



2012-034

George C. Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War*. New York: Basic Books, 2011. Pp. xxix, 491. ISBN 978-0-465-02046-1.

Review by Ralph M. Hitchens, Poolesville, MD (rmhitchens@netscape.net).

Prize-winning¹ historian George Daughan's fine new account of the somewhat neglected War of 1812 is one of a spate of works that have appeared to mark the conflict's bicentennial.² While he does justice to his subtitle, delving deeply into the details of the naval war, he also offers a fairly comprehensive overview of the US Army's often troubled operations, along with the conflict's shifting political background. Daughan translates his extensive research into a clear, linear, and (with one exception) unbiased narrative. A shortcoming is the placement of the few maps at the beginning of the volume, requiring much turning of pages to get a good picture of the land operations in particular. Broad of scale and lacking detail, they barely meet the reader's needs in following the convoluted land and naval campaigns in the Great Lakes region and Britain's amphibious debacle at New Orleans.

Daughan is on solid ground examining the domestic political background of the war. He dissects the partisan rancor that troubled the presidency of James Madison as what he thought to be an inevitable war with Britain approached. He gives an unsparingly critical view of the presidential dithering and congressional foolery that persisted throughout the war. Congress's ineptitude exceeded even Madison's failings as a commander-in-chief. The Republican majority supported the war but stubbornly opposed any imposition of taxes to pay for it. Secretary of the Treasury Alexander Dallas (Thomas Jefferson's son-in-law) told the Republican chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee that the vast wealth of the nation "remained almost untouched by the hand of government" (364)—a fact of which the small-government Republicans heartily approved but which, as Daughan documents, seriously hampered the prosecution of the war.

Both the Army and Navy were starved for resources, and men often went unpaid for months. President James Monroe's government and the country at large were fortunate that very skilled and innovative military officers arose at the right time to enable the United States to recover from humiliating defeats on land while gaining signal victories afloat. Monroe was equally fortunate that the steady Federalist opposition to the war centered in the New England states never reached critical mass; the famous Hartford Convention of 1814-15 eschewed separatist language and put forward surprisingly tame recommendations, which were swiftly overshadowed by national indignation over the outrageous terms the British government initially offered to the peace negotiators at Ghent.

The book provides a crisp treatment of the naval war on the high seas, the Great Lakes, and the all-important Lake Champlain, with meticulous attention to the ships, their captains and crews, and their armaments and sailing qualities. Students of military history will admire the extraordinary professional competence and initiative in particular of US naval officers, who put their Royal Navy opponents to shame. Oliver Hazard Perry, Thomas Macdonough, Isaac Hull, and Stephen Decatur stood in the top rank of their profession, each more than a match for any of his British counterparts. Even the repellent William Bainbridge—a captain under whom no one wished to serve—redeemed his sorry performance in earlier conflicts with a masterful victory in the third, stunning, single-ship frigate duel of the war.

1. The Samuel Eliot Morison Prize for *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy—From the Revolution to the War of 1812* (NY: Basic Books, 2008).

2. Or proximity thereto: see, e.g., Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 2007; pb rpt. 2010), Stephen Budiansky, *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815* (NY: Knopf, 2011) with my review at *MiWSR* 2012-007 - www.miwsr.com/2012-007.aspx, Mark C. Jenkins and David Taylor, *The War of 1812 and the Rise of the U.S. Navy* (Washington: Nat'l Geographic, 2012), Donald R. Hickey and Connie D. Clark, *The Rockets' Red Glare: An Illustrated History of the War of 1812* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins U Pr, 2012), and J.C.A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2012).

The author devotes too much space to the international background, including Britain's long war with Napoleon. An overlong narrative of the latter's Russian campaign could have been omitted altogether. Furthermore, Daughan's detours into European politics are as decidedly Anglocentric as Fleet Street propaganda during the administration of William Pitt the younger. Still, these international forays are only a minor irritant.

The author hammers home his principal thesis, that "Impressment was the issue that sustained the war" (327). He makes it very clear that this contentious practice both caused and prolonged the conflict. He argues convincingly that the Royal Navy's refusal to reform its harsh treatment of seamen forced Parliamentary acquiescence in the pressing of seamen from American vessels, thereby entangling the British Empire in a war not of its choosing. Since, by 1812, the Royal Navy enjoyed unchallenged prestige as the indispensable bulwark of Britain's defense against Napoleon, Parliament could not insist on an end to impressment even to avert an American declaration of war.

Royal Navy ill-treatment of seamen in this period, enshrined and untouchable by long tradition, was severe and pervasive: it included atrocious shipboard living conditions; very low, often nonexistent, pay; a substandard diet made worse by victualer and purser abuses; and brutal punishment even for trivial offenses. Humane captains being scarce, wherever possible the floating proletariat of the English-speaking world voted with their feet, seeking service with merchant ships at home and abroad or deserting outright at the first opportunity. The Admiralty had learned nothing from the famous mutinies of 1797.

Daughan gives good examples of just how self-defeating the savage treatment of seamen was: during his rampage up and down the Chesapeake Bay in 1814, the notorious Adm. George Cockburn could not risk sending shallow-draft boats into the many inlets and rivers to take and destroy American vessels and property, because British sailors would seize the opportunity to desert and flee inland. For the same reason, the Admiralty was reluctant to send large numbers of seamen to lower Canada to redress the all-powerful Royal Navy's embarrassing failure to wrest control of the Great Lakes from the Americans.

On the other hand, the explosive issue of impressment was not, purely in numerical terms, as bad as it is often portrayed: Daughan notes that, during the Napoleonic Wars, the Royal Navy pressed about six thousand American seamen, as compared with an estimated twenty-five thousand British seamen who were working in the American merchant service. Nevertheless, for Americans economically dependent on maritime trade, impressment was a sufficient *casus belli*. Daughan believes more enlightened treatment of sailors on British ships would likely have reduced impressment to a nonissue and forestalled war. Few readers will disagree, especially considering that another provocative issue—the Orders in Council restricting American trade with belligerents—had been obviated by their suspension at the outset of the war. Further, many licenses were granted to American merchants, authorizing trade with Britain and its overseas possessions in spite of the hostilities.

Daughan sees the Americans as highly opportunistic. By 1812, it seemed clear that Napoleon's imminent invasion of Russia would succeed, thus putting an intolerable strain on the increasingly isolated British. Across the ocean, Madison and all too many Americans thought this would in turn make it possible for the United States to seize Canada. British forces there, after all, numbered fewer than eight thousand regulars and militiamen: surely even the infant US Army could muster enough troops to overwhelm them. Thus, territorial greed combined with genuine outrage over impressment trumped the counsel of cooler heads.

As events played out, the American Army performed disgracefully along the Canadian border during the first year of the war, and only the initiative and skill of some junior US Naval officers on the Great Lakes prevented the British from gaining a significant foothold in the western territories. Cdr. Isaac Chauncey and Lt. Melancthon Woolsey on Lake Ontario and Lt. Jesse D. Elliott on Lake Erie exhibited a degree of energy and professionalism sadly lacking in their Army counterparts. (Daughan does a real service in rescuing these men from historical obscurity.) The Army's few successes in this theater of war included the Battle of the Thames in October 1813, a lopsided victory won by a future president, William Henry Harrison (ably assisted by Oliver Hazard Perry, fresh from his decisive naval triumph on Lake Erie) over a small British force that included the disappointed remnant of the once formidable Native American tribal coalition formed by

the Shawnee leader Tecumseh, who had seen in a British alliance his people's only chance to block American encroachment into their ancestral lands. When the great chief perished in the battle, "any chance—admittedly slim to begin with—for the Indians to preserve their ancient way of life in the Northwest, or indeed east of the Mississippi, died with him" (218).

As the war dragged on, the British, not unexpectedly, were as motivated by territorial aggrandizement as the Americans, launching an expeditionary assault on New Orleans even as the negotiators at Ghent were concluding a peace treaty. Fortunately for the Americans, this operation ended in a colossal failure, as Daughan details in a most instructive summary of the episode. To be sure, the British Army and Navy encountered stupendous difficulties waging war in the swamps of coastal Louisiana, but they might have done much better with more intelligent planning and resourcefulness on the part of the Royal Navy. (Britain seemed to have learned nothing from its embarrassing amphibious failures during the Napoleonic wars.) When the exhausted British Army had finally worked its way close to Gen. Andrew Jackson's hastily fortified defensive position along the Rodriguez Canal south of New Orleans, it confronted an additional obstacle—the American-controlled Mississippi River. The US Navy had two lightly armed sloops in the river, complementing a naval artillery outpost on the west bank directly opposite the British encampment. Commanding this small force was the energetic and capable Cdre. Daniel Patterson, whose immense contribution to Andrew Jackson's victory Daughan, unlike previous historians, gives deserved emphasis. Although skillful British cannon fire destroyed one of Patterson's sloops, the other kept threatening British forces for a few critical days before being withdrawn; many of its guns were left behind to reinforce both Jackson's line and the American battery on the west bank, where Patterson himself remained in command, directing damaging fire into the British camp.

It is astonishing that the Royal Navy was willing to forfeit control of the Mississippi. The tides and sandbars at the river's mouth were certainly formidable, but not insuperable, barriers, given the long British experience with operations in coastal waters. Fort St. Philip, some fifty miles up the river, was another major obstacle but, being isolated and far from reinforcements, it could have been neutralized had the British displayed more energy and determination. Control of the Mississippi River was decisive: had even a few British warships been able to provide flanking fire against Jackson's line, supplementing a successful operation to capture (albeit briefly) the American battery on the west bank, they would have reversed the disastrous tactical situation confronting their troops on the east bank. The latter were famously slaughtered in great numbers during a futile attempt to breach Jackson's line. Daughan understates the case in writing that the decision of Admiral Cochrane, the British commander in chief, to concede control of the Mississippi to Commodore Patterson "was a great help to Jackson" (383).

George Daughan has written an excellent military history that usefully explores the emerging political and military cultures of a nation scarcely out of its infancy. The United States avoided defeat and perhaps extinction in the War of 1812 thanks only to an array of institutional, strategic, and tactical failures on the part of the British—the Royal Navy in particular. Readers habituated to seeing the Royal Navy in heroic terms, embodied in Horatio Nelson and the fictional paragons popularized by C.S. Forester and Patrick O'Brian, will acquire in Daughan's book another, quite illuminating view of that venerable institution.