

1973

## Mahan on the Use of the Sea

William Reitzel

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Reitzel, William (1973) "Mahan on the Use of the Sea," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 26 : No. 3 , Article 20.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol26/iss3/20>

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](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

*Maritime power is a comprehensive and complex system that if judiciously developed will advance a nation's well-being. As a system it consists of two subsystems: seapower (commercial movement) and seaforce (navy), both of which must necessarily complement each other in the development of maritime power. Inasmuch as trade overseas has traditionally played a significant part in the U.S. economy, the size of its Navy is an accurate indicator of the economic and political status Americans feel their country must occupy.*

# MAHAN ON THE USE OF THE SEA

An article

by

Mr. William Reitzel

It is not easy to recapture Mahan's idea of maritime power. Although statesmen were supposed to have slept with his books under their pillows, the evidence is that they merely made extracts, summaries, and highly selective formulations of his views, using these chiefly to justify the role of a navy in relation to such national interests and policies as they wished to develop.

Mahan, taken as a whole, was not a thinker whose generalizations were of universal validity. Actually, once the skeleton of his concept was constructed, his preference was to persuade his fellow countrymen to action, applying his generalizations to the analysis of issues and situations of current liveliness. The climate of American opinion was highly receptive, combining as it did a feeling that the United States had a role to play in the world with diverse uncertainties

about what that role was or should or could be.

Mahan, along with the bulk of his contemporaries, was exhilarated by the idea of the United States flexing its economic and political muscles in the world arena. He and they saw the country's economic maturation as both necessary and desirable and accepted as natural the implication that this might well involve conflict with other muscle flexers. The basis for acting on this conviction was, according to Mahan, an understanding and proper use of sea-power.

The elaborate historical analysis on which this rested was, for the most part, confined to narrow professional circles. For the greater number of his contemporaries, civil and military, his views were used in fragmented, particular snippets. In the hands of the military,

especially those of naval advocates, these selections tended to become formulas, repeated to justify claims that were no longer unhesitatingly accepted by Americans generally. The change can be succinctly illustrated by an exasperated remark of Secretary Stimson: "The peculiar psychology of the Navy, which frequently seems to retire from the realm of logic into a dim religious world where Neptune is God, Mahan his prophet, and the U.S. Navy the only true church."

The piecemeal use of Mahan still goes on. Its use, however, after three-quarters of a century, naturally raises the question of the real applicability of Mahan's concept to the present-day international scene. In order to provide a reliable basis for examining this question—if necessary, a basis for rewriting Mahan—the original full-dress thesis must be recovered, recaptured, one might say, from the accumulation of cliché-ridden formulas in which it is now expressed. Thus, the sole purpose of what follows is to get back to the original.

Mahan's methods make it difficult to do this with any assurance. Like many sweeping generalizations, his core idea was not reached after slow and painful research. It sprang from a sudden insight, which research was then brought in to confirm, organize, and expand. Mahan knew what he wanted to prove before he set about proving it.<sup>1</sup> Consequently, Mahan's history is deliberately selective.

A further difficulty is that he expands and develops his basic insight in a variety of contexts—seapower in peace, in diplomacy, in commercial competition, in imperial expansion, in armed conflict—and does not always make it clear in which context he is working at any particular moment. He applies his key generalization somewhat indiscriminately to specific international crises, to the role and policy of the United States, to the world in general. He moves from the present to the past,

and back again, with a freedom of analogy that is indifferent to the critical changes that time may have brought about.

In spite of these hazards, a reconstruction is necessary. What follows is such a reconstruction. It is given either in Mahan's own words or in a close paraphrase. The structure has also been given a logical coherence. Except for these devices, the following is Mahan's concept of seapower.

**The Concept.** The concept of seapower derives, in the last analysis, from Mahan's assumptions about man and society. Two quotations are enough to set the tone.

Power and force is a faculty of national life; one of those talents committed to nations . . . no more than any other can it be abjured without incurring the responsibility of him who buries in the earth that which was entrusted to him.

National power is surely a legitimate factor in international settlements; for it is the outcome of national efficiency, and efficiency is entitled to assert its fair position and chance of exercise in world matters . . . the existence of might is no mere casual attribute, but the indication of qualities which should, as they assuredly will, make their way to the front and to the top in the relations of states.<sup>2</sup>

The sea is to be considered in the glare of this "actual world." It is a common over which men can pass in all directions. It is a great medium of communication established by nature. But it is important only to the extent that men use it.

Man's interest in the sea, and hence the interests of nations, is almost wholly interests of carriage, that is, trade. Maritime commerce, in all ages, has been

most fruitful of wealth. Wealth is a concrete expression of a nation's energy of life, material and thinking. Given the relation between wealth and maritime commerce, the sea is inevitably the major arena of competition and conflict among nations aspiring to wealth and power.

The capacity to move freely on the sea oneself and to inhibit as need be a similar capacity in others is a critical consideration. For it is a fundamental truth that an ability to control movement on the sea is chief among the purely material elements determining the comparative power and prosperity of nations.

There are four basic requirements for desiring, achieving, and maintaining this freedom of movement. First, a nation must produce and exchange products. Second, shipping, the instrument of exchange, must be available. Third, colonies and bases—at any rate, nationally held points of safety—must be secured to enlarge and protect the operations of shipping. Fourth, armed force—a navy—must be available to guard and keep open communications between these points of safety and the home base.

Put another way, seapower is shipping, bases, and their supporting adjuncts. Seaforce is a navy.<sup>3</sup> When brought into being and kept in motion by national productivity, a system of maritime power exists. Recognition of these interdependent elements is the clue to understanding the policies and actions of nations that use the seas and for whom the use of the sea is vital to national life.

Any nation bordering on the sea can, in principle, aspire to develop a system of maritime power; but, on the evidence of history, only a few have achieved it in fact. Maritime states differ widely in respect to the characteristics that are definitive. These characteristics are geographical location, physical configuration, territorial expanse, size and nature

of population, nature of the political system. The value of these characteristics is not absolute. They can and do change with time and circumstances. But, in a general sense,

- If a nation has easy access to the oceans of the world and is, as well, in a position to dominate major trade routes, it is in a position to develop maritime power; and,

- If its physical configuration provides harbors and puts a productive hinterland in easy touch with its sea frontiers, an impulse to develop maritime power naturally follows; and,

- If its territory is extensive or diversified, its population large and active, and its political structure encourages productive energy and gives it an outward thrust, an irresistible pressure to exploit the sea commercially and militarily demands and gets concrete expression in the form of seapower and seaforce.

In short, a true maritime state comes into being; and as long as time, circumstances, and faults of policy do not undermine its advantages, its maritime power increases and becomes its distinguishing feature. Maritime power, at this point, represents a tightly knit system of national activity critically meshed with the life and well-being of the nation.

Great Britain is the classical illustration. Throughout the 18th century it was the one nation that consistently earned its wealth in time of peace by seapower and in time of war ruled the sea by virtue of its seaforce. It spread its bases of maritime operation over the globe, bases that would have been valueless if seapower and seaforce had not combined to keep communications open. No one can fail to conclude that British maritime power was, by long odds, the dominating factor in this century of conflict.

The constant exercise of maritime power, however, cannot be equated with peace. Commercial interests, the

foundation underlying any maritime country's vitality and power, may tend to deter war from fear of the presumed losses that war might bring, but from its very nature commerce is competitive and engenders conflict by fostering ambitions that lead to armed collision. For when a nation sends its merchant ships abroad, it naturally looks for positions upon which those ships can rest for trading, for supplies, or for refuge. From this follows the need for control, primarily a matter of ensuring communications, which, in turn, multiplies the number of positions needed for the effective exercise of control. Since this progression does not take place in an empty world, the upshot is that a nation's seapower cannot be brought to its full value except by the addition of seaforce.

A navy follows from the existence and needs of peaceful shipping. The extent to which a navy subsequently takes on functions unrelated to the protection of trade, shipping, and commercial communications is a matter to be considered separately. But it can be said in anticipation that if these acquired functions displace or weaken a navy's capacity to fulfill its primary historical role, the maritime power of a nation is correspondingly reduced.

The efficient use and control of sea movement is but one link in the chain of exchange by which wealth accumulates, but it is the central link, for it puts other nations under obligation to the wielder of maritime power. The end result of the sustained exercise of maritime power is a nation geared to the production and exchange of goods, conducting its commerce freely and safely with all continents, possessing a network of colonies and bases, a visible presence of power and force on the high seas and in the world's ports.

When this stage has been reached in the life of a nation, maritime power has become the basis of a system for the creation and expansion of national

wealth and greatness. It is now essential to the life of the nation, and its maintenance and advancement are the major considerations of national policy. But the system is now one of immense size and complexity, as well as being extremely sensitive to interruption. It is in connection with the various possibilities and modes of interruption that we come to the navy, that is, to the addition of seaforce to seapower.

The basic relation of seaforce to seapower is simple and direct. The navy springs from the needs of merchant shipping. Though it would be theoretically possible to argue that if maritime commerce ceased to be essential to the life of the nation the navy could disappear, this conclusion is no longer practically tenable. The present realities of international life forbid it.

As things now stand, and have stood historically, the operations of seapower create competition, and competition is always capable of taking an armed form. A navy, accordingly, operates in peacetime to check inevitable disagreements from recklessly growing into armed clashes. At the same time, the necessary readiness to shift from the day-to-day work of deterring conflict to the occasional role of fighting a war has the effect of giving a navy a specialized life of its own with specialized requirements. This can, and sometimes has, tended to obscure the navy's fundamental relationship to seapower.

One must be clear. Navies do not exist merely to fight one another—to gain the sterile glory of fighting battles to win them. They do fight battles, but the purpose of the battle is to maintain maritime power. Thus it follows that in war a navy must aim first and always at depriving an opponent of sea movement in its broadest sense. This is not a matter of casual commerce destruction. It is a matter of strategically dominating sea movement so that every form of movement is at the mercy of decisively

superior maritime power.

A fully established maritime nation, if it is attentive to the conditions that dictate its policy, will aim at acquiring and maintaining that superiority in seaforce that enables it to project its seapower to the most distant quarters of the earth. In fact, it might well be argued that such a nation would be well advised to increase its navy above those arms more narrowly styled military.

Once a navy is developed, it begins to take on functions additional to the basic role for which it was created. It becomes an instrument of national policy in the broadest sense. When commerce expands a nation's contacts beyond its shores, a navy converts contacts into interests and consolidates interests as political influence. Statesmen, habituated to the concept and use of maritime power, find in a navy a means of forcible, yet beneficent, adjustment in international affairs, adjustments that would be impossible without the existence of seaforce.<sup>4</sup>

One should note in passing the case of a nation which, though not possessing seapower, nevertheless seeks to develop seaforce. Such a policy, in the absence of a significant seapower interest, inevitably produces the effect of planned aggression. The creation of such a force automatically makes its possessor an uncertain and threatening factor in international life. The policy cannot fail to stimulate vigorous defensive action in already developed maritime states, since it implies not commercial competition, but armed threat.

The essential structure of a system of maritime power can now be summed up. It rests upon a geographical location and a productive society. From this base springs seaborne trade and all its supporting agencies. This is seapower. The net of trade thus built up must then be protected. Seaforce becomes an integral part of the system. The navy, in turn, has its own requirements. These often include the acquisition of extra-

continental territory. Such holdings frequently prove valuable as new markets or sources of raw materials, and then navy needs and seapower become reciprocal.

By this time the maritime system has become an intricate mesh of interlocked components, a system in which the parts must be kept in balance if the system is to function effectively and economically. If any one element gets out of balance—if seapower declines, if seaforce expands for reasons unconnected with seapower, if national productivity falters—the system either demands internal adjustment or it loses ground in the international arena. On the other hand, if the system as a whole acquires colonies and bases beyond what is required by the commercial activity of the nation, the expansion becomes a source of national weakness by entailing division of energy and resources in order to maintain communications that have become too complex.

**Application of the Concept.** The experience of Great Britain brought a new dimension into thinking about maritime policy. In support of Britain's maritime growth there was developed, first, a mobile navy; and, second, local posts along the great sea routes for use as naval bases. In the seas where there were no national possessions, the navy first depended upon friendly harbors, but the uncertainties of such dependence soon led to territorial acquisition. The results were so striking that, in our time, this pattern of expansion is being followed by all states with maritime aspirations.

It will be readily appreciated that the pattern has implicit in it the constant threat of conflict. Furthermore, commercial competition being now worldwide, the regions of potential conflict are now global. Communications on a global scale are inevitably maritime, and conflict over such communications can

## 78 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

only mean sea war. This defines the essential task of the navy.

But, to perform this task, an opponent's navy must be dominated. This is the true object to be assailed on all occasions. While fixed positions are important, a fleet itself is the key position. A crushing defeat of a fleet means the ultimate dislocation of an entire system of maritime power, irrespective of the spot on the seas where the defeat is administered. With the elimination of opposing seaforce, the remaining elements of maritime power are wholly exposed to destruction. This is the foundation of control of the seas. From it follows the true objective—the sole end of naval war: to protect one's own commerce and to deprive an opponent of that great resource.

It is vital, in this connection, to disabuse American minds of their erroneous views of the function of a navy. These have historically been held to be: to defend American territory and to engage in commerce raiding. The defensive role was established as guarding coasts and harbors, and, by this measure, the demand was for many small ships, since tonnage put into large vessels could not be subdivided to cover all the points to be defended. The offensive role, commerce raiding indulged in by individual ships, could not bring down an opponent that had and knew how to use maritime power. It could not be the taking of single ships, or even convoys, that would strike down the money power of such a nation; only overbearing seaforce, literally driving the enemy's flag from the sea, could achieve this end.

Such narrow views ignore a critical fact. Political status in the world, to which a productive nation must aspire, involves activities that imply conflict. The real question for Americans, in respect to a navy, is a clear judgment of the political status they wish their country to occupy, for this determines the character and size of their seaforce. If

the United States were an aggressive nation and not simply a maritime state, the measure would be what it was desired to accomplish by aggression. But, as a productive society with potential maritime power, the true measure becomes what Americans are willing, or not willing, to concede to other states in a world of commercial competition and potential armed conflict.

It is impossible, as one reviews the part played by maritime power in the history of the prosperity of nations, not to consider the implications for the United States.

The great civilized nations of the world now feel a strenuous impulse to find and establish markets outside their borders. This is leading to manifold annexations and naval aggressions. The United States has, as yet, taken no part in this, though it constitutes a situation that adds immensely to American political and commercial anxieties. No one can ignore that seapower and seaforce play a leading part in these developments or that the United States, by its geographical position and by the expansive pressure of its industrial and commercial activity, must of necessity become a participant. Necessity, like a blind force of nature, is sure at last to overwhelm all that stands in the way of a movement of the nation toward acquiring a wider influence in the world.

When the United States is impelled to play its inevitable role in the world, it can no longer leave to one side the need for seapower and its essential adjunct, a navy. The commercial interests at stake are so great and the political considerations so uncertain that the desire to secure advantages leads countries that possess force into a dangerous temptation to use it. Force, when remote localities are concerned, means seaforce.

The development of maritime power by a state should not in itself be considered a threat, since maritime power is not aggressive. In fact, the interests of such a state are generally

peaceful, since it acquires too great an interest beyond its shores to wish to expand by force. But the superior influence of such a state is a condition that must be competed for.

The march of events not in the United States alone but all over the world—political events, events economic and commercial—has brought about a necessity for active seapower and larger navies. Furthermore, a world in which other states press competitively to all corners of the globe is one in which it is highly improbable that the seas will ever again be exclusively dominated by a single nation. Unless the United States is prepared to maintain its interests in this kind of world, its people may find themselves excluded. It must either participate or be shut out from the essentials of national growth. It follows that upon the seas must be developed the means to sustain the requisite external policy, and the means are seapower defended by seaforce.

*As Mahan Saw the World.* There were two basic assumptions by which Mahan viewed international life. The first was that it was a struggle for survival, with the best fitted coming out on top—what we would now call Social Darwinism. The second was that his historical evidence, drawn largely from the 17th and 18th centuries, provided a complete analogy with the situation of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The two assumptions reenforced each other and furnished a picture of the world to which the concept of maritime power was totally applicable.

Consequently, Mahan's thinking cannot be fully recreated without adding—again in his own words or by paraphrasing—his view of the world around him.

There is no region so remote or forsaken as not to be possessed by some human group. Many of these groups lack the capacity to organize themselves to hold what they possess. Civilized man—that is, modern, organized, and

productive societies—needs and seeks space that he can control and use on his own terms. The chief feature of the present world is the extent to which feeble groups are pressed upon by strong groups.

This pressure is a natural force and, like all natural forces, takes the line of least resistance. When it comes upon a region rich in possibilities but unfruitful through the incapacity or negligence of those who dwell there, the incompetent race goes down before the persistent impact of the superior. The feeble may have a vast preponderance of numbers but, being disorganized, are helpless in the face of organized power backed by material prosperity. To this historically recurring situation is now added steam which, applied to seapower and seaforce, has multiplied the points of contact between peoples and made proximity a significant characteristic of the times.

In these circumstances, enterprising commercial nations are not content to move patiently. Commercial activities are invariably followed by demands for settled government, for security of life and property. Productive nations proceed to control the centers of commerce they have opened, well aware that control is a powerful influence on the course and security of trade. And trade, as they envisage it, goes far beyond a question of bare existence. It is the source of national wealth and the measure of national importance.

It should be no cause for surprise that the competition for such great prizes results not only in growing armaments, but in the increase of a national spirit of which armaments are but an expression. Artificial institutions of adjustment may serve to soften somewhat the competition of organized and powerful states, but they are not applicable to the relations of strong advanced peoples and weak backward peoples. The present stage of evolution is one in which enterprising nations will



## 80 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

inevitably try to remedy impediments to their growth.

They can scarcely do otherwise. Their leading political interest is to provide and maintain outlets for the productive energies of their people. They will seek solutions by methods that are inherently combative. But, not merely do they confront societies that are resistive, even if feeble, they compete with each other for exclusive positions. Since the underlying spirit is one of domination, the possibility of military action is always present. The world is clearly in a state of transition, and some new order must evolve out of the chaos. But the order that emerges will be desirable and lasting only to the extent that the natural forces involved act freely and find their own equilibrium.

The power to act effectively in these circumstances is no mere accidental attribute. It is the natural concomitant of the qualities that have set advanced nations to expanding and that keep them in active motion. However, the relative ease with which they now deal with weaker opponents is not a permanent condition. The lesson they teach is one that can be learned. Present collisions are bound to become more frequent and more intense.

Since these confrontations are widely scattered and remote from the territories of advanced nations, the capacity to bring, first, influence and then force to bear, is the prerogative of nations that possess maritime power. In fact, this is the means by which they can compensate in distant places for their inferiority in numbers, their disadvantages of position, and their difficulties of communication. In short, this is an age in which maritime power fully predominates. With the extension of overseas commerce, the control and safety of maritime routes and positions have become the first aim of national foreign policies. Consequently, all advanced nations vigorously compete to

develop the elements of maritime power.<sup>5</sup>

**Summary Restatement.** In anticipation that someone may wish to analyze the applicability of Mahan to the contemporary scene, it will be useful to summarize the concept of maritime power in contemporary terms.

Maritime power is a comprehensive and complex system. In addition to certain attributes that belong to the system as a whole, maritime power contains two subsystems: seapower and seaforce (navy). Each of these subsystems has its specialized attributes. The whole, in its operation, reflects a national maritime policy, that is, maintaining and using maritime power systematically to support and advance national well-being under conditions of international competition.

In detail:

- *Maritime Power*, given the requisite geographical advantages and national will, is generated initially by an economic activity that produces sur-

---

### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

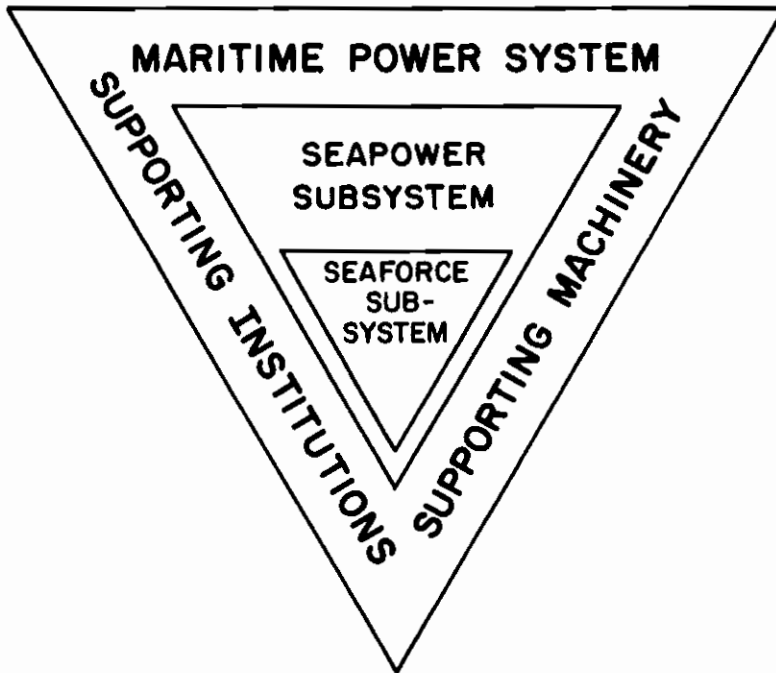


Mr. William Reitzel served in World War II as a commander in the U.S. Naval Reserve in the North Atlantic and Mediterranean theaters. He has served as professor of social science at Haverford

College, occupied the Chester W. Nimitz Chair of National Security and Foreign Affairs at the Naval War College, been active with the Central Intelligence Agency and the Brookings Institution, and served as a Director, Division of Strategic Studies, Center for Naval Analysis at Cambridge, Mass. His publications include *The Mediterranean: Role in U.S. Foreign Policy*, *Major Problems U.S. Foreign Policy*, *U.S. Foreign Policy: 1945-1955*, *Background to Decision-Making*. Mr. Reitzel resides in Newport, R.I., where he is engaged in independent research and writing at his leisure.

pluses for exchange. These surpluses must be disposed of and seaborne trade results. The process, however, requires institutional machinery—financing, insurance, exporters, importers, brokers, et cetera—and specialized industry—shipbuilding, ship repair, cargo handling, and the like—for its operation. Without such machinery in place and working smoothly, domestic and foreign markets cannot be developed, cargoes cannot be found, ships cannot be moved, and

greater access to raw materials needed by the nation's economic activities. The thesis is that the interplay between the national productive base of the maritime system and the sea movement capacity of seapower systems steadily adds to national wealth and influence, and the end product is maritime dominance. But seapower is an exposed system. It is open to every variety of interference, from political and economic impediment to armed attack. It



whatever maritime potential a nation may have cannot become a reality.

• *Seapower*, given the initial impetus to develop maritime potential, is a specialized subsystem of sea movement. Its basic element is merchant ships (cargo carriers), but their effective use depends upon the buildup of the supporting facilities mentioned above. With these facilities systematically related and employed, seapower can be presumed to compete successfully in world commerce and even to absorb increasing shares of world markets and to gain

requires organized protection.

• *Seaforce (Navy)*, a highly specialized subsystem geared primarily to the support and defense of seapower. The components of this subsystem need no detailed description here. It should be noted, however, that, like seapower, it has its own specialized shore-based requirements and that these are only to a limited extent interchangeable with those of the seapower system. Furthermore, as the special uses that could be made of seaforce came to be more fully appreciated, policymakers tended to

## 82 NAVAL WAR COLLEGE REVIEW

give a lower priority to the primary and original function of seaforce—namely, the support and defense of seapower. The result in time was increasingly to equate the navy with the military elements of national power rather than to see it as a specialized subsystem of national maritime power.

So far, Mahan. In his view, a maritime power system was an integrated whole, working to forward a nation's position in the world. It worked as a stimulus to a nation's total capacity to

produce, to distribute, and to influence in its favor the trend of international life. It used its seapower component offensively in commercial competition. It used its seaforce component defensively in a world of incipient conflict. Mahan's consistent reminder was that he was talking of a tightly knit system of institutions, facilities, commercial carriers, and naval fleets and that no one of these elements of the system could be allowed to become inadequate without the system losing its effectiveness.

---

### FOOTNOTES

1. In 1884, then 44 years old, Mahan sat in the library of the English Club in Lima. He was reading Theodor Mommsen's *History of Rome* (New York: Scribner's, 1887). Puzzling over Hannibal's dramatic failure as a conqueror, "... there dawned upon me one of those concrete perceptions . . . , that the control of the seas was an historical factor which has never been systematically appreciated and expounded. Once formulated consciously, this thought became the nucleus of my writing for twenty years to come."

2. The Chief of Mission at a Hague Conference reported on Mahan's contribution to discussion as follows: "... his views have effectually prevented any lapse into sentimentality. When he speaks, the millenium fades and this stern, severe actual world appears."

3. Seaforce is not Mahan's term. It is introduced in order to make more explicit Mahan's argument that maritime power is a system formed of distinct but interlocked elements.

4. Mahan cites the Monroe Doctrine as a case in point. Here a comprehensive position was taken whose only guarantee was naval.

5. To illustrate the fact that Mahan's view was not unique but shared by many of his generation, compare Brooks Adams in his *American Economic Supremacy* (New York: Macmillan, 1900).

Towards 1890, a new period of instability opened. Civilization then seemed to have entered upon a fresh period of unrest, and the inference is that no condition of permanent tranquility can be reached until a new equipoise shall have been obtained. . . . conflict will be between the maritime and non-maritime races, or between the rival merits of land and sea transport.



Not until the oceans cease to be the highways of the world will seapower lose its influence.

*W.D. Puleston, The Influence of Sea Power  
in World War II, p. 300*