
Book Reviews

The Civil War and America's naval 'surrogate war' against Britain

by William Jones

Divided Waters: The Naval History of the Civil War

by Ivan Musicant

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In the profuse literature on the Civil War, perhaps all too little attention has been paid to the naval aspects of that war and even less to its significance for the development of the U.S. Navy itself, a development that was intimately connected to the rapid industrial takeoff of the United States in the post-Civil War period and its emergence as the major world power.

In one sense, it is not unusual that the naval aspects of the Civil War have received so little attention, because the actual defeat of the military forces of the Confederacy occurred in major battles on land: the fall of Vicksburg, Lee's defeat at Gettysburg, Sherman's march to the sea—great moments that have been enshrined with a justifiable aura of military greatness. And yet, when the Civil War is understood in its true significance, as a continuing war of the United States against Great Britain, the naval aspects of the war take on a paramount importance.

Ivan Musicant's well-researched, and eminently readable work contributes greatly to an understanding of that importance. Unfortunately, his failure to view the war as a "surrogate war" against Great Britain, also causes him to leave out some important developments that would properly belong in any comprehensive naval history of the Civil War.

Before the firing died down at Fort Sumter, the first strategic war plan against the South was proposed by then-Commander of the Armies Gen. Winfield Scott, old "Fuss and Feathers," as the blustering figure was called for quite obvious reasons. Although an experienced military commander who had fought in the War of 1812 and the Mexican War, Scott had become something of a relic by 1861, with his advice more often hampering rather than aiding the war effort. But

Scott, realizing that this would be a longer conflict than most people did at the time, was the one who immediately proposed a plan for a complete blockade of all Confederate ports, thereby shutting the Confederacy off from the "aid and comfort" that would most certainly be offered by its British allies. If the Confederates could not get their cotton out for sale and bring in needed supplies, success for their cause would ultimately be hopeless.

"There were four main points to Scott's plan," Musicant explains: "establish and strengthen the blockade; split the Confederacy along the line of the Mississippi River; maintain steady pressure on the rebel armies in northern Virginia; and actively use the Navy to support the Army's operations by amphibious assault, naval gunfire, and the transport of troops."

Musicant explains how President Abraham Lincoln immediately took up Scott's idea (which had been ridiculed by its opponents as the "Anaconda Plan"), officially proclaiming on April 19, 1861, a naval blockade over the entire rebel coast from South Carolina to the mouth of the Rio Grande. As Musicant explains, the blockade, aimed primarily at Confederate trade with Great Britain, was more a statement of intent rather than an act of war, since the U.S. Navy, left to languish since the War of 1812, was in no position, without extraordinary efforts, to effectively "seal off" the Confederacy. "By statute, the Navy's enlisted force had been fixed at 7,500 men of all ratings," Musicant writes, "and when Lincoln took office it was slightly in excess of authorized strength."

Alexander Bache's strategy board

The strategy, however, was effectively elaborated by individuals far more capable than the aging Scott who had formulated it. Alexander Dallas Bache, for one, the great-grandson of Benjamin Franklin and a leading scientific figure internationally, was then head of the U.S. Coast Survey. Because of the war mobilization, there was a danger that the Survey would be without funds. Bache, however, realized that the Coast Survey would be the prime mover in filling in the blanks in the "Anaconda Plan." What other institution would be bet-

ter able to develop a strategy for sealing off the coast of the United States than the Coast Survey, which could provide a detailed account of what that coast actually looked like, including the key factors of sand dunes, shoals, and the like.

Bache succeeded in convincing two important colleagues, Navy Capt. Charles Davis (the translator of some of the works of Carl Gauss), who worked with Bache on the Survey; and the new assistant secretary of the Navy Gustavus Vasa Fox. Together they succeeded in bringing on board the skeptical Gideon Welles, Lincoln's secretary of the Navy. Welles established a Strategy Board, composed of Bache, Davis, Maj. John Barnard of the Army Corps of Engineers, and Adm. Samuel DuPont, who became its chairman. Musicant writes: "Over the summer and early autumn [of 1861], the board issued seven reports that solidified and refined the Anaconda plan with operational precepts that were essentially followed all the way to Appomattox Court House."

One part of the Strategy Board plan was to occupy key coastal areas along the southern Atlantic and Gulf coasts as potential areas of operations into the heart of the Confederacy. When the board issued these instructions, a large section of the Carolina and Georgia coasts could have been occupied by Federal troops for a subsequent plunge into the heart of the Confederacy.

The military unpreparedness of the Confederacy made

this a very real possibility, but the window of opportunity was not great. If significant forces could be brought to bear in combined Army-Navy landing operations, and then moved to central areas of Carolina and Georgia, the course of the war—and its duration—would have unfurled quite differently. Federal forces, still in the process of assembling what would become a very powerful war machine, but infected by what Lincoln would often characterize as "the slows," were not able to fully take advantage of the opportunity.

A combined Army-Navy operation did, however, occupy the South Carolina islands around Cape Hatteras. Having been given too few forces for a major thrust, the military contingent was not able to use its advantage in order to make an effective drive toward Charleston or Savannah, a measure, Musicant points out, that "might have saved the Union three years of war." But these Federal positions, maintained throughout the war, never became the base of operations for a more general Federal offensive deep into the Confederacy as envisioned by Bache and the Strategy Board. Moving into Georgia and the Carolinas would have to wait for three years, until Sherman would march through both Georgia and South Carolina to link up with the coastal positions. The sleepy waterway of Port Royal was, however, effectively converted into the major logistics and repair depot for the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, rivaling Hampton Roads on the Virginia coast, also in Federal hands, as a forward operating base.

Although the British never got to the point of actually recognizing the Confederacy, for fear of having to fight an open war against the United States, there were several occasions when they came very close to doing so. U.S. Secretary of State William Seward, who more often than not pursued a policy diametrically opposed to that of Lincoln, foolishly believed that widening the conflict into a war with Great Britain and France would serve to unite the country around a patriotic conflict. Lincoln, more aware of his military capabilities—and the intransigence of the secessionist leaders—sought to avoid what he considered a wholly justified conflict with the British and their French allies, in order to concentrate his forces on suppressing the Rebellion. Only then could the conflict with the British, the undeclared allies of the Confederacy, be dealt with.

'One war at a time'

The first confrontation with the British occurred in late 1861, with the "Trent affair." U.S. Navy Capt. Charles Wilkes, the man who had discovered the continent of Antarctica, detected in Havana the presence of two leading Confederate emissaries, John Slidell, a former U.S. senator from Louisiana, and James Mason, a former U.S. senator from Virginia. Mason and Slidell were being sent by the Confederate government in Richmond, Virginia, to France and Great Britain, respectively, in order to gain their recognition of the Confederacy. Wilkes, who was well-versed in international law, concluded that the various dispatches, instructions, and

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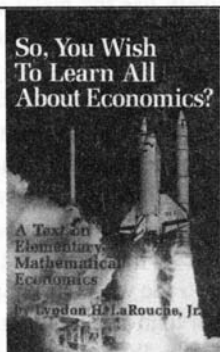
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other Confederate government documents being carried by the two Confederates amounted to “contraband of war,” thereby allowing him to seize any neutral ship carrying them. When Mason and Slidell then boarded a British commercial steamer, the *Trent*, to continue their voyage to Europe, Wilkes, aboard the sloop *San Jacinto*, stopped and boarded the *Trent*, and took Mason and Slidell into custody. However, and unfortunately, Wilkes did not take the *Trent* itself in tow; more seriously, he did not seize the incriminating papers that Mason and Slidell were carrying.

Wishing to avoid military complications with Great Britain, and lacking the type of evidence that would have justified holding the two men, Lincoln was forced to have them released. “One war at a time,” was Lincoln’s response, when Seward urged military actions against the British.

As he did in many situations, Lincoln explained this view of dealing with the British with a parable: A sick man in Illinois was on his death bed and felt that he ought to make peace with any enemies he might have. The man he hated the most was a fellow in a nearby village named Brown. The man then sent for Brown and told him that he wanted to die at peace with all his fellow men, and therefore wanted to shake hands and make up. Brown was so touched by the sentiments that he began to weep. Lincoln continues: “After a parting that would have softened the heart of a grindstone, Brown had about reached the room door, when the sick man rose up on his elbow and said, ‘But, see here, Brown, if I *should* happen to get well, mind that old grudge still stands.’ ”

Revolution in naval technology

Musicant then describes the naval buildup to the great battle between the ironclads, the *Monitor* and the *Merrimac*, at Hampton Roads, Virginia in March 1862, a battle that sounded the death knell of the old wooden fleets and began a revolution in technology that would change the rules of naval warfare. John Ericsson’s so-maligned “cheese on a raft” won acclaim as the primary craft for riverine and coastal operations at that battle, but would not prove itself as an ocean-going vessel until 1866. But for the next 20 years, Ericsson’s “cheese on a raft,” rejected by British naval planners when the Swedish engineer had earlier offered it to them, would be the bane of the British wooden fleet, whose existence had thereby been made obsolete.

The dramatic engagements on the Mississippi River, where combined Army-Navy operations were conducted under the smooth collaboration of Gen. U.S. Grant and Adm. Andrew Foote, produced major results in advancing the positions of the Western armies under Grant and Sherman along the Tennessee River, and opened the way for proceeding with the second part of the “Anaconda Plan”: the push to open up the Mississippi River, and effectively cut off the Confederacy from its western states which were providing Confederate armies with necessary foodstuffs and supplies.

The aging Adm. David Farragut’s daring breakthrough past the forts guarding New Orleans meant that now the Union could begin a move up the river toward Vicksburg, Mississippi from the south. Combined naval forces under the irrepressible Capt. Charles Davis were moving down from the North. Musicant describes the unsuccessful attempts by Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman to lead a combined Army-Navy contingent up the Yazoo River in order to flank Vicksburg from the rear, the sixth failed attempt to flank the Rebel stronghold.

After a series of operations, Grant, having moved his forces to a position south of Vicksburg along the western bank of the Mississippi, was able to bring in the needed supplies for his troops by having the naval contingent under Adm. David Dixon Porter make a successful run past the guns of Vicksburg with his rams and gunboats. Having succeeding in outflanking Vicksburg by this move to the south, the town was cut off and a siege laid. This heavily fortified river town on the heights above the banks of the Mississippi, surrendered after a month, on July 4, 1863, one day after the Union victory at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. “The Mississippi, the Father of Waters,” Lincoln proudly announced, “flowed unvexed to the sea.” The Confederacy had been cut in two. It was the beginning of the end.

Shortly afterward, Admiral Farragut would conduct another bold run past the forts south of Mobile, Alabama to completely shut off the Gulf ports to the Confederacy, ringing ever tighter the grip of the Anaconda.

Confederate raiders, ‘Made in England’

Musicant also devotes one longer chapter to naval operations on the high seas, operations in which the U.S. Navy was pitted against Confederate raiders, that were outfitted and supplied courtesy of Her Majesty’s shipyards. Here is where the British contribution to the Confederate cause really took place, in violation of their supposed neutrality, which would remain a bone of contention with the United States for many years, and which almost led to the British loss of its Canadian colony.

Another Confederate agent, Cmdr. James Bulloch, a maternal uncle of Theodore Roosevelt, was the Confederate agent in London assigned to arrange for the construction of naval vessels for the almost nonexistent Confederate Navy. Officially, Great Britain was a neutral in the conflict and therefore could lend aid to neither side. In addition, in accordance with Britain’s Foreign Enlistment Act of 1812, it was illegal, without a special license, to equip, furnish, outfit, or arm vessels for a belligerent, or to knowingly assist in doing so. Notwithstanding, the British government turned a blind eye to such operations, where it concerned arming the Confederacy, on condition that the final product be assembled outside of Great Britain, thus adhering to the “letter” of the law. Bulloch was careful to assure that the ship, the crew, and the armaments, although all “Made in England,” were

not assembled on British territory. In spite of protests by the American ambassador to the Court of St. James, Charles Francis Adams, the practice was not interfered with by British authorities.

In this way, the Confederates were able to build a series of cruisers, the most famous of which was the *CSS Alabama*, later destroyed by the *USS Kearsarge* off the coast of Cherbourg, France. These cruisers would prey on U.S. commercial vessels during the entire course of the war. They regularly used British ports in the Bahamas for refitting and taking on supplies. All in all, they succeeded in destroying 200 Union merchant ships, fishing craft, and whaling vessels, along with their cargoes worth millions of dollars.

Bulloch also attempted to have British shipyards produce ironclad rams for riverine duty for the Confederacy. It was only after the British were told by U.S. Ambassador Adams that this would mean war that they stopped that particular operation.

The destruction wrought under the protective hand of the British, led after the war to U.S. claims against Great Britain. Sen. Charles Sumner, later the chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee, was demanding that Great Britain withdraw from all her colonies in the Western Hemisphere, including Canada, in order to make amends for the damage done the United States during the war. The Grant administration, however, more interested in smoothing over relations with Great Britain, submitted the claims to an international court of arbitration in Geneva in 1871, settling for monetary damages.

The war's end

The final phases of the war are dealt with by Musicant in masterful terms. The port of Charleston, where the first shots of the war had been fired, was laid siege to by a fleet of monitors and gunboats. General Sherman, coming down from the north in his famous march to the sea, linked up with the fleet outside of Charleston, visiting fleet commander Adm. John Dahlgren on his ship. Sherman, using Savannah as his base, but avoiding Charleston, started to move his forces back across South Carolina in order to catch the Rebels in a giant vise between himself and General Grant in Virginia. But cut off on two sides, the Rebels abandoned Charleston on Feb. 18, 1864.

Speaking in August 1863 before a meeting of "unconditional Union men" in Springfield, commemorating the victories at Gettysburg and Vicksburg, President Lincoln also paid tribute to the vital contributions of the U.S. Navy. "At all the watery margins they have been present," he said. "Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow, muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been and made their tracks."

More significantly, as Musicant notes, the creation of the U.S. Navy in the course of the Civil War had made the United States a maritime ironclad power unmatched by any navy in the world, including the British, with a total of 670 ships, led

by an impressive fleet of turreted, ironclad monitors, equipped with 8-inch rifles and 15-inch smoothbore cannons. The manpower, originally 1,500 officers and 7,500 enlisted men in 1860, had increased sevenfold. As Musicant points out: "It was the unflinching naval blockade that slowly strangled the Confederacy, denying the South the war materials and foreign intercourse without which it could not—and indeed, did not—survive the contest."

U.S.-Russian naval cooperation

One important element, whose absence mars somewhat Musicant's history, but which should play a prominent role in any naval history of the Civil War, is the U.S. collaboration with the Russian Navy. Musicant notes that already in 1862, Russia, an inveterate enemy of Great Britain, was keen on achieving a diplomatic and naval alliance with the United States, but he says nothing of the crucial dispatch of the two Russian fleets to the West and the East coasts of the United States, that sent clear signals to the British that should Britain enter the war on the side of the Confederacy, the United States would find an ally in Russia. Already during the Crimean War, when Russia was attacked by the combined forces of England and France, the United States had offered valuable assistance to beleaguered Russia.

Although much of this belongs in the realm of diplomacy, the naval collaboration which did occur must be included in any comprehensive naval history. In 1862, Capt. Stepan Stepanovich Lissovsky of the Russian Navy was sent to the United States as a member of a technical team to examine the new monitor construction of John Ericsson. On that trip, the U.S. War Department handed over to Lissovsky and his colleagues the blueprints for construction of the monitor. In the next year, the Russian Navy would itself build 10 monitors for the defense of St. Petersburg and for operations in the Gulf of Finland. Also in 1863, the newly promoted Admiral Lissovsky, a personal friend of Admiral Farragut, would command the Russian fleet that visited the East Coast of the United States.

In 1866, the U.S. Congress would rule for the first time that U.S. manufacturers could begin producing warships for other countries—one of the primary recipients of this privilege being Russia. That same year, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gus Fox, would make the first ocean voyage on the *Miantonomoh*, the latest-generation monitor, to St. Petersburg, Russia, stopping very ostentatiously at British ports on the way, and proving definitively the seaworthiness of that class of ship. Fox's voyage was made as a return visit for the friendly actions of the Russian Navy to the United States during the war. For the rest of the century, until the assumption of the Presidency by Commander Bulloch's nephew, Teddy Roosevelt, the alliance between Russia and the United States would play a major role in international relations—directed against the primary backer of the Confederate cause, the British Empire.