

1996

Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama

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Recommended Citation

Schneller, Robert J. Jr. (1996) "Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 49 : No. 1 , Article 29.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol49/iss1/29>

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troops possible, and, more importantly, made their weak positions strong," deserve support and elaboration. Other statements, such as the "*Delaware* moved to the wharf and prepared to anchor," leave one with the sense that the sea is a foreign place to the author. There are numerous maps that are clearly marked but lack many of the place-names mentioned in the text, and not one has a scale—one must guess, or seek out an atlas, to determine the distances. A good editor could have spared both the author and his publisher such embarrassments.

Still, Browning keeps getting better, and if his early chapters were as good as his last two they would have been very good indeed. Most importantly, those who have read this book will better understand the Civil War.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Taylor, John M. *Confederate Raider: Raphael Semmes of the Alabama*. New York: Brassey's, 1994. 317pp. \$24.95

John Maxwell Taylor, author of several well received biographies, has written an objective and critical biography of Raphael Semmes, the "daring," "petulant," "flinty," mustache-twisting skipper of CSS *Sumter* and CSS *Alabama*. "The most successful practitioner of the naval strategy of commerce raiding," Semmes was lionized by Southerners as "the Stonewall Jackson of the sea" and scorned by Northerners as a pirate.

Do we really need another biography of Semmes? Surprisingly, the

answer is yes. Although several biographers have already written about him, their works are either stilted in style, pro-Southern in outlook, or not comprehensive.

Taylor has done a marvelous job filling in the gaps on the life of the Confederate Navy's most colorful character. Born in Maryland, Semmes pursued a dual career as a U.S. naval officer and lawyer. During the Mexican War he lost his ship, the *Somers*, in a storm. He "went south" during the Civil War because he viewed the struggle as a holy war of good against evil—the exploitative, intolerant "puritans."

The bulk of the book covers the cruises of the *Sumter* and the *Alabama*, during which Semmes personally accounted for 36 percent of the U.S. merchant ships destroyed by Confederate raiders. After the war Semmes worked as a college professor, newspaper editor, and lawyer, and became the "first citizen" of Mobile, Alabama.

Some readers might be disappointed that the book does not address broader questions, such as whether Semmes's actions had any subsequent impact on maritime law. However, Taylor does just what a biographer is supposed to do—focus on his subject. Rather than develop a thesis or central argument, Taylor concentrates on Semmes's personality and exploits and does not fall into the biographer's trap of becoming too fond of his subject. The author's writing is lively and engaging. He has a knack for using just the right anecdote to illustrate his point. For example, Semmes could be a hypocrite. His Mexican War memoir denounced commerce raiders crewed by foreigners,

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yet the crew of the *Alabama* consisted almost entirely of Englishmen. Also, Semmes probably lied about having no knowledge of the *Kearsarge's* chain armor before leading the *Alabama* into battle with the Union warship. Semmes's greatest flaws were his pride and his arrogance, but he did remarkably well with the *Alabama's* drunken, mutinous, desertion-prone crew, whose actions reinforced his view of sailors as lazy and morally corrupt.

But several errors of fact mar Taylor's otherwise admirable book. For instance, Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles was not "abysmally ignorant of naval matters" in 1861 as Taylor declares, and Captain Franklin Buchanan of the CSS *Virginia* sent two Union vessels to the bottom at Hampton Roads, belying Taylor's statement that "in defeating the *Hatteras* [Semmes] became the only Confederate captain to sink an enemy warship." In providing background for the decision to fight the *Kearsarge*, Taylor states that Semmes "knew little of the destructive potential of Winslow's eleven-inch guns." This is doubtful. The eleven-inch Dahlgren had appeared onboard U.S. Navy ships in the late 1850s and on the eve of the Civil War enjoyed a reputation in the service as the world's most powerful naval cannon. Several other such errors, a few typos, the absence of a bibliography, and the lack of a map showing the routes of Semmes's cruises also detract from the book.

These matters aside, Taylor has done a fine job. Not only does he include all the color and romance one would expect in a biography of Semmes, but he also answers the most significant questions

surrounding him. The "critical factor" in Semmes's decision to fight the *Kearsarge* was his "aggressive personality." As for commerce raiding, Semmes believed that if Confederate cruisers could sufficiently damage the U.S. merchant marine, the North's shipping interest would force Lincoln to sue for peace. The fact that commerce raiding had little effect on the North's war-making potential was not only "irrelevant" but also "by no means clear" at the time. "If the war could be won by embarrassing the government in Washington," concludes Taylor, "the Confederate cruisers were every bit as successful as Jeb Stuart's cavalymen and John Mosby's raiders."

In sum, Taylor's splendid book is the definitive biography of Raphael Semmes.

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Naval Historical Center

Hebb, David Delison. *Piracy and the English Government, 1616-1642*. Studies in Naval History. Aldershot, U.K.: Scolar Press, and Brookfield, Vt.: Ashfield Publishing, 1994. 303pp. \$69.95

Piracy was a major problem for England in the early seventeenth century. While some might have characterized England as a nation of pirates, it was more true to say that English merchants, particularly those trading in the Mediterranean, were victims of piracy. English ships were not the lone targets, however; piracy had become a general problem, and the major threat was from the North African states. In 1616, Algiers