, Middlesex, U.K.: Guinness Superlatives, 1983), pp. 89–92.
  31. Hartman, *Guinness Book of Ships*, p. 94.
  32. Francis Piggott, *The Declaration of Paris 1856: A Study* (London: Univ. of London Press, 1919), p. 346, available at *Internet Archive*, [archive.org/details/declarationofpar00piggiala](http://archive.org/details/declarationofpar00piggiala).
  33. Hattendorf, “Maritime Conflict,” p. 109.
  34. Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, p. 88.
  35. *Ibid.*
  36. E. B. Potter, ed., *Sea Power: A Naval History*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p. 124.
  37. William Morrison Robinson, Jr., *The Confederate Privateers* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1928), p. 13.
  38. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
  39. The officers and crew of the Confederate privateer *Savannah*, captured by USS *Perry* in June 1861, were tried for piracy in the U.S. Circuit Court for the Southern District of New York in October 1861, but the jury became deadlocked. Under pressure from both the Confederacy—which threatened to execute Union prisoners if *Savannah*’s crew was hanged—and European powers, the Federal government decided not to continue to press charges.
  40. Potter, ed., *Sea Power*, p. 130.
  41. The overoptimistic appraisal of privateering is reflected in section X of the “Act Recognizing the Existence of War between the United States and the Confederate States; and Concerning Letters of Marque, Prizes, and Prize Goods.” Here the Confederacy held out the prospect of financial gain for privateers who captured or defeated Union warships, offering twenty dollars for every captured Union sailor, as well as a 20 percent prize based on the value of the ship and its armament. Robinson, *Confederate Privateers*, pp. 22–23.
  42. See Spencer Tucker, *Naval Warfare: An International Encyclopedia* (Oxford, U.K.: ABC Clio, 2002).
  43. Potter, ed., *Sea Power*, p. 130.
  44. Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History*, p. 540.
  45. Keegan, *Price of Admiralty*, pp. 99, 103. The British had traditionally maintained that their navy was to equal the combined power of its next two potential rivals. Owing to the

pressure caused by the German construction program, the British in November 1904 revised this standard to include a 10 percent margin.

46. Hobson, *Imperialism at Sea*, pp. 26–29.
47. See David H. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy, 1856–1888: Forerunners to Tirpitz* (London: Frank Cass, 2004), p. 33.
48. Theodore Ropp and Stephen S. Roberts, *The Development of a Modern Navy: French Naval Policy, 1871–1904* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1987), pp. 19–22.
49. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy*, pp. 32–33.
50. The best discussions of the Jeune École are Arne Roksund, *The Jeune École: The Strategy of the Weak* (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Volkmar Bueb, *Die "Junge Schule" der französischen Marine: Strategie und Politik 1875–1900* (Boppard, Ger.: Harald Boldt, 1971); and Ropp and Roberts, *Development of a Modern Navy*, pp. 155–80.
51. Aube clearly was referring to what later came to be termed the "close blockade" rather than the "distant blockade" developed by the British during the First World War.
52. Bueb, "Junge Schule," p. 17.
53. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy*, p. 33.
54. The ideas of Aube and the Jeune École were a response to the overwhelming power of the Royal Navy.
55. Bueb, "Junge Schule," pp. 20–21.
56. Roksund, *Jeune École*, p. 56.
57. Aube, "Défense nationale, défense des colonies," in *Atlas Colonial*, ed. Henri Mager (Paris: n.p., 1885), pp. 11–12. The Aube quote is from Ropp, *Development of a Modern Navy*, p. 165.
58. Ropp and Roberts, *Development of a Modern Navy*, p. 165.
59. Roksund, *Jeune École*, p. 94.
60. For an overview of contemporaneous debates in the United States, see Craig L. Symonds, *Navalist and Antinavalist: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785–1827* (London: Associated University Presses, 1980).
61. Ropp and Roberts, *Development of a Modern Navy*, pp. 178–79.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 177.
63. Olivier, *German Naval Strategy*, p. 135. For a detailed discussion of German policy prior to and during the Tirpitz era, see Lawrence Sondhaus, *Preparing for Weltpolitik: German Sea Power before the Tirpitz Era* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1997); Christian Rödel, *Krieger, Denker, Amateure: Alfred von Tirpitz und das Seekriegsbild vor dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2003); and Holger Herwig, "Luxury" Fleet: *The Imperial German Navy, 1888–1918*, rev. ed. (London: Ashfield, 1987).
64. Tirpitz memorandum of June 1897, in Jonathan Steinberg, *Yesterday's Deterrent* (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 208–209.
65. Sir John "Jacky" Fisher, a keen advocate of the submarine, was earnestly concerned about its potential during the pre–World War I years. Yet he and others perceived the submarine largely in terms of a threat to the capital ship and the battle fleet rather than as an instrument of *guerre de course*. See Nicholas A. Lambert, *Sir John Fisher's Naval Revolution* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1999), pp. 80–81, 122–25.
66. Julian Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911; repr. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988), p. 266.
67. *Ibid.*, p. 267.
68. *Ibid.*, p. 270.
69. V. E. Tarrant, *The U-boat Offensive, 1914–1945* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 148. In addition, see Maurice Prendergast and R. H. Gibson, *The German Submarine War, 1914–1918* (Penzance, U.K.: Periscope, 2002), and Paul Halpern, *A Naval History of World War I* (New York: Routledge, 1995), for excellent discussions of the U-boat campaign in World War I.