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Focus on Seapower: A Perspective of the First Naval War College Seapower Symposium

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The beginning of the 20th century was the stage for Mahan's concepts for seapower, and while his basic tenets are still relevant, the environment in which they must be applied has witnessed a significant change. It was in recognition of this new setting that the Naval War College Seapower Symposium was conceived, and among the fruits of this event are an increased appreciation and awareness of the need for international responsibility and cooperation in the world maritime arena.

FOCUS ON SEAPOWER: a Perspective of the First Naval War College Seapower Symposium

An article prepared

by

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A university should be a place of light, of liberty, and of learning.

B. Disraeli, House of Commons,
3 March 1873

The work and thought of Alfred Thayer Mahan proved conclusively that the sea and seapower have always exerted significant influence on the events of human society. His analyses, theories, and published writings revolutionized basic concepts and strategies in every naval ministry of the world at the turn of this century. His accomplishment is memorable not because of his demonstrated skill at reconstructing the less obvious implications of historical maritime events, but principally because of his skill in the organization and pursuit of informed understanding in a new intellectual discipline—the study of seapower.

The U.S. Naval War College provided the platform from which Mahan could promote his theories as well as the intellectual environment within which he could pursue his personal search for the elusive structure of a new line of strategic thought. Since those early days of enterprise and inspiration, the War College has continuously directed its major efforts in support of its legacy as the conservator and executor of Mahan's intellectual estate. No graduate of the Naval War College has ever returned to his military or governmental duties without having gained a meaningful measure of understanding of the strategic implications of the sea and seapower. From time to time, through the eventful decades of this century, other more spectacular and visible disciplines have stimulated the imaginations and challenged the intellectual inclinations of political and military strategists.

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Throughout the period, however, the War College has focused on seapower, integrating new disciplines into its strategic studies as social evolution and technological change have brought them to maturity. Thus, as the predominant source of naval thought and expression and by its continuous appraisal of the sometimes subtle shifting of the world seapower balance, the college has always made major contributions to the evolution of U.S. national strategy.

The maritime campaigns of the Atlantic and Pacific wars have been fully cataloged, and many thoughtful authors have rendered tribute to the role of the Naval War College in envisioning the winning strategy and training the leaders who created victory. In one tribute, Fleet Adm. Chester Nimitz related that the only problem the Naval War College failed to foresee in the Pacific campaign was the Kamikaze.

The reputation of the Naval War College as a place of light and learning has remained undiminished through the postwar years. It is not unnatural, then, to find the college continuing to break new ground in devising tools with which to enhance its proven capability as a leading exponent of modern naval thought. In particular, the sponsorship by the college of the first Naval War College Seapower Symposium, held from 17 to 20 November 1969, which has been described in general terms in the February issue of the *Naval War College Review*, constitutes convincing testimony to the vigor and imagination of an institution which recently completed its 85th year of existence.

The symposium, brought together under one roof the largest single assemblage of senior naval leaders ever recorded in modern history. Thirty-seven nations sent representatives to Newport for the purpose of promoting mutual understanding of common problems and interests in the maritime field through free discussion of any aspect of maritime affairs deemed important to any participating nation. Countries represented include over one-third of the estimated total population of the world within their boundaries. The meeting was both heroic in conception and profound in its implications.

In his classic *Hiawatha*, the American poet Longfellow expressed a view which might most appropriately serve as the visible guiding spirit of the symposium and which, in retrospect, well characterizes the sense of unity created during this historic meeting. It goes:

> All your strength is in your
> union,
> All your danger is in
> discord.

In fact, the dynamic force which made the symposium a reality was rooted in the established recognition of the dangers of discord and the invaluable strength which comes from unity.

The Seapower Symposium concept was a logical outgrowth of events in which the War College played a leading role as far back as the mid-fifties. At that time, under the enthusiastic sponsorship of the CNO, Adm. Arleigh Burke, a new curriculum was established at the War College in support of an entirely new educational concept. The Naval Command Course, a 10-month resident course of instruction for senior officers of foreign navies, was established at Newport. It was hoped that an open exchange of opinions in an atmosphere of academic freedom would foster not only education, but mutual understanding of problems common to all naval leaders and strategists. The first class convened in August 1956, and during the ensuing 13 years, hundreds of non-U.S. naval officers have attended the course, with a total national representation of 40 different countries. The course was successful beyond all expectations: successful both for the professional advancement of the students who have returned to their own navies

and for the U.S. Navy and the War College.

The Navy and the War College have benefited immeasurably through the establishment of personal and professional ties in a worldwide fraternity of naval leaders, while the seapower perspectives of the Naval Command Course students have gained recognition on their own merit, in many cases earning the distinction of publication in the *Naval War College Review*, the *United States Naval Institute Proceedings*, and in the maritime journals of their native lands.

From this experience with the Naval Command Course and in keeping with its continuing analysis of the implications of seapower in a changing world, it became apparent to both the War College and a growing circle of senior naval leaders that the necessarily subjective analysis of U.S. naval officers could be complemented by incorporating the analytic ability of their counterparts who view the maritime arena from differing national perspectives. In a global society whose maritime interdependence has been growing apace with political, economic, and technological changes, a world view of common problems in the field would be invaluable to all world naval leaders.

In his opening remarks to the symposium attendees, Vice Adm. Richard G. Colbert, President of the U.S. Naval War College—and earlier the first Director of the Naval Command Course—testified to his faith in the ability of naval officers to contribute a broad-based understanding of common problems because of the unique conditioning arising from a lifetime of sharing both the hazards and the opportunities of seamen. As he clearly stated, there was no intent to develop concrete solutions to any problem which might be discussed—the principal goal of the symposium was simply to provide a forum in which the national perspectives of the participants could illuminate the problems and prospects of seapower in a world now grown far more sophisticated than that known by Mahan and his contemporaries.

Observers of maritime events may recognize that even this modest aim was most ambitious, as the world press has continuously played up the competitive aspects of recent maritime affairs, with greater emphasis on the differences than on the points of common interest shared by all maritime states. In this regard, then, an implicit goal of the symposium was to confirm the existence of assumed points of common interest and to identify others which could be revealed only through the frank and unfettered presentation of the views of each participant, conditioned as they are by the perspectives of their unique national experience.

No final evaluation of the degree of attainment of these goals is possible so soon after the event. It is clear, however, that the participants regarded the opportunity for these discussions very highly. They plunged enthusiastically into the search for meaningful approaches to questions of greatest common interest. Most importantly, their discussions were clearly on a level indicating sincere dedication to the spirit of free inquiry, which set the tone for the entire 4 days of discussion.

A detailed summary of the major events of the symposium has already been chronicled in the *Review*, and it is not the purpose of this essay to discuss them further. Also, it would be inappropriate for this observer to attempt to evaluate the substance of proceedings conducted by these naval thinkers at this time. Yet, without presuming to speak for any person other than myself, I believe that there are some generalized implications of, and observations about, this historic event which can be expressed by an interested observer privileged to be present during the symposium.

That the symposium took place at all

is tribute to the inherent nature of man to inquire into the meaning of events about him, even as it is equally predictable for him to conduct those events in turmoil and disorder. Further, even disinterested witnesses to happenings on the maritime scene over the last two decades have suspected a subtle but persistent recasting of the traditional maritime nations into new seapower postures. Thus, the ready participation of so many current naval leaders in an event advertised as an inquiry into this generalized problem is testimony to the reality of change in the international seapower balance during these eventful years. Recognizing the existence of a problem is the first step in obtaining a solution, and it may be reasonably inferred that the simple act of attendance, despite the considerable cost to participants in both time and treasure, acknowledges the probable existence of a common problem. Furthermore, this same act may be most indicative of an acceptance of the idea that solutions to international problems may most often be found through international cooperation.

Of further and more profound significance was the apparent acceptance by all present of the need to seek solutions to these international maritime problems through essentially nonmilitary means. In this respect, the activity of the conferees directly refuted the image of the stereotyped military mind which has been widely advertised by the world press in recent years. This clearly was no conclave of warmongers, seeking to increase their own power and importance through the enlargement of their forces or their budgets. These were concerned and competent professionals devoted to the national goals and aspirations which condition us all, but manifesting sincere appreciation for the international economic, psychological, and social implications of problems which, in a bygone era, might have been treated from a strictly military point of view. The depth of injustice being done daily to these eminent leaders by the generalized accusations of some authors that military professionals are unfit or incapable of statesmanlike appreciation of complex modern problems was clearly apparent. All of those in attendance constantly displayed a clear understanding of the fact that there are no longer any purely military problems. From this factor it is possible to draw some very favorable opinions about the educational and promotion structures which brought these men to the top of their individual navies. Furthermore, we need not deery the absence of the military intellectual in the councils of world strategy, as some of those same writers do, for the daily activity of the symposium revealed that new Mahans exist in probably every naval ministry of the world. They carve no public roads in the jungle of theory but, rather, privately devote their efforts to considered appraisal of their national strategies and the interrelationship of those positions with world seapower strategies.

However important these observations may appear in and of themselves, they signal the possible existence of an even more profound corollary interpretation of the real meaning of the discussions. Speculating on the singular events of that week, one is led to seek out a broader meaning.

Consider briefly the international political and military environment in which Mahan educed his theories and expressed his conclusions with lasting impact. At the turn of the century, international events hinged on traditional *realpolitik*, levered by forces created through interactions of classic balance-of-power theorists. The United States, despite its late move toward colonialism, resulting from the Spanish War, was introspective and effectively a bystander, responding to events generated by the activity of powers attempting to maintain residues of influence from the reactionary Concert of

Europe era of the dying century. What we now call the Third World existed only in the hushed dreams of effectively captive nationalists. Only a few decades earlier, humanity had existed principally in separate agglomerations sprinkled over the face of the earth, each clump having little need or desire to interact over the full spectrum of human interests with its neighbors, whether near or distant. Almost every countryside grew the food and fiber needed for the support of nearby cities, while almost every city processed and manufactured essentially all that was needed by the adjacent countryside to continue the social and economic cycle. International trade and economics were relatively minuscule and largely restricted to exchanges arising from semiclosed colonial systems.

As the new century progressed, mankind alternated in a few short years from an early, unwarranted reliance on international law for the control and the regulation of the ever more complex interactions of nations to the total barbarism of the war which opened in 1914. After that prolonged aberration from commonsense had been brought to a close, international relations reverted to what now seems a sort of controlled chaos, with competing advocacy of "back to normalcy," "world disarmament treaties," demands for reparations from the vanquished balanced haphazardly against the availability of loans from the victors to make the payments, all capped by the utter lack of sophistication reflected by the statement, "They hired the money, didn't they?"

Surely, the years between 1919 and 1940 were not marked by consistently statesmanlike conduct even on the part of statesmen, and thus military men of that era found it easy to limit the area of their concern to purely military matters. Most regarded diplomats and politicians with either absolute deference or wary indifference. Seapower theorists could justifiably limit themselves to the simple enlargement of Mahan's beliefs to accommodate a gradually changing but recognizably similar international environment. All of this was appropriate to those interwar years and, to some extent, was meaningful during the early postwar years. However, since 1950 a wholly new set of international values has come into existence. This shift of real world circumstance may have brought about the intellectual bankruptcy of those who continue to cling to seapower theories rooted in the classicism of Mahan, which are essentially governed by unilateral national considerations.

Since 1900 all of the major intellectual disciplines of society have undergone change at a pace which has forced their evolution into completely new conceptual dimensions. Physical science, politics, economics, medicine, art, religion, architecture—all these and more have moved to new plateaus, discarding once-treasured theories as they became incompatible with the times. So also it may be with the disciplines of naval strategy and seapower. Is it possible that the dead hand of classical seapower theorists is hampering the development of a more modern thesis?

For example, neither Mahan nor any of his contemporaries envisioned a world so economically and politically interdependent that events in a remote African jungle could affect the commodity exchanges of the entire world within hours of their occurrence. He could not conceive of nations so powerful that they dare not even consider the use of maximum military power in any circumstance short of national life or death. He would never have accepted the possibility of the smallest nations carrying equal weight with the largest in the deliberations of international councils. He would have countered any such propisition with his belief that an essential aspect of nationality is competitiveness and that national sovereignty is absolutely indivisible. However much he

may have wished it, he would never believe that powerful nations would subordinate strong national interests in support of the common good of all mankind. Most of all, he might have found incredible the possibility that nations would call into existence new political and economic forces which could now act out in proxy war the competitive *geist* of human nature in an arena called "peaceful coexistence."

Yet, despite the possible disbelief of turn-of-the-century theorists, is this not what is happening? Is it not possible that an entirely new world order has come into existence—a world in which substantially new theories of seapower would be more appropriate than those rooted in a world beyond recall?

Perhaps, then, the presence at the U.S. Naval War College of dozens of statesmanlike, concerned, intensely aware, and thoughtful naval leaders presages the growth of a modern theory of seapower constructed around a nexus of international responsibility and cooperation in the common good. In time, such a theory may be as significant as those simpler theories espoused from the same platform in an earlier and less complex world. Surely, no theory which places national considerations above all others can long survive in the face of new developments.

The very character of the sea itself has changed in the last 70 years. Both naval warfare and commercial exploitation have come to include in their calculations the dimensions of depth and airspace in addition to those of latitude and longitude. The riches of the sea bottom itself have become essential national resources of coastal states. The traditional ocean highways of antiquity have now become vital lifelines linking the economic well-being of almost all states. Mutual dependence of the world community of nations on the sea and sea resources dictates that purely national views of the meaning of seapower may now be subordinate to internationally oriented new concepts. This may prove to be the real meaning of the Seapower Symposium. Perhaps it will come to pass that all the peoples of the world will truthfully say of themselves, as once the British did, "We are a people of the sea, and the sea is our security and safety." (Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, *Speech*, 11 October 1929.)

In any case, the Naval War College has surely found justification for intensifying its appraisal of events affecting the world seapower balance. The symposium is clearly one of the most significant of those events, and it will remain as dynamic testimony to the fact that the Naval War College remains "a place of light, of liberty, and of learning."

BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

Comdr. James F. McNulty, U.S. Navy, holds a B.S. in marine engineering from the Massachusetts Maritime Academy, a B.A. in history and government from Tufts University, and a master's degree in international affairs from The George Washington University. He has served on LST's, as Commanding Officer of U.S.S. *Kiowa* (ATF 72), and on destroyers—the last such assignment as Executive Officer of the U.S.S. *Robison* (DDG 12) in 1967-68. Commander McNulty is a graduate of the Naval War College, School of Naval Command and Staff (Class of 1966), and is currently assigned to the Naval War College as a faculty member of the Naval Command Course.