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The U.S. Merchant Marine: In Search of an Enduring Maritime Policy

Lane C. Kendall
U.S. Marine Corps Reserve (Ret.)

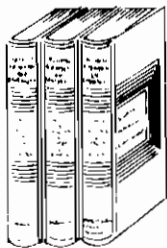
Clinton H. Whitehurst Jr.

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BOOK REVIEWS

A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

H.G. Rickover

In examining the contemporary merchant marine scene, Dr. Whitehurst arrives at “numbers” that challenge the very essence of a viable maritime policy—the dual responsibility of delivering supplies to military forces and of sustaining a civilian economy. In the follow-on volume Roger Villar describes a makeshift fleet of support ships that the British put together for the Falklands operations. While not a substitute for specialized craft, they did a creditable job and the experience should not go unnoticed.

Colonel Lane C. Kendall, US Marine Corps Reserve (Ret.)

Whitehurst, Clinton H. Jr., ed. *The U.S. Merchant Marine: In Search of an Enduring Maritime Policy*. Annapolis, Md.: US Naval Institute Press, 1983. 314pp. \$27.95

In the author’s judgment, “Only two goals compel government support of U.S.-flag shipping: (1) the logistical support a merchant marine provides to American forces overseas, whether in peace or war, and (2) the need to insure that our strategic import requirements never become hostage to a foreign-flag shipping boycott.” This forthright statement underlies the impressive arguments for an efficient American-flag merchant marine which Professor Whitehurst advocates so strongly in this book.

A professor of industrial management, Dr. Whitehurst is a sharp-eyed observer of the American maritime scene. He examines the existing merchant fleet and finds that in a Nato war, it can provide only about half the required sealift. Reliance on friendly foreign partners is questionable; the political and economic trade-offs and costs “may be unacceptably high,” with the result that “critical U.S. foreign policy goals may have to be sacrificed.”

Colonel Kendall is author of *The Business of Shipping*, was a member of the US Merchant Marine Academy faculty 1946-1960, and served as Commercial Shipping Advisor to Commander, Military Sealift Command 1960-1969.

Examining the capability of the US-flag merchant fleet as a component of Nato shipping, Dr. Whitehurst notes that, in time of emergency, commercial shipping would have the dual responsibility of delivering supplies to the military forces and sustaining the civilian economy. Without adequate pools of merchant vessels and the requisite naval escorts, "U.S. security is in peril." To support this conclusion, he offers actual numbers of cargo carriers needed for both a Nato war and a global conflict. For the Nato war, over 3,700 bottoms will be required, while the larger commitment will absorb more than 6,700 ships. Dr. Whitehurst estimates that the combined assets of the Nato countries will meet the demands for sea transportation in that theatre, but to satisfy American needs in support of the national economy will make a fleet of 1,800 vessels mandatory. The importance of this statement is made evident by the stark fact that less than one-third of that number of ships is registered under the American flag. Perhaps even more ominous is the likelihood that there will be a serious shortage of seamen to crew whatever additional ships this country may be able to acquire.

Subsidy of the merchant marine appears to be in process of elimination. Insofar as assuring that ships of US registry will be modern, efficient, and competitive, the only feasible alternative to government subsidy of building costs is to free shipowners to acquire their vessels in the world market, paying the lowest price consistent with American shipbuilding standards. By adopting this practice, US owners will be on an exact parity with their foreign competitors—a situation that has not existed for some years past under the construction differential subsidy program. Concerning the operating differential subsidy, Dr. Whitehurst notes that more than 80 percent of that money goes into wages. There is great need, he contends, for bringing the compensation of licensed officers more into line with both shoreside employment and foreign seafarers' pay. This will become increasingly important as operating subsidies disappear with the expiration of existing contracts.

It is not enough simply to have ships flying the national ensign. They must have cargoes. This means that the Federal Government must exert consistent effort to assure that adequate quantities of goods are made available to American ships. To this end, Dr. Whitehurst favors a system of flexible bilateral trade agreements; a few have been tried and found to be rather effective in assuring stipulated shares in the international exchange of goods.

In his final recommendations for a national maritime policy, Dr. Whitehurst urges decontrol of the maritime industry, and a definition of the "responsibility of the Military Sealift Command in relation to the privately-owned merchant fleet." The author is concerned lest the government become the principal source of shipping capability, and that the privately-owned industry be relegated to a secondary position. He considers this reversal of roles as wasteful and not in the best interests of the nation.

Without attempting to analyze in depth the problems facing the American shipbuilding industry, Dr. Whitehurst suggests that the shipyards, with government approval, seek contracts from foreign navies to build ships not incorporating the latest and most technical developments in design and ordnance. He believes this is a lucrative market which has not really been tapped.

Acceptably brief—the subject could be expanded easily to a multivolume presentation—this book offers a well-reasoned, adequately documented, and thought-provoking analysis of our merchant marine, together with plausible recommendations for solution of at least some of the problems described. It deserves careful study on the part of all those who have any concern for our national economic welfare and military security.

Colonel Theodore L. Gatchel, US Marine Corps

Villar, Roger. *Merchant Ships at War: The Falklands Experience*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1984. 192pp. \$14.95

The British success in recapturing the Falkland Islands in 1982 can be attributed to many factors. Some were predictable. I doubt if anyone who has served with or closely observed British units such as the Royal Marines, the Parachute Regiment or the Gurkhas was surprised by the excellent performance of those units during the campaign. Much less certainty existed, however, concerning the ability of the British to support a major effort 8,000 miles from home. Specifically in question was the ability of the Royal Navy to transport a force large enough to retake the Falklands and sustain it there as long as needed to accomplish the mission. Using conventional US military wisdom, the answer would probably have been no. By American standards, the brigade that conducted the initial landing at San Carlos would have required 20 amphibious ships or more to support it. The British, on the other hand, had only 2 true amphibians, the assault ships *Fearless* and *Intrepid*. Even counting the 2 carriers, which were not used in an amphibious role, and the 6 LSTs—LST-like Roll-on, Roll-off (RO/RO) ships manned by civilian crews—the British would still be hopelessly short of needed shipping. The solution to this shortage came in the form of “Ships

Colonel Gatchel holds an advanced degree in Management from the Naval Postgraduate School and is a faculty member of the Naval War College.