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B. Franklin Cooling

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THE MAKING OF A NAVALIST: SECRETARY OF THE NAVY BENJAMIN FRANKLIN TRACY AND SEAPOWER

While much has been written about the influence of Alfred Thayer Mahan upon U.S. naval policy and ship construction in the late 19th century, the very real contributions of others in these same fields have been largely overlooked. Without discounting Mahan's role as a publicist, it was the smalltown lawyer Benjamin Franklin Tracy, Secretary of the Navy from 1889 to 1893, who worked tirelessly, overcoming administrative bottlenecks, interservice rivalries, personality conflicts, and political obstructions to plan and build the new generation of ships needed to make Mahan's vision of the United States as a modern world seapower a reality.

An article prepared
by
Dr. B. Franklin Cooling

The sea will be the future seat of empire. And we shall rule it as certainly as the sun doth rise! To a preeminent rank among nations, colonies are of the greatest help!

The sentiment is Mahanite; yet such words did not emit from the mouth of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Rather, they came from Benjamin Franklin Tracy, Secretary of the Navy from 1889 to 1893—the public official who elevated to official policy the thoughts expressed somewhat later by the feisty naval intellectual.¹ They reinforce the caution lest we attach sole influence to Mahan in the renaissance of American naval power in the late 19th century. There were other principals—in and out of uniform and especially a series of civilian Secretaries—who also postulated the doctrine of seapower and national grandeur upon *mare liberum*.

The doctrine of seapower was hardly original with Mahan; certainly the British Admiralty had followed such strategic principles for centuries. Then too, numerous politicians and naval officers in the United States had discussed such a concept for several decades. Willing proponents of seapower in the late eighties included Senator Eugene Hale; Congressmen Charles Boutelle, who chaired the House Naval Affairs Committee, and his lieutenant Henry Cabot Lodge; as well as Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce, father of the Naval War College; Mahan; and Commodore James G. Walker, Chief of the Bureau of Navigation. Yet nowhere was anything spelled out clearly in official policy statements. The role of the Navy remained but hazily defined for most citizens and professionals alike. Stated succinctly, as Luce saw it in 1889, no

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Secretary of the Navy had yet proposed the creation of a fighting fleet.²

There is reason to believe that strategic fears rather than economic motivation formed a prime mover in the series of events which one observer has styled "the American naval revolution."³ It would seem that Mahan possibly overemphasized the economic motivation of seapower—at least in this regard. The emergence of his philosophical speculations coincided fortuitously with the return to political power on the Potomac of an intensely nationalistic Republican administration. There were, admittedly, definite signs of a burgeoning interest in overseas markets and other trappings of an expansionist-imperialist theory abroad in the land. But, Mahan's theory that the United States would possess a real fleet only when the revival of her merchant navy demanded protection, placed the cart somewhat before the horse.⁴ Fears for national security played a greater part than Mahan anticipated in the creation of a "new navy." Here it was Luce and Secretary Tracy who formed the principal cast.

Benjamin Franklin Tracy fit the pattern of late 19th century Cabinet appointments. A smalltown lawyer reared in upstate New York, Tracy rose to fame on the tide of successful Civil War service—he commanded a regiment in combat, administered the sensitive Draft and Prison Rendezvous at Elmira, and was brevetted Brigadier General of Volunteers for service to the Union.⁵ Resettling in Brooklyn after the war, his lucrative legal practice and stalwart labors as a lieutenant in the Republican State machine of Thomas C. Platt attracted the attention of national party leaders. His handsome appearance, engaging personality, and astute intellect combined with a blending of idealism and pragmatism to equip him for an important role in national affairs. When President Benjamin Harrison needed a compromise Cabinet appointment from

the Empire State, he tapped Tracy.

Nevertheless, Tracy was a landsman and he knew little about nautical affairs when he assumed his post in March 1889. Students of administrative history have observed bluntly that the Navy and War Departments were always the most difficult to administer for the lawyer or politician. This was due to the average civilian's lack of understanding the standards of value, traditions, prejudices, and eccentricities of the professional military class.⁶ They have pointed to the particular complexities of the Navy Department wherein manufacture, naval architecture, steam engineering, scientific enterprise, naval education, international law, medicine and surgery, astronomy, and hydrography all fell within the province of the Secretary's charge. Lacking the covey of experts which surround Cabinet officials today, the late 19th century Secretary hardly had time during his usually short term of office to learn the routine of duties, sift the advice of subordinates, or cope with the myriad undulations of service rivalries, technological changes, and personality differences within his department. For all the Secretaries of the period—War or Navy—Woodrow Wilson's comment on President Grover Cleveland's second Secretary of War, Daniel Lamont, was most apt:

There can be no reasonable doubt about his ability to administer the War Department with success as there would have been little doubt about his ability to occupy almost any other high administrative post with credit and efficiency. The only criticism which his appointment prompts is, that he was, so far as we are able to ascertain, no more fitted for the War Department than for any other. He is, in short, simply a very capable man of unusual executive talents. He has no special training to be war minister.⁷

Tracy was certainly no different

from Lamont. Yet, a confirmed nationalist from the start, he was to emerge while in office as an ardent Darwinian, navalist, and expansionist. The transformation took time, and it was influenced by contact with Congressmen over brandy in Washington drawing rooms and naval professionals in the stuffy meeting rooms of the State, War, and Navy building. Such individuals were persuasive men concerned with larger policy, and they appreciated the Navy's needs and understood the implications of seapower. Moreover, the naval Bureau Chiefs, while chary of their prerogatives within the corporate structure of the Department, knew well how to sail close before the prevailing political winds on Capitol Hill. So Tracy watched and listened and toured the naval facilities along the Atlantic coast during his first 6 months in office. At that juncture he became exposed, perhaps, to the thoughts of Mahan, but more importantly, to those of Stephen Bleeker Luce.

Luce had been urging various naval reforms for some years before Tracy's arrival upon the scene.⁸ He had pushed for proper training of crews and officers to man the complicated new warships. He had founded the War College at Newport in order to broaden the professional horizons of the top command, and he had pointed the proper course for Mahan's first hesitating steps as a naval historian. Moreover, he had stressed repeatedly the requirement to prepare for conflict in times of peace. But in July 1889—just as Secretary Tracy was still undergoing his shake-down cruise in office—Luce published an article in the *North American Review* which may have caused greater reverberations for the development of official U.S. naval policy in the era than the subsequent work of Mahan.

Luce's tract was entitled "Our Future Navy," and it was republished in the *Proceedings of the United States*

Naval Institute so that it would reach a larger professional audience.⁹ It plumbed the demand for a Navy capable of meeting the battle fleet of any potential enemy on equal terms. Luce pointed especially to the announced intention of the British Admiralty to construct 70 new warships, including 10 battleships and 60 cruisers, over the period 1889-1894. He decried the lack of any comparable "battle" vessels in the U.S. Navy. Calling a Navy a sort of sea army, the flag officer claimed:

We are building cruisers of various sizes, which correspond to the cavalry and light artillery of the land army; and we have monitors for coast and harbor defence, which supplement our fortifications; but we have no battleships to correspond to the infantry of the line, which constitutes the main strength of the line of battle.¹⁰

In short, the battleship was the keystone of the Navy; since the United States possessed no battleships, said Luce, she really had no Navy!

Yet, Luce wanted more than a mere collection of miscellaneous fighting ships. Citing historical precedent—thereby predating Mahan in print—Luce saw the Navy's duty as offensive and requiring balanced fleets of battleships, torpedo boats, depot and hospital ships, in addition to the independent cruisers. Pointing to the earlier seapower of the Nation—a squadron of 10 ships of the line that were equal to any in the world—he thought the new steel Navy of the United States could make no comparable claims. Indeed, it might require another decade before "we may begin to talk about 'rehabilitating' the navy without provoking a smile of derision." Meanwhile, said Luce, a solitary American steel cruiser with "its delusive prefix of 'protected' represents the latent possibilities of a great country placidly awaiting some national disaster to generate its mighty forces."

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Secretary Tracy did not share Luce's pessimism. He set to work immediately on the problem when he became aware of the admiral's article. He appointed a so-called "Policy Board" to consider and recommend the policy which the department should follow in the next phase of the New Navy program. He charged the group with answering questions relating to leadtime for fleet construction, number and classes of vessels "both for cruising and for coast defense purposes," annual and aggregate cost of the fleet project, and finally the number and classes of vessels which should be requested from Congress in the next session.¹¹ Navy professionals and the Nation's press generally praised this unprecedented move to bring unity into policy planning.

Tracy also returned Mahan from his exile on the Pacific coast where that officer had been searching for navy yard sites. He assigned him to Newport as President of the War College. It remains doubtful that Mahan immediately joined top naval circles in Washington. But the Secretary probably felt this eccentric officer was too valuable to the job of policy codification to waste on site surveys. He wanted him close by for consultation and advice as to clarity of expression necessary for public understanding of the Navy's plans and policies.

Finally, Tracy directed the Chief of the Bureau of Navigation to form the Navy's first "squadron of evolution" in the early fall. On 18 November 1889, Commodore James G. Walker took the nucleus of a permanent American fleet out of New York harbor. The four gleaming white ships scarcely formed a fighting fleet, but they were designed to provide practical application for the strategic and tactical principles under study at Newport.¹²

Tracy completed the initial phase of policy reorientation and submitted his first annual report to President Harrison just before Thanksgiving. This provoca-

tive document provided more than the usual recitation on the state of the sea service. It also contained proposals which represented a dramatic shift in naval policy. Furthermore, it codified the significant strands of new navalism as advanced by Luce and Mahan. Cited by modern observers as "one of the most forceful documents in the entire history of American naval policy," the Secretary's annual report for 1889 was a direct attack upon the weakness of the U.S. Navy.¹³

The Secretary opened his barrage with the remarkably modern observation that "at no previous time in the present century has the country been so relatively powerless at sea." The Navy of makeshift, obsolete wooden ships, useless monitors left over from the Civil War, as well as the eight steel cruisers of the "protected" class, ranked but 12th among the world powers, falling behind even Turkey, China, and Sweden, not to mention the superpowers of the day—Great Britain, France, Russia, and Germany. The sterile program of constructing unarmored cruisers could not hope to provide adequate defense for an unprotected American coastline of 13,000 miles with 20 centers of population, wealth, and commercial activity. Tracy wanted a more powerful deterrent force afloat—a fighting force of "seagoing battleships," coast defense vessels, fast armored cruisers, torpedo boats, and other auxiliary ships. Such a force would conduct a defense of American shores, but by raising blockades, beating off the enemy's fleet far out at sea, and even carrying combat to the enemy's coastal waters, rather than *guerre de course*.

The New York Republican denied such notions represented a policy of aggression. Rather, it was simply a sound business proposition of protecting property and trade not only for coastal centers of commerce, but also for production centers of interior America. To lawyer Tracy:

The annual increase of wealth in this country is estimated to equal that of England, France, and Germany, and before it can create an effective navy its population is certain to exceed that of any two of these powers combined. Such a nation cannot be indifferent to events taking place in close proximity to its coasts, threatening the freedom of its commerce and the security of its sea-ports.¹⁴

The Secretary felt that the security provided by an enlarged, reconstituted fleet was but a small price to pay to insure survival. He predicted that future naval wars would be short and sharp. They would be fought with the force-in-being at the opening of hostilities. Tracy closed his preamble with the statement: "The nation that is ready to strike the first blow will gain an advantage which its antagonist can never offset, and inflict an injury from which he can never recover."¹⁵

Tracy then turned to specifics which might be understood by budget-conscious Congressmen. He wanted a balanced armored fleet of 20 battle-ships, 20 coast-defense ships, 60 fast and armored cruisers, a line of fleet merchantmen for coaling and transport service as well as possible duty as auxiliary commerce destroyers, and a large number of torpedo boats. This force would be organized into two fleets of battle-ready warships, one for the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and one for the Pacific. To round out his package for modernization of the Navy, Tracy asked that the War College be given independent command status, that more overseas bases be acquired to service the fleets, that the Revenue Marine (predecessor to the Coast Guard) be transferred to Navy control, that further administrative streamlining be authorized for the main department, and finally, that enlisted personnel conditions be improved and sponsorship of State naval militia be undertaken. He

ended his plea on a Luce-like note by declaring:

Until the United States has a fleet of twenty battle-ships with coast-defenders, cruisers, and torpedo-boats in suitable proportions for efficient defense, and an establishment in such working order, as to administrative machinery, officers, men, reserves, and vessels, that it can be brought without delay into effective action, the country can not consider that it possesses a Navy; and a Navy it can never afford to be without.¹⁶

Public response to Tracy's advocacy of seapower was mixed as navalists, Congressmen, and citizens of seaboard States, as well as ardent nationalists in Government closed ranks against the Populists, isolationists from the Midwest, and even naval traditionalists who urged the more economical package of harbor defense monitors and coastal fortifications. The situation was hardly ameliorated by the Policy Board's report which appeared in January 1890. This report, which reflected purely naval professionals' ideas, called for an armada of 497,000 tons costing \$281.5 million with 10 "offensive" battleships having a 15,000 mile cruising range, 25 "defensive" capital ships of more limited range, a supporting force of 24 armored cruisers; 15 lighter "torpedo cruisers," five miscellaneous ships for China service, 10 rams, three depot ships, and 100 small torpedo boats.¹⁷ Such a program would have placed the U.S. Navy second only to that of Great Britain, and it was far too ambitious to be supported by the American people at that time. The naval professionals apparently sought overkill, and even the enthusiastic Tracy had to publicly repudiate such ambitious schemes lest Congress veto all naval construction programs.

The old adage that members of the executive branch propose but only Congress can dispose was clearly borne out

in the heated debates over the naval appropriations bill early in 1890. When finally enacted, Congress granted the Navy three vessels of 10,200 tons each armed with four 13-inch, eight 8-inch, and four 6-inch guns—styled “seagoing coastline battleships”—with a coal capacity for merely 5,000 miles. The politicians also provided for a light torpedo boat and a cruiser with heavy guns and armor yet sufficient coal endurance to steam around the world without refueling.¹⁸ Overall, compromise was the order of the day. Yet these ships were products of a moment when American policy was shifting from the old strategy of *guerre de course* and harbor defense to one embracing seapower. The authorized vessels reflected the hard work of Tracy, Speaker of the House of Representatives Thomas B. Reed, and the chairmen of the Naval Committees in both Houses, Congressman Boutelle and Senator James D. Cameron.

Tracy did not relax his efforts with the enactment of the Naval Appropriations Act on 30 June 1890. Until the end of his term in office, he sought to translate the doctrine of seapower into practical applications of modernization and reform. He sponsored elaborate experimentation with new armor plate and then effectively negotiated with Andrew Carnegie for the first successful fabrication and delivery of large high-grade forgings, nickel steel, and introduction of the Harveyizing process for hardening steel into the United States. The ambitious Cabinet officer instituted administrative instruments for coordinating Bureau Chiefs, and his continued patronage of the Naval War College rescued that institution from possible extinction. Equally important, his aid to the State naval militia movement and his removal of the navy yards from political patronage reflected his managerial skills which had been acquired through years of experience in dealing with people.¹⁹

Then too, Secretary Tracy gave the Navy some practical lessons in the use of seapower by means of his dabbling in cruiser diplomacy. His search for naval bases in Haiti and Santo Domingo, saber-rattling with Great Britain over the sealing question in the Bering Sea, and his brinkmanship tactics in the Chilean affair all reflected Tracy's ability to project seapower as an arm of national policy and grandeur.²⁰ Professional and philosophical rapport with President Harrison coupled with the poor health of Secretary of State James G. Blaine enabled Tracy to substitute his own counsel for that of the Maine statesman as the top Presidential adviser. Tracy sent naval vessels to the Caribbean, directed the formation of a strategy board with Mahan and Assistant Secretary James R. Soley as members to formulate operations plans for war with Chile, and the Secretary personally directed the stateside preparation of a “battlefleet” for an expedition against that South American Republic. Small wonder then that he emerged as a principal proponent of the art of employing American seapower in that day. When an unfriendly press pointed to the belligerence of Tracy's moves against Chile, the aghast official responded:

I did not know I was a war man; I rather thought I was peaceably inclined, but I am also inclined to maintaining the dignity of the United States government and its power to protect its civilians, soldiers, and sailors when abroad. If that leads to war, then I am for war; if it leads, as I believe it will, to peace, then I am for peace.²¹

Tracy continued to speak out on the need for naval preparedness. His second annual report included a possible scenario befitting later portrayals of possible nuclear holocaust wreaked on this country, His depiction of the descent of an enemy fleet upon New York City included graphic descriptions of shattered communications, ruined buildings,

the onset of famine, and the extraction of a huge ransom all because of the absence of a battlefleet. "Nothing short of a force of battleships, numerous enough to be distributed in the separate fields of attack and able to concentrate on any threatened point within their own field, will prove a complete protection," preached the naval official.²²

Finally, Tracy made an exhaustive summary of seapower progress since 1889 when he compiled his last report as a lame duck administrator after the 1892 elections had ousted the Harrison government from power. He noted that in 1889 no more than three modern steel vessels, aggregating 7,863 tons and mounting thirteen 6-inch and four 8-inch guns, comprised the first line of national defense. By comparison, the Harrison administration added to the Nation's protection some 19 additional vessels with an aggregate tonnage of 54,812 tons, mounting altogether two 12-inch, six 10-inch, sixteen 8-inch, and eighty-two 6-inch guns with some 18 additional vessels due for completion within the year. Naturally, these statistics were deceptive, for Tracy's tenure merely witnessed completion of ships authorized under previous administrations. Yet the continued pressure to get the job done and launch the vessels could be attributed to Tracy, and he graciously admitted that the Navy "has become a great national interest, which should receive the support of patriotic men, whatever their political faith."

None of the recital of progress prevented Tracy from finishing his report with a warning. The Nation could ill afford to let down its guard since: "The aggressive policy of foreign nations has continued, and this country will soon be forced into a position where it cannot disregard measures which form a menace to its prosperity and security."²³ With that, Tracy heartily reiterated the views of fellow navalists in Congress who earlier had announced: "Our true naval policy for the future is

to construct hereafter, principally if not entirely, only first-class cruisers and first-class battleships, with their accessories."²⁴

Tracy shaped something of a naval revolution by his espousal of a two-ocean battlefleet, adequate to the task of destroying an enemy force at sea. Based upon the ideas of Rear Adm. Stephen B. Luce and Capt. Alfred Thayer Mahan, Tracy's crusade ran counter to the traditional notions of American seapower and an isolationist bloc in Congress. It was a tribute to the Secretary's political acumen and perseverance that a nascent battlefleet lay on the construction ways by 1893. Tracy emerges from the period as a machine politician whose sense of national service enabled him to rise above petty politics. Policy revolutionist, shrewd manipulator in business negotiations with steel scions, reformist administrator, and Presidential confidant—Benjamin Franklin Tracy rose from humble rural beginnings to help move the U.S. Navy from the days of "wooden ships and iron men" into the modern world of seapower with its deterrent forces and complex weapons systems.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Dr. B. Franklin Cooling did his undergraduate work at Rutgers University and earned his master's and doctorate in history from the University of Pennsylvania. He has served as Park Historian with the U.S. Department of the Interior, as National Defense Historian with the Office of the Chief of Military History, U.S. Department of the Army, and continues as Curator of the U.S.S. *Olympia* (preserved in Philadelphia) and as a member of the editorial staff of *Military Affairs*. Dr. Cooling is currently the Chief of Research Studies, Military History Research Collection, Carlisle Barracks.

FOOTNOTES

1. *New York World*, 26 November 1891, as quoted in Walter R. Herrick, Jr., *The American Naval Revolution* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p. 107. Other useful studies of Tracy's Cabinet service include John K. Mahon, "Benjamin Franklin Tracy, Secretary of the Navy, 1889-1893," *New York Historical Society Quarterly*, April 1960, p. 179-201; and Benjamin F. Cooley, "Benjamin Franklin Tracy; Lawyer, Soldier, Secretary of the Navy," Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, University Park, Pa.: 1969.
2. Herrick's work overemphasizes Mahan's influence upon Tracy, but the perspective was broadened in Robert Seager II, "Ten Years Before Mahan: the Unofficial Case for the New Navy, 1880-1890," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, v. XL, (1953-54), p. 491-512.
3. Herrick, p. 11.
4. John A.S. Grenville and George B. Young, *Politics, Strategy, and American Diplomacy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1966), p. 34-35.
5. Tracy received a Congressional Medal of Honor in 1895 for gallantry in the Battle of the Wilderness although it is by no means clear that such an award was not more a bipartisan gesture for the New Yorker's public service as Secretary of the Navy.
6. Leonard D. White, *The Republican Era: a Study in Administrative History 1869-1901* (New York: Macmillan, 1958), p. 155; and Charles O. Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration 1775-1911* (Annapolis: United States Naval Institute, 1968), p. 328 passim.
7. Woodrow Wilson, "Mr. Cleveland's Cabinet," *Review of Reviews*, v. VII, p. 291.
8. A useful guide to Luce's published ideas appears in John D. Hayes, "The Writings of Stephen B. Luce," *Military Affairs*, Winter 1955, p. 187-196.
9. Stephen B. Luce, "Our Future Navy," *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, v. XV, no. 4, (1889), p. 541-559.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 542.
11. Secretary of the Navy to Commodore W.P. McCann [President], July 16, 1889 printed as Appendix A to U.S. Congress, Senate, *Letter from Secretary of the Navy in Compliance with Senate Resolution of January 27, 1890*, transmitting Report of the So-called Policy Board, Senate Executive Document 43, 51st Congress, 1st Sess., 29 January 1890.
12. U.S. Navy Department, *Annual Report 1889* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1890), p. 35.
13. Herrick, p. 54-55, and cogent portions of the report have been reprinted in Walter Millis, ed., *American Military Thought* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), document 26, p. 226-239.
14. U.S. Navy Department, p. 5.
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*, p. 49-50.
17. "Report of the So-called Policy Board" as reprinted in *Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute*, v. XVI, 1890, p. 206-209, 211.
18. "Naval Appropriations Bill," *U.S. Congressional Record*, v. XXI, 8 April 1890, p. 3169-3170.
19. Herrick, p. 44 passim; Mahon, p. 189, 192-200; and on armor procurement, Cooling, chap. 7.
20. Walter Le Feber, *The New Empire: an Interpretation of American Expansion 1860-1898* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), p. 110 passim; and Herrick, chaps. 5 and 6 especially.
21. *The New York Times*, 30 January 1892.
22. U.S. Navy Department, *Annual Report, 1890* (Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1891), p. 40.
23. *Ibid.*, 1892, p. 37.
24. *Ibid.*, citing 52d Cong., 1st Sess., HR 621, Appropriations for the Navy, 10 March 1892, p. 15.