Naval War College Review

Volume 35
Number 3 *May-June*

Article 9

1982

Sea Power: A Naval History

Frank M. Snyder

PROFESSIONAL READING

"The Nimitz influence has been reduced to 'steering the writers away from pitfalls of amateur military analysis.' "

by

Frank M. Snyder*

Potter, E.B. ed. *Sea Power: A Naval History*. Second edition. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1981. 419pp. $19.95.

For a generation, midshipmen and others have been introduced to the history of naval warfare through the textbook *Sea Power: A Naval History* (1960) or its predecessor, *The United States and World Sea Power* (1955). A second edition of *Sea Power* has now been published by the Naval Institute Press.

The fourteen authors of the second edition of *Sea Power* are instructors at the US Naval Academy. Twelve of the fourteen wrote the original work—*The United States and World Sea Power*—twenty-seven years ago.

The second edition is only half as long as the first. The reduction was made by cutting in half the number of chapters on World War II and by compressing the text in each chapter to about half its former length. The editors do not disclose whether such a drastic reduction was made necessary by the economics of publishing modern textbooks or by a deemphasis at the Naval Academy of the study of naval history. Neither explanation would be a reason to cheer.

The editors claim that shortening was achieved by "tightening the style, omitting minor operations, and deleting tactical details." The style of the second edition is indeed tighter. It reads well, but since much of the reduction seems to have resulted from the elimination of details, the question arises whether significant details have been retained or have been lost. Over half of the maps and diagrams have also been deleted. Gone, for example, are the maps that made understandable the geographic factors in the sea, land, and air actions of the Guadalcanal campaign, the "Channel Dash," and the mining campaign of World War I, Gone, also, are the diagrams that illuminated tactics employed in the battles of the River Plate, Empress Augusta Bay,

*Professor of Naval Operations at the Naval War College.

and Surigao Strait. The narrative, too, of these and other significant actions are now badly truncated. Making such deletions must have been painful indeed.

Some useful tactical details have been retained. Much of Arleigh Burke's explanation of his plan for the battle of Vella Gulf is included, but the revelation that his plan was based on his study of the Punic Wars and the tactics of Scipio Africanus is deleted. This fascinating testimony to the continuity of tactics over two millenia will, also, no longer be shared with readers of *Sea Power*.

In a comprehensive text on naval history, we should expect to find three great themes. The first is the discernible relationship between international affairs and naval warfare (and in some cases even the preparations for naval warfare). *Sea Power* provides the reader ample evidence of this relationship. But in view of the cuts made to tactical details, the text probably goes too far in following diplomatic and policy considerations as well as schemes of maneuver ashore.

The second great theme is that "principles of warfare" apply as well to war at sea as to war on land. The tactical application of these principles varies as the characteristics of platforms and weapons change, so that naval history is the continual evolution of tactics for twenty-five centuries. This theme was emphasized by Nimitz in his foreword to the previous edition. This edition of *Sea Power* is less consistent in pursuing and highlighting the theme. The authors often seem content to declare winners and losers, without necessarily identifying which battles were the milestones in the path of the evolution of naval tactics.

One important casualty in the reduction was a chapter entitled "Problems of the Pacific," which traced the evolution of amphibious and carrier warfare and of naval logistics. In this edition the Nimitz influence has been reduced to "steering the writers away from the pitfalls of amateur military analysis."

The third theme—one particularly appropriate in a text for midshipmen—is that advances in the art, the science, and the application of naval warfare as an instrument of national policy occur only when individuals with sufficient vision, determination, and energy apply themselves to these problems. *Sea Power* pays tribute to these gains and to some of the innovators, but (as comprehensive histories often do) mentions numerous leaders and units just because they "were there."

Surveys are always incomplete, and each is subject to some basic orientation—in this case, that of the US Navy. A few years ago, a visitor to the Turkish Naval Academy perceived that the large mosaic on the exterior of its library represented a sea battle between galleys, and asked the superintendent about it. The battle between the Turks and West, was his reply. So the visitor ventured that it must certainly then be the Battle of Lepanto. The superintendent patiently shook his head and politely pointed out, "No, Lepanto is the battle *you* study. *That* is the Battle of Prevesa, the battle *we* won." Indeed, Western students do study Lepanto and ignore Prevesa, and so it is in *Sea Power*.

Residents of Rhode Island will be pleased to see their sloop *Providence* mentioned in connection with the John Paul Jones' successful cruise in command of her, but they will look in vain for recognition that Rhode Island was the first of the colonies to create a navy, four months before the Continental Congress followed suit, approving a resolution to that effect proposed by Rhode Island delegates.

Sea Power makes a curious judgment about the Battle of Jutland. Declaring Jutland a British victory, although a limited one, and admitting that naval officers, for a

quarter century, gave Jutland "most intensive study," *Sea Power* credits it with "few lessons of abiding value to teach." Anyone who expected battles in World War II to be mere variants of the tactical themes present at Jutland was generally disappointed.

Yet the battle did contain many fundamental tactical lessons, lessons about the command and control of forces in action, about formations and maneuvering, about fire control, about shortcomings in damage control, about the utility of high frequency direction finding, and about how the fighting qualities of the commanders affect the outcome.

With historical gravity, *Sea Power* declares Jutland to be "the culminating surface action," and enshrines it with Lepanto and Trafalgar as a sort of historical curiosity. Yet, surface actions have continued, as veterans of Matapan. Savo Island, Surigao Strait, and recent missile "shoot-outs" can testify. Furthermore, Jutland is the first of the "modern" battles, battles in which opposing commanders are unable to view the entire scene with their own eyes or to issue orders directly and continuously to all their forces. The uncertainties confronting Jellicoe, dependent as he was on the meager, inaccurate, and conflicting reports from Beatty and others, are not unlike the uncertainties that confronted Fletcher, Spruance, and Mitscher in the great carrier actions.

This second edition of *Sea Power* devotes its final three chapters to the period after 1945. All the material about the sixties and seventies is, of course, new. But in the absence of great naval campaigns and battles like those of World War II, the narrative seems to shift its focus to shipbuilding and diplomatic history. It is as if the authors were not content to write a "naval" history, hut felt they had to cover all of the military and diplomatic history of the period. The effect is to shrink even further the limited space given to naval actions and developments.

The text contains nothing about the missile battles at sea between the Arabs and the Israelis or between the Indians and the Pakistanis, nothing about the Reorganization Act of 1958, the Unified Command Plan, or the evolution of Rules of Engagement, nothing about the use of satellites for communications or intelligence, nothing about tactical data systems or the increasing reliance on computers, nothing about the shift from active to passive sensing (particularly in acoustics), nothing about undersea surveillance systems, nothing about the implications of guided weapons, nothing about surface effect ships, nothing about the changing nature of merchant shipping generally or about the decline in the size of the US merchant marine in particular, nothing about the closures of the Suez Canal, nothing about the *de facto* changes in the width of the territorial sea or about the creation of new economic and fishery zones in international law, nothing about the USS *Liberty* or the USS *Pueblo*. In a paragraph on Nato, there is the unexpected understatement that "joint maneuvers were successively held on several occasions." The text implies that during the Cuban missile crisis all 200 US vessels took station on the quarantine line, and that all 41 Polaris submarines were named for famous Americans. It is disquieting to think that it may be twenty more years before midshipmen start to learn these things properly.

But is *Sea Power* suitable for readers other than the midshipmen for whom it was obviously written? A broad survey like the one presented in *Sea Power* is indeed valuable for the general reader because it helps make clear the scope and influence of sea power regardless of the reader's historical orientation. Even for people who

already appreciate naval history, and who have adopted certain battles as "their favorites," such a survey is useful. Although a reader may differ with the authors' emphasis and some of their conclusions, he may discover and learn to appreciate other battles, other campaigns and other applications of sea power.

If you have a copy of the first edition of *Sea Power* or of the 1955 volume, keep it for reference purposes. It is much more likely to contain the tactical details you might be looking for than does this second edition. Yet, as a survey of naval history (from the US perspective) for a reader unfamiliar with the subject, the second edition can be a valuable and readable introduction to a history rich in interest and significance.

Abrahamson, James L. *America Arms for a New Century: The Making of a Great Military Power.* New York: The Free Press, 1981. 253pp. $17.95

James L. Abrahamson is a professor of history at the US Military Academy. In this account of the transformation of the American military establishment in the forty years prior to World War I, Professor Abrahamson has provided us with a fine work of synthesis and analysis. He has also produced a compelling reinterpretation of how the military reform movement in America achieved so many significant successes before 1917, yet collapsed completely after the First World War.

Much of the ground which Professor Abrahamson covers will be familiar to those acquainted with American military history. Briefly summarized, the US Army and Navy in the late 19th century suffered from a multitude of problems brought on by rapid technical and scientific change combined with neglect by successive administrations in Washington. Among these problems were bureaucratic anarchy and managerial incompetence, increasing technological obsolescence of weapon systems and equipment, and glacially slow promotion within both branches of the armed services. Such shortcomings were symptomatic of a concept of the armed forces' mission more suited to an 18th-century frontier agrarian economy than to an expanding, economically powerful industrial nation on the verge of the 20th century.

Historians generally agree that the military reform movement began in the 1880s when farsighted individuals such as Maj. Gen. Emory Upton and Adm. Stephen B. Luce forced change upon an often reluctant, tradition-bound military establishment. Upton and Luce, together with their successors, men such as Gens. Leonard Wood and John J. Pershing, and Adms. Alfred Thayer Mahan, Bradley A. Fiske, and William S. Sims, are credited with fundamentally reshaping the American military establishment prior to World War I. Not only did they successfully urge modernization of the armed forces' weapon systems, from battleships to field artillery, but they also achieved major administrative and organizational triumphs. The latter included the creation of an Army general staff, the General Board of the Navy, the Joint Army-Navy Board, and the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. The effect of these changes was to improve procurement practices, modernize tactics, and, for the first time, provide central direction and strategic planning for the nation's armed forces.

Where historians have differed is over the motives and objectives of the reformers. Recent scholars have concluded that the military reformers were