

1994

## The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy

William R. Hawkins

Spencer C. Tucker

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Hawkins, William R. and Tucker, Spencer C. (1994) "The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 47 : No. 4 , Article 31.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol47/iss4/31>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## 146 Naval War College Review

futility. The press of the era, in order to build readership, portrayed the conflict in the decisive, romantic, and well defined manner the public expected. Public opinion, as shaped by the press in this case, demanded more of the war; that meant more press coverage; and that fueled the designs of General Sherman. The synergistic effect culminated in the famous march to the sea and up through the Carolinas.

Certainly one need look only as far back as the Gulf War and CNN's high ratings to see the continued existence of at least part of this relationship. In a similar vein, some observers question whether United States involvement in Somalia was driven more by policy or the media's attention to an issue of its own choosing. An additional caution this sub-thesis raises is that if the military carelessly shapes the image the press presents to the people, or hides factors inherent in warfare such as confusion and horror, the people may soon demand more of a war that does not really exist and that the military may not want.

Royster's forays into intellectual history are not as easy to read as the rest of the book, but they do help to place this work within the literature. With its cultural, intellectual, biographical, and military facets, this book is of the "drum and bugles" school; it easily qualifies as part of the new military history exemplified by such authors as Gerald Linderman and John Keegan. Having written extensively on earlier aspects of the American military tradition and edited the most recent edition of Sherman's *Memoirs*, Royster is well prepared for this venture into the mid-

nineteenth-century American military experience. The author's interesting system of notation makes the book "reader-friendly" while retaining its utility, albeit with minor difficulty, for the scholar.

STEVE C. HAWLEY  
U.S. Military Academy  
West Point, New York

---

Tucker, Spencer C. *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*. Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1993. 265pp. \$24.95

Few episodes in U.S. naval history have been more criticized than the decision during the administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to substitute a force of coast-defense gunboats, manned primarily by militia, for a regular fleet of blue-water warships. Alfred Thayer Mahan summed up the gunboat experiment as showing that these vessels were "not only excessively costly in expenditure, and lamentably inefficient in results, as compared with seagoing cruisers, but were also deleterious to the professional character of officers and seamen." Historian Fletcher Pratt called them "wretched" and "useless."

Spencer C. Tucker, chair of the History Department at Texas Christian University, takes a more balanced (and charitable) view of the gunboats, concluding that they "do not represent the triumph of a weapons system, nor were they a total failure." Thus he distances himself from Pratt while at the same time substantiating all of Mahan's charges.

The failure of the gunboat strategy was clearly shown in the War of 1812, to which Tucker devotes five chapters. His detailed examination of gunboat operations in each theater fills an important gap in the literature. However, he also devotes three chapters to the use of gunboats prior to 1812, and a chapter to their deployment after the war to show that their service was more useful than usually recorded.

The first gunboats were built to support an offensive strategy. They were to operate in and around the mouth of the Mississippi River, as a show of force to persuade the Spanish and French to keep that vital waterway open. It helped to prompt the Louisiana Purchase. A force of gunboats was sent to the Mediterranean to operate inshore of the frigates operating against the Barbary pirates, after Commodore Edward Preble had successfully employed gunboats he had purchased in Europe.

Tucker argues that the Russian defeat of the Turks in 1788 near the mouth of the Dnieper River convinced Jefferson that a flotilla of small ships could repel a conventional battle fleet.

However, Tucker makes no mention of Jefferson's philosophical bias towards a minimalist defense posture. Without such a reference, Tucker's argument that no alternative to a gunboat program was politically feasible hangs in mid-air. Tucker does cite Treasury Secretary Albert Gallatin's argument that gunboats would be cheaper than either frigates or fortifications. Gallatin's claim has a familiar ring—"If the sums to be expended to build and maintain the

frigates were applied to paying a part of our national debt, the payment would make us more respectable in the eyes of foreign nations than all the frigates we can build." Tucker refutes Gallatin by citing the observations of Secretary of the Navy William Jones in 1814 that the gunboat fleet, "from its scattered, irregular and irresponsible nature, [was] much more expensive and wasteful than that of the regular navy." Jones also stated that the gunboats used up enough manpower to equip thirteen ships of the line, "enough to paralyze [British] efforts on this continent," had these capital ships been built instead.

For coast defense, Tucker believes that a mix of fortifications and mobile batteries would have been more effective than the gunboats. He does recount a number of valiant battles fought by gunboats that do credit to the brave men who manned them. In several instances, the American boats got the better of British small craft in shallow waters or rivers, but outside these restricted areas the Royal Navy deployed its heavy ships with impunity.

Tucker devotes two chapters to the construction of the gunboats and to their equipment. These chapters are enhanced by a dozen line drawings showing their designs and sail plans.

He concludes that the experience of war "was not so much a condemnation of gunboats as it is an argument for a strong navy." The lack of a battle fleet "played into the hands of Britons who pursued an aggressive maritime policy." He goes on to say that "one unforgettable lesson . . . was that capital ships were essential to protect American commerce."

## 148 Naval War College Review

When employed as in the Mediterranean with the support of stronger warships, the gunboats did valuable work. Tucker writes, "Small vessels continued to play important roles in the world's navies and do so at the present, but only in conjunction with, not in place of, larger warships." This is something to keep in mind as the Navy is called upon in the aftermath of the Cold War to shift from a blue-water strategy to one more oriented toward seaboard operations. Successful performance in coastal waters depends on maintaining superiority in the primary naval environment of the oceans.

WILLIAM R. HAWKINS  
President of the  
Hamilton Center for National Strategy  
Knoxville, Tennessee

---

Guttridge, Leonard F. *Mutiny: A History of Naval Insurrection*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1992. 318pp. \$26.95

A fascinating work of synthesis, this first-rate, historically accurate casebook captures the reader's interest through its vivid and detailed depiction of the wide spectrum of recorded "mutinous" naval activity of the last two hundred years. Guttridge expertly presents a study that reveals the common threads among incidents of naval uprising as disparate as the classic mutiny on HMS *Bounty*, the hijacking of the Krivak-class Soviet missile frigate *Storozhevoy*, and the Vietnam-era sitdown strikes aboard the United States aircraft carriers *Constellation* and *Kitty Hawk*.

Guttridge exposes throughout his captivating examination of these sometimes bloody events the universal inability of governments and their respective courts to codify uniquely the act of mutiny. Historically we have called "mutiny" not only violent, chaotic, and murderous rampages but simple disobedience, cooperative acts of fleetwide insubordination, a group's refusal to do one particular job, and "carefully orchestrated acts of passive resistance." Guttridge insightfully deals with them all. He relates how society's semantic and legal reluctance actually determined the course of events during several incidents of large-scale disobedience. He also examines how punishment following those incidents was inconsistent, sometimes involving mass commutation of death sentences, sometimes immediate, unappealed execution, and sometimes total amnesty.

Each episode, with its wealth of action-packed detail and often colorful characters, is meticulously placed within the context of its historical period. The distinction is always clearly drawn between isolated responses to truly barbaric or insensitive leadership, acts tied up with national, regional, racial, or labor movements of the day, and reactions to specific circumstances. Guttridge's masterful use of historical perspective and his well researched characterization of the players make every page come alive. For example, we see Captain William Bligh as a total human being whose career was haunted by controversy—during his employment as sailing master with Captain Cook during Cook's fateful