

# History of the United States Navy (Conception thru Vietnam)

## American Revolutionary War

The United States Navy was officially founded on October 13, 1775, when the Continental Congress authorized the outfitting of two vessels "of ten carriage guns...for a cruise of three months" against British supply ships. A Naval Committee of three men-Silas Deane, Christopher Gadsden and John Langdon- was appointed to supervise the project.

The Continental Congress had a very limited role in mind for the Navy. It was not expected to contest British control of the seas, but rather to wage a traditional *guerre de course* against British trade in conjunction with privateers outfitting in American ports. The Continental Navy's ships were to raid commerce and attack the transports that supplied British forces in North America. To carry out this mission, the Continental Congress began to build up a cruiser Navy of small ships - frigates, brigs, sloops and schooners. For the most part Continental Navy ships tried to avoid fights with Royal Navy men-of-war. Few larger ships, in fact, ever put to sea.

During the Revolution, there were occasional triumphs in single-ship engagements - the capture, for example of the British sloop-of-war Drake by Captain John Paul Jones' Ranger. Jones also operated against the British in the North Sea itself, and actually raided the coast of Great Britain. Jones, born a Scot, had actually fled to Virginia originally to avoid prosecution by Great Britain for murder. He also captained the Bonhomme Richard and is known as the father of the American Navy.

The Navy also employed the first undersea combat submarine during the Revolution, the Turtle, designed by David Bushnell of Connecticut. This was a one man submersible with two hand-held propellers and an outside screw designed to place a plug in the bottom of British ships with an explosive barrel attached which would then explode after its fuse burned. The Turtle was employed in action on only one date, 6 SEP 1776, in New York Harbor, against the H.M.S. Eagle. It failed to explode the Eagle, but is reported to have scared the devil out of the British sailors on board the attacked ship.

As expected, though, the Continental Navy never became a strategic check for the British fleet. But the course of the War did demonstrate to America the importance of sea power. New York, for example, has one of the biggest and deepest harbors in the world. And Lord William Howe, the British commander, wanted New York City because it protected the British power base (2/3rd's of the City's inhabitants were loyalists) and because its capture meant the Royal Navy could sail up the Hudson River into the heart of rebel territory. The British had a powerful navy, and they knew we did not have much of one. They knew, given all that, it was a must for them to maintain their occupation of New York City for the duration of the Revolution, which is exactly what they did. And the control of the Atlantic by the Royal Navy allowed Great Britain to transport a large army to North America and to sustain it there.

French sea power, allied with the American cause after 1778, allowed Washington to isolate and destroy the British army of Lord Cornwallis at Yorktown in 1781, ending Britain's hope of crushing the Revolution. Two years after the end of the War the money-poor U.S. Congress sold off the last ship of the Continental Navy.

## Barbary Coast

The refusal of Congress to embark on even a minimum naval program began to change when the question of aggressors, such as the Barbary Muslim states in North Africa preying on U.S. merchant shipping in the Mediterranean, became a national issue. Jefferson had said, as early as 1784 that: "We ought to be a naval power, if we mean to carry on our commerce." Alexander Hamilton argued that while the United States could not challenge Europe's principal maritime powers on the seas, in the event of a Franco-British war, a small American fleet could play the makeweight in the balance of power in the Western Hemisphere. Hamilton and his Federalists in fact felt

that a Navy could play a broad national role in projecting the interests of the United States, and should not be limited to merely protecting American commerce.

In the 1790s the Barbary Algerians again began to prey upon American merchant ships in the Mediterranean and, this time, Congress responded by passing a naval act that called for the construction of six frigates. As these large frigates were being built - Constitution, President, United States, Congress, Constellation, and Chesapeake - Napoleon's France struck, by seizing hundreds of U.S. commercial ships and cargoes, mostly in the Caribbean. Congress responded by passing legislation expanding the Navy to 30 vessels and by creating an independent executive Department of the Navy. These ships aggressively began to patrol the Caribbean, effectively protecting U.S. merchantmen, gaining the Navy an excellent public impression by 1800.

Jefferson won the election of 1800, but was immediately confronted by more depredations aimed at U.S. commerce in the Mediterranean by the Dey of Tripoli, the leading Barbary state. Jefferson decided to use the new Navy in an offensive, forward way, by blockading and bombarding Tripoli and providing support and logistics for a force organized from Egypt to march on Tripoli and topple the Dey. By 1807 there existed in the United States a clear political consensus supporting a naval establishment, but the primary, and limited, theme of that Navy was still the protection of U.S. maritime commerce, and not the projection of American power, or even the protection of vital national interests.

## **War of 1812**

The War of 1812 with Great Britain resurrected the naval debate in the United States. The Navy was forced, in this War, to fight large British naval ships, and scored some tremendous victories for so small a force. In 1812, the Constitution, commanded by Captain Isaac Hull, destroyed the Royal Navy frigate Guerriere. The United States, commanded by Captain Stephen Decatur, Jr., captured then scuttled the British frigate Macedonian, and late in the first year of the War the Constitution, then commanded by William Bainbridge, captured the Java. U.S. men-of-war won many other single ship engagements.

Despite these victories, the cost to the United States of having a comparatively weak Navy were quickly driven home. Great Britain was able to send numerous naval squadrons and several armies across the Atlantic. The United States found its ports blockaded and its trade all but destroyed. The British raided the coast at will. In the summer of 1814 a small British force captured Washington and burned the Navy Yard and the White House. British victories on Lake Ontario gave Britain effective control of the Great Lakes. The British, however, had no desire to continue this struggle and signed a treaty of peace late in 1814. Word of this treaty reached New Orleans late where, in 1815, General Andrew Jackson, with an American force consisting largely of Tennessee volunteers, blacks, creoles, cajuns and privateers, scored a major victory over a British army advancing down the Mississippi, killing over 2,000 British troops at Chalmette Field in a battle lasting 50 minutes, and losing only 7 American dead. Thus was destroyed forever British chances of blocking our way westward by controlling the Mississippi River.

In the period after the War of 1812, the consensus for a strong Navy survived the peace. In the postwar years the Navy blockaded and bombarded Algiers and kept small ongoing squadrons in the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, off the west African coast, and in the Pacific.

The Navy also struggled during this period to keep up with rapidly changing technology which was quickly making the men-of-war built during the War, and all ships like them, obsolete. The Navy experimented with steam-powered propulsion systems, armor plating, breech-loaders, shell guns, and the telegraph. In 1839, the Navy's first steam powered vessel was built, creating the need for engineers as well as sailors. An engineering-oriented Naval Academy was also established at Annapolis, Maryland, on the site of the former Ft. Severn, in 1845. President George Washington had asked for it, a long time previously. The Naval Academy's first class was made up of fifty students, and taught by seven teachers.

## **Mexican-American War**

During the Mexican War (1846-1848), the Navy blockaded Mexican ports and supported operations ashore both along the California coast and in the Gulf of Mexico. The Navy also transported General Winfield Scott's Army to

Veracruz in 1847, from where it marched inland to capture Mexico City, thus ending the War. The Mexican-American War represented the first major projection by sea of American military power abroad. Transported and supplied in large part by the Navy, General Scott's Army, outnumbered five to one in every engagement with Santa Anna's forces, won every battle, took Chalpultepec Castle, and conquered Mexico City, bringing the war to a close with a speed that amazed knowledgeable military veterans of the day.

## Civil War

During the War Between the States (1861-1865) the Union had a near monopoly on naval power. Naval officers, more so than Army officers, remained on the Union side. The average Union trooper was paid \$4.00 a day for his service. At the beginning, in 1861, so many southerners volunteered for Confederate service that 1/3rd of them had to be turned away. By the end of the war that would change, as would many things.

When the South seceded in 1861, at the United States Military Academy in New York, the Superintendent of Cadets asked those Army cadets loyal to the Confederacy to fall out and re-form, which they did. They then paraded off the Plain at West Point to join the war with the South. As they marched, the story goes, the United States Military Academy Band played "Dixie" and the Southern cadets did an eyes-right to Old Glory for the last time, as their Union cadet brethren, to them, for the last time, presented arms.

The Naval Academy was moved to Newport, Rhode Island in 1861 because of fear of a Confederate attack. It was returned to Annapolis in 1865. The majority of the U.S. Navy's men-of-war also were in northern ports and the absence of Confederate oceangoing sea power initially gave the Union de facto control of the seas. Union control of the seas allowed the North to blockade the coastal ports of the South, severely handicapping the Southern war effort.

It is only emerging now, in the early 21st century, that Southerners, given the Union blockade, were right and left improvising the building and operation of a number of naval submarines since the first year of the war, 1861, especially in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico. One battle, in 1862, caused by the blockade, took place at the mouth of the Chesapeake Bay where a Confederate ironclad, C.S.S. Virginia, was attacking Union blockade ships. The Virginia was in turn attacked by a new Union ironclad, a true semi-submersible, the U.S.S. Monitor. In four hours of fighting, neither ship seriously damaged the other, but the Virginia withdrew. A Swedish-born inventor, John Ericsson, had created the Monitor. Ericsson actually hated the Navy because he felt it cheated him out of a contractor's payment years before. But he was urged to build a ship designed specifically to counter the Virginia, which, it was feared, would cruise up the Potomac and shell the White House.

Confederate commanders had to maintain tens of thousands of troops to guard against Union forays from the sea. In the critical battles fought along the Mississippi River, Union oceangoing and inland-water naval forces combined in a classic campaign to cut the Confederacy in two. By the time General William Tecumseh Sherman marched his 62,000 troops to the Atlantic from Atlanta in 1864, the South had been cut up at least three ways by Union forces, and its armies were falling apart. General Robert E. Lee signed the instrument of surrender with General Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Courthouse in Virginia in April, 1865. The costliest war America would ever fight was over.

After 1865 Americans were tired of war and were struggling to reconstruct the nation and the Navy entered a 20-year period of decline. There was no obvious threat of a European invasion during this time and our Navy was allowed to age into obsolescence. By 1880, in terms of manpower, number of ships, and technology, the Navy was far behind all the major navies of Europe.

During the 1880s, when Americans looked abroad, they saw a technologically superior Europe on the march with a new imperialism. The Ottoman and Chinese empires, for example, long the target of U.S. commercial and missionary interest, were under severe and steady pressure from the European powers and at times appeared to be on the verge of collapse. Europeans were expanding their political and economic control into the hearts of Africa and Eurasia. In the Western hemisphere, the European powers became increasingly involved in the internal affairs of Central America and South America.

A strong Navy would allow the United States to prevent European powers from threatening the United States or the Western Hemisphere and a renewed consensus began growing supporting the development of naval power. Among those who worked to shape this new Navy as an aggressive force to project American power were civilian leaders,

such as President Benjamin Harrison, William McKinley, and Theodore Roosevelt and, most notably, historian and former U.S. Navy Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan.

## **Spanish-American War**

The U.S.S. Maine exploded in Havana Harbor at 9:40 p.m. on the night of 15 FEB 1898. Costing an impressive \$2.5 million to build, the battleship Maine had been in commission for only 29 months and had originally been sent into Caribbean waters to prevent Americans from the Florida Keys, called "filibusterers," from invading Cuba in support of the Cuban insurgents' uprising there against Spanish imperial rule. The explosion took place as the sailors of the U.S. Navy aboard were retiring to their hammocks for the night, killing 266 of our men, out of a total crew of 392. The destruction of the Maine was America's first experience with faceless terrorism, and "Remember the Maine" became a naval, and American, battlecry in a Spanish-American War (1898-1899) which would redefine the new roles of the U.S. Navy.

Far in the Pacific, Rear Admiral George Dewey's Asiatic Squadron quickly entered Manila Bay and annihilated the Spanish fleet. In the Atlantic, other Navy squadrons blockaded Spanish naval forces based in Cuba, and transported U.S. troops to the island. Ultimately the Navy destroyed Spanish naval power in the western Atlantic, sealing the fate of Spain's now forgotten New World Empire.

After the Spanish-American War, the United States continued to expand its naval forces. In 1907 and 1908, President Theodore Roosevelt sent the Great White Fleet of sixteen new battleships on a global cruise to demonstrate U.S. naval power to the world, and especially to Japan. Under the Administrations of both Roosevelt and William H. Taft, the United States continued to build battleships. The U.S. Navy had become the Nation's first line of defense, defending a line now drawn far from American shores. In 1914, when the Panama Canal finally opened, allowing our Atlantic and Pacific Fleets to become mutually reinforceable, World War I began in Europe.

## **WWI**

The Great War threatened U.S. freedom of the seas, as German submarines struck at Allied and neutral shipping indiscriminately. Great Britain also exploited its control of the seas to the detriment of U.S. commerce. In 1916, increasingly frustrated, President Woodrow Wilson and the U.S. Congress responded to these actions by launching a massive naval building program designed to make the U.S. Navy second to none. The following year, when the Germans resumed unrestricted submarine warfare, the U.S. declared war on Germany. Wilson then sent the U.S. Navy and the American Expeditionary Forces across the Atlantic in a move that ensured Allied victory in 1918

A widespread desire to reduce military expenditures set into both the Democratic and Republican parties after World War I. This fiscal conservatism was coupled with a desire for disarmament and, while a series of naval treaties signed in Washington in 1923 ensured parity between the United States and Great Britain, they also provide

## **WWII**

On December 7, 1941, without warning, Japanese carrier-based aircraft attacked the Pacific Fleet at Pearl Harbor. The Fleet's battleline was all but incapacitated. On December 10, Hitler declared war on the United States and the country immediately faced a two-ocean war.

The initial phases of World War II went poorly for the United States, and especially the Navy. We were defeated in Bataan, and lost the Philippines. In the Atlantic, U-boats torpedoed Allied commercial shipping within sight of the eastern seaboard. Victory in the Battle of the Atlantic was essential if the manpower and the products of the U.S. arsenal of democracy were to be transported to Britain and brought to bear against the Axis.

By the middle of 1943 The U.S. and the Navy had largely controlled the U-boat threat through technological advances, code breaking, and the productive capacity of American shipyards, which turned out new destroyers, tankers, freighters, escorts, and patrol aircraft in huge numbers. Once the Atlantic shipping lanes were secure, the Navy was able to transfer huge land forces to Britain and North Africa which, along with air power, began to crack Hitler's Fortress Europe with massive amphibious invasions supported by naval firepower, including assaults in

North Africa in November 1942, Sicily in July and Italy in September 1943 , and Normandy in June 1944. 150,000 troops landed on the beaches of Normandy on June 6, 1944, the greatest sea-borne invasion of troops onto enemy-held territory in the history of the world.

In the Pacific the Navy threw itself into battle with the Imperial Japanese Fleet, gradually making up for the debacle at Pearl Harbor. With growing strength at hand, its two major commanders- Chester Nimitz and William "Bull" Halsey- opted to seek out a modern-day Trafalgar - a decisive, annihilative battle against the Japanese Navy. A series of carrier battles fought in 1942 in the Coral Sea, at Midway, and in the Solomon Islands turned the seemingly inexorable tide of the Japanese advance. Large-scale amphibious operations, part of an island-hopping strategy, supported by carrier-borne aviation, carried the Americans back across the Pacific.

By 1943, the Japanese Zero fighter had been far surpassed in quality and speed, by the United States Navy's Grumman Hellcat. By 1944, U.S. Navy pilots were at the cutting edge of military airmen worldwide. By then, the Navy was rotating its experienced naval aviators every two years as trainers for new pilots, and our rawest airmen had at least two years of training and flying experience behind them. The Japanese, by comparison, were forced to fly their pilots, new, inexperienced recruits included, until they died in combat, as most of them did. In 1944 the Battles of the Philippine Sea and Leyte Gulf virtually ended the threat posed by Japan.

By 1945 the United States was closing in on Japan. U.S. Navy submarines had devastated the Japanese merchant marine and isolated the home islands from the Asian mainland. Amphibious forces seized Iwo Jima and Okinawa, strategically placed islands guarding the approaches to Japan itself. From bases in the the Marianas, USAAF B-29 heavy bombers pounded Japanese cities with massive incendiary raids. Strikes from U.S. Navy carriers, ranging along the eastern coast of the Japanese main island, Honshu, added to the destruction. By the time President Harry Truman ordered the dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki it was over. The Japanese officially surrendered on board the battleship U.S.S. Missouri anchored in Tokyo Bay on September 2, 1945. Pearl Harbor had been avenged.

## **Cold War**

At the end of World War II, both the U.S. and the Navy found themselves almost immediately entering a Cold War with Stalin's Soviet Union. Of all the Allied Powers during World War II, only the United States still possessed the economic strength to be a military leader during this struggle, perhaps the greatest struggle the Western world was about to face.

By 1949, the Navy had developed a forward maritime strategy which would become the core of Allied conventional naval thinking throughout the Cold War. In the event of war, navy and Allied carriers would strike hard at Soviet naval and air bases around the periphery of the U.S.S.R. Amphibious units would reinforce threatened positions or retake lost ones, perhaps conducting raids or invasions against the Soviet Union itself. U.S. submarines, armed with advanced sonar and eventually powered by nuclear energy, would no longer stalk merchant ships, but would hunt down Soviet submarines as they left their ports, before they could reach Allied sea lanes of communication (SLOCs). The outbreak of war in Korea in June 1950 further strengthened the hands of U.S. navalists. Most notably during the carrier-supported Inchon amphibious assault of September 1950, the Navy demonstrated that conventional naval power still had an important role to play in the atomic age.

Both the second Truman Administration and the Eisenhower Administration, in an attempt to lower federal spending, often tried to "pick and choose" among the Service Branches, pitting one Branch against another, to find a Branch (or Branches) which could provide a "silver bullet" for military spending, in other words, a Branch which could provide a great national defense at a cheap price, vis-a-vis the other Branches. In these inter-service battles forced on the Branches by the politicians, the Navy always seemed to be shortchanged, as demonstrated by the cancellation of the carrier United States. Many high-ranking naval officers refused to quietly accept these decisions as they applied to naval force structures, during a period known as the revolt of the admirals. These were policies (both Democratic and Republican) which were bound to fail, and which did in fact fail. In the election campaign of 1960, Presidential candidate John F. Kennedy, a decorated World War II Navy hero, criticized the Eisenhower Administration for weakening America's defense and foreign policies. It was a criticism and argument that resonated with the American public.

One of the carryovers of military policy from the Eisenhower era was the doctrine of sufficient deterrence based on massive nuclear retaliation by the United States. The Navy was therefore nuclearized, with missile guidance technology leading to the development of mobile, stealthy, and therefore survivable nuclear powered submarines (SSBNs) capable of launching intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) as well as shorter range nuclear tipped missiles (IRBMs), all later to be armed with multiple warheads (MIRVs).

The height of the Cold War, if not its climax, may have come in 1962 when President Kennedy sat in the White House. The year previous, Nikita Khrushchev, the Chairman of the Central Committee of the Politbureau of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, had taken Kennedy's mettle in discussions over Berlin at Vienna, and found Kennedy "inexperienced," even though Kennedy had told Khrushchev he would not hesitate to use nuclear weapons if the Soviets attempted to take over West Berlin by force. By 1962, Khrushchev was placing intermediate range nuclear ballistic missiles in Castro's Cuba, targeted at the mainland of the United States. Kennedy told him to take them out, or we would, regardless of the cost, and placed a unilateral naval blockade on Cuba, as to incoming Warsaw Pact ships. Just as the U.S. Navy was about to interdict the first Soviet ship to enter the blockade zone, the Soviets blinked, and removed the missiles, even though Fidel later told Barbara Walters in an exclusive interview in 2003 that he, Fidel, had asked Khrushchev to fire the missiles at the U.S. rather than dismantle them.

If this was the climax of the Cold War, it was a climax which shortly became moot. With the advent of naval SSBNs on both sides, submarines capable of firing, from undisclosed locations close offshore, ballistic nuclear missiles into the heartlands of both protagonists, the U.S. and the U.S.S.R., the need to station land-based offensive nuclear weapons near the territory of the other side, became an obsolete, and unnecessary, proposition.

The Navy found itself playing a sizable role in the debacle that was known as the Vietnam War. Although military and naval patriots called for the use of greater firepower to be brought to bear against Communist North Vietnam, these cries went unacted on in a Washington still fearful of the Chinese invasion of Korea in 1950-51, and the threat of a nuclear conflagration. 16 North Vietnamese Divisions attacked Saigon prior to its fall in April, 1975. Nixon's "Vietnamization" policy finally resulted in the fall of Saigon in April, 1975 to Communist forces, giving international communism and the Soviet empire an impetus they never had before on the world stage, an impetus it took the U.S. another 15 years to finally overcome definitively.

[Source: [www.navyvets.org/id50.html](http://www.navyvets.org/id50.html) Jun 2010 ++]