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The 21ST-CENTURY RELEVANCE OF ALFRED THAYER MAHAN AND WILLIAM SOWDEN SIMS

Benjamin F. Armstrong, ed., *21st Century Mahan: Sound Conclusions for the Modern Era*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2013. Pp 179. ISBN 978-1-61251-243-3.

—, *21st Century Sims: Innovation, Education, and Leadership for the Modern Era*. Annapolis: Naval Inst. Press, 2015. Pp xii, 162. ISBN 978-1-61251-810-7.

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Benjamin Armstrong, a US Navy officer and doctoral candidate in war studies at King's College London, has edited the first two books of the Naval Institute's "21st Century Foundation Series," which aims to give a modern perspective on great military strategists and philosophers of the past by reprinting a sample of their essays and relating them to current issues and debates. The target audience comprises students, military professionals, and policy-makers rather than scholars. Hence the books lack indices and provide little or nothing in the way of footnotes or bibliographies.

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) and William Sowden Sims (1858-1936) have much in common and hence make excellent choices for the first books of the series. Both were Naval Academy graduates who became presidents of the Naval War College, both enjoyed mutually beneficial relationships with Theodore Roosevelt, and both wrote extensively on naval topics. Mahan became a rear admiral and Sims a four-star admiral.

21st-Century Mahan

After a ten-page introduction, Armstrong presents five of Mahan's papers, each preceded by four pages of explanation. The selection in chapter 1, "Management, Administration, and Naval Leadership,"² addresses the general public, rather than naval officers. Mahan begins by pointing out the natural tension between the goals of naval officers who want to win battles and of naval administrators who desire smooth, efficient operations. He then offers a historical comparison of American and British naval administrations. He argues for the superiority of the US system with its (at that time) civilian Secretary of the Navy, who had one superior (the president) and dealt with his subordinates individually, as he had no Board. In contrast, the First Lord of the Navy had to deal with his subordinates together in the Admiralty. Yet, in the essay's final paragraph, Mahan identifies the weakness of the American system as requiring an inexperienced secretary to coordinate the work of bureau chiefs. Armstrong does not describe changes to the system in the intervening century, instead focusing on Mahan's warning to future naval officers in a time of downsizing: "administration ... becomes the bigger and more imposing activity, with an increasing tendency to exist for itself rather than for the military purposes which are the sole reason for its existence" (14).

In the selection in chapter 2, "Globalization and the Fleet,"³ Mahan examines the strategy for allocating the ships of the Royal Navy, the world's largest in the early 1900s. He analyzes the interwoven political, military, and commercial situation worldwide that influenced the selection of naval bases. Armstrong notes that today's readers will recognize this phenomenon as globalization in response to new technologies—then steam power and the telegraph, now digital networks and drones. Mahan observes that "Attention has

1. The third installment published thus far is *21st Century Ellis: Operational Art and Strategic Prophecy for the Modern Era*, ed. B.A. Friedman (Annapolis: Naval Inst Pr, 2015).

2. "The Principles of Naval Administration: Historically Considered," originally in *National Review* [UK] (June 1903), rpt. in Mahan, *Naval Administration and Warfare: Some General Principles* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1908).

3. "Considerations Governing the Disposition of Navies," originally in *National Review* [UK] (July 1902), rpt. in Mahan, *Retrospect and Prospect: Studies in International Relations, Naval and Political* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1902).

centered on the Pacific generally, and upon the future of China particularly” (50). While the Mediterranean is no longer supremely important and no one now refers to “Marconi range” (63), many of Mahan’s conclusions about the offensive and defensive considerations for distributing ships may be extended to aerial assets in our own day.

The selection in chapter 3, “Training of Officers and Sailors,”⁴ concerns naval education. Much that Mahan writes here remains true today. His main concern is the curriculum of the US Naval Academy; he argues for less emphasis on engineering and science and more on English, foreign languages, history, and tactics. He thinks officers need only be able to use, not design, naval machinery, and that, of the science-based disciplines, they need master only navigation. He argues that, while English and foreign language study may not be directly relevant to naval duties, they foster a “breadth of thought and loftiness of spirit” (91). Armstrong, who majored in history while at Annapolis, notes that the Academy still stresses engineering.

A lecture on Admiral Horatio Nelson delivered at Boston’s Victorian Club in October 1905 for the hundredth anniversary of the battle of Trafalgar⁵ appears in chapter 4, “Leadership and Command.” Mahan states that “Our quest has been the strength of Nelson. I find it in the inborn natural power to trust; to trust himself and others; to confide, to use his own word. Whether it is the assurance within, which we call conviction, or the assurance without, which we call confidence, in others or in one’s own action, this is the basic principle and motive force of his career, as Duty was its guiding light and controlling standard” (140–41). Armstrong comments that such conviction promotes the rapid decision-making needed in the twenty-first-century military.

Chapter 5, “History and Conventional Wisdom,” contains Mahan’s short biography of Edward Pellew,⁶ a British officer who became Lord Exmouth after Britain defeated Napoleon and later Vice-Admiral of England. Pellew resembles Nelson in confidence and audacity, attributes Armstrong believes are important in junior officers. This brief biography is included here because Pellew spent his career in much smaller ships than the battleships for which Mahan is best known. Hence, smaller is relative. Pellew served in the American War of Independence on the *Inflexible*, a 180-ton ship that carried eighteen 12-pound guns and was “thus superior in power, not only to any one vessel of the Americans, but to their whole assembled flotilla in Lake Champlain” (150). Later, Pellew commanded a sloop and a small French prize before advancing to frigates and becoming Commodore of the Western Frigate Squadron in 1794. In 1797, in his most famous action, his flagship, the *Indefatigable*, and a second frigate, the *Amazon*, defeated the French 74-gun, 1000-man French ship of the line *Droits de l’Homme*.

Armstrong’s anthology provides a good introduction to Mahan’s lesser known works, with pertinent citations of his other works and those of other authors. He mentions Mahan’s seminal *The Influence of Sea Power upon History 1660–1783*,⁷ only briefly, noting its difficult writing style and focus on the tactics of now obsolete battleships. In fact, Mahan’s conclusions about the significance of geography and the impact of strong naval power, stemming from his observations in the days of sail, are less compelling today than in 1890 more because of the importance of air supremacy than the decline of battleships. Armstrong also holds that Mahan’s articles on acquiring Hawaii, the Philippines, and the Panama Canal are not relevant today, but the first two show clear parallels to China’s activities in and beyond the South China Sea. Surely these are as germane today as Pellew.⁸

4. “Naval Education: ‘Essays,’” *The Record of the US Naval Institute* 5.4 (1879) —“Mahan’s first published piece of writing” (80).

5. “The Strength of Nelson,” in *Naval Administration and Warfare* (note 2 above).

6. “Pellew: The Frigate Captain and Partisan Officer,” *Types of Naval Officers: Drawn from the History of the British Navy* (Boston: Little Brown, 1901).

7. Boston: Little Brown, 1890.

8. The book also suffers from poor proofreading: e.g., the United States annexed Hawaii and won the Philippines in the nineteenth century, not the twentieth.

21st-Century Sims

Armstrong follows a similar organization for his selections from Sims's writings. His eleven-page introduction to the "gun doctor" (1) is followed by six essays, three of them addresses to war college graduating classes. Each is prefaced by a few explanatory pages. The editor concludes with remembrances by one of Sims's colleagues.

Chapter 1, "Professional Debate and Military Innovation," contains Sims's most famous article,⁹ a discussion of errors he believes Mahan made in an account of a battle in the Russo-Japanese war¹⁰ due to inaccurate preliminary information. He refutes Mahan's conclusion favoring traditional ships with multiple gun sizes over those equipped exclusively with large guns, as the Naval War College had recently recommended. Armstrong states that Mahan's and Sims's accounts were "Just a few years away from Great Britain's launch of HMS *Dreadnought*, which would revolutionize ship design by bringing speed together with heavy armor and an all-big-gun battery..." (12). However, Britain had commissioned *Dreadnought* that same year in response to Italian naval architect Vittorio Cuniberti's 1903 article on such a ship and First Sea Lord Sir John "Jacky" Fisher's recommendation to the Admiralty in 1904. Sims in fact refers to the *Dreadnought* class in his article.

The articles Armstrong reprints are mostly faithfully copied; but, in chapter 1, he (or the publisher) silently—no note or even ellipsis points—omits a chart and two words referring to it. But the reprinted version still refers to the excised chart:

A glance at Lieutenant White's chart will show, however, that the Japanese admiral had no difficulty (barring thick weather) in repeatedly choosing his own position (distance and bearing) with reference to the head of the enemy's fleet, and that the battle therefore resolved itself into a competition between the fire-control officers of the two fleets as to which could make the most hits, under the conditions selected by the Japanese—these conditions being of course very unequal, since the Japanese were able to concentrate the fire of many ships upon a few of the Russians. (18–19)

This ninety-five-word sentence is hard to follow even with the chart showing the courses of two dozen Russian and Japanese ships; it is all but impossible without it. The sentence occurs in a five-page discussion of the battle that traces Mahan's faulty conclusions to a reliance on earlier erroneous reports of the directions and speeds of each fleet. Thus the chart is key to understanding the entire article. Curiously, the same chapter includes a full page of figures of a hypothetical situation (33).

Sims wrote the essay included in chapter 2, "A Proper Military Mindset," as an invited lecture for the Navy's National Naval Volunteers Program in 1916, when American participation in World War I seemed likely. While his other lectures treated such technical matters as torpedoes, tactics, and naval policy, Sims was asked to write a piece on military character. In it, he argues that a combination of loyalty and initiative accounted for the success of the German army—a strange choice of example, given that the volunteers were so likely to be facing the Germans the following year. Sims, like Mahan, chose Nelson as an example of an inspirational leader. He ends the lecture with suggested guidelines for future commanders that, Armstrong notes, are as applicable today as they were in 1916.

Chapter 3, "Preparing for Command and Preparing for War," contains a speech titled "The Practical Naval Officer" that Sims gave before the December 1919 graduating class of the Naval War College.¹¹ In it, he praises a lecture of the same title that Mahan gave at the opening of the college in 1892. Using the analogy with football, he shows that success requires, besides efficient material, adequate knowledge and mental training. He illustrates how war games, by then used at the war college for two decades, made practical naval education much easier. Just as football players practice until they react instantly and correctly to any situation they encounter, naval officers "practice the war games until their minds are so trained that deci-

9. "The Inherent Tactical Qualities of All-Big-Gun, One-Caliber Battleships of High Speed, Large Displacement and Gun-Power," *Proceedings of the Naval Institute* 32.12 (1906).

10. "Reflections, Historic and Other, Suggested by the Battle of the Japan Sea," *Proceedings of the Naval Institute* 32.6 (1906).

11. *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 47.4 (1921).

sions flow naturally and automatically from the war doctrine developed by the training itself" (92). Sims advises naval officers to read Clausewitz, Corbett, Derrecagaix, Hoenlohe-Ingelfingen (*sic*; read Hohenlohe-Ingelfingen), Mahan, and Wilkinson. That books by four of these six are still in print in English attests to their lasting value nearly a century after Sims recommended them.

Chapter 4, "The Forces of the Status Quo," contains Sims's November 1921 graduation speech at the Naval War College.¹² His theme here is the negative impact of military conservatism on military effectiveness. He discusses historical resistance to such advances as the cross-bow, sails, gunpowder, armor, steam power, breech-loading guns, gun training, and so on, ending with the submarines and airplanes he encountered in the First World War. He recommends "a combination of logical ability and military character—the ability to reach sound conclusions from established facts, and the character to accept, adopt, and fight for these conclusions against any material or spiritual forces" (120) as the way to guard against even more destructive weapons in the future. Armstrong contends that military conservatism is as strong today as it was a century ago.

Chapter 5, "The Peace Dividend and the Professional," presents a third graduation speech, delivered to the class of 1922, as Sims was about to retire from the Navy. In it, he compares the downsizing of the Navy after World War I to the reductions after the Civil War that left the Navy far behind other major powers until developments through the early twentieth century made it competitive. Facing new graduates who had known only better days, Sims counsels them to do their best during a time of cutbacks while awaiting the turning of the tide that would surely come. Armstrong recommends the speech to current officers who know that Sims was right then and is likely to be again.

In the sixth and final chapter, "A Century-Old Promotion System," Sims reviews the evolution of the Navy's promotion patterns from a pure seniority system, sometimes modified by "plucking boards" (139) that retired or cashiered many officers considered unfit, to the 1916 Naval Personnel Act that established the promotion boards that remain the basis of the present-day "up or out" system. Sims endorses a (never implemented) alternative method that Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels approved in 1919. It was intended to remedy two major defects: board members' unfamiliarity with most junior officer candidates and their need to rely on fitness reports by a few senior officers rather than a candidate's broader "service reputation" (141). The solution seemed to be to create a promotion board for each senior rank composed of officers of the next higher rank. Each board member would receive a list of candidates and rank them from one to "n," where "n" is the number of promotions desired. Then the board chair would combine the resulting lists and arithmetically determine the "n" officers to be promoted. Armstrong comments that "This calls to mind the modern idea of providing an officer, or a promotion or selection board, with '360 degree feedback'" (137). But Sims's recommended alternative, like the existing system, excluded feedback from peers or subordinates.

Armstrong concludes his book by advising readers to follow Sims's belief in self-study and to reflect on the issues raised in the preceding chapters. He includes a remembrance that Harry Baldridge, Sims's long-time assistant, published after his death.¹³ It traces Sims's decades of hard work to improve the Navy he loved.

By contrast with his Mahan volume, Armstrong provides no endnotes here but simply a list of further readings. The Sims volume is far weaker than the Mahan book, and not just in a scholarly sense, which is unimportant since it is intended for a general audience. Unfortunately, the book exaggerates Sims's accomplishments beyond what even he would claim for them. Armstrong parades his belief in Sims as an innovator in his book's subtitle. In fact, the man was an educator and leader, but less an innovator or creator than an early adopter, superb analyst, and dogged promoter. As Sims himself insisted,

it should never be forgotten that the credit for the inception of the epoch-making principles of the new methods of training belongs exclusively to Captain [now rear-Admiral] Percy Scott, Director of Target Practice of

12. *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 48,3 (1922).

13. "Sims the Iconoclast," *US Naval Institute Proceedings* 63,2 (1937).

the British Navy, who has, I believe, done more in this respect to improve naval marksmanship than all of the naval officers who have given their attention to this matter since the first introduction of rifled cannon on men-of-war.... (38–39)

He continued in his 1921 graduation speech on military conservatism to recount, with much frustration, extensive reports he made in China from 1895 and from France and Russia from 1897 through 1901 on these nations' gunnery systems, which were far more advanced than the American ones. At the same time he continued reporting on Scott's superior methods.

Armstrong also gives Sims more credit than he deserves for his work at the Naval War College: "He resumed his position in Newport after the end of the conflict [World War I], at which time he had the opportunity to influence an entire generation of naval officers. These were men returning from war and trying to put their experiences in perspective and learn lessons for the future. They had names like Nimitz, King, Spruance, and Halsey" (9–10). But these future admirals graduated in 1923, 1933, 1927, and 1933 respectively, that is, *after* Sims had retired. Armstrong does not indicate just how Sims used his "opportunity to influence" them.

21st-Century Sims will appeal to readers wishing to know exactly what Sims said—hundred-word sentences and two-page quotations and all. Those more interested in what can be learned from his career should consult the biographies Armstrong suggests.¹⁴ These reveal a man sailing close enough to the wind to draw a presidential reprimand while yet continuing a career that saw him shrewdly balancing the interests of his country with those of allies in the First World War.

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In these welcome anthologies, Benjamin Armstrong has achieved the publisher's goal of reproducing some of the writings of Mahan and Sims with special relevance to naval affairs of our own day. These short, accessible volumes will inform an audience of students, military professionals, and policy-makers seeking to understand the enduring insights of two of America's most outstanding admirals.

14. E.g., the biography by Sims's son-in-law, Elting E. Morison, *Admiral Sims and the Modern American Navy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1942). Excellent shorter accounts are available as well: see, e.g., Branden Little and Kenneth J. Hagan, "Radical, but Right: William Sowden Sims (1855–1936)," in *Nineteen Gun Salute: Case Studies of Operational, Strategic and Diplomatic Naval Leadership during the 20th and Early 21st-Centuries*, ed. John B. Hattendorf and Bruce Elleman (Newport, RI: Naval War College Pr, 2010).