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## Research & Debate: The New Young Turks

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## RESEARCH & DEBATE

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### THE NEW YOUNG TURKS

*Commander Benjamin Armstrong, U.S. Navy*

From the sixth floor of the University of Chicago Gleacher Center you can look down the river and into the reflected prism of the bustling city's concrete, steel, and glass. In the opposite direction you look out across Lake Michigan where the blue and grey come together at a far horizon. These remarkable vistas welcomed the second annual Defense Entrepreneurs Forum (DEF) in October 2014. Over one hundred and fifty military personnel, defense-industry professionals, and innovation experts came together for three days to discuss the issues and critical questions faced by American defense in the twenty-first century.

DEF was the brainchild of a small group of relatively junior officers. Coming out of more than a decade of war, many served with a high level of responsibility that is uncommon for young men and women. They encountered not just the issues of life and death that combat brings but also the demands of humanitarian work for entire towns, nation-building responsibilities in large cities, and the need to come up with creative solutions to the problems they faced. Frequently this included working with limited resources or for an unresponsive, stagnant bureaucracy. They knew, with challenges looming in the coming decades, that

the search for critical thinking needed an advocate in today's military services.<sup>1</sup>

DEF was established to bring together those creative junior men and women, who heartily embrace the Silicon Valley definitions of the terms *innovation* and *entrepreneur*, with civilian workers in the defense industry and both critics and current leaders. Through personal interaction at conferences and encouragement to advocate for ideas through professional writing, DEF's board

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of directors looked to expand the circle of people talking about new ways of addressing the defense world. They aimed to support those who were being constructively critical of military organizations, particularly those inside the system.<sup>2</sup>

As a naval officer by profession and military helicopter pilot by trade, I was drawn to these ideas. As a historian by education, I also knew that the processes they were exploring and the grand narrative they looked to build were not quite as new and disruptive as some believed. Context, as is said, is king.

Twice I've been asked to serve as a speaker at the annual DEF conference in Chicago, most recently as the opening keynote. My historical talks have looked to illuminate some of the recurring questions that come along with defense innovation and adaptation.<sup>3</sup> But as I have interacted and collaborated with these inspired defense professionals, I have also come to realize that there is a great deal of history in the existence of this organization, despite its clearly twenty-first-century roots.

#### A COMMENDABLE LITTLE INSTITUTION

Almost two hundred years ago during the presidency of Andrew Jackson, a period emerged in U.S. naval history that some historians have termed an *age of naval enlightenment*. The first two decades after the U.S. Navy's refounding in 1798 were a busy time for naval officers, who saw four wars: the Quasi-War with France, First Barbary War, War of 1812, and Second Barbary War. The following Jackson years brought a period of relative peace for the service, opening up a period of reflection and professionalization.<sup>4</sup>

With less combat and fewer deployments, officers began considering the details of their service more closely. The officers assigned to the Brooklyn Navy Yard took inspiration from the lyceum movement that had spread across Europe. In 1833 they established the U.S. Naval Lyceum in a small building on the base. Dominated by junior officers, the group wrote in its constitution: "We, the Officers of the Navy and Marine Corps, in order to promote the diffusion of useful knowledge,—to foster a spirit of harmony and a community of interest in the service, and to cement the links which unite us as professional brethren, have formed ourselves into a Society, to be denominated 'The United States Naval Lyceum.'"<sup>5</sup>

Their effort was twofold. First, they looked to establish a museum of artifacts, art, and curiosities that naval officers collected from their deployments across the seven seas. Second, they established the *Naval Magazine* to discuss the pressing issues of the day.

For two years the *Naval Magazine* was at the forefront of naval professionalism and criticism. Subjects for discussion included the military promotion system and rank structure, the introduction of new technology like steam power, and strategic and geopolitical subjects. Unfortunately, the maintenance of the

museum and building that housed the lyceum appears to have taken up a majority of the funds, and the magazine ceased publication in 1837. But the ideals of innovation and reform were alive and well, as one of the magazine's pseudonymous authors wrote: "The spirit of the times and the necessities of the navy loudly declare that change is requisite. We cannot remain as we are."<sup>6</sup>

The lyceum lived on well beyond the last issue of the magazine, continuing to host lectures and talks on the vital naval subjects of the day. The museum's collection grew into an important repository. The *New York Times* described it as "a commendable little institution in every sense."<sup>7</sup> The members who established the organization as junior officers rose through the ranks and became important naval leaders of the Mexican-American War and the Civil War. They commanded America's first steam-powered warships and led the Navy's growing responsibilities on the global stage. The lyceum established a vital intellectual foundation for military officers who looked to improve their service.

#### THE DECADE OF NEGLECT

Following the end of the American Civil War the United States continued a pattern that has been displayed throughout its history by dramatically cutting back on defense spending. The War between the States, reconstructing the nation in its wake, and the promise of continued expansion westward guided the American populace to a continental, internal focus that led to cuts in the Navy's size and capabilities. Many naval officers saw it as a decade of neglect.

In October 1873 fifteen of these officers came together on the grounds of the U.S. Naval Academy. Senior and junior commissioned naval officers, as well as warrant officers and Marines, they began as a discussion group to debate naval affairs and national and international issues. They named their society the United States Naval Institute. Many of the early meetings included discussing and commenting on papers that were prepared and presented by the members. They decided to publish their own journal, containing the best of the papers and some of the commentary. In December 1874 the journal was first published as the *Papers and Proceedings of the United States Naval Institute* and is now known today as *Proceedings* magazine.<sup>8</sup>

Early members of the institute included officers who would have enormous impacts on the Navy and Marine Corps, and even the nation at large. Stephen Luce, one of the first officers to present a paper, is best known as the greatest advocate for, and founding President of, the U.S. Naval War College. His virtual invention of American professional military education had an impact on strategic thought and military and naval affairs that rippled across generations. Another early member was Alfred Thayer Mahan, known to most students of military history for his strategic writing and his famous book *The Influence of Sea*

*Power upon History*. He was one of the institute's earliest presidents. He began his publishing career with his essay on naval education in the pages of *Proceedings*. From Civil War officers like Admiral David Dixon Porter to the future Spanish-American War leaders like W. T. Sampson and George Dewey, the organization grew rapidly. The articles published in *Proceedings* questioned the status quo and raised American knowledge of naval affairs as the country came out of its Manifest Destiny period and returned its attention to the larger world.<sup>9</sup>

The U.S. Naval Institute and *Proceedings* began primarily as a place for junior and midlevel officers to express their ideas and advocate for reform. Over time they continued that tradition but also became a place for thought leaders, from senior admirals to established academics, to debate the issues with upstart junior officers and military critics who looked to move in new directions. The professional society officially adopted the mission "to provide an independent forum for those who dare to read, think, speak, and write in order to advance the professional, literary, and scientific understanding of sea power and other issues critical to national defense."<sup>10</sup>

## REGENERATING SERVICE INTELLECTS

Forty years after the officers met in Annapolis another group gathered in discussion in Hampshire, England. These Royal Navy officers saw the approach of the Great War and feared that their service was unprepared. They met, as Reginald Plunkett said, to develop "some means of regenerating Service intellects before Armageddon."<sup>11</sup> These British sailors were focused on their own officer corps, which they believed needed a greater understanding of naval affairs and war as the United Kingdom approached the looming conflict.

Inspired by Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond and the noted civilian strategist Sir Julian Corbett, they founded what was originally thought of as a correspondence society. The purpose was to bring junior officers together in discussions for their own self-improvement. In 1913 they began publication of a journal titled the *Naval Review*. There was significant official resistance from the newly established Naval War Staff, and during World War I the Admiralty ordered the *Naval Review* to cease publication. However, W. H. Henderson, the editor at the time, continued to collect material and even circulated some of it to members in the original spirit of a correspondence society. At the end of the war the *Naval Review* began publication again, including the material Henderson had collected, to ensure there wasn't a loss of lessons learned from the conflict.<sup>12</sup>

When publication began again in 1919, Henderson's opening article specifically took inspiration from the U.S. Naval Institute but looked to take a uniquely British tack. Concerns that expressing contrarian views would have a negative impact on the careers of junior officers, who were the target audience, led to a

unique editorial policy. Where *Proceedings* has a clear editorial requirement for authors to write under their own names, and the *Naval Magazine* encouraged the use of pseudonyms, the *Naval Review* elected not to use bylines at all. Articles were considered “from the membership,” and the editors diligently protected the contributors.<sup>13</sup>

The no-name policy had a secondary impact. Senior officers or establishment supporters could write counterarguments without standing on their rank. Genuine debates about naval subjects were fostered through the process. Over the course of time the publication, which is still active and vibrant today, has gone through cycles of official approval as well as censure from the Admiralty. In World War II there was no censorship, and the “Diary of the War at Sea” published in the journal’s pages has become an important historical record. Today, the *Naval Review* has adjusted its editorial policy to allow both pseudonyms and real names, increasing flexibility for writers and editors while maintaining the ability to protect new thinkers. Like *Proceedings* in the United States, it has become the central place for discussions of naval affairs and constructive criticism from inside the naval sphere.<sup>14</sup>

## TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY YOUNG TURKS

At the start of the twentieth century a cadre of revolutionaries in Ottoman Turkey was first described with the label the Young Turks. Across the past hundred years the label came to mean a new breed or a young advocate for change. American politicians in the 1920s and beyond have described the junior officers who drove debate and writing in the pages of the *Naval Magazine*, *Proceedings*, and the *Naval Review* as Young Turks. Today, the members and leaders of DEF follow in the wake of these previous reformers and idealists. The ease of access to publishing created by digital and social media has led to a growing proliferation of new groups looking to foster ideas and critical debate. Examples include think-tank Internet forums like the Center for International Maritime Security (based in Washington, D.C.); blogs focused on strategy, policy, and leadership, such as the *Bridge* (also known as the Strategy Bridge on Facebook and Twitter) and *War Council*; and more formal web-based publications like *War on the Rocks*.

These new organizations should look to the history of reform-minded societies of the past to help chart their way. The career dangers from a military culture that remains conservative and slow to change are still real for internal critics, despite historical examples of successful reformers. Many senior officers still appear to ascribe to Admiral Arleigh Burke’s invective that “dissent is not a virtue.” Because of this, questions of attribution and clearly stated publication policies are important for the new Young Turks to consider. The longevity of *Proceedings* and the *Naval Review* offers both examples and warnings about balancing new ideas and criticism with explanations and defense of established policies.

It is inspiring to see those who are interested in looking at their military service, or employment in the defense world, with a critical eye. The field of critical military studies sometimes focuses on the work of academic, political, or civilian-interest groups to reform our military forces and defense industries from the outside. These groups can occasionally be seen as antagonistic toward those who wear uniforms, or even dismissive of them. However, criticism and dissent from within the armed forces are important drivers of change and adaptation. Publications, formerly in print but now commonly online, where these thinkers express themselves remain a vital outlet not only for forwarding modern debate and innovation but also for studying the past successes and failures of military criticism.

Finding organizations that, like DEF, aim to bring civilian and uniformed critics together to think of new ideas and harvest solutions will be an important part of progress in the twenty-first century.

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