Alfred Thayer Mahan—Father of Sea Power

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Historical Paper
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On December 7th, 1941, the implications of Alfred Mahan’s naval philosophy were revealed to the United States. By the end of the day, America’s Pacific Fleet was destroyed. The capabilities of Japan’s naval forces proved that naval power was national power—the basic tenet of Mahan’s works—and annihilated America’s naval capabilities in the process. The United States was forced to recognize that sea power and world involvement were crucial to national security. Mahan’s sea power thesis was tested and proven in combat; ultimately it was naval power which assured Japanese success in the Pearl Harbor raid.

The tale of Mahanism begins at West Point, where Alfred Thayer Mahan was born to Dennis and Mary Helena Mahan on September 27, 1840. Mahan’s grandparents were immigrants from Ireland; his father, an instructor at West Point. After attending Columbia College for two years, he enlisted in the Navy, against his father’s wishes. Mahan graduated from Annapolis in 1858, ranked second in a class of twenty.

Mahan’s career as a line officer was uneventful. He was promoted to lieutenant commander within ten years and captain in twenty-seven. He served in the Civil War as part of the blockading force, an experience which he would draw upon in his scholarly work. This was followed by a cruise to Europe, where Mahan served under the command of Stephen B. Luce. Mahan also served on other vessels, performing sundry tasks in Asia and South America.

It was in teaching and scholarship that Mahan would find success. Well-read in current affairs and military literature, he drew upon his knowledge and thought as material for teaching others. His first published work, “Naval Education for Officers and Men,” won third place in a competition sponsored by the United States Naval Institute in 1878 and
revealed his commitment to scholarship.\(^1\) Mahan also drew upon his Civil War experience and his reading in military literature in writing his first book, *The Gulf and Inland Waters*.

The founding of the Naval War College for advanced studies in naval matters and international law cultivated Mahan’s most significant thought. The president of the college was Commodore Luce, under whom Mahan had previously served. Luce asked Mahan to join the staff to direct work in strategy and tactics and to teach naval history. Mahan eagerly accepted both the position and a request to present a series of lectures to the college.\(^2\) In 1890, these lectures were published by Little, Brown and Company under the title *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*.

*The Influence of Sea Power upon History* was Mahan’s *magnum opus* and the basis of almost all of his later work. Contained in its opening chapters was Mahan’s sea power thesis, his firm belief that sea power was the key to national security and world dominance. This thesis was the position that Mahan defended and assumed in all his future work. The origins of sea power were central to the application of his thesis; hence the second chapter of the book was devoted to discovering these roots. Mahan enumerated six principal conditions affecting the sea power of nations: geographical position, physical conformation, extent of territory, population, character of the people, and the character of the government.\(^3\)

Mahan’s initial conditions concerned the geography and environmental situation of a nation. By geographical position, he meant that “a nation be situated so that it is neither forced to defend itself by land nor induced to seek extension of its territory by way of the

\(^1\) Alfred T. Mahan, “Naval Education for Officers and Men,” United States Naval Institute *Proceedings* V (Dec. 1879): 345-76.


land.”4 Physical conformation described the suitability of the shoreline for naval operations and its strategic value. Extent of territory concerned “not the total number of square miles which a country contains, but the length of its coast-line and the character of its harbors that are to be considered.”5 These characteristics generally predisposed a nation toward maritime affairs by minimizing its interests on land and by minimizing its desire to extend its territory by land. By implication, a nation predisposed toward naval power could not seek land power, a corollary of Mahanism that some adherents tried to ignore.

The last of Mahan’s conditions concerned the people themselves. Population appraised the willingness of the citizens to participate in maritime activities. National character, or the character of the people, implied the commercial aptitude of a people and their tendency to pursue trade by sea. Mahan especially stressed the importance of maritime trade. “The tendency to trade,” he wrote, “is the national characteristic most important to the development of sea power” (emphasis added).6 Character of government was the tendency of a government to support or oppose the development of naval industries.7 To Mahan these human qualities underlying sea power were the most important conditions, since the disposition of citizens toward the sea ultimately distinguished great naval powers from mediocre ones.

Mahan did not just take a stand in history; he took a stand on it. He used his principles as criteria for evaluating the history of wars from 1660 to 1783. In his evaluation, Mahan sought empirical proof for his sea power thesis and hoped to find a basis for predicting the

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4Mahan Influence 29.
5Mahan Influence 43.
6Mahan Influence 53.
7Mahan Influence 44-88.
outcome of future wars. In his following work, *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, published in 1892, Mahan built upon the principles established in the first work and extended them to events in a later time period. Mahan was especially interested in the attitude of France toward sea power because the French seemed to mirror the American attitude toward the sea. Despite a great geographical and commercial potential for dominance of the seas, both nations failed to fully exploit their naval capabilities.

Mahan’s message was directed at American audiences. Recognizing the importance of public support to national policy, Mahan sought to sway public opinion in favor of naval spending and naval power. His sea power series assessed the United States in each area of sea power in the hope that Americans would utilize their naval potential. Mahan especially emphasized American naval potential in the last of his six conditions, the ones which could be changed most easily. The United States received an unusually high rating in national character, a rating meant to encourage America’s development as a naval power. Mahan also realized that America could not withdraw from the world; she needed to be involved in the world through means like sea power, and she needed to protect her own interests. This was especially true in an era like that during the turn of the century, when all other nations were already pursuing a vigorous policy of imperialism and colonization.

Mahan’s efforts brought about some changes in naval policy during the first decade of the twentieth century. Followers of Mahan’s philosophy took steps to enact his naval doctrines. Of Mahan’s domestic exponents, Theodore Roosevelt made the greatest contribution to this

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end by constructing the “Great White Fleet.”¹⁰ As early as 1890, Roosevelt was sold on the need to build a “large navy, not merely of cruisers, but containing also a full proportion of powerful battleships, able to meet those of any nation.”¹¹ The sudden escalation in battleship construction is illustrated in Appendix I. The ships of the Great White Fleet were the first in a series of modernized vessels designed to establish the United States’ naval superiority in the Western Hemisphere. In December 1907, the fleet of sixteen battleships departed from Hampton Roads, Virginia, in a show of force that would travel 45,000 miles in fourteen months, a tangible example of the clout Mahan gained in national policy making (Appendix II). The voyage of the fleet around the world demonstrated another of Mahan’s doctrines—that sea power was more than mere battle-fleet strength; it could be augmented by the perception of naval strength.

Mahan’s doctrines also affected America’s expansionist policy. In 1893, Mahan published an article entitled “Hawaii and Our Future Sea Power” in Forum, which appraised the strategic value of that archipelago.¹² Though this work received little attention at the time, it influenced later decisions. Rear Admiral Stephen Luce wrote in 1907 that Mahan “served to crystallize current thought on the subject [of annexing Hawaii], and matters began to take a definite shape.”¹³ The article from Forum was cited frequently in the congressional debate over the establishment of a naval base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.¹⁴

The doctrines of sea power also seeped into America’s relations with her continental neighbors. Once again, Roosevelt obeyed Mahan’s advice, which asserted a “need of adequate

¹⁴Luce 112.
fortifications . . . at some point on the Gulf coast.”  

In his administration, Roosevelt constructed this fortification in South America—the Panama Canal. Located reasonably close to American ports, it greatly increased the mobility of America’s fleet in the years following its completion in 1914. Roosevelt also used America’s renewed naval power to enforce the Monroe Doctrine. When European powers demanded the settlement of Latin American debts, challenging American supremacy in the Caribbean, Roosevelt readied the fleet to defend those nations. This practice of American intervention to deter foreign intervention became known as the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine, a policy enforced by “gunboat diplomacy.”

Foreign nations also received Mahan’s works enthusiastically. The British, whose society Mahan admired greatly, received his works with much praise. Cambridge and Oxford both awarded him honorary degrees. The British government supplied copies of his works for the libraries of training ships. Mahan affirmed the naval and national philosophy that the British had pursued for centuries, reviving the interest of the British in their own navy. Germany also followed Mahan’s guidelines for imperialism. Kaiser Wilhelm II studied Mahan’s work assiduously; he wrote to a friend, “I am just now not reading, but devouring Captain Mahan’s book, and am trying to learn it by heart. It is a first class work and classical in all points. It is on board all my ships and constantly quoted by my Captains and officers.” Envious of the British empire, he sought to equal British achievements by constructing a navy of his own. The task of building this new fleet fell to Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, who became

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15Roosevelt 564.
the minister of the marine in 1897. Tirpitz’s primary objective was the construction of a considerable battle fleet in the North Sea to intimidate the British home fleet and prevent naval intervention. Tirpitz’s fleet finally met action with the outbreak of World War I. His failure was explained by Mahanism. Mahan clearly distinguished between sea power and battle-fleet strength, a distinction ignored by the German admiralty. He also observed that pursuit of a land power policy traded off with a policy of sea power, an argument which Tirpitz and Wilhelm disbelieved.¹⁹

Japan was yet another disciple of the sea power philosophy, receiving it in her infancy as a world power. The government placed translations of Mahan’s most important books in all schools, and many naval and military colleges adopted The Influence of Sea Power upon History as a textbook. A translator of Mahan’s work wrote to the author, “I trust that the great principles herein set forth by your forcible pen may . . . awaken our nation and . . . be the pillar of fire leading our nation in the century to come.”²⁰ The translator’s wishes were fulfilled, as Japan built up her navy and exercised her naval power in a war with Russia at the turn of the century and in two world wars during the twentieth century.

Mahan’s doctrines may have influenced the strategy of World War II. Hector Bywater, a British journalist, presupposed many of Mahan’s naval doctrines, one of them being command of the sea.²¹ His novel, The Great Pacific War, actually contained plans for a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and on the Philippines which coincided with the plans used by the Japanese in 1941 (Appendix III).²² The successes of the Japanese proved Mahan’s belief that navies were able to project power more effectively than land-based forces. In addition, the

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²⁰Livezey 76.
United States based her strategy for entering World War II, Rainbow-5, on the doctrine of sea power. Unfortunately, the attack on Pearl Harbor destroyed the navy that would have executed Rainbow-5.

Clark Reynolds, chairman of the department of history at the College of Charleston, contends that Mahan’s influence went far beyond the navy. He claims that Mahan’s arguments influenced Frederick Jackson Turner in framing the “frontier thesis.” In his famous “frontier thesis” published several years after Mahan’s *magnum opus*, Turner argued that an American geographical feature—the western frontier—influenced the formation of America’s character. This is remarkably similar to Mahan’s argument that a nation’s geography affected its character and its position in world affairs.

Despite his scholarship and his influence on future affairs, Mahan did not meet great glory or success in the remainder of his naval career. However, Mahan managed to complete a biography of the renowned British naval strategist, Admiral Nelson, and a sea power account analyzing the War of 1812. In 1896, after thirty-eight years of service, Mahan retired. Freed from his military duties, Mahan was able to pursue scholarly and didactic writing concerning sea power. After 1896, he published over one hundred magazine articles expressing his thoughts on sea power to the masses. Mahan was asked to advise Congress and President Roosevelt on strategic issues. In 1906, the Navy promoted him to rear admiral

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on the retired list.

World War I found Mahan in great demand as a military advisor. However, President Wilson and the Navy Department promulgated a Special Order in 1914 prohibiting officers of the Army or Navy of the United States from publicly commenting upon the military or political situation in Europe.\textsuperscript{28} Mahan sought exemption from this order, but his efforts were in vain.\textsuperscript{29} In any case, Mahan had little time to comment. He died on December 1, 1914, just as his theories on sea power were being tested and proven on a global scale.

Mahan found little success in military service. He came to wonder if his father was correct in questioning his choice of a naval career. Yet it was through his experiences and his stand on naval strategy that he also met his greatest success—teaching others the importance of sea power. Ultimately his career choice was vindicated; his sea power thesis gave him a unique place in the annals of history.

\textsuperscript{28}Livezey 23.
Appendix I–American Battleship Construction, 1890-1910

<table>
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<td>1910</td>
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This table illustrates the American naval buildup at the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{30} The Influence of Sea Power upon History was published in 1890; three years later, the first American battleships were constructed. Battleship construction was further accelerated by the presidency of Theodore Roosevelt, one of Mahan’s most prominent advocates.

Appendix II–The “Great White Fleet”

Theodore Roosevelt’s “Great White Fleet” stretches to the horizon.\textsuperscript{31} This armada was a tangible example of the influence that Mahan’s sea power doctrine exerted over the President.

Bywater’s plans for an amphibious assault on the Philippines are compared to those actually used by the Japanese in World War II. The similarity between the two plans can hardly be coincidence, considering that Bywater’s book was published sixteen years before the invasion took place.

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Bywater, Hector. *The Great Pacific War*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1932. This novel by British journalist Hector Bywater contained plans which the Japanese actually used to wage war in the Pacific. He clearly illustrates his debt to Mahan by using Mahan’s doctrines to explain the Japanese failure.

—. *Sea Power in the Pacific*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1921. In this nonfictional account, Bywater warned that Japan’s naval strength would outstrip American naval power in several years, a situation unacceptable to Mahan’s disciples. He would later carry this message to the masses in the novel *The Great Pacific War*.

Luce, Stephen. “Naval Strategy.” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* XXXV (1909) 93-112. This paper, written by Mahan’s former commander and a former director of the Naval War College, documents the influence which Mahan had on the establishment of the U.S. naval base at Pearl Harbor.


—. *The Gulf and Inland Waters*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1883. This was Mahan’s second published work which assessed the strategic value of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea. A comparison of this work with “Strategic Value of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Sea” shows the changes of Mahan’s thought after the formulation of the sea power thesis.

—. “Hawaii and Our Future Naval Power.” *The Interest of America in Sea Power*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1897. 31-55. This is a reprint of the *Forum* article advocating the annexation of Hawaii, which influenced Congress to establish a naval base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and later, to annex Hawaii entirely because of its strategic value.

—. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. 12th ed. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1918. This is Mahan’s greatest work on sea power. It presents his thesis that sea power was key to world dominance. A reading of this book developed a basic understanding of Mahan’s ideas and established the basis for this interpretation of his beliefs.

—. “The Isthmus and Sea Power.” *The Interest of America in Sea Power*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1897. 59-104. In this article, Mahan assesses the strategic value of another American geographical
feature—the Isthmus of Panama. It was yet another subtle way in which Mahan influenced government policy, in this case, bringing about American involvement in the construction of the Panama Canal.

This was Mahan’s first published work. It reveals his commitment to naval scholarship and naval education.

In this address to the Naval War College, Mahan warned that naval commanders should not be solely dependant upon the past. He argued that intuition and innovation were vital assets for winning naval battles.

—. “Strategic Features of the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico.” The Interest of America in Sea Power. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1897. 271-314. This article is a later assessment of the strategic features of the Gulf of Mexico which shows the development of Mahan’s naval thought. It assumes the sea power thesis, whereas The Gulf and Inland Waters did not.

In this letter, Mahan laments about the institution of a gag rule upon military officers, prohibiting them from publicly commenting on the situation in World War I.

This is Mahan’s letter accepting a position on the staff of the Naval War College. Mahan was rather surprised by Luce’s offer, but believed that he had the aptitude needed to do the job well.

In this letter, Mahan declares the goals of his lectures on sea power which were later given at the Naval War College. He hopes that the material will be instructive and guide the actions of future naval commanders.

In the first of many letters which Mahan would write to Roosevelt, he requests that Roosevelt do whatever possible to keep him from going to sea so that he might continue
his writing. The efforts of Roosevelt, Luce, and Henry Cabot Lodge proved insufficient, as he was later sent to sea.

Mahan shows his passionate advocacy for U.S. involvement in world affairs. It is yet another way in which Mahan took a stand by opposing the American diplomatic tradition of isolationism.

This is Roosevelt’s appraisal of Mahan’s Influence of Sea Power upon History. This account shows his enthusiasm for Mahan’s doctrines.

In this classic treatise, Turner claims that the frontier, a geographical feature unique to the United States, helped to shape its national character. His writing shows traces of Mahan’s influence.
Works Cited—Secondary Sources

Thomas Bailey surveys the American experience in this work, revised and edited by David Kennedy. It introduced Mahan’s sea power thesis and inspired this paper.

Benjamin maintains that Mahan was not merely a naval strategist; he hope to encourage the overall development of the United States by establishing it as a world power.

In this unpublished dissertation, Berge compares Mahan with several other expansionist and tries to find common characteristics among them.

This article concerns the leak of Rainbow-5 into American newspapers, viz. the Chicago Tribune and the Times Herald, three days before the Pearl Harbor attack. That, combined with the Pearl Harbor attack, made them a useless strategy.

Gilliam reevaluates the validity of Mahan’s predictions concerning contemporary events in this dissertation. He concludes that many of Mahan’s prediction were accurate, especially regarding the risks of a Panamanian canal.

This biography of Mahan, written from a liberal point of view, argues that Mahan made serious errors in his sea power thesis, and that his doctrines urged Britain and Germany onto the path of self destruction.

This biographical account of Mahan provided historical context for Mahan’s work and established a working knowledge of the naval thought of the time period.

Heppenheimer analyzes the historical cycle of American military buildups and disarmament, especially regarding Mahan’s warnings that the United States should maintain a powerful defensive military force.

This fascinating work describes the influence which British journalist Hector Bywater
had on the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It also demonstrates the influence that Mahan had on Bywater and, by implication, on the Pearl Harbor attack.

This comprehensive history of the United States Navy contains interesting material about Mahan’s influence on naval strategy and the powerful role of the Navy in the twentieth century.

Kesteloot claims in this history of the United States’ merchant marine that Mahan’s work provided motivation for the government to build up the merchant marine rather than adhere to isolationist tradition. Kesteloot notes that despite Mahan’s advice, the merchant marine is facing major cutbacks.

This review of Honan’s book introduced the naval thought of Hector Bywater and his role in devising the plans for a Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Subsequent research developed a connection between Mahan’s and Bywater’s strategic thought.

Morris argues in this dissertation that shifted the emphasis of United States foreign policy from arbitration through international laws to active promotion of ideals and goals.

This book discusses Mahan’s magnum opus and helped shape the interpretation of his sea power thesis. Livezey documents the influence that Mahan had on domestic leaders like Theodore Roosevelt and the reception that his work received in foreign countries.

This essay, which received honorable mention in the Arleigh Burke Essay Contest, contends that Mahan’s writings have many valuable lessons for politics and strategy, such as the need of a balance of power.

This book responds to the claim that air power superseded naval power. In fact, air power strategy owed a great debt to Mahan, because his works were a source of inspiration for Giulio Douhet, Billy Mitchell and other proponents of air power.

This book assesses the power projection capability of the world’s navies beginning
with Columbus and ending in the present day. It reveals that the peaks of seapower concentration coincide with world power phases in global politics.

In this article, Commander Needlam argues that many of Mahan’s beliefs concerning naval strategy are still applicable today, and that Mahan’s arguments for active American involvement in the world is still relevant, even if the sea power thesis may have questionable value in the 1990’s. He proposes six conditions for sea power in the 1990’s and hopes for the rise of a 21st century Mahan.

In this survey of American historians, Kathleen Brady names Mahan as the American most underrated by history. She concisely enumerates the influence that Mahan had during his time and during World War II.

Petillo’s biography of MacArthur reveals that America’s Pacific strategy of the 1940’s, War Plan Rainbow-5, was heavily dependent on American sea power. When the Seventh Fleet was destroyed in the Pearl Harbor raid, the United States was forced to create an entirely new strategy.

Captain Puleston wrote this comprehensive biography of Mahan hoping that Americans would break the isolationist tradition. He reaffirms that validity of Mahan, especially in the opening years of a second world war.

Puleston’s responds to Hacker’s criticism of Mahan in this short article. He argues that Mahan was not trying to interpret history; he was trying to develop a paradigm that could explained previous events and could predict the outcome of future events.

This essay presents the hypothesis that Mahan influenced the revisionist work of Frederick Jackson Turner and Charles Beard, a theory defended in this paper.

This reprint of Rosinski’s 1939 article assesses Mahan’s application of land warfare strategies to the sea. It also explicates Mahan’s distinction between the strategy and objectives of naval battles and land battles. It also evaluates the value of the sea power thesis in an age of air power.
—. “German Theories of Sea Warfare.” *The Development of Naval Thought.* Newport: Naval War College Press, 1977. 53-68.

This article concentrates on the German application of the sea power thesis, and shows the mistakes and contradictions that they made, thus causes their defeat in World War I.


Rosinski’s article, a reprint of an article from 1941, describes the role that the sea power thesis played in strategy for World War II. It also displays the shortcomings of air power as opposed to sea power.


Rosinski reveals the contradictions and flaws in Admiral Tirpitz’s application of Mahan’s sea power thesis. These flaws led to the German defeat in World War I.


In this comprehensive history of the Pacific theater of World War II, Specter links the naval tradition of seapower and Mahanism to War Plan Rainbow-5, the comprehensive strategy to halt the Japanese offensive in the Pacific.


In this book, the Sprouts trace the roots of American sea power and praise Mahan for his thesis which accounts for many of these roots.


This short biography of Theodore Roosevelt outlines his foreign policy. It describes Mahan’s influence on his diplomatic philosophy, especially regarding “gunboat diplomacy” and the Roosevelt corollary to the Monroe Doctrine.


This article documents the influence of Mahan’s doctrines on Theodore Roosevelt and the philosophy of the U.S. Navy, especially concerning the construction of the Great White Fleet.