

## NEW INSIGHTS FROM OLD BOOKS

---

### The Case of Alfred Thayer Mahan

*Jon Sumida*

**A**lfred Thayer Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, which appeared in 1890, is widely regarded as the first important study of the relationship between naval affairs and international politics. Mahan subsequently published twenty-odd additional volumes that extended and elaborated the views presented in this book. On the present occasion, an article based upon the traditional summary of Mahan's main ideas could be justified as an obligatory nod to the U.S. Navy's intellectual heritage, or as an act of faith in the ca-

*Jon Sumida received his B.A. (1971) from the University of California, Santa Cruz, with honors, and his M.A. (1974) and Ph.D. (1982), the latter with honors, from the University of Chicago. He has been a fellow-commoner of the Archives Center at Churchill College, Cambridge University (1983); a fellow of the Wilson Center twice (1986 and 1995–96) and of the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation (1990–91); and Visiting Distinguished Professor in the Department of Military Strategy and Operations at the National War College, in Washington, D.C. (2000). Of his numerous articles, two won the Moncado Prize from the Society for Military History (1993 and 1995); in 1997 he received the Naval History Author of the Year Award for 1996 from the U.S. Naval Institute. His books include *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered (1997 and 1999)*, *In Defence of Naval Supremacy: Finance, Technology, and British Naval Policy, 1889–1914 (1989 and 1993)*, and *The Pollen Papers: The Privately Circulated Printed Works of Arthur Hungerford Pollen, 1901–1916 (1984)*. Dr. Sumida is associate professor of history at the University of Maryland.*

capacity of patristic writing to inspire strategic insight. Recent scholarship, however, has demonstrated that Mahan's thinking about sea power has been fundamentally misunderstood. This article will thus examine three areas where the new interpretation of Mahan affects consideration of problems that are of interest today. The first is naval and military cooperation when fighting in inland or coastal waters; the second is the nature and role of naval supremacy with respect to a complex world system of trade; and the third arises from the requirements of higher naval education in a period of rapid technological change. In other words, Mahan's work will be related to jointness and power projection from the sea, the expansion of the global economy, and the "revolution in naval affairs."

There are three main arguments. First, Mahan believed that when one side in a conflict possessed

absolute sea command or in special cases even temporary local control, naval operations in direct support of land forces could be of decisive importance. Second, Mahan maintained that naval supremacy in the twentieth century would be exercised by a transnational consortium acting in defense of a multinational system of free trade. Third, Mahan was convinced that the transformation of naval materiel by radical technological change had not eliminated tactical and strategic uncertainty from the conduct of war, and that the improvement of executive ability through the rigorous study of history should therefore be the basis of naval officer education.

Mahan is often portrayed—because of misreadings of fragments of his writing, or all too often upon no reading of the original texts at all—as a purveyor of truisms about naval strategy and doctrine. The resulting caricature is frequently either misapplied or dismissed as outdated. This article, which is informed by the study of all of Mahan’s major publications and surviving correspondence, should remind us of the merits of the adage, “When you want a good new idea, read an old book.”

#### A COMPLEX PICTURE OF THE INTERRELATED DYNAMICS

Alfred Thayer Mahan was an officer in the Union navy during the Civil War. He was never a participant in a major battle, but his active service included many months of inshore work in small warships enforcing the blockade of the Confederate coast. Nearly two decades after the end of hostilities, Mahan accepted a commission to write a book about naval operations on the Caribbean coast and up the Mississippi and Red Rivers in the war. In addition to drawing upon his own experience during this conflict, Mahan studied memoirs and documents, and corresponded with veterans from both sides. The completed work, which was entitled *The Gulf and Inland Waters*, was published in 1883. Several years after the appearance of *Influence of Sea Power upon History* and its two-volume sequel, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, which came out in 1892, Mahan produced a biography of the admiral who had commanded most of the Union operations described in his first book. *Admiral Farragut*, which was published in 1897, gave Mahan another opportunity to present his views on fighting in littoral and interior waters that involved cooperation between the army and navy.

During the American Civil War, the lack of a fleet meant that the Confederacy could not mount an effective challenge to Union control of the high seas. Moreover, the naval weakness of the southern states exposed their vital internal riverine communications and major ports to seaborne assault. Over the course of the four-year conflict, the territorial integrity and economic vitality of the South were compromised by the integrated action of the Union army and navy,

which established Federal control of the Mississippi and captured New Orleans and Mobile. Mahan's two accounts of these campaigns demonstrate that he possessed considerable knowledge of the special characteristics of "brown water" fighting, appreciated the necessity of connecting the activity of land and naval forces, and recognized that the success of joint operations had been a major contributor to the ultimate Union victory.

In books written before and after the Farragut biography, Mahan criticized Admiral Horatio Nelson's advocacy of amphibious operations in support of land campaigns and, in general, opposed overseas expeditions. But these views were

---

*When dealing with Mahan, the focus of inquiry should not be his statement of principle but his choice of issues, and the complexities of the historical cases that were his main subjects.*

---

applied to circumstances in which the opposing side possessed—or was supposed to possess—the capacity to dispute sea command. Mahan reasoned that in such a case any attempt to project power

from water to land risked naval assets that were needed to preserve the general control of the oceans, upon which all depended. When the maintenance of maritime lines of communication was not an issue, he had no objection to using naval force in combination with an army to achieve a military objective, and he well understood that such action could have great strategic value.

Indeed, Mahan attributed his initial inspiration—for the idea that naval supremacy was of much larger historical significance than was generally recognized—to his reflections on a historical case involving the use of uncontested command of the sea to achieve decisive military success. In his memoirs, he recalled that in 1885 he had chanced upon Theodor Mommsen's history of ancient Rome. While reading this book, Mahan had been struck by the thought that the outcome of the wars between Rome and Carthage would have been different had the latter possessed the ability, as did the former, of using the sea as an avenue of invasion instead of moving its armies over land.

After some reflection, Mahan decided to apply the example of the victory of a state that could use naval force effectively over one that could not to the history of European wars in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This resulted in the first of the "influence of sea power" volumes, in which Mahan closed the introduction with a lengthy examination of the naval aspects of Rome's defeat of Carthage. He ended the main narrative of *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* with an account of the British defeat at Yorktown in 1781. The outcome of this battle had been determined by the reinforcement of American and French armies by sea, and also by French naval control of surrounding waters, which had prevented a British fleet from relieving the besieged British army. The Yorktown disaster had prompted negotiations that ultimately ended the war and

established American independence. In the book that made his reputation, Mahan thus used the survival of what was to become imperial Rome and the creation of the United States as powerful historical testaments to the transcendent value of naval force in support of military operations.

But *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* also introduced a set of propositions about the relationship between the economic basis of national strength and the development and effective use of a navy. Seaborne trade, Mahan maintained in his first best-seller, was a critically important generator of wealth. In the event of war, a nation that could protect its own maritime commerce while disrupting that of its opponent could shift the balance of national resources decisively in its own favor. A fleet capable of winning and keeping command of the sea was required to accomplish both of these tasks. In peace, therefore, a great state was well advised to do everything it could to build the strongest possible navy. Over time, the cumulative effect of sound naval policy and strategy in peace and war was economic prosperity and territorial aggrandizement.

Naval force structure and deployment were also important variables. Cruiser attacks on scattered shipping, Mahan believed, were incapable of inflicting prohibitive losses on a large merchant marine. Blockade of the enemy's main ports—implemented by a fleet of battleships capable of defeating any force that was sent against it—was the only way to accomplish the complete or near complete stoppage of overseas commerce required to achieve a significant strategic effect against a great maritime power. It was for this reason that Mahan made the number of battleships the measure of naval potency, and the destruction of the enemy battle fleet through decisive engagement—for the purposes of either securing or breaking a blockade—the main operational objective of naval strategy.

These interrelated arguments addressed major concerns of Mahan's own time. From the 1880s, the general expansion of European navies in response to increasing imperial rivalry was accompanied by intensive debate over the relative merits of a naval strategy based on commerce raiding by cruisers, as opposed to one based on command of the sea by battleships. In addition, the advent of steam propulsion and metal hulls had vastly increased the efficiency of maritime transport, which in turn caused a sharp upturn in overseas commerce and the wealth generated by this kind of activity. Mahan's choice of European great power conflict during the late age of sail as the vehicle for his argument also favored discussion of the general struggle for naval supremacy in preference to case studies of combined operations along coasts and rivers. So although Mahan clearly recognized the importance of power projection from sea to land, it was his examination of the contest for command of the sea, and its political-economic consequences, that created the immediate and wide audience for *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* and later publications. The resulting

association of Mahan with arguments exclusively about naval supremacy distorted perceptions of his identity as a strategic theorist, setting the stage for misleading comparisons with writers (such as C. E. Callwell and Julian Corbett) who focused more on the relationship of land and sea power. But a far greater problem was created by the serious misunderstanding of the basic character of Mahan's rendition of European naval history in the age of sail, a misperception that led to faulty inferences about Mahan's fundamental views on grand strategy.

The "influence of sea power" series began in the mid-seventeenth century with a situation in which three major maritime states—France, the Netherlands, and England—were roughly balanced with respect to naval prowess and accom-

---

*From the start, most writers on naval history and strategy misperceived his work, and successive generations compounded the errors of their predecessors.*

---

plishment. It ended in the early nineteenth century with the wars of the French Revolution and Empire, during which Britain's Royal Navy more or less ruled the waves.

In addition to the two works

named previously, which provided an overview of the entire period, Mahan wrote two supporting case studies: a biography of Admiral Nelson, and an account of the War of 1812. In terms of "plot," the entire series could be read as the story of the rise of Britain's naval supremacy and its consequent achievement of economic and political preeminence in Europe. In terms of "moral," the series seemed to say that Britain's sustained and aggressive use of a large fleet to obtain territory, wealth, and power could be emulated by any state that had the mind and will to follow its example.

Mahan, it appeared to many, had intended his analytical history to be a grand strategic primer for his own times, and in particular for the government of his own country. He was indeed a proponent of a much strengthened U.S. Navy. It is thus not hard to imagine that he hoped that his homeland would become the world's greatest power in the twentieth century by the same means that Britain had used to achieve this status in the period covered by his histories. The fact that the United States ultimately rose to the top in large part through the effective use of naval supremacy has only reinforced the propensity to draw such inferences about Mahan's underlying motive.

But careful consideration of Mahan's actual writing in the "influence of sea power" series, of his political-economic outlook, and of his punditry about the future course of world politics makes it impossible to accept the foregoing characterizations of his account of naval warfare in the late age of sail and of its intended application to the twentieth century. The first installment of the "influence of sea power" series is about the failure of France to exploit its maritime assets properly, a failure that in Mahan's view allowed Britain to achieve major

successes in war virtually by default. Mahan chose to close the book with a disproportionately lengthy account of the American Revolution, a conflict in which sound French policy and deployments resulted in Britain's defeat and the loss of a vast and rich colonial territory. In the wars of the French Revolution and Empire, in contrast, the navy of France was compromised from the start by political upheaval and institutional disintegration. The second installment was thus about Britain's use of naval supremacy to contain a militarily preeminent France through a strategy of attrition. Mahan did not hold that the ultimate outcome had been preordained—that is, that naval supremacy as such guaranteed victory. The triumph of Britain, given the evenness of the balance between the opposing sides, he argued in both the second and the third installments, depended upon extraordinary operational naval leadership—in the person of Nelson. In the concluding fourth installment, Mahan's main theme was that inadequate American naval strength was the fundamental explanation of diplomatic failure before the War of 1812 and of naval operational impotence, with all its attendant serious strategic drawbacks, during the conflict.

Britain and British naval strategy did not, in short, represent the focus of the “influence of sea power” series. Mahan's histories did not constitute a simple morality play about a single state acting according to a prescribed general course of action; they offered instead a complex picture of the interrelated dynamics of naval and maritime commercial activity on the one hand, and international politics on the other. Mahan's essentially liberal political-economic views, moreover, led him to reject the mercantilist conception of a world consisting of competing players with mutually exclusive interests. Mahan believed that free trade between nations promoted increases in the volume of international exchanges of goods, which worked to the benefit of all participants. The great expansion of French overseas shipping after the War of the Spanish Succession, he argued in the first installment of the “influence of sea power” series, was attributable to peace and the removal of restrictions on commerce, not to government initiatives. In the second installment, Mahan observed that sea power was an organism that included not only organized naval force but free maritime enterprise. While the former depended upon state funding and direction, the latter thrived in the absence of government interference. During the wars of the French Revolution and Empire, Mahan maintained, the British state was able to exploit the prosperity produced by an international sea-based mercantile system that it could protect but did not possess. Britain was not, in other words, the owner of sea power but its custodian.

Mahan believed that Britain had been both the defender and main beneficiary of seaborne trade in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because its parliament had been dominated by a small group of men with close

ties to maritime commerce. Such an oligarchy had been predisposed to heavy spending on the navy, producing a fleet strong enough to defend a merchant marine that carried a large proportion of the world's overseas trade. Over the course of the nineteenth century, however, the democratization of the British

---

*Mahan devoted as much attention to the strategic direction of naval operations as he did to the relationship between naval supremacy and the course of international politics.*

---

political system undercut the manipulation of government policy by a mercantile elite. As a consequence, Mahan argued, the British state of the late nineteenth and twentieth century lost the will to

finance a navy capable of defending what had become a much larger and increasingly multinational system of oceanic economic exchange. Moreover, in Mahan's view, no single democratized power would be capable of assuming such a burden. For this reason—and because he was convinced that free trade conditions provided large benefits to all major maritime countries—Mahan concluded that in the twentieth century, naval supremacy would be exercised by a transnational consortium of navies. The basis of such a system, he insisted, would not be formal agreement but the absence of important conflicts of political interest, coupled to a common stake in the security of a highly productive form of economic activity. Mahan was thus convinced that Britain and the United States would cooperate without recourse to a treaty and that in such a relationship the latter would serve as the junior partner. To play even this supporting role effectively, Mahan insisted, America needed a larger navy. He did not advocate the creation of an American navy that was stronger than every other unless the British navy was weakened by inadequate financing or by war with a European competitor.

Mahan offered his views on the future course of international affairs in several book-length monographs and in periodical articles that were later collected and published as books. In them Mahan contemplated a range of possible courses of events. These included the containment of an expansionist Russia by an international coalition, war between Britain and Germany, and even a cataclysmic collision between European and Asian civilizations. What he did not do was apply a crude reading of the great-power contests of the late age of sail to the industrial future and thereby imagine the rise of a hegemonic United States through offensive naval warfare and mercantilist economic policy. While his realist temperament prompted him to argue that war and the threat of war were likely to be facts of life for the foreseeable future, Mahan did not rule out either the possibility or desirability of general peace founded upon the workings of an international system of free trade. In such a world economy, he was confident,

the energy and entrepreneurial spirit of the American people would enable them to compete successfully.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the onset of industrialization transformed naval materiel within the span of a generation. When Mahan was a midshipman at the U.S. Naval Academy, just before the American Civil War, he was trained on wooden sailing ships armed with muzzle-loading guns. By the time he retired from the service at the end of the century, steel warships propelled by steam and equipped with breech-loading weapons of much larger size and power had become standard. The sudden obsolescence, as a result of rapid technical change, of much of what had constituted traditional naval fighting practice and the virtually worldwide sense that what now really mattered in war was the possession of the latest, and therefore most capable, naval armaments undermined the self-confidence of naval executive leaders. Conversely, naval officer technicians could celebrate the wonders of technical improvement and claim that the critical importance of qualitative advantage in materiel made their activity central to the efficiency of the Navy. Moreover, administrative burdens had been magnified by the management needs of the new technology and also by the expansion of the American fleet that had begun in the 1880s; these factors created a large class of naval officer bureaucrats with pretensions to higher status not directly connected to traditional requirements for command at sea.

The relative decline of naval officer executives alarmed Mahan. By dint of intellectual patrimony and personal experience in the greatest conflict ever fought by his service up to his time, he had decided opinions on the paramount value of effective leadership in war and how it might be developed. Mahan's father, Dennis Hart Mahan, a distinguished professor at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, had believed that great executive leadership was of crucial importance in war. The elder Mahan had observed that at critical junctures, commanders would be confronted with complex, contingent, changing, and contradictory information, which meant that decision making could never be reduced to the mechanistic application of rules or principles. Development of the temperament required for sound judgment under such circumstances, Dennis Hart Mahan was convinced, could be aided by the study of detailed and analytically rigorous operational history. There can be little doubt that this outlook was imparted to his son, and thereafter reinforced by the younger Mahan's direct observation of command decision making in the Civil War. Alfred Thayer Mahan's first publication, in 1879, was an essay on naval education in which he attacked what he regarded as the overemphasis on technical subjects and called for much greater attention to the study of what amounted to the liberal arts. Such an approach, he maintained, would develop the moral qualities that officers required

to be able to make decisions in the face of danger and uncertainty. The vital role of moral strength with respect to executive command, along with the appropriate means of improving it in naval officers, became a theme in Mahan's later writing that was no less important to him than his examination of the relationship between naval affairs and international politics.

In *The Influence of Sea Power upon History*, Mahan argued that although tactics changed as the character of armaments altered, the validity of the basic principles of strategy were relatively unaffected by technical progress, and human character was an absolute, a constant. History, therefore, might have little to say

---

*The study of all of Mahan's major publications and surviving correspondence should remind us of the adage, "When you want a good new idea, read an old book."*

---

of current applicability to tactics but a great deal that was pertinent to strategy and operational command. Mahan devoted as much attention in the main narrative of this work to the strategic direc-

tion of naval operations as he did to his grand strategic argument about the relationship between naval supremacy and the course of international politics. He also made a few observations about the critical effect of individual moral character on the exercise of naval command. In later installments of the "influence of sea power" series, he remained no less attentive to strategic questions and, through his treatment of Nelson's leadership qualities, wrote at length about the moral dimensions of executive decision making in war.

In several of his articles, Mahan maintained that the essence of effective command comprised rapid and judicious risk taking and full responsibility for outcomes. This set of characteristics was alien to the scientific *mentalité* of the engineer, who dealt deliberately with the discovery of certainty about physical matters through controlled experiment, and to the bureaucratized mindset of the administrator, who countenanced delay and fragmented accountability. In peace, an executive leader had few if any opportunities either to display his capacity for war command or to acquire experience that would enable him to develop it, while technicians and bureaucrats flourished in the pursuit of engineering innovation or administrative expansion. For Mahan, therefore, serious naval history, of the kind that he had produced in the "influence of sea power" series, served two major practical functions. First, it reminded the navy of what executive war command was and why it was important; second, it provided a sound educational basis for developing that capacity in officers who had no war experience. The latter task was accomplished through stories about naval decision making in war, narratives that prompted readers to imagine the psychological dynamics as well as material circumstances that condition the direction of operations in real conflicts.

Mahan lacked the powers of technical ratiocination that were needed to evaluate properly a complex engineering problem, such as capital-ship design. His criticisms in the early twentieth century of the all-big-gun battleship, therefore, failed to take into account several significant factors that exposed his analysis to swift and thorough destruction. But neither was Mahan a naval technological Luddite. If he was a critic of many of the claims made for mechanical innovation, it was because he was convinced that such progress had not eliminated uncertainty from decision making in war, and that the decadence of the naval executive ethos that had resulted was thus a dangerous weakness. His antidote to the technological determinists of his time, however, was history rather than political science; he believed that the verisimilitude afforded by detailed narrative about things that had actually happened could engage the minds and feelings of students of command in ways that summarized lessons or abstractions could not. Mahan's preference for historical representation over the construction of explanatory systems when dealing with the past is in line with much that has been argued recently by proponents of chaos and complexity theory. Further, his remedy for moral dilemmas—confidence in intelligent intuition—is one that is supported today by the findings of cognitive science. Viewed in light of these modern, cutting-edge inquiries into human learning and behavior, the writings of Mahan may be regarded as not just relevant but revelatory.

#### A COGNITIVE POINT OF DEPARTURE

For nearly a hundred years, Alfred Thayer Mahan's pronouncements on naval affairs and international politics were too famous to be ignored but also too extensive, difficult, and complicated to be easily understood as a whole. From the start, most writers on naval history and strategy misperceived his work, and successive generations compounded the errors of their predecessors, creating a large literature whose shortcomings further obstructed access to the meaning of the original texts. As a consequence, Mahan's basic ideas have been misrepresented as follows: first, sea control was always the central question of naval strategy; second, the ideal of national grand strategy was the achievement of naval supremacy as the prerequisite to international economic and political pre-eminence; and third, success in naval warfare depended upon the correct application of certain principles of strategy. These propositions add little to current naval discussions, which consider the American possession of sea control and a monopoly on superpower status virtually as givens, and which are preoccupied by the transformation of fighting practice through radical technological innovation.

The major arguments of Mahan that can be found through comprehensive and rigorous critical examination, however, are very different from what has

been supposed. Moreover, the issues that prompted him to put pen to paper were remarkably similar to those of today. He began both his naval and writing careers dealing with joint operations in coastal waters. Mahan was confronted by the rapid expansion of a global system of free trade; by uncertainty about what America's proper naval role under such conditions should be; and by a "revolution in naval affairs" that was occasioned by the replacement of pre-industrial by industrial naval armaments and that in turn raised large questions about the nature of wartime command and the education of those who would exercise it.

Mahan's contemplation of these problems produced the following conclusions. First, close cooperation between land and sea forces is essential for the success of joint operations, whose outcomes can determine the victor in a major war. Second, because the cost of building and maintaining a navy that is strong enough to command the seas unilaterally will be too high for any single power, sea control in the twentieth century and beyond would be the responsibility of a transnational consortium of navies. Third, great advances in technology do not diminish reliance upon the good judgment of naval executive leaders, who could best be prepared for effective high-level decision making in war by the proper study of history.

Identifying Mahan's true basic attitudes toward power projection from sea to land, naval supremacy, and the relationship between technological change and naval officer education does more than correct academic error. What have been believed to be Mahan's ideas created a body of theory that still—whether through acceptance, modification, or rejection—forms part of the thought processes of most senior naval officers. Changing what has for so long been a cognitive point of departure, therefore, has significant implications for anyone concerned with the future of naval policy. Mahan has been widely regarded as the discoverer of what he supposedly believed were universal truths about naval strategy that were to be applied directly. The fact is, however, that Mahan's propositions were observations about particular phenomena rather than general lessons. When dealing with Mahan, the focus of inquiry should therefore not be his statement of principle or delineation of precedent but his choice of issues, and the complexities of the historical cases that were his main subjects. The crucial linkages between his past and our present, in other words, are not to be found in his conclusions but in his questions and his conduct of the inquiry. These are still worth engaging, because Mahan faced problems that were similar to those that confront navies today, and he brought to them a powerful intelligence that was informed by rich experience and wide reading. History was the venue for Mahan's scholarly labors, because he understood both the limits of theory and the power of narrative when it came to matters of human behavior and social

organization under the conditions of war. There is much more that can and should be written about the general and particular aspects of navies and naval power, but approaching, let alone matching, the intellectual standard of Mahan's pioneering achievement will not be easy.