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The Influence of History Upon Seapower

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Just as seapower has influeneed history by its military and economic effects upon nation-states, so has history influenced the development of seapower by its psychological impact upon national leaders. In this article Mr. Gene Wolfe conducts the reader through the broad sweep of history in an effort to evaluate this feedback.

THE INFLUENCE OF HISTORY UPON SEAPOWER

An article prepared by

Mr. Gene Wolfe

My intent in writing this article was pure and simple. It was to record the nagging thought that history in some way must have influenced seapower just as surely as the other way around. Yet there was more than a slight awareness that at a glance the title of this piece could seem full of impertinences with regard to Admiral Mahan. These first words were, therefore, calculated to assure the reader that any trifling whatsoever with Alfred Thayer Mahan was not my aim at all.

The difficult thing to discover in approaching history's influence upon things naval and maritime is the coincidence of influence and confluence, where the effect is almost simultaneous with the happening. Examples of this are Japan's able mimicry of our carrier aviation and the American colonists' painful awareness of the British Navy off the capes in their ships of the line. On the other hand, some causes and effects are further apart, such as the influence of British and United States histories in full sweep upon Japan's total notion of modern seapower. In this meshing of time frames, it often is a question of defining the term "contemporary" and evaluating the relative weight of tradition and enrrent events. Nonetheless, it would appear that patterns of seapower persuasion do exist which are related to a meaningful observation by the one of another's national narrative.

The Mediterranean was the cradle of seapower as it was of Western civilization itself. The affluent society compiled by the Cretan-Greek alliance some 1,400 years B.C. was set upon by barbaric tribes of the north who came to be know as the Sea Peoples. As the very name suggests, these invaders have become indelibly identified with the sea. What is perhaps overlooked is that the Sea Peoples attacked the lush order of things to the south because their own histories had produced now obscure

unrests impelling such a movement. They moved by land as well as by sea; the sea was an instrument, not the begetter, of the deed.

Later, Homer noted the Phoenicians well: "men famed for their ships, greedy knaves, bringing countless trinkets in their black ship." To us the Phoenicians are also synonymous with the sea, perhaps to the exclusion of their other important characteristics and the thrust of their history which brought about their maritime greatness in the first place. History had developed in them a canny ability which became the generic force behind their better known role as the master middlemen of the Mediterranean. In the broadest view, the Phoenicians unwittingly made all subsequent Western seapower possible, not because of their seamanship or their exploration of the Middle Sea basin nor because of their extensive colonization, but because among the "trinkets" they brought the Greeks was an alphabet.

The Battle of Salamis, which taught never-to-be-forgotten lessons about the necessity of bases and fleet tactical doctrine, was, after all, an action inside the framework of larger historical forces which brought on the Greco-Persian War. The same can be said of Lepanto, where the Ottoman Turks met the forces of Christendom. In between, except when Agrippa resorted to naval tactics against the fleet of Antony, military use of the sea was largely a matter of using ships as troop transports.

There was more to the rise of Spain, Portugal, France, Holland, and England as oceanic powers than a capricious urge to go to sea. The cask of Europe was in ferment; nebulous regional feudalisms were coming under dominant feudal lords and kings; a rising merchant class was pressuring for a more centralized protection favorable to commerce and industry; and the religious unity of the Church was pitching and rolling under the winds of the Reformation. These and many other newly created forces of thought and activity, among them a perennial need in ruling courts for more income, combined to push the kingdoms of the Atlantic seaboard onto the sea.

What ultimately came to influence our own seapower most had its beginnings in those new energies emerging in medieval western Europe. It began when people living in the area of France started to think of themselves as Frenchmen and when the people on the "blessed isle" began to think of themselves as Englishmen. History had placed these two far too close together both in the sense of geography and in the sense of developing new-found nationhoods. The curtain thus was drawn for strife from Crecy to Waterloo, for England's mastery of the sea, and for France's rhythmic vacillations between land and seapower.

The fortunes of French seapower are a much better study in the influence of historical events than English because so much of England's history *is* seapower. French strength at sea waxed strong and brilliant, or it disappeared according to the degree of royal support it received. Frenchmen at sea were strong enough to beat the British at Yorktown, but in a few short years the French Revolution castrated the fine fleet by executing and exiling its superb officer corps.

If we can agree that the Mediterranean gave birth to seapower, then we must consider that English wars with the French gave it manhood. The Seven Years War beginning in 1756 was as much a global war as World War II, if we discount the sheer magnitude of the latter. In it England learned well many of the principles isolated so beautifully by Mahan with regard to national use of the sea. English power was everywhere ships could reach; that power included the close coordination of ships and troops and a mercantile base which provided the wherewithal even for practical aid to allies. And with that power

the home island was proteeted and her own sea bases were held, while additional bases were seized from the enemy.

In the later Napoleonic wars, seapower further matured, and again individual histories of individual states imposed significant effects. There is little doubt that if Britain's continental allies had cooperated earlier instead of being strictured within historical nationalistic feelings, it would not have taken 16 years to undo Napoleon. Trafalgar might never have been neeessary.

Early in the 19th eentury, history in the form of the industrial revolution imposed upon seapower the most drastie, dramatie, and far-reaching change to be effected in more than 50 eenturies. In its beginning the change was literally an unelean operation. Dirty black eoal and dirty black smoke came aboard ship as attendants to a dirty black engine. To master and seaman alike, after gencrations of clean wood and sail, the inferno of boilers and the unnatural mess of an engine spewing oil, steam, and greasy water was an unpalatable, if not ridiculous, speetacle.

Yet there it was, and there it was to stay. And to make matters worse in the blue-water sailor's eye, the progenitors of the beast did not come from the mainstream of nautical development. They were mostly landlubber mechanics, engineers, and inventors: Fulton—an engineer and businessman; Fitch—an unstable "inventor" trying to rig a steamboat for Ohio River commerce; and Rumsey—another "inventor" who, with George Washington's blessing, tinkered with a self-propelled boat on the Potomac. The mechanical boats and ships worked, but naval officers were reluctant to adopt them for a very good reason—the nachinery was exposed and vulnerable. Then came Ericsson's serew propeller which permitted the vitals to be placed below the waterline, and *Princeton*, the first self-propelled warship, was built for our Navy in 1842, a byproduet of the industrial revolution. The latest byproduets are *Nimitz* and NR-1.

With the launching of engine-driven ships a fact of nautical life, the advent of the modern battleship was only a matter of time, steel, and ordnanee. The result was *Dreadnought* and superdreadnoughts and the day of the modern battleship—epitome of seapower for nearly 50 years. But even as this was occurring, a speeialized history was shaping to influence the battleship as the essenee of seapower, if indeed not to preside over its demise. It was a different kind of history, the *personal history* of three men. One was an Irish sehooltcacher and inventor—John P. Holland. The other two were Ohio bicycle experts—Orville and Wilhur Wright.

The rise of the United States to its status as a modern seapower can be, with justifieation, aseribed to the labors of sueh men as Mahan, Theodore Roosevelt, Admiral Sims, and Henry Cabot Lodge. But there was also the larger context of history and its workings. We eame out of the Spanish-American War not only a global power in the sense of "power," we came out of it with vast new property holdings in the Caribbean and the wide Pacific. Many balked at affixing the term "empire" to this, but that did not materially denigrate the empirieal faet. And the fact immediately proceeded to set up its own imperatives. What was needed to administer, proteet, and develop that which history had given us was a big Navy, overseas bases, and a Panama Canal.

The grammar of America's emerging seapower was the English idiom. This was because of the feel of English history acquired by Roosevelt either on his own or by transfusion from the writing arm of Mahan. And although not the complete anglophile, Roosevelt's tendencies in this direction perhaps did cause him to see forcign

policy and naval policy as interrelated. He fashioned his naval weapon systems accordingly.

The forces of history and geography had much to do with the shaping of modern seapower in France and Germany. Not being insular, both countries had to think in terms of land strength, knowing only too well the histories of war on the Continent. Even so, Germany maintained a High Seas Fleet which was more than sufficient in size and quality to give England an acute concern. The seagoing strength of France, on the other hand, suffered from her fiscal history, and, like Italy, it featured fast cruisers fitted for coastal and Mediterranean work. In the military operations of the Triple Entente, France and England effected a trade-off, with France "using" the Grand Fleet and England "using" the great landpower of France.

Perhaps the prize history watcher of all time was Japan. By the middle of the 19th century, behind a protective wall of tariffs, U.S. industry had grown extensive enough to produce pressures for more foreign markets. Commodore Perry used the overt pressure of military seapower to force Japan to open her trade doors. But the pressures put upon Perry in the first place were, in reality, the forces of civilian industry at work through the instrumentality of President Fillmore. Perry's paddle frigates and sailing sloops of war and their talent for making a point were well observed by the Japanese. So well, in fact, that they were able to take on and defeat a sophisticated Western navy within a scant 50 years. A goodly part of that process included a careful study and analysis of British and American history. In a real sense, the Japanese amalgamated the best of both in fashioning their own variety of modern seapower. The same held for tactics and doctrine. They coupled American speed with Nelson flexibility in hitting the enemy via the shortest route, ship for ship. In quick succession they won a war with China and conducted for the world an almost unbelievable example in naval warfare at Tsushima. Further study resulted in the assimilation of the submarine and naval aviation. Japan reached her zenith on the morning of 7 December 1941 at the island of Oahu.

It is tempting to consider the Soviet Union as a more than competent history watcher. We know their rather amazing present-day manifestations of naval and maritime power have arrived with a certain suddenness, that is to say within the past 15 years or so. And from the size and quality of their naval, maritime, and oceanographic programs, we also know that Soviet presence on the world ocean is not a routine spin-off of normal total national development. It is the end product of major policy decisions and carefully planned and integrated effort with nothing less than first place on the sea in mind. But by whose thinking, whose sanctions, and under what influences? It would seem reasonable to suspect that whatever the overview included, it surely must have included a genuine feel for history's use of seapower and perhaps even seapower's use of history.

The latest major persuasion of American seapower has been the influence of the political and technological climate of the past 20 years. In that period, to heretofore unknown and horrendous world political excitation, technology added fantastically dangerous real-time destruction quotients to create a world that would have been pure science fiction to Theodore Roosevelt. A playback to Roosevelt perhaps has meaning since in the climate of the fifties and sixties our Navy again became strongly identified with our foreign policy, became the invaluable on-the-spot instrument of U.S. intent abroad. And once again the Navy's hardware was shaped accordingly. Enough Navy was maintained to establish a global deployment and, to some extent, a global surveil-

lance with strength where trouble was most apt to occur. Aside from the purely military necessity of ASW, our carrier aviation, amphibious warfare, and underway replenishment capabilities were kept as sharp as we could make them. And the Navy nibbled at the strategic weapons delivery mission because it was in position to do so, having had the foresight to put together a tool for the job—the *Polaris* submarine.

In the sense of what is most meaningful for American seapower, it is predicted that the strategic value of all that water out there will become more and more apparent as contemporary history goes on. The currently evolving political climate will force recognition of the inevitable.

A final speculation also has its tentacles in the future. It is what will happen in the sea when the longstanding affinity between the private entrepreneur and dollars brings about an oceanic revolution, perhaps one to outshade the industrial revolution in magnitude and effect. There are those who believe ocean space will become as valuable as land space and for the same reasons: the wealth of all kinds that can be extracted and for the life it will support. It is not so much that the sea has become the dreamer's antidote for landborne ills, but rather that the sea will pay hard dividends on hard investments—a kind of deal which has had some attraction for all manner of men since the time of the Phoenicians. And, as usual, modern technology is racing ahead of the more liesurely paced minions of international law and order, to say nothing of the lay understanding of what is even now happening in the briny deep. The time is almost now for the making of decisions with the wisdom of Solomon and the vision of Mahan to prevent chaos in the marketplace at sea.

For in any industrialization of the world ocean, indeed in a limited industrialization, accommodations will have to be made. Not the least of these accommodations will be with seapower as we now know it. At the very least, the exploitation of marine resources will have to be seen as part of the total national seapower, just as commerical shipping was accepted as a component, and will have to be digested as such.

What the ingestion and digestion will do to seapower remains to be seen, but an effect there will be. It may well change the face, perhaps even the body, as did steam and steel in what now seems like so many years ago.

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Mr. Gene Wolfe holds degrees in English literature from George Washington University, and is staff writer in the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations (OP-09D, the Navy's "Seapower" office). He served aboard destroyers through eight Pacific campaigns during World War II and for 10 years was speech and presentations writer in the former Bureau of Aeronautics, leaving the Bureau as Public Affairs Officer. In 1960 he became press officer for the Export-Import Bank of the United States, returning to the Navy in 1964 to accept his present position. His current work includes the scripting of speeches, presentations, and documentary motion pictures.

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