Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution,

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Recommended Citation
to discern any real patterns from his historical survey, and even if any exist, the stockbroker’s warning that “future results cannot be predicted from past performance” applies. At best, “if anything approaching a principle emerges from the confused record of the past it may be that the natural political environment for navies, their raison d’être, is the unforeseen. . . . Warships allow choice, naval force is a flexible instrument.”

The book is a good short summary of the political uses of naval force, both intended and unintended, over the past fifty years. However, it is of limited value in helping today’s defense analysts and policy makers think through the requirements for tomorrow’s naval forces.


This is a very good book and a very important one. Nicholas Lambert has followed in the path of Jon Sumida’s *In Defense of Naval Supremacy* to present a lucid, compelling, and comprehensive analysis of the policies of Admiral Sir John Fisher and the Royal Navy in the decade before 1914. This work is based upon Lambert’s doctoral study of the development of the submarine, but it goes much farther than his original work in explaining the fundamental elements of Fisher’s naval policies and their effects on the Royal Navy.

Lambert’s command of the primary sources is remarkable. He supplements grand strategy, national financial policy, and politics with the details of operational and tactical concepts with a skill that illuminates the linkages between the various levels and gives them all sufficient and appropriate weight. His treatment not only lays bare the superficial nature of much previous historical research in this era but also indicates the degree to which that superficiality has caused our understanding of the period to be profoundly flawed.

The book is not an easy read, but Lambert’s solid prose and grasp of his narrative allow the reader to follow his way through the labyrinth that was British naval policy in the Fisher era. To detail all its facets would take up an entire issue of the *Naval War College Review*, but some explanation is worthwhile.

Lambert makes clear that Fisher was installed as First Sea Lord in 1904 primarily to cut spending at a time when the British government desperately needed to achieve economies in its budget. He shows that Fisher developed extraordinary schemes to utilize emergent technology to maintain Britain’s naval dominance when that dominance was being increasingly challenged and the country’s ability to pay becoming ever more dubious. He shows too that Fisher’s ideas of dominance always focused on Britain’s worldwide requirements, particularly in the protection of sea communications (the threat from Germany was not the primary motivation of British naval policy until much later).

Lambert shows the devious way in which Fisher operated, often concealing his true motivations from politicians and naval colleagues alike, but he also maps out the logic behind the admiral’s approach. To Sumida’s explanation of the origins of the battle cruiser as the worldwide instrument of commerce protection, Lambert adds the concept of the “flotilla,” by which small craft—both surface and
submersible—with torpedoes would close the “narrow seas” around the British Isles and the Mediterranean to the operation of enemy battle fleets and protect Britain and its possessions from attack. “Flotilla defence” would effectively replace the capital ship as the primary element in Britain’s naval strength.

Lambert shows how Fisher always returned to these ideas as the best ways for Britain to utilize both its technological advantages and its strategic geography to achieve affordable naval supremacy. Even in retirement Fisher continued his efforts, and Lambert has discovered incontrovertible proof that in 1914, when the overseas building rates of battleships had become more than British finances could match, Fisher persuaded Winston Churchill, the young First Lord, to cancel the construction of at least two battleships and divert the funding to submarines and destroyers. In other words, the British in 1914 were on the point of stopping battleship construction altogether.

Lambert’s mastery of detail is apparent throughout this volume, but there are four aspects that are most important for the readership of the Naval War College Review and for the challenges ahead.

The first is Lambert’s exposition of the issues that the Royal Navy faced as an organisation, some of which will have a particular resonance for the contemporary audience. Finance was always a fundamental concern, but there were other factors as well. Cutting construction to save money jeopardised the existence of the industrial capacity on which Britain’s latent supremacy at sea rested. Much of Britain’s power derived from the fact that it could, in the final event, construct and arm more warships more quickly than any rival; it was essential that this ability be maintained. The “We Want Eight” crisis of 1909 may thus have had Fisher’s desire to sustain that capability as its primary cause, rather than his fears of German expansion.

The British also faced a crisis of manpower. Not only was the Royal Navy hard pressed to recruit sufficient personnel to man the increasing numbers of battleships and armoured cruisers entering service in the first years of the century, but retention was poor, particularly amongst the more highly skilled ratings vital to their operation. Even if the government provided the funds, the Navy did not have the human capacity to expand indefinitely to match increases in foreign naval capability. The primary focus of the redeployment process, which saw the removal of ships from overseas stations and the apparent concentration of forces in British waters, was not the German threat but the need to employ manpower more efficiently; perhaps, also, by retaining ships in home waters rather than keeping them semipermanently overseas it would improve the quality of life of the ships’ companies. The peacetime deployment of the fleet therefore did not necessarily reflect the intentions for its operations in a conflict.

A corollary to this is the fact that the primary focus of the Admiralty’s effort was the defence of the empire as a whole; the force that it sought to create was always intended to have worldwide responsibilities. The fleet that fought the 1914–18 war in the North Sea, the “Grand Fleet of Battle,” was an attempt to use resources that had been created the previous decade to the greatest effect within a theatre that was much more confined than had been expected only a few years earlier. The enemies that Britain faced in 1914 did not include Italy or any other power with the
potential to interfere with British maritime communications to the degree Russia or France could have. As it was, the problems of organising the Grand Fleet to be an effective tactical entity were such that many in the Royal Navy did not regard it as a practical offensive force. The results of Jutland show they had a point.

Thus we see the importance of Lambert’s careful inclusion of what was going on in the fleets at sea in terms of operational innovation and development. *Sir John Fisher’s Naval Revolution* makes it absolutely clear that whatever their failings in critical thinking, staff work, and analytical method, the senior officers of the Royal Navy were not operating in an intellectual vacuum, and that those in seagoing command were energetically attempting to exploit the emergent technology to the full. Because these officers were responsible for the fighting efficiency of the Royal Navy, however, they were required to work with what they had. As with the aircraft carrier in the 1920s and 1930s, this reality explains the contemporary logic of many decisions that seem misguided in retrospect. It also explains a good part (though not all) of the opposition to Fisher’s ideas, even amongst his erstwhile supporters, and thus a good part (though not all) of Fisher’s deviousness. At the same time, Lambert does not neglect the effects of personality and party in his description of the controversies that raged over Fisher and naval policy. There are human beings in this book.

Lambert’s mastery of context is, above all, why this work should be read by all who are involved with naval policy. He analyses the elements of British decision making and its consequences in terms of contemporary conditions, not hindsight. Lambert clearly explains the ways in which solutions and makeshifts were developed to answer, in the time available, the problems that the Royal Navy faced. He places clear and necessary emphasis on the British need to maintain warfighting capabilities year by year, in spite of all the stresses on the budget and the “stop-go” nature of so many of the new capabilities, such as the submarine and long-range gunnery fire control. In the uncertain strategic environment of the opening years of the twentieth century, the Royal Navy could not afford to surrender existing or immediately available battle power in favor of unproven systems. Nor could it permit the deterioration of the industrial capacity that allowed it to outbuild rivals in an emergency, or continue to seek “more of the same” at the expense of national finances. However ambitious Fisher’s ideas, all of what he did was influenced by these imperatives, as he sought to position the navy to exploit new possibilities.

Lambert’s story of the Royal Navy before 1914 presents a picture completely different from the accepted one, but it is a picture that is solidly founded in primary sources. Equally to the point, it is one that is wholly convincing in total and represents a more satisfying explanation of what happened, and why, than we have ever had before. It is a study that should sound a familiar note for those who have themselves had to struggle with the same sort of problems in other navies and defence forces in recent years.

As one who has written on the operational history of the Royal Navy in the opening months of the First World War, I now believe that such history, and indeed the entire history of the war at sea, needs to be approached anew. I also believe that Lambert’s work proves that we should look again at more of the history...
Maffeo, Steven E. Most Secret and Confidential: Intelligence in the Age of Nelson. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2000. 355pp. $32.95

In Most Secret and Confidential, Steven Maffeo has written an exceptional study of how intelligence was collected and used during the French Revolutionary Wars and the Napoleonic Wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. To limited degrees, the intelligence activities of the United States, Spain, Russia, Denmark, and several other European nations are described. More detail is provided concerning the excellent French intelligence efforts under Napoleon. The bulk of the text, however, deals with the use of intelligence by the British government, especially the Admiralty, during the years between 1793 and 1815.

Maffeo, who is a commander in a naval reserve intelligence unit, has combined his intelligence expertise with the skills of an accomplished historian to write this informative and most enjoyable history of British intelligence efforts during this period. His knowledge of the history of intelligence operations is excellent, and his grasp of the British navy of this era is unsurpassed. He uses not only primary sources (government papers and personal letters) to document his work but also the books of such novelists as C. S. Forester and Patrick O’Brian to make his points. The opening chapter describes how the British government collected intelligence. It has been clear that Lloyd’s of London, by means of its agents located around the world, was able to provide a continuous flow of intelligence to the government, but it is fascinating to learn that by virtue of opening diplomatic and personal mail, the British Post Office became the largest intelligence-gathering branch of the government.

Subsequent chapters treat other aspects of the British intelligence effort. The Admiralty’s collection and use of intelligence is discussed in depth, and so is the transmission of information. The difficulties are shown of sending any type of message, especially when the usual form of communication at sea was signal flags, which were useless at night or in limited visibility, such as in battle. The subject of several chapters is the commander as his own intelligence officer. Some commanders, such as Nelson, were expert intelligence officers; others were not. However, all commanders had to sort through whatever information was available to them and make the best decisions they could—they were literally on their own. Communications between detached fleets and the Admiralty often took weeks, if not months. Commanders, therefore, without knowledge of the current government policy, would ultimately decide on courses of action. The fact that they were fully supported by the Admiralty and the government demonstrates the high level of intelligence skills among the officers of the Royal Navy.

The concluding chapters are case studies that show what role intelligence, or the lack thereof, played in three naval engagements. They are remarkable summations of the Indian Ocean action of Pulo Aur in February 1804, the Copenhagen expedition of December 1800–April 1801, and the Nile campaign of March through August 1798. These three chapters form an excellent conclusion.