H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kevin J. Weddle. *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2005. 304 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-2332-1.

Reviewed by John Schroeder (Department of History, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee)
Published on H-CivWar (May, 2006)

Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont: Union Naval Hero and Scapegoat

Kevin J. Weddle has written an admirable biography of this well-known antebellum American naval officer. Born in 1803 to a well-connected and prominent family, Samuel Francis Du Pont, or Frank as he was known, entered the navy when he was twelve and served for almost fifty years. Since the naval officer ranks were cluttered in the years after the War of 1812, Du Pont rose slowly. He was promoted to lieutenant at age twenty-three after eleven years of service. At age forty, he became a commander after twenty-eight years of service, and at age fifty-six a captain after forty years of service.

Like other officers he received typical peacetime assignments in the antebellum navy, but Du Pont distinguished himself as a exceptionally talented officer. As commander of the *Cyane* in California waters during the Mexican War, Du Pont helped blockade Mexican ports, fought briefly, and embellished his rising reputation. He later commanded the first-class screw frigate *Minnesota* on the diplomatic mission that carried diplomat William B. Reed to China and resulted in the Treaty of Tientsin in 1858.

Although Weddle describes Du Pont's varied naval duties over a long career, the author argues that "the true significance of Du Pont's naval career" was the "tremendous and positive influence he exerted on the transformation of the United States Navy structurally, technologically, and strategically from the Mexican War through the Civil War" (p. 2). As an exceptionally bright, progressive and respected officer, Du Pont was an influential leader of those reform-minded naval officers who wanted to improve the efficiency of the navy, revamp the promotion system, introduce new steam and ordnance technologies, and modernize the nation's naval strategy. As a result of his influence in the department and his determination to reform the navy's officer personnel system, Du Pont emerged as an extremely controversial figure for his role in the naval Efficiency Board of 1855. Du Pont recommended, designed, and then served on the board that reviewed the performance and fitness for sea duty of some 250 officers. The board eventually recommended that a total of 111 officers be removed in some way from active duty, thus creating a major political controversy for the Secretary of the Navy and President, but unclogging the promotion channels for dozens of long-serving officers like Du Pont.

Once the Civil War began, Du Pont played an invaluable role on the Blockade Board that designed the Union's basic naval strategy for the war. Then in November 1861, he led the naval expedition that brilliantly attacked and captured Port Royal, South Carolina. Du Pont was now both a national hero and the navy's most distinguished officer. In July 1862, he also became one of the U.S. Navy's first three rear admirals. His stature and popularity would not last, however. Over the next seventeenth months, Du Pont increasingly found himself at odds with the Navy Department over the question of whether and how Charleston should be attacked and conquered. Eventually, the department ordered Du Pont to proceed with an exclusively naval attack instead of a joint army and navy assault that Du Pont advocated. In a rather fatalistic and less than wholehearted manner, Du Pont did as he was ordered, but the attack failed miserably in April 1863. Subsequently humiliated and disgraced by the Navy Department, Du Pont did not receive another combat command. Du Pont died shortly after the war ended in 1865 with his reputation still tarnished.

Lincoln's Tragic Admiral is based on the extensive records of the Navy Department and the voluminous Du Pont papers. Clearly organized and well written, the book strikes an admirable balance between descriptive narrative and analytical interpretation. The book is also an appropriate length. Given the duration of DuPont's career and the volume of available primary sources, this book could have been much, much longer, but Weddle knows how to distinguish between what is significant and worth writing about, and what is insignificant and

not worth telling. As a result, the book is devoted primarily to Du Pont's efforts to transform the navy in the 1850s and to his important role in the first two years of the Civil War.

Since Admiral Francis Du Pont was an admirable and likeable naval officer, any biographer would be tempted to defend him against critics and to explain away his shortcomings. But Weddle is not a hagiographer. While acknowledging Du Pont's many attributes, he criticizes his faults and mistakes. For example, with respect to the debacle at Charleston in 1863, Weddle criticizes the actions of Secretary Gideon Welles and Assistant Secretary Gustavus Fox in the Navy Department, but he also concludes that "at Charleston his [Du Pont's] demoralized performance was lackluster, and he demonstrated little aggressiveness" (p. 214). Weddle has written a well-informed and balanced biography which should be of interest to both American historians as well as to general readers with an interest in the mid-nineteenth-century U.S. Navy.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: John Schroeder. Review of Weddle, Kevin J., *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. May, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11759

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.