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## The Naval Aristocracy: the Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern Navalism

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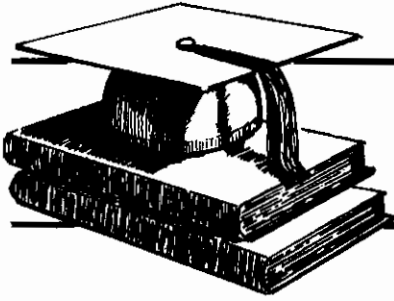
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## PROFESSIONAL READING

Karsten, Peter. *The Naval Aristocracy: the Golden Age of Annapolis and the Emergence of Modern Navalism* New York: Free Press, 1972. 461p.

Professor Karsten, a young historian and former naval officer, has undertaken a historical and sociological study of the professional naval officer from 1845, the date of the founding of the Naval Academy, to 1925, the year that the permanent Naval Reserve was established. During this period the naval officer corps was, as Professor Karsten suggests, a remarkably homogeneous socioprofessional group knit together by close ties of family, religion, social class, and professional identity. The author explores nearly every aspect of their life and thought, from marriage and family to political and social ideas. Their 19th century roles as diplomats, lobbyists, explorers, publicists, and inventors all come under close scrutiny. Few naval officers will be flattered by the results. The author finds "racism, authoritarianism and warmongering" to be rather widespread among these 19th century leaders of the U.S. Navy.

The officer corps was wealthy, old-stock American, and lily white, with few Baptists or Methodists and fewer Jews. Blacks were employed mainly as stewards and body servants. The American officers aped and admired the British, held other races and peoples in contempt, and believed unswervingly in the "survival of the fittest" among nations. At the Naval Academy the young midshipmen were taught a thorough identification with the service,

its reputation, and its interests.

Much, if not all, of the activities of these 19th century officers, Karsten suggests, can be understood as an effort to advance the interests of the Navy and of their own careers in the Navy. On the domestic scene they ceaselessly wrote and lobbied for a larger Navy, while internationally they "earnestly sought an opportunity to demonstrate [their] valor and abilities in combat; an aim which appears to have led [them] to offer force in dubious situations." The naval officers despised the American merchants and missionaries whom, in their role as "policeman of the seas," they were obliged to protect. Nevertheless, they assiduously guarded and promoted American business interests overseas, conceiving them to be identical to "the national interest."

Professor Karsten's thoroughgoing reassessment of Mahan and his role will probably be of great interest to historians. The author points out that concepts such as "seapower" and "control of the sea" were hardly original with Mahan. Neither did his books serve to convert large numbers of people to navalism and expansionism; most of them were already converted. The author strips away the layers of esoteric scholastic commentary, with which scholars have surrounded the admiral's work, to reveal what should have been evident all along: that the *Seapower* books were, first and foremost, an instrument for obtaining a big Navy. "Expansionist ideology was quite agreeable to Mahan . . . But it was the Navy's

growth and prosperity that was the first mover. It was the Navy for which he fought and the Navy, for Mahan, needed no justification." (p. 339)

Although it is an impressive performance, *The Naval Aristocracy* is not without some shortcomings, the most serious being that Professor Karsten, as he frankly admits, simply does not like the officers he is writing about. The result is that, in a few places, the book reads more like an indictment than a social history. In almost every instance, doubtful or ambiguous evidence is resolved in favor of the prosecution. Thus Capt. Percival Drayton's remark that "a little despotism in government is a good thing," is taken as typical of the views of his naval colleagues, while this same officer's very liberal (for the time) views on race relations are presented as quite untypical. Authoritarian, militaristic, or racist remarks by naval officers are presented in the text as typical; more moderate or contradictory remarks by other naval officers are presented in the footnotes as "exceptions." Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dismiss this book as merely an antimilitary polemic. Professor Karsten is a serious scholar who appears to have waded through every collection of personal papers, every memoir, and every biography pertaining to his "naval aristocracy." On many important points his documentation and the weight of statistical evidence he brings to bear are impressive and quite persuasive. The book will probably stand for a long time as the definitive study of the naval officer corps.

*The Naval Aristocracy* may be taken as indicative of a new trend in military history away from the narrow accounts of battles and the laudatory biographies of great captains. The time has passed when the military profession and its members can expect historians to accept, at face value, their beliefs about the nature and function of their profession. Naval readers who are disturbed by

some of Professor Karsten's findings may derive some comfort from the fact that historians are also beginning to examine the lawyers, the Army, the Foreign Service, and the medical profession in the same critical spirit. The indications are that the results will be no more flattering than *The Naval Aristocracy*.

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Taylor, Maxwell D. *Swords and Plowshares*. New York: Norton, 1972. 434p.

There are two diametrically opposed schools of thought on military professionalism. One school maintains that the job of a military man is not to reason why in matters of foreign policy but to win wars by military means and leave all other considerations to civilians. The other school argues, however, that the military does have responsibilities in the field of foreign policy and should make recommendations on the question of whether or not to use military force.

In a 1969 speech at West Point, Gen. Maxwell Taylor attempted to reconcile these contrasting views. But in his autobiographical *Swords and Plowshares* General Taylor leaves little doubt about which position he espoused in his distinguished post-World War II career as Commander of the 8th Army in Korea, Army Chief of Staff, Military Representative to the President, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Ambassador to South Vietnam, and White House Consultant. Never does the erudite general, publicly or privately, in or out of uniform, express any misgivings about the basic premises of the post-World War II containment policy. Instead, Taylor hails the Truman decision to intervene in Korea as courageous; he studies the Bay of Pigs disaster without even addressing the question of whether the United States should be invading Cuba in the first place; and he makes