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Book Reviews: If by Sea: The Forging of the American Navy—From the American Revolution to the War of 1812; The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British & French Navies, 1650-1815; Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy

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The *USS United States. President. Congress. Constitution. Constellation. Chesapeake.* The United States Congress voted to build these six frigates in 1794, to combat the pirates of northern Africa. They would be the first ships in the U.S. Navy. Remarkably, one of these ships, the *USS Constitution*, still floats today. Given that Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and many others opposed their construction, it is perhaps more remarkable that the ships ever existed at all.

Complex politics surrounded the founding of the U.S. Navy. The young country had incurred debts during the war for independence, and most Americans opposed the taxes that would pay down the debt, not to mention taxes that would pay for a navy. The Federalists, led by Alexander Hamilton, wanted a strong central government, a managed economy, and a navy. John Adams wanted a navy. "Republicans," led by Madison, Jefferson, and others, wanted to pay off the debts immediately and to keep the government as small as possible. They wanted no army or navy, but wanted to count on militias to fight when necessary. The Republicans, voting against the six frigates, said that the young navy would take on a life of its own, that it would grow and grow and become expensive. They were right.

In spite of opposition, the U.S. Navy became necessary to fight the Barbary pirates (1794, President George Washington); to oppose the French in the "Quasi-War" (1797-98, President John Adams); and to fight the British in the War of 1812 (1812-1815, President James Madison).

In those days, many political issues centered on the seas. National economies depended on sea-going transportation of people and cargo. American shipping was growing; American cargo ships by the thousands traveled along the European coasts, in the

Mediterranean, in the Pacific, and perhaps most importantly, in the Caribbean. Treaties assuring free trade made economies grow, but made enemies of countries excluded from the treaties. Great Britain, France, and Spain kept jealous eyes on one another, and fought bloody battles at various times. Each possessed islands in the Caribbean that had become crucial to their economies and to their power. Each made treaties with and paid tribute to the Dey of Algiers and other North African pirates/rulers. (European rulers found it cheaper to just pay off the rulers of the Barbary Coast, rather than to tie up their navies in the Mediterranean Sea.)

Congress founded the U.S. Navy during the first intercontinental struggles. Jonathan Dull's *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British & French Navies, 1650-1815* describes a world of piracy and opportunism. Dull portrays a Europe of countries and officials ready to attack almost any other country whenever it became vulnerable. Alliances would form for a few years only to dissolve after any decisive military campaign caused a shift in the balance of power. Countries fought wars for booty, for trade, for personal or national ambition, for vengeance. Before Napoleon, they were wars of attrition, fought for limited objectives.

The U.S. Navy's founding involved the problems Britain and France had with their colonies. Dull, an accomplished historian who also has published *The French Navy and the Seven Years' War* (2007) and *The French Navy and American Independence* (1975), shows that military victories can have ironic consequences. For example, the British "victories" in the French and Indian War and in the Seven Years' War caused France to lose its presence in India, territory in Canada, parts of Louisiana, and Martinique in the West Indies. But the losses became a blessing for France, because Great Britain and Spain now had to carry those burdens. France retained its access to northern fisheries, and to sugar and timber in the West Indies, which would help France to rebuild its navy. Writes Dull, "In the British victory lay the seeds of defeat; in the ruins of French defeat lay the seeds of future victory."

Ian W. Toll's *Six Frigates* (2007) and George C. Daughan's *If By Sea* (2008) both focus on the founding of the United States Navy, from about 1775 through 1815. Daughan's *If By Sea*, which includes a helpful set of maps, is a comprehensive, diplomatic history. Daughan focuses on the major political figures and the military history during the period 1775-1815. He chronicles Americans' mistakes and false starts during the Revolution, and the unsuccessful attempts by Congress to match British sea power. Congress funded the construction of some frigates during the Revolution, but none of them was ever useful. Rather, says Daughan, the Americans should have built and deployed thousands of small row galleys to pester British ships in ports and rivers. Nevertheless, he writes, the failed efforts during the Revolution taught the Americans much that they would use later.

In *Six Frigates,* his first book, Toll thoroughly explains the political events that shaped the U.S. Navy. And he does more. Toll makes good use of contemporary letters, journals, newspaper articles, and pamphlets to convey popular sentiments as well as the politics involved. He paints portraits of people, places, ports, workmen, tools: "In every

town, the waterfront was a maze of warehouses, ropewalks, boatbuilders' sheds, countinghouses, and sail lofts. The shipyards drew from a broad pool of […] carpenters, caulkers, joiners, painters, sparmakers, woodcarvers, coopers, ropemakers, smiths, and sailmakers…."

Toll describes controversies surrounding the design of the first six frigates by Joshua Humphreys, and Humphreys' rivalry with Josiah Fox. He describes the actual building of the ships. Toll paints an almost novelistic picture of the period 1775-1815 in America. He takes obvious pleasure in the details of American shipping--"flour, salmon, brandy, dried hams, barrels of salted pork and beef, peas, candles, soap, pots of butter, herring, claret" and many other products sent from "Portsmouth, Newburyport, Ipswich, Bristol, New London, Baltimore, Charleston, and a hundred other American seaports." His point, of course, is that this shipping had to be protected from the Barbary pirates, and then from British and French privateers, during the new nation's early years in a hostile world. Even Jefferson and Madison had little choice in the matter during the Quasi-War with France and the hostilities with Great Britain leading up to the War of 1812. In the end, they supported the U.S. Navy, too.

All three authors show that powerful nations often found themselves perplexed and even outmaneuvered tactically when they waged distant wars against smaller, militarily less capable countries. Unmentioned by these authors are the many similarities between those early hostilities and the war that the United States wages today in Afghanistan. The British, for example, the most powerful and technically advanced nation in the world, found that their might mattered little as they tried to bring the more primitive Americans to heel. Toll writes, "The British [in 1814] were frustrated by all the old, familiar problems of the American Revolutionary War. How to strike a decisive blow against a sprawling, pastoral republic with no vital center? Cities could be occupied, or even destroyed, but resistance forces could retire to the backcountry...." Authors Dull, Daughan and Toll all chronicle the waste, expense, and cruelties of much military action on all sides. Then as now, military action seemed necessary but did not always decide matters that, finally, had to be negotiated by diplomats.

Indeed, Vice-President John Adams wrote to Jefferson in 1794 about the Muslim pirates of the Barbary Coast, "We ought not to fight them at all unless we determine to fight them forever." Adams thought that even if the U.S. did fight the Muslims, "the United States would fight for years at great expense, only to pay for peace in the end" (Toll). And yet, after several decades of mistake-prone experience, ships from the U.S. Navy under Stephen Decatur in 1815 eventually did win a decisive victory in North Africa, and they did end the piracy and free American prisoners with no ransom paid. One wishes that a similar military victory were possible today in Afghanistan.

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