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George C. Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy from the Revolution to the War of 1812*. New York: Basic Books, 2008. Pp. x, 536. ISBN 978-0-465-01607-5.

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In the early years of this republic, most Americans resisted allocating scarce resources to create a navy. Navies cost a great deal—and evoked the abuses of the hated British Empire. Since most Americans lived in rural areas or small towns, protection of the frontiers loomed as the largest defense problem, but concern about costs and centralized governmental power kept even land forces tiny. Militias could always be called out in an emergency. Thus, at the outbreak of the Civil War, in a now vastly richer United States, overall Army strength stood at just over sixteen thousand,¹ while the navy operated fewer than forty ships. Only twelve were available to begin a blockade of the Confederacy.² George Daughan describes the trials of the naval forces from 1775 to 1815. His book consists primarily of well-written combat narratives, mostly ship-on-ship actions—but, in an effort to “integrate” naval and military actions, there are long sections on land combat in the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. In fact, *If By Sea* closes with Andrew Jackson’s successful defense of New Orleans, an operation with little naval involvement. Since Daughan is more interested in the story than systematic analysis, there is no summary/conclusion. However, the book does include good maps and a useful glossary of now obscure nautical terms for warships under sail.

Most accounts of the war for independence say little about American naval operations—and little of that is kind. In brief discussions, Howard Peckam has argued that the navy was no more than an “extreme annoyance” to Great Britain,³ and Robert Middlekauff that it was a “failure.”⁴ Both focus on a single engagement: John Paul Jones’s victory over HMS *Serapis*, off the east coast of Great Britain in 1779. Daughan largely agrees with their assessment: the Continental Navy was “utterly unable” to contribute as much to the war effort as its founders had hoped (2). However, by devoting half his substantial volume to the Revolutionary War and bringing to light many little known engagements and leaders, he makes a plausible case that the Revolution brought the “true beginning” of the United States Navy (2), mostly in the sense of creating traditions, such as the determination of John Paul Jones. Some famous ship names of revolutionary origins persist into the present: *Wasp*, *Hornet*, *Saratoga*, and, of course, *Enterprise*. But incompetence and futility figure in Daughan’s story, too: the Continental Navy was plagued by poor leadership, the inability of the young country to support the service logistically or with new vessels and, more than anything else, poor strategy. Congress, which oversaw the Navy, sent ships on pointless missions. Many problems grew from a thoughtless fixation on duplicating British weapons and strategies and the lure of fleet actions in open water. This made naval and political leaders unwilling to cooperate with the Continental Army in combined operations, for instance, in the defense of New York or Philadelphia. But the problem was larger—and rooted in the landsman’s culture of the colonies. In 1775, Massachusetts mobilized its militia, but not its sailors, in the defense of liberty. If only, Daughan laments, the navy had thrown its energies into small boats operating in rivers and bays, rather than ships, and into guerrilla tactics rather than conventional ones, which, he points out, the Royal Navy itself most feared. In any case, by 1783 the Navy barely breathed. After Congress sold the last ship the following year, the United States possessed no naval force for a decade.

Daughan spends the second half of his book tracing the sporadic revival of U.S. naval power as a result of renewed war in Europe, intensified dangers of piracy in the Mediterranean, and new and more financially

1. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army* (Bloomington: Indiana U Pr, 1984) 598.

2. Craig Symonds, *Lincoln and His Admirals* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2008) 49.

3. *The War for Independence: A Military History* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 1958) 127.

4. *The Glorious Cause: The American Revolution, 1763-1789* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 1982) 528.

sound government under the Constitution. But the new Navy was not universally welcomed. Jeffersonians bitterly opposed its creation, fearing the expense and the potential for misuse of all military power. In 1794, Congress approved just six frigates; these distinctive and powerful ships, designed by Joshua Humphreys and built in six separate cities, formed the backbone of American naval power for the next twenty years. Their names, chosen by George Washington, are justly famous: *United States*, *Constitution*, *President*, *Congress*, *Constellation*, and the *Chesapeake*. Characteristically, the legislation authorizing them required that construction cease if the threat of war disappeared—thus, only three were built. The Quasi-War with France (1798–1800) and the actions against the Barbary Pirates added significantly to the reputation of the Navy, but not to its political support. Following the XYZ affair, the Adams administration won the right to complete the frigates and increased the Navy to fifty vessels. But even after notable success against French warships in the Caribbean, a new administration (in 1801) once again reduced the Navy. Then, early in his presidency, Jefferson decided to confront the Barbary Pirates; after a modest buildup and much brave action, the Navy succeeded. Again, it was reduced.

James Madison's War, the War of 1812, guaranteed the permanence of a modest American navy. Humphreys' ships, still in service and again the core of the American fleet, continued to dominate similar-sized British vessels. Though the Navy received exemplary leadership from its captains, as early as 1813 the massive size of the Royal Navy forced U.S. ships into harbors and restricted them to occasional sorties. But then action shifted to fresh water, Lakes Erie and Champlain, where resourceful leaders, Oliver Hazard Perry and Thomas McDonough, backed by effective and firm administration in Washington, achieved critical victories.

Macdonough would need all his experience and learning to fight [British Commodore George] Downie. The navy had given Macdonough command of Lake Champlain in 1812, and had required him to build his fleet from scratch, just as Oliver Hazard Perry had been ordered to do. But Perry had the cooperation of his superior; Macdonough, who had an independent command, did not.... While Downie was struggling to get into position, Macdonough fired the first shot himself, crying out to his crew, "Impressed seamen call on every man to do his duty." And with that, he put a smoldering slow-match to a 24-pounder, igniting a bloody, two-hour-and-twenty-minute fight. "The firing was terrific," an eyewitness reported, "fairly shaking the ground, and so rapid that it seemed to be one continuous roar, intermingled with spiteful flashing from the mouths of guns...." That night, the deeply religious Macdonough wrote to Secretary Jones, "The Almighty has been pleased to grant us a signal victory on Lake Champlain in the capture of one frigate, one brig, and two sloops of war of the enemy" (458, 460–61).

In Daughan's words, the War of 1812 "ended the argument" over the need for a navy. Perhaps. The situation in 1861 makes this claim seem excessive: Congressional and public acceptance of a large, expensive navy awaited advocates like Alfred Thayer Mahan and Teddy Roosevelt—and a very different America.⁵

Daughan tells his story well, but many readers will want more: for instance, some discussion of republican ideology and how it shaped both strategy and shipboard life. Others will want to learn about shipboard living conditions and the relations of sailors with officers on American warships. Daughan makes clear the key role of privateers in each of the era's conflicts, but did they "throttle" the navy, as Peckham contends? The same question arises concerning the state navies: was their influence "ruinous"?⁶ Subordinate commanders so often disobeyed orders and thereby imperiled victories—a situation confronted by both Jones in 1779 and Perry in 1813—as to impugn the professional values of officers. Readers will also want more on the logistics and basing of the navy. Where did cannon come from? And powder? One-third of the British Empire's ships were made in America;⁷ did the Navy take advantage of this capacity? And how did the navy support squadrons or even individual ships in the Mediterranean or the Pacific? These are questions *If By Sea* does not answer.

5. Evan Thomas explores this later world in his recent book, *The War Lovers: Roosevelt, Lodge, Hearst, and the Rush to Empire, 1898* (NY: Little, Brown, 2010).

6. Note 3 above, 117–18.

7. See Middlekauff (note 4 above) 526.

So I hereby submit a summer reading plan, a short course in American naval history, using readily available books. Begin with Daughan's overview. Then, move on to Evan Thomas's thoughtful biography, *John Paul Jones*,⁸ a book rich in detail on matters ranging from republican values aboard ships to technology in the revolutionary era (it also shows that sailors were not paid for years at a time). Complete the syllabus with Ian W. Toll's fascinating and well-written *Six Frigates*,⁹ which concentrates on the leaders and combat operations of the blue water navy after 1794, but finds room for intriguing asides on everything from the logistics to politics. (Contact me for course writing assignments....)

8. Subtitle: *Sailor, Hero, Father of the American Navy* (NY: Simon & Shuster, 2003).

9. Subtitle: *The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (NY: Norton, 2006).