

1991

II. SSN: The Queen of the Seas?

Timothy E. Some
U.S. Navy (Ret.)

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

Recommended Citation

Somes, Timothy E. (1991) "II. SSN: The Queen of the Seas?," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 44 : No. 2 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol44/iss2/11>

This Article 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.

II. SSN: The Queen of the Seas?

Captain Timothy E. Somes, U.S. Navy (Retired)

Admiral Holland and I have shared an ardent zeal for the nuclear attack submarine since I was his student almost thirty years ago. It is a wonderful naval platform with great potential as an instrument of war; however, his enthusiasm and mine notwithstanding, the modern nuclear submarine's potential remains unproven. For that reason the United States must continue to invest in a carefully balanced force with a broad range of interlinked, synergistic capabilities. History convincingly warns against concentrating on single platforms at the expense of a broadly based inventory of forces, ships, and supporting systems.

Clausewitz cautions that war is merely the continuation of policy by other means. Naval War College students examine example after historical example which suggest the folly of assuming that a tactical advantage in a weapon of war, or even the success of skillfully executed operational campaigns, will necessarily lead to strategic victory. Yet Admiral Holland's metaphor, describing the SSN as the "queen of the seas," suggests that he may feel that a few tactically powerful platforms equate to strategic success. In the decade before World War I, the British undoubtedly held similar views as they poured their national treasury into that generation's "ultimate capital ship." But the lowly German diesel submarines, in an unanticipated campaign, outmaneuvered the tactically superior British "dreadnoughts."

The German submarine campaign failed, in turn, partly because the German leadership failed to appreciate the difference between the tactical success of their unlimited submarine campaign and the disastrous strategic consequences of drawing the United States into the war against them. Ultimately, of course, it was the armies of the Western alliance which decided the war's outcome—armies put on the European continent

A professor in the National Security Decision Making department at the Naval War College, Captain Somes headed the War College's Joint Military Operations department for a number of years before his retirement from active service. A veteran of many years at sea in the submarine force, he commanded U.S.S. *James Monroe* (SSBN 622) and was Deputy Commander, Submarine Squadron Ten.

by a vast array of merchant ships, even while control of the seas was still an open contest. Now, as then, nations should be suspicious of alleged "ultimate capital ships." World War I is but one example proving that maritime superiority is an elusive commodity, and one not gained through a single focus. Furthermore, historical evidence suggests that maritime superiority alone does not lead to the ability to achieve strategic success during war.

Admiral Holland focuses on the Falklands War of 1982 to make his case for the overwhelming superiority of the nuclear submarine. To argue that two 44-year old torpedoes fired by a modern British submarine against a 44-year old Argentine cruiser proves the dominant nature of the nuclear submarine is to ignore both the nature of war in general and the complexity of that maritime campaign in particular. If the Argentines had fully understood the value of Stanley airfield and quickly upgraded it for tactical aircraft use after its capture (as the British did after its recapture), their tactical aircraft could have dominated the surrounding ocean. Time would then have played on their side.

To give Admiral Holland's argument its due, the retirement of the Argentine navy to its bases after the sinking of its cruiser by the British submarine was not insignificant; but it did not decide the issue of sea control. Local sea control remained bitterly contested by mainland-based Argentine air force and naval aircraft for many more days. The Royal Navy lost a significant number of ships to these aircraft, flying at the limits of their range, while the British put ashore their ground forces from a variety of amphibious and merchant vessels. It was these troops, supported by a large number of unglamorous but vital logistic ships (merchant and military), that ultimately defeated the Argentine ground forces in the Falklands, thus deciding the outcome of the war.

Admiral Holland's analogy of the SSN to a chessboard queen suggests tremendous dangers as well as potential power. His metaphor brings to mind the *Bismarck*, tactically without peer but hounded by the Royal Navy's many smaller ships as it attempted to disappear into the tractless wastes of the open Atlantic, and finally receiving the *coup de grace* from lowly biplanes. Nor should we forget the Japanese focus on American battleships at Pearl Harbor, the keen attention the aircraft carrier has long drawn, or the more recent attention the SSBN has gained.

The large weapons capacity, high speed, and significant tactical capabilities of the newest American submarines come with a premium price tag and small numbers. A full weapons load is a significant additional investment. Is it wise to turn our smaller, tactically successful platforms into costly strategic "queens"? Though few in number, these

would be valuable enough to be hunted relentlessly by forces individually inferior but collectively formidable. Surely the American and British success in defeating the huge numbers of German submarines in the Battle of the Atlantic through these very tactics should suggest caution.

Admiral Holland and I agree on his most important points: "The United States needs the oceans, economically and politically"; and "the leverage that maritime superiority grants" is indeed a powerful element of our nation's security strategy. But this strategy is based on a comprehensive mix of military capabilities and forces. As Operation Desert Shield/Desert Storm in Southwest Asia emphasizes, the protection of American interests and the ability to achieve our stated policy objectives require a tremendously complex military force.

Our submarine capabilities certainly have helped to guarantee the ability of the coalition to use the oceanic lines of communication to support Desert Shield/Desert Storm; but the interdiction efforts of the many surface vessels in support of the U.N. embargo are no less important to achieving the coalition's strategic goals than the employment of the SSNs. Tomahawk cruise missiles, some launched by SSNs, have made a useful contribution to the coalition's air campaign, but the numbers fired pale in comparison to the ordnance delivered week after week by air force and naval aircraft and by other systems. And surely the success of the strategic sealift in moving the prodigious quantities of ground force equipment and supplies should remind all of us once again that "sea power" and "maritime superiority" are meaningless without the vital element of sealift.

The first mission of a navy is not "to control the sea," as Admiral Holland suggests. The only "mission" of a nation's navy is to provide a maritime force carefully balanced with the other components of the nation's total military force to guarantee the nation's security interests. This total force *must* include adequate numbers of technologically advanced submarines. Both SSBNs and SSNs are major deterrent elements of this total force, but numbers and capabilities must be weighed against the assessed potential threat, Soviet and other. Submarines alone do not come close to constituting a balanced maritime component of America's required total military force structure.

Submarines have been successful because they are covert; but, as stealth-technology aircraft remind us, non-detectability comes with a significant price. In addition, covertness prevents a submerged platform from performing efficiently, effectively, and at a reasonable cost many of the tasks that a maritime nation is required to perform day in and day out, in peacetime and wartime. A highly capable submarine force

is essential insurance, but like insurance it must be purchased wisely, based on assessed risk. As with any balanced investment plan, diversity is essential to avoid surprise. Let us avoid focusing on “queens of the seas” or “ultimate capital ships.” Rather, let us sustain a carefully constructed balance of integrable maritime platforms and systems which, when combined with the rest of America’s total force structure, will provide us with the military capability to adequately defend our security interests.



The way forward can become clearer when we keep our eyes on the function, not the form. It’s the service we render that justifies our existence, not the tools we use.

Gordon Graham
“Publishers, Librarians and Readers”
Publishers Weekly
(18 January 1991)