

# H-Net Reviews

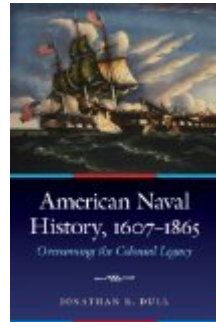
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Jonathan R. Dull. *American Naval History, 1607-1865: Overcoming the Colonial Legacy*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012. ix + 194 pp. \$27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-4052-0.

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Jonathan R. Dull's 2012 *American Naval History, 1607-1865* seeks to fill a glaring hole in the current naval historiography: the need for a broad survey of the early history of the U.S. Navy. Dull's synthesis draws on a wide range of secondary studies ranging from the colonial period to the Civil War, covering topics from individual officers to international relations. Despite this extensive scope, the author maintains an overarching argument that American naval progression was seriously impeded by its colonial legacy. He defines this legacy as the persistence of localism, the preference for decentralized government, an inferior naval infrastructure, sectionalism, and an intense interest in westward expansion. The turning point is the Civil War, when the United States was finally able to fully transcend these factors to mobilize an effective, sophisticated, and numerically superior naval force. The text is organized chronologically, with each of the six chapters covering a specific period or war.

Dull's discussion of the colonial period emphasizes the inherent economic and military subservience that were the results of British rule. Loose British administration resulted in a lack of colonial unity and cooperation. Royal Navy shipbuilding and arms production were essentially left to the metropole. These handicaps are best seen in Dull's narrative of the American Revolution. Despite some notable performances, economic and military inadequacy continued to define the rebels' naval effort. Much like they were in the Seven Years War, the colonies were dependent upon European forces. The diplomatic isolation of Great Britain enabled the combined fleets of Spain, France, and the Netherlands to neutralize the Royal Navy in Atlantic waters.

The third chapter of the book deals with the nascent

United States' struggles with France, in the so-called Quasi-War, and the various Barbary states of the southern Mediterranean. Although the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 enabled the creation of a national navy, no such effort was made beyond the creation of revenue cutters until the Naval Act of 1794. This effort is just one of the many examples provided by the author of how a step in the right direction was plagued by the colonial legacy. Six frigates were slowly built under regional contracts that divided production across the eastern seaboard, while "the American obsession with speed and overcoming adversaries in single-ship combat," priorities of the colonial era, resulted in "fine ships" that were still inferior to European designs (p. 38). As for the Tripoli War during the opening years of the nineteenth century, Dull argues that the American record was mixed. Writing contrary to much of the recent historiography about the conflict, which cites the war as evidence of the rise of American naval power overseas, he contends that the conflict reveals a continued reliance on European allies, inexperience in large-scale fleet action, and a prolonged war effort against a technologically and numerically inferior enemy.

This weakness continued into the War of 1812, the outbreak of which found the U.S. Navy with a mere five frigates. Although the Americans were able to pull off several successful ship-to-ship duels against the Royal Navy, the reinforcements of the latter force in the following year effectively blockaded the east coast. However, failures on the high seas were countered by American successes on the Great Lakes and on Lake Champlain. Officers such as Thomas Macdonough and Oliver Hazard Perry were able to take advantage of superior supply lines to stall British advances from Canada. Dull ar-

gues that the United States was able to survive the limited, defensive war thanks in large part to the navy. Although colonial characteristics continued to plague the emergence of a truly effective fighting force, the War of 1812 served to ensure “there was no danger that [the navy] would fade away as it had after the end of the War of American Independence” (p. 64).

While the American Revolution, the Barbary conflicts, and the War of 1812 have received much attention from naval historians, the Mexican War has not. Dull’s examination of the conflict in his fifth chapter, which covers the years from 1815 to the eve of the Civil War, may prove to be the most interesting to readers not only because of its coverage of the often forgotten war but also because of the examination, albeit brief, of the shipboard life of the average American sailor. In terms of the Mexican War, the author shows that the U.S. Navy, for once, was actually fairly well prepared. This was due in part to the skilled stewardship of naval secretary Abel Upshur. Although Mexico had virtually no navy at the outbreak of war in 1846, the Americans were able to gain valuable experience in terms of blockading, port seizures, logistics, amphibious landings, and river penetration. As for social factors, Dull touches upon the difficulty in obtaining crews due to the popularity of merchant service, the limited promotional opportunities for upstart officers, the use of free blacks aboard naval vessels, and the superior pay and provisions compared to British crews. Harsh discipline, often a reality of early modern military service, was paired with “camaraderie, a sense of humor, and pride” (p. 75).

The American triumph over the colonial legacy is completed in the book’s longest chapter by far, which covers the Civil War. The author identifies the Northern advantages by 1861 as including superior industry and shipbuilding, Navy Department reforms, a healthy merchant fleet, and a strong executive in the form of President Lincoln. The Confederacy, on the other hand, still suffered significantly from the effects of the colonial legacy; state rivalries, a focus on agriculture, a shortage of officers, a weak central government, and poor naval infrastructure served to place the Confederate navy in a position that the United States had experienced multiple times in the past. As a result, the South did not stand a chance against Union superiority both at sea and on inland waterways. The accumulation of these advantages led to the “great turning point” in American naval history (p. 113). Dull draws several interesting comparisons at the end of the chapter, likening the Confederate’s strategic situation to that of other isolated and vulner-

able countries, such as Prussia and New France during the Seven Years War. The book closes with a brief but provocative epilogue. Here Dull suggests that the colonial legacy has not yet been completely wiped out; isolationism and the penchant for low taxes and guns are ills from America’s backward past that need to be eradicated. The author urges the United States “to embrace change as the path to progress” (p. 125). The polemic seems out of place, to say the least.

This curious insertion of contemporary politics can be forgiven since the rest of the book provides a clear and concise narrative of American naval history that is unrivaled. Naval specialists, scholars of early America, and general readers interested in both military and American history will benefit from the narrative found in this book. Accounts of the wars during the period are given a fresh perspective as they are viewed through a naval lens. Furthermore, it fully integrates American naval history, a topic usually dominated by more traditional military histories, within broader administrative, diplomatic, and geopolitical contexts. Dull brings to light the valuable roles not only of heroic officers who served in key battles, but also the labors of usually forgotten administrators like Upshur, Gideon Welles, and William Jones.

In terms of the author’s thesis, its persuasiveness is mixed. *American Naval History, 1607-1865* is explicitly described as a companion volume to Dull’s 2009 work, *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French Navies, 1650-1815*. The latter work focused exclusively on material factors, arguing that the Anglo-French naval rivalry was essentially a battle of economies and not societies. This argument was a direct challenge to the likes of N. A. M. Rodger and others who identified British social factors nurturing a triumphant Royal Navy. The volume in question here broadens its approach by identifying colonial mindsets as the cause of naval backwardness. This raises a host of neglected issues about the American colonial legacy in terms of naval development. While Dull rightfully characterizes the colonial role in the Seven Years War as that of a dependent, his first chapter ignores the contributions of New England colony ships in the 1740s. He also gives short shrift to the Atlantic orientation of the Thirteen Colonies. While it is true that the colonies lacked a naval infrastructure similar to Britain’s, their integral role in the Atlantic world fostered ports, sailors, and other important maritime features that surely played a much bigger role than the author gives credit. Thirdly, the rise of American industry is pointed to time and time again as a factor for the growth and improvement of the navy but little to no attention is

paid to how or why the economy expanded. Is it possible that some of this economic success is rooted in the colonial legacy? Continued links to British overseas markets, paired with a laissez-faire attitude and open society, certainly contributed to the meteoritic rise of American industry during the nineteenth century.

In addition, the author imposes a narrative of naval progress where a European, specifically a British style, navy is deemed the desirable end goal. It is never questioned whether or not the United States, specifically before the Spanish-America War, would have been better off with such an institution given its lack of imperial com-

mitments and different foreign policy goals.

Regardless of these flaws, the argument put forward is one that should entice further discussion among historians about not only the rise of the American navy but also the legacy of the colonial period. Furthermore, *American Naval History, 1607-1865* is an important work in that it continues a recent historiographical trend that places naval and other military history into broader discussions that detail not only how outside factors shaped fighting forces, but also how military institutions were integral parts of the wider modern world.

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