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# Stephen Bleeker Luce



An article prepared by

Rear Admiral John D. Hayes, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

Stephen Bleeker Luce served in the U.S. Navy for 70 years, and 60 of them were spent on active duty. His pre-eminence was not achieved in war but rather in the trying sphere of preparing for it. He entered the Navy as a midshipman 5 years before the Mexican War, and he thus was able to have a part in the first of America's overseas conflicts. He served as a seasoned officer during the Civil War and perceived with his keen professional understanding the purpose of a Navy and the needs of the men who compose it. He never afterwards allowed himself or those who followed him to forget that the two foundation stones of their calling were war and the preparation for it. His acumen, zeal, and untiring energy throughout the next half century helped

bring about a revolution in naval thought that has had its impact to this day, not only on his own Navy, but on the other navies of the world. Luce died a few months after the United States entered World War I, but he lived to see the Nation to which he contributed so much take its first decisive steps toward world power.

The prime of Luce's life was spent in the period when the U.S. Navy was at the lowest point in its history. After the Civil War the American people turned their eyes and efforts inward to the development of their heartland and away from the sea which had been the basis of their prewar outlook. The Navy and the merchant marine were neglected and forgotten. Most senior naval officers were content to reflect upon the glories

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of their war days, and even Luce's contemporaries generally chose to look backward. Luce's thoughts, however, were kept focused on the future of war and war's handmaiden, strategy. His happy enthusiasm transmitted this ardent and unselfish professionalism to the younger men who were to create the U.S. Navy of the future: Alfred T. Mahan, William T. Sampson, Robley D. Evans, French E. Chadwick, Henry C. Taylor, Bradley A. Fiske, and William S. Sims.

Luce thereby forms the link between the two great periods of our naval history, that of the sail and wooden navy with its revolution during the Civil War and that of the steam and steel navy which did not have its beginnings until 20 years after the war. He, almost alone, preserved and carried forward the spirit and tone of the old Navy through those barren years and infused it into the modern Navy of today. One of his contributions in doing this was his insistence that men were as important as weapons and machines. He also constantly pointed out that the purpose of a navy is to wage war, and regardless of how remote war appears to be, it is the officer's function to study war and train his men for it.

It is difficult to measure in tangible terms the contributions that Stephen B. Luce made to his profession and to his country's naval power. One of the ablest of his disciples, Bradley A. Fiske, defined it best by saying, "Luce taught the Navy to think." Luce's concrete accomplishments, however, were many.

He prepared the first comprehensive textbook on the seaman's craft published in the United States. His *Seamanship*, first printed in 1862, went through several editions before it was replaced in 1901 by Knight's *Modern Seamanship*. Luce's work, however, is still in print, having been republished by the Cornell Maritime Press of Cambridge, Md., in 1952.

He was Commandant of Midshipmen at the Naval Academy from 1865 to 1868 during the superintendency of David D. Porter, which were perhaps the Academy's most dynamic years.

He was an early advocate for training and licensing merchant marine officers and in 1875 organized the New York State Maritime Academy, the first of such institutions. He did this by getting legislation enacted extending the noted Morell Act of July 1862, which created our land-grant state universities, to include nautical as well as agricultural and mechanical training.

Luce conceived and initiated in 1872 a successful system for training enlisted apprentices which evolved into the present naval training stations. His objective was to replace the foreigners who then filled the enlisted billets with native Americans and to create a permanent body of enlisted men such as existed in the navies of Europe. By the turn of the century, the first had been largely accomplished. He never succeeded in doing the second because of the short term of enlistment in the United States and the attractive inducements in civilian life for the skills that were acquired in the Navy. He succeeded, despite apathy and a lack of funds, in improving the rations of enlisted men and their recreational facilities. He also designed the present enlisted dress blue uniform.

Luce also made many contributions to contemporary naval literature. He saved many of the sea chanties of the days of sail with his book *Naval Songs*, which was first published in 1883 and reprinted in 1889, 1902, and 1908. For over a decade and a half, after the influential *Army and Navy Journal* was founded in 1863 by William C. Church, Luce was virtually its anonymous editor. Church remained editor in chief until 1917, and the two men were friends for 56 years. Luce contributed to the paper almost until his death. The leading article in the first issue of the

*Proceedings* of the United States Naval Institute was written by Luce. He was President of the Naval Institute for 11 years, and 25 of his articles were published in the *Proceedings* from 1874 to 1911.

Luce is best known for establishing the Naval War College at Newport, R.I. What is not so well known is that he spent the next 20 years preserving it. Opposition came not only from those who did not believe in such education but also from a large group who maintained that the proper place for the institution was in Annapolis or Washington.

Luce gave Alfred Thayer Mahan his great opportunity by selecting him for the faculty of the new war college and by choosing him to be his successor. Mahan's lectures evolved into his first two literary works on seapower on which his reputation mainly stands. It is interesting to note that the original title of the series of lectures was not "The Influence of Sea Power upon History" but "The Influence of Naval Power on the Growth of Nations," which more adequately expressed Mahan's maritime thesis.

Finally, Luce was senior of a group of forward-looking naval officers who, after almost 40 years of effort, succeeded in creating in 1915 the office of the Chief of Naval Operations in the Navy Department.

Luce accomplished all this by teaching, writing, and promoting. He had a flair for public relations far ahead of his time which did not always have the approbation of his contemporaries. But he was, above all, a philosopher, always putting his thoughts on paper. He was "persistent in his demands and prolific with his suggestions," as the biographer of W.C. Church put it. He made these demands and suggestions in letters to friends in high places and in periodicals, both professional and national. This gave him influence in his time that enabled him to make a lasting

impression on the Navy, but it also contributed to his being forgotten when the men who knew him passed on. He never took the time to compose his thoughts into books, as Mahan did, and he refused to write an autobiography. His thoughts and ideas were therefore not easily available on library shelves but had to be searched for in unpublished letters and uncatalogued publications.

A resumé of Luce's more important professional writings was published by this author in the Winter 1955 issue of *Military Affairs*, a military history journal, under the title of "Writings of Stephen B. Luce." Thirty-six articles are listed and annotated, largely in Luce's own words. They are arranged by categories of subjects to indicate the extent of Luce's interests and thinking. These are naval organization and administration, military ethics, naval warfare, naval history, officer education, and enlisted training. Twenty-two were published in the *Proceedings*, the remainder mostly in *North American Review and the United Service*.

Luce was undoubtedly the most learned man that the U.S. naval profession has produced. His learning was not of the analytical and specialized character so current, but rather a vast and comprehensive synthesis. Researching the references in his writings is a liberal education in itself. His familiarity with foreign languages enabled him to know firsthand the extensive French military writings of the 19th century. He had a much better knowledge of the French Navy and of French strategy than did Mahan.

Luce's devotion to his profession kept him a poor man all his life, unable even to give a college education to his son. On active duty he preferred posts of usefulness to those of status and power. He was a sincerely religious man as his letters, journals, and his three articles on military ethics indicate. His affiliations were Episcopalian, tending

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to High Church. His good health, active mind, and genial sense of humor all, no doubt, contributed to his long life.

Unfortunately, a definitive biography of this man is not possible. Although the collection of his papers in the Naval Historical Foundation fills 16 boxes, there are no more than a half dozen personal letters among them. The correspondence between him and his wife was destroyed by Mrs. Luce after his death, over the protests of his son. Luce's last living descendant was Dr. Stephen B. Luce, a grandson, who is now deceased. This grandson provided the information concerning the destruction of the Luce correspondence, but he did not know if the destruction was accomplished at Luce's request or on his wife's decision. There are lacunas also among Luce's nonofficial correspondence; his papers contain almost no evidence of his long and singular connection with the *Army and Navy Journal*. And, in at least one case, the draft of an official letter preserved in his papers is radically different from the original in the National Archives.

Luce's character is best summarized by his contemporaries.

John S. Barnes, the founder of the Naval Historical Society, served with Luce on two ships and at the Naval Academy. He later resigned to pursue a successful legal and business career. Of Luce he said:

Stephen B. Luce, all through his distinguished career, was one of the most capable officers in our or any navy. Besides his professional accomplishments which were great, his scientific and literary knowledge, increased by constant studying and reading, made him an ideal naval officer, fitted to fill any office with dignity and power within the scope of government action. My intercourse with him, then and later, I regard as one of

the most fortunate intimacies of my life.

Adm. David D. Porter said to Assistant Secretary Fox in 1866: "He is a straightforward fellow and nature has not given him soft manners possessed by people who are all smiles to your face and abuse you behind your back."

Bradley A. Fiske, in the obituary in the *Proceedings* of the U.S. Naval Institute, said in 1917:

Luce taught the Navy to think . . . to think about the Navy as a whole. . . . He saw that a navy in order to be good must be directed as an entity along preconceived and definite lines of strategy. . . . More clearly than any other man in American history, he saw the relations that ought to exist between the central government and its military and naval officers. . . . Luce saw strategy as clearly as most of us see a material object. To him

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### BIOGRAPHIC SUMMARY



Rear Adm. John D. Hayes, U.S. Navy (Ret.) is a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy in 1924, holds a masters degree from the University of California, has done advance work at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, and has attended the Army and Navy Staff College, the Naval War College, and the Industrial College of the Armed Forces. During his naval career he served on destroyers, cruisers, and battleships; served on the staffs of the 3d and 7th Amphibious Forces in the Pacific in World War II; and commanded Service Squadron 1 during the Korean war. As a retired naval officer, Rear Admiral Hayes resides in Annapolis, Md., where he is active as a writer on modern applications of seapower for professional military and naval periodicals.

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more than any other officer who ever lived are naval officers of every nation indebted for the understanding they have of their profession.

Robley D. Evans described him as "that master of his trade," and Albert Gleaves ended the only biography of him with "to such as he there can be no successor."



None other than a Gentleman, as well as a Seaman both in Theory and Practice is qualified to support the Character of a Commissioned Officer in the Navy, nor is any Man fit to Command a Ship of War, who is not also capable of communicating his Ideas on Paper in Language that becomes his Rank.

*John Paul Jones, 1747-1792*