

1969

## President's Notes: Challenge!

Richard G. Colbert  
*U.S. Navy*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colbert, Richard G. (1969) "President's Notes: Challenge!," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 22 : No. 4 , Article 2.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol22/iss4/2>

This President's Forum is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

# CHALLENGE!



A particularly vivid warning of the continuing expansion of Soviet sea-power is the dramatic growth of the Russian merchant marine. In 1950 the Soviet Union's merchant marine consisted of 1.9 million tons of shipping, ranking 21st in the world's commercial fleets, while in 1968 this fleet passed 12 million tons and achieved a world ranking of fifth. If the present rate of growth continues, the Soviet Union probably will, within a decade, have the world's largest merchant fleet. Without question it will be the most modern.

While the Russian merchant fleet has undergone an explosive expansion, that of the United States has declined both absolutely and relatively. From a position of being the world maritime leader following World War II, the United States now has fewer merchant ships and only slightly greater tonnage than that of the Soviet fleet. Even more disturbing is the *qualitative* difference of the two fleets. Seven out of ten Russian merchant ships are less than ten years old, compared with the fact that four out of five U.S. flag vessels are of World War II vintage or older. Of all the merchant ships on order throughout the world, 24 percent (456 vessels) are for the Soviets, whereas only 2.7 percent (51 vessels) are for the United States. Thirty percent of all cargo ships under construction are for the Russian order. America's shipbuilding industry, once the greatest in the world, has shared the decline and now ranks 14th in the world.

During the last few years the U.S. flag merchant marine has been stretched

to the limit in supplying friendly forces in South Vietnam, where 96 percent of all war material has been supplied by surface ships, by sealift. Some difficulties have been experienced in using U.S. owned "flag of convenience" ships for this task. At least four times during the Vietnam emergency, crews of foreign flagships refused to sail with military cargoes for Vietnam, necessitating the transfer of cargoes to U.S. registered ships and resulting in serious delays. With more American owned tonnage under Liberian and Panamanian flags than under U.S., this may well signal a critical, serious problem. Any further erosion of the strength of the U.S. merchant fleet can severely diminish our capability for projecting power into remote regions of the world--at the same time the Soviet Union is developing their capability in this regard in a most dramatic and significant way.

A dozen years ago the Soviet Union had little capability to render effective support in terms of heavy tonnage overseas, such as to an area as remote as Vietnam. As an example, in 1964 the number of Soviet merchant ships supplying military sealift to North Vietnam was 47. However, by 1967 this had grown to 433 ships. It is probable that without the support provided by this lift capability, North Vietnam would have been unable to maintain the war in the South at anything approaching the intensity which it did.

With these facts in mind, it is vitally important that we correctly assess the significance of the growth of the Soviet merchant marine and the decline of that of the United States. A large and efficient merchant marine is not only a significant economic tool, but also a vital means of projecting national power so necessary to world leadership. This rapid expansion of their merchant marine gives the Soviet Union a powerful weapon against the free world in situations ranging from day to day economic competition in peacetime--to hot war situations.

A strong merchant marine is vital to world power status for economic and political as well as military reasons. The government owned and directed merchant fleet of the U.S.S.R. need not always charge rates commensurate with the cost of cargo carrying, but may vary and cut these rates below accepted world shipping rates as political and economic objectives dictate--a practice the Soviets have already utilized. Alternatively, for the United States, commercial cargo carrying is an excellent means of earning needed foreign exchange. A revitalization of our merchant marine and repatriation of the "flag of convenience" fleet would, in all likelihood, be of substantial help in remedying the chronic U.S. balance of payment problems. Again, the Soviet Union obviously sees commercial fishing as important in the battle for world leadership. With much of the world starved for protein, it will be necessary to turn increasingly to the seas for food. Ability to compete in harvesting food from the sea will be increasingly important to many nations' future survival. But here too, the U.S. is rapidly falling behind not only the Russians, but other maritime nations of the world.

I have already alluded to the military utility of a strong merchant marine in transporting supplies during actual military conflict. However the Russian merchant marine plays an even wider

role. Simultaneously with their commercial employment, the Soviet merchant and fishing fleets serve an important intelligence collection function. On balance, there is little distinction between the peaceful uses of a merchant ship and its war time uses. Passenger ships easily serve as troop ships; cargo ships can serve as submarine mother ships; and fishing trawlers can be used for commando operations or to infiltrate supplies to guerrilla forces. When it is recognized that all of these Russian ships are financed, designed, built, operated and controlled by the Soviet government their employment in this way has particular significance.

In the Cuban crisis, it was merchant shipping that took the missiles into Cuba and took them out again. The list of para-military uses of the merchant marine may be lengthened almost indefinitely. My point here is that the growth of the government owned and tightly controlled Soviet merchant fleet and the decline of the privately owned United States fleet is of clear and important politico-military significance.

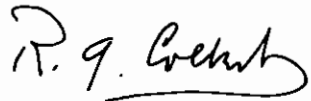
The expansion of the Soviet merchant fleet, coupled with the new capability of their navy to operate far from home with afloat supply signifies a radical change in Soviet maritime policy. Recognizing that the capacity for mutual nuclear destruction demands the avoidance of direct military confrontation between the United States and the U.S.S.R., and therefore the struggle between the Free and Communist Worlds might well best be fought largely on the periphery, the Soviets have been building the maritime capacity for exerting power far from their own shores. Until recently, the Soviet Navy was relegated primarily to defensive tasks in coastal home waters. Now, with the newly potent merchant marine in support of their expanding naval forces, they have a capacity to intervene "where the action is."

The growth of the Soviet merchant

fleet, and the relative decline of the U.S. merchant marine will result in a tremendous reversal of role, a shift in the balance of maritime power. At the same time the Soviet Union is developing a new capacity to project economic and military influence to the most remote corners of the world, we would appear progressively to be losing that capability. The Soviet Union, historically thought of as a land power, is moving toward the position of maritime supremacy that has until now belonged to the great maritime nations of the free world. If this trend is to be countered by the U.S., there must be a revitalization of our merchant marine. To this end, new solutions are required, for the old ones have obviously been wholly inadequate.

For the foreseeable future, the conflict between the Communist and Free Worlds will continue to involve economic and political competition, brush-fire wars and "wars of national liberation" in many parts of the world—requiring extended supply lines. Unless

we maintain the sealift capability to meet these demands when and where they are made, we will lose the battles before they start. New, solid and imaginative thinking is needed to create an effective program to revitalize the American merchant marine. The importance of a healthy merchant marine to the national defense makes it appropriate that we in the Navy work toward the development of a new and dynamic merchant marine program. The years ahead must see the United States undertake a bold and effective program to rebuild our merchant marine, if we are to meet the Soviet challenge.



R. G. COLBERT  
Vice Admiral, U.S. Navy  
President, Naval War College

---

**Cover: Photograph of the residence of the President of the Naval War College. Built in 1896, it was designated for use by the President of the Naval War College in 1911 and first occupied by Admiral Raymond P. Rodgers. It has since seen a stream of distinguished visitors—chiefs of state, flag and general officers, and high ranking government officials of many nations as well as prominent educators and experts in the many fields of study at the College.**

---