

From Farce to Fleet:
The Evolution of the Antebellum American Navy

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Introduction

On October 13, 2019, the Navy of the United States celebrated its 244th birthday. This would seem to give the impression of 244 years of continual naval service to the United States. However, the United States Navy has not always been in existence, let alone always been the superior and modern fighting force it is seen as today. The road to our modern navy was not a straight path to 2019 or even the navy of the Civil War which had hundreds of innovative steam and iron-clad ships. That road, even to the navy of 1865, was one filled with trials, tribulations, and detours. This paper argues that the establishment of the US Navy was one almost doomed to fail, but was able to save itself by bold leadership, changes in American policy, and technological advances. In the end, it should be visible that the survival of the early republic hinged on the survival of its navy and vice versa at a few key times.

Leadership

With war looming with Great Britain, the Second Continental Congress began to take measures to secure the safety of the colonies. First, with the creation of a colonial army in July of 1775 and finally with the creation of the Navy in October of the same year. However this move was not to create some large, floating fighting force, but instead only to buy “ a swift sailing vessel, to carry ten carriage guns, and a proportional number of swivels, with eighty men”. The congress also authorized the purchase of a similar ship for the goal of disrupting British ships with “warlike stores and other supplies”.¹ So, the Continental Navy was born really in name only and could be found in reality as one ship with ten cannons that would then face off with the Royal Navy with hundreds of ships some of which could hold six to seven times as many larger

¹ William Bell Clark, ed, “Journal of the Continental Congress, 13 October 1775,” *Naval Documents of the American Revolution* 2, (1966): 44.

cannons. The Continental Navy would continue to evolve and grow in interesting new ways, not always under the strict guidance of congress, individual bold leadership was the only way forward for the few and distant ships the fledgling nation had.

This leadership would be as diverse as the ships they commanded. Both George Washington and Benedict Arnold built small fleets to help in their actions at New York and Lake Champlain, respectively. Both events had ended in failure for the fleets and the armies they protected. Adding to the confusion, eleven of the thirteen individual colonies also kept and maintained navies of their own during this period that would engage and even defeat the British at several different turns.² These state ships would, for the most part, remain near the shores of their respective state and act as a buffer against the Royal Navy from landing men or material on American shores. This meant that other than the small continental navy taking to the sea starting in 1776, many disconnected ships and fleets were cruising American waters from the Great Lakes to Georgia. Throughout the next two years, all of these separate navies faced overwhelming odds that often ended in failure, such as the Penobscot Expedition which saw three Massachusetts Navy ships and twelve other American vessels taken to the bottom of the sea off the Maine coast after issues with a clear chain of command and communication within the fleet.³

Despite these losses, a new upcoming naval officer was showing both Britain and America that a navy, correctly used and led, could take on the Royal Navy. This man would be John Paul Jones and would later be considered as the Father of the American Navy. In 1778,

² “November Meeting. The Civil War; State Navies and Privateers in Revolution; The American Navy, 1775-1815; Reminiscences of Seventy-Five Years; Canning to Vaughan, 1826; Petitions for Lafayette's Release, 1796,” *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society* 46, (1912): 179, *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/25080015.

³ *Ibid*, 184.

Jones was determined to take the fight to the British instead of trying to protect American shores. So in November of 1778, Jones and his ship the *Ranger* slipped into the harbor of Whitehaven, England. Here, he and his men took on two British warships, raided the town of Whitehaven, and attempted to kidnap an English Earl, who luckily was away at the time.⁴ Jones would terrorize the English coast and would have people seriously doubt the power of the Royal Navy in the British Isles as well as in the colonies. In the British media, he was depicted as nothing but a brigand and a pirate. One earl even wrote, “Jones flings us all into consternation and terror”.⁵ He certainly made an impact abroad as well as at home.

The captain was vaulted as a hero in the new independent nation once he returned in 1783 and was inducted into the Society of Cincinnati by George Washington and praised by the royalty of France, Spain, and Russia. After all, he had proven that an American Navy could and indeed did win if it was led correctly. After the war, Jones urged for the continuation of a United States Navy and was instrumental in the ideas of a naval academy, training a corps of officers, building full fleets, and even securing American maritime power in the New World.⁶ Jones had set an example of leadership and advocacy for the navy that would be seen and emulated by men like Oliver Hazard Perry in the War of 1812. Jones knew that America could only succeed with a strong naval presence when he wrote “it never can become respectable, it never will become formidable; and without a respectable navy, alas *America!*”.⁷ All of Jones' requests would be

⁴ Evan Thomas, *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2003), 120-135.

⁵ *Ibid*, 200.

⁶ *Ibid*, 256-257.

⁷ John Paul Jones, “Letter from John Paul Jones to Robert Morris,” accessed October 30, 2019, <https://digital.lib.niu.edu/islandora/object/niu-amarch%3A86400>,

fulfilled eventually. Sadly, America would not learn these lessons until roughly 30 years after his death in 1792.

Changes in Policy

After securing the Revolutionary War, the new American states were in a bind financially as it tried to pay off massive amounts of war debts and figure out a way to collect taxes and tariffs. Congress needed money and the new Articles of Confederation had barely given any way for the government to make a dime. So with no threat on the horizon and no need to protect America's commercial fleets, the navy was sold off.⁸ In August 1785, the final frigate *Alliance* was sold off for \$2887.⁹ The American Navy was sold off into the history books and dead, but not for long.¹⁰ The new American republic was seen by many foreign powers as not something to take too seriously, especially without a navy to enforce and protect its policy across vast oceans. Britain had served as a protector and had always dealt with any issues of rogue states or pirates attacking American shipping, but now with the cords to the old country cut, American merchant vessels were running into serious issues. In the next 15 years, naval and trade issues with Ottoman tributaries and Great Britain would arise and force the United States Navy back into an existence that lasts to the modern day.

The Dey of Algiers, Morocco, Tripoli, and other Ottoman tribute states would be the first issue to arise and be the antecedent to the recreation of the United States Navy. Great Britain had paid off these nation-states in order to protect their trade moving through the Medditereran Sea, but after the revolution the United States government did not immediately repay these bounties. Due to this, several American ships and their crews were captured and ransom was put up by the

⁸ Thomas, *John Paul Jones*, 258.

⁹ Roughly Equivalent to \$40,000 in modern American currency.

¹⁰ "November Meeting," 202.

Dey of Algiers.¹¹ The US government was now in a bind, did it expand the money to pay off these Ottoman raiders or did it put that money into the creation of a navy to protect their merchant fleets. This issue, as most issues in the new republic, would fall on Federalist and Republican Party lines. Jefferson and the Republicans favored building a navy and protecting American freedom; something he had been clambering for since the Navy sold off its last ships.¹² Adams and the Federalist supported buying off the raiders so that America would not be forced into a costly war. Of course, a new navy would have had to have been completely reconstructed if the Republicans would win out in Congress. The budget allocated to US ships and naval operations from 1785 to 1793 was less than \$5,000 combined.¹³

Eventually, the threat of these African pirates led congress to resurrect the US Navy with six brand new top of the line ships known as frigates, most of which were larger than most American or state vessels during the revolution.¹⁴ A budget was also allocated of \$769,000 to build and equip the new ships and also pay the new sailors and marines.¹⁵ Twice after 1800, American fleets sailed twice for the African coast. The Americans succeeded with state-of-the-art ships like the *USS Constitution* and bold leadership from men like Lieutenant Stephen Decatur, who pulled together a plan reminiscent of John Paul Jones' Whitehaven raid and attacked the raider capital of Tripoli with an outnumbered force of ships and took the city

¹¹ "November Meeting," 203.

¹² Marshall Smelser, *The Democratic Republic: 1801-1815* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1968), 58-59.

¹³ "Budget of the US Navy: 1794-2014," US Navy Naval History and Heritage Command, accessed October 31, 2019, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/b/budget-of-the-us-navy-1794-to-2004.html>.

¹⁴ "November Meeting," 202.

¹⁵ "Budget of the US Navy." Roughly Equivalent to \$15,000,000 in modern American currency.

with only 75 sailors and marines.¹⁶ American policy had shifted and protection of American shipping and American lives had become the precedent.

Another foreign policy change would have major ramifications for the rebuilding of the US Navy. This issue of impressment would bring the power of Great Britain against the fledgling republic once again. This was a key question for America's newfound sovereignty and the coming war with Britain. The issue boiled down to England impressing American Navy and merchant sailors into their own navy and forcing them to serve in their wars against France's radical new governments and later Napoleon's. Starting in 1790 in Spanish ports, these British actions were seen as a major affront to American freedom abroad and something of a real threat to the American Navy who was forced to submit to English press gangs at will.¹⁷ The issue of impressment came to a head in June of 1807, when the *HMS Leopard* hailed the *USS Chesapeake* in order to investigate rumors of British deserters now working on board the US vessel. The American captain refused to submit to the press gang and so the *Leopard* opened fire and boarded *Chesapeake* by force. After the smoke cleared 21 American sailors were dead and 4 suspected British deserters were taken aboard the *Leopard* one of whom would be hung for treason and the others, who were Americans, would sit in prison until 1815.¹⁸

This action and other increasingly aggressive actions taken by the Royal Navy spurred the American people and the Navy, most of which was still in the Mediterranean. A House representative at the time, John C. Calhoun felt it was America's duty to once again take up arms against Britain for the depredations they had suffered at sea. The question was simple, "Which

¹⁶ Benjamin Armstrong, "The Most Daring Act of the Age: Principles of Naval Irregular Warfare," *Naval War College Review* 63, no. 4 (Autumn 2010): 109.

¹⁷ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power In Its Relations To The War of 1812: Volume One* (New York: Haskell House Publishers LTD, 1969), 119-120.

¹⁸ Smelser, *The Democratic Republic*, 157-158.

shall we do, abandon or defend our own commercial and maritime rights, and the personal liberties of our citizens employed in exercising them? These rights are vitally attacked, and war is the only means of redress".¹⁹ These actions and policies involving the US Navy were a major catalyst for the War of 1812 and saw the expansion of the navy to unprecedented levels in order to once again protect American shipping and American lives. By the height of the war, the budget for the US Navy would be expanded once again and reach over \$9 million far outstretching the navy of any previous American conflict and bringing it closer to the modern navy.²⁰

American Technology

The period of the Barbary Wars, War of 1812, and after would see an explosion in American ship building technology that would only continue further into the 19th century finalizing in the innovative iron-clad steam navy of the US Civil War. Both natural and man-made innovations would end up helping to create a navy that could defend itself from both the Royal Navy and Algerian pirates.

The first of these valuable steps forward in technology was one from the American soil itself. When the US Navy was rebuilding it's fleet in 1795 a different source of wood was used previous from any other ship built in the Americas. The *Constitution* was the first and most famous for its design which featured a mix of white and live oak boards lapped over in three sections, instead of the average two laps of white oak. These were extracted from the swamps of Southern Georgia, an area which had only been recently settled by Americans.²¹ This new

¹⁹ John C. Calhoun "John C. Calhoun: *On the Second Resolution Reported by the Committee on Foreign Relations*," Accessed October 23, 2019, Milestone Documents.

²⁰ "Budget of the US Navy." Roughly Equivalent to \$153,000,000 in modern American currency.

²¹ William Gilkerson & Tyrone G. Martin, "The Artist, The Historian, and the USS *Constitution*," *Naval War College* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1997): 116-117.

construction method would allow for American ships to be faster and more well-defended than most British naval vessels or pirate gunboats. The *Constitution* was able to gain national fame during its fight *HMS Guerre* when British cannonballs bounced off its sides of live and white oak. This event would lead to the *Constitution* being immortalized as “Old Ironsides”. By the War of 1812, the American Navy was also utilizing better cannons and gunnery training. This allowed for American gun crews to score twice as many hits than even British crews.²² These new advances would be essential for the survival of the American Navy and American freedom on the high seas.

This precedent for American technological advances would continue past the War of 1812 after the republic had secured a place for itself on the world stage. The US Navy even began experimenting with steam engines by the 1830’s and 1840’s as it tried to tackle a myriad of new naval technology coming out at the time.²³ The next major time for innovation and an increasing budget would be just prior to the start of the US Civil War. The 1850’s would see the first naval budget in the tens of millions of dollars and a specific allotment for new experimental ships.²⁴ The implementation of many of the administration efforts that John Paul Jones had called for in 1783 also finally came into being. These new experiments in design would include changes in steam power and iron armor that would eventually lead to ships built just prior to the Civil War, such as the innovative *Monitor*-class design and the other hundreds of ships that the US Navy would employ by 1865, certainly a far cry from the initial two-ship “navy” of 1775.²⁵

²² Smelser, *The Demorcratic Republic*, 248-259.

²³ Kurt Hackeme, “Building the Military-Industrial Relationship: The US Navy and American Business, 1854-1883,” *Naval War College Review* 52, no. 2 (Spring 1999): 89-90.

²⁴ “Budget of the US Navy.”

²⁵ Hackeme, “Building the Military-Industrial Relationship,” 98.

Conclusion

While the importance of the Navy's birth in 1775 can not be overstated, the path to the modern American Navy or even the force of the Civil War was not an easy one and almost saw the American Navy sink at certain points. The American Navy was able to protect American shipping and liberty abroad only after 1795. However once it was reinstated, it was able to reinvent itself from a hodgepodge of state and continental ships into a fighting force led by bold and daring leadership, that adapted to and took advantage of different policy changes, and finally was able to use uniquely American technological advances that resulted in the large navy of the US Civil War. While the 244th birthday of the US Navy should be celebrated, it should be its second birthday in 1795 that should be seen as the clear starting point of our modern US Navy.

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