



# Founders Afloat

*'The fortunes of the nation and its navy'  
have always been linked.*

BY JOSEPH F. CALLO

In his first paragraph George Daughan quotes President John Kennedy's foreword for *Naval Documents of the American Revolution*. The words that Daughan selected to establish a premise for his own work were written by Kennedy to express the hope that the *Naval Documents* series would "make it amply clear the critical role played by sea power in the achievement of American Independence."

Daughan meets that challenge in absorbing detail, beginning with the initial deployment in December 1775 of a Continental Navy squadron against New Providence (Nassau) in the Bahamas and continuing through scores of naval actions and political disputes, both large and small. And to his credit, he avoids depicting naval actions as free-standing events, instead showing how they were more often than not linked to the land war.

Importantly, *If by Sea* also stretches well beyond the War of Independence to include two post-Revolutionary periods that were critical in the establishment of a credible U.S. Navy. The first of these was the nine years between June 1785, when Congress authorized the sale of the last ship of the Continental Navy, and March 1794, when Congress authorized the reestablishment of a navy with the purchase or construction of six frigates.

During the years when the United States had no navy at all, the Federalists, led by George Washington and

John Adams, generally supported the establishment of a blue-water navy. In contrast, the Republicans, led by Thomas Jefferson, argued against a navy that projected American power offshore, claiming it was too expensive and internationally provocative. Those two opposing policy positions permeated the first four decades of American history, and were driven by such factors as regional socio-economic differences, states' rights versus federal power, and conflicting views of America's position on the global stage.

**If by Sea**  
*The Forging  
of the American Navy  
from the Revolution  
to the War of 1812*  
by George C. Daughan  
Basic, 576 pp., \$30

The final post-Revolutionary period of importance that Daughan covers includes the years from 1795 through the War of 1812, when international realities such as the Barbary Wars, the Quasi-War with France, and the War of 1812 harshly demonstrated the importance of a respectable navy to the survival of the new United States of America.

As Daughan works through the Navy's early course, he goes beyond a mere chronology of events and shows how the complex political cross-currents of America's birth somehow came together, albeit haltingly, to trigger America's emergence as a global naval power. The political rough and tumble of the four different presidencies involved emerges as a seemingly counterproductive process—surprisingly reminiscent of today's scene.

As president, Washington emphasized the importance of avoiding American entanglement in Europe's ongoing wars and supported the reestablishment of a navy with congressional authorization of six frigates

during his second term. Adams's four-year administration was marked by the struggle to establish a viable economic foundation for the country. He generally followed Washington's support of a significant navy, and his policies involved rebuilding strong commercial ties with Great Britain. His challenges included coping with attacks against American commerce by the Barbary Pirates and by France.

During his two terms as president, Jefferson gravitated towards France and put his emphasis on trade leverage, rather than naval power, to achieve international objectives. (One political ally, Albert Gallatin, expressed that position graphically by referring to navies as "great engines of war and conquest.") During his presidency, James Madison faced ongoing challenges from both Britain and France, and his use of trade to leverage international relations proved to be generally inadequate. In addition, the Army and Navy were not prepared for war against a great power, and the country was politically divided as it entered a particularly testing period.

Each administration dealt with contentious issues that bore on how—at times, even *if*—U.S. naval power would be created. The international challenges faced by each of those administrations were compounded by a common denominator: Each was going through on-the-job training in how maritime power leverages the geopolitical fortunes of nations. They also were struggling with the application of a principle that is now automatically accepted: civilian control of the military. The process was not tidy.

A little-known but important player in the parallel processes of nation- and navy-building was the first secretary of the Navy, Benjamin Stoddert, who was appointed by Adams and confirmed by Congress in May 1798. Daughan quantifies Stoddert's organizational and recruiting achievements, pointing out: "By the end of 1798, Stoddert had twenty-one warships in service, by the end of 1799, thirty-three, and by the end of 1800, fifty-four." The force that Stoddert organized and led was able to overcome the challenges of the United States' first war as an independent

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nation: the Quasi-War with France, a conflict fought at sea.

With initiative and organizational skills, Stoddert bridged the gap between the improvised naval policies of the Revolutionary War, when the Continental Navy was established with eight converted merchantmen, and the formation of a credible naval force to deal with France's attacks on America's ocean commerce. Elements of his achievement included the firming-up of a credible navy officer corps. Stoddert also began building a pool of Navy seamen in America, using recruiting methods that included specific terms of enlistment and excluded the use of impressment, a mainstay of the Royal Navy.

The first secretary of the Navy also brought some organization to America's shipbuilding base, positioning it to create and sustain a fleet of warships that, at least on a ship-to-ship basis, could hold their own against those of any navy. Perhaps most important, the first secretary gave much needed strategic direction to the force he fashioned. Although Stoddert's name does not exactly echo down the halls of history, serious navalists might say that he has a more legitimate claim to the title of "Father of the U.S. Navy" than some with more visible achievements.

Arguably the most important aspect of the improbable beginning of the U.S. Navy is the high level of seamanship and raw courage of the diverse group of men who took to the sea on behalf of a struggling nation—initially for independence, and then for survival. The dangerous and discouraging times they faced required special motivation. They fought against long odds with meager resources. Defeats and discouragement were routine, but they persevered.

Towards the end of these three decades plus, during which the Navy was forged into an important element of national policy, five captains of the War of 1812 emerged as instructive

examples: Isaac Hull, who commanded USS *Constitution*; Stephen Decatur of USS *United States*; William Bainbridge, who commanded USS *Constitution*; Oliver Hazard Perry, who led an American squadron at the Battle of Lake Erie; and Thomas Macdonough, who commanded a naval force at the Battle of Lake Champlain.

Hull, Decatur, and Bainbridge each achieved psychologically important victories over British opponents in single-ship combat. Their victories changed attitudes in the capitals of Europe about the fighting quality of the U.S. Navy and the ability of the United States to back up its diplomacy with military force.



*The Constitution defeats the Guerriere, 1812*

They also changed attitudes in Congress about the political efficacy of funding a strong navy. Perry and Macdonough, while also demonstrating personal courage, achieved *strategically* important fleet victories and demonstrated that the United States was beginning to learn how to use naval forces in a strategic context.

Perhaps the most important aspect of these five leaders is that they were not alone in possessing exceptional courage, seamanship, and tactical skills in their Navy. They were, in fact, representative of a Navy culture that had been tempered in far-reaching deployments and combat against the leading navies of the world. In the process, they had developed a preference for offense over defense as the basis of a combat doctrine.

When the Treaty of Ghent ended the War of 1812, the result was, by most historical counts, a political standoff between the United States and Great Britain. There had been no clear military decision, and each party left the negotiating table without achieving all of its objectives. But for the United States Navy, the war was defining, a coming-of-age.

As far back in the Navy-building process as November 15, 1778, John Paul Jones answered a letter from Thomas Bell that stands out in hindsight. Bell was an American privateer and friend, who wrote of the sorry state of the Continental Navy and sad conditions in the capital, Philadelphia. It was a time of frustration for Jones and the Continental Navy, but he responded with optimism and astonishing vision:

Your account of the situation of Philadelphia and our poor marine (navy) distresses much ... but the one will yet become the first city and the other the first navy within a much shorter space of time than is generally imagined. When the enemy's land force is once conquered and expelled [from] the continent, our marine will rise as if by enchantment, and become within the

memory of persons now living, the wonder and envy of the world.

Jones's timing was a bit off, but the fulfillment of his prediction about the American Navy was firmly in motion by the end of the War of 1812.

A defining point in the process is captured by Daughan, as he describes the legislation moving through Congress to significantly expand the Navy in the fall of 1812: "[T]he public mood had changed, and the pro-navy forces had the upper hand." The linkage between the fortunes of the nation and its Navy had been clearly established with both the public and its government. And despite the fact that the lessons embedded in America's and our Navy's earliest years have had to be periodically relearned, that linkage continues to serve the nation well. ♦

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