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Mark R. Shulman

Pace Law School, mshulman@law.pace.edu

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Putting Naval Before History

By KENNETH J. HAGAN and MARK R. SHULMAN



US NAVY

How could naval history be of any value to Naval Academy midshipmen studying modern warfare? Not until the “naval renaissance” of the 1880s and teachers such as Alfred Thayer Mahan—here, lecturing at the Naval War College—did the subject of naval history begin to get its due.

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Naval history came to the Western world when Thucydides chronicled the sea battles of Athens and Sparta; it came to the U.S. Naval Academy only after the Civil War, when the Navy was struggling to reverse a precipitous decline in appropriations, personnel, ships, and popularity. Its introduction into the course of studies was integral to the tortuous resurrection of the Navy

in the 1880s. Its assumption of an unquestioned place in the curriculum after 1895 confirmed its value in educating the young men who would dominate the steam-driven battleship navy of the first half of the 20th century.

In 1873, the same year a concerned group of naval officers founded the U.S. Naval Institute at the Naval Academy in Annapolis, the Department of English Studies, History, and Law added lectures on naval history to the two-semester sequence on Western Civilization and U.S. history required in the fourth- and third-class years. But no other alterations in the curriculum were made. Two generic texts and accompanying geographic atlases remained the principal source of reading assignments for the cadets: Edward A. Freeman, *General Sketch of History* (New York: H. Holt and Company, 1874) and Samuel Eliot, *History of the United States, From 1492 to 1872* (Boston: Brewer and Tileston, 1874).

Four years later, under the leadership of the distinguished Professor James Russell Soley, the department instituted a one-semester, third-class course composed of 12 or more lectures on the history of the U.S. Navy. Aside from this insertion, the structure and purposes of the history offer-

ing remained unchanged: "to give the cadets . . . such an acquaintance with the history of their own and other countries, and of the service to which they belong, as will enable them to understand the character and development of the Government they serve, its relation to foreign states, and their duties toward it as public officers." To achieve this end, the cadets were expected to acquire a "tactical familiarity" with 14 classic battles, stretching from Lade (494 B.C.) through Lissa (1866), "in addition to all important actions in American [naval] history."

While the cadets were busy memorizing the details of the Western World's naval legacy, Professor Soley contributed his pen to the U.S. naval renaissance of the 1880s. He joined with an Academy colleague, Commander Alfred Thayer Mahan, head of Ordnance and Gunnery, in writing two of the three volumes of Scribner's naval history of the Civil War, published in 1883.¹ The deepening professional and institutional interest in naval history soon manifested itself further with the establishment of the Naval War College (1884), where study of the topic had a more grandiose and deterministic purpose than at the Academy. From their exposure to naval history the officer-students at the War College were expected to learn "that the elementary and basic principles of war remain unchanged throughout the many discoveries of new and formidable appliances. . . . Thus from history we deduce the principles of warfare which must govern us to-day."⁴

For almost two decades the Naval Academy hesitated to make additional changes in its history courses, despite this widening intellectual ferment, the concurrent construction of the "new navy" of steam and steel, and the publication of Mahan's classic, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1890). Then, in 1895-1896, apparently in response to pressure from Secretary of the Navy Hilary A. Herbert, the Superintendent of the Naval Academy revised the history curriculum radically.⁵ He abolished the previously offered courses and substituted two one-semester surveys: a fourth-class, second-semester course on U.S. History, and an entirely new, one-semester, third-class course on U.S. Naval

History, for which a newly published popular survey of U.S. naval battles became the text: Edgar S. Maclay, *A History of the United States Navy, from 1775 to 1893*, 2 volumes (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894). From that moment to the present, the Naval Academy has consistently offered a course in naval history based on a required textbook.

The creation of the U.S. naval history course and the adoption of Maclay's book as a text coincided with the Mahanian transformation of U.S. naval strategy and policy—from frigate-based coastal defense and commerce-raiding to battleship-backed fleet engagements—as well as with the emergence of the United States as a major international power with global political and military-naval ambitions. In 1895-1896 the United States became embroiled in a war-threatening dispute with Great Britain, the world's leading sea power, over a river boundary dividing Venezuela and British Guiana. In not-very-subtle reference to the expanding caliber of the rifled cannon carried by the new U.S. battleships, Secretary of State Richard Olney's protest to London was dubbed a "twenty-inch gun."

The "new navy" was hungry for a fight, and it found one in the Spanish-American War (1898), the naval glory of which Maclay hastened to record by adding a third volume, carrying the story to 1901. His "history . . . for the people" remained the primary textbook for the Academy's naval history course through the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) and Theodore Roosevelt's deployment of the Great White Fleet on an around-the-world cruise (1907-1909).⁶ But at this time

an energetic cadre of Naval Academy instructors saw an opportunity to write their own text derived from materials tested by use in the classroom. Guided by their department head, Commander George R. Clark, they published *A Short History of the United States Navy* (Baltimore, MD: The Lord Baltimore Press, 1910), which immediately displaced Maclay's work as the text required for naval history. The new volume remained the mainstay of the history curriculum covering the U.S. Navy until 1942, and in later editions the book made a serious if tentative attempt to discuss topics other than battles.⁷



Naval Academy Professor James Russell Soley—pictured here later as Assistant Secretary of the Navy—launched a one-semester third-class course of 12 lectures on U.S. naval history and collaborated with Mahan on a three-volume naval history of the Civil War

Armed with their new text, the faculty in 1912-1913 reorganized the course into a two-semester, third-class sequence on "Naval History and U.S. Naval History." For the traditional survey of ancient and foreign naval combat, the professors turned to a book by an English author, John Richard Hale: *Famous Sea Fights from Salamis to Tsushima* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1911), which they used from 1912 until 1919.⁸ Two additional books augmented the required reading list in 1918: [Lieutenant Commander] Charles Clifford Gill, *Naval Power in the War (1914-1917)* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918), and Allan Westcott, ed., *Mahan on Naval Warfare: Selections from the Writing of Rear Admiral Alfred T. Mahan* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1918).⁹

As these books make clear, the focus of the teaching was upon naval battles and command of the sea in a Mahanian sense. Hale captured the spirit of the endeavor by noting that "The Great War, now in progress, has witnessed the putting forth of Sea Power on a scale unexampled in all previous history, . . . though as yet there has been no decisive battle between the opposing navies . . ." The "recent developments" in submarines and naval aviation "have influenced the details of naval warfare, but [they] have not affected its great principles."¹⁰ For those who wanted to believe Hale, the Battle of Jutland was a godsend.

Almost from the moment that the German and British battle fleets met on 31 May 1916, Jutland assumed a place alongside Tsushima (1905) and Horatio Nelson's victory at Trafalgar (1805) as a formative force in the mainstream of U.S. naval thinking about how navies should fight. As historian Edward S. Miller has observed, in the early 20th century "American naval imaginations were obsessed by the dramas of Trafalgar, Tsushima, and Jutland."¹¹ Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz's postwar remark—that the playing and replaying of Jutland at Newport had firmly cast the mold for the U.S. Navy's strategy in the Central Pacific—emphasizes the important role the battle played in naval war games of the 1920s and 1930s.¹²



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From 1918 to World War II, Professor Allan Westcott's favorite—sometimes only—naval history case study at the Academy was the Battle of Jutland. Then, in 1947, he and other naval historians directed their attention to the tactics of World War II.

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Less well known is the intensive study accorded to Jutland at the Naval Academy from 1918 until World War II. In *A History of Sea Power* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), the principal text used in the one-semester, third-class naval history course throughout the interwar years, Professors William O. Stevens and Allan Westcott concluded of Jutland:

Thus the great battle turned out to be indecisive. . . .

On the other hand, if the British had destroyed the German fleet the victory would have been priceless. . . . Without a German battle fleet, the British could have forced the fighting almost to the very harbors of the German coast—bottling up every exit by a barrage of mines.¹³

Within this reasonably balanced conceptual framework, midshipmen were urged to study mostly the tactical and technical aspects of Jutland, such as the "Value of forcing action . . . Value of tactical training . . . Importance of radio security and radio intelligence . . . importance of communications and navigation . . . criticism of Jellicoe's tactics. . . ."¹⁴ The midshipmen were not invited to contemplate why the two greatest European navies had elected to seek supremacy at sea in terms of dreadnoughts at the very moment when the submarine was emerging as a possibly decisive maritime weapon system. Instead, they were offered without criticism the erroneous prophecy Admiral John R. Jellicoe made in a letter to the Admiralty of 19 October 1914 to the effect that "the Germans have shown

that they rely to a very great extent on submarines, mines and torpedoes, and . . . that they will endeavor to make the fullest possible use of these weapons in a fleet action. . . ."¹⁵ Jellicoe and the other top British strategists of the World War I had totally misread the submarine's lethal potential for interdicting transatlantic shipping.

From 1914 to 1918 the key to victory in the Atlantic lay in defeating German submarine attacks on Anglo-Amer-

ican shipping, but midshipmen at the U.S. Naval Academy were not encouraged to speculate on whether Jutland or antisubmarine warfare constituted the true model for warfare in the 20th century. This remarkable misdirection of analytical focus continued well into World War II, as was made clear by a highly revealing document that now reposes in the Naval Academy Archives. "N.R.O.T.C. Pamphlet No. 10(a), Outlining Course in Naval History as given at the U.S. Naval Academy" was prepared by the Department of English, History and Government for Naval Academy midshipmen and for the "Second Reserve Officers' Training School" held in Annapolis in 1942. Drawn from the lesson plans, guides, and bibliographies used in the Academy's naval history courses between 1919 and 1941, the comprehensive "Pamphlet" included texts, reading assignments, and weekly lesson topics. It was very present-minded and enjoined the instructor using it to "Impress upon your midshipmen the practical value of naval history, how it may and should help them in the war in which they will soon play a part"¹⁶

For the classes held in the weeks of 9 February through 14 March 1942, 11 lessons addressed the naval aspects of World War I. One of these covered the U.S. Navy; five were devoted to Jutland. Jutland therefore constituted the core of the Naval Academy's teaching on the naval history of World War I at the very moment the German U-boats of Karl Dönitz were ravaging the tankers traversing the coast of the Carolinas en route from the oil-producing states in the Gulf of Mexico to the U.S. industrial heartland in the northeast. This inordinate preoccupation with Jutland and the grand battle was part of the reason for the U.S. Navy's lack of preparedness for an antisubmarine campaign of convoy and escort of tankers in the opening phases of World War II.

The Navy painfully revived the practice of convoys in time to thwart Dönitz's coastal and north Atlantic campaigns of 1942 and 1943. It then turned its most active attention to the war against Japan, where the search for the

classic—and, it was hoped, decisive—fleet engagement continued to mesmerize U.S. naval strategists. As the planning to retake the Mariana Islands was reaching its peak in spring 1944, Admiral Nimitz felt compelled to reassure Fleet Admiral Ernest J. King that the "destruction of the enemy fleet is always the primary objective of our Naval forces."¹⁷ A few months later, Nimitz included in his operation plan for the invasion of Leyte Gulf in the Philippine Islands the phrase, "In case opportunity for destruction of [a] major portion of the enemy fleet offer or can be created, such destruction becomes the primary task."¹⁸ This injunction caused Admiral William F. Halsey, Jr., to uncover the Leyte landings and rush far to the north in hot pursuit of a decoy Japanese fleet.

He reversed course on 25 October 1944 only when stung by a sharply worded message from Nimitz. For the rest of his life Halsey lamented having headed back toward Leyte at the very moment that the northern Japanese fleet "was exactly 42 miles from the muzzles of my 16-inch guns. . . . I turned my back on the opportunity I had dreamed of since my days as a cadet [at the Naval Academy]."¹⁹

When the momentous struggle in the Pacific was over, a new generation of naval history teachers settled in at the Naval Academy. At least four of them initially were naval reserve officers on active duty, including Commander Elmer B. Potter, who soon emerged as the dominant figure in the teaching of naval history at the Naval Academy, a distinction he held even after his retirement in 1978.²⁰

The task of these naval academicians was to interpret U.S. naval history, especially the Pacific War of 1941-1945, in

such a way as to praise the U.S. Navy for correctly understanding that the Mahanian principles of sea power dictate a strategy of winning command of the sea through fleet engagements. They joined with Allan Westcott, who remained at the Academy as a senior professor, in writing a new text for the U.S. segment of the course: *American Sea Power Since 1775* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company 1947). Blandly declaring that "Jutland was a turning



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*Of the "new generation of naval history teachers" after World War II, E. B. Potter became the unofficial dean of naval historians at the Academy, eventually collaborating on several texts, including *Sea Power: A Naval History*, with Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz*

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point in the war at sea in World War I," Westcott and his younger associates eagerly turned their attention to the naval battles of World War II, where they placed the traditional emphasis on tactics.²¹

The new Westcott book appeared when the U.S. Navy was experiencing one of its cyclical postwar nadirs. Congressional appropriations were at rock-bottom, and the Air Force was attempting to decimate, if not entirely eliminate, naval aviation. The Korean War (1950-1953) saved the day for the Navy by temporarily eliminating fiscal restraints on military spending, and President Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953-1961) permitted the Navy to carve for its supercarriers and ballistic-missile-launching submarines a permanent place in the anti-Soviet strategic or nuclear deterrent force of the Department of Defense. In this more confident environment, E. B. Potter and his veteran colleagues wrote *The United States and World Sea Power* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1955). This book riveted the pedagogic focus onto World War II and immediately became the only required text for the one-semester, first-class naval history course.

Five years later Potter, joined by Fleet Admiral Nimitz as the associate editor, compiled *Sea Power: A Naval History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), the text remembered today by the majority of Naval Academy alumni.²² Potter and Nimitz completed the metamorphosis of Pacific warfare into classic or mythic status: "The Battle for Leyte Gulf was the Trafalgar of World War II. Halsey and Kinkaid in 1944, like Nelson in 1805, finally had wiped out the Japanese fleet as an effective fighting force. There would be no more stand-up battles at sea in this war."²³ Nor would there be any more substantive criticism of William F. Halsey, Jr. He was indissolubly linked in victorious partnership with Thomas C. Kinkaid, whose amphibious forces he had, in fact, left unprotected and exposed to the desperate attacks of the Japanese while he dashed north in quest of a naval Armageddon.

For Potter and his colleagues, and hence for Naval

Academy midshipmen of the early Cold War era, the great sea battle remained the ultimate objective. The sea-clearing Anglo-American sweep against Dönitz's U-boats, the bloody and tide-turning amphibious landings of the Atlantic and Pacific theaters, and the crippling U.S. submarine interdiction of Japanese tankers and transports were sideshows. The center ring was reserved for the westward march of the carrier task forces and the annihilation of Japanese carrier aviation. Since Halsey personified the aggressive carrier commander, harsh criticism of him for abandoning Kinkaid and the amphibians at Leyte was not permissible. Potter's monumental text thus mirrored what Stevens and Westcott had attempted immediately after

World War I: inculcation of the view that everything the Navy does in war is subsidiary to the climactic battle for command of the sea. Nothing had been changed by World War II except the addition of a fourth battle. Now the composite touchstone was four-cornered: Trafalgar-Tsushima-Jutland-Leyte.

Sea Power: A Naval History remained the standard text until the mid-1980s. In the meantime, under Superintendent Vice Admiral James Calvert (1968-1972), the Academy abandoned its historic uniform curriculum and introduced a program whereby midshipmen might major in selected academic disciplines. Shortly thereafter, a new generation of professors with advanced academic training in the field of naval history made their own lasting change to the curriculum. Too young to have served in the military in World War II, and inspired by the desire to treat naval history as a subject of analytical academic inquiry much like any other sub-field of history, these younger

scholar-teachers transformed the required "sea power" course into "American Naval Heritage."

First introduced in spring 1978 and generally taught to fourth- or third-classmen, this required one-semester course concentrates on U.S. naval history, but not inordinately on the Navy in World War II. It deemphasizes the study of battles and tactics and stresses the interpretation of transcendent "themes," such as the interrelationship between



Acknowledged as one of the most innovative of the Academy Superintendents, Vice Admiral James Calvert introduced what was then a radical notion: that midshipmen be allowed to choose majors in various academic disciplines, a policy still in practice today.

The study of naval history enhances the readiness of today's midshipmen to anticipate and grapple with the profound changes facing the Navy they will lead into the 21st century.

U.S. national policy and naval strategy, the ceaseless evolution of naval technology from sails and smoothbores to nuclear power and missiles, the contradictory demands of leadership at sea and ashore, the impact of congressional attitudes on naval growth or retrenchment, and the intractability of interservice rivalry. The instructors democratically select a common or "core" text for the course, but each compiles his or her own unique list of required supplementary readings.¹⁴

In the second semester of 1994-1995, instructor and Marine Corps Major Robert G. Baker experienced a high degree of success in this environment of creative academic freedom. As part of his final examination he asked his plebe students to compare the naval history of the early Cold War with that of any other era. He directed them to use four themes as an analytical structure: strategy, naval forces

as an instrument of foreign policy, technology, and leadership. Midshipman Rebecca M. Dowling (Class of 1998) incisively compared the U.S. Navy in World War I, World War II, and the Cold War, noting that technological changes and varying strategic goals resulted in different patterns of operations. Her answer perfectly exemplified the way the study of naval history enhances the readiness of today's midshipmen to anticipate and grapple with the profound changes facing the Navy they will lead into the 21st century. ♪

Dr. Hagan is a professor and museum director emeritus at the U.S. Naval Academy.

Dr. Shulman is professor at the U.S. Air War College. Before assuming his current position, he was a fellow at the National Strategy Information Center and of Georgetown University's Foreign Affairs Research Program. He has been a research associate of the Naval War College's Advanced Research Department since 1989.

¹⁴James Russell Soley, *Historical Sketch of the United States Naval Academy* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876), p. 203. See also the Annual Register of the United States Naval Academy (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1876-1896). Deposited in the Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

¹⁵National Archives, Record Group 405, Records of the United States Naval Academy, Entry 191, Detail and Arrangement Book, October 1878 to January 1884, p. 18. Deposited in Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

¹⁶[RAdm.] Daniel Ammen. *The Atlantic Coast*; [Capt.] Alfred T. Mahan. *The Gulf and Inland Waters*; James R. Soley, *The Blockade and the Cruisers* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883). Soley served as head of the Department of English Studies, History, and Law from 1873 until 1882. Mahan was head of the Department of Ordnance and Gunnery from 1877 until 1880. For the two historians, see Mark R. Shulman, *Navalism and the Emergence of American Sea Power, 1882-1893* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1995).

¹⁷Annual Report of the Secretary of the Navy for the Year 1895 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1895), p. XLII.

¹⁸Superintendent to Chief of the Bureau of Navigation, 17 December 1894. National Archives, Record Group 405, Records of the United States Naval Academy, Entry 204, Journals of the Academic Board ("Minutes of the Academic Board," "Academic Journals"), 1854-1942 Vol. 13, 3 October 1893 to 20 December 1896, pp. 132-133. Deposited in Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

¹⁹Maclay, *A History of the United States Navy, from 1775 to 1893*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1894). I, xxi. The last edition was Maclay, *A History of the United States Navy from 1775 to 1901*, 3 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906).

²⁰A Short History of the United States Navy was published

by J. B. Lippincott in 1911, 1914, and 1916. It was "revised and continued" by Carroll S. Alden and again published by Lippincott in 1927 and 1939. Hale's book was first published in Great Britain. It went through seven editions, culminating as *Famous Sea Fights from Salamis to Jutland* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1931).

²¹[LCdr.] Charles Clifford Gill. *Naval Power in the War (1914-1917)* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1918). See also [Cdr.] C. C. Gill, *What Happened at Jutland: The Tactics of the Battle* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1921).

²²Hale, *Famous Sea Fights from Salamis to Jutland* (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1931), p. vii.

²³Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897-1945* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 160.

²⁴For Jutland at the Naval War College, see Mark R. Shulman, ed., Harris Laning, *An Admiral's Yarn: The Autobiography of Harris Laning* (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, forthcoming).

²⁵William Oliver Stevens and Allan Westcott, *A History of Sea Power* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1920), p. 417. The book was reprinted in 1937, revised for a 1942 edition, last published by Doubleday, Doran & Company in 1952, and last used as a text in naval history in 1954-1955. For the annual coverage of Jutland in the classroom, see the lesson schedules for the academic years 1917-1918 through 1941-1942. National Archives, Record Group 405, Records of the United States Naval Academy, Entry 201 A, Records of the English, History and Government Department, Box 9, Academic Course Material, Folder 3, Naval History, 1917-1941. Deposited in Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

²⁶"N.R.O.T.C. Pamphlet No. 10(a), Outlining Course in Naval History as given at the U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, MD." (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942), p. 45. The pamphlet may be found in National Archives, Record Group 405,

Records of the United States Naval Academy, Entry 201A, Records of the English, History and Government Department, Box 9, Academic Course Material, Folder 4, Naval History, 1942-1949. Deposited in Naval Academy Archives, Nimitz Library, U.S. Naval Academy.

²⁷Jellicoe quoted in "N.R.O.T.C. Pamphlet No. 10(a)," p. 40.

²⁸Ibid., p. 46.

²⁹Quoted in Robert W. Love, Jr., *History of the U.S. Navy, 1942-1991* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1992), p. 213.

³⁰Quoted in E. B. Potter and Chester W. Nimitz, eds., *Sea Power: A Naval History* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1960), p. 782.

³¹Ibid., p. 789.

³²The other reserve officers were all lieutenant commanders in 1947: William W. Jeffries, Neville T. Kirk, and Thomas F. McManus.

³³Allan Westcott, ed., *American Sea Power Since 1775* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1947), p. 254. This book replaced Carroll S. Alden and Allan Westcott, *The United States Navy: A History* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1943), which the publisher refused to reprint because of a shrinking market.

³⁴See also E. B. Potter, ed., *Sea Power: A Naval History*, 2nd ed. (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980). Two younger scholars were added to an otherwise unchanged roster of contributing authors: James C. Bradford and Craig Symonds, both members of the Naval Academy History Department.

³⁵Potter and Nimitz, eds., *Sea Power*, pp. 813-814.

³⁶The most widely used texts in recent years have been Nathan Miller, *The U.S. Navy: A History* (New York: Quill, 1990); Kenneth J. Hagan, ed., *In Peace and War: Interpretations of American Naval History, 1775-1884*, 2nd ed. rev. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984); Hagan, *This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power* (New York: The Free Press, 1991).