

PETTY DESPOTS AND EXECUTIVE OFFICIALS:
CIVIL MILITARY RELATIONS IN THE EARLY AMERICAN NAVY, 1794-1820

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the evolution of civilian control of the military in the early American republic. It looks in particular at the earliest days of the United States Navy, and how the executive branch maintained oversight of American military power at sea. Prior to the War of 1812, the Navy Department's authority over its officer corps was ill defined, and many naval officers displayed ambivalence about their civilian superiors, offering verbal acknowledgement of their subordination to civil authority, but often acting in ways contrary to orders. The Constitution and congressional naval legislation provided little help, as both endorsed the idea of civilian control of the military but never clearly spelled out the exact boundaries of the relationship between government officials and military officers. Naval officers sought to carve out a sphere of autonomy for themselves, without completely undermining the ideal of subordination to the civilian government. Successive presidents and secretaries of the navy each established their own unique working relationship with their captains, and all of them engaged in repeated quarrels with recalcitrant officers over issues of personal honor, money, and duty assignments. My dissertation explores the evolution of republican government in the United States, as successive presidential administrations sought to maximize the usefulness of military without at the same time undermining their ability to control it.

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difficult to imagine a better working environment for an early Americanist than the David Library of the American Revolution, currently under the able direction of Meg McSweeney. I had a delightful and highly productive time during my fellowship there, and I will certainly try and go back as often as possible.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	1
2. The Essential Principles of Our Government: Civilian Control of the Military.....	18
3. A Treasure Irrecoverable Once Lost: Honor and the Early American Republic	35
4. To Rid Our Navy of Such Men: Benjamin Stoddert and the Creation of the U.S. Navy	54
5. To Save What's Far More Valuable: Honor and the Naval Officer Corps in the Tripolitan War, 1801-1805	108
6. A Government Rigorously Frugal and Simple: Naval Politics Under Jefferson and Madison	153
7. The Precious Germ of Our National Glory: The Navy Department and the War of 1812.....	191
8. A Radical Change of System: The Navy Board and Professionalization, 1815-1820.....	240
9. Epilogue	274
10. Conclusion	282
Selected Bibliography	288

In each ship, there is one man who, in the hour of emergency or peril at sea, can turn to no other man. There is one who alone is ultimately responsible...He is the Commanding Officer. He is the ship.

Joseph Conrad¹

The sea is no wet nurse for democracy. Authority and privilege are her twin foster-children. Instant and unquestioning obedience is the rule of the sea; and your typical sea captain would make it the rule of land if he could.

Samuel Eliot Morison²

I owed my life to the service of my country. But I knew of no duty imposing on me the obligation to sacrifice my reputation.

Commodore Thomas Truxtun³

The Secretary of the Navy, like the other secretaries, is the regular organ of the president for the business belonging to his department; and...his official acts derive their authority from, or, in other words, carry with them, the authority of the Executive of the U.S...He is to be understood to speak and act with the Executive sanction, or, in other words, the Executive is presumed to speak and act through him.

James Madison⁴

¹ Quoted in James Stavridis and William Mack, *Command at Sea* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1999), 4.

² Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Maritime History of Massachusetts, 1783-1860* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1921), 24

³ Thomas Truxtun "Reply of Commodore Thomas Truxtun to an Attack made on him by the National Intelligencer in June 1806," Thomas Truxtun Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

⁴ James Madison to Benjamin Crowinshield, June 12, 1815 in *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, Fourth president of the United States*, volume II, 4 volumes (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1865): 603-606.

Introduction

June 1, 1813. The War of 1812 had been raging for over a year, and had thus far brought nothing but embarrassment and frustration at sea for the British. Captain Philip Broke of the Royal Navy burned for a chance to bring his ship, the *HMS Shannon*, into combat with one of the upstart Americans' vaunted frigates, and his desperation came through in a letter to Captain James Lawrence of the U.S. vessel *Chesapeake*. Broke's pleasant tone and high praise for the American captain's honor belied the bloody purpose of the missive. "I request you will do me the favor to meet...ship to ship, to try the fortunes of our respective flags," wrote Broke, adding a detailed explanation of the forces he had at his disposal and promising to order the other ships under his command to stay out of the battle, insuring equal odds. If Lawrence preferred, Broke expressed his willingness to sail away from his squadron under a flag of truce, and engage the *Chesapeake* beyond all hope of reinforcements. He even disclosed valuable intelligence, revealing to Lawrence that he lacked water and provisions for his crew, and would be exiting the scene very shortly.¹

An American prisoner carried the letter ashore in Boston for Lawrence, only to find he had already sailed; Lawrence would not live to read his British counterpart's challenge. Had he, the American captain probably would not have seen anything strange in Broke's request. This was a war between men of honor, and no captain of either navy could fail to seek out a chance to meet a ship of equal size in noble combat. As it happened, Lawrence

¹ Captain Philip Broke to Captain James Lawrence, June 5, 1813, William Dudley and Michael Crawford, eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington DC: Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 1985-), 3 volumes, II: 126-128). Hereafter referred to as *NW*.

did not need to see Broke's appeal. When he learned that the *Shannon* was nearby, and sailing in isolation (Broke had sent away the remainder of his squadron to make himself a more tempting target for the American frigate), Lawrence immediately sought to bring it into action.¹

Broke gleefully complied. Among the Royal Navy's most experienced officers and a man obsessed with drilling his crew, Broke proved more than ready for battle. His men decimated the *Chesapeake* with their disciplined fire. The first broadside destroyed Lawrence's sails, making it impossible to steer the vessel, and Broke easily maneuvered to blast away at the hapless enemy two more times. Meanwhile, snipers on board the *Shannon* cut down most of the American officers, including Lawrence himself. Mortally wounded in the hip, Lawrence shouted to his men the legendary last words "Don't give up the ship," as he was carried below. It was a hopeless order. Second Lieutenant George Budd and Acting Third Lieutenant William Cox were now the senior officers on board, but Cox carried Lawrence below and was caught up in the swarm of retreating men while Budd was already engrossed in events belowdecks, oblivious to the desperate straits of his crew. When Broke led a boarding party onto the *Chesapeake*, the inexperienced and leaderless Yankee sailors yielded easily, and the British lowered the American flag.

Lawrence lingered for four days following the battle, though largely insensible because of the pain. He finally died on June 5, just as the *Chesapeake* sailed into Halifax, Nova Scotia. The British showed the utmost regard for their gallant enemy, wrapping his

¹ The account of the battle and its aftermath is primarily taken from Broke, "An account of the *Chesapeake-Shannon Action*," June 6, 1813; Lieutenant George Budd to Secretary of the Navy William Jones, June 13, 1813, NW, II: 129-134; George Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 187-195; Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812*, 2 volumes (New York: Dodo Press, 1905), 119-136; Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain Against America in the Naval War of 1812* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 159-191; and Kevin McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The U.S. and Royal Navies in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 147-156.

body in the *Chesapeake's* flag and burying him with full military honors. The United States likewise showered praise on the fallen captain. Although Lawrence was clearly and decisively beaten and his ship passed to the enemy's control, his death insured that no censure would be attached to his name for decades.² He became a martyr for his nation. Although the *Chesapeake* now belonged to the enemy and his body lay buried, the American public exalted Lawrence as a national hero, a man who had lived up to the standards of his era and profession by dying with honor.

He also blatantly defied orders. Amid celebration of Lawrence as the heroic ideal of the young navy, most Americans chose to forget that Lawrence would have survived if he had obeyed the directives of his civilian superiors.³ The new secretary of the navy, William Jones, had been quite explicit that he was initiating a new strategy upon assuming office in 1813, one that called for avoiding the British and preserving America's precious few frigates, not seeking the glory of capturing ships that the Royal Navy could easily replace.⁴ In addition to the clearly-stated general orders of the new secretary, Lawrence also had very specific orders to disrupt the enemy's communication and destroy its commerce; no room was left to him for adventurism against an equally-sized and more experienced Royal Navy vessel.

But a stronger imperative than obedience to orders drove Lawrence. His keen sense of honor and quest for glory forbade him from fleeing in the face of the enemy, regardless of his civilian superior's wishes. It was impossible, of course, to hold the dead captain to

² Alfred Thayer Mahan was among the first to criticize Lawrence for violating orders and seeking battle with a significantly more experienced captain and crew. Mahan, *War of 1812*, 118-134.

³ Daughan, *1812*, 195; Mahan, *War of 1812*, 118-119.

⁴ Jones Circular to Officers, February 22, 1813, *NW*, II: 48

account for allowing himself to be drawn into an engagement, but even if he had survived it is doubtful there would have been any serious repercussions. Lawrence was a product of an officer corps that prized aggressiveness, unassailable physical courage, and even reckless daring. And the civilian leadership of that navy had not opposed such attitudes prior to the War of 1812; it often applauded them. When William Jones took over the Navy Department in 1813 and tried to rein in these traits, he clashed with the policies of his predecessors and the prevailing culture of the officer corps.

Civil-Military Relations in the Early U.S. Navy

Jones was not the only secretary, however, to struggle to define his relationship with the navy's officer corps. The first five secretaries of the navy and their officers suffered from an ambiguous relationship. In the early republic, everyone – government officials, military officers, and citizens – accepted the idea that the military must remain subordinate to the civilian government. However, exactly what that subordination should look like was often contested. Naval officers verbally acknowledged their duty to obey the government, and there was never the slightest threat of a naval coup or a rogue captain abandoning his country. Nevertheless, officers also felt that certain matters were their prerogative, and guarded their turf zealously. The Constitution and congressional naval legislation provided little help; while both affirmed the ideal of civilian control of the military, neither clearly spelled out the exact boundaries of responsibility of military officers. Moreover, the small size of the Navy Department and the vast distances separating captains from civilian superiors meant that naval officers often had to assume a measure of autonomy. Successive secretaries of the navy – Benjamin Stoddert, Robert Smith, Paul Hamilton, William Jones, and Benjamin Crowninshield – each established his own unique working relationship with

his captains, even as each faced repeated quarrels with recalcitrant officers over issues of personal honor, money, and duty assignments.

This recalcitrance should not have come as a surprise, however, to the secretaries. American naval officers certainly understood their generations' ideas about authority, hierarchy, and deference, but they also saw themselves as very high on the social ladder. In 1835, while stationed in Constantinople, Commodore David Porter noted the parallels between the Turkish sultan, who ruled his people with absolute authority, and the power of the captain of a naval vessel. "A man of war is a petty kingdom, governed by a petty despot," he observed. In ways, the captain maintained even more unchecked power than the Sultan, for being "the most absolute sovereign on earth," Mahmoud could "afford to be kind and courteous to those around him." The ruler of a man of war must, to maintain the unquestioned obedience of his subjects, lord over his subordinates on board with near tyrannical authority to maintain their constant compliance.⁵ For many officers, releasing that power, once the ship was in port, proved problematic.

The power of a captain over his seamen was indeed immense, and officers saw themselves as inhabiting a different world than those who took orders from them. To stoop to receiving orders instead of giving them could be frustrating. David Porter, the same man who compared himself to a Turkish sultan, groused at one point that South Carolinian Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton needed to remember that his officers were of an entirely different class and station than the plantation slaves he could command at his pleasure. "It is supposed," Porter said of Hamilton, "that he has been too long in the habit of driving slaves

⁵ David Porter, *Constantinople and its Environs in a Series of Letters, Exhibiting the Actual State of the Manners, Customs and Habits of the Turks, Armenians, Jews and Greeks as Modified by the Policy of Sultan Mahmoud by an American Long Resident at Constantinople*. 2 volumes (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835): 10-11.

to know how to regard the honorable feelings of gentlemen.”⁶ While willing to acknowledge the vague principle of civilian authority, officers also valued their own independence and dignity, and resented it when they perceived civilian oversight as too restrictive.

It was not so much the reality of orders that troubled officers, however, as the nature of them. Naval officers saw certain areas as their own concerns, and expected civilian officials to defer to their judgment. Usually, the secretary of the navy was willing to comply. As Porter’s quote about “petty despots” indicates, the captain of a ship enjoyed the Navy Department’s full backing in his treatment of junior officers and especially the men under his command. We may argue whether or not Porter exaggerated in comparing his role to that of a dictator. Christopher McKee contends that there was an unspoken relationship between officers and men aboard ship that constrained the captains’ authority.⁷ Even McKee, however, ascribes this constraint of an officer’s power to the men themselves, who might mutiny if their captain exceeded mutually-acceptable limits. As for the secretary of the navy, he occasionally agreed to transfer a junior officer unhappy with his commander, though even that was rare, but he virtually never intervened on behalf of ordinary seamen, even when they appealed to him.⁸

⁶ Quoted in David Long, *Nothing Too Daring: A Biography of Commodore David Porter, 1783-1843* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1970), 58.

⁷ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 258-259.

⁸ Matthew Raffety, *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), also argues that tensions sprang up on board American merchant vessels from seamen who believed their officers were too authoritarian, though he has less to say about naval service. While he contends that American courts sometimes intervened on behalf of merchant seamen, most of his analysis dates from the Jacksonian era, when democratic ideals were on the rise and increasing tensions between classes. This project cuts off before that time, and is mainly focused on an earlier ethic, one more attuned to hierarchy and obedience.

Senior officers showed varying degrees of concern for the well-being of their seamen, but most took the responsibility for their subordinate officers very seriously. In an era prior to any kind of naval academy, they understood that it was their duty to train up the next generation of naval officers, and they devoted significant attention to this role. The first five secretaries of the navy were generally happy to let them. Stoddert looked to his officers to choose the best of their subordinates for promotion, and while later secretaries took a much more active role in choosing candidates for commissions and promotions, they still gave significant latitude to senior officers in dealing with their subordinates. Robert Smith, for example, established a formal examination for promotion to lieutenant, rather than simply rubber-stamping captains' recommendations. Yet it was the captains who conducted the examinations, and managing promotion remained primarily the duty of the officer corps itself. Smith and Hamilton also proved generous with leave for young officers to sail on merchant voyages and learn their profession, but whenever a "young gentleman" was on board a naval vessel, he was indisputably under the authority of his captain.⁹ It fell to captains to cull the ranks of undesirable officers, and they enjoyed substantial discretion when they felt a young man was worthy of a second chance. In short, whatever the vagaries of the relationship between civilian authority and senior officers, the fact of a chain-of-

⁹ In the 1820s, this situation started to change somewhat. While during the years this dissertation covers promotion was fairly rapid and opportunities to distinguish oneself readily available, with the conclusion of the War of 1812 promotion stagnated, and many officers remained stuck in a lieutenantcy for many years. Tensions between junior and senior officers naturally emerged, and both groups occasionally appealed to the secretary of the navy or the president for support, though civilian leaders still generally sided with the ranking officer. See: Linda Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1986), 449-468, esp. 457; Claude Berube and John Rodgaard, *A Call to the Sea: Captain Charles Stewart of the USS Constitution* (Dulles, VA: Potomac Books, 2006), 126-132; David Curtis Skaggs, *Thomas Macdonough: Master of Command in the Early U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2003), 174-185.

command in control of more junior officers remained unambiguous in the early days of the Navy Department, and junior officers interacted with the secretary through their superiors.

Eventually, the officer corps and navy department forged an unofficial division of labor that maximized the navy's ability to enhance American prestige, allowed the officer corps a sphere of autonomy, yet remained firmly committed to the principle of civilian control. Officers understood that any display of timidity or excessive caution in the face of another nation meant an immediate end to that officer's career. The officer corps assumed near-total responsibility for the oversight of junior officers and seamen as well as the day-to-day management of the navy. Yet questions of where to deploy naval force and how sea power should be used were firmly vested in the secretary of the navy, acting at the behest of president.

Historiography of the Early U.S. Navy

The period covered by this dissertation is among the most-written about eras of American naval history. It is a story that appeals to Americans' patriotic fervor and love of drama. According to the popular narrative, the tiny American navy, beset by domestic foes and dwarfed by the mighty Royal Navy, overcame the odds and ultimately proved its worth in a series of stunning victories during the War of 1812. There is a measure of truth to this story, but in its nationalistic and sensational aspects it ignores a more complex reality. Fortunately, historians have produced a bevy of nuanced, carefully-researched studies of the early days of the United States Navy. Even among the wealth of excellent historical studies, however, there remains a gap in the literature. The relationship between the civilian and military leadership of the early navy is understudied, and by analyzing it we can come to a deeper understanding of the administrative history of the early republic, the development of

the executive branch, American cultural attitudes towards armed forces and violence, and the role of international factors in America's evolution as a republic.

Accounts of the earliest days of the American navy came almost immediately. Following the successes of the War of 1812, writers found an eager market for works on the birth of the American navy and the exploits of its officers. Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, himself a naval officer who had served under Stephen Decatur, penned biographies of some of the most famous heroes, including Decatur as well as Oliver Hazard Perry.¹⁰ James Fenimore Cooper, the famed novelist, was also a naval enthusiast, and he published *A History of the Navy of the United States and Lives of American Naval Officers*.¹¹ America's celebration of the War of 1812 did not only inspire Americans, however. William James, a British naval officer, became disgusted with what he perceived (not unreasonably) as American distortions of the recent conflict. He began what he hoped would be an impartial history of the war in 1817. He vehemently argued that the war had been an indisputable British triumph. The American ships that had won victories were all significantly larger than their British counterparts and, he argued, mostly manned by British deserters anyway. Furthermore, James argues, they failed to weaken the massive British Navy in any appreciable sense.¹²

¹⁰ Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur: A Commodore in the Navy of the United States* (Boston: Little and Brown, 1846); *The Life of Commodore Oliver Hazard Perry* (New York: Harper, 1840).

¹¹ James Fenimore Cooper, *A History of the Navy of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lee and Blanchard, 1839); Cooper, *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846).

¹² William James, *Naval Occurrences of the War of 1812: A full and correct account of the naval war between Great Britain and the United States of America, 1812-1815* (London: Conway Maritime, 2004, originally published 1817).

These earliest histories of the navy enjoyed one tremendous advantage over subsequent historians: the ability to interview participants in the events they described. As a result, we have access to many occurrences that would otherwise have gone unrecorded. Unfortunately, these authors seldom cited their interviews, and indeed used citation lightly. Thus, while we may know of episodes that would otherwise be lost to history, we also have to take the authors' word that they come from reliable sources. Moreover, the emphasis in early histories was overwhelmingly on the officers themselves. Civilian administrators receive scant credit or even attention for their role in these events.

By the dawn of the twentieth century, a new generation of naval scholars with a somewhat more modern standard of scholarship rose to the fore. Most famously, Theodore Roosevelt wrote *The Naval War of 1812* to counter James. While acknowledging that earlier American claims were somewhat inflated, Roosevelt still refutes James' claim that the U.S. Navy was crushed, arguing that Americans can indeed recall the war with pride.¹³ Written in roughly the same period, Gardner Allen's excellent studies of the American Revolution, the Quasi War with France, and the Barbary Wars are also characterized by thorough research, but exclusively interested in the exploits of officers in battle.¹⁴

The beginning of the twentieth century also saw the birth of administrative history of the navy. Charles Oscar Paullin's voluminous output covered the management of the early navy, and touched on civil-military relations on occasion. His emphasis was consistently on who directed the navy in peacetime as well as war, and he was careful to cover matters of

¹³ Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999, originally published 1881).

¹⁴ Gardner Allen, *A Naval History of the American Revolution*, 2 volumes, (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1913); Allen, *Our Naval War with France* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1909); and Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1905).

procurement, supply, and finances as well as leadership. As a result, secretaries of the navy played a prominent role in his narratives.¹⁵

Paullin remains widely read among naval historians, but he was the anomaly. As the century progressed, officers and battles remained the primary interest of scholars.

Biographies, in particular, made up the bulk of the writing on the subject. William Bell Clark wrote a plethora of biographies, usually focused on the American Revolution.¹⁶

Dudley Knox likewise penned a narrative account of American naval history that primarily focuses on officers as American heroes.¹⁷

Still, at midcentury, signs of the so-called “New Military History” were certainly present. Harold and Margaret Sprout’s work on the creation of the American navy is explicitly focused on the wider American public’s perception of their country’s maritime forces.¹⁸ Marshal Smelser also delved into the navy’s place in American society, exploring the Congressional debates on founding a maritime force, and how such a force would mesh with republican ideology.¹⁹

¹⁵ Most of Paullin’s articles have been compiled into a single volume: *Paullin’s History of Naval Administration, 1775-1911: A Collection of Articles from the US Naval Institute Proceedings* (Annapolis: US Naval Institute, 1968). Paullin, *The Navy of the American Revolution: Its Administration, Its Policy and Its Achievements* (New York: Haskell House Ltd, 1971), originally published 1906.

¹⁶ William Bell Clark, *Gallant John Barry, 1745-1803: The Story of a Naval Hero of Two Wars* (New York, The Macmillan Company, 1938); *Captain Dauntless: The Story of Nicolas Biddle and the Continental Navy* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1949); *Lambert Wickes: Sea Raider and Diplomat; the Story of a Naval Captain of the Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1932); *George Washington’s Navy: Being an Account of His Excellency’s Fleet in New England Waters* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1960); and *Ben Franklin’s Privateers: A Naval Epic of the American Revolution* (Baton Rouge : Louisiana State University Press, 1956).

¹⁷ Dudley Knox, *A History of the United States Navy* (New York, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1936).

¹⁸ Harold and Margaret Sprout, *The Rise of American Naval Power, 1776-1918* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1939).

¹⁹ Marshal Smelser, *The Congress Founds the Navy, 1787-1798*. (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1959).

Currently, there are three distinct but interrelated strands of American naval history. There remains a massive market for traditional narratives of the creation and course of the American navy, but we also have a much wider variety of works on administrative history and social history. Narrative accounts, of course, often incorporate elements of social and administrative history alongside major political and military events, but they tend to be more focused on the stuff of narrative history: major battles, political maneuvering, and key leaders.

Such accounts of the early navy abound, whether focused on individual conflicts and events or the overarching narrative. The War of 1812, in particular, has been the subject of considerable attention during its bicentennial, and a wealth of new scholarship has emerged studying the war at sea and on the Great Lakes.²⁰ Many of these works also provide a valuable perspective by integrating the events of the war at sea into the wider conflict. Other recent works cover a broader time span, showing the War of 1812 as the climax of the United States Navy's development, much the way it was perceived by the participants.²¹

²⁰ The recent scholarship on the War of 1812 to coincide with its bicentennial is voluminous. Some exceptional works not already cited here include: Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial Edition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), originally published 1989; Alan Taylor, *The Civil War of 1812: American Citizens, British Subjects, Irish Rebels, and Indian Allies* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2010); and John Elting, *Amateurs to Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812* (Da Capo Press, 1995), originally published 1991. For the war on the Great Lakes, see: David Curtis Skaggs and Gerard Atloff, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1213* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997); and Eliot Cohen, *Conquered into Liberty: Two Centuries of Battles along the Great Warpath that made the American Way of War* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), 267-304. Other conflicts from this period have received far less attention. For the Quasi War: Michael Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations During the Quasi-War with France, 1798-1801* (1987. Reprinted with a new introduction by the author. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2000). For the Barbary Wars, in addition to Lambert: Michael Kitzen, *Tripoli and the United States at War: A History of American Relations with the Barbary States, 1785-1805* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1993); Frederick Leiner, *The End of the Barbary Terror: America's 1815 War against the Pirates of North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

²¹ William Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores: The American navy, 1783-1815* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1984); Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006).

Social and cultural historians have also turned their gaze towards the navy, but their emphasis has been almost exclusively focused on the ordinary seamen who manned the ships; the officers receive less attention and civilian administrators almost none at all.²² Two exceptions, James Valle's *Rocks and Shoals* and Matthew Raffety's *The Republic Afloat*, address the relationship between officers and their men, though Raffety is almost exclusively interested in merchant shipping.²³ A more comprehensive portrait of the officer corps can be found in Christopher McKee's magisterial, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*. Based on a tremendous wealth of careful research, McKee's study shows how officers perceived themselves, their subordinates, and their profession. There is little that McKee does not touch on, tracing the origins of the officer corps under the Washington and Adams Administrations, and also showing the progress from midshipman to (hopefully) captain that succeeding generations of naval officers followed. He also recognizes the importance of secretaries of the navy, and gives descriptions of each one that come to office prior to 1815 and evaluating their strengths and weaknesses.²⁴

Administrative history of the American navy, as noted above, dates back to Charles Oscar Paullin, and he remains among the foremost authors on the subject. Paolo Coletta's edited volume *American Secretaries of the Navy* is a superb resource for understanding who the secretaries were, offering short biographical sketches of each one through World War

²² For the experiences of Jack Tar in the early republic, see Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); and Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2000).

²³ James Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Order and Discipline in the Old Navy, 1800-1861* (Annapolis, MD: naval Institute Press, 1980); Raffety, *The Republic Afloat*, 95-98, 123-124. Both works will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

²⁴ McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*.

II.²⁵ Edward Eckert's *The Navy Department in the War of 1812* is a valuable resource, but at a scant 77 pages, it is hardly comprehensive.²⁶ Michael Palmer's *Stoddert's War* is an administrative history only in a very limited sense, as his primary concern is with the first secretary of the navy's strategic thinking. Still, Palmer integrates the story of the oversight of the navy and its management by civilians with that of the battles and sea admirably, to paint a more complete picture of this understudied conflict.²⁷

This study aims to bring together these three strands, showing how the military culture of the early American naval officer corps was directly shaped by civilian administrators and in turn restricted those administrators' ability to impose their will on the officer corps. It traces the implicit and explicit negotiations over power in the early navy, negotiations that were rooted in ideas about authority, personal freedom, deference, and honor. The administrative history of the creation and development of the United States Navy cannot be understood apart from social and cultural ideas of the time.

Chapter Outline

The dissertation begins with the creation of the United States Navy in 1794. To fully understand the relationship between naval officers and their civilian superiors at this time, however, it is vital to first explore two key concepts that shaped virtually every aspect of this relationship. The first is American understandings of civil-military relations. Chapter one explores the current social science and historical literature on civil-military relations and applies these concepts to the early American republic.

²⁵ Paolo Coletta, *American Secretaries of the Navy, Volume I, 1775-1913* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980).

²⁶ Edward Eckert, *The Navy Department in the War of 1812* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 1971).

²⁷ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*.

Chapter two focuses on honor. American naval officers drew on two traditions for their understanding of honor. European armies, and especially the British, had carefully-delineated expectations of honorable behavior from their officers, and their American counterparts thoroughly internalized these standards. Meanwhile, society as a whole in the early republic still expected men of honor to hold to certain standards, including unassailable personal integrity and refusal to brook the slightest insult, and American naval officers were committed to these principles as well. This chapter also notes how the infant republic sought national honor, and how the standards of the time applied to the nation, and its navy, as a whole as well as to individuals.

Chapter three begins the narrative discussion of the early U.S. Navy. It addresses the dissolution of the Continental Navy after the American Revolution and the arguments for and against creating a new force in the early republic. Its primary interest, however, is in how Benjamin Stoddert, the first secretary of the navy, established the Navy Department, set the tone for his officer corps, and made a lasting impact on the military culture of the force. Stoddert was thoroughly committed to his era's understanding of honor, and drilled that sense into the officer corps of the new navy, removing those who failed to measure up. His tenure had a lasting impact on the culture of the U.S. Navy.

Chapters four and five deal with the Jeffersonian Republicans in power. Although widely perceived as "anti-navy," which many in his party certainly were, Thomas Jefferson actually used naval force fairly effectively in the war with Tripoli. Chapter four details how Stoddert's culture of honor had several negative repercussions, including rampant dueling among junior officers, and also analyzes the American war with Tripoli in light of the civil-military relationship in the navy at that time.

Chapter five focuses on Jefferson and his successor, James Madison, in their domestic naval policy. It includes the maligned gunboat program and embargo of 1807, both of which were particularly distasteful to naval officers. Nevertheless, those same officers dutifully worked to advance both to the best of their abilities, demonstrating that while civil-military relations might grow strained, officers' commitment to the principle remained strong. Meanwhile, the officer corps sought to purge its own shame over the humiliating *Chesapeake-Leopard* episode, in which one of their own, James Barron, yielded to a Royal Navy vessel of equal size without a fight. The embarrassment of this episode burned for years, and officers sought to regain the honor of their profession after Barron, they believed, had tarnished it.

The War of 1812 is the subject of the sixth chapter. Begun during the administration of Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, the first six months of the war saw stunning American victories at sea alongside severe bureaucratic incompetence at home. The latter eventually became too much for Madison, and he sacked Hamilton after securing reelection. To replace him, the president turned to William Jones, a Philadelphia merchant. Jones immediately set about attempting a culture change in the navy, urging officers to flee needless combat and concern themselves less with the nation's honor and more with commercial warfare. His changes yielded some fruit militarily, but failed to make a major dent in officers' attitudes beyond his short tenure.

Finally, chapter seven considers the aftermath of the war. A dramatic change in the national outlook wrought by the war led to a greatly expanded emphasis on the professionalization of America's military forces, and the navy benefited from this. This chapter examines the expansion of the navy in the aftermath of the war, and also the areas in

which naval officers' ambitions remained disappointed. Central to these changes was the new administrative apparatus set up for the now-larger navy. The Board of Navy Commissioners was intended as a way to reduce the secretary's workload, but instead it created an opportunity for high-ranking naval officers to press for more power, and a harmonious working relationship only emerged after the president ruled, decisively, in favor of the secretary. Even then, with the idea of civilian supremacy affirmed, the exact boundaries of civilian control remained murky, and the relationship between the secretary and the Board continued to be a fluid one well into the 1820s.

The Essential Principles of our Government: Civilian Control of the Military

The supremacy of the civil over the military authority... [is one of] the essential principles of our government.

Thomas Jefferson¹

The Army (considering the irritable state it is in, its sufferings and composition) is a dangerous instrument to play with... Upon the whole, disband the Army, as soon as possible; but consult the wishes of it, which really are moderate, in the mode, and perfectly compatible with the honor, dignity, and justice which is due from the country to it.

George Washington²

In the autumn of 1777, with Philadelphia captured and British troops rapidly closing in on two almost completed ships, General George Washington calculated that it would be better to sink the vessels than allow them to be put to the enemy's use. Thus, he gave orders to destroy the *Effingham* and the *Washington*. The Commander-in-Chief sent word to the local Navy Board, one of two bodies created by the Continental Congress to oversee administrative matters of the rebellious colonies' maritime forces. The Board immediately forwarded the commander's wishes to John Barry, the captain charged with overseeing the ships' construction.³ On the night before the ships were scuttled, Barry and one Board member, Francis Hopkinson, engaged in a shouting match that did little credit to either man

¹ Thomas Jefferson, "First Inaugural Address," March 4, 1801, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

² George Washington to Alexander Hamilton, April 4, 1783, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011.

³ Tim McGrath, *John Barry: An American Hero in the Age of Sail* (Yardley, PA: Westholme Press, 2010), 126-137. See also: Joseph Gurn, *Commodore John Barry: Father of the American navy* (Cranbury, NJ: The Scholar's Bookshelf, 2005, originally published 1933), 54-70 provide the best secondary accounts of this episode, though both are noticeably slanted in Barry's favor.

and eventually led to a court martial. Barry appealed to Hopkinson to allow work to continue on the ships, assuring him that his defenses were adequate and that there was no chance of them falling into the enemy's hands. Hopkinson informed Barry of his refusal in a manner the heroic and proud captain found humiliating, denigrating his knowledge of maritime matters and issuing the directive in a condescending tone. Flying into a rage, Barry informed his rival that he "knew more about a ship than General Washington and the Navy Board together," and threatened to refuse to sink the ships. Hopkinson exploded with anger, shouting "you shall obey our orders," and forcibly evicted Barry from his office.¹

While it would be easy to interpret Barry and Hopkinson's spat as a personality clash between two proud men, the deeper reality is that this episode emerged out of a murky civil-military relationship that haunted the Continental Navy throughout the Revolution.²

Although created by the Continental Congress to act on its behalf, the local Navy Board that Hopkinson oversaw was unsure of its relationship to General Washington. Indeed, in the course of his argument with Hopkinson, Barry even claimed that, as his original orders came from the Marine Committee of the Continental Congress, he could not sink the vessels until authorized to do so by that body.³ While Barry himself ultimately did not put enough stock in this argument to defy Hopkinson, and finally did sink the ships as ordered, it is telling that no one seemed to know where final authority rested throughout the ordeal.

¹ McGrath, *John Barry*, 129-130.

² For the Continental Navy, see: William Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail: The American navy during the Revolution*. (New York: Scribner, 1976); Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory: The Continental Navy Fights for Independence, 1775-1783*. (New York: David McKay Company Inc, 1974); and James Volo, *Blue Water Patriots: The American Revolution Afloat* (Westport, CN: Praeger Publishers, 2007).

³ John Barry to the Continental Congress, January 10, 1778, in Clark, *Naval Documents*, XI: 85-88.

A clearer civil-military relationship emerged under the Constitution, which emphatically invested command over the armed forces in the president.⁴ A healthy relationship between the government and America's tiny standing army and navy did not immediately follow. However reassuring the idea of civilian control of the military might sound – and it is rightly regarded as one of the bedrocks of republican government – the truth is that it is a concept that is very much open to interpretation, debate, and even manipulation. Americans today, both scholars and servicepersons, still struggle to define the proper division of responsibility between the military and the civilian government. This chapter explores the literature on civil-military relations, particularly when it comes to questions of the military's ability to manage its own internal affairs and what role military officers' expertise and advice should play in civilian decision-making. Understanding the early American navy through this lens will enable us to make sense of the often contentious relationship between the office of the secretary of the navy and the officer corps. Far from inhabiting a different world than military officers of the twenty-first century, naval officers of the early republic clashed over almost identical issues to those explored by present-day political scientists, and a stronger conceptual understanding of civil-military relations literature highlights the rationale behind many of the issues that plagued relations between the first American naval officers and the early U.S. government.

⁴ Richard H. Kohn, "The Constitution and National Security: The Intent of the Framers," Richard H. Kohn, ed., *The United States Military under the Constitution of the United States, 1789-1989* (New York: New York University Press, 1991), 61-94.

Like the leaders of the early republic, scholars today struggle to define the precise meaning of civilian control. Christopher Gibson offers what is probably the most concise definition, labeling civilian control as “the exercise of the will of the country’s elected leadership over the armed forces.”⁵ Richard Kohn agrees, defining civilian control as a situation in which “all great decisions relating to war and peace, to raising and organizing armies and navies, to governing them internally, and to their use and support, [rests] in the hands of the representatives of the people, or those appointed by them to administer military affairs.”⁶ Similarly, Kohn elsewhere defines true civilian supremacy as when civilians not only issue orders, but when they “frame the alternatives and define the discussion, as well as make the final choice.”⁷ While these definitions might seem all-encompassing and absolute, there is in fact a considerable literature in the disciplines of political science and sociology on the proper nature and extent of civilian-control of the military, and this debate can be of great help in informing our understanding of the earliest interactions between the new United States’ government and military forces.

The social science literature largely ignores the early republic. Samuel Huntington, in one of the first works to delve into civil-military relations, *The Soldier and the State*, argued that a professional officer corps did not exist in the United States prior to the Civil War, and he has little to say about all that came before that.⁸ Although Huntington has been critiqued

⁵ Christopher Gibson, “National Security and Civilian Control of the Military: A Madisonian Approach,” Suzanne Neilsen and Don Snyder, eds., *American Civil-Military Relations: The Soldier and the State in a New Era*, (Baltimore: Johns-Hopkins University Press, 2009), 248.

⁶ Richard H. Kohn, “Civil-Military Relations: Civilian Control of the Military,” John Whiteclay Chambers, ed., *The Oxford Companion to American Military History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 122.

⁷ Richard H. Kohn, “How Democracies Control the Military,” *Journal of Democracy* 8.4 (1997), 140-153.

⁸ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 193-221.

by historians on that point, it remains true that most practitioners of political science, public policy, and sociology are far more interested in recent history as the material for their arguments and theories.⁹ A major intervention of this project is to apply the concepts from this literature to the United States in the decades immediately following the American Revolution. Although standing military forces in the early republic were comparatively tiny, and their destructive capacity dramatically less than it is at present, current social science literature on civil-military relations can still make the role of the military in the early American republic more understandable.

Samuel Huntington's *The Soldier and the State* remains one of the most influential works available on civil-military relations, and essential reading for any scholar of American attitudes towards its armed forces.¹⁰ Huntington argues in favor of what he calls "objective civilian control," wherein the officer corps is allowed autonomy to manage their forces and wage war as they see fit, while being removed from political questions. This is superior to subjective civilian control, in which the civilian government oversees all aspects of the

⁹ For example, Peter Feaver, *Guarding the Guardians: Civilian Control of Nuclear Weapons in the United States* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), and Feaver and Christopher Gelpi, *Choosing Your Battles: American Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004) both address the post-Cold War U.S. military. The impact of September 11, 2001 on civil-military relations is also an area of concern, as seen in Feaver and Gelpi as well as Thomas Mackubin, *U.S. Civil-Military Relations after 9/11: Renegotiating the Civil-Military Bargain* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011). Much of the political science literature on civil-military relations is also concerned with emerging democracies and the developing world, such as: Larry Diamond and Mark Plattner, *Civil-Military Relations and Democracy: (A Journal of Democracy Book)* (Baltimore, MD: Johns-Hopkins University Press, 1996); Dale Herspring, *Civil-Military Relations and Shared Responsibility: A Four Nation Study* (Baltimore, MD: Johns-Hopkins University Press, 2013); Dhirendra Vajpeyi and Glenn Segall, eds., *Civil-Military Relations in Developing Countries* (Washington DC: Lexington Books, 2013).

¹⁰ Huntington's significance remains true despite the fact that much of his argument has been discredited or challenged. Peter Feaver and Erika Seeler note that Huntington's influence extends beyond the nature of his argument to the simple fact that he was the first to apply social science methods to questions of civil-military relations. His ideas "remain influential, not because subsequent scholars have accepted Huntington's argument in toto – most have not – but because it is almost impossible to think or write about civil-military relations without engaging Huntington." Peter Feaver and Erika Seeler, "Before and After Huntington: The Methodological Maturing of Civil-Military Studies," Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, 72-73.

military. The military, Huntington contends, is altogether different from civilian society, espousing conservative values and a pessimistic outlook generally not shared by those outside the armed forces. Subjective control tries to make the military conform to civilian culture and values, leaving that society at a disadvantage when warfare arises. Society needs the values of the military, and needs the military to be able to function in its mission unimpeded by the civilian population's liberal values. Objective civilian control allows the military to flourish within its own realm, while keeping it "a tool of the state."¹¹

Peter Feaver challenges Huntington's interpretation, however, seeing the relationship between civil and military as less rigid than Huntington's objective model, and the government's role in overseeing the military as far more expansive. Feaver argues that military officers and their civilian superiors form a principal-agent relationship. The principal – the civilian government – delegates to an agent – the military – to perform a variety of tasks related to maintaining national security. Feaver's framework creates significant complications for Huntington's strict civil-military bifurcation. The civilian government, Feaver argues, will necessarily influence military matters, and the military leadership will of course have preferences on policy issues; true objective control cannot exist in the real world. Furthermore, rather than a strict division between obedience to orders and insubordination, Feaver sees a spectrum of subordination and considers military leaders' response to civilian superiors in terms of "working" and shirking." Shirking, in this case, does not refer to cowardice in battle, but merely to an officer allowing his preferences to trump those of the civilian government. "Working, in the broadest sense of the word, means doing something to the principal's satisfaction," Feaver argues, while "shirking means not

¹¹ Huntington, *The Soldier and the State*, 83.

doing it to the principal's satisfaction." The ideal of working is when the agent "does what it is has contracted with the principal to do, how the principal has asked it to, with due diligence and skill, and in such a way as to reinforce the principal's superior role in making decisions and in drawing lines of delegation." Anything less than this is, in some form, considered shirking.¹²

"Shirking" has a wide spectrum, the most extreme form being a military coup, something that has rarely, if ever, been a realistic threat in American history. There are three major forms of shirking, according to Feaver, that do occur in the United States. Officers can 1) influence policy by providing misleading information on the costs of a potential use of military force, 2) they can appeal to the public at large through "unauthorized leaks," or direct contact with influential civilians, or 3) they can delay policy implementation through "foot-dragging" and other bureaucratic delays.¹³

Feaver also addresses the attitudes military officers develop towards their civilian government. One issue that is regularly a source of tension is how the government goes about monitoring the military. Officers want to maximize their ability to perform their assigned tasks without oversight, while civilians desire to monitor the behavior of their military agents to insure that their orders are being carried out in the manner they desire. Militaries prefer the least intrusive monitoring mechanisms possible.¹⁴ Of course, one reason militaries prefer weak monitoring is that it maximizes their ability to shirk. Feaver notes that

¹² Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 1-15, 60-68.

¹³ Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 68. See also: Richard H. Kohn, "The Erosion of Civilian Control of the Military in the United States Today," *Naval War College Review*, Vol. 55.3 (Summer 2002), 15-16.

¹⁴ Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 75-77.

one key component in an officer or officers' decision to shirk is their belief about the likelihood of punishment.¹⁵

Eliot Cohen likewise believes that pure objective control is impossible. He argues that the most effective wartime civilian leaders routinely consider issues of a military nature and make decisions that would be considered the purview of generals (or admirals) under Huntington's objective control.¹⁶ Cohen identifies Huntington's model as "the normal theory of civil-military relations," but then acknowledges that "the bounds of civilian and military authority seem far blurrier than either [civilian or military leaders] might like, or than scholars might expect."¹⁷ In a major revisionist argument, Cohen contends that reliance on the normal theory was a major contributing factor to the disaster in Vietnam and it stunted the fullness of victory in the first Gulf War of 1991.¹⁸ Cohen uses Abraham Lincoln, Georges Clemenceau, Winston Churchill, and David Ben-Gurion as examples of successful wartime civilian leaders because they questioned and critiqued their military leaders and held them accountable for their ability to mold strategic and tactical decisions to meet political ends.

Although Huntington's ideal of objective control has come under fire from scholars, it remains a frequently cited and studied work. Indeed, an entire volume was published fifty years after *The Soldier and the State* to respond to Huntington's thesis. Virtually all the

¹⁵ Feaver, *Armed Servants*, 56, 68, 87-95.

¹⁶ Eliot Cohen, "The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and Reality of Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force," Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 429-458; and Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Cohen, "Unequal Dialogue," 432.

¹⁸ Cohen, *Supreme Command*, 175-202.

scholars consulted for Suzanne Nielsen and Don Snider's edited volume *American Civil-Military Relations* acknowledge that Huntington's ideal of objective control has been unrealistic in the United States and most countries, historically as well as in the present. Still, they also recognize its value as a theoretical concept. Risa Brooks, for example, argues that there are certain benefits to the military following and weighing in on political debates. Military leaders can help politicians make more informed decisions about how to use military force, discourage ill-advised tampering with military doctrine and organization by civilians, and insure that the military continues to develop and evolve in an effective manner in peacetime. Nonetheless, she concludes that the threat posed to democracy by military leaders stepping too far over some indistinct line into political matters far outweighs the potential benefits, and ultimately argues for maintaining some form of objective control, despite its downsides.¹⁹

Christopher Gibson challenges Brooks (and, of course, Huntington) by calling for a more nuanced understanding of civilian control, what he calls a "Madisonian Approach."²⁰ Gibson repudiates objective control as "fundamentally flawed...because it presumed that the military and political spheres could be distinguished in a comprehensive and meaningful way." He calls for harkening back to the Founding Fathers and their views of controlling the military. Specifically, he argues that "elected leaders should always have the final say and nothing is beyond their purview...members of the military must remain nonpartisan in their public life, and...civilian control of the military is shared between the president, who serves

¹⁹ Risa Brooks, "Militaries and Political Activity in Democracies," Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, 213-238.

²⁰ Christopher Gibson, "Enhancing National Security and Civilian Control of the Military: A Madisonian Approach," Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, 239-263.

as commander in chief, and the Congress, whose vast authority over military is outlined in Article 1, section 8 of the Constitution.”²¹ Specifically, Gibson calls for drastically reducing the power of the Secretary of Defense by making him, or her, a part of the military agent and not an extension of the president. As we shall see in chapter 7, this is a decidedly un-Madisonian concept, since Madison himself argued that cabinet officers *are* in fact extensions of the chief executive.

Others argue over the limits of civilian authority. James Burk rejects the idea that military officers are called to obey any and all lawful orders. To claim that they should is to argue that “professional soldiers should suspend all thought and give no time to deliberation about whatever they are commanded to do.”²² While Burk recognizes the centrality of military obedience to civilian orders for democracy to function, he argues that members of the military must be granted discretion in how they carry out their missions, and held accountable for their use of that discretion.

Granting discretion to members of the military, of course, comes with an element of risk, just as it requires a risk on the military’s part to take a vow of apolitical loyalty to the government. Both sides are dependent on the other to faithfully live up to their side of the bargain. The crucial component of healthy civil-military relations, argues Richard Kohn, is trust between political leaders and military officers. He calls for military leaders to build trust with the government by eschewing any kind of partisan behavior, even after retirement, and by strictly and faithfully obeying all orders.²³ Meanwhile, civilians can gain the trust of

²¹ Gibson, “Madisonian Approach,” 248.

²² James Burk, “Responsible Obedience by Military Professionals: The Discretion to do what is Wrong,” Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, 149-171, quote on page 151.

²³ Richard H. Kohn, “Building Trust: Civil-Military Relations for Effective National Security,” Nielsen and Snider, *American Civil-Military Relations*, 264-289.

the military first by assuming its loyalty and understanding its culture and mentality, and also by accepting responsibility for their policy decisions instead of “hiding behind the military to cover their own mistakes.”²⁴ There is no question in Kohn’s mind, however, that regardless of the health of the relationship, the military *must* always remain subordinate to elected officials, and *must* not bring the prestige of their position, public support, or even perceived expertise to bear to control or manipulate policy decisions.²⁵

Kohn notes with alarm a growing trend in the post-Cold War United States for the military to try to shape American policy. Military officers have gone so far as to appeal directly to the American public to try to coerce the government, making themselves more of an interest group than a bipartisan tool of the state. Indeed, the military no longer can be considered especially bipartisan, given the overwhelmingly conservative Republican leanings of the officer corps. Kohn also notes a growing openness, at least theoretically, to officers resigning rather than follow distasteful orders, something he categorically rejects. “Proper professional behavior cannot include simply walking away from a policy, an operation, or a war an officer believes is wrong or will fail...there is in fact no tradition of resignation in the American military.” Elsewhere, he is equally blunt: “[resignation] even the very hint of it – much less the threat or act – is a direct assault on civilian authority.”²⁶

Russell Weigley agrees that civil-military relations in the United States are strained, but he dates the problem much earlier. While Weigley agrees with Kohn and Gibson that civilian control means that the government has final authority, he rejects the idea that this

²⁴ Kohn, “Building Trust,” 286.

²⁵ Kohn, “Erosion of Civilian Control.”

²⁶ Kohn, “Erosion of Civilian Control,” 31; “Building Trust,” 282.

authority should be used without caution or restraint. “The most desirable civil-military relations,” he argues “are those in which there is a nearly altogether candid exchange of ideas between the soldier and the statesman, along with a consequent founding of policy and strategy upon a real meeting of the minds.” In other words, while the president does have final authority, a close working relationship and unfettered communication between civilian and military leaders can make this unequal relationship and mutually-supportive one instead of one of hostility. Such good working relations, Weigley argues, have seldom been the case since the Civil War. He blames Major General Emory Upton, a Civil War veteran and later faculty member at West Point, who argued for something very much along the lines of objective control. “Upton came to perceive civilian control of the military as the root cause of the military deficiencies of the United States,” Weigley argues, and therefore Upton advocated that “the president ought to regard his role as commander in chief of the armed forces as simply ceremonial, and...leave military command completely to the professionals.” Although Upton’s “poisoning” of American civil-military relations never led to a coup or blatant public insubordination – with the lone exception of Douglas MacArthur – it did destroy the trust between the American government and its military, making collegial, thoughtful interaction almost impossible.²⁷

Nonetheless, commitment to the ideal of subordination to the government remains a bedrock of military ideology. A staunch commitment to civilian supremacy, whatever that might mean in practice, dates back well prior to the American Revolution. American colonists inherited an English Whig tradition that saw standing armies as tools of for quashing dissent and depriving the people of their liberties. Americans were quite familiar

²⁷ Russell Weigley, “The George C. Marshall Lecture in Military History: The Soldier, the Statesman, and the Military Historian,” *Journal of Military History* 63 (October 1999), 807-822.

with Oliver Cromwell's tenure in England as military dictator, and believed only constant vigilance in defense of liberty could prevent something similar. Indeed, among the key causes of the Revolution was King George's decision to quarter troops in the New World in 1774, and to usurp the civilian government of Massachusetts. Of course, winning the war with Britain ultimately required the creation of a somewhat professional army, but Americans clamored for it to be disbanded almost immediately after the war ended.²⁸

When the founders gathered to craft the Constitution in 1787, they recognized both the need for some type of armed forces for national defense and also the great threat such forces would represent. They were therefore committed to a government that would allow for a national army, but also firmly and unquestionably make it a tool in the hands of the government. "On the basis of history and political theory, Americans considered standing armies to be instruments of despotism as well as defense," Kohn argues, and thus "civilian control of the military was already firmly established as an axiom of government," by the time of the Constitutional Convention.²⁹ Whatever the dangers a regular army might pose, however, the need for one was an inescapable fact of the new nation's political situation. The Framers recognized a plethora of internal and external threats to the infant republic, and the Constitution assumed a standing army in peacetime firmly under the control of the president and Congress.³⁰

²⁸ Russell Weigley, "The American Civil-Military Cultural Gap: A Historical Perspective, from Colonial Times to the Present," Feaver and Kohn, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 215-246.

²⁹ Kohn, "Civil-Military Relations: Civilian Control of the Military," Chambers, *The Oxford Companion to American Military History*, 122-125, quote found on page 122.

³⁰ Kohn, "The Constitution and National Security," 61-94.

Richard Kohn's *Eagle and Sword* discusses the federal government's use of military power in the early republic.³¹ He considers why a new nation with such an intense dislike of standing armies still produced one so quickly after the war for independence. He argues that for a cadre of staunch Federalists, many of whom were veterans of the Revolutionary War, it was patently obvious that the militia was incapable of providing ongoing security for the new nation. These men managed to craft the Constitution in such a way that a permanent military establishment was likely to come into existence in the new nation.³² Although the Federalists managed to create a "national military establishment" in the years after 1789, their expansion and then use of the standing army in the late 1790s seemed to confirm the worst fears of its opponents, and this contributed to Jefferson's election in 1800.

Reginald Stuart's *Civil-Military Relations during the War of 1812* explores the relationship between military commanders and civilians during the country's second war with Great Britain.³³ Stuart's work overlaps with Kohn's, as his analysis begins in the 1780s just after the Revolutionary War. Stuart concludes that, for all the problems America suffered during the war from poor militia forces and inadequate leadership, civilian supremacy and respect for Constitutional rights remained intact at the close of the conflict.

Huntington's assertion that no professional officer corps existed until after the Civil War has come under sharp criticism from historians, notably William Skelton.³⁴ Skelton

³¹ Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: The Free Press, 1975).

³² Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 76-81.

³³ Reginald C. Stuart, *Civil-Military Relations during the War of 1812* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger Security International, 2009).

³⁴ William Skelton, *An American Profession of Arms: The Army Officer Corps, 1784-1861* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), xiv. Other works which do not challenge Huntington's thesis directly, but nevertheless completely undermine it by their characterization of American military officers prior to the Civil

traces the emergence of a professional officer corps in the Army from the aftermath of the humiliating performance in the War of 1812. Far from a post-Civil War phenomenon, Skelton argues that by the time the South seceded, a professional army was already very much in place. He grounds this argument in the fact that the Army possessed “a regular system of recruitment and professional education, a well-defined area of responsibility, a considerable degree of continuity in its membership, and permanent institutions to maintain internal cohesion and military expertise.”³⁵ Officers self-consciously developed these traits, and were careful (with some exceptions) to cultivate political neutrality until the outbreak of the Civil War forced them to choose sides. Samuel Watson likewise argues that the army had already begun the process of professionalizing by the War of 1812, and that this process was essentially complete well before the outbreak of the Civil War.³⁶ He traces the United States Army on the frontiers during the Jeffersonian and Jacksonian Eras, arguing that it was at first a highly insubordinate and difficult to manage body, particularly when the fiery Andrew Jackson was among its senior officers. Over time, however, officers developed a sense of professionalism and ingrained within their culture a strict subordination to civilian control.

Whatever successes Army officers might have had in advancing their profession, they were still met with ambivalence by Americans in general. Marcus Cunliffe’s still classic

War include McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession* (which undercuts Huntington in its title); Wayne Wei-Siang Hsieh, *West Pointers and the Civil War: The Old Army in War and Peace* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2009); and Edward Coffman, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).

³⁵ Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, xiii.

³⁶ Samuel Watson, *Jackson’s Sword: The Army Officer Corps on the Frontier, 1810-1821* (Lawrence, KN: University of Kansas Press, 2012); Watson, *Peacekeepers and Conquerors: The Army Officer Corps on the Frontier, 1821-1846* (Lawrence, KN: University of Kansas Press, 2013).

study, *Soldiers and Civilians*, demonstrates that Americans continued to hold contrasting ideas about professional soldiers all the way up to the Civil War.³⁷ Because most Americans looked with distain and fear on permanent standing armies, they preferred to rely on citizen-soldiers of the militia for defense.³⁸ He also notes that professional soldiers coming out of West Point were never as completely removed from politics as they liked to pretend.³⁹ In the end, he finds that American Army officers prior to and during the Civil War never fully escaped their civilian identity, but that a professional officer corps was nonetheless essential for the United States to survive.⁴⁰

Kohn, Stuart, Skelton, Watson, and Cunliffe all provide vital insights into the nature of civil-military relations in the early American republic. All are primarily interested in the role of land forces, however; the navy plays a minor role, if at all, in each of these works. Skelton gives the navy only a single paragraph, while Watson ignores it entirely.⁴¹ The other works here are similarly concerned with the Army as an institution. This dissertation builds on their work by applying the standards of professionalism and subordination to civil authority to the emerging United States Navy.

The Constitution and congressional legislation relating to the navy was vague on what civilian control would look like in practice. By the early 1820s, however, a rough division of

³⁷ Marcus Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians: The Martial Spirit in America* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1968).

³⁸ This proved disastrous during the War of 1812. See: John Elting, *Amateurs to Arms!: A Military History of the War of 1812*, (Chapel Hill, NC: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991).

³⁹ Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 301 asserts that “the argument for political virginity among the military depends on ready obedience and subordination, and in the American context these could not be strictly enforced.”

⁴⁰ Cunliffe, *Soldiers and Civilians*, 334, 427-438.

⁴¹ Skelton, *American Profession of Arms*, 360.

responsibilities had been negotiated. This division bore some similarities to objective control; naval officers oversaw those matters they were most qualified to supervise, such as ship construction, maintenance, and training junior officers, while the civilian government decided when and how to use the navy as an instrument of foreign relations. In other ways, however, the civilian government acted in ways that contradicted the normal theory of civil-military relations. Presidents and secretaries alike meddled in a host of details as to how the navy fought America's enemies. Furthermore, while the officer corps enjoyed considerable discretion in selecting, training, and promoting junior officers, this was never entirely outside the secretary's control either, regardless of administration.

In Feaver's terms, the U.S. Navy was clearly an agent of the civilian government in the early republic. But the government contracted with the navy to do far more than just protect American shipping or capture enemy vessels. The government expected the navy to enhance American prestige, particularly in the eyes of Great Britain. The newly-independent nation was perceived as weak by Europe's powers, and the navy's duty was not only to protect the country from direct attack by other nations, but also to earn it a place alongside these nations as an equal. Achieving such a stature demanded something more than simply a technical or tactical competence, or so the officers of the U.S. Navy believed. The civil-military relationship between the Navy Department and the U.S. Navy in the early republic only makes sense when viewed through conceptions of honor and reputation that pervaded American and European society. Widely shared notions of honor in the early modern world ultimately shaped, and hindered, civilian control of the military in the early years of the United States.

“A Treasure Irrecoverable Once Lost:” Honor and the Early American Republic

Many authors have wrote (sic) on [honor], but I find none that have compared it to the eye, which can't suffer the least mote in it, without being blemished. Honor may be called a precious stone, which the least speck makes less valuable! It is a treasure irrecoverable once unfortunately lost!

Major Robert Donkin¹

The honor of a nation is its life. Deliberately to abandon it is to commit an act of political suicide ... The nation which can prefer disgrace to danger is prepared for a master and deserves one.

Alexander Hamilton²

Duels inherently involved an element of risk – that was, after all, the whole point – but few duels were as suicidal as the series faced by Richard Somers on board the frigate *United States*. The affair began when Stephen Decatur and Somers were both stationed in the Mediterranean under Captain John Barry.³ Decatur's sharp sense of humor was well known to his companion, and Somers apparently thought nothing of it when Decatur told him he looked like a fool during one bantering conversation. Somers laughed it off, and resumed

¹ Robert Donkin, *Military Collections and Remarks* (New York: H. Gaine, 1777), 202.

² Alexander Hamilton, “The Warning No. III,” February 21, 1797, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011.

³ This account is taken from Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005), 25-26 and Charles Oscar Paullin, “Dueling in the Old Navy,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 1909, 1163. Paullin cites the *Naval Chronicle*, an account of the early navy written by Charles Goldsborough, for years the chief clerk of the Navy Department and later the Board of Navy Commissioners. Given his position, Goldsborough would have had access to interviews with virtually every officer of the early navy, but exactly where he heard of this episode is impossible to know, and some historians question its validity. All of Decatur's biographers, however, accept it as factual, and it agrees with everything we know about the culture of honor in the officer corps at the time.

his business, probably planning to return the jab at an opportune moment. Somers' fellow midshipmen, however, were not amused. In their minds, Somers had displayed fatal cowardice by walking away from a direct insult to his character. The following day, they informed him that they would not dine at any table he occupied. The situation simmered aboard the tight confines of a man of war, Somers's insistence that his friend had meant nothing by the comment falling on deaf ears. According to his fellow officers, only by meeting Decatur on the field of honor could Somers salvage his reputation; otherwise he would be forever regarded as something far worse than a fool: a coward. Faced with such unforgiving disdain, Somers did indeed issue a challenge: to six of his tormentors. The young man agreed to trade shots with each of them in succession, thereby proving his worthiness to serve or falling dead from a brother officer's bullet.

Decatur, by all accounts, urged his friend not to go through with what appeared to be a suicidal duel, but Somers refused, and insisted that Decatur act as his second. On the appointed day, the parties met, and Somers lined up against his first opponent. He inflicted a slight wound, but received a bullet in his right arm, forcing him to shoot at the second man with his left. Unsurprisingly, he missed entirely, while taking a second shot in his hip. Weakened from the loss of blood, he had to sit on the ground, with his arm propped up by Decatur, and fire off a third shot, amazingly managing to hit the other man, though not seriously. By this point, there could be little question that whatever faults Somers might have, he was no coward, and the affair was called off, with each of the six men he challenged alternating at nursing his wounds.

Somers' decision to duel six men at once was extreme, even by the standards of the time, but his willingness to die for his reputation was not. This was an era in which personal

reputation, and the quest to maintain it, dominated every aspect of a man's life. Somers knew the risk he was taking, and there is no reason to doubt he considered it worthwhile even if he perished; a man's life was a reasonable price for his honorable standing. As Somers' case indicates, this emphasis on honor could prove problematic in depriving the navy of valuable subordinates in a theater of war. But it had other, more insidious aspects as well. A fixation on honor could subvert the chain-of-command, or at the very least could strain officers' relationship with the government. In an age when honor was paramount, any officer who felt his orders might taint his reputation was more than willing to contemplate insubordination (or shirk, to use Feaver's terminology). Understanding civil-military relations in the early republic requires understanding the early modern world's conception of honor, and the tremendous power this ideal held over Americans in the first decades of independence.

For all its significance, the term "honor" is remarkably difficult to define, and this was certainly the case in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as well.¹ In his landmark 1755 dictionary, Samuel Johnson listed no less than thirteen possible definitions of the term, encompassing social standing, personal integrity, rank and dignity, and reputation.² For military officers, the essential tenets of honor were a bit more specific, but even Captain George Smith's 1779 *Universal Military Dictionary* conceded that it was "a vague

¹ Frank Henderson Stewart, *Honor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 9.

² Samuel Johnson, *A dictionary of the English language: in which the words are deduced from their originals, and illustrated in their different significations by examples from the best writers. To which are prefixed A history of the language, and An English grammar*. 2 volumes, (London, 1756), 1: "honor."

expression, which custom has given different meanings.”³ Smith emphasized the importance of virtue in honor, and reminded his readers that the esteem granted a man who performed honorable deeds was “a real good, which should be dear to us.” He did not, interestingly, tie honor to courage in battle, though that was certainly seen as an essential component of meriting honor. Whatever the definition, it was widely understood that honor was highly fragile. Major Robert Donkin of the British Army mused that many authors “have wrote on [honor], but I find none that have compared it to the eye, which can’t suffer the least mote in it, without being blemished. Honor may be called a precious stone, which the least speck makes less valuable! It is a treasure irrecoverable once unfortunately lost!”⁴

Julian Pitt-Rivers defines honor as “the value of a person in his own eyes, but also in the eyes of his society. It is his estimation of his own worth, his *claim* to pride, but also it is the acknowledgement of that claim, his excellence recognized by society, his *right* to pride.” He finds honor to be intimately bound up with social status, but it is more than just that. Someone of low status lacks honor, but mere social standing does not automatically confer honor; it must be earned through conduct. Pitt-Rivers argued that honor “provides a nexus between the ideals of a society and their reproduction in the individual through his aspiration to personify them.” Nor is honor exclusively individual. It is something which is possessed by a group or society, but only so long as all members conform to its ideals. Allowing one member to violate the norms of honor without sanction shames the entire group.⁵

³ Captain George Smith, *An Universal Military Dictionary, A Copious Explanation of the Technical Terms & c. Used in the Equipment, Machinery, Movements, and Military Operations of an Army*. (London: J. Millan, 1779).

⁴ Robert Donkin, *Military Collections and Remarks* (New York: H. Gaine, 1777), 202.

⁵ Julian Pitt-Rivers, “Honour and Social Status,” J.G. Peristiany, *Honour and Shame: The Values of Mediterranean Society* (London: Widenfeld and Nicholson, 1965), 19-78.

Anthropologist Frank Henderson Stewart, although heavily influenced by Pitt-Rivers' work, contends that his definition is incomplete. In fact, he argues that "the Western notion of honor has never been analyzed in a satisfactory fashion," and strives to come up with a comprehensive definition of what Westerners mean when they refer to their "honor." He identifies two interrelated components. Internal honor refers to one's own sense of integrity and uprightness. The old definition of character, what you are when no one is looking, might encapsulate this idea of honor nicely. But the other form of honor, Stewart's external honor, is impossible when no one is looking. It refers to perceptions, social standing, and reputation.⁶ Crucial to this form of honor is the concept of the "honor group," which is essentially "a set of people who follow the same code of honor and who recognize each other as doing so." Thus, what Stewart dubs "the title to right of honor" would be "the right to be treated as a full and equal member of the honor group."⁷ Stewart characterizes "honor as a right, roughly speaking, to be treated as having a certain worth." Both inner and outer honor fit into this categorization. The claim to honor can easily be lost, however; it is contingent on others recognizing the bearer's right.⁸ Moreover, Stewart distinguishes between what he calls "horizontal honor" and "vertical honor." Horizontal honor is the right to be recognized as an equal. Vertical honor is "the right to a special respect enjoyed by those who are superior." The most familiar form of this is "rank honor...the honor enjoyed by all members of a superior rank in relation to their inferiors."⁹

⁶ Stewart, *Honor*, 10-12.

⁷ Stewart, *Honor*, 54.

⁸ Stewart, *Honor*, 21-23, 41-47.

⁹ Stewart, *Honor*, 54-59.

Military Honor

Military officers, at least since the early modern era, have pursued their own unique sense of honor, which overlaps with that of their society but contains requirements unique to their profession. For early American naval officers, ideas about what constituted honor were an extension of two very similar strains of thought in the early modern world. One was the ideas about honor and hierarchy drawn from the militaries of Europe, especially Great Britain. The other was civilian ideas about honor that were, at the time, universally accepted across the United States.¹⁰ While the two differed in some ways, both forms had, at their core, the idea that being a man of honor depended as much on perception as on actual conduct; external honor was preeminent, and the honor group zealously enforced the standards of the officer corps, even, at times, at the expense of civil law and military regulations. Merely believing oneself to be honorable was useless; true honor was something conferred by one's peers and acknowledged by one's inferiors.

Sociologist Morris Janowitz explored uniquely military ideas about honor in his classic *The Professional Soldier*.¹¹ As in the larger society, honor in the military is based on a code of behavior, and being well regarded by one's peers – fellow officers – is among the foremost goals of a military professional. Janowitz traces the American military's ideas about honor to the Revolutionary Era, when Washington and others consciously copied European, and especially British, standards for the new nation's armed forces. Officers were

¹⁰ Bertram Wyatt-Brown argues that honorculture in the North began to diverge substantially from what is outlined here in the 1830s. His research focuses on the South, where conceptions of honor remained largely static. For the purposes of this dissertation, however, his discussion is quite applicable across the United States. See: Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor: Ethics and Behavior in the Old South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 18-19.

¹¹ Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (New York: The Free Press, 1960, updated edition 1971).

expected to be gentlemen, loyal to their superiors, members of “a cohesive brotherhood which claimed the right to extensive self-regulation,” and finally warriors who fought for glory or fame. The last is crucial; Janowitz argues that the best military officers will fight more for the noble end of honor or glory on the battlefield than for any specific political objective.¹²

Janowitz addresses the precedents from early modern Europe that forged American ideals of military honor, but his work is primarily concerned with the twentieth century armed forces. Fully appreciating the values and attitudes of early American naval officers requires a more specific analysis of the world of European military officers in the years surrounding the American Revolution. Mark Odintz’s unpublished dissertation “The British Officer Corps, 1754-1783,” provides a detailed analysis of honor in the British army in the era of the American Revolution, while Armstrong Starkey’s *War in the Age of Enlightenment*, David Bell’s *The First Total War*, and Christopher Duffy’s *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* all consider martial honor across Europe during the early modern era.¹³ Starkey notes the moral component of honor, arguing that it “represented the soldier’s ethic of duty, bravery, and self-sacrifice” that drove military officers. But there was a social component as well. In an age when the restriction of officers’ commissions to well-born gentlemen was breaking down, the code of honor instilled an aristocratic ethos across the officer corps. “The eighteenth century code of honor...represented a corporate culture

¹² Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier*, 215-218.

¹³ David Bell, *The First Total War: Napoleon’s Europe and the Birth of Warfare as we Know It* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 2007); Christopher Duffy, *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987); Armstrong Starkey, *War in the Age of Enlightenment* (Westport, CT: Praeger Press, 2003); Mark Odintz, “The British Officer Corps, 1754-1783,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1988. I heartily thank Dr. Odintz for calling my attention to his manuscript when the two of us were on fellowship at the David Library of the American Revolution together, and to the David Library, which holds a copy of his dissertation.

that assimilated men of nonaristocratic background,” Starkey argues, concluding that the “officer corps provided social mobility for many of its members who accepted the culture of honor as an emblem of their new status.”¹⁴ A commitment to honor unified the officer corps and distinguished it from the rabble of enlisted men, and therefore each officer had to earn and constantly maintain a good reputation. When one’s honor was even remotely called into question, it had to be defended even, quite literally, to the point of death. Hence the widespread practice of dueling in European armies. Loss of standing in the eyes of one’s peers would almost certainly mean the end of an officer’s career.¹⁵

As Mark Odintz notes, however, duels often had ulterior motives besides just defending one’s reputation. They were more frequent in stations far from combat where boredom was rampant, and often a handful of bullies issued the majority of the challenges. Some young, inexperienced officers might even fight duels not so much because they felt their honor was in question, but in an effort to build a name for themselves or establish a reputation. Nevertheless, Odintz and Starkey agree that refusing to participate in a duel, once challenged, irreparably ruined an officer’s career. Odintz contends that some British officers viewed the practice as detrimental to the army, but it was too essential to the honor code and burned too deeply into military norms to be immediately curtailed. Unless one of the participants died, which was surprisingly uncommon, the likelihood of a court-martial following a duel was virtually non-existent. In fact, an officer might even face a court-martial for conduct unbecoming an officer if he refused to participate in a duel once

¹⁴ Starkey, *Age of Enlightenment*, 76-77.

¹⁵ Starkey, *Age of Enlightenment*, 70-76, 95-97. See also: Arthur Gilbert, “Law and Honour among Eighteenth-Century British Army Officers,” *The Historical Journal* 19 no. 1 (1976), 75-87.

challenged.¹⁶ Ideas about honor were an integral part of the chain-of-command. Common soldiers obeyed their officers not only because they faced draconian punishment if they failed to do so – though that was certainly true – but also because their officers acted in such a manner as to merit obedience.¹⁷

David Bell cautions us against exaggerating the meritocratic nature of the officer corps in Europe during this period. Especially on the continent, the upper ranks remained very much the province of the well-born, even after the purchase of commissions was abolished in the 1770s. He also challenges the idea of patriotic honor, arguing that officers were not unconcerned with their country, but also fought for far more personal motives and identified strongly with their fellow-officers on enemy armies. Bell wholeheartedly agrees with Starkey, Odintz, and Duffy that honor was the primary driving force of the officer corps in Europe in the century leading up to the French Revolution.¹⁸

Christopher Duffy's *The Military Experience in the Age of Reason* falls somewhere between Starkey and Bell on the question of aristocracy versus meritocracy in European officer corps. While the military was seen as the appropriate realm of the high-born – indeed the only appropriate realm, a nobleman disgraced as an officer often had no other occupation open to him – tentative steps took place in the mid to late eighteenth century to open the military to competent members of the middle class. Such officers, however, often faced constant hostility from their peers. France opened up access to commissions somewhat in the 1750s, but by the Revolution such meritocratic officers had largely been driven from the

¹⁶ Odintz, "British Officer Corps," 375-391, 494-517.

¹⁷ Odintz, "British Officer Corps," 375-379.

¹⁸ Bell, *The First Total War*, 27-28, 35-36.

ranks. Still, “in no country was there a totally effective prohibition against a commoner obtaining commissioned rank.”¹⁹ Duffy sees patriotism as a real but weak force in the early modern era, with officers loosely loyal to king and country but honor was a much more significant value. Betraying your sovereign in wartime was utterly disgraceful, not so much because the traitor failed his country, but because he dishonored himself by breaking a sacred trust pledged to that country. Once the war was over, “it was not considered unpatriotic if you went on your travels at the end of the conflict and found yourself a new home.”²⁰ Kevin McCranie, however, argues that this had begun to change by the nineteenth century. During the War of 1812, naval officers for both Britain and the United States explicitly stated that they were fighting for not only their own honor but for the honor of their nations.²¹

Such a carefree attitude was nowhere to be found when it came to honor. The slightest hint of disgrace, even for circumstances totally beyond an officer’s control, meant that he would be immediately shunned. “Honor demanded to be constantly tested and reasserted, and it was a commodity which could so easily be lost,” Duffy writes, that it bred “curious feelings of insecurity.”²² As with Starkey, Odintz, and Bell, Duffy devotes considerable attention to the duel as an outgrown of the culture of honor, but that custom was hardly the only expression officers gave themselves over to. An honorable officer had no fear of death; bravery that would seem idiotic to twenty-first century viewers was the bare minimum standard at the end of the eighteenth. Officers ostentatiously put themselves in

¹⁹ Duffy, *Military Experience*, 35-45, quote on page 43.

²⁰ Duffy, *Military Experience*, 74.

²¹ Kevin McCranie, “Dueling with Warships to Satisfy Honor: The Use of Naval Challenges in the War of 1812,” *The International Journal of Maritime History* 25 vol. 61 (2013), 61-84.

²² Duffy, *Military Experience*, 77.

harm's way in battle, carefully signifying their position through dress and conduct even in the heat of battle. To make oneself and enemy target and show contempt for his bullets was the duty of every officer worthy of the name.

While American naval officers (like their army counterparts) inherited the martial traditions of all of Europe to some extent, their foremost guide was unquestionably Britain, and especially their former mother country's navy. British naval officers possessed finely-developed notions of honor, and their specific standards of honorable conduct were particularly important for the early U.S. Navy. Indeed, it is not an exaggeration to say that every professionally-minded American naval officer sought to consciously emulate his British counterparts to the greatest extent possible, particularly in personal behavior.²³ The Royal Navy also recognized the importance of noble deportment and social standing among its officers. In response to rampant insubordination and ill-discipline among young officers, the Admiralty regularized ranks and introduced uniforms in the early eighteenth century to promote *esprit de corps*. By the time of the American Revolution, the Royal Navy had made great strides in insuring that its officers, who usually but by no means always came from the upper-crust of society, could be perceived as true gentlemen.²⁴

For honor in the early American navy, the literature is somewhat thin. Two exceptions are James Valle's *Rocks and Shoals*, and Matthew Raffety's *The Republic Afloat*, both of which explore the crucial role of honor in the officer corps. Valle is decidedly unsympathetic to the young officers that launched the U.S. Navy, blasting their "exaggerated

²³ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the U.S. Naval Officer Corps* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 210-215.

²⁴ N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 324-326, 387-394.

sense of personal honor which led to pointless quarrels,” and claiming that they were a “crop of overwhelmingly proud and egotistical young commodores... incapable of sacrificing private considerations for the good of the service.”²⁵ In Raffety’s analysis, however, this perspective overlooks the crucial role of honor in shipboard life. As in the British Army, it was a sense of honor and trappings of authority that maintained order (or failed to) aboard ship. “Atop the ship’s chain of command, the captain was expected to represent the pinnacle of honor,” Raffety argues. “Officers’ authority had several sources, including craft convention and the law. In a less concrete but perhaps more essential way, however, officers legitimated their authority by illustrating through their behavior, dress, and speech that they were the sort of men who deserved to command.” Therefore, a diminishment of an officer’s personal standing before the crew would perilously undermine the ship’s hierarchy. So essential was the officers’ standing in the eyes of the crew that naval and merchant officers alike feared legislation designed to bolster their authority. Their honor established their fitness to command sailors, and legal intrusion, even if intended to expand a captain’s power, undermined his authority before the men.²⁶ Although Raffety devotes the bulk of his attention to civilian captains, he does argue that all these trends were not only also true, but were taken to extremes, among naval officers.

²⁵ James Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Order and Discipline in the Old Navy, 1800-1861* (Annapolis, MD: naval Institute Press, 1980), 24, 88.

²⁶ Matthew Raffety, *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 95-98, 123-124.

Honor in the Civilian Realm

American naval officers drew for their honor culture from their own civilian society as well as from their European military counterparts. This was an era when the democratizing spirit of the Revolution had only begun to take root, and all Americans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries with pretensions to status craved both honor and reputation. Douglas Adair identifies two key ideas that drove the founding generation. One was fame, the desire to be celebrated by one's fellow men. It was a yearning to be a "great man," that is, "one who stands out, who towers above his fellows in some spectacular way." The desire for fame included not only one's fellow countrymen, though they were certainly part of it, but also future generations. At its heart, the "desire for fame is the desire for immortality." "Honor," on the other hand, is slightly different. One could do great deeds and still be regarded as a morally-deficient human being. Early Americans longed for fame, but not at the cost of their standing in society. Adair defines honor as similar to a conscience; it governs behavior by weighing on the mind what others would think of this or that action. He does not, however, see it as the same for everyone. There was a social component to honor, a belief that honor could only be held by free men who occupied a position of significance in society.²⁷

Writing about honor in the South, Bertram Wyatt-Brown offers a similar definition. Honor, he contends, was bound up in a socially stratified society with "clearly understood hierarchies of leaders and subordinates," though he argues that people at all levels of this hierarchy pursued a sense of honor. At its essence, honor was "essentially the cluster of

²⁷ Douglas Adair, "Fame and the Founding Fathers," Trevor Colbourn, ed. *Fame and the Founding Fathers: Essays by Douglas Adair* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1974).9-13.

ethical rules ... by which judgments of behavior are ratified by community consensus,” and it called for “the rejection of the lowly, the alien, and the shamed.”²⁸ This rejection was essential, for any individual or community that tolerated dishonorable behavior was thereby tainted. Simply feeling a sense of personal distaste was inadequate; honorable people had to publicly and emphatically shame those who violated the norms of honor.

Although his emphasis is on the Old South, Wyatt-Brown takes pains to note that this sense of honor was universal in America during the colonial era and early republic. It was only in the 1820s and ‘30s that values in the North began to shift. A key reason that all of the original thirteen colonies held to similar ideas about honor was that they derived from the same source. Ideas about honorable behavior came to the New World from the Old, and their origins stretch into the distant past beyond the historian’s gaze. This “primal honor,” as Wyatt-Brown dubs it, was to some extent supplanted by Judeo-Christian ideas, but it was never fully expunged from the Southern mind, and its influence throughout America was readily apparent during the Revolution and early republic. He identifies five characteristics of primal honor:

(1) honor as immortalizing valor, particularly in the character of revenge against familial and community enemies; (2) opinion of others as an indispensable part of personal identity and gauge of self-worth; (3) physical appearance and ferocity of will as signs of inner merit; (4) defense of male integrity and mingled fear and love of woman; and finally, (5) reliance upon oath-taking as a bond in lieu of family obligations and allegiances.²⁹

The first two characteristics clearly overlap with Adair’s definition of fame and Starkey and Odintz’s emphasis on the external nature of honor, while all, but especially the third, feed into Stewart’s idea of an honor group. Equally important is the fragility of honor, an idea

²⁸ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 4.

²⁹ Wyatt-Brown, *Southern Honor*, 34.

attested in Starkey, Odintz, and Stewart as well as Pitt-Rivers, Janowitz, and Gilbert. For early Americans, maintaining honor was among their most vitally important tasks.

Joanne Freeman illuminates this point well in her study of early republican politics, *Affairs of Honor*.³⁰ An attack on honor was an urgent and frightening issue, demanding immediate attention. “When honor was at stake, all else fell by the wayside” in the early republic. For politicians, the ability to win and hold office hinged on their reputation before the American public. In some ways it inverted the notions of honor within the military hierarchy. Now it was those being led who critiqued, and possibly withdrew, the honorable standing of their leaders. Yet in other ways, it was simply a less volatile form of the military’s system. In the navy, seamen who lost respect for their officers might mutiny in a variety of ways large and small.³¹ American voters simply kicked the disgraced politician from office. As such, politicians often went to the same lengths to preserve their honor as military officers. The frequency of dueling in the military was exceptional, both in Britain and the United States. But the acceptance of the practice, however grudgingly, was not. Alexander Hamilton, an opponent of the practice, still consented to participate in his fatal duel with Aaron Burr in order to maintain his ability to participate in politics.³²

How then, did all this shape the early American navy? Desiring as they did to emulate their British peers, American naval officers readily carried over the ideas about honor from the British Army and especially the Royal Navy. Christopher McKee cites Adair’s discussion of the pursuit of fame in the early republic, and ranks it among the chief

³⁰ Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

³¹ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 169-177.

³² Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 24, 57-60, 164-166.

influences of the early navy. “Unless this search for fame...is recognized as a primary element in the ethical air breathed by naval officers,” McKee contends that ‘a true understanding of that corps is as impossible as if one lacked basic data of ranks and numbers.’”³³

As in both the civilian and military realms, honor within the early U.S. naval officer corps was enforced by the community, Stewart’s “honor group.” It was vital to shame officers who violated the norms of honor by displaying cowardice in the face of the enemy, accepting insults, acting or speaking dishonestly, or violating an oath. Although they felt a measure of solidarity with one another as members of a common profession, protecting that profession meant that officers usually had no qualms about criticizing one of their own to the secretary of the navy or offering their endorsement to the secretary when he removed a disgraced officer from the corps. When it came to balancing their own honor and reputation against the good of the service, most officers felt a strong ambivalence. They genuinely wanted to advance the nation’s interest, and their patriotism was part of their honorable standing. But when following orders or putting the good of the nation ahead of one’s self might damage an officer’s reputation, such an officer faced a deeply troubling choice, and none were above seeking their own honor first, even at the cost of defying orders.

National Honor

Such attitudes did not mean that the good of the nation was insignificant. On the contrary, American naval officers, like their counterparts on land and in Europe, understood that disgrace for their country was just as shameful as person disgrace. The rules about honor accepted for individuals in Europe and the United States in the early modern world

³³ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 47.

applied to nations as well.³⁴ Early modern European officers carried the reputation of their class, and their monarch, onto the field of battle with them. For Americans, they carried the idea of republicanism and the nation itself. That nation, however, did not have the luxury of being assumed to have honorable standing.

The United States, in the years after independence, lacked national honor. It was perceived as unable to defend itself against aggression, willing to tolerate insults, and of a lower station than Britain or France. Although politically independent of the British Empire, American leaders still felt themselves shamed, still not fully able to regard themselves as honorable, as long as their former mother country believed it could transgress their rights with impunity.³⁵ America's leaders wanted more than to be politically distinct from Great Britain. They wanted to be recognized as a member of Britain and France's honor group. Presidents and their cabinets from both parties sought to lay claim to their title of right to "be treated as having a certain worth," to receive from Britain and France recognition as possessing horizontal honor.³⁶ This meant, among other things, refusing to passively accept insults from another nation, just as a man of honor could not accept an insult from a peer.

³⁴ McCranie, "Dueling with Warships," 68.

³⁵ Troy Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, The British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012) argues that this was one of the primary causes of the War of 1812, though he discusses it in terms of independence from the British Empire's undue influence more than in terms of national honor. See also: Norman Risjord, "1812: Conservatives, War Hawks, and the Nation's Honor," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 18 no. 2 (April 1961), 196-210 for a similar argument that the War of 1812 was fundamentally about securing national honor vis-à-vis Great Britain. Andrew Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 200-201 makes a similar argument for the Barbary Wars, contending that they were primarily intended to improve American international standing. Jonathan Dull, *American Naval History, 1607-1865: Overcoming the Colonial Legacy* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), also addresses this idea.

³⁶ Stewart, *Honor*, 21-23, 41-47, 59.

Alexander Hamilton made this point explicit in a newspaper editorial during a war scare with France, arguing that

the most pernicious of conquests, which a state can experience, is a conquest over that elevated sense of its own rights which inspires a due sensibility to insult and injury, over that virtuous pride of character which prefers any peril or sacrifice to a final submission to oppression, and which regards national ignominy as the greatest of national calamities.

In short, no nation could expect anything but contempt and exploitation as long as it refused to defend its status and worth. “The honor of a nation is its life,” he concluded, and to “abandon it is to commit an act of political suicide.”³⁷ His fierce political rival, Thomas Jefferson, agreed. “Weakness provokes insult and injury,” he wrote to John Jay, “while a condition to punish it often prevents it.”³⁸

The pursuit of national pride fed attitudes about honor among military officers in the early modern era, but it could also strengthen military forces in battle. The need to vindicate the honor of their nation drove officers, soldiers, and sailors alike, while pride in the superiority of their country’s institutions or society gave them confidence in battle. Even disgusted continental observers, who regarded Englishmen as insolent, tasteless, and overly proud, had to acknowledge that these attitudes gave English warriors a unique courage in battle.³⁹

³⁷ Alexander Hamilton, “The Warning No. III,” February 21, 1797, *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton Digital Edition*, ed. Harold C. Syrett. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2011.

³⁸ Thomas Jefferson to John Jay, August 23, 1785, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

³⁹ Duffy, *Military Experience*, 31-32.

This dissertation argues that the conflation of personal and national honor began in the United States well before the War of 1812. Almost from the moment of its creation, the U.S. Navy implanted in its officers a sense that their country's reputation hinged on their behavior. Although they differed over the size, and expense, of the navy, Federalists and Jeffersonian-Republicans alike saw it as the key to putting America in "a condition to punish" attacks on its honor. Naval captains thus carried the dual burden of personal and national honor, and their civilian bosses were cognizant of this fact and shaped their expectations accordingly. The first five secretaries of the navy had no patience for officers who displayed timidity, sloth, or cowardice, yet tolerated blatant insubordination from captains who evinced zeal for the honor of their country and its navy. Promoting such attitudes was not without cost, however. These same officers often put their own honor and reputation ahead of the good of the service, and their infighting, even to the point of fatal duels, proved a constant source of frustration to the Navy Department in the early years of the nineteenth century.

It seemed an inescapable frustration, however. The code of honor was too entrenched, and too crucial to building an effective navy. No one articulated this better than Benjamin Stoddert, who became the first secretary of the navy in 1797. Staunchly committed to a navy that would bring credit to his young country, he wholeheartedly embraced his society's ideals of honor, and governed the first naval officer corps accordingly, laying the foundations of a naval culture that would long outlive his tenure as secretary.

“To Rid Our Navy of Such Men:” Benjamin Stoddert and the Creation of the United States Navy

Our Navy at this time when its character is to form, ought to be commanded by men who, not satisfied with escaping censure, will be unhappy if they do not receive and merit praise – By men who have talents and activity, as well as spirit, to assist a judicious arrangement for the employment of the force under their command, or to cure the defects of a bad one – I hope and I believe that there are several such men in the service.

Benjamin Stoddert¹

A man may be a very good seaman, and be qualified to command a merchant vessel, but at the same time very unfit to command in the Navy. If I am not misinformed there are several of that description in the Navy.

Richard Dale²

A new century dawned inauspiciously for the American navy. On the first day of 1800, eleven barges manned by “negroes and mullattos and armed with muskets, sabers and boarding pikes” surrounded the United States Navy schooner *Experiment* and its merchant convoy of four ships in the Caribbean “with the intention to board each of the vessels.”³ In fierce action lasting over five hours, the *Experiment* repelled three boarding attempts, but lost two of the ships it was convoying, including the schooner *Mary*, whose captain was slain by the attackers. Lieutenant William Maley, senior officer of the *Experiment* attributed the loss

¹ Benjamin Stoddert to John Adams, April 19, 1799, in *Naval Documents related to the Quasi-War between the United States and France* (hereafter referred to as *NDQW*) seven volumes (US Government Printing Office, 1935-38), III: 66-67.

² Richard Dale to Stoddert, September 28, 1800, in *NDQW*, VI: 389-390.

³ Edward Stevens, US Consul General, St. Domingo to Captain Silas Talbot, January 2, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 1.

of those ships to the totally becalmed waters, which prevented them from escaping, and boasted that not a single man from his own vessel perished in the fighting, with only Lieutenant Porter slightly wounded. He swore that he had done everything in his power to prevent the loss of the vessels under his protection, but to no avail.¹

Maley's report is a model of brevity, unsurprising given that he certainly preferred the secretary of navy know as few details of the battle as possible. He omitted, among other things, the fact that he spent the entire battle in the hold of his ship. When he realized the *Experiment* and its convoy were surrounded, Maley judged the situation hopeless and directed his crew to acquiesce without firing a shot. Lieutenant Porter, the same David Porter who would become a towering figure in the American naval history, refused to comply with such a disgraceful order and promptly assumed command. Maley either tamely submitted to this and withdrew to the hold of the ship or the other officers sided with Porter and compelled him to do so. Either way, half of the convoy survived the attack thanks to Porter's act of blatant insubordination.²

The episode highlights the two greatest internal threats to America's then embryonic navy: incompetent and insubordinate officers. Either had the potential to cripple America's maritime force, and President John Adams and first Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Stoddert had to cope with any number of such men throughout the undeclared war with France, which

¹ Edward Stevens, US Consul General, St. Domingo to Captain Silas Talbot, January 2, 1800 in *NDQW*, V:1; Extract from the journal of Lieutenant William Maley, Captain of the *Experiment*, January 1, 1800, in *NDQW*, V: 4.

² Accounts of the episode involving Maley and Porter can be found in David Dixon Porter, *Memoir of Commodore Porter of the United States Navy* (New York: J. Munsell, 1875), 29-32; David Long, *Nothing Too Daring: A Biography of David Porter* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1970), 12-13; William Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores: The American navy, 1783-1815* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 1984), 51-52; and Gardner Allen, *Our Naval War with France*, (New York: Houghton-Mifflin Company, 1967, originally published 1909), 139-147.

lasted from 1797 through 1801. But when confronted by the incompetence of Maley and the insubordination of Porter, Stoddert did not hesitate; Porter emerged without the slightest censure while Maley found himself before a court martial to account for his conduct.³ In building the officer corps for the infant navy, Stoddert's primary concern was that men of action, men who would take daring risks and zealously seek to advance the nation's reputation abroad, should govern American ships. While he encouraged discipline aboard ship and grew annoyed when officers failed to follow his orders, Stoddert worried far more about idleness and excessive caution than compliance when evaluating captains. Writing to John Barry, Stoddert commented that a "spirit of enterprise and adventure, cannot be too much encouraged in our officers under your command, nor can too many opportunities be afforded the enterprising to distinguish themselves." Although such actions carried great risks for the country's undeniably few vessels, Stoddert's primary concern was not to avoid losing ships. "We have nothing to dread," he went on to inform Barry, "but inactivity."⁴

Stoddert's inclinations led him to what might be termed a "hands-off" approach in his oversight of captains. Beyond providing broadly outlined orders, Stoddert allowed them considerable discretion in all matters of naval governance. He routinely consulted them on his decisions, and he tolerated behavior that came perilously close to insubordination, especially from officers whom he considered zealous and active. This mindset, and the attitudes it created among the officer corps, caused him difficulty late in his tenure, but slothful, careless, and overly cautious captains produced a far greater measure of grief, and if Stoddert came to regret his excessive delegation by the close of the war, he also did an

³ Silas Talbot to the Secretary of the Navy, 13 June 1800 in *NDQW* V: 41-43. Porter, perhaps not surprisingly, was eventually court-martialed in 1825 for overstepping the bounds of his authority (See Epilogue).

⁴ Stoddert to Barry, December 7, 1798, in *NDQW*, II: 70-71.

admirable job culling the ranks of captains whose timidity failed to bring credit to their country. Stoddert's administration, and the officer corps that rose to prominence under him, played a defining role in the naval history of the United States. The Constitution and subsequent Congressional naval legislation were often deliberately vague as to how the American navy would function, and what the precise duties and prerogatives would be for civilian administrators and military officers. Stoddert's term as secretary was crucial for the precedents it set as much as for the actual decisions he made, though those too could be momentous. While naval administration evolved a great deal after Stoddert, it was he who determined the kind of character America preferred in its naval officers, and all subsequent captains through the War of 1812, for good or ill, came from a mold that Stoddert established: aggressive, courageous, sensitive to any insult to their own or their country's honor, and often difficult to control.

His achievements deserve further study, but if he enjoys the status of America's first secretary of the navy, Stoddert cannot claim major naval campaigns against Barbary pirates or the vaunted Royal Navy that his successors can. His administration coincided with the all but forgotten undeclared war between the United States and its Revolutionary ally, France.⁵ His accomplishments gave the so-called Half War significance, however. While the Quasi-War is seldom studied, it played a crucial role in the internal development of the American navy. The Washington and Adams Administrations essentially created the United States Navy from nothing during this period; the Continental Navy of the American Revolution

⁵ The Quasi-War, also referred to as the Half War, is among the most understudied chapters in American history. To date, it has generated only three monographs: Gardner Allen, *Our Naval War with France*, (Hamden CN: Archon Books, 1967, originally published 1909), Alexander DeConde, *The Quasi War: The Politics and Diplomacy of the Undeclared War with France, 1797-1801* (New York: Scribner, 1966), and Michael Palmer, *Stoddert's War: Naval Operations of the Undeclared War with France* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2002, originally published 1987).

provided little in the way of positive examples or talented officers for its successors to build on.

“If the Continental Navy had never existed, it is hard to see how the outcome of the Revolution would have been any different,” writes historian William Fowler.⁶ John Adams, the man with perhaps the greatest claim to the title “Father of the American navy,” would have agreed, commenting during the war that “recollecting the whole history of the rise and progress of our navy (during the Revolution), it is very difficult to avoid tears.”⁷ Other than a few dramatic successes by John Paul Jones, John Barry, and a handful of others, the Continental Navy was, at best, an annoyance to the British, and the only naval engagement with a significant impact on the outcome of the war, the Battle of the Chesapeake, was wholly the work of the French Navy. Once the war ended, the newly created nation possessed only two vessels that the enemy had not captured or sunk, and these were quickly sold. Faced with staggering war debts and led by a Congress unable to raise revenue, it was out of the question for the United States to attempt to rebuild its fleets, and for the next thirteen years American merchant vessels sailed entirely at their own risk.⁸

⁶ William Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail: The American navy during the Revolution* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1976), 263. For a much more positive interpretation of the naval war in the American Revolution, see Nathan Miller, *Sea of Glory: The Continental Navy Fights for Independence, 1775-1783* (New York: D. McKay, 1974); George Daughan, *If By Sea: The Forging of the American navy from the American Revolution through the War of 1812* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); and James Volo, *Blue Water Patriots: The American Revolution Afloat* (Westport, CN: Praeger Press, 2007). While these find more to praise in the colonies' efforts at sea during the Revolution, all agree that the Continental Navy failed to seriously contest the Royal Navy, though it did combine with privateering to greatly annoy British commerce. These studies tend to focus exclusively on the American point of view. For the British and French Navies during the Revolution, see: Jonathan Dull, *The Age of the Ship of the Line: The British and French Navies, 1650-1815* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2009), 91-118; and N.A.M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2004),

⁷ John Adams to the president of Congress, July 6, 1780, in Francis Wharton, ed. *The Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States* 6 volumes (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1889), III: 833-834.

⁸ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 1-16. The Continental Navy was as much a victim of American anti-militarism as its own ineptitude or financial woes. The Continental Army likewise vanished after the

Unemployed, most of the officers of the Continental Navy returned to life as merchant captains. John Paul Jones, the most celebrated and influential naval hero of the Revolution, drifted across the Atlantic to Russia, hoping to use a commission in the Czarina's navy to gain the glory he never quite found in his own country.⁹ Far more typical were the experiences of John Barry and privateer Thomas Truxtun. Both used their skills as seamen in lucrative commercial voyages to Canton, China, where they mingled with numerous other patriots from the recent war with Britain, and often dined convivially with their former adversaries. Although very rewarding financially, the Canton trade – or any voyages by American merchant vessels – posed hazards; merchant captains drilled their crews to defend the ship if pirates attacked, particularly if they sailed anywhere near the Mediterranean, where the Barbary corsairs seized United States' merchant ships with impunity. Such an ever-present threat could not fail to remind these men that the country they had helped create no longer possessed the ability to protect its commerce at sea.¹⁰

The only hope of the country creating a new navy rested with the Constitution drawn up in Philadelphia in 1787. By and large, naval veterans of the Revolution enthusiastically supported the charter. Joshua Barney gave speeches campaigning on behalf of pro-Constitution delegates in his home state, firmly convinced that repealing the Articles of

Revolution, see Richard H. Kohn, *Eagle and Sword: The Federalists and the Creation of the Military Establishment in America, 1783-1802* (New York: The Free Press, 1975), 41.

⁹ The best source for Jones' life remains Samuel Eliot Morrison's *John Paul Jones: A Sailor's Biography* (Boston: Little-Brown, 1959). His tenure in the Russian Navy can be found on pages 360-390. Evan Thomas, *John Paul Jones: Sailor, Hero, Father of the American navy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003) provides an excellent recent life of the captain, including his stint in the Czarina's service (267-299).

¹⁰ For Barry's postwar merchant career, the best source is Tim McGrath's excellent recent biography *John Barry: An American Hero in the Age of Sail* (Yardley, PA: Westhome, 2012), 359-403. For Truxtun, Eugene Ferguson's 1956 biography remains the sole study of his life. His merchant career can be found in Ferguson, *Truxtun of the Constellation: The Life of Commodore Thomas Truxtun, 1755-1822* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns-Hopkins University Press, 1956), 60-99.

Confederation offered the best hope for his country, but certainly also aware that it represented the best chance for the creation of a federal navy, and therefore of a commission for himself.¹¹ While many veterans of the Revolution at sea favored the new charter, few went so far to see it approved as John Barry. Watching from the gallery at the Pennsylvania ratifying convention, Barry was disgusted when Antifederalist delegates, aware that they lacked the votes to prevent ratification, left the convention before a vote could take place, thereby denying a quorum. Barry, likely with the collusion of Speaker Thomas Mifflin, led a gang of sailors to the inn where a few of the truant assemblymen dined peacefully, prematurely celebrating the success of their plan to subvert the Constitution. The Convention only lacked two delegates for a quorum, and Barry's gang unceremoniously seized James McCalmont and Jacob Miley, two ringleaders of the Antifederalists, and dragged them – quite literally kicking and screaming – back to the state house. Relatively unhurt, the two recalcitrant delegates found themselves blocked inside and forced to watch as their colleagues ratified the Constitution.¹²

If the Revolutionary War hero expected gratitude for his extra-legal activities, he was soon disappointed. To Barry's chagrin, McCalmont brought charges against him, which Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Mifflin, and even Barry's good friend Charles Biddle felt obliged to support, despite their great relief at Barry's actions. The matter quickly passed, however. Relieved that the Constitution did indeed become the law of the land, none of its

¹¹ Louis Arthur Norton, *Joshua Barney: Hero of the Revolution and 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 102-104.

¹² Charles Biddle, *The Autobiography of Charles Biddle: Vice-President of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania, 1745-1821* (Philadelphia: E. Claxon and Company, 1883), 217-220.

supporters could stomach the thought of an actual reprimand for Barry, despite the highly dubious legality of his actions, and the charges were subsequently dropped.¹³

The Constitution that Barry so strongly supported laid the foundation for a future United States Navy, while explicitly insuring civilian control of any such force once it was created. The delegates vested the president with power as “Commander in Chief of the Army and Navy of the United States,” while restricting the power to “provide and maintain a Navy,” and “to make rules for the government of land and naval forces” to Congress.¹⁴ In *The Federalist*, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay argued strongly in favor of a naval force, citing Congress’s ability to create one as a key reason for supporting the new government.¹⁵ The Constitution also took steps to insure that any navy would be the sole prerogative of the central government. By prohibiting states from granting letters of marque or maintaining ships in a time of peace, the new charter insured that the constant squabbling between the Continental Navy and the various state navies that mired the Revolution would not be repeated in future wars.¹⁶ Although they found some measure of compromise unavoidable regarding the militia, the delegates thoroughly restricted the states’ power over armed forces and made the central government paramount.¹⁷ This, of course,

¹³ McGrath, *John Barry*, 358-364.

¹⁴ Article II, Section 2, Constitution of the United States of America; Article I, Section 8, Constitution.

¹⁵ Publius, *The Federalist: No. 11*, George Carey and James McClellan, eds. *The Federalist: The Gideon Edition* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 2001), 49-55. Hamilton also addresses the role of the central government and naval forces in *The Federalist: No. 24*, 117-122.

¹⁶ Article I, Section 10, Constitution of the United States.

¹⁷ During the American Revolution, the Continental Congress did not have a monopoly of force at sea. Nine of the thirteen states built and maintained their own separate navies, and competition between state and national navies for seamen and officers was fierce. Charles Oscar Paullin, *The Navy of the American Revolution: Its Administration, Its Policy, and Its Achievements* (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1906), 315-477, includes detailed analysis of the creation, oversight, and use of each individual state navy. For the views of the Framers of the Constitution on military matters, see Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 73-81. The Constitutional

formed a crucial part of the Antifederalists' objection to the Constitution, since they feared the diminution of state power it promised. Among features they protested was the ability of Congress to create and administer a navy, with Southerners especially fearing that this would grant inordinate power to New England states, where shipping dominated the economy.¹⁸

Furthermore, argued opponents of the Constitution, creating a navy also meant creating a naval officer corps. Military leaders, whether they command forces on land or sea, have "a different interest from and opposed to the civil power," argued one Antifederalist delegate.¹⁹ While naval forces' role at sea physically separated them from the government and population, thereby making them less of a threat to liberty, opponents of the Constitution still feared the creation of an officer corps whose values would be antithetical to ideals of the Revolution. Finally, the key reason Antifederalists opposed a naval force was the massive expense of building and maintaining so many ships. Governmental funds would be wasted, they argued, when the Atlantic Ocean acted as a perfectly good barrier against invasion.²⁰

The Federalists ultimately triumphed, and the Constitution became the basis for a new American government. A navy did not automatically follow, however. Opposition still ran strong, and the fragile financial condition of the new government precluded the immediate

Convention seems to have given little thought to a navy, as the members were more concerned with strengthening the central government's power over land forces. Although the militia system was universally regarded as woefully ineffective, the attitude of the times towards militaries made some sort of compromise between federal and state power over military forces necessary. Kohn, "The Constitution and National Security: The Intent of the Framers," Richard H. Kohn, ed. *The United States Military Under the Constitution of the United States, 1789-1989* (New York: New York University Press, 1989), 61-87, also addresses the drafting of the Constitution in light of national security concerns, and the strong desire to curtail the states' power over military affairs.

¹⁸ The discussion of Antifederalist opposition to the creation of a Navy during the debate over ratification comes primarily from Smelser, *Congress Founds a Navy*, 13-18.

¹⁹ James McClellan and M.E. Bradford, eds. *Jonathan Elliot's Debates in the Several State Conventions on the Adoption of the Federal Constitution*. 7 volumes. (Richmond, VA: James River Press, 1989), III: 430.

²⁰ Smelser, *Congress Founds a Navy*, 13-18; Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 81-86.

construction of a fleet. For many leaders of the new nation, however, an American display of force at sea was only a matter of time. Any reader of *The Federalist* could hardly doubt that Hamilton intended for the United States to eventually become a naval power.²¹ Washington shared his Treasury Secretary's sentiments, as did first Secretary of War Henry Knox. Even Thomas Jefferson, who later drastically reduced the American navy as president, believed a small force necessary and advocated to for its creation.²²

Jefferson's party, led by James Madison in the House of Representatives, later worked to prevent the creation of a navy, but at the time the sage of Monticello ardently supported giving the nation such a force to combat rampant piracy in the Mediterranean. The Barbary corsairs consisted of four semi-independent regencies of the Ottoman Empire on the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Their economies hinged on seizing the ships of infidel nations and enslaving their crews. Massive ransoms and annual tribute from maritime nations generated revenue for rulers.²³ In 1793, the capture of American merchants by Barbary corsairs finally forced Congress to take decisive action. On March 27, 1794, it passed the Act to provide a Naval Armament, allowing for the construction of six frigates. The legislation authorized the building of a mere half-dozen ships, to begin immediately.

²¹ For Hamilton's life and political views, see Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2007). See also, John Miller, *Alexander Hamilton and the Growth of the New Nation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1959).

²² Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, July 11, 1786, in *Naval Documents relating to the United States' Wars with the Barbary Powers*, 6 volumes (Washington DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1939),

I: 10-11 (Hereafter *NDBW*). See chapter 5 for a detailed discussion of Jefferson's views on a standing navy.

²³ For the Barbary corsairs, see: Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Richard Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Joshua London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005); and Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). America's relations with the Barbary coast figure prominently in chapter 2.

Despite the fact that Americans citizens were enslaved within the Barbary regencies at the time, stiff opposition to any kind of navy ran through much of Congress, and the Act passed only narrowly. Moreover, it ended ominously for naval advocates, promising that “if a peace shall take place between the United States and the Regency of Algiers,” construction of the frigates must cease immediately.²⁴

The creation of the United States Navy prompted a flurry of letters from applicants seeking officers’ commissions. Selecting the first officers to lead the nation’s incipient maritime force fell to president Washington and Secretary of War Henry Knox. Given his sterling Revolutionary War record, John Barry was an obvious choice for the most senior officer in the new navy, and Washington and Knox sought his advice on appointments for the other five frigates. By doing so, they set a precedent that the future Navy Department would routinely follow. Civilian officials charged with selecting naval officers looked to those same officers to nominate their peers. In this case, the three men seem to have enjoyed a cordial working relationship. Barry praised Washington for ignoring “powerful interests” backing some candidates and choosing the first officer corps based on each man’s merit.²⁵

The first six captains chosen were, in order of seniority, John Barry, Samuel Nicholson, Silas Talbot, Joshua Barney, Richard Dale and Thomas Truxtun.²⁶ Seniority was

²⁴ Act Pertaining to the Navy, 27 March, 1794 in *NDBW*, I: 69-70. For the debate over the creation of the Navy, see Craig L. Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980): 17-49; Toll, *Six Frigates*, 40-44

²⁵ Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 294, contends that in the army of the Federalist Era, “commissions at all levels, as in England, could be bought – not with money, necessarily, but with political influence.” Barry’s assertion that Washington ignored “powerful interests,” would seem to indicate this was not the case in the navy, at least initially, though Barry may also not be the most unbiased source for the officer selection process, and certainly would have been slow to offer any judgment critical of Washington. See: McGrath, *John Barry*, 423; Toll, *Six Frigates*, 56-57.

²⁶ Knox to Captains Barry, Nicholson, Talbot, Barney, Dale and Truxtun, June 5, 1794, Letters Sent by the War Department relating to Naval Matters, M739, National Archives, Washington DC.

based on each man's standing in the Continental Navy at the close of the Revolution.²⁷

Truxtun, who would go on to tower over the others in the historical record, carried the distinction of being the only one who had not served on that force. He had captained a privateer during the war, a position looked upon with contempt by his peers within the Continental Navy, though probably not as much contempt as Truxtun had felt for the Continental Congress' anemic maritime force. Truxtun also appears to have enjoyed the least political patronage, with no record of his receiving the endorsement of a prominent figure as part of his application to the service. Nonetheless, it would be Truxtun who would do more than all the others to establish the navy's reputation and prepare it for the future.²⁸

Internal bickering in the navy began before the first keel was laid. Although the first six captains were nominal equals, their order on the initial list determined seniority in the event of a dispute. More importantly, it reflected on the honor of the men chosen, at least in their own minds. As soon as he learned that he ranked behind Talbot, Barney resigned and subsequently joined the French Navy.²⁹ He believed, with some justification, that Talbot's

²⁷ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 57.

²⁸ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 57, contends that Truxtun was in fact an "afterthought," for Washington, Knox, and Barry, which seems unlikely given his contact with Barry in Canton. Toll does go on to note that Truxtun "would do more to shape the culture of the officer corps than any on the roster above him." See also: Ferguson, *Truxtun of the Constellation*: for Truxtun's Revolutionary career, 17-50, and lack of patronage, 102-103. Of course, the fact that no letters of recommendation on Truxtun's behalf remain does not necessarily mean none existed, or that Truxtun did not have friends verbally endorsing him to Washington and Knox. Truxtun also owned stock in "The Asylum Company," a venture owned by Revolutionary War financier and former head of the Continental Navy Robert Morris (Thomas Truxtun Collection, Box 51, Folder 2, Library of Congress, Washington DC). Finally, given Truxtun's interaction with Barry in Canton, it is not entirely fair to say he had no political connections; he may in fact have enjoyed the strongest connection of all, a friendship with the man helping the Administration make its decision on who should receive captains' commissions.

²⁹ Knox to Barney, June 5, 1794, Letters Sent by the War Department. According to Norton, *Joshua Barney*, 128-129, Barney's decision almost led to disaster. The Jay Treaty, which the United States subsequently negotiated with Britain made it possible for British courts to try and execute any American citizen serving another nation at war with Britain, and had Barney been captured at any time in the Revolutionary or Napoleonic Wars it might have cost him his life. Later, he had to refuse to comply with orders to fight against his native country once the Quasi-War began. His reputation in the United States survived his stint in a foreign navy, and he went on to be one of his country's heroes in the War of 1812.

standing was the result of his position as a congressman from New York, not his Revolutionary War record. Talbot possessed a fine war record, but Barney nonetheless felt insulted by his place on the list and refused his commission. The navy called in James Sever to replace him, but it was off to an inauspicious start.³⁰ Difficulties with recalcitrant captains soon became the least of its problems, however, when word arrived that the Algerine government had agreed to terms of peace.

Almost as soon as Congress approved the captains, the navy nearly disappeared. A successful treaty with the Regency of Algiers removed the immediate need for a naval force, and according to the Act, construction on the ships should have ceased immediately and the officers returned to civilian life. North Africa was no longer the only source of danger to American shipping, however. Relations had soured between the United States and its ally in the Revolutionary War, France. The Treaty of Amity and Commerce signed by the two countries during the war for independence stipulated that each would come to the other's aid in the event of a war. In 1793, France had occasion to claim this clause, when Great Britain declared war to reverse the work of the French Revolution. Washington recognized that involving the United States in the conflict would be the height of folly, given the country's weakness and financial struggles. His declaration of neutrality infuriated the French, as did the Jay Treaty with England, which many in France, and the United States, for that matter, saw as an economic alliance with Britain. The French Revolutionary government began authorizing privateers to seize American ships, which they could do with impunity thanks to inability of the American government to protect its merchant fleets.³¹

³⁰ Knox to James Sever, July 18, 1794, Letters Sent by the War Department.

³¹ Alexander DeConde, *Entangling Alliances: Politics and Diplomacy Under George Washington* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1958),

With the cries against French depredations becoming incessant, a compromise allowed work to continue on three of the frigates.³² The War Department chose the vessels under construction in Philadelphia, Boston, and Baltimore – those closest to completion – and scrapped the other three.³³ John Barry, Samuel Nicholson, and Thomas Truxtun, the officers assigned to oversee construction of these vessels, retained their jobs. Their counterparts were not so lucky. The three remained on the roll as captains, but with no ships to command or duties to perform. Having already had to squeeze three ships from a tight-fisted Congress largely opposed to any naval establishment, the Washington Administration found no justification for keeping these men on the pay roll without suitable employment for them. Richard Dale, Silas Talbot and James Sever were released from the American navy in all but name.³⁴

Dale chose the merchant marine over being stranded on land with a useless title of captain.³⁵ He saw little value in being referred to as a naval officer with no time at sea, nor pay. Talbot accepted the post of Agent for Impressed Seamen, and set out on a frustrating and largely fruitless sojourn to the West Indies, where the British routinely seized American sailors for their own navy. While Talbot did manage to secure releases for a few victims of the British press who were obviously American citizens, he suffered continual frustration working with haughty and otherwise occupied British officials. Following that, he too spent

³² Act Pertaining to the Navy, United States Statutes at Large, An Act supplementary to an act entitled “An act to provide a Naval Armament,” April 20, 1796, *NDBW*, I: 150.

³³ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 62.

³⁴ War Office to Sever and Talbot, June 4, 1796, Letters Sent by the War Department (Dale’s notification is not included); War Office to Sever, January 18, 1797, Letters Sent by the War Department; Allen, *Naval War*, 49-50.

³⁵ James Fenimore Cooper, *Lives of Distinguished American Naval Officers, Volume I* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart, 1846): 258-259.

time in the merchant service.³⁶ Their decision is certainly understandable; at the time, neither man had any way of knowing when or if the government would ever require his services. Their time away from active duty in the military would, however, have serious implications in the future, and, in Talbot's case, nearly bring the navy to a halt at the moment of America's greatest success against France.

While Washington managed to convince Congress of the need to complete the naval force already begun, a separate government department devoted to naval affairs was out of the question, and oversight remained under the War Department. As long as Henry Knox remained Secretary of War, this arrangement worked well, for Knox was a capable and careful administrator.³⁷ His duties were also limited to overseeing the construction of a mere six, and later only three, frigates. There was no functional navy to man or to plan strategy or operations for. And so far as the construction of the frigates was concerned, Knox delegated most of the responsibility to the officers themselves. Barry, Truxtun, and Sever were appointed superintendents of their respective ships and charged with constructing, equipping, and manning the ships they were to command, though they maintained regular communication with the War Department.³⁸

³⁶ Fowler, *Silas Talbot*, 117-127.

³⁷ Mark Puls, *Henry Knox: Visionary General of the American Revolution* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) is an excellent recent biography of one of Washington's closest friends and political allies.

³⁸ Knox oversaw selecting the locations where the frigates would be constructed and initiated the process, and all three maintained regular communication with him while the ships were under construction. The details of initiating construction of the frigates can be found in Knox's extensive correspondence in *Letters Sent by the War Department*. It appears Alexander Hamilton, then Secretary of the Treasury, was involved in the process, as Knox sent him a detailed account of estimated costs early on and sent regular updates thereafter: Knox to Hamilton, April 21, 1794, *Letters Sent by the War Department*. For the delegation of authority, see: Knox, "Instructions to the Persons Appointed for Building the Frigates," *Letters Sent by the War Department*; and Barry, Dale, and Truxtun to the Secretary of War, December 18, 1794, in *American State Papers, Documents, Legislative and Executive of the Congress of the United States: Class VI, Naval Affairs* 4 volumes (Washington DC: Gales and Seaton, 1832), I: 8. For secondary accounts of the construction of the frigates, see Toll, *Six Frigates*, 44-62; and Paullin, *History of Naval Administration*, 89-96.

With Knox's retirement from public life in January of 1795, the civilian oversight of the new navy grew considerably weaker. Timothy Pickering served briefly as secretary of war, but his tenure was uneventful as far as naval matters were concerned. Finally, Washington's old friend James McHenry assumed the duties of secretary of war on January 27, 1796.³⁹ The choice proved unfortunate. McHenry lacked Knox's prestige and Pickering's administrative abilities. His most remarkable trait was what one historian dubs an "easygoing" manner that was ill-suited for the myriad responsibilities and powerful egos a man in his position faced.⁴⁰ Alexander Hamilton initially considered him "well-disposed, but unqualified," and later became convinced that "McHenry is wholly insufficient for his place, with the additional misfortune of not having himself the least suspicion of the fact!" In time, Hamilton became the de facto Secretary of War, operating the War Department himself as the head of the Army, a situation not wholly dissatisfying to a man of Hamilton's ambition.⁴¹ Despite McHenry's less than sterling record and qualifications, when John Adams assumed the presidency in 1797, he felt it best for the sake of national unity to retain Washington's cabinet, and McHenry remained at his post.⁴²

Meanwhile, the federal government's lethargy in building up a fleet to defend American commerce rankled Northern merchants. Increasing French depredations frustrated

³⁹ There is, to date, only one biography of McHenry: Bernard Steiner, *The Life and Correspondence of James McHenry: Secretary of War under Washington and Adams* (Cleveland, OH: The Burrows Brothers Company, 1909). Overly sympathetic to its subject, the work also functions as more of an edited volume of McHenry's writings than a true biography, relying almost exclusively on excerpts and quotations rather than analysis. The definitive study of his life remains to be written.

⁴⁰ Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 241-249, is generally more sympathetic to McHenry than most observers at the time and subsequent historians. While not a superb administrator, McHenry faced a daunting challenge that would have taxed the abilities of anyone.

⁴¹ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 7-9; Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 565-566.

⁴² Ferling *John Adams*, 333.

citizens of the nation's vital shipping centers: Baltimore, Boston, and coastal New England. That frustration mingled with patriotic fury when the XYZ Affair became public. American emissaries to France were approached immediately upon arrival by agents, codenamed X, Y, and Z, who informed them that substantial bribes would be required before any negotiations could begin. When Adams made these overtures public, war fever swept the nation.⁴³

Fueled by anger at French haughtiness and possibly to encourage greater action by their government, private citizens began taking up subscriptions to build warships which would then be put to the federal government's use.⁴⁴ Such generosity, while certainly helpful for a country seeking to build a navy from scratch in wartime, posed a threat to the ideal of civilian control. Washington, Knox, and Hamilton had tried desperately to rid themselves of the militia system specifically because localized forces diminished central control, and the potential that the towns, and especially the subscribers, who provided these ships would also want to dictate their use must have given pause to the new president, particularly since he had no Navy Department and an already overworked and unreliable secretary of war at the time.⁴⁵ Fortunately, the subscribers proved willing to let their government use the ships as it wished, though they did exert some influence over the captains assigned to "their" vessels.⁴⁶

For example, the citizens of Philadelphia seem to have been instrumental in Stephen Decatur

⁴³ For a concise summary of the so-called "XYZ Affair," see: William Stinchcombe, *The XYZ Affair*, (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1980); Ferling, *John Adams*, 352-353; and Allen, *Naval War with France*, 23-27.

⁴⁴ The story of the subscription warships is ably recounted in Frederick Leiner, *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ For the debate over the militia and the accompanying dispute over central versus state control, see Kohn, *Eagle and Sword*, 128-138.

⁴⁶ On merchant influence in officer assignments, see Anderson, "John Adams," 127.

Sr. being assigned to the ship built by their subscriptions, also named *Philadelphia*. Decatur proved a fine choice, but the precedent was problematic nonetheless.⁴⁷

The subscription warships formed only a part of naval expansion. With the nation clamoring for war, Adams finally enjoyed widespread public support and the political capital to build up the navy. The federal government set about purchasing merchant vessels for conversion into warships.⁴⁸ The task of overseeing all this, along with the final stages of construction on the three frigates, proved too much for the Secretary of War. McHenry's obvious inability and the growing size and responsibility of the navy made it imperative that Congress create a Navy Department, and it finally did so in 1798. Once again, however, Congress left the exact prerogatives and powers of the head of the department vague. It was careful to note that the secretary's principal duty was to execute orders given him by the president, and otherwise transferred any powers over naval matters once held by the Secretary of War to him. It was assumed, though never explicitly stated, that naval officers would be subject to the orders of the secretary of the navy, but the Act offered no guidance on the exact boundaries of the captains' authority, or on any practical matters relating to the oversight of the officer corps. These matters were left for the first Secretary to work out on his own, and the boundaries of civilian control fluctuated with each new secretary of the navy.⁴⁹

Adams faced a daunting task finding someone to accept the post of civilian head of the navy. The federal government had little to offer talented men, and any capable secretary

⁴⁷ Leiner, *Millions for Defense*,

⁴⁸ Paullin, *History of Naval Administration*, 109-110.

⁴⁹ "An act to establish an executive department, to be denominated the Department of the Navy," April 30, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 59-60

could certainly make far more money in private business. Adams' first choice, George Cabot, declined, citing his own lack of qualification, and also his "life of indolence" for the previous two decades, which he felt certain rendered him physically unfit for the demanding workload of a cabinet officer. He did, however, offer up an assessment of the qualities the young republic needed in its first Secretary. Besides the obvious need for someone holding "considerable knowledge of maritime affairs," the secretary of the navy should possess considerable knowledge "of the human heart," in order to effectively evaluate, motivate, and maintain his officer corps.⁵⁰ For all his doubts about his own fitness for the job, Cabot proved remarkably prescient. The man eventually chosen struggled with the personalities, foibles, and stubbornness of his officers far more than he did with strategy, procurement, or seamanship.

Rebuffed, the president then offered the job to merchant Benjamin Stoddert of Georgetown. Though not the man most coveted for the job, few could have questioned Stoddert's qualifications. A native of Maryland, he enjoyed a modestly successful merchant career before the Revolution, and was commissioned as a captain in the Continental Army during the war, where he suffered a severe wound at the battle of Brandywine before honing his administrative skills as secretary for the Congressional Board of War. Throughout the conflict, the young Marylander received near universal praise, with one superior gushing that "all...acknowledge the greatest merit and bravery of Captain Stoddert. I cannot say enough in his favor; he deserves the esteem of his country." His postwar mercantile career proved successful, but land speculation cut deeply into his finances, a fate he shared with many

⁵⁰ Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 102-103.

aspiring Americans in the years after independence.⁵¹ It seems the only person ill at ease with Stoddert's nomination was Stoddert himself. "I hate office – I have no desire for fancied or real importance," he complained to one friend, and after acquiescing to Adams' offer, he lamented that "in conferring the appointment of secretary of the navy upon me, the president could not also confer the knowledge necessary for the secretary of the navy to possess, to make him most useful to his country."⁵²

The self-doubts and insecurities that Stoddert brought to the capital dissipated as he grew more confident in his abilities to perform the duties of his office, but Stoddert always relied heavily on subordinates to manage naval affairs. In part, this was an unavoidable outgrowth of communications in the era. The great distances and slow mail service meant that "Stoddert...had to trust the local navy agent and vessel commander. Rarely was there a second opinion to guide the secretary."⁵³ Moreover, the Navy Department had no apparatus for recruiting, training, or evaluating its officers in its early years, and all these tasks fell, by necessity, to the officer corps itself. If Stoddert was dependent on subordinates, he also expected peak performance from those he trusted, and seldom hesitated to sharply reprove those who failed to measure up. In his life prior to government service, Stoddert could be exceedingly blunt with merchant captains who failed to meet his expectations. In words that he would echo many times as secretary of the navy, he expressed "very great mortification and surprise, that your ship still remains in the country" to a lackadaisical merchant captain,

⁵¹ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 10-14, quote on "merit and bravery" of Stoddert on page 11; Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 103-104.

⁵² Stoddert to Stephen Higginson, July 12, 1798, in *NDQW*, I: 198-199.

⁵³ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 22-23.

and delivered a stinging rebuke to an associate for mutual financial loss that, he claimed, “proceeded from...your failure in your engagements.”⁵⁴

But if Stoddert expected merchant captains in his employ to perform well, he also trusted them with substantial responsibility. Merchant captains enjoyed a great deal of autonomy on cruises and even over their ships while in port. They routinely chose their own officers, with mixed results. One captain, days before his ship was to sail, still had not seen the man selected to be his first mate, and was contemplating going into town and finding a new second in command at the last moment before sailing on a months-long cruise.⁵⁵ And life in merchant shipping did little to hone an officer’s sense of subordination to authority. Men might command their own independent vessel as young as twenty-one. And a good captain enjoyed tremendous latitude in his actions while cruising.⁵⁶ That said, merchant captains, like their counterparts in the navy, still had to maintain careful logbooks and keep detailed records of their dealings to present to owners. Their autonomy at sea was difficult to check, given communications of the era, but when mercantile firms owned their cargo, ship, or both, they were expected to account to the ship owner for all their activities once they returned to port. Captains also carried the responsibility for their cargo, often enjoying substantial discretion in negotiating its sale, but also facing the grim possibility of being held accountable for its loss.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Stoddert to Captain Johns, October 16, 1784, Benjamin Stoddert Papers, Manuscript Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC, underlining in the original.

⁵⁵ June 21, 1802, Jones and Clark Papers, Box 2, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

⁵⁶ John M. Leary to Edward Preble, December, 1793, Edward Preble Papers, Box 21, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

⁵⁷ Truxtun to A. and J. Caldwell, Merchants, April 21, 1780, Thomas Truxtun Correspondence, Box 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

Two crucial, and somewhat interrelated, factors separated merchant captains from naval officers. Merchants carried heavy responsibilities for the financial state of their ships and cargoes, but not as much for their personal honor. In determining to set out on another voyage to Canton, Samuel Shaw commented that “at the worst, I can lose only my time.”⁵⁸ For an officer of the United States Navy, the loss of honor or esteem was the greatest threat, worse even than loss of life. But that sense of honor carried over to his country once a man donned the uniform of the U.S. Navy, at least in theory. The best officers understood that they carried a heavy responsibility for their nation’s reputation, and those who earned Stoddert’s approbation were those determined to reflect honorably on the United States. In the aftermath of Maley’s disastrous command of the *Experiment*, Richard Dale (who had by then returned to the navy) commented to Stoddert that, although Maley was a capable enough seaman, he was “a very unfit person to command a vessel of any description in the Navy of the United States.” “A man may be a very good seaman,” he added, “and be qualified to command a merchant vessel, but at the same time be very unfit to command in the Navy.”⁵⁹ Carrying the burden of a nation’s standing in the eyes of Europe’s powers required a daring and sense of duty far beyond the basic skills needed to sail a cargo across the ocean. Stoddert’s foremost task was to separate those mentally capable of being a naval officers from the mere “good seamen.”

Having dealt with merchant captains for years, Stoddert was fully prepared to delegate substantial authority to his captains once he assumed the office of secretary of the

⁵⁸ Samuel Shaw to Nathaniel Shaw, December 24, 1783, Samuel Shaw Papers, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington’s Crossing, PA.

⁵⁹ Dale to Stoddert, September 28, 1800, in *NDQW*, VI: 389-390. Dale, it should be noted, had been restored to the navy by the time he wrote this.

navy. Stoddert's first priority, remained that his officers be zealous in advancing the infant navy's reputation, and he repeatedly stated his desire to purge those who failed to measure up. "Our navy at this time when its character is to form, ought to be commanded by men who, not satisfied with escaping censure, will be unhappy if they do not receive and merit praise," he commented to Adams, adding that "I hope and I believe that there are several such men in the service."⁶⁰ Disgrace worthy of removal was not limited to cowardice in battle or neglect of duty either. Stoddert showed no patience with captains who dallied in getting to sea over difficulties he considered surmountable. Annoyed that one of his ships remained in port long after it should have sailed, despite multiple warnings, Stoddert complained that "I have always entertained an opinion that men who suffer trifling difficulties to interpose between them and their duty are unfit for public service. It shall be my endeavor to rid our navy of such men." Stoddert felt inclined to assume the worst when a captain failed to get to sea in a timely fashion. Although he acknowledged to Adams that he was unsure what circumstances kept Christopher Perry from sailing in distant Newport, the delay still diminished his trust in the captain. "Men of real merit," he commented "always know how to get over difficulties."⁶¹ He reiterated the same idea to Josiah Parker later, complaining that the country, "had better have no navy than have it commanded by indifferent men, and it shall be my study to rid the service of such men." The consequences of timidity or sloth among the officer corps weighed heavily on his mind; the tiny fleet of a new and relatively weak nation depended on the character of its leadership to deter attack and generate respect for the United States. Officers of "zeal and spirit" might be able to "make

⁶⁰ Stoddert to Adams, April 19, 1799, in *NDQW*, III: 66-67.

⁶¹ Stoddert to Stephen Higginson, August 28, 1798, in *NDQW*, I: 350 Stoddert to Adams, May 28, 1799, *NDQW* III: 264-265.

up for want of great force by great activity.” But if not “we had better burn our ships, and commence a navy at some future time when our citizens have more spirit.”⁶² The first secretary felt a “determination to honor and reward, by promotion...the meritorious officers,” but he was equally committed to “rid the service of men who disgrace it.”⁶³

His hopes for a high quality officer corps were challenged by the massive expansion prompted by the Quasi War with France. Christopher McKee estimates that the corps under Stoddert ballooned from the three remaining captains to over 700 officers in the four years the United States was at war with France.⁶⁴ There were two means for Stoddert to choose the officers who could lead America’s navy in the aggressive manner he desired. One was to select from among a host of applications himself. Practical seamanship counted for surprisingly little. Stoddert, and his successors, for that matter, did not care if an applicant had never left shore or even seen the ocean. He depended on the current officers to train newcomers. Far more important were an applicant’s credentials as “sprightly young men of good education, good character, and good connections.”⁶⁵ Stoddert wanted not only men who were “sprightly” and industrious, but who also exhibited staunch physical courage. “The captains should possess...real bravery,” he commented to Alexander Hamilton, adding to another correspondent that “bravery is a quality not to be dispensed with in the officers.

⁶² Stoddert to Stephen Higginson, August 28, 1798, in *NDQW*, I: 350.

⁶³ Circular to captains of the U.S. Navy from the Secretary of the Navy, June 27, 1799, in *NDQW*, III: 420-421.

⁶⁴ McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 38. The following discussion of the selection, promotion, and purging of officers draws heavily from this monumental work.

⁶⁵ Stoddert to Moses Tryon, February 7, 1799, quoted in McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 46.

Like charity, it covers a great many defects.”⁶⁶ In choosing from among a host of applicants which potential midshipmen best fit these criteria, Stoddert relied heavily on letters of recommendation from prominent citizens who knew the applicant personally. There was one class of persons whose judgment in recommending officers he never questioned: officers themselves.

With his senior officers already in place, Stoddert looked to them to fill the ranks by appointing their own subordinates.⁶⁷ “I wish you would select, and nominate to me, suitable characters for your officers,” he wrote to one man, stipulating only that “men of courage, abilities, and patriotism, and such men only” be added to the ranks of “our infant Navy.”⁶⁸ While a captain’s appointment of junior officers had to be formally confirmed later, in practice the secretary rubber-stamped any acting commissions granted by his captains, and openly told his officers that such would be his practice.⁶⁹

Beyond merely appointing them, he also looked to captains to maintain the quality of the officer corps, pressing them to severely punish those who merited it while also giving him detailed reports of those ready to move up in rank. He even encouraged Silas Talbot to bypass him and go directly to the president with the names of those the captain wanted appointed as midshipmen, assuring him that Adams would readily approve all recommendations. Stoddert also proved willing to delegate the task of pruning the officer

⁶⁶ Stoddert to Hamilton, January 1, 1799; quoted in McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 47; Stoddert to Robert Oliver, October 15, 1798, Miscellaneous Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy, M209, National Archives, Washington DC.

⁶⁷ McKee notes that it would have been difficult for Stoddert to do otherwise, as the speed with which the navy needed to mobilize to meet the immediate threat posed by privateers precluded a lengthy process of sorting through applications. See McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 48-53.

⁶⁸ Stoddert, to Christopher Perry, September 28, 1798, in *NDQW*, I: 463

⁶⁹ Stoddert to Nicholson, July 6, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 172.

corps to his most senior commanders. In the same letter to Silas Talbot, Stoddert urged him to try everything in his power to induce a few “unworthy” lieutenants to resign.⁷⁰ Still, Stoddert felt strongly that meritorious officers should join with him in nudging out their peers who failed to measure up. In an enclosed missive to Talbot’s apparently frustrated subordinates, Stoddert reiterated his theme of acting “to rid the service of them who disgrace it” this time urging that it was “the duty of all the other officers” to do so.⁷¹ Writing to a subordinate to urge his immediate resignation, Alexander Murray cited Stoddert’s opinion as corresponding with his own, but also made it clear that the secretary developed his view that the man should be removed based on Murray’s report.⁷² But Stoddert also proved willing to defer to his officer corps when they left men in place that he felt the service would be better off without. When a court-martial acquitted a young lieutenant of sleeping on duty, Stoddert clearly believed that the evidence was sufficient to cashier him, but chose not to reject the court’s findings.⁷³

Even ashore, Stoddert was in so sense a micromanager, and he tended to allow captains substantial leeway in construction and outfitting of their ships. He did, however, expect careful returns on all expenses, and strictly ordered captains to provide them.⁷⁴ Like Knox, Stoddert believed that the men who commanded ships at sea knew best to supervise

⁷⁰ Stoddert to Silas Talbot, May 29, 1799, in *NDQW*, III: 274-275.

⁷¹ Stoddert to Henry Knox, Nathaniel Bosworth & Others, Midshipmen U.S. Navy on board the U.S. Frigate *Constitution*, May 29, 1799, in *NDQW*, III, 275.

⁷² Alexander Murray to Lieutenant Jeremiah Barton, May 5, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 479-480; also note Murray to Barton, March 17, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 316

⁷³ Stoddert to Lieutenant Blake Cordis, September 17, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 198-199.

⁷⁴ Stoddert to John Rodgers, July 29, 1799, Rodgers Family Papers, LOC Collection, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington DC; Stoddert to William Bainbridge, September 7, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 379-380.

their construction, and the autonomy he allowed naval officers was little different from that given merchant captains, who also often oversaw the outfitting and sometimes the construction of their vessels, and who also, as noted earlier, were expected to provide detailed reports of their activities. Like all his predecessors at the War Department, Stoddert faced a daunting workload with a limited staff, making delegation even more of a necessity than the communications of the era already dictated.⁷⁵ He could even be flexible on naval regulations when he felt circumstances dictated, as when he told one captain that, although regulations prohibited the employment of boys on board ships, he would allow the officer to do so anyway, on the grounds that “your opinion...corresponds entirely to my own.”⁷⁶

The area where Stoddert maintained his authority to the greatest degree was in ship movements and overall naval strategy. Stoddert formulated a plan for waging the war against France, and he oversaw the movements of the Navy with this broader view in mind.⁷⁷ Yet he by no means shut his officers out entirely in this realm either. He was willing, at times, to grant captains discretion on where they sailed.⁷⁸ That the leeway he granted them came in part from his own inclinations and not solely from pressure brought to bear by the officer corps can be seen in Alexander Murray’s response to his orders. Murray felt honored by the “extensive and unconfined latitude,” he enjoyed “leaving me at large to act as my

⁷⁵ For the composition of the Navy Department staff in this era, see: McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 4-27.

⁷⁶ Stoddert to Stephen Decatur Sr., June 21, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 127. See also, Stoddert to Sever, July 6, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 172-173.

⁷⁷ The best source for Stoddert’s strategic thinking in the Quasi War is Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*. See also, Robert Jones, “The Naval Thought and Policy of Benjamin Stoddert,” *American Neptune* 24 (January 1964), 61-69.

⁷⁸ Stoddert to Hugh Campbell, October 13, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 528-529; Stoddert to Barry, July 11, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 189-191; Stoddert to Nicholson, December 5, 1798, *NDQW*, II: 65.

judgment shall dictate.” The freedom granted Murray had a salutary effect, with the captain moved to assure his superior “I will not disgrace your confidence,” a vow he reaffirmed later with a promise to “achieve something of moment that will meet with your approbation.”⁷⁹ Early in the war, Stoddert even sought Truxtun’s advice on “the manner of employing our force”.⁸⁰ When Stoddert considered revising the naval regulations originally penned by James McHenry, he assigned Barry, Truxtun, Dale, Stephen Decatur Sr., and Thomas Tingey to recommend new regulations.⁸¹

Stoddert’s desire to grant his captains discretion to utilize their expertise and respond quickly to changing events may have stemmed in part from his wish that the president treat cabinet officers in a similar fashion. Adams took a keen interest in naval affairs, and Stoddert never acted entirely out of the president’s oversight.⁸² The two kept up extensive correspondence throughout the war, in addition to regular face-to-face meetings to discuss the optimal use of America’s navy. On one occasion, Adams inserted himself directly into the use of the navy, ordering the *Merrimack* to sail and notifying Stoddert afterwards, hinting in the letter of his displeasure at the number of vessels still in port.⁸³

If Stoddert ever complained of the president’s meddling in naval affairs, no record of it remains, even when Adams called on Stoddert’s already overworked staff to locate and

⁷⁹ Murray to Stoddert, August 5, and August 11, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 30-31; 60-61

⁸⁰ Stoddert to Truxtun, *NDQW*, II: 5.

⁸¹ Stoddert to Campbell, September 21, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 434; Stoddert to Barry, November 29, 1798, *NDQW*, II: 55-56. It is unclear if these men ever got around to fulfilling this request. New regulations were issued in 1802. See chapter 4.

⁸² Anderson, “John Adams,” 120-132 discusses Adams’ relationship with Stoddert, and the degree of autonomy the president granted his subordinate.

⁸³ Adams to Stoddert, May 31, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 285.

catalogue the “best writings in Dutch, Spanish, French, and especially English” on naval matters and naval biographies – and delegated to the department the task of applying to Congress for the funds to complete the project.⁸⁴ Throughout his tenure, Stoddert regularly cited the president’s wishes in his instructions to officers, indicating the two routinely consulted verbally on naval affairs in addition to their letters. And Adams never became overwhelming in his oversight of the navy, allowing Stoddert a fair measure of autonomy in the use of his ships. The episode with the *Merrimack* was the exception, and if it was intended to prod the navy into getting ships to sea faster, it apparently worked to the commander-in-chief’s satisfaction. In fact, given Stoddert’s admission of insecurity in his post, there are indications that the level of involvement by the president may not have been entirely Adams’ doing. Stoddert wrote to Adams on one occasion begging pardon for his failure to communicate more regularly, and later apologetically informed the president that officers were resigning in such numbers as to make it impossible for him to clear every new appointment with Adams before sending them out.⁸⁵ There is no record of Adams complaining about either practice, either before or after the letters from Stoddert. Later, when Silas Talbot needed additional officers before sailing with the *Constitution*, Stoddert sent him to meet with Adams, carrying a list of possible candidates to fill the vacancies, flattering the president with assurances that “you sir can judge better than I” those that would make the best officers.⁸⁶ But even if he at times felt uncertain in his role as secretary of the navy, Stoddert still felt comfortable enough to give forthright advice to Adams, even when he

⁸⁴ Adams to Stoddert, March 31, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 363.

⁸⁵ Stoddert to Adams, May 25, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 252-253; Stoddert to Adams, June 25, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 405.

⁸⁶ Stoddert to Adams, May 30, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 280.

it involved recommending against the president's wishes.⁸⁷ Overall, the two seem to have enjoyed a positive working relationship, and Stoddert remained completely loyal to the president even when the rest of his cabinet conspired against him.⁸⁸

Given wide latitude in performing their duties and routinely consulted on all matters of naval governance, it should come as no surprise that many officers "shirked" in their submission to civilian oversight.⁸⁹ Some, notably Alexander Murray, scrupulously kept the secretary apprised of all their activities and constantly reaffirmed their subordinate status.⁹⁰ Others proved less restrained, treating orders as guidelines, greatly overestimating their own authority, and putting personal squabbles and concerns about honor and status ahead of the needs of the navy. In addition to his duties overseeing the purchase and construction of ships, manning and equipping the navy, and keeping Congress apprised of his activities, Stoddert spent a significant portion of his time and energy settling disputes between officers and trying to sooth bruised egos.

Stoddert's constant reminders to act aggressively did not always yield positive results either. A zealous desire to win laurels for oneself and the country could be a double-edged sword, as many captains proved less careful than Adams would have liked in determining whether a ship was from a neutral nation before seizing it.⁹¹ "Mistakes of this kind" Stoddert

⁸⁷ Stoddert to Adams, August 17, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 87-88.

⁸⁸ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*,

⁸⁹ Peter Feaver, *Armed Servants: Agency, Oversight, and Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 60. See chapter 1 for a discussion of Feaver's "working" and "shirking."

⁹⁰ Murray wrote to Stoddert that he considered it his "duty to give you a particular detail of all my transactions," and kept up a frequent correspondence apprising the Secretary of his activities. Murray to Stoddert, November 9, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 373-374

⁹¹ Stoddert, "Circular Instructions to the Captains and Commanders of Vessels in the Service of the United States," March 12, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 447.

complained, “will lead us into quarrels with all the world.” Having entrusted great authority to his officer corps, Stoddert felt the need to rein them in based on repeated errors on this score, reminding them that captains “must be governed by laws, and by their instructions founded on laws.” Even at sea, a captain could not consider himself law – though he could come close with his own crew – but must remember that his duties were to the president. Furthermore, Stoddert expressed great displeasure at officers writing to friends and even to newspapers with commentary on the American war effort and executive management of the navy. Doing so clearly violated the duty of a military officer to his government, provided the enemy with valuable information, and generally proved “injurious not only to the public interest, but to the officers themselves.”⁹² The practice of writing to newspapers seems to have ended once Stoddert directed his captains to cease doing so, though he continued to receive unsolicited advice from officers on a variety of matters for his entire tenure.⁹³

But the action that elicited the most anger, by far, from Stoddert was captains returning home early from cruises. This remained a constant problem throughout the war. Stoddert grouched to one correspondent that if it had “not been for the unlucky return of so many of our vessels, there would be nothing to regret in the conduct of our navy.”⁹⁴ John Barry, the senior captain and Revolutionary War hero, ranked among the worst offenders. Stoddert was “mortified” that Barry neglected a key part of his instructions in where to sail,

⁹² Stoddert to Talbot, January 23, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 120-121. Although addressed to Talbot, Stoddert urged him to spread the word to his peers that both practices met with Adams’ disapproval, and the tone and structure of the missive indicates it was a form letter sent to various commanders, with only Talbot’s copy making it into the *NDQW* collection.

⁹³ On the practice of writing newspapers ending after this letter, see Anderson, “John Adams,” 128. For examples of unsolicited advice, see Truxtun to Stoddert, *NDQW*, II: 516-517; Murray to Stoddert, *NDQW*, IV: 229-230.

⁹⁴ Stoddert to Tingey, June 22, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 384. See also: Tingey to Stoddert, February 18, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 366-368.

cut short his cruise, and after his return lingered in port far longer than the secretary would have liked. Barry also proved lax in maintaining communication with the Navy Department, and his continued sloth in getting to sea and engaging the enemy prompted Stoddert to remind him to “set an example of activity and enterprise” for younger officers, lest they too begin displaying similar lethargy in performing their duty.⁹⁵ Barry’s leisurely attitude towards his responsibilities in the Quasi War stands in stark contrast to his aggressive Revolutionary War record, baffling observers then and later. Michael Palmer concludes that Barry’s age had stripped him of the vigor he displayed during the previous war.⁹⁶ At the time, Barry’s contemporaries seem to have agreed, with Stoddert considering him “too infirm for service,” and complaining to Alexander Hamilton that he was “old and infirm.”⁹⁷ Thomas Tingey somewhat less tactfully referred to him as “an old wife,” in private conversation.⁹⁸

If his highest-ranking captain caused him grief, the second on the list was even worse. Unlike Barry, Samuel Nicholson possessed a spotty Revolutionary War record.⁹⁹ His career in the Quasi War, on the other hand, proved far more consistent; his every voyage was an unmitigated disaster. Nicholson repeatedly failed to make any effort at discerning the

⁹⁵ Stoddert to Adams, April 6, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 24-25; Stoddert to Barry, June 17, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 349; Stoddert to Barry, September 20, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 211; Stoddert to Barry, October 1, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 241-242.

⁹⁶ Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*, 35-44.

⁹⁷ Stoddert to Talbot, May 2, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 120-121; Stoddert to Alexander Hamilton, February 7, 1799, *Alexander Hamilton Papers*, XXII: 468-469; Stoddert to Hamilton, May 3, 1799, *Alexander Hamilton Papers*, XXIII: 96-98.

⁹⁸ Truxtun to Charles Biddle, October 24, 1801, Truxtun-Biddle Letters, HSP. Truxtun claimed that Tingey had confided this view to him, and he seems to have agreed whole-heartedly, but then he was also comparing Barry’s abilities as a naval officer to his own, and no one could have expected a favorable treatment in such a letter.

⁹⁹ Palmer, *Stoddert’s War*, 44-46.

national origin of the ships he seized, to the point that Stoddert even toyed with having him arrested after one particularly egregious violation of neutrality.¹⁰⁰ If Nicholson's only offense had been lack of care in seizing vessels, that would have been frustrating enough, but he also displayed a tendency to return early from cruises and dallied in setting sail again even after he received orders to do so.¹⁰¹ Moreover, he presumptuously ordered a subordinate captain to join his squadron, despite orders to the contrary from Stoddert.¹⁰² But here Stoddert's earlier zeal for ridding the service of incompetents clashed with his humanity, as he realized that Nicholson's family suffered from a heavy load of debt and would be impoverished if their breadwinner lost his captain's salary, to say nothing of the humiliation they would suffer if he were arrested or cashiered. So, rather than fire his second-ranking officer, Stoddert stationed him where he could do no harm, granting him shore duty

¹⁰⁰ Stoddert to Stephen Higginson, March 26, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 519-520.

¹⁰¹ Stoddert to Nicholson, October 5, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 493; Stoddert initially wrote this very harsh letter but then crossed it out, presumably meaning he never sent it. He did, however, send Adams a letter expressing his disgust with Nicholson's conduct: Stoddert to Adams, October 5, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 495, and finally sent Nicholson a sharp letter ordering him to return to sea immediately: Stoddert to Nicholson, October 8, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 504.

¹⁰² Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 60. The practice of an officer countermanding the orders of the civilian government to one of his subordinates was not without precedent. The Royal Navy required that "when an inferior officer of any degree happens to meet with a superior or senior officer, either at sea or in port, he is to shew to the superior, the orders he is under, and notwithstanding, is to obey such other or further orders he may receive from the superior or senior officer, for his majesty's service; though the same may be repugnant to those already had. But for this, the superior is to account to the Board of Admiralty, as before mentioned, and it answerable for the consequences." Nicholson's actions, in and of themselves, would have been considered acceptable practice in the British Navy. However, the crucial point is that an officer who took such a course needed a valid justification for doing so, and Nicholson certainly had none. Palmer speculates that he was catering to the desires of wealthy merchants, who promised him a share of a freight of money in return for transporting it back to the United States. This, clearly, would not have constituted a legitimate "account" before the Navy Department, had Nicholson's actions been formally investigated. See, John Cowley, *The Sailor's Companion and Merchantman's Convoy...* (London: Printed for T. Cooper, 1740), Society of the Cincinnati Museum, Washington DC

supervising ship construction on the pretext that he had been separated from his family for so long while at sea (although not as long as his orders actually called for).¹⁰³

Isaac Philips was not so lucky. He committed the opposite mistake; where Nicholson was too quick to act against another nation's vessels, Philips displayed too much timidity, and received no leniency whatsoever from Stoddert. On November 16, 1798, while cruising off Havana in the *Baltimore*, Phillips encountered a Royal Navy squadron, under the command of Captain John Loring. Loring hailed Phillips and asked him to come on board his flagship, the *Carnatic*. With the two countries at peace, and fighting a common enemy, Phillips probably saw nothing amiss in this and readily allowed British messengers to row him across to the *Carnatic*. Any hopes he had of a friendly encounter vanished once he arrived on board. Loring, a native of America, had been a Loyalist and prisoner of war during the American Revolution, joining the Royal Navy as soon as he obtained his parole. His hostility to his native country hung over all that followed. Although Phillips was clearly a commissioned officer in the United States' Navy and the *Baltimore* a government ship, Loring dismissively asked "who is Ben Stoddert" and said that "the name was new to him." Loring made it painfully obvious that he felt not the least concern for whether the United States even had a navy, let alone whether the ship before him was part of such, and announced that he would be taking desperately needed seamen for his own ship from among Phillips' crew. Whatever verbal protests the American officer might have made fell on deaf ears, and Phillips meekly returned to his own ship and obeyed British orders to assemble his

¹⁰³ Stoddert to Higginson, March 26, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 519-520; Stoddert to Decatur, May 31, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 285-286; Stoddert to Adams, May 15, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 185; Stoddert to Nicholson, May 15, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 186.

crew and hand over his muster role. He watched in dismay as Loring's men carried off fifty-five tars, almost a third of the *Baltimore's* crew.¹⁰⁴

Perhaps reflecting on the enormity of his actions afterwards, Loring did send fifty of the seamen back the following day. This small token made it easier for Phillips to sail his ship back to the United States, but did him no good beyond that. Stoddert exploded when he read the report, telling his soon to be unemployed captain that "it is impossible to find an excuse for...your tame submission to the orders of a British lieutenant, on board your own ship." It was bad enough that Phillips failed to put up any kind of defense against being boarded, "but you descended further, and actually obeyed his orders to have all hands called, and to give him a list of their names." For such "degrading" conduct, Adams summarily dismissed Phillips from the service, and revoked his commission as an officer.¹⁰⁵ Although the power to dismiss an officer rested solely with the president, Adams acted on Stoddert's recommendation.¹⁰⁶ A spirited letter from Phillips defending his conduct got no sympathy from the secretary. Even if he lacked the force to prevent the British from taking his men, Stoddert informed him, Phillips should have maintained a vigorous defense and, if defeated, struck his flag and surrendered his ship as well as his crew.¹⁰⁷ To obey the dictates of another nation's officers, as he would have to a superior American captain was unforgivable.

¹⁰⁴ Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 60-63; U.S. Secretary of State to British Minister and Envoy Extraordinary to the United States, December 31, 1798, in *NDQW*, II: 29-30; Isaac Phillips to Stoddert, February, 11, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 30-32.

¹⁰⁵ Stoddert to Phillips, January 10, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 30.

¹⁰⁶ Stoddert made this point perfectly plain in a later letter, telling a correspondent "if (Phillips) has been hardly dealt with I am to blame, not the president, who judged from my representation." Stoddert to Richard Caton, January 24, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 276-277.

¹⁰⁷ Stoddert to Phillips, February 20, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 32-34.

Despite the obvious hopelessness of his case, Phillips continued to campaign for his old job, or at least to punish Stoddert and Adams for dismissing him. He enticed several of his subordinates on the *Baltimore* to resign in protest to his dismissal. Although this delayed the ship sailing again, Stoddert shed no tears at their loss.¹⁰⁸ The example made of Phillips apparently had a salutary effect. When a British officer came aboard the *Ganges* in February of the following year, Captain Thomas Tingey boldly informed him that he would not muster his crew, as he “considered all my crew Americans by birth or adoption.” Furthermore, Tingey’s men could not produce individual protections commonly carried by American seamen at the time, because their protection was the American flag flying from atop the vessel. Just in case his crew felt any doubt as to their safety, Tingey called all hands on deck after the British left, and reiterated that not a one of them would be taken unless the British first slew him in combat. He received a rousing three cheers from his crew and praise from the president.¹⁰⁹

While Tingey’s boldness impressed the secretary, his favorite among his officers was Thomas Truxtun, supposedly the least qualified of the initial six captains. Truxtun’s lack of service in the Continental Navy, something he considered an asset, did not stop him from becoming the most celebrated hero of the entire Quasi-War. Truxtun, who also enjoyed a fairly close personal relationship with Stoddert, embodied his civilian superior’s ideal of a naval officer. He served his country not out of any pecuniary interest, but to perform great deeds that would outlive him. “Does any man enter into (naval service) for the sake of

¹⁰⁸ Stoddert to Truxtun, February 6, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 314-315.

¹⁰⁹ Tingey to the *Norfolk Herald*, February 28, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 412-413; Stoddert to Tingey, March 7, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 429-430. Timidity in the face of British impressment remained an issue, however. Two years later, Truxtun placed an officer under arrest for allowing just one of his men to be taken. Truxtun to Robert Rosseter, January 20, 1801, Thomas Truxtun Records, Volume 4, Letterbook, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA

subsistence,” he rhetorically inquired of his brother officer, Richard Dale. The answer, to Truxtun, was perfectly self-evident: “are not glory and fame the grand incentives?”¹¹⁰ He possessed tremendous courage in battle and zeal in pursuing the enemy. In part, this was a function of his desire for personal fame and honor, but he also took his duty to his profession very seriously. Truxtun had been openly contemptuous of the Continental Navy during his stint as a privateer, and he was determined to insure that his country’s new naval force commanded the respect of Europe.¹¹¹ That meant building the navy on the British model, and Truxtun sought to emulate the Royal Navy in establishing an American tradition at sea.¹¹²

Emulating Royal Navy discipline, however, did not always sit well with his crew. He began his first cruise by facing a potential mutiny, and the angry seamen only relented after being threatened with court-martial and execution.¹¹³ Tellingly, he learned of the mutinous plotting from Stoddert, who forwarded him a letter sent by anonymous members of the *Constellation*’s crew to Congress. The Speaker of the House had no interest in intervening between a naval officer and his sailors, and forwarded the message to Stoddert, who likewise preferred to let Truxtun handle the matter himself.¹¹⁴ At the time, and for decades

¹¹⁰ Truxtun to Dale, August 3, 1805, quoted in Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 103

¹¹¹ Truxtun famously aroused the ire of John Paul Jones during his stint as a privateer when he failed to lower his ship’s pennant before a ship of the Continental Navy, as per the orders of Congress. Jones sent messengers to rebuke Truxtun’s arrogance, but they were ignored. Only when Jones sent over one of his lieutenants did Truxtun finally comply. Despite his clear violation of Congressional directives, Truxtun was never reprimanded, and the incident had obviously been forgotten by the time he was named one of the initial six captains, but it demonstrates the contempt he felt for his country’s first navy. See Thomas, *Sailor, Hero, Father of the American navy*; and Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 39-42

¹¹² Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 127.

¹¹³ “Captain Truxtun concerning mutinous assemblies on board U.S. Frigate *Constellation*,” July 2, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 156-158

¹¹⁴ Stoddert to Truxtun, July 2, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 158

afterwards, captains faced almost no interference whatsoever from civilian authorities on the treatment of their crews, and seamen had practically no recourse, other than desertion, for having their grievances addressed beyond an appeal to the captain of their ship.¹¹⁵

Truxtun squelched any talk of mutiny among his crew fairly easily, but he took his oversight of the subordinate officers entrusted to his care much more seriously. Truxtun complained endlessly of the lazy, intemperate, and often insubordinate set of officers he took on his first cruise, and he expressed the view that the navy's only hope for producing a laudable group of leaders was to "purge well at first."¹¹⁶ Still, at sea he could hardly dispense with the only officer corps he possessed, though he continuously remonstrated them for their substandard performance. He considered the "improper behavior" exhibited by his subordinates "hitherto...unprecedented in naval discipline."¹¹⁷ In speaking to one lieutenant, he cited the infancy of his country's naval service in urging his lieutenants not to be "idle and indifferent spectators of what is going on," but should instead display a "minute attention to duty."¹¹⁸ The recipient of this letter, Lieutenant Cowper, apparently responded by accusing Truxtun of making no allowance for his inexperience. Truxtun summarily dismissed this complaint, calling it a "heinous crime indeed," to neglect any and every chance to develop the experience necessary for the performance of his duty.¹¹⁹ Truxtun continued to express

¹¹⁵ For the life of ordinary seamen in this era, see Paul Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004); James Valle, *Rocks and Shoals: Order and Discipline in the Old Navy, 1800-1861* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980).

¹¹⁶ Truxtun to Stoddert, March 7, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 426-427

¹¹⁷ Truxtun to Midshipman Robinson, February 9, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 325. Truxtun was not alone in his frustration. Murray said much the same thing to his midshipman at one point. Murray to midshipmen, December 15, 1800, *NDQW*, VII: 35.

¹¹⁸ Truxtun to Lieutenant Cowper, August 15, 1798, Thomas Truxtun Records, Volume 2, Letterbook, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (HSP), Philadelphia, PA

¹¹⁹ Truxtun to Cowper, August 16, 1798, Letterbook, HSP.

vexation at the “very much neglected” performance of duty, on board the *Constellation*, and eventually created a book for superior officers to list all their complaints against inferiors, which he planned to regularly forward to Stoddert.¹²⁰ He keenly felt the youth of the United States Navy, and the need for officers devoted to its reputation, urging his lieutenants not to expect the comparatively luxurious treatment of their peers in European navies, but instead to “say, I prefer the attention I owe the infant marine of my country, to every indulgence, and pleasure,” at least until such time as the service had established itself.¹²¹

Clearly, Truxtun was an exacting officer, and expected his subordinates to perform their duties well, but he saw himself as a mentor as much as a commander. After reproving one midshipman, he offered paternal counsel on the proper conduct of a naval officer, and concluded by telling the young man, “this is the advice of a friend.”¹²² When young David Porter complained at his superiors’ swearing at him constantly, and threatened to resign, Truxtun chose not to simply let him go, but instead exploded

Why you dog! If I can help it you shall never leave the Navy! Swear at you? Damn it, sir – every time I do that you go up a round on the ladder of promotion! As to the first lieutenant’s blowing you up every day, why, sir, ‘tis because he loves you and would not have you grow up a conceited young coxcomb. Go forward and let us have no more whining.

Porter apparently took Truxtun’s words to heart, for he remained in the navy and went on to a celebrated career. Later, he openly credited his successes with having been trained “in such a thorough naval school,” on board the *Constellation*.¹²³ Truxtun chose well in insuring Porter remained, and it was not out of character in doing so, for he readily reserved for himself the

¹²⁰ Truxtun to officers, September, 1798, Letterbook, HSP.

¹²¹ Truxtun to Cowper, October 30, 1798, *NDQW*, I: 572-573

¹²² Truxtun to Midshipman Robinson, February 9, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 325

¹²³ Both quotes found in Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 7-8.

discretion as to which officers to push out of the service and which to retain. In addition to preventing Porter from resigning, he later chose not to bring charges or report to Stoddert when the troubled midshipman struck a superior officer during a confrontation.¹²⁴ He even ignored Stoddert's and Adams' repeatedly-stated desire that only men of proven character and good reputation be named officers, appointing the son of a close friend in hopes that naval service would transform him into "a useful member of society."¹²⁵ He was even capable of affection for some of his men, and expressed genuine grief when one of his lieutenants died of fever late in the war.¹²⁶

Truxtun's relentless discipline of his officers and crew paid off. Despite his seemingly constant complaining about their laxity and sloth, he worried that other officers would become jealous at how quickly his subordinates received promotions.¹²⁷ And his men eventually recognized that they were fortunate to have him as a mentor, even to the point of declining independent commands to remain under his tutelage.¹²⁸ The *Constellation's* captain may have thought little of the men under his command, but they performed well enough to make their ship the first in the republic's navy to capture an enemy vessel. In a fierce action

¹²⁴ David Dixon Porter, *Memoirs of Commodore David Porter*, 18-19; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 8-9.

¹²⁵ Truxtun to Midshipman Enoch Brown, February 23, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 392. On hopes that naval service would improve the character of troublesome youths, see McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 112. McKee concludes that problematic citizens sent to the Navy for reform usually gave their officers as much difficulty as they had their parents. That this was an especial problem in the Quasi War is hinted in a letter of introduction sent to James Sever on behalf of a midshipman, stating that he "has not been placed on board a man of war by his friends, as many young men have, for the purpose of having vicious habits or inclinations corrected, but has embarked on the service through choice and intends continuing it." John Rutledge to James Sever, October 3, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 251-252.

¹²⁶ Truxtun to Tingey, December 1, 1800, *NDQW*, VII: 1-3

¹²⁷ Truxtun to Barry, March 20, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 491-492

¹²⁸ Truxtun to Stoddert, July 2, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 455, though it should be noted that the vessel in question was a fairly small one, and Truxtun's lieutenants may have felt that the chance for fame and glory was greater as a subordinate on a frigate than in command of a ship that size. Still, they obviously found Truxtun's command tolerable enough to turn down a chance at leaving, despite his sharp reproofs and harsh discipline.

on February 9, 1799, the French frigate *L'Insurgent* surrendered to Truxtun. The battle was a remarkable victory for the infant navy of the United States. The *Constellation* lost only one man killed, compared to seventy French sailors. Truxtun was justly proud of what he and his men had accomplished, and he knew he could expect the profuse praise of his country upon his (premature) return home.¹²⁹

Truxtun's victory sparked celebration in Washington, but two other events marred the triumphant atmosphere.¹³⁰ The sole death for the American ship was a young man named Neal Harvey, who, for the crime of appearing cowardly, was run through by Lieutenant Andrew Sterrett in the midst of the action. Sterrett felt no shame afterwards for his actions, boasting to his brother that "we would put a man to death for even looking pale on board this ship."¹³¹ Truxtun, as well as his government, tacitly approved his conduct by failing to issue even the slightest rebuke, despite attacks from the Republican press. While he had endlessly chastised his subordinates for every trifling error in shipboard management, cutting down an American seaman in battle apparently did not merit a response in Truxtun's mind. In any navy of this era, life was brutal and cheap, and actions such as this were not unheard of. That said, not many years later Sterrett would have, at the very least, been called before a court-martial to explain his actions. There is no record of him ever specifying exactly what Harvey did to warrant death. In the heady celebration of the nation's first naval victory, and with the navy suffering from a shortage of competent officers, the entire matter was forgotten.¹³²

¹²⁹ Truxtun to Stoddert, 10 February 1799 in *NDQW*, II: 326-327.

¹³⁰ For the response to ashore to Truxtun's victory, see Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 170-174.

¹³¹ Andrew Sterrett to his brother, 9 February, 1799, in *NDQW*, II: 334-335.

¹³² Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 172-173

Truxtun also felt the need to accompany his victory with his own commentary on the war effort. In his report to Stoddert, he famously announced that French Captain Barreaut “tells me I have caused a war with France, if so I am glad of it, for I detest a thing done by halves.”¹³³ Truxtun’s inclusion of his opinion of government policy clearly crossed the line separating the military force and its civilian government. Moreover, it identified Truxtun with the radical wing of Adams’ Federalist Party, which broke with its president and loudly clamored for a declaration of war, even as Adams strove to keep the conflict contained. Alexander Hamilton, who acted as the leader of the Radical Federalists, hoped to shore up his own power by openly challenging the president’s desire to avoid war.¹³⁴ No doubt he was delighted to read the comments from the navy’s premier captain in an official report. While Truxtun was certainly entitled to his opinion in a democratic society, his thinly veiled criticism of his own government’s policy flouted the authority of civilian control of the military. With the navy short on victories and in desperate need of popularity, and with Truxtun a national hero, the department apparently chose to ignore his implied criticism.¹³⁵ Like Sterret’s slaying of Harvey, the matter was ignored.

Truxtun’s euphoria over his capture was short-lived. With the war expanding – if still not declared – Silas Talbot returned to service. He received his orders recalling him in the summer of 1798, and was already preparing to return to sea when Truxtun captured the

¹³³ Truxtun to Stoddert, 10 February, 1799 in *NDQW*, II: 326-327.

¹³⁴ Hamilton’s political machinations behind Adams’ back are well documented. The best sources are Ron Chernow, *Alexander Hamilton*, 510-529, 566-573; Elkins and McKittrick, *The Age of Federalism*; and John Ferling, *John Adams: A Life* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 343-363, 382-396.

¹³⁵ For Stoddert’s response to news of the victory, see Stoddert to Truxtun, March 13, 1799, *NDQW*, II:450-451. This was not the last time Truxtun tried to tell his civilian superiors how to do their job. He wrote Stoddert criticizing Dale for taking a furlough, and to implicitly rebuke Stoddert for granting it, less than two weeks later. Truxtun to Stoddert, March 26, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 516-517.

L'Insurgent. Ostensibly, Talbot outranked Truxtun. He had been ahead of him on the initial list of captains, and had never resigned from the navy, even serving in a government post during part of his absence. Truxtun, however, was by far the most successful of America's captains, and he felt that his accomplishments, and Talbot's time away, made him superior in standing to Talbot. While he had willingly agreed to be last among captains at the outset of his career, sensitivity over the issue of rank set in very soon thereafter. As early as 1796, he was "mortified" at the slightest rumor that Talbot might return to service, citing both the British and French precedents that active duty officers surpassed those who spent time away from service in rank.¹³⁶

In truth, the question of relative rank had vexed Stoddert from the beginning of his administration. He probably regretted the precedent he set early in his tenure of referring complaints about such matters to the president to settle. Rather than explicitly order two officers to accept their relative standing based on the dates of their commission, he told them that such standing would remain in place until Adams ruled with finality.¹³⁷ Alexander Murray, one of the captains involved in that dispute, soon needed additional soothing, after he protested to Stoddert being placed under Truxtun's command. Murray's protest, Stoddert claimed, "gave me real pain," and he assured his injured officer that "nothing was ever farther from my thoughts, or the thoughts of the president, than to do any act, which might imply a distrust of you."¹³⁸ Although he was nothing but conciliatory here, within a few months his patience for officers complaining of insult in their standing seems to have worn

¹³⁶ Fergusen, *Truxtun of the Constellation*, 123-124

¹³⁷ Stoddert to Murray, September 15, 1798; Stoddert to Tingey, September 15, 1798, *NDQW*, I:407-408

¹³⁸ Stoddert to Murray, March 13, 1799, *NDQW*, II: 451

thin. He mildly rebuked a master commandant for complaining about his standing vis-à-vis officers commissioned to newly constructed ships. Stoddert informed him that he should be satisfied with his condition, although the letter is nonetheless primarily an attempt at conciliation.¹³⁹ Although he could sharply reprove any officer who displeased him, with those he favored Stoddert found it difficult to issue directives he knew they would object to, and in matters of relative rank he preferred to conciliate, or pass the issue on to the president.¹⁴⁰

With Truxtun and Talbot, he certainly made his views perfectly clear. Stoddert sided whole-heartedly with Truxtun, but more importantly he wanted to keep the navy running at peak efficiency, and that meant keeping Truxtun placated. And so, Stoddert somewhat disingenuously assured his favorite captain that all was well, and that there was no doubt the president would see Truxtun's merits and grant him seniority.¹⁴¹ The truth was that Adams felt far more inclined to take Talbot's view of the matter. Talbot, moreover, marshaled the influence of any political connections he could find to make his case for him. Henry Knox's relationship with Talbot dated back to the Revolution, and Talbot had appealed to their friendship in 1794 when he sought a commission in the new navy. Talbot now turned to him again for help in the controversy with Truxtun. Knox apparently did intervene on Talbot's behalf, as Stoddert wrote to Knox afterwards to assure him that "the president...will never consent to injure any person to gratify popular clamor." He went on to inform Knox that it "was my intention to place your son under the command of Captain Truxtun," but Truxtun's

¹³⁹ Stoddert to William Bainbridge, August 28, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 128-129

¹⁴⁰ For the impact of relative rank on operations, see: Palmer, *Stoddert's War*, 81-83.

¹⁴¹ Stoddert to Truxtun, July 3, 1799, *NDQW*, III: 463.

subsequent resignation forced Stoddert to put the younger Knox under another officer's tutelage. This may have been an innocent enough attempt to keep Knox apprised of his son's naval career, or it could have been a veiled rebuke of Knox for contributing to the navy's loss of one of its best officers.¹⁴² Talbot also called on Alexander Hamilton, the former Treasury Secretary, right-hand man of George Washington, and de facto commander of America's Provisional Army to present his case before Adams, which was probably not the wisest move given Adams' hostility towards Hamilton at the time, but still an indication of Talbot's willingness to use powerful political connections to compel the secretary of the navy to do his bidding.¹⁴³

Ever the mediator, Stoddert tried calling the two feuding captains together for a meeting to discuss their differences. Incredibly, Talbot simply failed to show up. His inside connection with the president allowed him to ignore anything as trivial as a conference between officers called by the secretary of the navy. There is no record of any kind of reprimand from Stoddert to his captain for ignoring the conference. Instead, Stoddert resorted to what historian William Fowler dubbed a "lame stratagem that fooled no one."¹⁴⁴ When Talbot was formally named one of the initial six captains, none of them were issued commissions.¹⁴⁵ Stoddert now decided to mail one to Talbot, but dated it 1798. Infuriated,

¹⁴² Talbot to Knox, January 31, 1790; Talbot to Knox, July 6, 1799, Henry Knox Papers, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington's Crossing, PA; Stoddert to Knox, August 6, 1799, Knox Papers.

¹⁴³ Talbot to Hamilton, January 15, 1799, *Alexander Hamilton Papers*, XXII: 418-420

¹⁴⁴ Fowler, *Silas Talbot*, 141

¹⁴⁵ War Office to James Sever, January 18, 1797, Letters Sent by the War Department. Apparently, Barry, Nicholson, and Truxtun were sent official commissions shortly after their compatriots were put on indefinite furlough. War Office to Nicholson and Truxtun, March 7, 1797, Letters Sent by the War Department.

Talbot immediately went over Stoddert's head and threatened Adams that he would resign if the issue were not settled in his favor once and for all.¹⁴⁶

Adams had favored Talbot throughout the entire ordeal, and his opinion did not change now.¹⁴⁷ He ordered Stoddert to place Talbot ahead of Truxtun on the list of captains. While Adams lauded Truxtun's service, and expressed his hope that the captain would not prove himself a man of "selfish vanity and aspiring ambition," by resigning, he was unshaken from his view that Talbot had held the same commission from 1794 up to that day, unaffected by his time away from the service. While Adams insisted that his decision came from "mature deliberation, impartial consideration . . . and conscientious opinion that it is right," he likely had two other, possibly subconscious factors influencing his views.¹⁴⁸ The Continental Navy had not performed well, and Truxtun had always been adamant that his lack of service in it did not diminish his qualifications. Not surprisingly, Adams, one of the key figures in the creation of that naval force, took a different view. His letter to Stoddert made a point of noting that Truxtun was a latecomer to the navy, while Talbot had an impressive Revolutionary War record. Secondly, there was the issue of the frigate *Constitution*, which Adams desperately wanted to get back to seas soon as possible. A resignation from Talbot and a search for a new captain would mean a lengthy delay.¹⁴⁹

Stoddert then had to break the news to Truxtun. Not surprisingly, the hero of the *Constellation* immediately offered his own resignation. He felt insulted that the navy did not

¹⁴⁶ Fowler, *Silas Talbot*, 146-147

¹⁴⁷ Anderson, "John Adams," 124-125.

¹⁴⁸ Adams to Stoddert, 23 July, 1799, in *NDQW*, III: 528-532.

¹⁴⁹ Adams to Talbot, July 8, 1799, in Charles Francis Adams, ed. *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1854), 10 volumes, VIII: 663-664; Adams to Stoddert, 664-665, Adams, ed. *Works of John Adams*, VIII: 664-665. See also, Anderson, "John Adams," 125.

fully appreciate his accomplishments, and refused to continue serving having had his reputation, in his mind, impugned. “It as little becomes my character to yield my rank against what I think a well founded right as it would my ship to an enemy unequal in force. I have therefore thought it proper to quit,” he informed his officers on the *Constellation*, in the process undermining the selfless attention to duty he had worked so hard to instill in them.¹⁵⁰

Truxtun did not, however, fade quietly into the sunset. One of his fellow officers, though upset at his decision to leave the service, took heart when he saw “in today’s paper that he will still act as his own trumpeter.”¹⁵¹ “He might more aptly have been likened to a full brass band,” comments Truxtun’s generally sympathetic biographer, for the wounded captain made sure his side of the story was not lost. Truxtun loudly proclaimed his ill treatment to anyone who would listen until the public lost interest and he faded from view. He was left to spend a few months simmering in his home at Perth Amboy, New Jersey.¹⁵²

Stoddert never lost interest. Upon receiving his wounded captain’s letter of resignation, he put it in a drawer, and for a time he and Adams simply allowed Truxtun to remain in the United States Navy, even while he refused to perform any duties associated with the position. He somehow convinced George Washington himself to invite the captain to Mount Vernon, where the Father of his Country urged him to reconsider. Once the situation had quieted down sufficiently, Stoddert personally went to Truxtun and asked him to return to the service. Whether bored with civilian life, believing himself indispensable to

¹⁵⁰ Truxtun to his officers, August 9, 1799, Correspondence, Box 1, HSP

¹⁵¹ Captain Daniel Carmich, US Marine Corps, to Major Commandant W.W. Burrows, US Marine Corps, May 21, 1799, in *NDQW*, III: 227.

¹⁵² Ferguson, *Truxtun*, 182-184, quote on page 182.

his country, or genuinely moved by the secretary's appeal, he agreed, but only on the condition that he never be ordered to serve under Talbot.¹⁵³

Having enticed Truxtun back into the service, Stoddert's next task was to prevent any other officers from leaving over rank. Had Truxtun's resignation been accepted, and then the former captain readmitted to the navy, several other officers would have passed him in seniority. Stoddert's next step after readmitting Truxtun was to write a soothing missive to Stephen Decatur, urging him not to also resign over relative rank. Once the other officers knew that the president had not accepted Truxtun's resignation, Stoddert expressed confidence that "it cannot give a moment's uneasiness" to them that they still ranked beneath him.¹⁵⁴ Perhaps recognizing this statement for the wishful thinking that it was, he went on to describe the "great pain" he and Adams would feel if the rest of the officer corps objected.¹⁵⁵

Even with the clash between Truxtun and Talbot settled, Stoddert's duties grew increasingly overwhelming. He briefly held the dual roles of heading the Departments of War and the Navy, and the massive increase in the size of the navy during wartime had not brought a corresponding increase in Stoddert's staff. In addition to overseeing the activities, and occasionally soothing the egos, of his officers, Stoddert often acted as a liaison between his officer corps and Congress. He regularly reported to the House of Representatives and

¹⁵³ Stoddert to Truxtun, October 23, 1799, October 28, 1799, and November 6, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 311-312, 333, 361-362.

¹⁵⁴ This is the elder Stephen Decatur, father of the more famous naval officer of the same name. The younger Decatur was just entering the navy at this time.

¹⁵⁵ Stoddert to Decatur, October 24, 1799, *NDQW*, IV: 314-315. Stoddert shifted the blame for Decatur's frustration to Adams in this letter, saying that he had assumed Truxtun would not be allowed to resume his former rank without the consent of the officer corps, but that the president had declined to accept Truxtun's resignation. Given that Stoddert must have known such consent would never be granted, Stoddert's relationship with Truxtun, and his relentless efforts to bring Truxtun back, it is difficult not to conclude that Stoddert was being disingenuous. While Adams certainly consented to the decision not to accept Truxtun's resignation, the Navy Secretary would have been just as eager to leave the door open for the hero of the *Constellation's* return.

Senate on naval activities, and took upon himself to appeal to Congress for better pay for his captains, and to encourage the creation of the rank of admiral. Moreover, he sought the creation of 74-gun ships that could compete with the mightiest vessels in the Royal Navy, and fought an ultimately futile battle with a parsimonious Congress for a program of naval expansion.¹⁵⁶ He also faced constant pressures from merchants, who consistently felt he provided them with insufficient protection, and who cared little how many ships he actually had available to convoy them. Defending himself before accusations of inadequacy or deliberate failure to protect all of America's commerce wore on him, and the strain began to show in his relations with subordinates.¹⁵⁷

In the midst of such a workload, Stoddert understandably expected his captains to continue showing the initiative that he so prized. He found it annoying when officers looked to him to issue orders for steps that he felt they could easily take on their own authority, especially in terms of dealing with their own subordinates. He wrote James Sever to express his hopes that actions "so obviously dictated by common sense" had been taken without waiting for specific orders from him, and further urging Sever to deal as severely as necessary with a problematic subordinate, in hopes of driving him to either resign or to commit some offense that would provide a pretext for cashiering him.¹⁵⁸ His concern with the sensitive feelings of captains also diminished, and he crossed out a section of a letter to

¹⁵⁶ Stoddert to House of Representatives, February 9, 1799, April 9, 1799, December 29, 1799, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, I: 34, 56, 65-66, 70-71, 75

¹⁵⁷ Stoddert to Adams, *NDQW*, VI: 174-175.

¹⁵⁸ Stoddert to Sever, March 18, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 322.

Talbot reassuring him of the president's confidence in his abilities, and sent only a fairly terse list of directives instead.¹⁵⁹

Even Truxtun did not escape censure. When he wrote to the secretary asking for permission to court-martial several mutinous seamen, Stoddert testily informed him that he should have taken the initiative to do so himself, without consulting the department. Furthermore, he informed Truxtun that "I do not like this method of appealing to the head of the Department by officers who are themselves competent to the object of appeal."¹⁶⁰ The following day, he wrote Truxtun again, even going so far as to tell him to start acting as an admiral, as he would probably be one soon enough. "You must act," Stoddert informed Truxtun, "with all the authority...as if you had command of the whole navy."¹⁶¹

The letter proved to be a mistake, in more ways than one. Congress did not create the rank of admiral, at least not for another sixty years, and Truxtun took Stoddert's comments to heart far more than the secretary ever intended. The following month, Truxtun approved a court-martial sentence and signed it "Thomas Truxtun, Vested with the power of Commander-in-Chief of the Navy of the US."¹⁶² Seeing Captain Andrew Murray's vessel idle in port awaiting instructions from the Department, Truxtun ordered him to sail immediately, giving him instructions on his own authority, which, he had every reason to believe, included command of "the whole Navy." Unfortunately, Murray sailed in the

¹⁵⁹ Stoddert to Talbot, November 18, 1800, *NDQW*, VI: 536-537. The crossed out section, interestingly, began with "I am directed by the president to assure you..." indicating that Stoddert was either ignoring a directive (or possibly a suggestion) from the president or, much more likely, that he at times cited the president's opinion in letters when he was actually giving his own views.

¹⁶⁰ Stoddert to Truxtun, April 15, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 418.

¹⁶¹ Stoddert to Truxtun, April 16, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 421.

¹⁶² Sentence of Court in Case of Patrick Brown, April 13, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 400.

opposite direction Stoddert intended. The Navy Department had intended for him to relieve Talbot at Cape François, and when he left before orders reached him, the Department scrambled to find another officer to allow Talbot to return home.¹⁶³

For the second time in less than a month, Stoddert reprimanded his favorite captain, informing him of Murray's intended duty in Cape François and adding that his hasty departure meant that his ship sailed without valuable supplies. Stoddert also, apparently for the first time, thought to instruct one of his officers on the details of civil-military relations. "I am extremely mortified," he complained at the "unwarrantable" and "in every way improper" step taken by Truxtun. Seemingly reversing his earlier instructions, Stoddert noted that certain decisions "belong to the Executive exclusively." "You must avoid such interference in the future," he warned.¹⁶⁴ Within a week, though, Stoddert cooled down, and sent a very conciliatory letter to Truxtun, assuring him that the navy would be able to work out all the confusions resulting from Murray's early sailing, and expressing a wish that Truxtun visit him in Washington if he decided to return from Norfolk by land.¹⁶⁵ He may have realized that he ultimately had no one to blame but himself for the episode with Murray, and likely felt some guilt for his outburst at an officer who genuinely believed he was fulfilling his superior's wishes. That Truxtun took a somewhat loose view of civilian authority should have been obvious by that time though, and by mellowing his earlier expressions of dismay, Stoddert may have missed an opportunity to deter his favorite officer from causing injury to the service in the near future.

¹⁶³ Stoddert to Samuel Barron, May 17, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 526-527; Stoddert to Truxtun, May 22, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 545-546; Stoddert to Truxtun, May 24, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 555

¹⁶⁴ Stoddert to Truxtun, May 24, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 555

¹⁶⁵ Stoddert to Truxtun, May 29, 1800, *NDQW*, V: 573.

Truxtun had no choice but to keep detesting the war effort, for Adams never ceased waging it “by halves.” Even as Alexander Hamilton schemed to seize the power of the presidency from him and field a massive army, Adams continually sought a peaceful solution to America’s differences with France, and he succeeded in 1800. The United States and France signed a new treaty, although it would take years to sort out all the competing claims for damages.¹⁶⁶ For the remainder of his life, Adams regarded the peaceful resolution of hostilities with France as one of his greatest legacies, but at the time it cost him dearly.¹⁶⁷ Having infuriated the radical wing of his own party, Adams fell to Thomas Jefferson in the election of 1800, and his cabinet prepared for a transfer of power.

Stoddert knew all too well that Jefferson’s backers included many of those most hostile to the creation of the navy in the first place, and that the new president had won the election on promises to dramatically reduce federal spending. His last days in the Navy Department were thus spent scrambling to lay a foundation that could survive Jefferson’s Administration. Stoddert reluctantly conceded that the peacetime navy should sell all but thirteen of its frigates, but he could not resist trying again to get Congress to build 74s. Knowing the Jeffersonians would insist on reducing the officer corps, he campaigned for those released to receive half-pay for life, financed by the sale of the navy’s unneeded ships. Congress balked at much of Stoddert’s proposal plan, instead allowing half-pay only for those officers who were retained but not on active duty. The captains released from the navy received nothing. The United States would not send out a seventy-four gun ship for almost

¹⁶⁶ DeConde, *Politics and Diplomacy* 259-293; Allen, *Our Naval War with France*, 245-251.

¹⁶⁷ Ferling, *Adams*, 384-405.

two decades, and of the thirteen frigates retained, seven were stored “in ordinary” until such time as they might be needed.¹⁶⁸

Although Stoddert did not leave the navy as powerful as he would have liked, he did bequeath it an officer corps capable of future greatness. Complete incompetents such as Nicholson had been stationed far from any potential damage, and aging patriots like Barry had been nudged towards retirement. The reduction of the naval officer corps under Jefferson finalized their removal, but both were clearly on their way out by the time Stoddert left office.¹⁶⁹ More importantly, captains who displayed cowardice or simply lacked drive had been made into examples. Phillips and Maley offered ample excuses for their poor decisions, but Stoddert was singularly unimpressed, and cashiered both men. On the other hand, he readily tolerated threats to resign and hypersensitive egos from officers who brought credit to the service. Truxtun, for a time, was allowed to remain on the rolls of the navy, even as he refused to perform any duties associated with the job. Even after he returned, he dictated to the Department what orders he would accept, refusing to serve in any capacity that might cross paths with Talbot.

Stoddert not only tolerated behavior such as this, he encouraged it by consistently delegating authority for running the navy to his officers. Those that met his expectations played a major role in choosing subordinates, determining strategy, and enjoyed near-total autonomy over their crews. Stoddert left something of a mixed legacy to his successors. Robert Smith, who followed him in the Navy Department, inherited an officer corps that was

¹⁶⁸ Stoddert to Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, January 12, 1801, *NDQW*, VII: 80-84; Jones, “Naval Thought and Policy of Benjamin Stoddert,” 84-89.

¹⁶⁹ Stoddert actually believed Jefferson’s Administration cut far too many captains, commenting to Murray that the number retained was “too small to include all those who would do honor to any service.” Stoddert to Murray, March 27, 1801, *NDQW*, VII: 158.

daring, bold, and zealously determined to combat any enemy. On the other hand, they showed a willingness to include their civilian superiors and each other among their list of enemies to be zealously combated. Thomas Jefferson and Robert Smith assumed command of a competent but highly contentious officer corps, and like Stoddert, they would spend much of their time struggling to control it.

**“To Save What’s Far More Valuable:” Honor and the Naval Officer Corps in the
Tripolitan War, 1801-1805**

*I owed my life to the service of my country. But I knew of no
duty imposing on me the obligation to sacrifice my reputation.*

Commodore Thomas Truxtun¹

*I have great cause to complain of the conduct of the
midshipmen of this ship (with some exceptions). They are
young men totally regardless of any order they receive and pay
no kind of attention to their duty, answer to no purpose on
board but to create noise and confusion, and set an ill example
to the people, who I’m loath to punish for conduct which
officers use with impunity.*

Commodore Samuel Barron²

“I think I shall have to advertise for a secretary of the navy,” Thomas Jefferson half-joked at the beginning of his Presidency.³ As the leader of a party traditionally hostile to naval forces and elected in part on promises to drastically reduce government spending, Jefferson hardly appeared a friend to the navy. He was dismayed to find that no one wanted the job of gutting its fleet and officer corps. Naval advocates, already alarmed by Jefferson’s election, surely found no reassurance in his lengthy quest for Stoddert’s replacement. The man he eventually chose, Robert Smith, had little in his background to reassure proponents of

¹ Thomas Truxtun “Reply of Commodore Thomas Truxtun to an Attack made on him by the National Intelligencer in June 1806,” Thomas Truxtun Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA.

² Commodore Samuel Barron to the lieutenants of the *Philadelphia*, July 28, 1802 quoted in McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 186. Strangely, this letter has been omitted from Dudley Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Relating to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers* (hereafter *NDBW*), 6 volumes (Washington DC: US Government Printing Office, 1939-1946).

³ Jefferson to Gouverneur Morris, May 8, 1801, Paul Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Federal Edition (New York and London, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1904-5), IX: 189.

a strong navy, but he proved an inspired choice. Smith's legal experience and administrative skills more than compensated for his lack of naval expertise, and he proved an effective wartime leader during America's four-year conflict with Tripoli. Although no more qualified than his predecessor, arguably less, Smith brought none of the crippling doubts and self-consciousness that plagued Stoddert, and he evinced a willingness to rebuke and oversee his officers. Still, he also found it important to delegate, entrusting tremendous autonomy to commodores and even consulting them on one occasion regarding the treatment of a brother officer. In short, Smith strove to maintain a professional and efficient maritime force, but the management and oversight of the navy remained a joint venture between civilian and military with the lines of authority not always clear. The nature of communication played a role in this, for officers stationed in the Mediterranean could be supervised only with great difficulty. Yet the hesitancy that Smith showed in dealing with rowdy subordinates and limiting frequent duels between officers is remarkable, especially given the difficulties it caused the navy both internally and with America's relationship to other nations. Ultimately, he struggled as much with the officer corps' intense sense of personal honor as with foreign nations, for the officers of the early American navy, while they valued the ideal of subordination, civilian control, and duty, often proved unwilling to subordinate their own reputations to orders they feared would fail to bring credit to their names.

In fairness, the government did not always inspire submission by its actions either. Commodores to the Mediterranean struggled to wage an effective war while their civilian masters quibbled over legalities of the use of naval power. While the Constitution seemed to make clear that the president was commander-in-chief of the military, in practice Jefferson assumed the Presidency with serious doubts about his authority to wage war. The debates

over executive authority took place simultaneously with the war itself, often leaving commanders in the Mediterranean uncertain as to what actions they were authorized to take and frustrated by limitations that kept them from bringing the conflict to an honorable end sooner.

The navy may have represented only an economic issue to Jefferson, but members of the recently beaten Federalist Party were determined to make it a central issue of his administration. The navy seems to have factored into Jefferson's ability to assume the Presidency. The election of 1800 ended in a tie between Jefferson and his supposed Vice president, Aaron Burr. While Burr initially indicated he would step aside if all Republican electors cast votes for him as well as Jefferson (who no one doubted was the true Republican candidate), he later reneged and tried to use the uncertainty to his own advantage. A Federalist-dominated House cast seemingly endless ballots, but never produced a decisive winner.¹ Key Federalist leaders approached both candidates through intermediaries, seeking concessions in return for votes. Gouverneur Morris openly informed Jefferson that the Presidency would be his if only he would promise, among other things, not to abolish the navy. Jefferson sharply rejected this advice, saying he would "never go into the office of president by capitulation, nor with my hands tied by any conditions."² Nevertheless,

¹ The election of 1800, among the most famous in American history, is well represented in historical literature. See John Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson: The Tumultuous Election of 1800* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), and Edward Larson, *A Magnificent Catastrophe: The Tumultuous Election of 1800, America's First Presidential Campaign* (New York: The Free Press, 2007) for narratives of the contest.

² Jefferson, *Anas*, Ford, *Works of Jefferson*, I: 189. Jefferson, of course, had ample political reasons to deny having made a deal, but historian Sean Wilentz nonetheless asserts that "Bayard was persuaded that Jefferson had made specific concessions." Even if Jefferson never explicitly authorized a deal, he seems to have been aware of assurances emanating from his closest supporters, and did nothing at the time to challenge the perception that he was willing to make a deal. Sean Wilentz, *The Rise of American Democracy: Jefferson to Lincoln* (New York: W.W. Norton Company, 2005), 94; Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 181-191.

Jefferson appears to have tacitly authorized Samuel Smith to assure Federalist James Bayard that Jefferson would preserve the navy if elected, and those promises at least helped members of the defeated party stomach the thought of Thomas Jefferson as their new president. After thirty-six ballots, he finally received the required votes and became the nation's president-elect.³

With the election settled in his favor, Jefferson could finally begin assembling a cabinet. Among his first decisions was one that must have chilled the Federalists who supposedly voted for him based on promises to preserve the navy. Albert Gallatin, the man Jefferson chose to be head of the Treasury Department, was among the most vocal and uncompromising opponents of a navy. He had vigorously opposed its creation as a member of the House, and was zealous to see debt reduced and public expense minimized as a member of Jefferson's cabinet.⁴

Finding someone to counter Gallatin proved difficult. Jefferson's first choice was eminently sensible. Samuel Smith, a prominent merchant, declined the post, but when Jefferson pleaded with him a second time he agreed to serve on an interim basis until a replacement could be found. John Langdon then declined the post, twice, as well. William Jones, who would eventually agree to serve as secretary during the War of 1812, refused to leave his lucrative merchant career at this time. As one man after another rejected the president's offer, Smith's brother Robert finally accepted the nomination on July 27, 1801. Jefferson, relieved at finally filling the position, surely had modest expectations for his new

³ Ferling, *Adams vs. Jefferson*, 190-191.

⁴ Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1972), 101-102; Charles Oscar Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration, 1775-1911: A collection of Articles from the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2012), 119-120; Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: WW Norton and Company, 2006), 80-81, 91-92, 174.

Secretary, but the younger Smith would go on to be one of the most influential figures in American naval history and a crucial player in the administration.⁵

One of the reasons that so many men were hesitant to take on the job was that among the new Secretary's duties would be gutting the officer corps. Adams and Stoddert had tried to head off Jefferson's probable drastic cuts by preemptively slashing the navy in both ships and men, but even so more cuts remained. One of Robert Smith's first acts was to reduce the size of the corps by removing several "meritorious" officers.⁶ Moses Brown, a captain who served heroically in the Quasi War, received a form letter from Acting Secretary Smith within weeks of the new president's inauguration, informing him that his vessel had been sold and that he was now unemployed.⁷ Robert continued the purging when he took office. Among his first acts was to send a terse note to Daniel McNeill informing him that his services were no longer needed under the Peace Establishment Act. Times had apparently grown harder in the interim, as McNeill received nothing but orders to surrender his accounts, as opposed to the four months severance given Brown.⁸

As Brown's case illustrates, it was not only officers, but ships as well that disappeared from American service, as Smith, along with his predecessors, had to sell several vessels to generate revenue while reducing expenses. Ironically, the new secretary often had

⁵ Paullin, *Naval Administration* 122-123; Frank Owsley, "Robert Smith, 27 July, 1801-7 March, 1809," Paulo Coletta, *American Secretaries of the Navy: Volume I, 1775-1913* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 77-92.

⁶ Smith to Amaziah Jocelin, January 3, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 12-13.

⁷ Samuel Smith to Moses Brown, April 3, 1801, *NDQW*, VII: 176. For Brown's Quasi War career, see Frederick Leiner, *Millions for Defense: The Subscription Warships of 1798* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2000), 30-52.

⁸ Smith to Daniel McNeill, October 27, 1802, M149, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Naval Officers, National Archives, Washington DC (hereafter "Letters Sent").

more officers than he could use even with a drastically reduced corps. He liberally granted, and at times ordered, furloughs for young officers to spend time in the merchant service, honing their nautical abilities and saving their government the expense of training them.⁹

While Jefferson wanted a smaller navy, he by no means wanted to eliminate it altogether. Jefferson's chief concerns, it seems clear, were to maintain a fiscally responsible government and avoid what he feared would be a disastrous war with Great Britain. To that end, he concocted an elaborate scheme to replace America's large frigates with gunboats, while putting the frigates in ordinary until such time as they might be needed. His hope was that the gunboats would be cheaper to man and maintain than frigates, and that they would be less likely to make Britain feel threatened and launch a preemptive strike against their former colonies.¹⁰ He was not willing to completely abandon the frigates immediately upon assuming power, however, as they promised to serve a very useful purpose. The navy that his party had so zealously opposed finally gave the new president a chance to fulfill a decades-long dream: humbling the Barbary corsairs. Situated along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa, the Barbary regencies of Algiers, Tripoli, Tunis, and Morocco were nominally subordinate to the Ottoman Empire, but enjoyed near-complete autonomy in their affairs so long as they provided regular tribute to the Turkish Sultan. Their economy hinged on piracy; although prohibited by Islamic law from plundering fellow Muslims, they preyed

⁹ There are numerous letters in the Records of the Secretary of the Navy granting furloughs for service in the merchant marine. A few examples include: Smith to Lieutenants, November 6, 1802; Smith to Midshipman Clark, November 13, 1802; Smith to Midshipman Wood, December 13, 1802; Smith to Midshipman Masury, January 24, 1803; Smith to Midshipman Keene, March 14, 1803, Letters Sent.

¹⁰ Jefferson's views on the gunboat program will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. The essential secondary works on his naval policy are: Gene Smith, *For the Purposes of Defense: The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995); Spencer Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993); Julia Maclead, "Jefferson and the Navy: A Defense," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 8 no. 2 (February 1945), 153-184. For Jefferson's foreign policy, the best source is Robert Tucker and David Hendricksen, *Empire of Liberty: The Statecraft of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

upon shipping from Western states, seizing cargoes, enslaving crews, and demanding exorbitant ransoms for the release of captives. European nations paid regular tribute, bribes in all but name, to maintain peace with the Barbary rulers, but a change in leadership of one of the regencies – a frequent occurrence – or simply a desire for more wealth could prompt any one of the four to withdraw from a treaty and resume plundering. Wars between the Barbary corsairs and European nations were frequent, but Westerners usually fought to gain the best deal possible, not overthrow the existing tribute system. Great Britain alone possessed the naval might to humble the corsairs, but it considered them useful in weakening rival European states and Barbary rulers were wise enough to keep their demands of the British well within reason.¹¹

While part of the British Empire, the Americans colonies enjoyed the Royal navy's protection, and the Barbary powers meant nothing to them. Victory in the American Revolution changed all that, and the newly created United States had to determine a course of action to deal with Mediterranean piracy. Almost from the moment of American nationhood, Jefferson advocated sending a squadron to the Mediterranean. He hoped a simple display of American might would be enough to compel the Barbary rulers to honor existing treaties, but he was also willing to fight if necessary. Not only was tribute humiliating, it interfered with his vision of enlightened economic freedom, and besides he felt certain that the cost of tribute would eventually exceed the cost of using force.¹² He had more in mind than just American

¹¹ For the Barbary powers, see: Frank Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005); Richard Parker, *Uncle Sam in Barbary: A Diplomatic History* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2004); Joshua London, *Victory in Tripoli: How America's War with Barbary Pirates Established the U.S. Navy and Built a Nation* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005); and Robert Allison, *The Crescent Obscured: The United States and the Muslim World, 1776-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹² Jefferson to Wilson Cary Nicolas, June 11, 1801, Ford, *Works of Jefferson*, IX: 199.

freedom in the Mediterranean, however. The new president saw renewed negotiations and treaties without tribute, even if it meant war with one or more of the Barbary powers, as a chance to demonstrate his nation's mettle to Europe, and possibly improve America's standing, and bargaining strength, in the eyes of other nations.¹³

Meanwhile, in Africa, the Muslim rulers had equally strong incentives to strike at American shipping. The United States always proved slow in delivering its promised tribute to the Barbary powers, and as it grew in economic strength in during the Washington and Adams administrations Barbary rulers naturally expected more lucrative treaties. For Yusef Karamanli, the Bashaw of Tripoli, the incentive to declare war was even greater. Yusef seethed at the American agreement with Algiers, which recognized the Algerines as the preeminent power in the Mediterranean and granted them greater tribute than any other North African principality. War with the United States – an untested power who, the British assured him, was incapable of a major military operation – gave him a chance to solidify his hold on the throne and increase his country's wealth and standing. So it was that even as Jefferson planned to avoid war by a mere show of force, the Tripolitans chopped down the American flag from its embassy in a symbolic declaration of war.¹⁴

Jefferson was unaware of this development for some time, and prepared to send a squadron only to enforce existing treaties and take stock of the situation. Knowing that war with Tripoli was a possibility, however, the new president at least considered the constitutionality of using force in the Mediterranean. The issue vexed him considerably, for he entertained grave doubts about his ability to wage war, even against an openly hostile

¹³ Allen, *Our Navy and the Barbary Corsairs*, 90-91.

¹⁴ Lambert, *Barbary Wars*, 125-126.

nation. Jefferson had long been a strict-constructionist of the Constitution, arguing that the branches of government could each exercise only the powers explicitly allotted to them. And the Constitution granted Congress, not the executive, the power to declare war. He consulted his cabinet on May 15, 1801, but they were hardly of one mind on these issues, and offered little clarity. Even sending the squadron, some argued, constituted an act of war. Still, they were aware of Tripoli's threats to declare war and recognized that something needed to be done. Even Gallatin, no friend of naval forces, argued that the Constitution granted Congress the power to declare war, but that the president needed no authorization to defend the country if another nation went on the offensive. Jefferson nonetheless adhered to his limited view of executive power; his orders to commanders in the Mediterranean starkly curtailed their ability to engage Barbary vessels in battle, even if one of the Barbary powers had already initiated hostilities.¹⁵

In a foreshadowing of things to come, the government's first choice, Thomas Truxtun, initially set about preparing for a voyage but ultimately stayed behind. He at first indicated that he would decline command of the squadron unless it "should be intended to act decisively." Acting Secretary of the Navy Samuel Smith then outlined for him the intended purpose of the cruise, but unfortunately gave tacit recognition to the legitimacy of Truxtun's threat to decline to obey specific orders while remaining in the navy. That is precisely what happened shortly thereafter, as the hero of the Quasi War determined that the proposed mission was beneath his stature, and convinced Smith to release him from an obligation to go to North Africa. "Peace can afford no field for me on the ocean," he complained, and the Acting secretary finally relented and allowed Truxtun to withdraw as commander of the

¹⁵ Lambert, *Barbary Wars*, 124-127.

squadron. Despite his grouching and ultimate refusal to obey orders, he remained on the rolls as a captain. Smith did, however, somewhat testily inform the recalcitrant captain that he would not discuss some perceived injury to Truxtun's honor regarding relative rank.¹⁶

Richard Dale received command of the first Mediterranean Squadron instead, though his orders indicate why Truxtun was so frustrated with the assignment. In keeping with Jefferson's decision to proceed with caution, Samuel Smith ordered Dale to assure all the Barbary powers of America's friendly intentions, and to "enjoin upon your officers and men the propriety and utility of a proper conduct towards the subjects of all those powers – a good understanding with them being extremely desirable." The purpose of the squadron was not to make war or negotiate a new treaty, but rather to deter the Bashaw from violating the current agreement, and only in the event that Tripoli had already declared war (which it had) was Dale allowed to use force. His instructions limited him even in that event, however. He could "protect our commerce and chastise their insolence" through attacking outgoing ships, but offensively he was limited to a blockade of the capital city; no attacks on Tripoli itself were allowed.¹⁷

Dale's squadron, the *President*, *Philadelphia*, and *Essex*, along with a schooner, the *Enterprize*, departed for the Mediterranean in the spring of 1801. Although ostensibly on a mission to maintain peace, it did not take long for his cruise to turn bloody. Andrew Sterrett, captain of the *Enterprize*, detached from the squadron, became the first to "chastise" the Tipolitan ruler's "insolence" in April, but his situation illustrates the frustration American

¹⁶ Samuel Smith to Truxtun, April 2, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 426-427; Smith to Truxtun, April 10, 1801, *Naval NDBW*, I: 428-429; Truxtun to Smith, April 13, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 432; Smith to Truxtun, April 28, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 438-440.

¹⁷ Samuel Smith to Dale, May 20, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 465-469.

naval officers felt at their country's seemingly timid policy. While flying a British flag from the mainmast of his ship, a common practice at the time, he encountered a Tripolitan vessel, which gleefully informed him that they were seeking American merchantmen to capture. Their pride turned to horror as Sterrett dropped the British flag and replaced it with the Stars and Stripes. The American lieutenant hurriedly called his men to battle, and boasted to Dale that "the officers and men throughout the vessel behaved in the most spirited and determined manner, obeying every order with promptitude and alertness." For three hours the two vessels dueled, and the men of the *Enterprize* repelled three boarding attempts "with great slaughter." Incredibly, the Americans suffered no casualties of their own in the fighting, despite repeatedly being duped by false surrenders from their enemies. Finally, the slaughter aboard the *Tripoli* became unbearable, and the Tripolitan captain surrendered, genuinely this time, just as Sterrett was giving orders to sink the enemy vessel.¹⁸

The carnage on board was horrific. Twenty men, a full quarter of the crew lay dead, and another 30 wounded. The ship itself sustained crippling damage, and was little more than a hulk. Although justly proud of his victory, Sterrett now found himself in an awkward position. Technically, his capture violated international law, for the United States had not declared war on Tripoli, nor had his civilian superiors authorized him to seize its ships. Ruefully, he let the corsairs go.¹⁹ To complete the neutralization of the vessel as a threat to his country's commerce, Sterrett ordered its guns thrown overboard and surviving masts cut down. The floating hulk then drifted back home, where, if newspaper accounts are to be

¹⁸ Sterrett to Dale, August 6, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 537; "Capture of Ship of War *Tripoli* by US Schooner *Enterprize*, *National Intelligencer*, November 18, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 539-540.

¹⁹ Lambert, *Barbary Wars*, 130-131.

believed, its captain was severely beaten and forced to ride through the city “on a jack ass...as an object of public scorn.”²⁰

The secretary’s orders to Dale promised further such frustrations. His instructions defined his mission as one of observing the situation in the Mediterranean, training his green seamen, and displaying such force as America was willing to send out. Throughout the summer and fall of 1801, Yusef entertained limited communications with Dale, in which he indicated at least some interest in a temporary truce, but the commodore did not believe his limited orders allowed him to enter such a parley, and the opportunity passed.²¹ If Dale did not consider himself able to negotiate at all, his view of his ability to wage war was little better. He contented himself with blockading the port of Tripoli as best he could with inadequate resources. Dale perceptively informed his government that a complete blockade was impossible, especially without gunboats to stop smaller ships from hugging the coastline where the water was too shallow for frigates to attack. Moreover, he believed a blockade would not force an honorable treaty in and of itself, and pleaded with his superiors to authorize an attack on the Tripolitan capital.²²

Such an attack remained more than the president was willing to stomach. Jefferson’s primary concern remained keeping government expenditures contained, and he feared an attack on the capital would lead to a lengthy and prohibitively expensive war. He and Smith

²⁰ “Capture of Ship of War *Tripoli* by US Schooner *Enterprize*, *National Intelligencer*, November 18, 1801, *NDBW*, I: 539-540.

²¹ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 91; London, *Victory in Tripoli*, 94-96, 100-101.

²² The capital city of Tripoli was also called Tripoli. Dale’s services in the Mediterranean, it should be noted, were apparently perfectly satisfactory to the president and Secretary. Upon returning, Dale decided his days at sea were finished, and resigned his commission to pursue a less-demanding life. Smith assured him that Jefferson was “not unmindful of your services nor insensible to of your merits,” and charged Smith to “express to (Dale) his wish that you may enjoy as much private happiness as you do public honor,” and convey his “great personal esteem and high consideration.” Smith to Dale, December 21, 1802, Letters Sent.

loosened their restrictions only slightly, authorizing the next commodore to restrict all shipping in and out of Tripoli and prevent its ships from preying on American vessels. Dale's hoped for assault on the capital city would have to wait for another failed expedition and a state of desperation on the part of the civilian government.²³

Early forays against Tripoli revealed a deeply flawed oversight of the war effort. Naval officers missed promising opportunities under inadequate authorization leaving them unable to achieve the government's political objectives. Meanwhile, their civilian superiors argued over what war-making abilities they even possessed. The Federalists in particular blasted the president for his constitutional scruples. Alexander Hamilton was especially outraged when he learned of Sterrett releasing his captured. It "excites our surprise" he complained, to learn that "*though Tripoli had declared war in form against the United States, and had enforced it by actual hostility, yet there was not power...to capture and detain her cruisers.*" Jefferson's view of his authority to wage war, Hamilton argued, amounted to "nothing less than this, that *between* two nations there may exist a state of complete war on the one side – of peace on the other."²⁴ While Hamilton's attack on his rival was not entirely fair, it is undeniable that American naval officers were dispatched to the Mediterranean with unclear, contradictory orders as a result of Jefferson's highly restricted views on executive authority and desire to pinch pennies while fighting a war.

In the summer of 1801, the composition of the cabinet changed, with profound implications for the navy. Jefferson finally found a permanent secretary of the navy, none

²³ McKee, *Preble*, 94.

²⁴ Hamilton, "The Examination No. 1," *New York Evening Post*, December 17, 1801, Harold Syrett, ed., *The Papers of Alexander Hamilton* 27 volumes (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961-1987), XXV: 444-457.

other than the Acting Secretary's brother, Robert Smith. Smith accepted the post on July 27, 1801. Unlike Samuel, Robert had no experience whatsoever with anything maritime-related, and historian Charles Oscar Paullin speculates that his chief qualification for the job (besides the fact that he agreed to do it) was that he could rely on his brother for advice.²⁵ Moreover, the Smiths were a very prominent and influential family, and if Jefferson could not have the member most qualified to head the navy, he at least managed to secure a political alliance with them through Robert's appointment.²⁶

Smith had other qualities, however, that proved highly beneficial in managing the Navy Department. He brought a keen mind and superb organizational abilities to the office and he had none of his predecessor's self-doubts about his fitness for the post. This is surprising for the younger Smith's resume appeared wholly unsuited to the post. He had served in the Maryland legislature and was a respected lawyer in his home state, but had never served in any capacity aboard a ship, merchant or naval. Moreover, he lacked Stoddert's experience managing merchant captains. Yet Smith managed quite well, and even developed a measure of popularity with his officer corps. If he lacked maritime experience, in one historian's estimation he "possessed in considerable measure the lubricating qualities of a politician, which by reducing the friction may greatly accelerate the speed of the administrative machine."²⁷ In short, Smith knew how to get things done.

He had no qualms about reminding his officers of their subordinate status when the occasion required. When one purser complained of his assignment, Smith informed him that

²⁵ Owsley, "Robert Smith," Coletta, *Secretaries of the Navy*, 77-90; Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 121.

²⁶ Dumas Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term, 1801-1805* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1970), 59.

²⁷ Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 122.

he was under no obligation to “consult the conveniences or wishes” of his officers, nor should they “expect never to be ordered upon service that may be irksome or disagreeable.”²⁸ Still, if he could be abrupt and imperious in his communications, he also displayed a warm and even pleasant side when he had no grounds for complaint with an officer. One anxious midshipman, newly admitted to the service, found himself completely at ease after a conversation with Smith, having been treated with “the utmost politeness.” and reassured that his ignorance of navigation was easily remedied.²⁹ He was the image of compassion and patience when illness incapacitated a meritorious captain. Despite his advanced age and the certainty that he could never again take to the sea, Smith tried to find manageable tasks for John Barry to justify keeping him on the rolls, and he expressed genuine sadness upon learning that the aged commodore was beyond performing any duties.³⁰ Edward Preble found himself “at a loss to express” his “highest gratification” at Smith’s kindness in refusing his resignation due to illness. Bedridden, Preble had returned his commission, believing he would be unable to recover within a reasonable timeframe for the navy to retain him on its rolls. Smith responded with the highest praise of Preble’s abilities, refused the resignation, and granted him a furlough instead.³¹

Like Stoddert, Smith proved willing, at times, to trust officers he considered reliable with virtually any other matter of naval oversight. He consistently affirmed the absolute authority of a captain over every person and aspect of his ship. Once a ship sailed, Smith

²⁸ Smith to John Darby, November 9, 1805, Letters Sent.

²⁹ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 120.

³⁰ Smith to Barry, July 29, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 216-217; Smith to Barry, August 12, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 230. See also, McGrath, *John Barry*, 497-498.

³¹ Smith to Preble, April 16, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 122; Preble to Smith, April 22, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 133.

never acted to undermine the authority of its captain over all other persons on board, and even deferred to captains on the assignment and use of subordinate officers.³² During the Tripolitan War, he remained detached from the incessant dueling by junior officers in the Mediterranean, leaving it to captains to handle such situations. Naval officers worked hand-in-hand with civilian negotiators in Barbary, with the lines between spheres of responsibility often blurred. Smith also delegated the task of writing new naval regulations to an officer, Thomas Tingey, then circulated them to several senior officers for comment before approving them.³³ He also systematized promotion, while still leaving it primarily the domain of the officer corps. Rather than relying solely on individual captains to recommend their own midshipmen for lieutenancies, he ordered that impartial officers examine candidates for promotion.³⁴ While this was more restrictive of individual captains' influence over promotion than Stoddert had instituted, it remained the case that the officer corps itself was responsible for evaluating candidates for higher rank.³⁵ Outfitting ships and managing seamen remained almost exclusively the prerogative of captains, and they continued to enjoy wide latitude in this regard.³⁶

³² Smith to Samuel Barron, November 12, 1802; Smith to Marine Commander John Dent, May 3, 1808, Letters Sent; Smith to Preble, July 8, 1806, Preble Papers, Box 18, LOC.

³³ "U.S. Navy Regulations Issued by Command of President Thomas Jefferson, 25 January, 1802," *NDBW*, II: 29-39. McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 544n, makes a compelling case for Tingey's having written, or at least significantly influenced, the new regulations, based on his copy of the British *Regulations and Instructions*.

³⁴ Smith to Barry, August 19, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 239-240; Smith to J. Decatur, February 4, 1803, Letters Sent; Smith to Abner Woodruff, February 4, 1803, Letters Sent.

³⁵ Smith to Rodgers, January 13, 1806, Letters Sent.

³⁶ For example, see Smith to Isaac Hull, October 27, 1801, *NDBW* I: 609-610, and Smith to Morris, April 5, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 106.

Nevertheless, Smith found conflict almost immediately upon assuming control of the navy. Among the first officers he dealt with was none other than Thomas Truxtun. Knowing that the next commodore sent to negotiate with the Bashaw would be allowed much more leeway to go on the offensive, Smith rightly concluded that Truxtun would find an assignment as commander of the Mediterranean squadron more to his liking. Once again called on to represent his country's interests at sea, Truxtun discovered that he could no longer expect his demands to be catered to by the navy. What he wanted, in this instance, was hardly unreasonable. Given the multitude of responsibilities of governing an entire squadron, Truxtun requested a flag-captain to handle his own ship, allowing him to focus on broader responsibility. Throughout the controversy that followed, he insisted, rightly, that this was standard practice in the British Navy, that it was promised to him(true) and that it was a privilege accorded both Dale and the man who eventually replaced him, Richard Valentine Morris(also true).³⁷

Truxtun wrote the secretary informing him of the difficulties he had had organizing the squadron to that point and pointing out that the crews he had been assigned suffered greatly from inexperience, and the condition of his ships posed significant difficulties in getting them ready for sailing. He considered it impossible for the squadron to function effectively unless he had a flag captain. There was more on Truxtun's mind than the efficiency of the squadron. Making no effort to conceal his motives, Truxtun informed Smith that "having a reputation to lose which I am very tenacious of," he demanded another officer

³⁷ Truxtun "Reply," Truxtun Papers, HSP. This pamphlet reprinted Truxtun's correspondence with Smith prior to his resignation, and subsequent letters between the two are taken from this.

to see to the details of captaining his flagship. Failing that, ‘I must beg leave to quit the service.’³⁸

Truxtun almost certainly expected a repeat of his resignation of 1799, with Smith immediately acceding to his demands rather than lose his services. Given his earlier conduct and subsequent correspondence, it seems probable that that is the course Stoddert would have followed, had he still been Secretary. Smith, however, responded unequivocally. Citing the reduction in the size of the navy, and its officer corps, under the Jefferson Administration, Smith claimed to have no suitable officer to serve under Truxtun. He therefore wrote Truxtun that he considered his letter to be an “absolute” resignation, and informed him in the same letter that he had already dispatched Richard Valentine Morris to replace him.³⁹ Subsequent historians have interpreted his response two ways. Truxtun biographer Eugene Ferguson asserts that “his ejection from the Navy...could have been avoided by a more diplomatic and less hostile secretary of the navy.”⁴⁰ Naval historian Ian Toll, on the other hand, is somewhat less sympathetic, saying that “Smith had reached the end of his tolerance for Truxtun’s Olympian ego and his high, whining tone.”⁴¹

Both interpretations of the end of Truxtun’s naval career contain a measure of truth. But this was more than just a personality clash between two headstrong men. Truxtun’s removal set a major precedent for the navy. During the Quasi-War, Talbot’s plans to resign threatened the launch of the *Constitution* and all of the navy’s plans for that cruising season. To cater to Truxtun now would have had the same effect, delaying sending a relief squadron

³⁸ Truxtun to Smith, March 3, 1802, Truxtun Papers, HSP.

³⁹ Smith to Truxtun, March 13, 1802, Truxtun Papers, HSP.

⁴⁰ Ferguson, *Truxtun*, xx.

⁴¹ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 172.

to the Mediterranean and preventing the United States from escalating the conflict with Tripoli. It would also have set a precedent that an officer could stop the navy and demand his own desires be met by simply threatening to resign. For all his previous contributions to his country, Truxtun had become too great a liability to the service.⁴²

Reading Truxtun's letter, it is difficult to view it as anything but a resignation. He specifically used the words "quit the service," so he could hardly have been surprised when Smith removed him from the navy. He later insisted, however, that resignation was the farthest thing from his mind, and that he had hoped to continue in the service of his country, despite refusing to follow the Secretary's orders. His biographer speculates that this was the last of multiple instances of Truxtun convincing himself of his own outlandish claims, arguing so vehemently that even he came to believe he had not intended to resign.⁴³ In a pamphlet distributed to counter supposed attacks on his honor made by the *National Intelligencer*, Truxtun insisted that he only meant to decline his orders to the Mediterranean, as the elder Smith had allowed him to do, and that had Robert insisted on his proceeding, he would have done so despite the absence of a flag-captain. His letter, he insisted, was merely a request for a more agreeable service than the one he was ordered to.⁴⁴

Smith could have easily ignored Truxtun from this point on. He clearly resigned from the navy in his last letter to Smith, and his delay in responding when the new secretary returned his commission stripped him of any legitimate claim to the contrary. Truxtun waited a full three years before trying to return to the navy, in 1805, and he then insisted that

⁴² Portions of this discussion were taken from Thomas Sheppard, "Petty Despots and Executive Officials: Civil-Military Relations in the Early American navy," MA Thesis, Florida State University, 2010.

⁴³ Fergusen, *Truxtun*, 227.

⁴⁴ Truxtun to Smith, 7 September, 1805, Truxtun Papers, HSP.

his health had been too debilitated for him to respond when he received the Smith's letter informing him he was being replaced. While Truxtun was legitimately ill at the time, this assertion strained credulity. It also raises the question of why he did not ask to be relieved of command of the squadron to take a sabbatical for his health, as he certainly could not have commanded multiple ships if he was unable even to write a letter.

However outlandish Truxtun's case might have seemed, Smith apparently hesitated to handle the matter himself. Perhaps he feared alienating his current officers by harsh treatment of a war hero, or he may have hoped to build goodwill with them by including them in the decision to allow a brother officer back into the ranks of captains. Conceivably, he saw some merit in Truxtun's claims. Most likely, though, Smith simply wanted support before making the decision to reject a man who enjoyed considerable public support following his exploits in the war with France. Whatever his reasoning, Smith apparently pondered the idea of seeking counsel for some time. He wrote to Stephen Decatur alone at first, explaining Truxtun's argument and asking for the celebrated war hero's opinions. Decatur responded unequivocally that he did not "consider it in the power of an officer to resign any particular service he may be ordered to, however hazardous or disagreeable."⁴⁵ Not fully satisfied, Smith then sent a circular letter to four of his most noted captains. The brothers Samuel and James Barron, Edward Preble and William Bainbridge were all asked to give their professional opinion on Truxtun's claims, and encouraged to discuss the matter amongst themselves. The verdict was unanimous: Truxtun had specifically stated that he

⁴⁵ Decatur to Smith, January 14, 1805, Letters Sent.

wanted out of the service. His letter could only be interpreted as a resignation, and he was no longer an officer in the United States Navy.⁴⁶

Truxtun never gave up; for the remainder of his life, he pontificated to anyone who would listen about his qualifications to return to the navy and the cruel injustice of his government. He never budged from his insistence that members of the Jefferson Administration had acted maliciously towards him and that he was a victim of a conspiracy to ruin his reputation.⁴⁷ He even found a sympathetic ear in his former superior; Stoddert and Truxtun kept up regular correspondence after both retired. The former secretary wrote to Truxtun in 1810 that he expected Samuel Smith to be impeached from Congress and spoke contemptuously of the “two infamous brothers.”⁴⁸ Stoddert proved wrong in his views, and Truxtun’s relentless campaigning was to no avail.⁴⁹ For all his laudable attributes, for all that he had given America, his ego had become too much of liability, and Smith turned to other officers to wage war in the Mediterranean.

Unfortunately, Truxtun was not the only officer in the U.S. Navy whose concept of personal honor interfered with the service. Steeped as they were in a tradition that allowed no insult, however trifling, to be ignored, many of junior officers showed more interest in fighting each other than in defeating the Barbary corsairs, and Smith could exert little influence over their conduct from thousands of miles away in Washington.

⁴⁶ Smith to Samuel Barron, October 18, 1805, Samuel Barron Papers, Box III, Early Gregg Swem Library, William and Mary University. Preble to Smith, November 3, 1805; Preble to Bainbridge, November 3, 1805; Bainbridge to Smith, November 15, 1805; James Barron to Smith, November 23, 1805, Captains’ Letters.

⁴⁷ Truxtun to William Patterson, June 14, 1806, Thomas Truxtun Correspondence, Box 51, Folder 1, LOC. Truxtun to Nicolas Biddle, May 30, 1814, Truxtun-Biddle Letters, HSP. See also Stoddert to Truxtun, 1808, Jones and Clark Papers, Box 1, Historical Society of Pennsylvania.

⁴⁸ Stoddert to Truxtun, January 10, 1810, Thomas Truxtun Correspondence, Box 51, Folder 1, LOC.

⁴⁹ Fergusen, *Truxtun*, 227-232.

Confined to minute quarters, with the accompanying boredom, chafing under the command of often-haughty captains, and without an outlet for their passions, it is not surprising that violence broke out among the earliest midshipmen of the navy. On top of all this, young officers in the U.S. Navy carried a hypersensitive sense of honor, and refused to tolerate the slightest insult. The “insults” that drove men to duel would be comical were the results not so deadly. One young man died for refusing to remove his hat upon entering a room; others traded shots over a spilled container of ink ruining a new vest, and one lieutenant sacrificed his life “for the preference in a simple game of billiards.”⁵⁰ Prevailing views on honor made it difficult for men to avoid duels even when they wanted to. That a man did not feel slighted by another’s action could not absolve him from issuing a challenge if his companions viewed him with contempt for refusing to do so, as seen in the clash between Richard Somers and his shipmates.⁵¹

Duels even occasionally took place between officers of unequal rank, such as a conflict between Marines James McKnight, the brother-in-law of Decatur, and Richard Lawson, both of the *Constellation*. The two men served together in 1802, during the early stages of the Tripolitan War. McKnight was a captain and Lawson a lieutenant. Lawson responded to a challenge from McKnight by insisting that they exchange shots from a distance of only three paces, prompting McKnight’s second to refuse the terms and label Lawson an “Assassin.” The matter should have ended there, yet Lawson could not resist the

⁵⁰ McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 403. For dueling in the Old Navy, my principle sources, in addition to McKee, have been Toll, *Six Frigates*, 218-221; and Charles Oscar Paullin, “Dueling in the Old Navy,” *United States Naval Institute Proceedings* 1909, 1155-1197. For ideas about honor, reputation, and dueling in the era, see Armstrong Starkey, *War in the Age of Enlightenment, 1700-1789* (Westport, CN: Praeger Press, 2003), 69-78; Joanne Freeman, *Affairs of Honor: National Politics in the New Republic* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 2001); and Douglas Adair, “Fame and the Founding Fathers,” *Fame and the Founding Fathers*, Trevor Colbourn, ed. (New York: Norton, 1974): 5-31.

⁵¹ Starkey, *War in the Age of Enlightenment*, 72; Toll, *Six Frigates*, 218-219.

opportunity to trumpet himself as having “proved the famous duelist a coward,” and sent a message to all the officers onboard to that effect. Such conduct could have no other result than to goad the captain into accepting the challenge. McKnight apparently intended to refuse to fight for a time, but the two continued quarrelling, until they had “aggravated each other to the highest pitch,” and finally agreed to fight at the still murderous distance of six paces. Lawson’s shot went directly through McKnight’s heart.⁵²

Thousands of miles away, and often learning of such incidents well after the fact, there was little Smith could do to curb dueling. Jefferson and the Congress likewise ignored the problem. One Congressman even urged that no action be taken against a duelist who had killed a young member of his family. Cornelius Dehart avoided prosecution for slaying William Nicholson in a duel when Joseph Nicholson, a member of the House of Representatives, wrote to the secretary of the navy asking him to allow Dehart to go free and maintain his rank. However “reprehensible” dueling might be, it remained “one of those evils consequent upon society,” which “the wisest legislators and the most able magistrates have for some hundred years in vain endeavored to check.” Nicholson generously, though almost certainly with accuracy, assumed that the duelist had only been following the example of “older, wiser, and more exalted men than himself” and more importantly “conceived in that moment his own life or that of his adversary a necessary sacrifice to his reputation.” Representative Nicholson and his family called for their loved one’s killer to be released and

⁵² Captain Daniel Carmick, US Marine Corps, to Lieutenant Colonel Commandant William W. Burrows, US Marine Corps, October 15, 1802, *NDBW*, II:293-294. Alexander Murray, the captain overseeing both men, ordered Lawson and his second, Jacob Jones, placed under arrest and reported the incident to the Secretary, but it is unclear if either man was ever charged with a crime. Murray to Smith, November 7, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 310-311; Murray to Lieutenant Edward Hall, October 16, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 299.

wished for Stoddert and others to act “as though this unfortunate event had never happened.”⁵³

American legislators were not the only officials to show magnanimity to duelists who killed their opponents. In February of 1803, while stationed at Malta, Midshipman Joseph Bainbridge, with Stephen Decatur acting as his second, killed a young Irishman, John Corcoran, employed by the British government there. Sir Alexander Ball, British governor of the island, allowed the two Americans to escape to their own ship, where their superiors sent them back to the United States with no (surviving) rebuke.⁵⁴ Both young men returned to the Mediterranean within a matter of months. Henry Wadsworth, a midshipman, kept a diary of his time in the Mediterranean that included a brief account of this episode, which stressed Bainbridge’s complete justification for his actions.⁵⁵ Unlike later sources, he makes no mention of Ball demanding the two Americans’ arrest, for which there is no contemporary evidence. The British governor also declined to press charges against the British man who had acted as Corcoran’s second.⁵⁶ Whether the American government would have handed over Bainbridge and Decatur to avoid an international incident is an interesting question that, unfortunately, cannot be answered.

It had to be embarrassing for Smith to learn of so many of his future leaders killed in petty disputes with each other, and even more so to hear of them potentially creating

⁵³ Honorable Joseph Hopper Nicholson, Representative from Maryland, US Congress to the Secretary of the Navy, February 28, 1805, in *NDBW*, V: 376.

⁵⁴ Donald Sultana, “Coleridge, Stephen Decatur and the Mysterious Duelist at Malta,” *The Modern Language Review* 89 no. 2 (April 1994): 282-288. It seems probable someone in authority conveyed his displeasure to the two duelists orally, given the potential ramifications of the episode, but no official censure is recorded.

⁵⁵ Extract from the journal of Midshipman Henry Wadsworth, February 14, 1803, *NDBW*, II, 362.

⁵⁶ Sultana, “Mysterious Duelist.”

international tensions. But whatever emotions he may have felt never led him to take action against affairs of honor. As under Stoddert, much of the burden of policing junior officers and culling troublemakers from the ranks fell to captains, and this was especially true in the area of dueling. After losing McKnight to Lawson's bullet, Murray even proposed amending the naval regulations to include harsh penalties, including the revocation of commission, for anyone who participated in or failed to prevent a duel.⁵⁷ Nothing came of it. After losing his brother-in-law in a foolish affair of honor, Stephen Decatur curbed his own propensity for engaging in duels and closely monitored his subordinates, eventually issuing a standing order that all disputes be referred to him, as captain of the ship, for arbitration before resorting to violence.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, a decade later he felt no compulsion to take a similar dispute to his civilian superiors, and Decatur himself died in a duel. Ideas about honor held at all ranks in the navy made the practice inevitable, and most captains seem willing to turn a blind eye unless it became epidemic.⁵⁹

The propensity to duel was but one symptom of an officer corps that could be brash, reckless, or simply uncontrollable, and although successive commodores in the Mediterranean found their hands full of such men, they also worked to purge the corps of the most problematic. "I have great cause to complain of the conduct of (my) midshipman," Samuel Barron, the fourth commodore sent to Tripoli, bemoaned. "They are young men

⁵⁷ Murray to Smith, November 7, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 310-311

⁵⁸ Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 32.

⁵⁹ There was ample precedent in European militaries for ignoring the practice. Starkey, *Age of Enlightenment*, 73-76 argues that during the American Revolution, French regulations against dueling were "more theoretical than real. They scarcely applied to those that did not kill their adversaries." The British likewise showed incredible leniency to officers who engaged in duels or issued challenges, with court-martials occasionally punishing men who refused challenges with "conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman." See also, Mark Odintz, "The British Officer Corps, 1754-1783," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1988.

totally regardless of any order they receive and pay no kind of attention to their duty...no greater scene of confusion and disorder can possibly exist than at times does on this ship.”⁶⁰ Even worse, such rowdy behavior was not confined to ships, as midshipmen and lieutenants on shore in neutral ports could wreak havoc among America’s allies. The burden for dealing with such situations fell on commodores, with mixed results. Even officers who insisted on strict discipline aboard ship could be lax in checking the excesses of their men on shore. This was especially true when the targets of young officers’ explosive tempers and violent behavior were haughty British officers.⁶¹ Even when captains viewed their subordinates’ behavior with dismay, there does not seem to have been anyone with Truxtun’s force of will to maintain order over an unruly group of young gentlemen.

Moreover, captains often took upon themselves the authority to overlook or excuse unacceptable behavior, if they judged a young officer worthy of a second chance. While on shore leave in Syracuse in December of 1803, Midshipman Walter Boyd became roaring drunk and displayed blatant public intoxication, even abusing several locals. Exactly what Boyd did is unclear from the report sent to Commodore Edward Preble, only that he was guilty of some form of “abuse.” His attacks were not only against the civilian inhabitants of Syracuse, however. Two lieutenants, either also on leave or sent to find Boyd, ordered him back to his ship, whereupon Boyd began verbally abusing them as well. When one officer, identified only as Lieutenant Thorn, grabbed him, Boyd tackled his superior and it took three other officers to drag him back to his ship, where Preble placed him under arrest.⁶²

⁶⁰ Commodore Samuel Barron to the lieutenants of the *Philadelphia*, July 28, 1802 quoted in McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 186.

⁶¹ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 230-234; Toll, *Six Frigates*, 220-223;

⁶² Unknown to Edward Preble, December 4, 1803, Edward Preble Papers, Box 8, LOC, Manuscript Division, Washington DC. The signature on this document has become illegible. It is unclear from the text if the sender

Boyd sent the commodore a contrite letter, after sobering up, and promised to conduct himself honorably from that point on.⁶³ He swore that his actions were the results of too much drink, and purely an isolated incident. For restless young men confined to a ship for long periods of time and then released for brief periods of freedom, the fact that many of them used the opportunity to become drunk and create mischief should not come as a surprise. Two aspects of Boyd's case are remarkable. Not only did Boyd create havoc at a vitally important neutral port, he also physically attacked at least two superior officers. Yet, if Boyd is to be believed in his letter to Preble, the lieutenants whom he attacked granted him their forgiveness. Moreover, despite the gravity of his actions, Preble never bothered to summon a court martial, clearly within his rights under the Articles of War, and left no record of a written reprimand. Whatever private discussions he had with his errant midshipman, Preble had a record of displaying mercy to subordinates whom he believed would benefit from a second chance, and this is yet another case of his doing so. While he did value the service and wanted to purge it of young officers who would bring their country grief, he preferred to do so himself rather than allowing official procedures to dictate the consequences. There were in fact no courts-martial during Preble's tenure in the Mediterranean. This does not mean that he had no difficulties with his officers, as Boyd demonstrates, or that he uniformly let them escape without punishment. Officers who were obviously unfit to hold commissions in the navy could usually be induced to resign, sparing them the stain of removal. But Preble regularly took it upon himself to excuse with light

was with Lieutenant Thorn, who is referred to in the third person, another of the officers present at the time or another party to whom the events were reported for transmission to Preble.

⁶³ Walter Boyd to Edward Preble, December 5, 1803, Preble Papers, Box 8.

punishment offenses that, while warranting dismissal, he believed to be aberrations in promising young men.⁶⁴

If Smith and Jefferson were happy to let their senior officers remove or retain unworthy subordinates at their discretion, the two shared Stoddert's willingness to personally yank captains who dallied in the performance of their duty, as Richard Valentine Morris painfully learned after replacing Truxtun. Morris' instructions, like Dale's, limited him to defending American commerce from attacking corsairs and blockading the coast of Tripoli. He managed to fall short of even those restricted orders, however.⁶⁵ Bringing along his wife, young son, and personal servant, Morris dallied in Gibraltar for two months, enjoying the fine company of his naval brethren from Britain there while the coastline of Tripoli remained open. Upon finally leaving Gibraltar, he took a less than direct course for Tripoli, escorting American and Swedish merchant ships, a decision for which the owners were no doubt grateful but which did little to aid the overall war effort. He then stopped off at Leghorn, where he again lingered longer than was absolutely necessary, and arrived at Tripoli in late January of 1803, only to return to Gibraltar in March, just when the weather was optimal for Tripolitan cruisers to go out against American merchantmen.

Morris's lackadaisical blockade infuriated the president, who ordered the captain home to face a court-martial for his conduct. "His conduct has been astonishing," Jefferson complained to Gallatin. "I know of but one supposition which can cover him; that is, that he has so far mistaken the object of his mission as to spend his time convoying." Even if Morris did interpret his orders that way, which seems unlikely given Smith's explicit instructions to

⁶⁴ McKee *Edward Preble*, 224-227.

⁶⁵ For Morris' tenure in the Mediterranean, I have relied heavily on McKee, *Edward Preble*, 109-122; Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 136-139; and London, *Victory in Tripoli*, 108-113.

maintain the blockade, the president would not have been satisfied. Jefferson's response explicitly outlined his expectations for his ships' captains, and implicitly revealed his vision for civil-military relations. Morris had received "latitude" and "discretion" in his instructions based on the supposition that "he had an ambition to distinguish himself."⁶⁶ The long distances and slow communications demanded both discretionary orders and ambitious officers to fill the gaps in those orders, and any officer who lacked such ambition was unworthy of his commission. Smith was equally incensed at the commodore, though for a slightly different reason. "We can obtain no information (from Morris) on what he is proposing to do. We have to generally rely upon others with respect to his movements," vented Smith to John Rodgers. Not only had Smith just learned second-hand of Morris' having left Gibraltar, where he should not have been in the first place, but "neither do I know where he is or what he is proposing to do."⁶⁷

Morris was guilty of two failures in terms of civilian expectations of naval officers at the time. On the one hand, he failed to display a vigorous, fighting spirit. Even if his orders did not grant him the ability to attack Tripoli on land, neither did they permit him to cruise entirely at his leisure. As Jefferson noted, the American government expected naval officers to zealously pursue distinction and give evidence of a willingness to risk their personal safety in combat. Young officers who were too brash or hot-tempered might be forgiven, even if they killed one of their own on the field of honor. But a mature commander who seemed too intimidated or lazy to wage warfare was inexcusable. Morris received orders that granted him a measure of discretion in the hope that he would make the most of his leeway. On the

⁶⁶ Jefferson to Gallatin, March 28, 1803, Ford, *Works of Jefferson*, IX: 317.

⁶⁷ Smith to Rodgers, June 21, 1803. This letter is the private possession of Mr. Frederick Rodgers, who allowed a copy to be made for McKee, *Edward Preble*, 114.

other hand, the extent of the discretion given came from the Navy Department and the president, not naval officers. Smith still expected to be apprised at all times – as best as possible given communications of the era – on where Morris was and what he planned on doing. For failure to do that, he incurred his superior's wrath. Furthermore, Morris lacked any discretion whatsoever on one point. "Whereas Richard V. Morris was specially instructed to...lay off against Tripoli and closely and vigorously blockade that port...and whereas a close and vigorous blockade of Tripoli hath not been made" Smith ordered a court of inquiry into Morris' conduct.⁶⁸

The court did not issue the ultimate rebuke on one of their own, ruling that Morris's actions did not result from "any deficiency in personal courage." While this was no doubt a relief to the commodore, the verdict still stung. It conceded that he rendered some "essential services" to the navy, but he nevertheless failed to "throw any degree of luster upon our arms." Simply performing the minimal requirement of his duties, without gaining honor for the service, was not enough. The court ruled that Morris might have been an acceptable commander of a single ship, if another stood in authority over him, but was unfit for command of a squadron. While it could have been worse, the court's findings were damning enough, and Morris resigned. In the meantime, John Rodgers was left in temporary command until a replacement for Morris arrived.⁶⁹

At this point, Smith finally found a competent officer who could lead his men effectively while also waging an aggressive war against the enemy. Edward Preble had been offered the Mediterranean command before, but he declined because of ill health. By the

⁶⁸"Concerning Commodore Morris' Squadron in the Mediterranean," August 31, 1803, *NDBW*, II: 526-531.

⁶⁹"Concerning Commodore Morris' Squadron in the Mediterranean," August 31, 1803, *NDBW*, II: 526-531.

time the cabinet determined to recall Morris, Preble felt up to the task, and Smith enthusiastically sent him to chastise Karamanli and achieve an honorable peace for the United States. Political considerations did intrude somewhat into Preble's selection. The captain, despite leaning towards the Federalists in his political outlook, managed to build a close personal friendship with Secretary of War Henry Dearborn, which allowed him to be invested with such momentous responsibility despite an as yet unimpressive naval career and frequent health problems.⁷⁰

For Rodgers, the interim until Preble arrived was a chance to show his mettle in the navy, and establish his own reputation.⁷¹ Yet by the time he received orders granting him temporary command, and fought through foul weather from his station at Leghorn to the American station at Gibraltar, Preble had already arrived, and Rodgers was denied his chance at "erecting a lasting monument to the zeal and regard I have for my country." Furthermore, Preble proudly displayed the commodore's pennant from his flagship, the *Constitution*, which Rodgers, who technically outranked Preble, deemed insulting.⁷² Preble, who was by nature more conciliatory, wrote to assure him that he only flew the pennant so that the ships of his squadron would know where their commander was located, and not seek out a ship from another squadron for orders. He assured his fellow officer that the flag "is not hoisted for the purpose of injuring your feelings," and that he had "no disposition to be on such

⁷⁰ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 88-89.

⁷¹ John Schroeder, *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early American navy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 34-37; Sheppard, "Petty Despots and Executive Officials."

⁷² McKee, *Edward Preble*, 147. Rodgers' quote about "erecting a lasting monument" is contained here.

terms...as to injure the interests of our country,” and expressed hope that Rodgers would let the matter rest.⁷³

His hopes proved in vain. “Permit me to observe,” Rodgers sniped back, “that this is not an affair between private individuals, and that my feelings *as an officer* have been most sensibly injured.” Preble need not bother citing the will of the government to justify his pennant either. “I do insist that, if the date of your commission is subsequent to mine, *it is not in the power even of the government* (italics added) to place you...in a situation...of treating me with disrespect.” Such language almost invariably would have preceded a challenge, however, Rodgers held back from this drastic step, citing “the interest of our country.” He promised to take the matter up again with Preble at a time when they were not on a distant station overseeing a war. In the meantime, he agreed to meet with Preble to discuss strictly naval and diplomatic matters.⁷⁴ It would appear from all available evidence that the two did indeed set aside their egos for the duration of Rodgers’ time in the Mediterranean, despite the obvious animosity that existed between them.⁷⁵ Had the two not been so far from home at the time, the situation likely would have escalated. Yet given that they were thousands of miles from the United States, and consequently certain that it would take months for the secretary to learn of their quarrel, a resignation from either officer at this point would have been nothing short of treasonous. Preble, furthermore, held the advantage, and therefore had less reason to feel injured.⁷⁶

⁷³ Preble to Rodgers, September 15, 1803, *NDBW*, III, 46-47.

⁷⁴ Rodgers to Preble, September 15, 1803, *NDBW*, III, 47.

⁷⁵ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 147-148.

⁷⁶ It is also noteworthy that dueling, while prevalent in the Old Navy, tended to confine itself to junior officers. The older, and higher in rank, a man became, the less likely he was to resort to the field of honor. Paullin, “Dueling in the Old Navy,” 1156.

With matters with Rodgers settled, Preble could finally begin with his real job of humbling Tripoli and achieving an honorable peace for his country. Like his predecessors, Preble enjoyed a measure of autonomy in the use of the forces under his command. "The varying aspects of our affairs in the Mediterranean," along with the "great distance between this country and the probable places of your operations" led Smith to conclude that it would be "improper for the government to prescribe to you any particular course of conduct." Instead, the secretary informed Preble that he would be "unrestrained in your movements and at liberty to pursue the dictates of your own judgment," within the confines of broadly outlined orders. Preble's mission was to protect all American commerce and seamen, and to maintain the blockade of the port of Tripoli. Recalling Morris' lackadaisical performance, Smith especially stressed the latter point. Lest the commodore entertain any doubts that he was expected to exceed the dilatory performance of Morris, Smith concluded by reminding him that

(the) conduct for some time past pursued by our squadron in the Mediterranean has, unhappily, not been calculated to accomplish the object of government nor to make an impression on the enemy of our national character. We have therefore transferred to you the command of our forces in that sea in full confidence that you will maintain the dignity of your station and the FLAG of your country will not be dishonored in your hands.

In addition to pointedly reminding him to act aggressively for the sake of his country's honor, Smith also restricted Preble's ability to seize prizes, reminding him that his foremost duty was to protect American vessels, and that the capture of Tripolitan ships could only come as a byproduct of such actions. Finally, Smith cleared up the issue of negotiations with Karamanli. Preble could negotiate prisoner exchanges, should the opportunity arise, but Jefferson calculated that the time was right for a civilian emissary, and Tobias Lear sailed with the squadron to act as consul to Algiers and also to negotiate a treaty with Tripoli.

There would not be a repeat of Dale's missed opportunity to end the conflict because of confusion over the power to treat with the Bashaw.⁷⁷

Although initially very optimistic about his chances, disaster struck almost as soon as Preble arrived. In November of 1803, while serving in Preble's squadron as captain of the *Philadelphia*, Bainbridge allowed himself and over 300 other Americans to fall into the hands of the Bashaw of Tripoli. While pursuing an enemy vessel, he strayed too close to shore, and grounded his ship. Faced, he believed, with the choice of either surrendering or destroying the ship and all aboard, he wasted no time on making a decision. "I never presumed to think that I had the liberty of putting to death 306 Souls because they were placed under my command," he insisted to Preble.⁷⁸ Indeed, Bainbridge's mortification at his plight is clearly evident from the stream of letters he sent Preble in the days immediately following his capture, filled with excuses and assurances of the impossibility of preserving the ship.

In the opening of his letter to the Secretary, Preble was furious. "This affair distresses me beyond description and very much deranges my plans," he lamented. In that same letter he put forth thinly veiled criticism of his now imprisoned subordinate. "Would to God, that the officers and crew of the *Philadelphia* had one and all determined to prefer death to slavery," he bemoaned, concluding that "it is possible such a determination might have saved them from either."⁷⁹ While it is unlikely Preble truly wished that Bainbridge had led his crew on a mission of collective suicide, Preble was also a fighter, waging near

⁷⁷ Smith to Preble, July 13, 1803, *NDBW*, II: 474-477.

⁷⁸ Bainbridge to Preble, November 25, 1803, in *NDBW*, III, 175. For an account of Bainbridge's loss of the *Philadelphia*, see David Long, *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1981), 71-77.

⁷⁹ Preble to Secretary of the Navy, December 10, 1803 in *NDBW*, III, 256-258.

constant battle against the city while he was in command. It strains credulity to envision him surrendering a vessel as quickly as had his subordinate, without even token resistance.

Worse, if Preble had hoped that the ship was damaged beyond hope upon grounding, and was unable to offer any resistance, he soon learned that Tripoli now had the *Philadelphia* in its possession, in near perfect condition, for use against his remaining squadron. Historian Craig Symonds notes that Bainbridge had given up the fight “so precipitously that (he) had to send Porter out in a ship’s boat to inform the incredulous Tripolitians that the *Philadelphia* had in fact surrendered.”⁸⁰

His outburst to the secretary about “(preferring) death to slavery” was the last Preble ever said on Bainbridge’s conduct. Even given the obvious distress he felt at the loss, there is little in this document that actually reflects negatively on Bainbridge. He immediately eased his tone after this comment, however, offering to let the secretary form his own opinion from Bainbridge’s report.⁸¹ From captivity, Bainbridge received a generous letter from Preble offering reassurance of the commodore’s full confidence in his abilities as an officer, despite the loss of his ship.⁸² Despite his frustration at the setback, Preble maintained a calm demeanor and never again disparaged Bainbridge.⁸³

After the war, Bainbridge appeared before a court-martial to account for the loss of the *Philadelphia*, a routine practice at the time, and escaped without censure. This must have come as a tremendous relief, for he surely spent many an hour in his captivity reflecting on

⁸⁰ Craig Symonds, “William Bainbridge: Bad Luck or Fatal Flaw,” in Bradford, *Command Under Sail*, 97-125. This quote can be found on page 109.

⁸¹ Preble to Secretary of the Navy, December 10, 1803 in *NDBW*, III, 256-258.

⁸² Long, *Ready to Hazard*, 89.

⁸³ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 181-182.

Isaac Phillips and William Maley's fate. Losing his ship might have been forgiven him, even if he erred in allowing it to be stranded. But to give it up without a fight could have easily cost him his commission. The reasons for Bainbridge's generous treatment are unclear. Following the successful treaty ending the war with Tripoli, the mood in the Navy Department was celebratory, and no one felt the need to tarnish victory with proceedings against an officer. Decatur's subsequent burning of the *Philadelphia* directly under Tripoli's guns was a source of tremendous pride for the navy and the American public, and it seems likely that no one wanted to darken the memory of the event by suspending or cashiering Bainbridge. Furthermore, Bainbridge had been in captivity in Tripoli for several months by the time the treaty secured his freedom, regularly providing intelligence in the form of invisible ink to Preble. His services likely gained him a measure of goodwill, and he had the benefit of not being tried for the loss of his vessel until well after the fact, when the shock of the event had passed.⁸⁴ Whatever the reason, Bainbridge's treatment after his release from captivity marked an exception to the navy's usual policy of removing any officer who displayed the least timidity.

Although the loss of the *Philadelphia* frustrated Preble's plans it did not dampen his ardor to wage an effective war. He oversaw the daring raid by Stephen Decatur to burn the *Philadelphia* while it sat in Tripoli's harbor, catapulting the younger Decatur to fame. He also enjoyed more freedom to launch attacks against Tripoli itself than his predecessor's had, and he sent gunboats against the city multiple times. He even tried using a fireship, a vessel loaded with combustible material sent as a giant weapon, but the attempt failed when the ship exploded prematurely, killing its entire crew without injuring Tripoli in the slightest. All his

⁸⁴ For Bainbridge's court of inquiry, see Long, *Ready to Hazard*, 99-102.

efforts came to little, in fact. Undermanned after losing the *Philadelphia*, Preble made do as best he could with limited resources, but Karamanli stubbornly held on, believing that his American prisoners provided him with a trump card that would guarantee a favorable treaty.

While Jefferson and Smith were perfectly satisfied with Preble's performance, an accident of command structure forced them to recall him. While Bainbridge's capture took place in November of 1803, it was months before word could travel back to Washington and Jefferson did not learn of the loss until spring of 1804. When he finally learned the fate of the *Philadelphia*, Jefferson immediately sent reinforcements, but had to send a commander senior to Preble in charge of the forces, forcing the commodore's recall. The man chosen to replace Preble was Samuel Barron, the brother of James Barron and a man who, like Preble, was prone to illness. Barron's squadron arrived with word that Preble had been relieved in September of 1804.⁸⁵

Along with the change in command of the squadron came a new development. William Eaton, a captain in the U.S. Army and also the resident diplomat in Tunis, finally received permission to recruit Yusef's brother, Hamet Karamanli, for an expedition to depose the troublesome Bashaw and establish a regime friendlier to the United States in Tripoli. Eaton and Barron sought to force the Bashaw to terms while Lear prepared to negotiate an end to hostilities.⁸⁶ This three-headed command structure was bound to create tension, all the more so since Eaton had a long history of friction with naval officers. He had repeatedly accused naval officers of neglecting their duties to him, and took it upon himself to provide the secretary of State with a detailed account of every shortcoming displayed by one of his

⁸⁵ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 222-225.

⁸⁶ Lambert, *Barbary Wars*, 150.

brethren at sea that he encountered (in fairness, many of his criticisms were not inaccurate, especially with respect to Morris).⁸⁷ He also wrote Alexander Murray to censure his conduct, prompting the captain to remind him that “our government will determine whether I was right or wrong in my proceedings.”⁸⁸

Finally free to launch his daring expedition, Eaton enjoyed great success. A force under his and Hamet’s command captured the city of Derne, second only to the capital of Tripoli in importance, and they prepared to launch an attack on the capital. Jefferson, however, never actually planned to assume responsibility for propping up a ruler in Tripoli who had already failed to maintain power once before, and who lacked his brother’s ability to manage affairs of state effectively. Hamet was intended solely as a way to put pressure on Yusef, a fact Eaton never fully appreciated. While Lear scrambled to complete an acceptable treaty, and Yusef Karamanli, suddenly in a more conciliatory mood with his brother threatening, began backing off his more outlandish demands, Eaton gleefully prepared to march on Tripoli.⁸⁹

It was not to be. Fearing for the lives of over 300 Americans held in captivity in Tripoli after the loss of the *Philadelphia*, Lear decided to go ahead and sign a treaty. The United States paid \$60,000 in ransom to Tripoli for the release of the crew of the *Philadelphia*, despite Eaton’s certainty that Yusef Karamanli was on the brink of total defeat. He despondently evacuated Derne, leaving Hamet to face Yusef’s wrath with little hope of American support. The change in fortunes was “as strange a reverse in so short a time as was

⁸⁷ Eaton to Secretary of State, June 8, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 166-170.

⁸⁸ Murray to Eaton, August 18, 1802, *NDBW*, II: 238-239.

⁸⁹ Lambert, *Barbary Wars*, 150-155.

ever recorded in the disasters of war,” he complained, lamenting that he had been thrown from proud success and elated prospects to an abyss of hopeless wretchedness.”⁹⁰

Eaton vigorously proclaimed in pamphlets and correspondence that a treaty could have been had without any ransom or tribute, if only a final attack had been mounted.⁹¹ The terms were certainly better than any European power enjoyed, but Eaton remained convinced that peace was available for the taking at no cost if only his attack had been pressed with support from Barron’s squadron. Once the Senate ratified the treaty, Eaton shifted his attacks to anyone who had supported it.⁹² He found an ally in Preble, who wrote him to commiserate over the humiliating terms. The “sacrifice of national honor which has been made by an ignominious negotiation” sickened the former Mediterranean commander, and Preble expressed hope that the Senate would recall Lear and appoint Eaton in his stead.⁹³ The former Mediterranean commodore’s support, however, came only in the form of private condolences. Preble never publicly opposed the treaty, and loyally stood by his government.

The controversy surrounding the treaty nearly cost the navy the services of two of its most valued officers.⁹⁴ Almost immediately following the conclusion of hostilities, the ailing

⁹⁰ Eaton to Rodgers, June 13, 1805, *NDBW*, VI: 116-117.

⁹¹ The text of the treaty can be found via Yale’s *The Avalon Project*, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/19th_century/bar1805t.asp. On the controversy surrounding the treaty, see Lambert, *The Barbary Wars*, 158-160 and McKee, *Edward Preble*, 334-337.

⁹² Eaton kept up regular correspondence with Hamet for the remainder of his life, and continually urged the American government to care for him. He wrote John Rodgers in 1805 asking him to grant Hamet an interview and telling him that the former U.S. ally was considering another operation against his brother with the help of the Kingdom of Two Sicilies, Eaton to Rodgers, July 10, 1805, William Eaton Papers, LOC. Three years later, Hamet desperately appealed to his friend for help when his family was in dire straits financially, Bashaw to Eaton, November 29, 1808, Eaton Papers, LOC.

⁹³ Preble to Eaton, February 8, 1806, *NDBW*, VI: 364.

⁹⁴ Actual duels apparently generate more ink than near misses, and the secondary literature on the Barron-Rodgers Affair is thin. For discussion, see: Schroeder, *Commodore John Rodgers*, 53-56; and Sheppard, “Petty Despots and Executive Officials,” 43-44.

Samuel Barron returned to the United States to recover, leaving Rodgers in command of American forces in the Mediterranean. During his tenure as commander, Rodgers apparently either made comments disparaging Samuel Barron's leadership, possibly regarding his reluctance to resign command sooner, or the Barron brothers came to believe he had done so. James Barron, younger brother of Samuel, unsurprisingly took offense at this, and sent Rodgers a letter in the care of William Bainbridge expressing his displeasure. The communication reached Rodgers at the worst possible time. Already feeling that his reputation had been under attack during his absence, he returned to the United States in the summer of 1806 determined to take revenge on all whom he believed had "injured" him.⁹⁵ Outraged, he wrote to Barron assuring him that he was more than ready to meet him and "account for his claim."⁹⁶

By late 1806, the conflict between the two had degenerated into a seemingly inescapable morass. Barron insisted he fought for "vindication of his brother's honor,"⁹⁷ while Rodgers felt he had no choice but to take to the field of honor or face disgrace. Rodgers named Thomas Tingey as his second, while Barron chose Franklin Wharton, both fellow naval officers. Fortunately, before the two could schedule an "appointment," illness seized Barron, and the matter had to be delayed.⁹⁸ In the meantime, the entire messy episode became known among the officers of the navy and officials in Washington. Barron wrote in January of 1807 that the delay "has produced a family of opinion...greatly injurious to my

⁹⁵ B. Cocke to James Barron, July 29, 1806, James Barron Papers, Box I, Earl Gregg Swem Library, College of William and Mary.

⁹⁶ Rodgers to Barron, July 23, 1806, James Barron Papers, Box I.

⁹⁷ Thomas Tingey to Franklin Wharton, undated, though it had to have been written in July or August of 1806, James Barron Papers, Box I.

⁹⁸ Paullin, *John Rodgers*, 177-178.

character,” and insisted that his health had recovered and the duel must take place soon, lest he be forever branded a coward.⁹⁹

As the affair between two of his most senior officers reached its climax, Smith finally broke his silence on the matter. Yet even now, Smith was unwilling to directly address the approaching duel. Instead, he vaguely informed Barron that his “services will soon be required for purposes other than those to which they are now directed,” an oblique reference to the preparations for meeting Rodgers on the field of honor. He then pointedly ordered Barron to “give all your attention to the gunboat building under your direction...you will of course remain where the boats are building, and you will not move from that place without special orders from me.”¹⁰⁰ Smith gave similar orders to Rodgers, thereby making it impossible for them to meet in person without an act of blatant insubordination.¹⁰¹ Yet that is precisely what both were prepared to do. So insistent was Barron that the two meet, he expressed a willingness to violate orders to bring the matter to a close.¹⁰² Like Truxtun, Rodgers and Barron felt that they had no duty to follow orders that they believed would tarnish their reputations.

The duel was scheduled to take place at Havre de Grace, with Rodgers incredibly hoping “that it will be with such circumspection as to prevent the knowledge of his friends or the civil authorities,” despite the fact that the forthcoming meeting was by this point common knowledge in the Navy Department.¹⁰³ Where the wishes of their civilian commander in

⁹⁹ Barron to Rodgers, January 20, 1807, James Barron Papers, Box I.

¹⁰⁰ Smith to Barron, December 17, 1806, Rodgers Family Papers, Part III: Box 1, Library of Congress.

¹⁰¹ Wharton to Tingey, January 10, 1807, Rodgers Family Papers, Part III: Box 1, LOC.

¹⁰² Barron to Rodgers, January 20, 1807, James Barron Papers, Box I.

¹⁰³ Tingey to Wharton, February 1, 1807, James Barron Papers, Box I.

Washington failed, however, the intervention of fellow officers succeeded in preventing bloodshed. Unlike many duels, the seconds in this situation strove to bring about a peaceful settlement. Delays from Barron's illness and separation had, as Tingey hoped, given time for the principals to reflect on the enormity of their actions.¹⁰⁴

John Stricker, a fellow officer, wrote to Rodgers that he believed the controversy "might be settled without resorting to arms." Apparently, he had talked the matter over with Barron as well, and informed Rodgers that his potential opponent was having second thoughts about "calling" on him, but still felt insulted by "the style of your reply" to his letter sent via Bainbridge. By merely conceding that "your reply was the hasty suggestion of the moment-the effect of an instantaneous irritation that was excited by so unexpected a notification," he could settle the matter. Stricker felt confident that Rodgers could do so without a diminution of honor, and "put an end to an affair of much concern to your friends-and particularly so to the secretary of the navy." Rodgers succumbed to the prodding of his friends, and conceded to the terms outlined by Stricker. The seconds published a pamphlet, including the full text of Stricker's letter and a heading assuring readers that Barron and Rodgers's friends considered the terms "highly honorable to both parties."¹⁰⁵ Although pamphlets tended to have a fairly limited readership, the most crucial audience, Barron and Rodger's naval peers, would have certainly either read it or quickly heard of its contents. It was crucial that the two men not only avoid a duel and comply with the secretary's wishes,

¹⁰⁴ Tingey to Wharton, January 20, 1807, James Barron Papers, Box I.

¹⁰⁵ Copy of a Certificate for Publication with the Signatures of Franklin Wharton and Thomas Tingey together with a letter from Colonel Stricker to Com. Rodgers, Box 2, Rodgers Family Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Manuscript Division, LOC. Stricker, Tingey, and Wharton to Rodgers, March 9, 1807, Rodgers Family Papers, Part II: General Correspondence, Box I, LOC.

but that their peers recognize that they did so of their own volition and in perfect keeping with the standards of honor.¹⁰⁶

How much credit did Robert Smith deserve for the peaceful settlement? It seems probable that, despite their claimed intention to ignore his orders and trade shots in secret, Smith's intervention at least influenced both Barron and Rodgers to settle the matter peacefully. Neither ever said so, however, and agreed to set aside their differences only after being pushed to do so by their seconds, who were also fellow naval officers and therefore far better qualified to comment upon the implications for both men's reputations of failing to resort to the field of honor. Smith was apparently just relieved not to lose either man, and let the matter rest, though he must have known of their plans to fight anyway despite his orders. Two captains agreeing that their honor could be satisfied without resorting to arms in so long-standing a dispute was undoubtedly precedent enough. Besides, Smith had long ignored constant dueling for far more trivial causes among his younger officers, and he apparently felt no need to initiate a practice of civilian interference in such matters with the two celebrated naval heroes. Like Stoddert, he wanted an effective officer corps that did not irreparably damage itself through constant dueling, but that remained committed to the era's ideals of honor. By not dueling, Barron and Rodger's satisfied Smith's wishes for an effective officer corps that knew when to show appropriate restraint. By showing their willingness to duel unless absolutely certain settling their differences would leave their honor intact, they proved that American naval officers were in way weak, effeminate, or contemptible, a crucial point for a young nation still trying to prove itself.

¹⁰⁶ For pamphlets in the early republic, see Freeman, *Affairs of Honor*, 114-119.

Historians generally view the Tripolitan War as a partial success. The United States achieved a treaty with Tripoli that surpassed any terms enjoyed by Europe's powers, but failed to achieve its objective of total freedom of trade in the Mediterranean. Jefferson was obliged to keep a squadron in the Mediterranean at all times just to maintain the status quo, and within a few years America was at war in the region again. Still, the conflict provided another chance to train up a generation of naval officers and cull the corps of undesirables, two things that would be of immense value when the nation found itself at war with the Royal Navy during Madison's Presidency. The first war formally declared by at least one side under the Constitution, it gave the country a chance to work out the role of the president and Congress in the use of military forces during wartime.

The war also demonstrated anew the limits of civilian control over the navy. Civilian officials "supervising" officers thousands of miles from Washington, could only give broadly outlined orders, and stood by helplessly while brash young officers slew one another and embarrassed their country. Even among senior officers, the ability of the secretary of the navy to control their behavior had its limits in the face of entrenched ideas about personal honor. On the one hand, an officer, even one of Thomas Truxtun's caliber, could not bring the service to a standstill for the sake of his reputation. On the other hand, in personal squabbles Smith usually hesitated to intervene, and he nearly lost the services of two crucial captains, either from a lack of resolve to order them to settle their differences peacefully or because he knew they would ignore such an order. Naval officers were not insensible to their country's needs, however. Rodgers and Preble set aside their differences in the Mediterranean when a duel might have crippled America's war effort, and Rodgers again proved willing to compromise when his fellow officers intervened to prevent an affair of

honor with Barron. The two captains were surely happy to have the matter behind them, but the reprieve would be short-lived for Barron. His reputation was about to suffer a far more grievous blow than an angry verbal exchange.

“A Government Rigorously Frugal and Simple:” Naval Politics under Jefferson and Madison

I am for relying, for internal defense, on our militia solely, till actual invasion, and for such naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors from such depredations as we have experienced; and not for a standing army in times of peace, which may overawe the public sentiment, nor for a navy which by its own expenses and the eternal wars in which it will implicate us, will grind us with public burdens and sink us under them.

Thomas Jefferson¹

Oh, that some of the murderous balls had deprived me of the power of recollection the moment our colors were struck...you cannot conceive of my feeling...to have the finger of scorn pointing me out as one of the Chesapeake.

Lieutenant William Allen²

Few men knew the inner workings of the Navy Department more intimately, or cared more about its success, than Charles Goldsborough. Initially Stoddert's clerk, he was subsequently appointed Chief Clerk of the Navy Department, and went on to become one of its most influential men, serving in a variety of capacities until 1843.³ He worked closely with Robert Smith throughout Jefferson's administration, and later acted as interim secretary

¹ Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799, Paul Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson, Federal Edition*. 12 volumes, (New York and London, G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-5), VII: 327-328.

² Lieutenant William Allen to General William Allen, June 24, 1807, quoted in Ian Toll, *Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy* (New York: WW Norton, 2006), 299.

³ He was briefly removed from the department during the War of 1812, but soon returned (see chapter 5).

of the navy under Madison.¹ All that lay in the future in February of 1801, however, and Goldsborough foresaw only a bleak future for his beloved navy in the aftermath of Jefferson's election. Writing anxiously to Edward Preble, he feared the "new order of things [that] is now to be adopted" and expressed his dread that "our political ship is about to be launched...with an unskilled pilot at the helm." If Preble hoped to read some hint of optimism as the letter progressed, he was sorely disappointed. Goldsborough abruptly closed his missive, lamenting that "I forebear any reflections on this subject, as they cannot be otherwise than painful."² Goldsborough's fear is understandable, even if it proved unfounded. No one, Federalist or Republican, doubted Jefferson's staunch commitment to reduce government spending, and his party's opposition to the navy was widely known.

By the end of his administration, however, Jefferson's image among naval officers and naval advocates had improved considerably. Goldsborough himself became a close confidant to his boss at the Navy Department, Robert Smith. Captains drifted towards Republicanism in their politics, and some even showed genuine support for the gunboat program, more support, in fact, than many subsequent historians.³ Jefferson and Madison are

¹ Christopher McKee, *A Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession: The Creation of the US Naval Officer Corps, 1794-1815* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1991), 13-15; Charles Oscar Paullin, *Paullin's History of Naval Administration, 1775-1911, A Collection of Articles from the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1968), 123-124; Frank Owsley, "Robert Smith," Paolo Coletta, ed., *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 2 volumes, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), I:70.

² Goldsborough to Preble, February 20, 1801, quoted in Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972), 83.

³ James Fenimore Cooper, for example, dismissed the gunboats as "a species of force that, in its nature, is merely auxiliary to more powerful means, and which is entirely unfitted to the moral character of the people, as it is to the natural formation of the coast." Cooper, *The History of the Navy of the United States of America*, (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001, originally published 1846), 232. Forrest McDonald likewise took a harsh view of the gunboat program, alleging that Jefferson intended to "let the nation's magnificent Humphreys frigates rot in the wharves, and in 1805 [he] began to build a 'mosquito fleet' of gunboats in their place." Forrest McDonald, *The Presidency of Thomas Jefferson* (Lawrence, KN: University of Kansas Press, 1976), 44. Finally, Frank Owsley asserts that if "Jefferson had had his way, he would have placed nearly the entire peacetime naval force in the dry dock and discharged most of the officers and seamen." Owsley, "Robert Smith," *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 83.

justly criticized for the thoroughly unprepared state of the U.S. Navy going into the War of 1812, but they labored under a host of political and fiscal constraints. Though their administrations were not without mistakes when it came to the navy, they maintained the loyalty and support of the officer corps.⁴ The first decade of the nineteenth century could easily have become a crisis point for the infant navy. Instead, for all their devotion to honor and fears of Jeffersonian Republicans, the officer corps never wavered in its willingness to subordinate itself to the government. Slashed budgets, purging of the corps, and a hotly-contested gunboat program never provoked blatant insubordination. Robert Smith and his successor, Paul Hamilton, continued to negotiate spheres of authority with their officers, particularly in terms of duty assignments and the use of government funds, but where they held firm on their authority, it went unchallenged. Naval officers groused among themselves about their civilian superiors, but neither secretary ever faced a crisis of his authority.

While they felt frustration with their civilian superiors, the greatest threat to the officer corps' reputation came from one of its own. James Barron's humiliating performance as captain of the *Chesapeake* brought disgrace on the officer corps as a whole, and they labored under a cloud of shame until the outbreak of the War of 1812. The *Chesapeake-Leopard* incident did have the salutary effect of insuring that naval officers and the secretary of the navy were pursuing the same goal. Both recognized the humiliation of the officer corps, and the need to redeem its honor and professional image. James Barron became an unfortunate casualty of this, as his reputation was sacrificed for the good of the corps. But the entire affair only reinforced existing trends in the navy. Officers were subtly and not so

⁴ For some of the more scathing criticisms, see Adams, *History of the United States*; and Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain, the United States, and the War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012).

subtly pressured to act aggressively to redeem their corps' honor, while those who were perceived as timid, even if their actions were technically correct, received no mercy.

Jefferson came into office convinced that his election had narrowly subverted a Federalist plot to use the military as a tool for bypassing the will of the people and establishing a despotic government. His mission, however, was not to strip America of military power – he understood all too well the hostility of the Old World to his country – but to build a distinctly republican, and therefore Republican, style of military. As such, regular army officers were stationed on the frontiers, where they posed little threat to the civilian government. Somewhat ironically, he also fulfilled a longtime dream of the Federalists by creating the Military Academy at West Point, but not for the reasons that Federalists had proposed it. He hoped for an academy that would train up an officer corps steeped in Republican ideals. He also made political ideology one criteria for retaining or removing current officers, though merit was decidedly important as well.⁵ The naval officer corps experienced a purge as well, though Stoddert and Adams had already begun that process by the time Jefferson assumed office. But Jefferson's views on the country's maritime force extended beyond simply making it smaller and cheaper. The new president held two somewhat contradictory goals for the U.S. Navy. While he intended to use it to squelch Barbary piracy and improve America's international standing, he hoped to reform it to be more in keeping with the country's militia tradition, with a program that has become synonymous with his name: gunboats.

⁵ Theodore Crackel, *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment, 1801-1809* (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 54, 65, 71-73, 173-176.

It is easy to see Jefferson's two key contributions to American naval history, the Tripolitan War and the gunboat program, as in conflict. That Jefferson would use the large frigates his party had opposed building in an overseas venture, while at the same time planning to mothball them in favor of small, supposedly useless gunboats, is written off as a quirk of his often-contradictory personality.⁶ In truth Jefferson was never thoroughly anti-navy; he merely wanted to minimize expenditures and avoid provoking a war with Britain.⁷ He best summarized his views on naval forces in a letter to Elbridge Gerry just before the election of 1800. "I am for a government rigorously frugal and simple," he told Gerry, and went on to emphasize the importance of avoiding a navy that would suck America into Europe's "eternal wars."⁸ A small enough blue-water navy to enforce treaties in the Mediterranean and protect American commerce was sufficient in Jefferson's mind. And a navy, as opposed to an army, posed no threat to the American people. "Every rational citizen must wish to see an effective instrument of coercion, and should fear to see it on any other element but the water," Jefferson wrote to Monroe shortly after the Revolution. "A naval force can never endanger our liberties, nor occasion bloodshed; a land force would do both;" Jefferson saw in the navy a means of maintaining America's independence, both political and economic, without endangering the liberties they had fought for in the first place.⁹

Westward-focused, particularly after the Louisiana Purchase, his primary concern was defending America's coastline against attacks from the Royal Navy. Gunboats could

⁶ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 62.

⁷ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 648-649; Daughan, *If By Sea*, 350-351; Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 60-61.

⁸ Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, January 26, 1799, Ford, *Works of Jefferson*, VII: 327-328.

⁹ Jefferson to Monroe, August 11, 1786, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson Digital Edition*, ed. Barbara B. Oberg and J. Jefferson Looney. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, Rotunda, 2008.

accomplish this, without at the same time provoking Britain into war, since they lacked any offensive capacity to threaten rival nations.¹⁰ That the gunboats ultimately proved woefully inadequate to this mission in the War of 1812 should not obscure the fact that they were not universally despised during Jefferson's administration. For all their trepidation prior to the election, no naval officers viewed the gunboat program as an existential threat at the time. Many even showed genuine support for it. The views of the gunboat ranged from thorough distaste to genuine support. But, in a sign of growing commitment among the officers to complete civilian control, the attitudes of officers never hindered the program. While they might complain privately to one another, officers all set about constructing the vessels and fulfilling Jefferson's wishes to the best of their ability. Unlike the recently departed Truxtun, no officer threatened to resign rather than face the shame of being assigned to gunboat duty, and none turned to newspapers or pamphlets to oppose the program to the public, even anonymously. Whatever long-term problems the gunboats created – and these were certainly real – they did not precipitate a crisis of civilian control, but rather demonstrated the officer corps' growing devotion to it.

As to the gunboats themselves, historians have begun to rehabilitate the frequently lambasted program. No one has gone so far as to say it was a good idea, but scholars are at least more sympathetic to the challenges Jefferson faced and acknowledge his logical basis for creating the system.¹¹ Gunboats were small, shallow-draft vessels limited in their ability

¹⁰ "President Jefferson's Message to Congress," William Dudley and Michael Crawford, eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* 3 volumes (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1985-) I: 15.

¹¹ More sympathetic interpretations of the gunboat program can be found in Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 144-145; and Malone, *Jefferson the President: First Term*, 442. While openly hostile to Jefferson and the Republicans in many regards, Andrew Lambert also acknowledges that the gunboat program was a sound outgrowth of Jeffersonian policy, and warns against judging it in light of subsequent American history. Lambert, *The Challenge*, 34-35. Samuel Watson, "Trusting to 'the Chapter of Accidents': Contingency, Necessity, and Self-Constraint in Jeffersonian National Security Policy," *Journal of Military*

to go far beyond the coastline, but they were rowed independent of the wind, and could cripple larger ships in enclosed waters, especially when they were becalmed.¹² Since Jefferson wisely decided to spread construction across the country, insuring economic benefit to numerous cities, there was no single design, but all ranged from forty-five to seventy feet in length and mounted one or two guns in the bow.¹³ They were not Jefferson's invention, nor were they particularly novel when he began the program. European powers had been using them in the Baltic and Mediterranean for over a century by this point. The shallow coastal waters in the Mediterranean were ill-suited to large frigates, and as early as 1794 Thomas Truxtun had urged the creation of a fleet of gunboats for use against the Barbary Powers.¹⁴ His ideas were vindicated after he left the navy. Gunboats proved valuable in the Tripolitan War; Preble used them in an offensive capacity in shallow waters, and commanders in the region contracted with Italian states to build more. Meanwhile, tensions with Spain over the Mississippi River basin at New Orleans demonstrated the need for riverine vessels at home. Jefferson soon went beyond simply building a few gunboats for use in the Mississippi, however. He determined to build a fleet of them.¹⁵

History 76 no. 4 (October 2012), 973-1000 critiques Jefferson's entire military policy as unfit to meet his goals, but focuses more on the Army than the Navy. Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, 86-90 also recognizes Jefferson's naval policy as complex, far from instinctively hostile, and a rational outgrowth of Jefferson's politics.

¹² Two works are absolutely essential for understanding Jefferson's gunboat program: Gene Smith, *For the Purposes of Defense: The Politics of the Jeffersonian Gunboat Program* (Newark, NJ: University of Delaware Press, 1995); and Spencer Tucker, *The Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1993).

¹³ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 144-145; Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 36. For an extended discussion of gunboat design and construction, see Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 36-64.

¹⁴ Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 7.

¹⁵ Smith, *Purposes of Defense*, 23-26, 73-93; Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 17.

They were never intended to remove the need for frigates.¹⁶ Albert Gallatin presciently warned the president that his opponents would cast them as such. In his comments on Jefferson's 1804 annual message, he lamented that "the efforts made in the federal papers to impress the idea that this establishment is intended as a substitute for the navy have so far succeeded that some distortion of the president's recommendations will take place."¹⁷ He was certainly proven right, though how much credit he deserves for correctly predicting the Federalist press would lambast anything Jefferson did is debatable. William Plumer, a prominent Federalist Senator, blasted the vessels as being "incapable...of being of use to us."¹⁸ Meanwhile, the *Washington Federalist* printed a letter referring to Jefferson's program as a "wasteful imbecility."¹⁹

One group that did not attack the gunboats, however, was the Navy Department. While Robert Smith apparently felt some qualms about the force, he mostly kept them to himself.²⁰ Naval officers themselves generally accepted the new fleet as well. They expressed concern that shore-based small vessels would be inadequate for training young officers, but managed to work around this difficulty.²¹ Their personal views on the gunboats

¹⁶ Even John Adams acknowledged Jefferson's pro-navy credentials, once the bitterness over the 1800 election passed. See Adams to Jefferson, October 15, 1822, Lester Cappon, ed. *The Adams-Jefferson Letters: The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams* 2 volumes, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), II: 582-584. See also, Jefferson to Adams, November 1, 1822, Cappon, *Adams-Jefferson Letters*, II: 584-585 for a concise summary of Jefferson's largely unchanged views on navies late in life.

¹⁷ Gallatin to Jefferson, October 29, 1804, Ford, *Works of Thomas Jefferson*, VIII: 327.

¹⁸ Quoted in Smith, *Purposes of Defense*, 34.

¹⁹ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 286.

²⁰ George Davies, "Robert Smith and the Navy," *Maryland Historical Magazine*, XIV no. 4 (December 1919), 305-322; Owsley, "Robert Smith," *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 85.

²¹ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 156-158.

as a fighting force were mixed but muted. Early in his assignment to supervise construction of several gunboats, Stephen Decatur privately grumbled to Bainbridge that it would not be any great loss if the whole fleet of them sank, and during the war scare with Great Britain in 1807 he urged the secretary to assign him to a frigate, believing that such a post offered more prestige. But he otherwise energetically performed his duty to make sure his particular gunboats were of the highest quality and kept his personal feelings to himself.²² When Jefferson consulted Samuel Barron and Thomas Tingey for their views, both strongly encouraged the use of gunboats to defend rivers and shallow coastal waters. Tingey even acknowledged that the Royal Navy made substantial use of gunboats. Neither in any way implied that gunboats could replace frigates, or that they believed that was the president's intention. Rather, they acknowledged the defensive value of gunboats in coastal waters and rivers.²³ William Bainbridge likewise campaigned for the construction of gunboats and later supervised their construction without voicing any objection to them.²⁴

Not only did officers grant support to the gunboat program, but many in the process became more friendly towards Jefferson himself. Preble, although a longtime Federalist, became a genuine supporter of his Republican commander-in-chief. Indeed, he was even widely rumored as a possible nominee for secretary of the navy should Robert Smith step down. While nominally Federalist, Preble's first devotion was to his country and its naval service, and his biographer identifies him as "apolitical" and largely supportive of the administration, making him an early paragon of what would later be held up as the ideal

²² Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 81; Tucker, *Stephen Decatur*, 86-88.

²³ Barron to Jefferson, February 8, 1807; Tingey to Jefferson, February 9, 1807, William Lowrie and Walter Franklin, eds., *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, 4 volumes (Washington DC: Gales and Seton, 1834) I: 164.

²⁴ Long, *Ready to Hazard*, 104-105; 112-115.

military officer under a democratic government.²⁵ Having used gunboats against Tripoli, he became a fairly enthusiastic proponent of their value, and threw himself into the task of overseeing their design and construction.²⁶ Isaac Hull likewise drifted towards Republicanism at this time, and applied himself to the president's gunboat program without complaint. After accusations from a naval agent by the name of Constant Taber that Hull was a staunch Federalist, Robert Smith thoroughly vetted his politics, and found him and his family to be strong supporters of Jefferson.²⁷ Hull was allowed to continue work on gunboat construction, and he determined to produce vessels of the highest possible quality.

All these officers were outspoken men who had commanded frigates before, and none would have failed to raise some objection if Jefferson had indeed planned to scuttle the seagoing navy in favor of an exclusive focus on coastal defense. Rather, naval officers recognized the gunboats' value as part of a varied force that could respond to all potential threats. No one resigned in a huff over being assigned to oversee their construction, nor were there any openly critical letters sent to the Department protesting their use. With the country at peace, however temporarily, there were few opportunities for officers to distinguish themselves at sea, and they genuinely believed the gunboats would be useful protecting coastal cities in the event of a war. Perhaps too, they hoped that the presence of gunboats

²⁵ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 81-81; 314-322. Whether Preble was ever seriously considered for the post is doubtful, but McKee rightly notes the significance of the mere fact that the rumor attaching his name to a Republican administration was able to gain such traction.

²⁶ Boxes 18 and 19 of the Edward Preble Papers at the Library of Congress contain voluminous correspondence on the design, construction, and manning of gunboats. That Preble performed the task to the best of his abilities, with keen attention to detail, is obvious. This is not the correspondence of a man half-heartedly performing a distasteful job.

²⁷ Linda Maloney, *The Captain from Connecticut: The Life and Naval Times of Isaac Hull* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1986), 122-124.

along the coast for defense gave them their best chance of taking the larger frigates out to sea and challenging the Royal Navy.

All of these reasons, however, should not detract from the reality that an officer corps, possessing a carefully-cultivated culture of aggressive pursuit of honor, completely accepted the transition to a fleet of small gunboats intended solely for defense. While the administration wisely consulted at least some officers for their expert opinions, it seems clear that all the officers set aside whatever qualms they might have felt and fulfilled their duties assigned by the administration. No crisis of civilian control arose, and Robert Smith never had to assert his authority on the issue; all officers complied without complaint.

One of Jefferson's greatest fears when it came to seagoing frigates was antagonizing the British. He was well aware of the recent example made of the Danes. When the Danish government proposed armed neutrality in the Anglo-French war, refusing to participate but repelling attempts by either to interfere with its shipping, Britain sent a squadron to Copenhagen in 1801 and utterly destroyed or seized the entire Danish Navy. Jefferson had no desire to watch his country suffer a similar fate.²⁸ Britain, on the other hand, lacked Jefferson's concern when it came to avoiding provocation. Throughout his administration, the Royal Navy continued its practice of seizing men from the U.S. Navy, despite the provocative nature of such actions. In August of 1805, Lieutenant James Lawrence reported that his ship, *Gunboat No. 6*, had been stopped by two significantly larger British vessels, and that three of his men had loudly called out to their former shipmates on board that they were British subjects, one of them even confessing to desertion. Lawrence rowed over to the

²⁸ Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, 88-89.

Flora to discuss the matter with the British Admiral Rothman. He positively refused to surrender the men, but assured Rothman that he would investigate the matter when they reached Gibraltar and gladly hand them over if American authorities determined their claims to be British subjects were true. Rothman was unimpressed. Meanwhile, Lawrence's second in command, Lieutenant Roach, ignored positive orders not to allow the men to be taken and stood by as they were rowed over to the *Flora* only a few minutes after Lawrence. One can only imagine Lawrence's humiliation when, even as he adamantly protested that he would never surrender a single man under his command, he glanced out the window of the Admiral's cabin and saw the three alleged British sailors gleefully returning to the Royal Navy.²⁹

Roach pleaded that the men had jumped overboard without his knowledge, although depositions from some of the crew claim that he tamely allowed the British to seize the men.³⁰ Lawrence, highly conscious of standing orders in the navy, duly offered up his sword and his ship as soon as he saw the men had been taken back into the Royal Navy. Rothman brusquely refused, and sent him away. He could count himself lucky. The navy apparently felt he had done his duty and responsibility rested with Roach and the deserters.³¹ Other victims of Britain's desperate need for seamen would not be so fortunate.

Despite accusations that Jefferson wanted to disband the frigates altogether, he continued to send them to the Mediterranean well after the final treaty with Tripoli was signed. Determined to hold on to the hard-won gains of the recent war, he planned to keep at

²⁹ Lawrence to John Rodgers, June 12, 1805, *NDBW* VI: 112-113.

³⁰ Depositions Concerning Impressments, and Roach to Rodgers, June 12, 1805, *NDBW* VI: 113-114.

³¹ Rodgers placed Roach under arrest for neglect of duty and sent him home. His fate is uncertain, though given the fate of several earlier officers it is hard to imagine him ever going to sea again. Rodgers to Smith, August 21, 1805, *NDBW* VI: 243.

least one frigate there at all times to enforce existing treaties. By the summer of 1807, it was time to relieve Rodgers and the *Constitution*. For this mission, Robert Smith dispatched a vessel soon to acquire a reputation as a cursed ship, the *Chesapeake*, captained by Rodgers' recent nemesis, James Barron.

Late in life, Barron penned a brief account of his naval career. Perhaps he hoped to use it to repair his shattered image, but if so he obviously judged the effort as hopeless, because the account was never published. Any reader unfamiliar with his life would probably conclude that Barron played only a minor role in American history. While he dwells on his creation of a naval signal code that greatly improved ship communication, a source of legitimate pride for the remainder of his life, the rest of his discussion of his own career includes only minor episodes and stints as commander of the Philadelphia Navy Yard and the Naval Asylum. The truth, however, is that Barron is among the most discussed figures in the formative years of the American navy, but not for anything which he wanted to include in his own life story.³² There is no mention of his near duel with Rodgers, no mention of his fatal encounter with Decatur and absolutely no mention of his command of the *Chesapeake*. Barron had the misfortune to preside over one of the most embarrassing episodes in American military history, and spent the rest of his life trying to rehabilitate a ruined career and reputation.

He set sail for the Mediterranean on June 22, 1807.³³ No doubt his mind was fixated on American relations with the Barbary Powers, and how he could best maintain the recent

³² Autobiographical material, James Barron Papers, Box I, Early Gregg Swem Library.

³³ The major primary source of the *Leopard's* engagement with the *Chesapeake* is the full transcript of Barron's court-martial, *Proceedings of the general court martial convened for the trial of Commodore James Barron, Captain Charles Gordon, Mr. William Hook and Captain John Hall of the United States' ship Chesapeake, in the month of January 1808* (Washington DC: Jacob Gideon Junior, 1822). The only secondary work devoted exclusively to this incident is Spencer Tucker and Frank Reuter, *Injured Honor*. It is given at least some

treaties and promote his country's interests. Britain was among the least of his worries. Nonetheless, 1807 was a troubled year for American relations with its former colonial masters. British seizure of American cargoes and impressments of American sailors were on the rise. Locked in a desperate battle with Napoleon and increasingly irate at the desertion of sailors into America's navy and merchant fleet, the island nation prepared to take drastic steps.³⁴ Upon learning that British deserters were not only aboard the *Chesapeake*, but openly (and foolishly) flaunting the fact to British officers they encountered on shore in Norfolk, Vice Admiral of the White, Sir George Cranfield Berkeley, Commander in Chief of the British North American Station, sent out a circular to all captains in the area alerting them about these men, and giving orders for the *Chesapeake* to be stopped and its crew mustered and searched. This was a seriously belligerent order, even by the standards of British practice at the time. While British officers had attempted to take men off American naval vessels during the Quasi-War, as Isaac Phillips could so painfully attest, these had been actions of individual captains on their own authority. A British admiral was now ordering all ships under his command to openly violate the sovereignty of a man of war in the service of a nation which even Berkeley admitted to being "in terms of peace and Amity" with his own.³⁵

mention in virtually all works on the Navy in this period. I have relied most heavily on Toll, *Six Frigates*, 294-308; Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 153-155; and especially Michael Latshaw, "Flawed Judgment: The Court-Martial of Commodore James Barron," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 105 no. 4 (Autumn, 1997): 377-408 for my analysis. See also: Sheppard, "Petty Despots and Executive Officials," 66-75.

³⁴ Virtually all the literature on American and British naval history in this period at least mentions the issue of impressments and Britain's manpower issues. Excellent discussions of the Napoleonic Wars at sea and resulting Anglo-American tensions include Lambert, *The Challenge*, which takes a decidedly pro-British stance. Toll, *Six Frigates* and Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores* favor the American perspective. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power and its Relations to the War of 1812* (London: Dodo Press, 1999, originally published 1905) remains a fine balanced summary of the quarrel. For the British war with Napoleon at sea, see Rodger, *Command of the Ocean*, and Noel Mostert, *A Line Upon the Wind: The Great War at Sea, 1793-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2008).

³⁵ The circular is reprinted in its entirety in William Oliver Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: The Biography of Commodore James Barron, USN* (Norfolk VA: Norfolk County Historical Society, 1969): 60-61.

That Berkeley would take such a drastic step demonstrates the level of frustration Britain felt over its desertion rate, as well as the arrogant disdain with which it viewed the United States.

Unaware of Berkeley's orders, Barron set sail in a ship woefully unprepared for any kind of hostile encounter. As historian Henry Adams noted, "the gun-deck between the guns was encumbered with lumber of one sort or another; the cables were not yet stowed away; four of the guns did not fit quite perfectly to their carriages, and needed a few blows with a maul to drive the trunnions home." Such glaring deficiencies in preparation, he notes wryly, "escaped the eye." Meanwhile, "in the magazine the gunner had reported the powder-horns, used in priming the guns, as filled, whereas only five were in fact filled."³⁶

The blame for this sorry state partly lay with Barron's flag-captain, Charles Gordon, whom Barron held a fairly low opinion of. Barron might have requested a new flag captain; whether such a request would have been granted is impossible to know, but asking would not have been unheard of. Gordon, however, was politically well-connected, with an uncle in the Senate and connections to Albert Gallatin, so Barron overlooked his short-comings. Even with Gordon's connections, however, Barron still could have taken Gordon to task for his lax performance and demanded more efficient oversight. Even if Gordon had complained to Smith, the secretary certainly would have backed Barron; the practice of secretaries staying out of a senior officer's way in his dealings with subordinates was already well-established at this time. Nevertheless, after assuming command of the squadron, he issued no rebuke for Gordon's appallingly lax discipline nor did he take steps to correct it.³⁷ Barron was no fool, and he certainly knew of Gordon's connections, but it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that

³⁶ Henry Adams, *History of the United States of America during the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: Library of America, 1986): 934.

³⁷ Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 85.

the primary reason Barron ignored the sorry state of his ship was that he simply did not care. The division of responsibilities between a commodore and his flag-captain was an ambiguous one. In theory, the routine maintenance of the ship and crew should have been Gordon's responsibility, but this was never specified in any regulations, and the decision of the subsequent court-martial would seem to indicate the officers of the court felt that it was primarily Barron's job.³⁸

Besides the general disarray of the military stores aboard the ship, Barron also carried with him several civilian passengers, whose baggage remained strewn across the decks as the ship took to sea.³⁹ Historians will always wonder, as Barron no doubt did for the remainder of his life, why the captain did not take steps to improve his vessel's condition more promptly. Adams notes that, as was common at the time, a great part of the crew was sick. Barron of course, still had sufficient men to begin the relatively simple task of clearing the decks, otherwise he would never have sailed. The most likely answer is that, with no fear of hostility until he reached the Mediterranean, and likely not even then, Barron simply chose not to bother. It would prove to be a devastating lapse in judgment.

At about 3:30 that afternoon, Captain Salusbury Price Humphreys of the British 54-gun ship *Leopard* hailed Barron. It was fairly common at the time for nations at peace to carry mail and other communications for one another, and Barron probably assumed this was all Humphreys wanted. He welcomed Humphreys' lieutenant, John Meade, on board. Only after Meade entered his quarters to speak with him privately did Barron realize that the British meant to seize from the *Chesapeake* four known deserters from His Majesty's Navy.

³⁸ Latshaw, "Flawed Judgment," 401-403.

³⁹ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 295.

Meade presented Barron with a copy of Berkeley's circular and another letter from Humphreys expressing his duty to comply with the orders of his commander and also his hope that the entire affair could be settled amicably.⁴⁰ Barron responded that he was not aware of any such men among his crew, stretching the truth as he did know of at least some British deserters on board, but also that these did not come from Berkeley's squadron.⁴¹ He nonetheless indicated to Meade that his crew was wholly American and promptly returned him to his own ship with a message that he would only allow the *Chesapeake's* crew to be mustered by American officers and that it was impossible for him to comply with Humphrey's desire. This was his only legal recourse, especially since he surely recalled the example made of Phillips just a few years prior. He did indicate to Gordon that he should look into whether or not there really were British deserters among there crew, but Gordon would later testify that he did not complete this investigation because, "the manner in which Commodore Barron spoke to me, [led] me to believe that he did not wish such examination made."⁴²

Tucker and Reuter assert that, after sending Meade back to his captain, Barron expected no more than "an angry verbal exchange."⁴³ Gordon later testified that, upon Meade's departure, he believed that "nothing more would ensue." The commodore's actions tell a different story. As soon as Meade was gone, Barron told Gordon that he had "better get

⁴⁰ A copy of Humphry's letter is contained in Barron to Smith, July 22, 1807, M125, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Captains, National Archives, Washington DC (hereafter "Captains' Letters").

⁴¹ Barron to Humphreys, June 22, 1807, Dudley Knox, ed., *Naval Documents Relating to the United States Wars with the Barbary Powers: naval operations including diplomatic background* 7 volumes (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1939-1944) VI: 536; Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 5-6.

⁴² *Proceedings of the General Court-Martial*, 120.

⁴³ Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 6.

the gun deck clear, as their intentions appear serious.” Incredibly, Gordon testified that he regarded this as more of a “request” than an order, and for the second time that day he failed to comply with Barron’s instructions. When Barron came on deck, he gave orders for the crew to be sent to quarters, but that it should be done quietly so as to escape the notice of the British vessel.⁴⁴ His hope seems to have been that he could be prepared if Humphreys tried to forcibly carry out his orders, without provoking an attack. The last thing he wanted was to attach blame for an attack to himself by engaging in potentially provocative maneuvers.

Ultimately, it mattered little if the British saw the American crew mustering. Humphreys would later, after his actions had created an international incident and he found himself sacrificed to appease the Americans, claim that he recognized the harshness of Berkeley’s order but had no choice but to obey. In 1851, Humphreys, by then Rear Admiral Sir Salisbury Davenport,⁴⁵ wrote that he felt intense regret over the “apparent severity and harshness” of Berkeley’s order, but “as an officer and a gentleman,” he could only obey and try his best to minimize the damage.⁴⁶ Interpreting his orders in the broadest possible terms, Humphreys believed he had no choice but to use force. As soon as he heard Barron’s reply, he prepared to open fire on the *Chesapeake*. When a warning shot was ignored, he gave orders for a general engagement.⁴⁷ The *Leopard* unleashed a broadside on the *Chesapeake*.

The scrambling efforts of the American crew to resist the attack produced something akin to a comic opera. Men stumbled over baggage strewn across the decks amid enemy fire,

⁴⁴ Testimony of Captain Charles Gordon, *Proceedings of the General Court-Martial*, 120.

⁴⁵ As was common in Britain at the time, Humphreys changed his name upon acquiring a title of nobility.

⁴⁶ Humphreys made these comments in a newspaper clipping, but the title of the paper was torn off. James Barron Papers, Box I, Earl Gregg Swem Library, William and Mary University.

⁴⁷ Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 9.

fumbled with cannons that were never loaded, and generally displayed shocking ineptitude at the most basic tasks of a man-of-war. Many of the seamen failed to report to their proper battle stations throughout the fight, whether from cowardice or, more likely, because the untrained crews did not know where to go or could not find their way in the confusion.⁴⁸ Under the oppressive fire of repeated broadsides from the *Leopard*, men scrambled to load guns with improperly fitted cartridges, only to find it impossible to light them. “For God’s sake gentlemen, will nobody do his duty?” Barron screamed amidst the chaos, then piteously added, “is it possible we can’t get even one of the guns to fire?” Barron himself suffered a serious laceration to his leg in the midst of the onslaught, but bravely pressed on, trying to direct his befuddled crew to accomplish *something* before the inevitable surrender.⁴⁹

Finally, one of the mightiest ships in the United States naval force managed to get off a lone token shot. Barron sharply ordered Captain John Hall to get “one shot off for the honor of the flag” and promised to strike once this was done. Unable to locate any matches, Lieutenant Allen grabbed a hot coal from a stove and, reportedly juggling it in his bare hands, carried it across the ship to light a canon.⁵⁰ After firing a single ball, Barron immediately struck his colors before the *Leopard* could inflict further damage. Once Humphreys boarded, he immediately offered up his ship as a prize. The British captain declined to assume command of the ship. His orders were only to seize the four deserters and the two nations were, after all, technically at peace. He even offered assistance to his American counterpart, though he must have known this would be ignored. Once the

⁴⁸ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 296.

⁴⁹ Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 11-13.

⁵⁰ Testimony of Captain John Hall, *Proceedings of the General Court Martial*, 84-86. See also, Tucker and Reuter, *Injured Honor*, 12-13 for their account of the surrender and the endnote on page 217 for Allen carrying the coal in his bare hands.

Leopard had sailed away, the officers surveyed the damage. Three men were dead, sixteen wounded. Three feet of water stood in the hold, and the general state of the vessel was hopeless.⁵¹ Barron and his officers concluded that the ship was far too damaged to go on, and limped back to Norfolk, Virginia.⁵²

For the rest of his life, Barron genuinely believed that he had done the best that could be expected of him, under the circumstances.⁵³ Virtually none of his peers agreed. Barron became the scapegoat for the navy. His fellow officers blamed him for humiliating the service, while the men under his command set to work placing the entirety of the guilt for the debacle on him to preserve their own careers. The very next day, six officers present at the attack wrote to Secretary Smith, blaming the entire disaster on Barron and asking for his arrest.⁵⁴ That Smith not only overlooked their disregard for protocol but wrote back to them with praise is puzzling; they had clearly and egregiously violated the chain of command.⁵⁵ We can only speculate at Smith's motives for allowing these junior officers' actions to stand. Smith may have felt that if these men turned on Barron, he must have been a poor leader, and had only himself to blame. Then too, whatever the faults of his subordinates, final authority, and responsibility, rested with Barron, and perhaps Smith assumed from the moment he heard of the attack that all culpability would naturally fall on the commodore. Smith also

⁵¹ Log of the US Frigate *Chesapeake*, June 22, 1807, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, 27-28.

⁵² William Oliver Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: The Biography of Commodore James Barron, USN* (Norfolk, VA: Norfolk County Historical Society, 1969): 72-73. The British did eventually return two of the men who were seized. Bainbridge to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, July 11, 1812, Dudley, *Naval War of 1812*, I: 190-191.

⁵³ Barron to William Jones, July 22, 1813, James Barron Papers, Box II, Earl Greg Swem Library.

⁵⁴ Officers of the *Chesapeake* to Smith, June 23, 1807, Captain's Letters.

⁵⁵ Latshaw, "Flawed Judgment," 381-382.

must have understood the implications of the disaster. The navy had been humiliated, and if the entire complement of officers on the ship was defective, that would stand as a devastating indictment of his leadership and of the men he selected for commissions, not to mention a poor reflection on the country. If, however, the entire debacle were the work of one incompetent officer, then the corps' reputation could be salvaged by dealing appropriately with the outlier. Whatever the reason, Smith took the officers at their word that Barron had bungled the entire episode, and from that moment his fate was sealed.

Even before court-martialing Barron, Smith needed to find someone who could repair the moral and physical damage done to the *Chesapeake*. Lieutenant Allen, no doubt knowing he would be called to account in the forthcoming inquiry, reiterated to Smith his assurance that the fault for the debacle was entirely Barron's, and that under better leadership the vessel would perform valiantly. "Give us a man to lead us to glory," he appealed, clearly a jab at his former commodore, "and there is not an officer on this ship who will not immolate himself to serve his country."⁵⁶ The man chosen was Stephen Decatur, and Smith could hardly have made a better selection. Decatur was well-known, and not a little envied, in the navy for his remarkable ability to inspire loyalty in his tars.⁵⁷ Believing a British attack on Norfolk could be imminent, he threw himself into the task of rebuilding the ship with zeal.⁵⁸ His avowed intention, which Smith apparently never discouraged, was to have the ship

⁵⁶ Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 89.

⁵⁷ Frederick Leiner, "Decatur and Naval Leadership," *Naval History* 15 no. 5 (2001):

30-34, argues that Decatur inspired loyalty in his men by treating them with a greater measure of respect and dignity than was common practice in either the American or British navies at the time.

⁵⁸ Decatur to Smith, June 29, 1807, and enclosure dated June 28, RG 45, Captains' Letters.

perpetually ready for an encounter with the *Leopard*, and he was prepared to strike first to avenge the *Chesapeake*'s honor even if the United States and Britain remained at peace.⁵⁹

His correspondence with Smith during his command at Norfolk sent mixed messages. Decatur, of course, wanted to demonstrate his own competence and rebuild the navy's reputation. In short order, he assured Smith that, should the British attempt an attack on Norfolk, "you may rely most confidently on the 'Chesapeakes' retrieving their reputation." Yet in almost the same breath, he expressed a dim view of the crews of the gunboats under his command, complaining that "they are entirely ignorant of the duty that must be performed, and are extremely averse to control." He begged for "men subject to the articles of war." Specifically, he desired "men who, if not disposed to do their duty, I can force to do it." Inferior crews notwithstanding, Decatur wanted the secretary to know that he was wholly committed to his duty. Provide him with the proper crews, and he assured Smith that "if I fail to do everything you expect from me, I beg you will not spare me."⁶⁰ A few weeks later, however, he also reported that the marines under his command were "the worst detachment I have ever seen." They were almost entirely foreigners, and "bad soldiers, turbulent men, and few of them able bodied."⁶¹ He also reported difficulties with his subordinate officers. Despite their supposed willingness to immolate themselves for their duty, they proved unwilling to check their drinking habits for it. Decatur removed one officer for drunkenness, and probably would have booted another had the lieutenant not saved him the trouble by

⁵⁹ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 303.

⁶⁰ Decatur to Smith, July 8, 1807, Captains' Letters.

⁶¹ Decatur to Smith, August 25, 1807, Captains' Letters.

shooting himself in the head. Finally, he could not trust the purser with the ship's funds because of the man's notorious gambling habit.⁶²

As if all this were not enough, Decatur also had the unpleasant duty of trying and sentencing his former friend and mentor, James Barron. Any chance that Barron might have had for a fair trial vanished when Smith named the officers to serve on his court-martial. Upon receiving orders from the Smith to sit on the court, Decatur openly acknowledged his hostility towards Barron and asked to be excused from participating, saying that he had already "formed and expressed an opinion that Commodore Barron had not done his duty" and admitting that "it is probable I am prejudiced against Commodore Barron." He frankly stated that he could not trust himself to give an unbiased hearing to the commodore, and asked that another be appointed in his place. Smith refused, saying that he did not have enough captains available to fill out the court-martial as it was.⁶³ In addition to Decatur, the senior officer of the court was the very same man Barron had almost dueled with the previous year, John Rodgers. David Porter also served on the court, and although not openly hostile to Barron the way Rodgers and Decatur were, he was also close friends with both men, and unlikely to challenge their views.⁶⁴

There were indeed few officers available senior enough to try Barron, so Smith's spoke truthfully when he told Decatur his options were limited. That said Smith also put very little effort into finding unbiased officers to decide Barron's fate.⁶⁵ The court-martial

⁶² Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 93-94.

⁶³ Decatur to Smith, December 17, 1807, quoted in Tucker, *Stephen Decatur*, 93-94.

⁶⁴ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 10.

⁶⁵ The composition of the court, Tucker and Reiter assert, "says a great deal about the Jefferson administration's prejudgment of Barron," Tucker and Reiter, *Injured Honor*, 164.

system was designed so that, while the president held ultimate authority to accept or reject a court's findings, in practice officers' fitness to serve and consequences for failure would be decided by their fellow officers. In this case though, Smith was, at the least, passively allowing a court filled with personal enemies of the defendant and officers who openly admitted to prejudging his guilt. At worst, he was arranging the court to insure a guilty verdict.

Barron did little to improve his situation however. He selected as his council his own cousin, Robert Barraud Taylor, who provided a miserable defense. Decatur, still desperate to avoid serving, or perhaps simply believing it the ethical thing to do, sent a copy of his letter to Smith asking to be relieved to Taylor, believing the attorney would surely challenge his presence on the court after reading his opinions. Taylor inexplicably ignored the letter.⁶⁶ During the trial, he ignored weak points in the case against Barron, and failed to exploit Gordon's rather blatant failures to perform his own duty and obey Barron's orders.⁶⁷ Complete hearsay, impermissible even under the more lenient rules of the time, was allowed to stand and questionable evidence admitted without objection.⁶⁸ While it is possible to censure the presiding officers for their biases against Barron, it was not their responsibility to take the initiative to make judgments on the permissibility of evidence or testimony, only to rule where one of the counsels raised objections. The failure to oppose some of the more blatant instances of illegal testimony or evidence rests with Taylor. But even if Barron had

⁶⁶ Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 96.

⁶⁷ Barron may be somewhat to blame here as well. Incredibly, even as he worked to insure that Barron took the fall for the debacle, Gordon wrote to Barron to complain of reports that he was blaming Gordon. Barron earnestly assured him that he had in no way imputed the disaster to Gordon, and that he did not hold him responsible. Barron to Gordon, July, 1807, Box 1, Barron Papers, Earl Gregg Swem Library.

⁶⁸ Latshaw, "Flawed Judgment," 380-383.

enjoyed a vigorous defense, the verdict was likely predetermined. The court convicted Barron of failure to have his ship ready for action, and sentenced him to a five-year suspension from the navy, without pay.

Historians have largely agreed with the court's findings and sentence, though they have voiced some doubts about the legality of the court's proceedings. Michael Latshaw is the glaring exception, unreservedly arguing that Barron was grossly maltreated.⁶⁹ While the near-complete exoneration of Gordon and most of the other officers seems dubious, it is difficult to agree with Latshaw's judgment. It simply staggers the imagination to try and conceive of Truxtun, Decatur, or Preble going to sea with their ship in such a state, or bungling the attack quite so spectacularly. And given the prevailing sentiment in the navy at the time, it was simply impossible for such a debacle to pass without someone being punished. Considering the Navy Department had already cashiered officers for allowing men to be seized by the Royal Navy, Barron's sentence was arguably quite lenient.

Smith and Jefferson readily accepted the court's findings and sentence. While there is no reason to doubt that all involved sincerely believed Barron deserved his fate, it was also a convenient outcome for everyone involved (except Barron). The officer corps salvaged its own honor by ruling that the fault for the debacle lay entirely with one man. Widespread laxity in enforcing regulations and failure to adequately equip junior officers for their duty had nothing to do with the loss of the *Chesapeake*, according to the court's findings. Likewise, Smith enjoyed indirect justification for his oversight of the Navy Department; only one officer was deficient, not large numbers of the men under his supervision. By purging themselves of Barron – who they rightly judged would face great difficulty returning to duty

⁶⁹ Latshaw, "Flawed Judgment," 379, 408.

once his suspension ended – the rest of the officers could continue to look on themselves with collective pride. Barron's fate was also consistent with existing trends in the navy. While he had not erred as egregiously as Maley or Phillips, who had failed to put up even token resistance, he had still dishonored his profession by not being perpetually willing to fight. His one ball fired, while he might have thought it symbolically significant, could not compensate for the fact that an American ship and crew looked amateurish against a vessel of the Royal Navy. Barron had shamed the service, and it could only begin to restore its image by sending a message to all officers, yet again, that such behavior would never merit compassion or leniency. In addition, it now fell to the rest of the navy to prove that Barron was an aberration as soon as they got the chance.

While naval officers focused on recovering the pride of their profession, Jefferson desperately sought to keep the United States from going to war. He released a proclamation to the American people describing the incident with just enough outrage to reflect the severity of the offense but not enough to stir up the already growing war fever.⁷⁰ He ordered all British vessels from American waters and forbade them from entering American ports except in emergencies. This temporarily placated Americans, but still left the issue of how to retaliate against Britain's long list of depredations. He came up with the unconventional solution of punishing American merchants for British depredations, establishing an embargo that forbade all trade with Europe. He acted under the not unreasonable assumption that Britain was too dependent on American goods to endure long under such a state of affairs, and he considered whatever costs the American people might have to bear better than the devastation of a war the country was woefully unprepared for. Still, the embargo prompted

⁷⁰ "By Thomas Jefferson President of the U.S. of America: A Proclamation," July 2, 1807, *NW*, I: 29-31.

fierce opposition and widespread smuggling, and the financial toll on many American merchants ranged from onerous to crushing.⁷¹

Smuggling was rampant, and it fell to the navy to enforce the president's policy.⁷² As with the gunboat program, naval officers dutifully set about performing a distasteful duty for the Jefferson administration. Policing American merchants in gunboats, rather than pursuing glory against enemy navies in large frigates, was surely the least desirable job imaginable for men with pretensions to honor and gallant images to uphold. Their frustration was compounded by the fact that they consistently lacked the tools to accomplish the job.⁷³

It was not only American merchants who complained of financial toils during this period. Tensions over money within the Navy Department began even before the *Leopard-Chesapeake* incident. It was not the gunboat program, but simple squabbling over salary that generated the most civil-military tension during the Jefferson and Madison Administrations. Numerous officers objected to their low pay throughout Smith's tenure, with limited success. Smith oversaw a department being downsized, and sparred constantly with Gallatin for what little money he did receive. Meanwhile, he was expected to oversee a war with Tripoli thousands of miles from the United States, and by the time a peace treaty was finally signed most of the funds for the department were gone. In the midst of these frustrations, he had

⁷¹ Louis Sears, *Jefferson and the Embargo* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1927) defends the Embargo as a legitimate expression of Jefferson's pacifistic tendencies. Malone, *Jefferson the President, Second Term* is also inclined to regard the Embargo in a positive light. Lambert, *The Challenge*, is much harsher, judging it a disaster for American merchants while accomplishing nothing in influencing British policy. Ellis, *American Sphinx*, 237-238 agrees. McDonald, *Presidency of Thomas Jefferson*, likewise sharply criticizes the embargo, particularly Jefferson's violations of the Constitution to enforce it (142-152, 155-158). Wilentz, *Rise of American Democracy*, 130-133, takes a more balanced view, judging it the best of a series of bad options.

⁷² Smith to Stephen Decatur, May 2, 1808, M441, Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, National Archives, Washington DC (hereafter "Letters Sent"); Smith to Lieutenant Samuel Elbert, May 2, 1808, NW, I: 35-36.

⁷³ Smith, *Purposes of Defense*, 105-106; Tucker, *Jeffersonian Gunboat Navy*, 89-90.

little patience with officers who clamored for more pay or looser restrictions on expenditures. Thomas Tingey, upon being appointed commander of the Washington Navy Yard in 1803 asked Smith for a raise. In this case, Smith complied, but Tingey still considered his salary insufficient, and threatened to resign if he did not receive more money. Having just let Truxtun, a far more successful and valued officer, walk away from the navy, Smith seems to have been perfectly content to do likewise with Tingey. But in this case the commander-in-chief intervened. The Washington Navy Yard was a favorite project of Jefferson's, since it would enable him to maintain ships at a much lower cost, and he was determined to have a competent commander running it. He urged Smith to make Tingey another offer, though still less than what he had demanded.⁷⁴

Tingey again rejected the offer, but remained on the rolls as a naval officer. Smith appointed a new superintendent for the Navy Yard, one junior to Tingey, and then changed the captain's title to financial agent. Tingey passed off this bizarre solution as a temporary demotion, and it seems upon having his bluff called he decided to remain in the service after all. It is worth noting that Tingey's near resignation came after Smith let Truxtun go, but before he consulted other officers on the legitimacy of Truxtun's claims. Jefferson's intervention on Tingey's behalf may very well have been what caused him to doubt his previous decision to release Truxtun and consult other opinions before refusing to reinstate him. Nonetheless, Tingey could count himself fortunate that his brethren never evaluated his own threat to leave the corps, as the language he used in his resignation was almost exactly the same as Truxtun's. Once the matter passed, he and Smith eventually settled into a fairly

⁷⁴ Brown, *Captain Who Burned His Ships*, 52-53.

harmonious relationship. Still, both Smith and his successor had to repeatedly remind Tingey to watch his spending habits with government funds.⁷⁵

Tingey was not alone in bickering with the government over finances. Upon his return from the Mediterranean, Smith ordered David Porter to New Orleans, where his primary job became chasing smugglers entering the port.⁷⁶ While in New Orleans, David Porter grew infuriated at what he perceived as Smith's parsimony. His troubles began on the journey down the Mississippi. Porter claimed that the gunboats he was authorized to use for the trip were not seaworthy, and on his own authority he purchased a galley for himself, his officers, and his family. Unfortunately, when he notified Smith of the unauthorized purchase, he used the same letter to also ask for a higher salary. Infuriated, Smith rejected Porter's request and refused to refund him for the cost of the galley. He later informed Porter that he would not be accepting *any* expenses sent from New Orleans unless the Navy Department had authorized them beforehand, and further rebuked the captain that "the constant enormous expenditures of the New Orleans Station exceed all calculations."⁷⁷

Porter tried to alleviate his perceived poverty by suggesting that a committee of active naval officers approve expenditures, rather than leave that duty entirely in the hands of the civilian secretary. He probably believed that his naval brethren would be more sympathetic than Smith, but his suggestion called for a drastic restructuring of the civil-military division of labor within the Navy Department. Porter wanted to severely curtail the power of the president's representative over how taxpayer dollars were spent in favor of increasing the

⁷⁵ Smith to Tingey, June 26, 1806, Smith to Tingey, July 11, 1806, Letters Sent; Brown, *Captain Who Burned His Ships*, 52-53.

⁷⁶ Smith to Porter, August 13, 1807, Porter Letterbook, David Porter Papers, Box 16, LOC.

⁷⁷ Quoted in Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 42

power of the officer corps in a policy matter. Considering just a few years later the Navy Board would indeed assume considerable responsibility over expenditures, Porter's suggestion is not as outrageous as one might think, but it nevertheless probably came as no surprise when Smith ignored it. Porter grew increasingly frustrated with his civilian superiors during his time in New Orleans, having grown so "disgusted with the management of naval affairs," and that he possessed "no confidence in its justice."⁷⁸ Even after he returned from the Gulf coast, he continued to fight for funds he felt he was entitled to, and the Navy Department only settled in his favor in 1846, when the commodore had been dead for three years. It seems Porter's complaints reflected real destitution. Porter sent a desperate note to his friend Samuel Hambleton one night, pleading that he found himself "destitute" and feared he would be unable to buy food the next morning. Would Hambleton "have the goodness to keep him from starving," by loaning him whatever money he had in his house?⁷⁹

Porter was certainly not the only officer whose accounting practices annoyed the Secretary, and he sent out a circular to all his captains ordering them to keep more careful records.⁸⁰ Smith never bent on his determination that decisions about how Department funds be spent should come from his office, and he constantly reminded his officers to check their spending habits. One reason Preble was among his favorite officers is that he was the most scrupulous at keeping expenses to a minimum wherever he was stationed.⁸¹

⁷⁸ David Dixon Porter, *David Porter*, 81

⁷⁹ Porter to Hambleton, December 19, 1808, Porter Papers, Box 1, LOC.

⁸⁰ Smith circular to officers, July 26, 1808, David Porter Papers, Box 15, LOC; Smith circular to officers, July 27, 1809, Porter Papers, Box 1, LOC.

⁸¹ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 323.

While Smith clung tightly to his prerogatives as civilian head of the department to make final decisions on finances, he continued the precedent of granting officers broad autonomy on a host of other matters, especially in their dealings with subordinates.⁸² Even as he ignored or angrily rejected Porter's endless requests for more money, Smith continued to hold himself aloof from inter-officer relations in the station. Although he considers him "no Captain Bligh," Porter's biographer concedes that the commodore's relationship with his subordinates and enlisted men was never particularly good. Porter kept the secretary apprised of his frustrations and occasionally harsh discipline, but it appears Smith never considered getting involved, and Porter's relations with subordinates remained entirely his responsibility.⁸³ Smith did occasionally have to insert himself in disputes between officers of the same rank. He did so very reluctantly in Rodgers' near duel with Barron, and he later reprimanded John Dent for presuming to issue orders to Marines who were outside his jurisdiction. Dent, commandant of the Charleston Navy Yard, wrote to complain that his orders to Marines to assume guard duty were not being followed. An exasperated Smith replied that the regulations were quite clear and "fixed" on the chain of command. Marines were under the command of the senior Marine officer on station, not the senior naval officer. "You cannot order" Smith sharply reproved Dent, "you are to make requisitions."⁸⁴

⁸² Smith to Porter, October 26, 1808, Porter Papers, Box 15, LOC; Smith to Preble, May 26, 1803; Smith to Barry, April 5, 1803; Smith to Samuel Barron, March 10, 1803; Smith to Captain John Carson, June 26, 1803, Letters Sent.

⁸³ Porter to Hambleton, February 20, 1809, Porter Papers, Box 1, LOC; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 51. McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 258-259 argues that the highest ranking officer at a given station or ship did in fact have limits on his authority. There was, McKee contends, a kind of "unspoken contract" between officers and enlisted men which, if violated, gave seamen a sense of entitlement to resist or desert. For subordinate officers, walking away from what they considered excessively harsh treatment would have been even easier, since they could simply resign their commissions. Nonetheless, this arrangement existed outside of navy regulations, and outside the influence of the secretary. Men deserted or resigned their commissions precisely because they could not appeal to the civilian government for better treatment.

⁸⁴ Smith to Dent, May 3, 1808, Letters Sent.

Smith's irritation with Dent may have stemmed in part from his belief that he should not have had to trouble himself with the matter. Smith firmly believed in trusting officers to manage details that fell under their expertise, and he avoided needlessly adding to his own responsibilities at his captains' expense. "Exercise your own judgment entirely...upon all other points" related to outfitting gunboats, Smith cheerfully informed Decatur in one letter.⁸⁵ His willingness to trust their judgment was probably a major reason he remained generally popular with his officer corps, despite supervising a cash-strapped service in the midst of downsizing. Early in the gunboat program, Smith floated the idea to Preble of appointing merchant captains as a separate class of officers to command the gunboats, leaving the current officer corps to command frigates. Preble strongly objected, believing that this would weaken discipline, since such commanders would never have served as subordinates, and that it would diminish the standing of the officer corps in society. Upon reading Preble's objections, Smith dropped the idea.⁸⁶

In addition to letting trusted officers nix his own ideas, Smith occasionally allowed them wide latitude on other matters. For example, he allowed Thomas Tingey to draft new Naval Regulations in 1802.⁸⁷ He later let Tingey draft regulations for the Washington Navy Yard that substantially increased the commandant's authority over personnel in the Yard. While accepting Tingey's draft, Smith did, however, sternly warn him, again, to rein in his expenditures.⁸⁸ Stuck at the Philadelphia Navy Yard with restless young officers, who seemed to have a knack for getting themselves into trouble during their idle hours, Alexander

⁸⁵ Smith to Decatur, June 16, 1808, Letters Sent.

⁸⁶ McKee, *Edward Preble*, 325.

⁸⁷ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 543-544.

⁸⁸ Brown, *Captain Who Burned His Ships*, 60.

Murray took it upon himself to commission several gunboat expeditions up the Delaware River, where young officers learned pilotage, seamanship, and sustained themselves from the abundant fish and game available, rather than from government expense. The plan became a great success, and Smith, always an advocate of officer training, was no doubt thrilled by Murray's initiative.⁸⁹ Finally, he even allowed the occasional act of nepotism from trustworthy officers. He allowed Isaac Hull to hire his father as a naval contractor, a job that the elder Hull was never particularly zealous nor good at. Hull took up the slack for his father, insuring that the necessary work got done, but the elder Hull continued to draw a government salary without objection from Smith.⁹⁰

After a difficult second term, Jefferson gladly followed George Washington's precedent and stepped down from the Presidency in 1808. Not surprisingly, the office went to his longtime friend and collaborator, Secretary of State James Madison. With the changing of presidential administrations came new leadership to the Navy Department. Robert Smith left to become Madison's secretary of state, a highly honored position since it was at the time seen as a stepping-stone to the Presidency. The post would have been especially satisfying to Smith, since Madison's first choice was his old rival Albert Gallatin. Congressional pressure forced Madison to leave Gallatin in the Treasury, and Smith assumed the duties of the State Department.⁹¹

While personally gratifying to Smith, the move proved unfortunate for the navy, as the new head of the department proved woefully unsuited to managing a wartime naval force.

⁸⁹ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 157-158.

⁹⁰ Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 125-126.

⁹¹ J.C.A. Stagg, *The War of 1812: Conflict for a Continent* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 34-35; Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 663.

Paul Hamilton hailed from South Carolina, where he owned a large plantation, and like Stoddert boasted service in the Revolutionary War. He did not lack for executive experience, having served as governor of his home state prior to taking over as secretary of the navy. He came into the office with no shortage of enthusiasm or good intentions. Christopher McKee lauds his integrity, loyalty, and genuine concern for his fellow man, while Charles Oscar Paullin praises him as having “a kindly heart, high sense of duty, and honesty of purpose” and acknowledges that his character had “a wholesome influence upon the navy.” Unfortunately, Hamilton also indulged in his enjoyment of alcohol enough to raise eyebrows in Congress – though none of the naval officers who worked closely with him ever accused him of drunkenness. More problematic, he simply lacked administrative abilities.⁹²

Such faults were not initially apparent. Thomas Tingey, who as commandant of the Washington Navy Yard interacted with Hamilton the most of any officer, considered him “an ardent advocate of the service.”⁹³ Hamilton assumed office with the laudable goal of improving the administrative efficiency and educational apparatus of the Navy Department, and the rumors of alcoholism were nonexistent for the first two years of his administration. Like Smith, he valued economy, and he wrote Goldsborough before leaving the capital for a short time to not exceed appropriations whatsoever unless specifically authorized to do so by the president.⁹⁴ He also displayed concern for the moral character of his officers, which led him to occasionally overstep long-accepted boundaries of civilian control. When he learned that some midshipmen were frequenting taverns where they spent their free hours playing

⁹² Frank Owsley, “Paul Hamilton,” Coletta, *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 93-100; McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 9-11; Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 135-136.

⁹³ Tingey to Rodgers, November 21, 1809, Rodgers’ Family Papers, Part III: Box 1, LOC.

⁹⁴ Hamilton to Goldsborough, August 12, 1809, quoted in Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 137.

billiards and getting drunk, he ordered Thomas Tingey to rein them in.⁹⁵ He also, no doubt to his officers' dismay, proved more willing than either Stoddert or Smith to meddle in captains' relations with their subordinates. Alarmed at what he perceived as Isaac Hull's overly harsh treatment of his crewmen, he wrote to urge the captain to avoid "degrading punishments."⁹⁶ Hamilton's compassionate side also showed in his relations with his officers, however. He reinstated a midshipman who had been removed for repeated displays of temper at the appeal of John Rodgers, believing that yet another second chance would finally make a good officer out of him.⁹⁷

Hamilton's thinking meshed perfectly with his predecessors' in one crucial respect: he had no tolerance for any officer who passively allowed the American flag to be insulted. He issued orders to all his officers reminding them of "the injustice and insults heaped on our country" by both Britain and France, and specifically of "the inhumane and dastardly attack on the frigate *Chesapeake*, an outrage which has prostrated the flag of our country and has imposed on the American people cause of ceaseless mourning." How should captains of the U.S. Navy respond to such outrages? In Hamilton's mind, the answer was clear: "it is therefore our duty to be prepared and determined at every hazard to vindicate the injured honor of our navy" and "maintain and support at any risk and cost the dignity of your flag."

⁹⁵ Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 136.

⁹⁶ Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 136-137.

⁹⁷ John Eppes to George Pearce, March 4, 1809, Rodgers Family Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Box 1, LOC.

Hamilton expected that no officer under his command would allow Britain to humiliate the United States again, and he soon had the chance to put this resolve on display.⁹⁸

Lieutenant John Trippe, a celebrated fighter from the Tripolitan War, lost any favor he had built up in the Navy Department on June 24, 1810. Trippe's vessel, the *Vixen*, came under fire from a British ship, whose captain immediately apologized and claimed he had believed Trippe to be a French privateer. Although his ship was badly damaged, Trippe accepted the captain's apology at face value and proceeded on his way.⁹⁹ Hamilton was furious. "I fondly cherished the hope that our officers needed only an opportunity to vindicate the wounded honor of our flag," he blasted to the unfortunate lieutenant. Trippe had let just such an opportunity slip by him and the Secretary immediately recalled him to the United States to face a court-martial.¹⁰⁰ Yellow fever ended Trippe's career before the Hamilton could, but his explosive reaction to what was, technically, the proper course on Trippe's part shows how desperately the United States Navy desired vindication of its honor and fighting spirit.¹⁰¹

By May of 1811 the navy had labored under a cloud of shame for four long years.¹⁰² Upon learning that a British ship had seized and impressed an American sailor off the coast of New York, Hamilton ordered John Rodgers and the *President*, to sail to the area and

⁹⁸ Hamilton to Porter, June 1, 1810, Porter Papers, Box 15, LOC; Rodgers to Hull, June 19, 1810, *NW*, I: 39-40. See also, Hamilton to Porter, June 5, 1810, Porter Papers, Box 15, LOC, where he elaborates on this view and orders Porter to protect American merchant ships from British or French molestation.

⁹⁹ Trippe to Hamilton, May 29, 1810, M148, Letters Received by the Secretary of the Navy from Commissioned Officers below the Rank of Commander and from Warrant Officers, NA, Washington DC.

¹⁰⁰ Hamilton to Trippe, July 20, 1810, Letters Sent.

¹⁰¹ David Long, *Gold Braid and Foreign Relations*, 41-42.

¹⁰² Portions of the following are drawn from Sheppard, "Petty Despots and Executive Officials," 61-62.

protect American vessels. Spying a strange ship in a dense fog, Rodgers called for identification. He would later insist, to the satisfaction of a court-martial, that the vessel had responded to his inquiry with a shot across the bow. The British report, however, insisted that the *President's* attack was totally unprovoked. Whatever the case, Rodgers, fully aware his opposite was a British vessel, unleashed the full firepower of the *President*, killing or wounding 32 men from the other ship. He later discovered that he had opened fire from his 44-gun frigate on a corvette armed with a mere 20 guns.¹⁰³

Rodgers apologized to Captain Arthur Bingham for his error, but did so in such a way that Bingham found it “evident, that had he fallen in with a British frigate, he would certainly have brought her to action.” It seems beyond question that Rodgers sailed out hoping for a fight. Certainly attacking a vessel of equal size would have brought more honor to his profession, and we may believe his insistence that he was not fully aware of the other ship’s size in the dense fog. His inclination apparently was to open fire on any pretext, however, regardless of the possible ramifications. Hamilton expressed no dismay at his commodore’s trigger-happy display. The “chastisement” Rodgers had delivered was “very properly inflicted” the secretary gushed, and promised Rodgers whatever he needed to repair the slight damages to his own ship immediately. “You must want nothing,” he pledged. The lone “wounded boy” from Rodgers ship deserved appropriate reward, and Hamilton inquired if he was appropriate material for a midshipman’s warrant. “I would hug him to my bosom ... while I made him an officer,” if only he had character to match his gallantry, promised the

¹⁰³ Commander Arthur Bingham, RN to Vice Admiral Herbert Sawyer, RN, May 21, 1811; Commodore John Rodgers to Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, May 23, 1811, *NW*, 44-49.

Secretary. As for Rodgers, “I declare that my sentiments towards, and estimation of you, go beyond what may be expressed.”¹⁰⁴

While Hamilton’s effusive praise for his commodore’s destruction of a ship less than half the size of his own may seem excessive, Rodgers’ actions carried much deeper significance. He showed a perfect willingness, even a desire, to fight at a time when the navy’s last two encounters with British vessels had produced disgrace and humiliation. More importantly, his ship had been fully prepared for action. In his orders to Rodgers to rendezvous with Decatur, Hamilton urged him to insure that Decatur’s crew was “equally prepared,” to his own.¹⁰⁵ The secretary wanted it clearly understood that, while captains who went to sea unready to face any threat could expect shame and chastisement, those who evinced a fighting spirit that credited the service could expect to enjoy the highest praise.

Jefferson managed to avert war with Great Britain through the embargo, but he also did little to prepare the navy for the quite likely occurrence of a future war. He has been justly criticized for this, but most of the country shared his belief at the time that no amount of expansion could make the navy ready to face the mighty fleets of Great Britain.¹⁰⁶ He bequeathed to James Madison a small naval force consisting largely of gunboats, which would prove useless against the British. Stoddert, Smith, and Hamilton also left a more positive legacy to the next president, however. The naval officer corps consisted of captains whose burning ambition for honor, while highly problematic from a civilian control standpoint, made them ideal for facing the staggering odds of a war with the Royal Navy.

¹⁰⁴ Hamilton to Rodgers, May 28, 1811 *NW*, 44-49.

¹⁰⁵ Hamilton to Rodgers, May 28, 1811, *NW*, 44-49.

¹⁰⁶ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 147; Toll, *Six Frigates*, 306-307.

“The Precious Germ of Our National Glory:” The Navy Department and the War of 1812

*Honor is a jewel of more value than whole fleets and armies
and public prejudice waits not to inquire into the particulars of
a defeat where the result is so mortifying.*

Philip Broke¹

*The flag of my country will never be struck, so long as there is
a hull to wave it from.*

Stephen Decatur²

If anyone in the early republic should have been used to humiliation, it was William Bainbridge. The son of Loyalists during the American Revolution, he convinced the Navy Department of his patriotism enough to earn a captain's commission, but his early career was plagued by failure. Three times he lowered his flag in surrender, including the humiliating loss of the *Philadelphia*, which resulted in him sitting out the Tripolitan War in the Bashaw's

¹ Philip Broke to his wife, December 14, 1812, quoted in Kevin McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry: The US and Royal Navies in the War of 1812* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2011), 84.

² Quote attributed to Decatur in Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, *The Life of Stephen Decatur: A Commodore in the United States Navy* (Boston: Charles C. Little and James Brown, 1846), 157-158. Mackenzie, a young naval officer who served under Decatur, enjoyed the benefit of interviewing eye-witnesses for his biography, and he either overheard this remark in person or talked to someone who did. While he unfortunately did not provide the reader with his source for this quote, Mackenzie's reliability as a historian is widely accepted. There does exist at least a possibility that he fabricated the incident, or heard of it from someone else who did so, but such comments would have been very much in keeping with Decatur's attitudes and those of the navy generally. At the very least, the quote illustrates prevailing views of naval and national honor among American naval officers just prior to the outbreak of the war. Recent Decatur biographers accept the story at face value. See: Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 114-115; Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 110-111.

prison.¹ Yet even after repeated disgrace, he retained enough pride that he could not stomach the reports he heard in February of 1812. With war almost certain between his country and Great Britain, Bainbridge learned that Madison and his cabinet, including Secretary of the Navy Paul Hamilton, were seriously contemplating confining the entire U.S. Navy to port. The ships could serve a purely defensive purpose in the event of a British invasion, for the cabinet, again including Hamilton, was convinced that sending them into the Atlantic was as good as giving them to the British. Horrified at the possibility of such humiliating service, Bainbridge and Charles Stewart fired off a forceful letter of protest to the president. The Navy, and the nation, could handle the loss of ships, they assured Madison, provided their captains fell honorably. But the country would be forever disgraced if its forces failed to make even an effort to wage war against their rival. The letter had its intended effect; Madison relented, and allowed naval vessels to sail out against the Royal Navy.² If rumors

¹ For Bainbridge's life, see David Long's excellent biography *Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1980).

² Charles Stewart, "Biographical Sketch of Commodore Charles Stewart of the Navy of the United States," Philadelphia, 1852, 13-14, recounts this episode, but places it in June, after the outbreak of hostilities. Long, *Ready to Hazard*, 129-132, makes a compelling case that it actually occurred in February, when Madison realized that war with Britain was almost certain, but before he presented his war message to Congress. See also: Charles Stewart to Charles Jared Ingersoll, September 23, 1845, and Ingersoll to Stewart, September 28, 1845, Charles Jared Ingersoll Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, wherein Stewart discusses the episode with Ingersoll and defends his and Bainbridge's motives for acting. For another secondary account of the episode, this time from Stewart's perspective, see: Claude Berube and John Rodgaard, *A Call to the Sea: Captain Charles Stewart of the USS Constitution* (Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2005), 60-63. Stewart notes in his autobiography that the letter from him and Bainbridge to Madison had already been lost in 1852, and speculates that Madison concealed or destroyed it due to its sensitive nature. This was likely the most polite way he could think of to say that the then-deceased former president wanted to conceal the whole embarrassing affair. Most likely, Madison destroyed the letter after the sensational frigate victories of 1812, when the Navy's worth had been proven and its popularity with the American people secured. Another interpretation, however, is that such a letter never existed, and Stewart made the whole thing up. There is historical debate on this point. As noted above, both Stewart's and Bainbridge's biographers accept the story as having happened. George Daughan also agrees that Madison at least "toyed with" the idea of confining the navy to port. George Daughan, *1812: The Navy's War* (New York: Basic Books, 2011), 40. Christopher McKee, however, views the account as a likely fabrication, and he calls into question a great deal that Stewart took credit for in his later life. Christopher McKee, *Edward Preble: A Naval Biography, 1761-1807* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1972), 368, n1. Likewise, Linda Maloney asserts that there was no "real truth to the story, fabricated in 1845 by Commodore Charles Stewart" that Madison planned to bottle up the navy. Maloney, "The War of 1812: What Role for Sea Power?" Kenneth Hagan, ed., *In Peace and War*:

are to be believed, members of the cabinet hostile to naval forces (one of them was almost certainly Gallatin) agreed with Bainbridge and Stewart on the grounds that once the Royal Navy captured all of America's ships, the country would no longer have to pay for maintaining them.³

The two captains' willingness to forgo the niceties of military subordination and protest their civilian head's decisions was fortunate for the country. Although the Royal Navy technically triumphed, at least at sea, the US Navy enjoyed enough success that its existence was never again a subject of debate in Congress or with the American people.⁴ The episode speaks to the Royal Navy's dominance at the time, but it also reveals Hamilton's weak leadership in the Navy Department. Despite repeatedly urging his captains to aggressively defend their honor, he was apparently unwilling to challenge Madison on such a disgraceful policy. His flaws were only magnified once the war began. Although he presided over a series of single-ship actions that sparked wild celebrations across the nation, as a wartime leader he was found lacking. Historians are quick to note his administrative shortcomings, and certainly the volume of work he faced once war broke out increased

Interpretations of American Naval History, 1775-1978 (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1978), 46-62, quote found on page 46.

³ James Fenimore Cooper, *A History of the Navy of the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Lee and Blanchard, 1839), 242.

⁴ The debate over who "won" the War of 1812 is extensive. The most thorough argument for a British victory is Lambert, *The Challenge* and Jon Latimer, *1812: War with America* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). While he stops short of declaring American victory, Troy Bickham argues that America achieved its foremost objective of compelling British to treat it with respect and establishing as an actor in international relations. Bickham, *The Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). Wayne Lee, "Plattsburg, 1814: Warring for Bargaining Chips," Matthew Moten, ed. *Between War and Peace: How America Ends its Wars* (New York: The Free Press, 2011), 43-63 argues that the war was similar to earlier European "cabinet wars" in which nations vied to win territorial gains, not complete victory. Virtually all sources agree, however, that the United States interpreted the war as a victory after the Battle of New Orleans, and that the single-ship victories of 1812 greatly bolstered public morale and the navy's standing.

dramatically. But more telling was his willingness to defer a host of major decisions to his captains. The senior officers of the U.S. Navy often lacked clear orders or even guidance on how to engage the enemy. Civil-military relations within the Navy Department changed with Hamilton's ouster, however. William Jones, a prominent merchant, ship captain, and Revolutionary privateer took over the Navy Department in 1813, and brought to that office the clear-thinking and force of personality necessary to impose order and control the officer corps.

Despite Jones' good qualities, his tenure was not without conflict. Naval officers had to deal with recalcitrant and sometimes openly hostile civilians, both in the general public and local officials, particularly in New England where opposition to the war ran strongest. Their authority in cities fell short of martial law, even when their jurisdiction was facing almost certain invasion by the British. Underfunded and undersupplied, they lacked the resources to enforce their will on populations that were, in some cases, openly siding with the enemy. Although the War of 1812 proved difficult for the U.S. Navy in all aspects of civil-military relations, the growing sense of professionalism and Jones' late-war leadership enabled it to function as well as could reasonably be expected throughout the conflict.

The entire nation was woefully unprepared to engage Great Britain, and the navy was no exception. Jeffersonian Republicans, although bitterly hateful of the British, feared the threat that large military forces (and the taxes to sustain them) far more, and so kept the country's ability to wage war small even as they moved ever closer to a declaration of war against the world's mightiest military power. Madison abandoned his predecessor's embargo when he became president, but even as hostilities became increasingly certain during his first

term, he never called for naval expansion, nor did he significantly expand the land forces that would be desperately needed for a likely invasion of Canada. Congress increased the army only slightly, but just months before declaring war overwhelmingly voted against increasing the navy.⁵ Hamilton faced a host of manpower and materiel shortages at the outset of the conflict. Most of the men, munitions, and supplies the navy had available went to the frigates, leaving the navy yards that would play a crucial role in combating smuggling and repelling British invasions with deficient materials, or none at all.⁶ To his credit, Hamilton appealed to Congress for greater appropriations to address these problems, but he met with limited success.⁷

The Great Lakes were in even worse condition, a problem all the more inexcusable since American strategy hinged on seizing Canadian territory. Believing that defeating the Royal Navy was impossible, Madison and his cabinet concluded, not unreasonably, that the best strategy was to seize all or part of Canada and then barter it for concessions on impressments and neutral commerce.⁸ Controlling Canada, however, hinged on controlling

⁵ Gordon Wood, *Empire of Liberty: A History of the Early Republic, 1789-1815* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009) 671-672; Samuel Watson, "Trusting to 'the Chapter of Accidents': Contingency, Necessity, and Self-Constraint in Jeffersonian National Security Policy," *Journal of Military History* 76 no. 4 (October 2012), 978-1000; Lawrence Cress, *Citizens in Arms: The Army and the Militia in American Society to the War of 1812* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 151-153.

⁶ Sailing Master Thomas Gautier to Captain John Dent, April 22, 1812; Dent to Hamilton, April 27, 1812; Lieutenant Colonel Commandant Franklin Wharton to Captain John Hall, May 4, 1812; Hamilton to Selected Officers, May 6, 1812; Master Commandant Samuel Evans to Hamilton, May 7, 1812; Dent to Hamilton, June 4, 1812; Bainbridge to Hamilton, June 5, 1812; Tingey to Hamilton, June 9, 1812; Tingey to Hamilton, June 15, 1812, William Dudley and Michael Crawford, eds., *The Naval War of 1812: A Documentary History* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 1985-), 3 volumes, I: 98-107, 128-130, 186-189. (hereafter cited as *NW*).

⁷ Hamilton to Langdon Cheves, Chairman of the Congressional Naval Committee, June 30, 1812, *NW* I: 176-179.

⁸ Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 103-120. Bickham, it should be noted, goes on to argue that after the initial frustrations in the opening months of the war, and especially what were seen as brutal actions by Indian allies of the British, American attitudes shifted towards conquering and keeping Canada rather than using it as a bargaining chip. As Wayne Lee notes in "Plattsburg, 1814" the repeated setbacks of the Canadian invasion,

the Great Lakes. Yet naval officers in charge of gaining and holding these waters had to build fleets from scratch with minimal support from Washington. Although Congressional parsimony contributed to these problems, Hamilton bears part of the blame too, having sorely neglected in the Lakes in favor of the Atlantic. Because of the great distances and unreliable mail service, commanders in the Great Lakes Theater were far more cut off from their civilian superiors than those on the Eastern Seaboard.⁹ Hamilton's neglect of his responsibilities on the Canadian border vexed his officers considerably. Lieutenant Melancthon Woolsey, who sent far more letters to the Department than he received, begged Hamilton at one point to simply provide him enough officers to man the few ships he did have. "I am now about to sail without a single officer that has seen any service in the Navy," he complained, adding that "not one of my midshipmen have ever been at sea." He continued to supply Hamilton with regular reports of his efforts and plight, still without a response. "It is much to be lamented, sir, that we have not sufficient means of defense," he pleaded a few days later. He finally received a perfunctory response from Hamilton that assured him a few more cannon were en route, but gave him little reassurance that the secretary was aware of his desperate straits.¹⁰

Hamilton's leadership during wartime was unquestionably lacking, but he did not differ from the president in this regard. Madison was almost no help.¹¹ Having initially

plus the arrival of seasoned veterans for the British after Napoleon's abdication, pushed American diplomats back towards using any territorial gains as bargaining chips.

⁹ Lieutenant Sidney Smith to Hamilton, June 16, 1812, *NW*, I: 275.

¹⁰ Woolsey to Hamilton, August 3, 1812; Woolsey to Hamilton, August 8, 1812; Hamilton to Woolsey, August 21, 1812, *NW*, I: 286, 289, 294.

¹¹ For Madison and the U.S. Navy in the war, see Daughan, *1812*, 31-41, 55; and Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 148-149. For Madison as a wartime leader, see: Daughan, *1812*, 416; Hickey, *War of 1812*, 69-

opposed the creation of the Navy as a member of the House of Representatives, as president he shared his cabinet's conviction that Britain would annihilate the force in short order. While he hoped privateers would harass British commerce and possibly help hasten John Bull to the negotiating table, he assumed American frigates would play no role in the conflict and did not factor them into his strategy. As noted earlier, he was open to the idea of simply using America's frigates as floating defensive batteries, until persuaded otherwise by Bainbridge and Stewart. He reportedly assured the two captains, after agreeing to let them engage the enemy, that "it is victories we want; if you give us them and lose your ships afterwards, they can be replaced by others."¹² This was patently false; Congress had already rejected calls to build more vessels at the time of this conversation, and Madison was more likely giving assurances to a navy he believed would soon be swallowed up. Hamilton entertained similarly defeatist sentiments. "[When] I reflect on the overwhelming force of our enemy," he wrote to his son-in-law, "my heart swells almost to bursting, and the only consolation I have is that in falling they will fall nobly."¹³ Hamilton's fears were not unreasonable. The United States had sixteen ships that were seaworthy at the outset of the war. Britain had over six-hundred.¹⁴ As if the staggering numerical odds were not already

70, 304-305; and Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 502-505. The assessments are generally negative. Madison, Daughan argues, declared war recklessly and perhaps unnecessarily, while Hickey and Stagg sharply criticize his failure to adequately prepare for war, mobilize national resources or popular support, and his general mismanagement of what forces he did have. That said, he is also credited with his restrained use of executive power, and all agree that his refusal to stifle civil liberties or silence opponents, even in the face of secession threats, was laudable.

¹² Brant, *James Madison*, VI: 39.

¹³ Quoted in Stephen Budiansky, *Perilous Fight: America's Intrepid War with Great Britain on the High Seas, 1812-1815*, (New York: Alfred Knopf, 2010), 111.

¹⁴ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 332. The British, it should be noted, were maintaining a tight blockade of France at the time, and had to divide their forces. This did not, however, even come close to negating their massive numerical superiority.

bad enough, America's navy was under the authority of a weak and indecisive civilian head and a largely indifferent president. For the first six months of the war, it was the captains themselves who forged what strategy the navy possessed and put it into operation.

Ignored by the president, Hamilton turned to two of his senior officers to provide him with a strategy. Early in the summer of 1812, with war looming, Hamilton asked John Rodgers and Stephen Decatur what they believed should be done with American naval forces.¹⁵ Both of them offered reasonably sound advice, though they each offered plans that would work to their own personal benefit. Both sensibly argued against keeping the entire navy in one location, where America might have "the whole of our marine crushed at one blow."¹⁶ Decatur, apparently more concerned about this, argued for sending out all of America's ships individually, or at most in pairs. Rodgers was a bit less worried about grouping ships together, since he would be in command of the largest squadron, and he was also seemingly less cognizant of just how tiny his own country's navy was. He advised that

to dispose our comparatively very small force, in such a way as to harass [Britain's] West India commerce by our lightest vessels, and her coasting trade, East India trade and other foreign trade by our Frigates & one or two of our fastest sailing sloops of war: our small vessels to be disposed in a way, according to circumstances, to annoy to the greatest extent all the avenues leading to and from her West India Islands, Surinam, Berbice, and Demamara (sic): a small squadron of two, or three of our fastest sailing frigates and a single sloop of War, to cruise on the coasts of England, Ireland, and Scotland; and the residue of our frigates to act separately, or in squadron on our own coasts to harass the enemy by cruising in the tracts of his ships trading between him & his colonies of Canada, Nova Scotia, and Newfoundland; and occasionally to unite all our frigates & attack his East India convoys.¹⁷

¹⁵ Hamilton to Rodgers, May 21, 1812, Rodgers to Hamilton, June 3, 1812, Decatur to Hamilton, June 8, 1812, NW I: 117-124. Hamilton's letter to Decatur is not included, but Decatur mentions being delayed in seeing Hamilton's letter to him in his response, making it clear he was consulted as well, and not volunteering his thoughts.

¹⁶ Decatur to Hamilton, NW, I: 123.

¹⁷ Rodgers to Hamilton, NW I: 119.

Such an ambitious plan was possible, he argued, because the British sent all their vessels out at the onset of a war to attack the enemy's forces in their own harbors, leaving the British coast undefended. His judgment was later vindicated, when American privateers wreaked havoc on British shipping, even on the very coast of England.¹⁸ Nevertheless, Rodgers also enjoyed immense personal benefit from his plan. As the senior officer, he would be in command of this large squadron, and thus would be the most likely to win laurels for himself, while Decatur and other ambitious officers would be under his command.¹⁹ If the American navy were divided up, other officers might win great victories apart from him. Moreover, as squadron commander over Decatur, Rodgers would stand to receive a share of all prizes, whereas with Decatur in command of his own squadron, any prizes those ships under the younger officer's command captured would be of no financial benefit to Rodgers.

Rodgers also displayed greater bravado about challenging the Royal Navy. Perhaps bolstered by his encounter with the *Little Belt*, or perhaps still smarting at having "defeated" such a tiny ship and hoping for a more glorious encounter, he pleaded for command of one of the squadrons off the British coast. "[The British] have already...honored me with the title of Buccaneer," he chortled to Hamilton, "and nothing on this side of the grave would afford me with more satisfaction, than...affording them a more bitter subject for their still more bitter and illiberal animadversions." He was not only zealous for his own reputation, however. Rodgers' goal for the U.S. Navy was nothing less than to "astonish all Europe." While Britain had enjoyed a string of unbroken success against other European powers, let

¹⁸ J. Mackay Hitsman, *The Incredible War of 1812: A Military History*, Updated by Donald E. Graves (Toronto: Robin Brass Studio, 1999, originally published 1965), 269-270; Daughan, *If By Sea*, 430.

¹⁹ Maloney, "War of 1812," 47.

them challenge Americans and “they will soon find that we are neither Frenchmen, or Spaniards, Hollanders, or Danes.”

While Decatur was less verbose in his response, it is worth noting that he too had a self-serving aspect to his recommendations. It would be best, he suggested, to send American ships out individually or in very small squadrons, thereby insuring that the British could not wipe out nearly the entire Navy in one action. As to what should be done with these ships, he encouraged the secretary to send them out “without giving them any specific instructions, as to the place of cruising, but to rely on the enterprise of the officers.” His advice was sound, and probably more realistic than Rodgers, but he did not miss the opportunity to call for greater autonomy for himself and his fellow officers from Washington’s control. Also, by separating ships, he insured at least a small squadron for himself, whereas under Rodgers’ plan he would have been under Rodgers’ command.

Hamilton, and the entire cabinet, continued to waffle on the best use of the navy even after a declaration of war. Gallatin, not unreasonably, hoped to use what forces America had for commerce protection. How naval officers would have reacted to such a mission can never be known, but it seems probable they would have complied only grudgingly. The officer corps had been molded since its creation to favor aggressive action against the enemy. They thirsted for glory, and taking ships from the greatest naval power of the age was their ultimate prize.²⁰ Hamilton again dithered in making a decision, but ultimately yielded to Gallatin’s urgency. In the process, he also avoided definitively siding with either Rodgers or Decatur on whether American ships should cruise in squadrons or separately. On June 21, he sent orders to his captains informing them that they were “entitled to every belligerent right

²⁰ McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 26-27.

to attack and capture and defend,” and urging them to act aggressively against the enemy.²¹ But less than a week later, he apparently caved to Gallatin and sent orders to Rodgers informing him that “it has been judged expedient to employ our public armed vessels as to afford our returning commerce all possible protection.” He ordered Rodgers and Decatur to cruise separately, but to stay in constant contact in case they determined it would be best to link up into a single squadron. The likelihood that Decatur would ever judge it best for him to leave independent command and suborn himself to Rodgers was quite remote, of course, but on paper that door was left open. Hamilton thus managed to concur with both Rodgers’ and Decatur’s suggestions, which charitably might be regarded as an effort to draw on both men’s expertise, but is more likely another example of the secretary’s inability to make a decision. In any case, Hamilton now stressed that the foremost purpose of the navy was to protect American commerce, and striking at the enemy was of decidedly secondary importance.²²

But by this time Rodgers was already gone to sea. Interpreting Hamilton’s initial orders as giving him the right to immediately sail out against the Royal Navy, he rushed his men to sea within minutes of receiving word from the secretary that the two nations were at war. Hamilton was unable to communicate with him for the next four months, and essentially lost operational control of the U.S. Navy.²³ As for Rodgers, his cruise failed to bring him the glory he craved. He managed to bring the British frigate *Belvedera* to action, but when the winds died down, he was unable to draw close enough for his guns to do any

²¹ Hamilton to Hull, June 18, 1812, NW I: 135-136. John Schroeder, *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early American navy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006), 113, notes that Rodgers received identical orders.

²² Hamilton to Rodgers, June 22, 1812, NW, I: 148-149. See also, Brant, *James Madison*, VI: 35-37.

²³ McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 27; Daughan, *If By Sea*, 412-413; Schroeder, *John Rodgers*, 113-114.

serious damage, and the enemy escaped. Throughout the remainder of his cruise, he captured a mere seven small merchant vessels. Although he found it “a truly unpleasant task to be obliged to make a communication thus barren of benefit to our country,” he did console himself that his very presence in the Atlantic occupied the Royal Navy’s attention, and allowed American merchants to reach home unscathed.²⁴ Of course, such strategic insight only occurred to him after he failed to win any other laurels for himself – he said nothing about merely distracting the Royal Navy in his brash letter to Hamilton recommending a strategy – but it did hint at the strategic vision Jones would soon bring to the navy. Meanwhile, other officers were enjoying much better luck against their adversaries.

Isaac Hull’s first cruise proved far more eventful. Encountering a British squadron, he recognized that he was hopelessly outnumbered and determined that it was better to survive to fight another day. He almost failed to do that. With no wind, Hull could not move his ships. Only by kedging, a tactic that involved rowing the anchors in front of a ship and using capstans to pull it forward, was Hull able to evade his pursuers. Although not a victory in any sense of the word, Hull’s daring escape did him no dishonor. His display of seamanship impressed even his pursuers, and the odds were enough in the British squadron’s favor that no one looked askance at his running away. Upon hearing of the affair, Oliver Hazard Perry stressed the fine state of Hull’s crew throughout the crisis, and took pride in the fact that no British vessel dared to risk attacking the *Constitution* by itself.²⁵

Hull, however, dreamed of better things than hair-breadth escapes. He found his chance soon enough. The *Constitution* shortly encountered Captain Dacres and the

²⁴ Rodgers to Hamilton, September 1, 1812, *NW*, I: 262-264. See also, Daughan, *1812*, 80-82.

²⁵ Hull to Hamilton, July 21, 1812, *NW*, I: 161-165; Perry to Hamilton, July 26, 1812, *NW* I: 200. For British Admiral Broke’s praise of Hull’s seamanship, see Lambert, *The Challenge*, 71-72.

Guerriere. Now Hull had his chance to display American prowess and prove that he was the equal of any British officer. Hull's account of the encounter leaves no doubt that this, and not mere commerce protection, was what he and his crew dreamed of. "Actions like these speak for themselves," he gushed to Hamilton, "which makes it unnecessary for me to say anything to establish the bravery and gallant conduct of those who were engaged in it." Nevertheless, Hull took the time to give a detailed description of his crew's rousing cheers when they learned they were to fall in with a British frigate, and he heaped praise on all the officers and men for so thoroughly destroying their enemy. The battle must have surpassed his wildest hopes. In less than thirty minutes, the *Constitution* inflicted such savage damage to the enemy that Hull called off a planned boarding attempt, rightly concluding that Dacres already had no choice but to surrender.²⁶

Decatur also found success soon after setting sail. Two months after Hull, he became the second American to take a British ship in battle. According to legend, he had enjoyed a congenial relationship with British Captain John Carden before the war, and the two had jokingly wagered a hat on the outcome of a battle between their two ships, the *United States* and the *Macedonian*. The conversation soon turned serious though, as Carden predicted that any American ship would surely be doomed against an equal vessel in the Royal Navy. "Your ships may be good enough, and you are a clever set of fellows," Carden condescendingly remarked to Decatur, "but what practice have you had in war?" Decatur solemnly responded that if the two ever met "as enemies with equal forces, the conflict will undoubtedly be a severe one." But Carden was mistaken, Decatur assured him, if he thought

²⁶ Hull to Hamilton, August 28, 1812, *NW*, I: 237-242.

Americans would surrender easily. “The flag of my country will never be struck whilst there is a hull for it to wave from,” he boasted.²⁷

The two men’s boasts were tested on October 25, 1812. Samuel Leech, a British sailor on the *Macedonian* who subsequently defected to the Americans, recounts the horrors he witnessed in the battle. Amid the “torrents of blood which dyed our decks,” and the “deafening roar...like some awfully tremendous thunder storm” of the gunfire, Leech witnessed limbs blown off, bowels split open, and wounded men who were judged beyond hope thrown overboard alive.²⁸ His masts and rigging in shambles, his crew decimated, and his ship “an unmanageable log,” Carden saw no choice but to surrender.²⁹ The *United States*, meanwhile, showed only the faintest signs of having been engaged in battle. Decatur had only twelve men killed or wounded, compared to thirty-six dead and another sixty-eight wounded on the British side.³⁰

Carden was devastated after the battle, believing that he was the first British commander to strike his flag to an American. Decatur tried to console him by letting him know of the *Guerriere*’s earlier surrender, though how comforting this news really was is debatable.³¹ The American public felt no ambivalence whatsoever about the battle though. Decatur brought the shattered frigate back to shore with him, and his victory, like Hull’s

²⁷ Mackenzie, *Life of Stephen Decatur*, 156-158.

²⁸ Samuel Leech, *Thirty years from home, or, A voice from the main deck, being the experiences of Samuel Leech, who was for six years in the British and American navies, was captured on the British frigate Macedonian: afterwards entered the American navy, and was taken on the United States brig Syren, by the British ship Medway* (London: Chatam Publishing, 1999, originally published 1843), 71-77.

²⁹ Carden, *Curtail’d Memoir*, 263.

³⁰ Carden to Secretary of the Admiralty John Croker, October 28, 1812; Decatur to Hamilton, October 30, 1812, NW I: 549-553.

³¹ Toll, *Six Frigates*, 365.

sparked wild celebrations across the nation. Decatur dispatched Lieutenant Archibald Hamilton, the secretary's son, to carry the *Macedonian's* flag to Washington. He arrived in the midst of a ball attended by James and Dolly Madison and most of Washington high society. A euphoric celebration erupted, and at least one guest compared Decatur's victory to the Athenian victory over Persia at the historic Battle of Marathon.³² A victory tour followed, with Decatur taking both ships to New York. Samuel Leech, by now counting himself among the Americans and shamelessly partaking in the celebratory atmosphere, recalled the "continual cheering," of the jubilant crowds.³³ Decatur and his crew were especially happy not only because of the celebration of their exploits, but also because they were entitled to prize money from the captured vessel. Under maritime law, the officers and crew received half the proceeds of a captured ship's sale if it was of inferior size, and the entirety if it was of equal or greater size. Although the two ships now floated side by side, making it patently obvious to any observer that the British vessel was smaller, in the heady atmosphere of victory no one wanted to quibble over prize money, and the *Macedonian* was quickly declared to be of equal force to the *United States*, ensuring that Decatur and his crew received the whole of the prize money.³⁴

Perhaps no American captain was more elated to capture an enemy vessel than William Bainbridge. In July of 1812, he received orders to relieve Hull as captain of the *Constitution*. Having been on the losing end of his share of battles, the chance to finally redeem himself was a desperately needed balm for his reputation. Frustrated by the

³² Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 121-122.

³³ Leech, *Thirty years from home*, 90-91.

³⁴ Tucker, *Stephen Decatur*, 122.

ambiguous and often nonexistent direction from Hamilton, Bainbridge sought counsel elsewhere on where to cruise. He contacted his old friend and prominent merchant captain, William Jones, the future secretary of the navy, for advice.³⁵ Jones responded with detailed counsel based on his extensive knowledge of maritime life. He urged him to avoid sailing all the way to the Indian Ocean, even though the volume of British trade there almost guaranteed a fat prize. Bainbridge would find it difficult to put into any ports for supplies and the known prevalence of diseases in the region might frighten his crew and limit their effectiveness, Jones warned. Better to stick to the Caribbean or the South American coast, where ample merchant shipping would still give Bainbridge the best chance to disrupt British trade. Interestingly, Jones made no mention of the recent frigate captures, which he surely would have heard of, and failed to wish Bainbridge similar luck. This is the first hint of the new strategy the navy would employ when its civilian leadership changed; Jones understood that a far worse disaster for the British than the loss of two or three ships would be extensive raiding of their commerce, which would threaten to further sink the economy and drive up insurance rates.

But Bainbridge had more on his mind than insurance rates when he sailed in October. Almost pathologically desperate to vindicate his honor, nothing would have satisfied him but taking a British frigate of equal size. Fortunately for him, on December 30 he encountered the British thirty-eight-gun ship *Java*, and a fierce battle ensued which lasted for over three hours. When the smoke cleared, the British captain Lambert lay seriously wounded upon the

³⁵ Bainbridge to William Jones, October 5, 1812, Jones to Bainbridge, October 11, 1812, *NW*, I: 509-515.

deck, with another fifty-seven of his men killed. Lieutenant Henry Chads had the immensely unpleasant duty of becoming yet another British officer to strike to an American.³⁶

The British were as frustrated by the losses as Americans were thrilled. From faraway Portugal, the Duke of Wellington grouched that the war would end quickly “if we could take one or two of these damned frigates.” Although the American ships were technically all larger than the British vessels they captured, that gave little consolation to a naval force that was not used to losing *any* ships, regardless of circumstances. The Admiralty ordered John Borlase Warren, theater commander in North America, to impress on his officers the need to “[vindicate] the honor of His Majesty’s Arms.” Sir Philip Broke, among the most tenacious officers in the Royal Navy, lamented to his wife that “honor is a jewel of more value than whole fleets and armies and public prejudice waits not to enquire into the particulars of a defeat where the result is so mortifying.”³⁷ British newspapers were equally distraught. The *Naval Chronicle* announced the *Java*’s loss but refused to print any further details, as “the subject is too painful for us to dwell on.” The *London Pilot* managed to comment at greater length. “Anyone who had predicted such a result of an American war this time last year would have been treated as a madman or a traitor,” it opened, further reminding its readers that British public opinion (and Madison and his cabinet, it might have added) had assumed it would only take a few months to annihilate the American navy. Instead “not a single American frigate has struck her flag.” American captains “insult and

³⁶ Journal of Commodore William Bainbridge, December 29, 1812; Lieutenant Henry Chads to Secretary of the Admiralty John Croker, December 31, 1812, NW I: 640-649.

³⁷ All quotations taken from McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 84, 91. For the British reaction to defeat, see, in addition to McCranie, Toll, *Six Frigates*, 370-372. Daughan, *1812*, 149, notes that the victories might not have had a significant impact in the final outcome of the war, but they did serve the United States well in the aftermath of the conflict. The war, he argues, was waged “in part because Britain refused to accord America the respect it demanded. The naval victories were changing attitudes in London, laying the groundwork for a more equitable and peaceful relationship in the future.”

laugh at our want of enterprise and vigor,” while sailing where they please from the West Indies to South America to even Europe itself.³⁸

Ecstasy from the American public, dismay from the British Admiralty, and elation from officers whose honor and reputation were exalted in victory could not hide the fact that these frigate victories had limited strategic value. Britain had an abundance of ships; losing three hardly made a dent in the Royal Navy’s force, even when fighting a two-front war.³⁹ In the emotional aftermath of victory, Americans reading accounts of the battles might be forgiven for forgetting this fact, but Paul Hamilton cannot be excused so easily. His duty was to see the war with a dispassionate eye for victory, focusing on what would give his country the best chance to force concessions from Great Britain and achieve the nation’s stated war aims. The single-ship actions had little chance of accomplishing that, so long as Britain had an ample supply to draw from. Yet Hamilton was as caught up in the euphoria of the moment as anyone. “In this action, we know not which most to applaud, your gallantry or your skill,” he gushed to Hull.⁴⁰ Nor did Hamilton forget Stewart and Bainbridge’s intervention that made these victories possible. According to Stewart’s admittedly self-promoting autobiography, when word of Decatur’s victory reached Washington, Hamilton proclaimed to the celebrating crowd that “it is to Commodores Stewart and Bainbridge that you owe your naval victories!”⁴¹

³⁸ Quoted in Toll, *Six Frigates*, 381.

³⁹ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 183.

⁴⁰ Hamilton to Hull, September 9, 1812, NW I: 472-473. See also, Hamilton to Decatur, December 29, 1812, NW I: 638-639.

⁴¹ Stewart, “Biographical Sketch,” 21. It appears Hamilton was drunk at the time. See Brant, *James Madison*, VI: 125-126.

Hamilton was profuse with his praise in the aftermath of such stirring victories. Presiding over an officer corps that fought for their own reputations and honor, such applause was wholly appropriate and a key part of his job. The victories were indeed surprising and a significant boost to the nation's morale at a time when little else about the war was going well. That Hamilton joined in the celebration was expected. The problem was his failure to put these early successes in the context of an overall strategy, something he as of yet had not formulated. He must have known the captures would only infuriate a still significantly larger British Navy, and that they had no chance of forcing any kind of war-ending concessions. Hamilton was understandably caught up in the moment, because he had been making up strategy as he went. It would await another secretary of the navy for the United States to put in place any kind of comprehensive naval strategy.

Throughout the early victories of 1812, Hamilton continued to look primarily to his officers for how to manage the United States' limited naval forces.⁴² He did finally make a decision on how to organize his ships, dividing his forces into three squadrons under the command of Rodgers, Decatur, and Bainbridge. But beyond that, commodores were on their own. He ordered each squadron to "pursue the course, which to the commanding officer may, under all circumstances, appear the most expedient to afford protection to our trade and annoy the enemy." The only caveat was that they were to write the department "at all proper opportunities."⁴³ Hamilton's deference to his captains only increased with victories. William Fowler concludes that, by the end of his tenure, his relationship with Rodgers, Decatur, and company was "solicitous and at times almost fawning," and that he was

⁴² Maloney, "The War of 1812," 46-48.

⁴³ Hamilton to Rodgers, September 9, 1812, *NW*, I: 471-472.

completely beholden to their advice to know how to oversee the navy.⁴⁴ The problem may not have been so much Hamilton's attitude towards his officers as that, lacking a coherent strategy himself, he was easily swayed by others. Daniel Dobbins, a merchant captain on the Great lakes prior to the war, convinced Hamilton that Presque Isle Bay, which just happened to be his home, would be an ideal spot to construct additional vessels for the battle to control the Lakes. Oblivious to the situation, or geography, on the Lakes, Hamilton accepted Dobbins' pitch at face value and immediately commissioned him as a sailing master and signed the orders to move ship construction facilities to Presque Isle without consulting his two officers already at work on the Lakes. Although the wisdom of using Presque Isle was later vindicated, Hamilton strained his relations with Jesse Elliott and Isaac Chauncey by his handling of the episode.⁴⁵

Upon dispatching Dobbins, Hamilton returned to his habit of ignoring the Lakes. Officers in the Atlantic received more attention, but scarcely more supervision and direction. What efforts Hamilton did exert to control his officers were limited and confined to a few of the more problematic captains. He sternly rebuked David Porter for standing by and allowing his crew to tar and feather a seaman who claimed to be British. John Irving, a sailor who apparently was born in Britain but had signed on to an American ship before the declaration of war, informed Porter that he would be unable to take an oath of allegiance to the United States now that the two countries were at war. Momentarily abdicating leadership, Porter willingly granted the rest of his crew permission to cover Irving in tar and feathers, and cast him off in a strange port where he had no friends or acquaintances to turn

⁴⁴ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 185.

⁴⁵ Skaggs and Atloff, *A Signal Victory*, 41-42.

to. The police took him into protective custody.⁴⁶ Hamilton was infuriated at Porter's report, and sharply informed him that "mobs should never be suffered to exist on board a man of war." Instead, "order and discipline and perfect observance of the law should be enforced."⁴⁷ Still, Hamilton's relationship with Porter was always tense, dating back to the captain's days at the New Orleans Station. Only in egregious cases did he intervene in a captain's treatment of those under his command. When a group of employees at the Washington Naval Yard sent him a petition complaining of Thomas Tingey's authoritative ways, he sent the petition back to Tingey and promptly forgot about it.⁴⁸ This was certainly in keeping with precedent; like Stoddert and Smith before him, Hamilton preferred to leave officers' relations with their subordinates alone, be they seamen or civilian employees.

Hamilton also found himself in trouble with his officers over promotion practices. While he initially tried to make the Department more efficient and systematized, he had a tendency to get carried away in the aftermath of victory. He allowed Lieutenant Charles Morris to jump two ranks to post captain, ahead of several other lieutenants senior to him, after his heroic conduct in battle. Fellow officers were disgusted at what they regarded as excessive reward. While all had only the highest praise for Morris, they felt that a single promotion would have sufficed, and Arthur Sinclair pointedly informed the secretary that he had been serving for fifteen years, without having been lucky enough to be involved in a war. If every lieutenant with the good fortune to fight a battle with a British frigate jumped over all his peers, Sinclair argued, Hamilton might face a mass exodus from the officer corps.

⁴⁶ Porter to Hamilton, June 28, 1812, *NW*, I: 171.

⁴⁷ Hamilton to Porter, June 30, 1812, *NW*, I: 176.

⁴⁸ Tingey to Hamilton, October 7, 1812, *NW* I: 524.

James Lawrence was even more forceful, threatening to resign rather than serve under an officer he regarded as his inferior. Although Hamilton put up a tough front to Lawrence's threat, informing him that if "(without cause) you leave the service of our country, there will still remain heroes and patriots to support the honor of its flag." Calling Lawrence's bluff apparently worked; he immediately wrote back a less than contrite letter accusing Hamilton of questioning his patriotism, but he at least assured him that he had no thoughts of resigning. Hamilton nevertheless took their objections to heart.⁴⁹ When Stephen Decatur tried to secure a similar reward for his first lieutenant, William Allen, after defeating the *Macedonian*, Hamilton declined.⁵⁰

In short, Hamilton failed to provide leadership amid the chaos of war. His problem was not only that he was overly deferential to his officer corps. That was certainly true in cases, but he also occasionally overruled them or gave emphatic orders. His problem was inconsistency in his directives and relations with those under his authority. Moreover, he proved too easily convinced to follow anyone else's advice on virtually any issue. At his core, Hamilton had no coherent strategy, no concrete idea of how to put his means toward a definite end, and thus he was willing to defer to anyone who appeared to know what they were doing. He surely felt the weight of his authority very intensely, and in the meantime he continually received reports that his South Carolina plantation was deteriorating and his personal finances going to ruin in his absence. Although he protested, it probably came as a relief to him when Madison brought his tenure at the head of the Navy Department to an end.

⁴⁹ Hamilton to Charles Morris, October 5, 1812; Arthur Sinclair to Hamilton, October 7, 1812; Bainbridge to Hamilton, October 8, 1812; Lawrence to Hamilton, October 10, 1812; Hamilton to Lawrence, October 17, 1812; Lawrence to Hamilton, October 22, 1812, NW I: 516-523.

⁵⁰ Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 119.

Despite the successes at sea in 1812, it was clear by the year's end that the department was in trouble, and Hamilton came under increasing fire from Congress. Among the most popular charges was that he was perpetually drunk. One congressman grouched that he "never spends a day without being in a state approaching intoxication," and besides that his "talents have never been estimated above mediocrity."⁵¹ David Porter echoed the charge, complaining to Samuel Hambleton that, so long as Hamilton lived there, it would be impossible to find "so much as a pint of whiskey in the District of Columbia."⁵² Porter, however, is not the most reliable source on this issue. As noted earlier, he quarreled constantly with Hamilton and openly hated him.⁵³ No other officer ever leveled a similar accusation, even as Hamilton's popularity declined. Accusations that Hamilton was a drunk or that his alcoholism kept him from performing his duties effectively are greatly exaggerated. Christopher McKee notes that his handwriting remained "beautifully small, clear, and precise," until his ouster, hardly an indication the man was in a drunken haze on the job most days.⁵⁴ Yet it is clear that Hamilton was ill-suited to be a wartime cabinet officer. The administration of the Department fell into disrepair shortly after the outbreak of war and became increasingly chaotic in the final months of 1812.⁵⁵ Goldsborough later admitted to Madison that "owing to the very loose manner in which the books of money and warrants and drafts have been kept, for some time past" he was unable to give the president

⁵¹ Samuel Taggart to John Taylor, December 8, 1812, quoted in McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 111. See also, Brant, *James Madison*, VI: 125-126; Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War*, 289-290; Maloney, "War of 1812," 53-54.

⁵² Porter to Hambleton, October 4, 1812, quoted in McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 111.

⁵³ Porter to Hambleton, October 2, 1812, David Porter Papers, Box 2, LOC; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 57-58.

⁵⁴ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 10.

⁵⁵ McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 110-112.

any idea of how much money the department had spent.⁵⁶ In fact, the Navy Department ended the year almost a million dollars over budget, with little to show for these expenses in terms of ship construction, defenses against British invasion, and preparations on the Great Lakes.⁵⁷ A handful of isolated victories masked the fact that the navy remained woefully ill-suited to wage war with Britain. Once Madison secured reelection, he took the opportunity to clean house, accepting resignations from both Hamilton and Secretary of War James Eustis.⁵⁸ To replace Hamilton, Madison turned to William Jones.

William Jones' connection to the navy dated almost from its creation. In 1798, an aspirant to the officer corps begged Jones to "use your interest with the Secretary of the Navy in my behalf."⁵⁹ His familiarity with the sea stretched back before that, having served on board of Thomas Truxtun's privateer during the American Revolution, after service in the Continental Army under Washington. Since then, he had enjoyed a thriving career as a ship captain and merchant. He was recognized as a strong candidate for secretary of the navy early on, with Jefferson offering him the post on two separate occasions before turning to Robert Smith. With the country at war, Jones found it more difficult to refuse Madison. While Jones weighed the possibility of taking the post, Jonathon Roberts of Congress appealed to him that the country was "in a state of public suffering to be relieved only under your saving hand."⁶⁰ Moreover, the public outpouring of support for the navy meant that,

⁵⁶ Goldsborough to Madison, January 7, 1813, *JMP: Presidential Series*, V: 558; See also: Benjamin Homans to William Jones, undated (but almost certainly from 1813), Box 1, Uslema Clarke Smith Collection D, HSP.

⁵⁷ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 186.

⁵⁸ Brant, *James Madison*, VI: 120-127.

⁵⁹ George Croft (or Cross) to Jones, August 23, 1798, Jones and Clark Papers, Box 2, HSP.

⁶⁰ Congressman Jonathon Roberts to Jones, December 28, 1812, *NW*, I: 635-637.

instead of overseeing downsizing as he would have for Jefferson, Jones could now head a growing maritime force.⁶¹ On the other hand, Jones' business was suffering from the embargo and the war, and accepting the post would only cause his personal finances to deteriorate further. He came very close to declining the position once again on those grounds, but he concluded that "we are engaged in a war *more just and inevitable* than our glorious revolution," and "the same indignant feelings which impelled me, not to the 'tented field,' but to the frozen *untented* heights of Princeton, Pluckamin, and Morristown" now compelled him to set aside his private affairs for the sake of his country.⁶² Laying aside personal considerations, Jones accepted the post.

Jones vigorously threw himself into the task of managing a wartime navy. The only exercise he could make time for was that of "the head and hands," he wrote to his wife, Eleanor. He was up every morning at seven and at his desk writing until midnight. He fortified himself each day with four glasses of wine at dinner but, no doubt mindful of his predecessor's scandals, he did not allow himself "a drop of any kind of spirit since I have been here."⁶³ Although he considered it "a Herculean task," and appreciated his friends who "commiserated with" him, he was still upbeat about the labors he faced. "Having accepted the trust with reluctance, but with the purest motives and most ardent zeal for the cause of our country, why should I despair?"⁶⁴

⁶¹ Fowler, *Jack Tars and Commodores*, 186.

⁶² Jones to Madison, April 25, 1814, *JMP: Presidential Series*, VII: 437-439. For more on Jones's personal views of the war, see: Jones to W.B. Giles, February 4, 1809; Jones to Eleanor Jones, July 12, 1812; and Jones to William Young, 1813, Box 1, Uslema Clarke Smith Collection D, HSP.

⁶³ William Jones to Eleanor Jones, March 8, 1813, Box 1, Uslema Clarke Smith Collection D, HSP.

⁶⁴ William Jones to Eleanor Jones, January 23, 1813, NW II: 34-35.

His most frustrating task, even more than grappling with the Royal Navy, was removing those he considered corrupt or inept from the department. He complained of the “excessively disordered and confused state of which I have found every branch of the department,” and the “corruption of self-interested men who have taken root in the establishment and, like the voracious poplar, nothing can survive in their shade.”⁶⁵ He promptly fired all department employees but one. Even Chief Clerk Charles Goldsbrough was not immune from his purging. Although he had contributed a great deal to the department in its early days, even briefly serving as acting secretary prior to Hamilton’s arrival, Goldsbrough had apparently followed his boss’s example a bit too much early in the war, doing little to salvage the department from Hamilton’s mismanagement. Jones might have been inclined to remove a long-serving and powerful subordinate from a prior administration anyway, but Goldsbrough did himself no favors when he began trading increasingly vicious public broadsides with Dr. Thomas Ewell, a former naval surgeon. Ewell referred to Goldsbrough as “one of the most cunning scoundrels with whom I have ever come in contact,” and compared him to a rabid dog. Goldsbrough, in turn, gave as good as he got, and the entire affair embarrassed the Navy Department at a time when its reputation was already suffering.⁶⁶ Jones insisted on Goldsbrough’s resignation, though he did feel some compassion for the man, and allowed him to remain in the department a few days and purchase some of its furniture to at least give the appearance of a mutual and

⁶⁵ “Notes Made by Secretary of the Navy William Jones Regarding a Visit by Chief Clerk Charles W. Goldsbrough,” undated. *NW*, II: 54-55. The editors conclude that this meeting almost certainly occurred on February 28, 1813. William Jones to Eleanor Jones, January 13, 1813, Box 1, Uslema Clarke Smith Collection D, HSP. Jones’s firing of all employees but one is taken from McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 11-12.

⁶⁶ McKee, *Gentlemanly and Honorable Profession*, 17.

amicable parting.⁶⁷ Benjamin Homans, a staunch Republican and former merchant captain who had the endorsement of Vice president Elbridge Gerry and Secretary of State James Monroe, had the unenviable task of replacing Goldsborough as clerk and trying to restore some semblance of order to the department.⁶⁸

His relationship with his officers got off to a good start. Decatur no doubt spoke for many of his brethren when he wrote Jones to express his happiness with the change in leadership. "I in common with all my brother officers feel now that the establishment in which our feelings and interest are involved will have nothing to struggle against, but such things as ought fairly to be charged against it," he wrote, apparently believing that the navy would be free to achieve new heights of success against the Royal Navy, now that its incompetent civilian head was out of the way. Decatur added that "whatever may have been the talents of the gentleman filling that office, his deficiency in practical nautical knowledge was such as to increase the expense of our establishment infinitely beyond what it ought to have been," and that he hoped "the enormous unnecessary expenses our establishment has been taxed with" would cease under Jones' direction.⁶⁹ Bainbridge likewise rejoiced at Jones's appointment, and commiserated with his friend – and now superior – about "the unorganized state of your department." "I can say that there never was any system in it, and for the want of which great abuses have crept in."⁷⁰

Though no doubt gratified to receive Bainbridge and Decatur's endorsement, Jones came into office determined to make sure every officer knew who was in charge in the Navy

⁶⁷ "Notes Made by Secretary Jones," *NW*, II: 54-55.

⁶⁸ Homans to Jones, n.d., *NW*, II: 55-56.

⁶⁹ Decatur to Jones, January 26, 1813, Uselma Clark Smith Collection, Box 1, HSP.

⁷⁰ Bainbridge to Jones, March 1, 1813, Uselma Clarke Smith Collection, Box 1, HSP.

Department. “The latitude and discretion you have been in the habit of exercising is altogether inadmissible, and must not be repeated,” he wrote to one officer early in his tenure.⁷¹ As with Smith and Hamilton, spending habits proved the biggest source of conflict between Jones and his officers. He fired one officer for making an unauthorized purchase (the man had already been tried once before for unofficerlike conduct). More common was his sharp reprimand to another officer who consistently exceeded what Jones thought were acceptable expenditures. “I have great concern that the expenses on the New Orleans [Station] are extravagant beyond all reasonable bounds,” he charged one officer, before threatening not to reimburse him. Throughout his tenure, he waged an ongoing battle to “check the great and astonishing extravagance” of his officers’ spending.⁷² “The expenditure at your station has been very extravagant and must be corrected,” he ordered another captain, otherwise “for every expense not authorized by law or the sanction of this department...you will be held accountable.”⁷³

Despite such seemingly imperious letters, Jones still proved willing to allow his officers to use their own discretion in certain instances. While he found it necessary to order his captains, at times, to coordinate with land forces, he sympathized with their frustrations at joint command and granted them considerable leeway to clash with their army counterparts. “In all cases where your cooperation with the military shall be required, you are to be the exclusive judge of the nature, extent, time, and circumstances of the required cooperation,”

⁷¹ Jones to John Dent, April 9, 1813, *NW*, II: 95.

⁷² Jones to Captain John Smith, February 5, 1813, *NW*, II: 638-639.

⁷³ Jones to Dent, April 9, 1813, *NW*, II: 96.

he wrote to Arthur Sinclair, adding only that he should put forth a genuine effort to give any aid that he could “with propriety.”⁷⁴

As with all of his predecessors, Jones came into office understanding that naval officers represented the nation by their conduct, and if one of them behaved in a shameful manner he shamed the entire country. “The moment an officer becomes a commander,” he wrote to one lieutenant thirsting for promotion, “the honor and reputation of the nation is committed to his single judgment, discretion, and valor.”⁷⁵ Jones took a more limited view of officers’ duty to national honor than any man who had overseen the Navy Department to that point. Unlike Hamilton, Jones came into office with a clear idea of how he planned to match America’s naval means with its stated goals of forcing British concessions. His new strategy, however, marked a radical departure from earlier attitudes in the Navy Department. No longer would officers be pressed to hazard everything in the pursuit of national honor. Instead, Jones instituted a cautious policy that praised officers who shrank from needless combat. The purpose of sending out the U.S. Navy against Britain was not primarily achieving glory, earning prize money for naval officers, boosting public morale (though that was nice), and certainly not crippling the Royal Navy. Jones sought to damage British commerce enough to affect its economy and force concessions regarding impressment and neutral rights.⁷⁶ While Stoddert had opened his tenure as secretary of the navy in 1798 by informing his senior officer that “a spirit of enterprise and adventure cannot be too much encouraged in the officers under your command, nor can too many opportunities be afforded

⁷⁴ Jones to Arthur Sinclair, May 25, 1814, Uselma Clarke Smith Collection, Box 1, HSP.

⁷⁵ Jones to Robert Spence, July 26, 1813, M149: Letters Sent by the Secretary of the Navy to Officers, National Archives, Washington DC.

⁷⁶ Eckart, *Navy Department*, 21; Maloney, “War of 1812,” 55; McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 116-139.

the enterprising for distinguishing themselves. We have nothing to dread but inactivity,” Jones informed his officers that “our great inferiority [to the British] in naval strength does not permit us to meet them...without hazarding the precious germ of our national glory.”⁷⁷ Where Hamilton had told his officers it was their duty to “be prepared and determined at every hazard to vindicate the injured honor of our navy” and “maintain and support at any risk and cost the dignity of your flag,” Jones informed them that they were “strictly prohibited from giving or receiving a challenge to or from an enemy vessel...*the character of the American navy does not require those feats of chivalry.*”⁷⁸

Jones based his change of tactics on simple math. Britain could replace the ships it lost, while America could not. Rather, naval vessels should cruise individually and target “rich and exposed commercial fleets,” which would force Britain to pull valuable ships away from the blockade, thus achieving “the two-fold object of increasing the pressure upon the enemy and relieving ourselves.”⁷⁹ He also forbade his officers from bringing prizes into port for adjudication. Not only was it virtually impossible to get a prize all the way back to the United States without it being retaken by the British, but by diminishing his own crew to man the prize a captain made his ship vulnerable. Burning prizes was frustrating enough, but Jones’ instructions to avoid engaging Royal Navy ships were even more repugnant to his officer corps. By and large, naval officers complied, though by the summer of 1813 their

⁷⁷ Jones Circular to Officers, February 22, 1813, *NW*, II: 48.

⁷⁸ Hamilton to Porter, June 1, 1810, Porter Papers, Box 15, LOC; Jones to MasterCommandant George Parker, December 8, 1813, *NW*, II: 294-296. Italics added.

⁷⁹ Jones Circular to Officers, February 22, 1813, *NW*, II: 48.

main problem was simply getting to sea through the British blockade, not what to do once they got there.⁸⁰

Rodgers managed to slip through the blockade in the *President*, and his cruise perfectly illustrates the disconnect between Jones' strategy and the mentality of naval officers. Rodgers sailed out in the spring of 1813, and began seizing and burning British merchant vessels, forcing the Royal Navy to divert valuable ships to track him down. The American captain led the British on a merry chase across the Atlantic for five months. Still, at the end of it, he had only a dozen captured merchant ships to show for his efforts. While not a bad record for a cruise of that length, Rodgers still felt less than elated with his performance. A hundred merchantmen probably would not have satisfied him, however. Rodgers wanted his name added alongside Hull, Decatur, and Bainbridge; he wanted to capture a prize from the Royal Navy. After all the hardships at sea suffered by himself and his crew, he still returned feeling that he had failed to "add any additional luster to the character of our little navy."⁸¹

Jones had no such reservations. He did not want Rodgers to capture a single British vessel. Given the disparity of numbers, the loss of one would not restrict the enemy's ability to blockade the coast. Far better to keep an entire squadron in pursuit, while also showing British insurers that the Royal Navy was helpless to protect its merchant vessels, he explained.⁸² If Rodgers struggled to accept the concept, it was not lost on the British public. "How gratifying it must be to him," wondered the *Morning Chronicle*, "to learn that not

⁸⁰ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 228-230.

⁸¹ Rodgers to Jones, September 27, 1813, *NW*, II: 251-253.

⁸² Jones to Rodgers, October 4, 1813, *NW*, II: 253-254.

single ships but squadrons were dispatched after him, one under the command of *an admiral*.⁸³ Of course, part of Rodgers' ability to draw such a significant force away from blockade duty to give chase stemmed from the earlier frigate victories. Britain dared not send "single ships" after the *President* specifically because they feared a repeat of their earlier embarrassments. But this only serves as further evidence that the American navy did not need any more engagements with the British. Their earlier victories were sufficient to prompt an overreaction whenever a U.S. ship slipped through the blockade.⁸⁴

If their ability to fight the British was diminished, naval officers continued to clash with each other too. As usual, the issues of relative rank and prize money drove a wedge between many fellow captains. Stephen Decatur took one of his subordinates to court over the prize money for a capture made thousands of miles from his location. On January 13, 1813, the *Chesapeake* – nominally part of Decatur's squadron, although Decatur was in New York at the time, while the *Chesapeake* sailed off the African coast – encountered the British ship *Volunteer*, a merchant vessel which had foolishly strayed from its naval convoy. Captain Samuel Evans of the *Chesapeake* easily seized it, and the ship and cargo were condemned in New Hampshire for almost \$200,000. Initially, the prize money was awarded only to Evans and his crew, but Decatur immediately pounced. Suffering from failing eyesight and ill health, Evans retired from the Navy as soon as he returned to port, passing power of attorney and prize money disbursal duties to his purser, Thomas Chew. Although he was considerably inferior to Decatur in rank, Chew was unwilling to disburse prize money to him or anyone else until the legality of Decatur's claim was settled. In theory, Decatur

⁸³ London *Morning Chronicle*, November 3, 1813, quoted in McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 127.

⁸⁴ McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 116-117.

could have made trouble for Chew, given his rank and immense popularity, but he apparently agreed without complaint to hand the matter over to the courts. He no doubt realized that his would set precedent, but also that he had the overwhelming weight of English common law practice behind him. His calculations proved correct; the court awarded him the squadron commander's share of one-third of the captain's earnings.⁸⁵ The incident was settled amicably, by all accounts. Jones, for his part, kept out of it. He apparently regarded it as a matter for the courts, and made no effort to intervene in an officer corps squabble.

Meanwhile, the British finally achieved a measure of redemption for what they perceived as their debacle at sea during the first year of the war. Philip Broke of the *H.M.S. Shannon* managed to fall in with Lawrence and the *Chesapeake*. Still heady from having captured another British vessel, Lawrence disregarded Jones's new instructions and engaged the *Shannon*. His dreams of adding his name to that of Hull, Decatur, and Bainbridge came to an end, as did his life. A British sniper caught him in the hip, and Lawrence knew even as he was being carried below the wound was mortal. In one of the bloodiest engagements of the war at sea, the British finally won only by slaying the majority of the American ship's officers during a fierce boarding action. Even then, or perhaps because there was no one with the authority to do so, the Americans refused to strike their flag; the British boarding party hauled down the *Chesapeake's* colors.⁸⁶

⁸⁵Frederick Leiner, "The Squadron Commander's Share: *Decatur v. Chew* and the Prize Money for the *Chesapeake's* First Cruise of the War of 1812," *Journal of Military History* 73 no. 1 (January 2009), 69-82. Evans did not suffer too much from his losses. Despite making only one cruise, the incredibly lucrative cargo on the *Volunteer* meant that he still emerged from the war with the eighth most prize money of any American officer.

⁸⁶For accounts of this battle, see "An Account of the Chesapeake-Shannon Action," June 6, 1813, *NW*, II: 129-133. Extended discussion is included in Lambert, *The Challenge*, 159-185; Daughan, *1812*, 187-195; and McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 140-156.

When it became obvious that the ship was lost, the dying Lawrence urged his men to blow it up rather than allow it to fall into British hands. Fortunately for all aboard, the remaining officers ignored him, loath though they were to strike the flag.⁸⁷ Lawrence's seemingly outrageous order was not entirely an American phenomenon. A British lieutenant urged Carden to sink the *Macedonian* with all hands rather than surrender to Decatur, though he too was overruled.⁸⁸ For many in this generation of naval officers, death seemed preferable to disgrace. Of course, some of this was more empty talk than actual attitudes. No one ever actually blew up their ship rather than surrender in the War of 1812, nor did any captain fight to the last man, despite multiple captures by both navies. Preble indicated that he wished Bainbridge would have sacrificed himself and the *Philadelphia* during the war with Tripoli, and touted the crew of the *Intrepid* for seemingly doing so. But when Bainbridge took offense after the war, Preble backed off from these comments, and Bainbridge never suffered ostracism for still being alive. It is certainly difficult to imagine any secretary of the navy, even Stoddert, pushing for such radical actions by his officers. Such conduct would have violated international norms of warfare, and besides, even if the ship would be lost either way, the United States could still exchange for valued officers and experienced crews. But the fact that such outlandish suggestions were mentioned speaks to how much officers of the period hated the thought of admitting defeat. Falling honorably was better than craven surrender or submission, but it was still a loss.

As further evidence of this attitude, one need look no further than the American reaction to the loss of the *Chesapeake*. The U.S. Navy had nothing to be ashamed of in the

⁸⁷ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 177. McCranie, *Utmost Gallantry*, 152, further contends that Lawrence urged his men to continue fighting until the ship sank.

⁸⁸ Leech, *Voice from the Main Deck*, 77.

aftermath of defeat, all things considered. Broke was among the best officers in the Royal Navy, and he sailed to North America carrying an almost pathological obsession to capture an American frigate. The two ships were roughly equal in size, weight of metal, and crews, and Broke had enjoyed his share of luck as well. But the officer corps of the American navy was not the least bit interested in admitting defeat in a fair fight. They immediately began a quest to seek “excuses for a defeat that needed none, a defeat that brought nothing but glory to the men who gave their lives defending their ship.”⁸⁹ If anything, Lawrence was guilty of recklessly going into battle with his crew unprepared.⁹⁰ Had this battle opened the war, the American reaction would surely have been very different. Lawrence had fulfilled the expectations laid down for naval officers by Stoddert, Smith, and Hamilton, and enthusiastically accepted by the leaders of the officer corps. He had not avoided battle, he had stood courageously on deck throughout the engagement at the cost of his own life (in the mold of Nelson), and he had earned the approbation of his enemies. That glorious defeats were no longer good enough speaks to the growing confidence of the officer corps, as well as the heightened expectations created by the war’s initial victories. Perhaps too, with Jones’ orders to avoid single-ship engagements now widely known, officers knew the navy would not have many more chances to humble the British. Regardless of the reason, victory and victory alone was an acceptable outcome now, and the quest for excuses for the *Chesapeake*’s loss began as soon as word of the defeat spread throughout the country.

⁸⁹ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 192. Theodore Roosevelt, *Naval War of 1812* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999, originally published 1882), 100-109, likewise concludes that there was no shame in the defeat, as each side fought bravely, but does not the inexperienced nature of the American crew, and consequent lack of discipline. This, he argues, was the true reason for the American defeat.

⁹⁰ Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Sea Power in its Relations to the War of 1812* 2 volumes (London: Dodo Press, 1999, originally published 1905), II: 128-132.

The court of inquiry heaped blame on the *Chesapeake's* bugler, William Brown, claiming in his terror he had failed to sound the men to quarters fast enough, and had subsequently sounded the bugle without adequate zeal. He was sentenced to 300 lashes, with Madison reducing that to 100. Still not satisfied, the navy also charged Acting Third Lieutenant William Cox with negligence. Cox had helped carry the dying Lawrence below, then struggled to get back on deck through a crowd of fleeing seamen. For this, the court had him cashiered, and Madison readily signed off on the verdict. Cox served as a private in the Army for the remainder of the war, then spent the rest of his life fighting to clear his name. It was not until 1952 that the verdict was finally repudiated, a century after his death.⁹¹

In addition to heaping blame on two men, a host of other excuses for the *Chesapeake's* performance began to circulate. A large contingent of Portuguese seamen supposedly diminished the fighting-ability of the crew, according to one rumor. Many also claimed, not unreasonably, that the crew was exceptionally green, with many having never experienced combat and most of them unfamiliar with the ship. Improbably – and in a mirror image of claims made about American victories earlier in the war – naval officers claimed that the *Shannon* was significantly larger than the *Chesapeake*.

Jones, however, responded not with dubious excuses but with fury that his orders had been ignored and one of his most valuable ships lost in a needless battle. He reiterated his orders, even more forcefully, that officers not engage with Royal Navy vessels. “Should any attempt be made to allure you by a challenge to single combat, I am directed by the president to prohibit strictly your acceptance,” he wrote to Charles Stewart. Reiterating his earlier exhortation that America’s honor was not worth the loss of irreplaceable frigates, he bluntly

⁹¹ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 191-194; Daughan, *1812*, 195.

told Stewart that “[Madison’s] confidence in your skill and gallantry is entire, and no apprehensions are maintained for the honor of the flag.” The first priority for captains was no longer proving American mettle, but “the safety of the precious ship entrusted to your care.”⁹²

However disappointed the American public was with the loss of the *Chesapeake*, there were finally victories to celebrate in the battle for Canada.⁹³ Since the outbreak of war, American and British forces had been scrambling to build fleets to secure the Great Lakes that sat at the U.S.-Canadian border. Without control of the Great Lakes, Britain’s designs on the northern portions of the United States would be impossible, while maintaining control gave them hope of sweeping their armies throughout the northwestern portions of the United States. A naval arms race ensued, though both sides were guilty of slighting this crucial theater in favor of the Atlantic.⁹⁴

In command of this theater for the United States was Isaac Chauncey. Chauncey focused on Lake Ontario, while Master Commandant Oliver Hazard Perry, Chauncey’s subordinate, supervised construction on Lake Erie. Contrary to Jones’ intentions to focus on Lake Erie, Chauncey saw his own position as the more crucial, and he continually deprived

⁹² Jones to Charles Stewart, September 19, 1813, K. Jack Bauer, ed., *The New American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, 10 volumes (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc, 1981), 182.

⁹³ In the first year of the war, America’s land operations in Canada were a series of spectacular disasters, and proved highly embarrassing to the Madison administration. See: John Elting, *Amateurs to Arms! A Military History of the War of 1812* (Da Capo Press, 1996), 1-66; Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 102-106; and Hickey, *Forgotten Conflict*, 100-161.

⁹⁴ For the Battle of Lake Erie, the best secondary source is David Curtis Skaggs and Gerard Atloff’s excellent study *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1813* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997) and Skaggs biography of Perry, *Oliver Hazard Perry: Honor, Courage, and Patriotism in the Early U.S. Navy* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 49-149. For the Perry-Elliott feud, see: Atloff, “The Perry-Elliott Controversy.” *Northwest Ohio Quarterly* 60 (Autumn 1988): 135-152; Lawrence Friedman and David Curtis Skaggs, “Jesse Duncan Elliott and the Battle of Lake Erie: The Issue of Mental Stability.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 no. 4 (Winter: 1990): 493-516. Portions of the discussion of the Battle of Lake Erie have been taken from Sheppard, “Petty Despots and Executive Officials,” 64-65.

Perry of desperately needed men and supplies.⁹⁵ As spring turned to summer in 1813, Perry grew increasingly embittered against Chauncy, and took to writing directly to Jones, violating the chain of command, to try and compel his superior to supply him with what he considered essential to success on Lake Erie.⁹⁶ Breaking the common practice of his predecessors, Jones allowed himself to be drawn into an inter-officer feud, at least somewhat. In this case, however, he was partly motivated by the fact that Chauncey was not only creating tensions with Perry, but was also ignoring directives from Washington. Even so, Jones restrained himself from checking an officers' authority in a theater of combat. After making his displeasure with Chauncey abundantly clear, Jones reaffirmed that Chauncey was the commander at the station and that his authority would almost always be recognized and his view of the situation deferred to. Jones imposed his will on Chauncey only with "a very great degree of reluctance," but the situation on Lake Erie seemed dire enough that he felt he had no choice. Nevertheless, he concluded his letter by reaffirming Chauncey's authority from that point forward. Although he did so reluctantly, Jones's decision to overrule a senior officer in favor of a subordinate shows that he was less concerned with the touchy sense of honor and perceived prerogatives of his officers than earlier secretaries. The location may have played a role as well. In contrast to his orders to officers at sea, in the essential Great Lakes Theater, Jones – who gave the Lakes far more attention than his predecessor – seems to have preferred fighting captains, and he may have recognized that Perry was willing to

⁹⁵ Skaggs, and Atloff, *Signal Victory*, 76-77.

⁹⁶ Jones to Chauncey, June 26, 1813; Chauncey to Perry, July 30, 1813, NW, II: 530-531. See also: Skaggs, *Oliver Hazard Perry*, 71-73.

engage the enemy while Chauncey was not.⁹⁷ In any case, Jones reprimanded Chauncey for not supplying Perry the men he had previously been ordered to.

Chauncey complied, but also fired off a letter to Perry condemning him for going over his superior's head and accusing him of giving Jones misleading or outright dishonest information. Perry promptly resigned. Jones kept his cool throughout all of this, and managed to send a placating letter to Perry rather than simply ordering him to do his duty. But the secretary refused to budge on the resignation. In the midst of a war that was going badly, he could hardly try and replace the commander in a crucial theater. Fortunately for himself and the country, Perry allowed his temper to cool, and continued his preparations on the lake.⁹⁸

Finally, on September 10, 1813, Perry had his chance to strike. The *Lawrence*, Perry's flagship, led the way, engaging its British counterpart, the *Detroit*. The fighting was brutal, with the British vessel *Queen Charlotte*, unengaged by any other American vessel, joining the attack on Perry's flagship and subjecting his crew to a vicious barrage of fire. The *Lawrence* lost every mast and spar, as well as much of its crew, but still managed to keep its guns firing, inflicting surprising damage on both British attackers. Nonetheless, it soon became all too obvious to Perry that his ship had been reduced to an utter wreck, and could not hold out much longer against vastly superior firepower.⁹⁹

⁹⁷ Jones to Chauncey, July 3, 1813, *NW*, II: 509-512. See also: Jones to Chauncey, August 3, 1814, *NW*, III: 556-557. Jones was also only willing to intervene in inter-officer spats under exceptional circumstances. He soundly rejected one captain's request to have a problematic subordinate transferred, and continued to follow the advice of senior officers in handling disciplinary matters. See: Chauncey to Jones, April 16, 1813; Jones to master Commandant Lewis Warrington, October 2, 1813; Jones to Acting Lieutenant Edward Haddaway, December 6, 1813, *NW*, II: 259-260; 284-289; and 441-444.

⁹⁸ Perry to Jones, August 10, 1813; Jones to Perry, August 18, 1813, *NW*, II: 532-533.

⁹⁹ Atloff, "The Battle of Lake Erie: A Narrative," 11-16; and Skaggs and Atloff, *A Signal Victory*, 128-137.

Incredibly, throughout the beating that the *Lawrence* endured, another ship, the *Niagara*, the second largest American vessel on the water, stood by, hardly scratched in the fray. The actions of Jesse Duncan Elliott, the captain who allowed Perry to come perilously close to losing his ship, will forever confound historians. The most generous authors argue that he too scrupulously followed the letter of his orders, remaining fixed in his place in the line of battle even when it became abundantly clear that he was needed alongside the *Lawrence*.¹⁰⁰ A more harsh analysis is that he hoped to see Perry killed, so that he could then claim the title of hero of Lake Erie for himself.¹⁰¹ Whatever the reason, the *Niagara* remained at the back of the battle, unengaged, until Perry heroically rowed into American lore by taking a small rowboat through the thick of the fighting, assuming command of the *Niagara*, and ultimately winning the battle.

In the heady moments following victory, Perry made a decision he regretted the rest of his life. In his official report of the battle Perry avoided calling attention to Elliott's conduct, saying that it was Elliott who "was enabled to bring his vessel, the *Niagara* gallantly into close action." He went on to say that, in the battle, Elliott "evinced his characteristic bravery and judgment," and proved immensely valuable following the British surrender.¹⁰² This could be a case of an officer damning a subordinate with faint praise, for Perry also strongly implied that Elliott missed the better part of the battle. While temporarily

¹⁰⁰ David Curtis Skaggs, "Aiming at the Truth: James Fenimore Cooper and the Battle of Lake Erie," *The Journal of Military History* 59 no. 2 (April 1995), 237-255;

Lawrence J. Friedman and David Curtis Skaggs, "Jesse Duncan Elliott and the Battle of Lake Erie: The Issue of Mental Instability," *Journal of the Early Republic* 10 no. 4 (Winter 1990): 493-516.

¹⁰¹ David Long, "William Bainbridge and the Barron-Decatur Duel: Mere Participant or Active Plotter?" *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 103 no. 1 (Jan. 1979): 34-52. Long speculates that Elliott hoped for Perry's death on pages 35-36.

¹⁰² Captain Oliver H. Perry to Secretary of the Navy William Jones, September 13, 1813, NW, II: 557-558.

satisfied, Elliott later blamed Perry when the truth of his conduct inevitably came out. His repeated demands for another, unambiguous statement on his bravery and essential use during the battle exhausted Perry's goodwill, and the hero of Lake Erie finally turned against his former second-in-command. Elliott solicited statements from British officers captured after the battle attesting to his bravery, but they instead informed him that he would have been shot for his conduct if he had served in the Royal Navy. The *Niagara's* captain resorted to personal attacks against Perry, even going so far as to campaign for all the prize money from the captured British vessels, arguing that the crew of the *Lawrence* deserved none. His patience finally at its end, Perry assembled all documents relating to the battle, and made plans to have his former ally court-martialed. Only his untimely death on a mission to South America saved Elliott.¹⁰³

Why did Perry initially plan to spare Elliott? The explanation he gave for the rest of his life was that he did not want to taint a major American victory. There is no reason to doubt this explanation, but his biographer also notes that Perry had a history of overlooking glaring deficiencies in his subordinates, and his treatment of Elliott is one of the worst examples.¹⁰⁴ Whatever the reason, Perry's decision, and the Navy Department's refusal to investigate the matter further when reports of Eliot's conduct began circulating, would have far-reaching consequences for the navy.

In addition to their occasional clashes with each other, officers had to deal with tense relations with the American people whom they were sworn to defend. Prior to the War of 1812, civilians' interaction with naval officers had been fairly limited and, not unrelated,

¹⁰³ Friedman and Skaggs, "Issue of Mental Instability;" Skaggs, *Oliver Hazard Perry*, 186-244; Atloff, "Perry-Eliot Controversy."

¹⁰⁴ Skaggs, *Oliver Hazard Perry*, 43-44.

generally harmonious. The exception, of course, was when naval officers were called on to enforce Jefferson's embargo, seriously damaging their popularity with civilians. But the thrilling victories over the Royal Navy made captains popular with Americans again, as they were seen as the country's most gallant heroes. Unfortunately, these heroes had a less generous perception of Americans. They complained constantly to Hamilton and Jones about civilian trade with the enemy, legal and otherwise, and rampant smuggling.¹⁰⁵ In the Northwest, Thomas Macdonough even had to send one of his men away to avoid prosecution after he was attacked by a tavern keeper and his men killed the assailant in the scuffle.¹⁰⁶

Direct clashes between civilians and naval officers finally came when the Navy Department appointed captains to oversee defensive preparations for British invasions. The war seemed to confirm the worst fears of standing militaries raised by Americans since before the Revolution. But naval officers' authority in shore stations, even when the threat of British invasion was immanent, never approached absolute. Rather, they and their Army counterparts quarreled with one another and civilian officials in a murky civil-military division of authority that usually produced little in the way of effectiveness.¹⁰⁷

Few faced as much hostility from the civilian population as Joshua Barney. Barney had been one of the initial six captains commissioned when the navy was created, but had resigned his commission after being ranked below Silas Talbot, and had gone on to serve in

¹⁰⁵ Decatur to Hamilton, December 28, 1812; John Shaw to Hamilton, January 18, 1813; Bainbridge to Jones, December 31, 1813; Barney to Jones, April 4, 1814, *NW*, I: 638, II: 273-274, 632-633, III: 53-54. For Americans trading with and aiding the enemy, see Hickey, *Forgotten Conflict*, 113-114, 169-175, 258-259.

¹⁰⁶ Macdonough to Jones, August 20, 1814; Macdonough to Drury, November 12, 1814, *NW* III: 592-593. Skaggs, *Thomas Macdonough*, 107.

¹⁰⁷ Historians generally regard Madison as a poor wartime president, but do give him high marks for his scrupulous adherence to civil liberties during the war. The restraint displayed by the Navy Department was part of this larger policy. See: Daughan, *1812*, 416; Stagg, *Mr. Madison's War* 501-509; Hickey, *War of 1812*, 304-305.

the French Navy. Although he left before the outbreak of the Quasi War, accusations of deficient patriotism or even treason had dogged him ever since. Even when the United States declared war on Great Britain and was desperate for officers, Hamilton refused to grant Barney a commission, and instead he sailed out as a privateer. A reasonably successful run against British shipping, and no small measure of desperation on the part of the Navy Department, finally enabled him to return to service, and Jones assigned him to lead the defense of the Chesapeake.¹⁰⁸ Although he threw himself into the task, he was less enthusiastic about protecting the inhabitants of the region, many of whom seemed to favor the British. Barney grew increasingly disgusted with the Federalists who dominated local politics, and they seemed to confirm his dim view at every turn. When one man openly encouraged his fellow citizens not to resist a British invasion and tried to obtain information from Barney that he planned to transfer to the enemy, Barney tried to arrest him as a spy, but was apparently prevented from doing so. A militia unit not only abandoned him, but absconded with vital provisions, while other members of the city openly wished both Barney and the president were condemned to hell.¹⁰⁹

Barney did finally lash out against at least one Baltimorean. Lemuel Taylor wrote to the department and accused the captain of being a “most abandoned rascal as to politics and morals,” and that “he is despised by nine-tenths of those who have taken part in the defense of Baltimore.” Jones rallied to Barney’s defense, publishing a lengthy letter in the same paper strongly endorsing his character and career. The secretary called Taylor’s accusations “flatigious (sic) libel,” and taunted him that “it has at length been read by the scavengers...of

¹⁰⁸ Joshua Barney’s Defense Proposal; Jones to Barney, August 20, 1813; Barney to Jones, December 15, 1813 *NW*, II: 373-379, 398-400.

¹⁰⁹ Norton, *Joshua Barney*, 175-176.

the common sewer.” His spirited defense of his officer is a bit surprising, since his predecessors tended to stay out of such public feuds, and it certainly did nothing to enhance the dignity of his office. But his officers were no doubt gratified to see their superior defending one of their own. For his part, Taylor responded by calling Jones “an unprincipled villain and a base coward.”¹¹⁰ Given the exchange, it is probably not surprising that Jones followed precedent and looked the other way while Barney fought a duel with Taylor, slightly wounding him.¹¹¹

Jones’s support for Barney in his clashes with civilians only went so far, however. Opposed to the war and even more opposed to anything that impaired their ability to make money, local merchants adamantly refused to supply Barney with the supplies he desperately needed to fend off a British invasion. Jones and Madison alike apparently never even considered the idea of allowing Barney or his counterparts in other Federalist cities to requisition supplies. The prospect of even limited martial law was likewise not up for discussion. The resistance of the merchant community to helping Barney extended to his efforts to acquire men as well as materiel. Barney tried to recruit seamen from the city, but with limited success. Even at the height of the British blockade, many preferred to take their chances trying to get to sea on merchant ships to defending against an invasion. “The cupidity of our merchants is such that they care not how much the city is threatened [as long as] they can get a vessel to sea,” he groused to Jones.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Newspaper clipping, September, 1813, Uselma Smith Clarke Collection D, Box 1, HSP.

¹¹¹ Norton, *Joshua Barney*, 170-171.

¹¹² Barney to Jones, April 4, 1814, *NW*, III: 53-54.

Meanwhile, William Bainbridge also struggled to maintain a healthy relationship with the people he was supposed to protect. After capturing the *Java*, Bainbridge was stationed in Boston to supervise the construction of America's first 74-gun battleship, the *Independence*. He surely knew he would face a less than enthusiastic response from the local population; the governor of Massachusetts, Caleb Strong, had declared a day of fasting and prayer in June of 1812 to seek God's forgiveness for declaring war on "the nation from whom we descended, and which for many generations has been the bulwark of the religion we profess." British blockading ships actually entertained prominent Federalist citizens at the height of the war. Citizens of the city even requested that he hand the almost-complete ship over to the British in hopes they would relent on attacking the city.¹¹³ A fair number of Bostonians eventually came around and contributed to the war effort, but only when the threat of invasion became dire. In the meantime, there was little Bainbridge could do other than try and prepare defenses as best he could with the men under his command. As with Barney, the idea of allowing Bainbridge to declare even limited martial law was never expressed, nor did Jones give even the slightest latitude to Bainbridge to requisition men or supplies.

Isaac Hull likewise found himself fighting a two-front war on the island of Portsmouth, just off the coast of New Hampshire, as he prepared to fend off British raiding parties and also keep a watchful eye on the Federalist population of the city. Republican William Plumer had recently served as governor of New Hampshire, and he had taken a few steps towards defending the coasts and islands from the British, but the elections of 1812 ousted Plumer in favor of Federalist John Taylor Gilman, who made his own views of the

¹¹³ Long, *William Bainbridge*, 178-183.

war clear by promptly revoking orders to supply rations to militiamen assigned to defend the state. “I see no disposition on the part of the people to secure their harbor,” Hull lamented to Jones, “we must therefore endeavor to defend ourselves.”¹¹⁴ He became convinced that he was without support among the population, later writing to Jones that even in the event of an actual British invasion of the island, the locals would do nothing to help. Hull pleaded with Gilmer for munitions for the forts on the island, and asked the War Department to further impress on the recalcitrant governor the urgency of his requests, but to no avail.¹¹⁵ Gilmer budged a little when British vessels appeared within eyesight of the coast, but even then Hull’s difficulties continued. While Hull lived in, and was responsible for defending, New Hampshire, the island that housed the Portsmouth Yard was technically part of Massachusetts, then under the control of staunch Federalist Caleb Strong. Strong consistently refused to grant Hull, an officer of the national navy, any materials that he could keep under state control.¹¹⁶ Meanwhile, the enthusiasm of the populations of both New Hampshire and Massachusetts fluctuated based on their perceived likelihood of a British attack, and Hull lived under constant strain until he received word of the end of the war.¹¹⁷

Jones and Madison were certainly aware of his officers’ troubles. In addition to their frequent complaints, they also received regular updates from pro-war citizens on trade with

¹¹⁴ Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 229.

¹¹⁵ Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 244.

¹¹⁶ See: Stuart, *Civil-Military Relations in the War of 1812*, 109 for discussion of state vs. federal control of militia and resources. The Supreme Court ultimately ruled in favor of the president on such issues, but not until 1827. During the War of 1812, such debates were hashed out in an ad hoc fashion, with the overwhelmed federal government limited in its ability to enforce its will on the states.

¹¹⁷ Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 247-258.

the enemy and near treason from Federalists.¹¹⁸ In every instance, naval officers assigned to protect citizens from British coastal raids depended on their own ability to inspire – or beg for – support to rally civilians to their own defense. Despite the dire nature of the war effort by 1814, the government only allowed for very limited martial law. Full martial law, Reginald Stuart argues, was “politically impossible to propose, let alone apply and enforce.”¹¹⁹ The results were predictable. In Baltimore, where the people of the city voluntarily rallied around John Rodgers, the British failed in their attack on the city. Elsewhere, British raiding parties were able to land on the American coast at will, inflicting dreadful damage, culminating in the burning of the capital.¹²⁰

Jones’s career in the Navy Department was influential but brief. Like Hamilton, his personal finances suffered greatly during his tenure in government, and he too became worn down by the staggering administrative responsibilities. He tendered his resignation in the spring of 1814, although he remained on another eight months until Madison found a replacement.¹²¹ By the time he left Washington in December of 1814, the war was essentially over. American and British negotiators formally agreed on the Treaty of Ghent less than a month later. His successes had been limited. His commerce-raiding strategy had frustrated the British, but the strength of the blockade by the end of the war meant that few

¹¹⁸ “The Republican Citizens to Newburyport” to Vice President Elbridge Gerry, September 8, 1813 reported rampant trade with the enemy. Gerry to “Republican Citizens,” September 19, 1813: the Vice President promised to forward their concerns to Madison and the rest of the cabinet. The report certainly ended up in Jones’s hands, since it is filed among his personal papers. Box 1, Uselma Clarke Smith Collection D, HSP.

¹¹⁹ Stuart, *Civil-Military Relations in the War of 1812*, 106. For a broader discussion of martial law during the war, see pages 101-120.

¹²⁰ Lambert, *The Challenge*, 309.

¹²¹ Jones to Madison, April 25, 1814, *JMP: Presidential Series*, VII: 437-439.

warships were getting to sea, and those that did inflicted little damage thanks to the Royal Navy's convoys. Although the burning of Washington was primarily the army's responsibility, he was still in government when it happened. Moreover, throughout his tenure, the navy proved totally unable to prevent British coastal raids. He took over a badly undersupplied department overseeing an undermanned navy, and the situation only deteriorated under his watch. All of this, it should be added, was largely beyond his control. Given the tools at his disposal, it is remarkable what the navy did accomplish as secretary, including two major victories in the theater he showed the least interest in: the Great Lakes.

Moreover, his career included an attempted transformation of naval culture. For the first two decades of its existence, the navy had been a tiny force, starkly limited in its ability to project power or intimidate rivals. Given its small size, successive secretaries of the navy sought officers with ambition, zeal, and even recklessness to compensate for a deficiency of force. Cautious or even lazy officers, who likely would have proven perfectly functional and enjoyed long if unimpressive careers in the Royal Navy, were publicly shamed and ejected from the service. The aggressive mindset showed in the beginning of the War of 1812. Successive captains sailed with one goal: find and defeat a Royal Navy vessel of equal size (or what they could claim was equal size with a reasonably straight face). Jones's demand for a less aggressive strategy therefore called for a dramatic shift in military culture.

But the war also revealed that the zealous, fight at all costs mentality could not be eradicated easily. Lawrence defied Jones' wishes and challenged the *Shannon*, then called for his officers and crew to immolate themselves rather than admit defeat. After the loss, the navy's officers were desperate to absolve the corps of the slightest hint of blame, instead reaching rather far-fetched conclusions to excuse defeat. Whether Lawrence would have

been held responsible if he had survived is impossible to know, but he became, in many ways, a heroic ideal for the navy by dying in battle, conveniently sparing himself the shame of surrender. For the surviving officers, the end of hostilities with Great Britain did not mean an end to their quest for fame, nor to their internal squabbling.

“A Radical Change of System:” The Navy Board and Professionalization, 1815-1820

It has ever been my opinion that a Naval Board was absolutely necessary, and that Board composed of Officers that are capable of fixing on what is necessary to fit out every class of ships, and after having given what they absolutely require, they should have nothing further, nor should any alteration be made in the equipment or stores furnished.

Isaac Hull¹

The law authorizing the establishment of a board of commissioners of the Navy, making executive interference necessary to a construction which has unavoidably left the subject still involved in difficulties, the commissioners from that reserve which unavoidably attends an exercise of powers which are doubted, have not since their appointment, been enabled...to extend as far as is desirable, their knowledge of matters connected with the navel establishment of the United States.

Report of the Board of Navy Commissioners²

America's performance in the War of 1812 provided the Madison Administration's critics with an abundance of ammunition, but in the celebratory atmosphere of 1815 they found themselves unable to use it. Across the nation, Americans exulted in Andrew Jackson's crushing victory over the redcoats at New Orleans, the fact that the nation fought Britain to a standstill in Canada (conveniently forgetting that they began the war hoping to conquer the entire country), and especially the frigate victories of 1812. So exultant was the

¹ Theodore Weld, *Commodore Hull: The Papers of Isaac Hull, Commodore of the United States Navy* (Boston: Boston Athenaeum, 1929), 37.

² "Report of the Board of Navy Commissioners," November 25, 1815, Rodgers Family Papers, Box 4, Library of Congress, Washington DC.

country, that the war's less heroic moments were quickly forgotten.¹ This was especially true of the navy's brightest star, Stephen Decatur. The War of 1812, having begun for him with such spectacular success, ended with an equal measure of disappointment. In an effort to break free of the British blockade, he instead suffered the ignominy of surrendering one of his country's finest vessels, the *President*, to a Royal Navy squadron.

The loss of the *President* barely touched his reputation, however, and he remained among the navy's most celebrated officers.² A court-of-inquiry composed of his peers unreservedly absolved him of blame, ruling that the odds against him were such as to make doubts about his honor in defeat absurd. Personally, however, the loss burned within him. Possibly he understood what future historians would note, that he could have tried harder to escape.³ Or perhaps the precipitous fall from national exultation after capturing the *Macedonian* to mere exoneration of blame in defeat was too much to bear. Whatever the reason, the hero thirsted for another chance at glory. He got his chance almost immediately following the cessation of hostilities with Britain. With the American navy occupied, the Dey of Algiers saw a golden opportunity to press for better terms with the United States, and began seizing American merchant vessels and enslaving their crews. He no doubt based his

¹ Donald Hickey, *War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict*, (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1989), 314-315; Troy Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance: The United States, the British Empire, and the War of 1812* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2012), 278.

² Robert Allison, *Stephen Decatur: American Naval Hero, 1779-1820* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), 160-162 and Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring*, (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2006), 150-152.

³ See, especially, Theodore Roosevelt, *The Naval War of 1812* (New York: The Modern Library, 1999, originally published 1881): 221-227. While critical of some British accounts that exaggerate the success of the battle, Roosevelt concludes "I do not think that the facts bear out the assertions, on the part of most American authors" that Decatur acted commendably. In fact, he argues that Decatur "acted rather tamely, certainly not heroically," in his defeat. Andrew Lambert, *The Challenge: Britain, the United States, and the War of 1812* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), 350-379, is somewhat less harsh, but still thoroughly unimpressed with Decatur's performance.

actions partly on British promises that the American navy would be utterly destroyed in the war.⁴ If so, it proved a fatal miscalculation. The American navy not only survived the war, but its successes banished the last vestiges of congressional opposition, setting the stage for a final expedition to the Mediterranean, intended to end piracy against American shipping once and for all.⁵ Decatur determined to be at the head of this mission.

William Bainbridge also longed for a chance at glory in the Mediterranean, with even more reason than Decatur. His victory over the *Java* no doubt came as a tremendous relief, and proved that he was no coward nor was he incompetent in managing a ship. Nonetheless, he still had only one capture to balance three surrenders, and he was especially anxious to add to his reputation in the place where he endured two humiliating failures. Initially, Bainbridge was given command of the Mediterranean expedition and orders to negotiate, forcibly, treaties with Algiers and also Tunis – the latter regency appeared set to follow the Dey's lead in resuming attacks on American shipping. Given his seniority, Secretary of the Navy Benjamin Crowninshield, who had just replaced Jones, tapped him for the mission, and awarded him command of the United States' first 74-gun ship of the line, the *Independence*. An elated Bainbridge immediately set about procuring supplies and outfitting his ships for the cruise.

⁴ Andrew Lambert, *The Barbary Wars: American Independence in the Atlantic World* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), has a brief account of Decatur's mission. While most books on the Barbary Wars emphasize the 1801-1805 Tripolitan War, Frederic C. Leiner, *The End of the Barbary Terror: America's 1815 War Against the Pirates of North Africa* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006) focuses entirely on the 1815 mission, and provides significant detail left out of other surveys. See also Ray Irwin *The Diplomatic Relations of the United States with the Barbary States, 1776-1816* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1931): 161-186 for the diplomatic background and course of the 1815 mission as well as its aftermath.

⁵ See Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1794-1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 194-200.

Decatur then launched one of the least flattering chapters of his life.⁶ While the obligatory court-of-inquiry into his loss of the *President* remained unresolved, admittedly with the outcome a foregone conclusion, Crowninshield offered Decatur three choices, all befitting a hero of his country. He could assume command of the Charleston Navy Yard, a prestigious post that would have allowed him to remain in the States. If he preferred to go to sea again, he could take command of the 44-gun *Guerriere* and sail as part of Bainbridge's squadron – Bainbridge had been in the service longer than Decatur and his commission as a captain predated Decatur's by a few weeks, so it was not (in Crowninshield's mind) insulting that Decatur would serve under him. Should he absolutely refuse to serve under Bainbridge, he could take another 74-gun ship, the *Washington*, to the Mediterranean upon Bainbridge's return. While all of the secretary's offers were fully befitting an officer of Decatur's stature, he boldly demanded more than any of them. He wanted to take the *Guerriere* ahead of Bainbridge to commence negotiations with Algiers, with it explicitly understood that he would return home the moment Bainbridge arrived. The secretary yielded to Decatur's every demand.⁷ The only chance for the man to whom command was originally intended was to get underway ahead of Decatur. Bainbridge's luck continued its normal course, however, and he had trouble getting his squadron outfitted in time. Decatur seized the opportunity to sail out ahead of him, and appeared at the port of Algiers in the summer of 1815 with two captured Algerine vessels and the overwhelming force necessary to dictate peace terms. When Bainbridge arrived shortly thereafter, he found that the United States had already

⁶ Portions of the discussion of Decatur's voyage to the Mediterranean are taken from Sheppard, "Petty Despots and Executive Officials," 2010.

⁷ Leonard Guttridge, *Our Country, Right or Wrong: The Life of Stephen Decatur, The US Navy's Most Illustrious Commander* (New York: Forge Press, 2006): 172-178.

signed treaties with both nations, and there was nothing left for him to do. After a cursory tour of the Mediterranean, displaying his force to nations already at peace with his country, an embittered Bainbridge returned home.⁸

This episode is significant in its own right and also illustrative of larger issues within the postwar U.S. Navy. Despite Jones's efforts, the secretary of the navy's authority over the officer corps still extended only as far as the force of his personality. Crowninshield, an amiable and often indecisive man, was easily manipulated by Decatur.⁹ While Decatur's undermining of the secretary's wishes and stealing a march on Bainbridge were inappropriate, even by the standards of the time, it was still not entirely clear to naval officers exactly what was appropriate. The boundaries of civilian control remained vague in the aftermath of the War of 1812, and while the navy became markedly more professional over the next few years, no one, civilian or military, made any great effort to clarify this relationship.

It took a civil-military crisis to bring the dispute to a head. The Board of Navy Commissioners, created immediately after the war to ease the secretary's workload, instead looked to seize power for the officer corps at the expense of the civilian head of the department. Although that failed, the board's power over the navy remained immense, so

⁸ David Long, *Ready to Hazard: A Life of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1980) has a detailed and very well researched analysis of the entire episode, emphasizing the Decatur-Bainbridge rivalry, on pages 188-206. Long is openly hostile to Decatur and portrays Bainbridge, with some justification, as a wholly wronged victim in the affair. Among Decatur biographers, none entirely justify their subject, though some cast him in a better light than others. Allison, *Stephen Decatur*, 169-177, is a bit more balanced, though he too is critical of Decatur's treatment of his fellow officer and friend.

⁹ Samuel Flagg Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), 252; Edwin Hall, "Benjamin Crowninshield, 16 January, 1815-30 September, 1818," Paolo Coletta, ed., *American Secretaries of the Navy* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 2 volumes, I:113-122.

much so that the office of secretary of the navy did indeed become less influential, usually with the passive acceptance of Crowninshield and his successor, Smith Thompson.

The War of 1812 effectively ended the Federalist Party.¹⁰ Although many of their criticisms of the conflict were valid, in the euphoric aftermath of Andrew Jackson's victory over the British at the Battle of New Orleans, it proved all too easy to label any opponents of the war as traitors, little better than the Tories of the American Revolution. Yet even as the party of Jefferson and Madison exulted in their opponents' demise, they quietly conceded that the Federalists had been right about a great many things. After the many humiliations of the war, Republican leaders quickly absorbed many of the Federalists' policies regarding a standing army and navy, national defense, and the bureaucracy and national bank required to fund them.¹¹

There were a few policies, however, that remained too much for the Republican Congress to stomach. For one thing, it was unresponsive to concerns about the navy's educational apparatus for its officers. The idea of a school for training junior officers had been floated as early as 1777 by John Paul Jones, and his plea was echoed by such prominent Americans as James McHenry, Henry Knox, and John Adams. The Board of Navy Commissioners strongly proposed the creation of such an academy.¹² None of this, however, swayed enough members of Congress to make the academy a reality. Americans cringed at

¹⁰ Bickham, *Weight of Vengeance*, 278; Donald Hickey, *The War of 1812: A Forgotten Conflict, Bicentennial Edition* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012, originally published 1989), 314-315.

¹¹ Richard Hofstadter, *The Idea of a Party System: The Rise of Legitimate Opposition in the United States, 1780-1840* (Berkeley, CA: The University of California Press, 1969), 172.

¹² "On the Expediency of a Naval Academy," n.d., Rodgers Family Papers, Box 4; Board of Navy Commissioners (hereafter BNC), January 17, '86, "Letters Sent by the Board of Navy Commissioners to the Secretary of the Navy (hereafter Letters Sent – Secretary), National Archives, Washington DC.

the thought of a naval West Point for many of the same reasons they initially opposed West Point itself. It would breed aristocratic pretensions among officers, create a society of military professionals whose loyalty to the military would trump their loyalty to liberty, and provide would-be despots with a ready tool for subverting the will of the people. Moreover, it was seen as expensive and wholly unnecessary. Even in the aftermath of the War of 1812, many Americans remained committed to the idea of a militia at sea made up of privateers. The successes of the War of 1812, while improving most Americans' opinion of the navy, actually worked against the idea of an academy, since the British had been humbled (according to public opinion) by self-trained officers. The idea of a naval academy never went away, however, with successive secretaries of the navy pushing for a school for midshipmen throughout the Monroe, Adams, and Jackson Administrations, but it was not until 1845 that the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis was finally created. In the meantime, senior officers had to continue training their successors at sea as best they could.¹³

The Naval Academy was not the only idea whose time had not yet come. Ever since Stoddert, the Navy Department had pushed for the creation of the rank of admiral. The lack of higher ranks than captain was especially frustrating to officers who reached the pinnacle of their profession in their early twenties, and had no hope of future promotions. "If we are to have a Navy (which I almost despair of), we ought and must have admirals," Isaac Hull wrote to Senator David Daggett of Connecticut. Hull was especially frustrated because of the navy's half-hearted effort at according higher rank by giving the courtesy title of commodore. Any captain in command of a squadron – even one of only two ships – enjoyed

¹³ Frederick Leeman, *Long Road to Annapolis*, 69-100 discusses the process of founding an academy. For Americans' fears of a formally-educated officer corps, 4-5; for the successes of the War of 1812 working against the establishment of an academy, 72, 99.

this title, and usually kept it for life. Although no additional powers came with it, it galled Hull that men lower than himself in seniority could demand that he refer to them by a title that at least implied greater distinction.¹⁴

Not all ideas for the improvement of the navy fell by the wayside, however. For one thing, Congress proved far more willing to accept the expenses of a permanent navy, authorizing a substantial expansion, including the 74-gun ship of the line *Independence* that Bainbridge sailed into the Mediterranean. In April of 1816, Congress followed this construction project with “An Act for the Gradual Increase of the Navy of the United States.” The act, which sailed through both Houses of Congress virtually unopposed, approved nine more ships-of-the-line as well as an additional fifteen smaller vessels. “The significance of this legislation cannot be overstated,” argues Craig Symonds. “It represented the complete reversal of the policy of two decades,” in that “the construction was not designed for any specific purpose, but for general service.”¹⁵ In other words, Congress, under the near-complete control of the party of Jefferson, was now enthusiastically supporting the idea of a standing navy in peacetime.

For leading this newly expanded maritime force, Madison was initially inclined to trust administration of the navy to one of its own, and when Jones resigned as secretary of the navy in 1814, he offered the post to John Rodgers. The commodore politely declined, telling Madison that “my abilities are not of a kind to justify my acceptance” of the post, as “neither (sic) my habits, temper, nor education are such (as in my own estimation) to sanction” him becoming the civilian head of the navy. While his self-doubts may have been sincere –

¹⁴ Weld, *Papers of Isaac Hull*, 37. See also, Maloney, *Captain from Connecticut*, 292-304 for a detailed discussion of Hull’s frustrations on this point.

¹⁵ Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists*, 199.

though in light of his actions as president of the navy board this is certainly questionable – we get a hint as to Rodgers’s true motives for rejecting the post later in his letter to Madison. Rodgers said he would be willing to assume the office of the secretary on an interim basis, but only if he could maintain his commission and standing in the officer corps. Rodgers also used his letter declining the post as another chance to push for a navy board, which he must have known he would be appointed to.¹⁶ Madison saw no way that an active naval officer could simultaneously hold a civilian post, even temporarily, and he left Rodgers as he was.¹⁷

After Rodgers declined, Madison turned to New Englander Benjamin Crowninshield. In terms of experience, Crowninshield seemed among the most qualified men ever to hold the post. He, like most of his predecessors, came into the office with extensive knowledge of maritime affairs. His father, also named George, was among the most respected and successful merchants of New England. The elder Crowninshield served as a midshipman in the Royal Navy, but left to join the American militia at the outbreak of the Revolution, and was wounded at Bunker Hill.¹⁸ Following the Revolution, he spent several years as a merchant captain, before founding an East Indies trading company, which proved tremendously successful and soon accumulated substantial wealth for the family.¹⁹ The younger Crowninshield had grown up in the heart of America’s maritime commercial

¹⁶ Rodgers to Madison, November 29, 1814, Rodgers Family Papers, Box 2, LOC.

¹⁷ Schroeder, *John Rodgers*, 141.

¹⁸ Certificate of the Bunker Hill Monument Association, undated, but in or close to the year 1823, Folder 11, Crowninshield Papers, Series 1: Benjamin Crowninshield Sr. Papers, Peabody-Essex Museum, Salem MA.

¹⁹ Crowninshield Sr.’s career in merchant shipping is documented in Box 1: Folder 1: *Prudent* (Ship) papers, 1800-1801; Folder 2: *Prudent* (Ship), ledger, 1800-1805, 1885; Folder 3: *Prudent* (Ship), day book, 1799-1821; and Folder 4: Various ships papers, *Alexander* (Ship); *Belisarius* (Ship); *Commerce* (Sloop); *Eunice* (Brig); *Peggy* (Schooner), 1788, 1798, 1813, 1819, Crowninshield Papers, Series 1; Hall, “Benjamin Crowninshield,” 113.

industry. He also had political experience, having served a term in the Massachusetts House of Representatives and later in the state senate, and after his career in the Navy Department he went on to serve in the United States House of Representatives.²⁰

His qualifications on paper did not, however, make him a strong or effective secretary. Although warm and friendly, Crowninshield was temperamentally ill-suited for the post. In contrast to his war hero father, known as “Sailor Ben” in the maritime community, the younger Crowninshield was dubbed “Philosopher Ben.” A bookish young man, it is unclear if Crowninshield Jr. ever captained a vessel.²¹ He preferred intellectual and philosophical pursuits, commenting that “no American [should] dare to think lightly of philosophy and science, and if my countrymen wish to acquire power, influence, and respect among nations, and convenience and perfection in society, let learned men be honored and a spirit of enquiry be encouraged.”²² He was in his element conducting scientific experiments and debating points of philosophy, but he apparently lacked his father’s hard-headed business sense or love of the sea.²³

²⁰ Hall, “Benjamin Crowninshield,” 113; “Crowninshield, Benjamin Williams (1772-1851,” Biographical Directory of the United States Congress, bioguide.congress.gov; “Rules and Orders to be Observed in the Massachusetts House of Representatives for the year 1827-1828” (Boston: Printed by True and Greene, 1827), lists Crowninshield among the representatives from Salem County, but is listed as being on leave of absence, Crowninshield Papers, Box 2, Folder 1.

²¹ The only voyages Crowninshield took that are recorded in his personal papers he sailed as a passenger. “Journal on board *Cleopatra’s Barge*, on a voyage of Amusement and travels to the Western Islands and the Mediterranean in the year 1817,” typed transcript, Box 2, Folder 8; “Three Specimens of Poetry, written on board US Ship Columbus” June 15, 1821, May, 1821, and January, 1821, Box 3, Folder 1, Crowninshield Papers.

²² Crowninshield, “Journal on board *Cleopatra’s Barge*.”

²³ For his scientific pursuits, see: Crowninshield to Dr. B.L. Oliver, May 30, 1804: noteworthy because Crowninshield talks about “Newton’s theory of Light” and describes his efforts to learn more on the subject and perform his own experiments, Box 1, Folder 13; Crowninshield, untitled, incomplete (it begins on page 105), notebook with an essay on various scientific experiments, Box 2, Folder 1; Crowninshield, “View of the Science of Life,” Box 3, Folder 3, Crowninshield Papers. For Crowninshield’s philosophical bent, see: unaddressed letter dated from Williamsburg (where Crowninshield was studying at William and Mary), May 13, 1804, regarding a lengthy conversation he had with Thomas Jefferson, apparently a friend of the family,

Moreover, he could be indecisive and directionless. He dithered for months on whether to accept the post of secretary of the navy or not, leaving Chief Clerk Benjamin Homans the de facto secretary for a time.²⁴ Even in his intellectual pursuits he occasionally showed a lack of commitment and drive. He filled numerous notebooks with chapters for his ambitious project “A General History of Mankind from the beginning of the world to the present time,” though he never came close to finishing it.²⁵ Samuel Flagg Bemis, the great historian of American diplomacy, regards Crowninshield as “irresolute and vacillating.” All in all, he was “barely competent to handle the navy.” Edwin Hall largely agrees. Although he credits Crowninshield with some measure of effective leadership early in his tenure, he criticizes him for a “lack of initiative,” and concludes that he was “in general content to let [others] do his work for him.”²⁶

Even if Crowninshield had been more forceful and energetic, he would have struggled. War had made it abundantly clear that the duties of overseeing the navy were too great for one man. The successes of individual ships and commanders could not conceal the navy’s lingering administrative problems. “It has been affirmed, and cannot be denied, that imperfections exist in the civil administration of the naval establishment” William Jones

Box 1, Folder 13; “Journal on board *Cleopatra’s Barge*” contains a host of personal observation on slavery, religion, and government, Box 2, Folder 8; Crowninshield, “Observations on Mr. King’s remarks, etc.” which looks philosophically at god’s purposes in creating the world,” Box 2, Folder 9, Crowninshield Papers.

²⁴ Hall, “Crowninshield,” 114.

²⁵ Crowninshield, booklet entitled ““A General History of Mankind from the beginning of the world to the present time,” that includes chapters on “The State of the World before the Flood,” and “From the blockading of Boston port to the capture of General Burgoyne in 1777,” Box 2, Folder 10; Box 3, Folder 1 also contains a map and narrative of the Battle of Quebec in the French and Indian War. Box 3, Folder 3 contains an extended essay on the Black Death in Europe, and an essay on “Definition of the Continent of America in General, more particularly of the United States,” Crowninshield Papers.

²⁶ Bemis, *John Quincy Adams and the Foundations of American Foreign Policy* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1949), 252; Hall, “Benjamin Crowninshield,” 113.

reported to Congress in the midst of the war, asserting that “a radical change of system alone can remedy the evils.”²⁷ Despite the efficiency and general success of the navy, room for improvement remained, and the job of overseeing the growing service exceeded the capabilities of even the most enthusiastic secretary. Jones called for expanding the size of the Navy Department, allowing the secretary to delegate substantial responsibilities thereby reducing the workload on himself and his successors.²⁸

Jones proposed granting experienced naval officers greater authority in the administration of the service through the creation of a Board of Navy Commissioners. The board was duly established by Congress in the aftermath of the War of 1812, but Jones’s idea rested on earlier precedents. During the Revolutionary War, the Marine Committee of the Continental Congress created two navy boards to oversee administrative matters. The Navy Board of the Eastern Department was primarily responsible for the New England states, while the Navy Board of the Middle Department oversaw the rest of the Continental Navy. The boards, in sign of things to come, suffered from a vague mandate, and it shows how little planning went into them that even their names vary in the documentary record; no standard name was ever given.²⁹ Most congressmen serving on the Marine Committee lacked interest in the navy, and in any case labored under a substantial workload, so in short

²⁷ Secretary of the Navy William Jones, “Reorganization and Extension of the Navy, the Establishment of a Board of Inspectors, and a Naval Academy,” communicated to the Senate, November 15, 1814, *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, Volume I, 4 volumes (Washington DC: Gales and Seaton, 1832): 320. Some of the discussion of the Board of Navy Commissioners is taken from Sheppard, “Petty Despots and Executive Officials,” 2010.

²⁸ Jones, “Reorganization and Extension.”

²⁹ Charles Oscar Paullin, *Navy of the American Revolution: Its Administration, Its Policy and Its Achievements* (New York: Haskell House Ltd, 1971, originally published 1906), 97.

order the boards were essentially running the Continental Navy.³⁰ Stoddert had also recommended such a body before his retirement.³¹ In 1805, James Barron and Thomas Tingey campaigned strongly in favor of the creation of such a board to establish uniformity in ship design, examine candidates for promotion, and advise the secretary of the navy.³²

Shades of the board can also be seen in the occasions when the civilian government sought out the counsel of selected officers before making a decision; Robert Smith's 1805 circular regarding Truxtun's readmission, Thomas Tingey and Samuel Barron's official reports in 1807 on the best use of gunboats, and even Hamilton's plea to Rodgers and Decatur for advice at the beginning of the War of 1812 all foreshadowed the board to some extent. Now, rather than having to rely on whichever officers were close by at a given time, future presidents and secretaries of the navy would have a panel of trusted officers readily available to weigh in on whatever matters were most pressing. That this panel might come to view itself as more than a mere advisory body on policy issues does not seem to have occurred to anyone.

Like so much that the American navy did, the creation of a Navy Board was based on the British Navy, which possessed a set of similar boards. For Britain, however, the subordinate boards' responsibilities were unambiguously limited to specific matters, and they were duly designated as the Victualing Board, the Sick and Hurt Board, the Ordinance

³⁰ *Journals of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789*, 34 volumes. (Washington, DC: US government Printing Office, 1904-1937), November 6, 1776, VI: 928. "Letterbook," Navy Board of the Eastern Division, October 1778-October 1779, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington's Crossing, PA, contains the outgoing correspondence of one of the boards. It touches on matters of relative rank, ship construction, procurement, and even coordination with French naval officials. For a more detailed survey of naval administration during the Revolution, see Fowler, *Rebels Under Sail*, 39-79; Paullin, *The Navy of the American Revolution*, 31-60; 79-103; Volo, *Blue Water Patriots*, 51-67.

³¹ Stoddert to Chairman of the Committee on Naval Affairs, January 12, 1801, *NDQW*, VII: 80-84.

³² McKee, *Edward Preble*, 338.

Board, and later the Transport Board; the British Navy Board, whose status, influence, and role in government fluctuated over time, generally tended to focus on dockyards, ships, and supplies. Strategy, operations and questions relating to the officer corps were the clear prerogative of the separate Board of Admiralty, also known as Lords Commissioners of the Admiralty. All other boards were technically subordinate to this body. Even with a reasonably clear designation of roles, tensions between the British Navy Board and Board of Admiralty were frequent.³³ Jones's proposed Board of Navy Commissioners – and the subsequent congressional legislation – failed to provide such specificity of duties, leaving open the possibility that the board, once created, would define its own conception of its duties and powers.

Even before the formal creation of the board, it was clear that the government intended a greater role for the officer corps in managing the navy. When the idea of creating a Navy Board was first proposed, Congress solicited opinions from several prominent naval officers, whose suggestions were duly taken into consideration and, in some matters, implemented.³⁴ The secretary had, for example, proposed a five-man board, consisting of three officers and two civilians. Naval officers, unsurprisingly, felt that a three-man board consisting solely of active duty captains would be far better. Their views were not unreasonable; long-serving captains who had spent years at sea aboard naval vessels certainly possessed the competency to oversee the details of such ships without civilian aid. Congress

³³ For the British Navy Boards, see Piers Mackesy, *The War for America, 1775-1783* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1992, originally published 1964), 15-16. For detailed discussion of British naval administration, see: N.A.M. Rodger, *The Admiralty* (Lavenham, GB: Terence Dalton Limited, 1979); and Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1649-1815* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2004), 95-111, 181-200, 291-311, and 358-379.

³⁴ Opinions of: Commodores Bainbridge, Stewart, Hull, Decatur, Perry, Porter, Warrington, Evans, Morris, Shaw and Tingey on the establishment of a Board of Naval Inspectors, *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, I: 354-358.

implemented this suggestion quite readily. While the proposed change had much to recommend it, however, removing any civilian influence from the board greatly enhanced the power of the officer corps, allowing the board to become a unified voice for a strictly military viewpoint.

That said, this body was not intended to increase the role of the officer corps in decision-making. William Reed of the House, in his follow-up to Jones' proposal, gave three key reasons for the need for such a board, two of which related directly to curtailing the officer corps. "The want of sufficient checks upon, and the consequent irresponsibility of, subordinate agents," along with "the great latitude allowed commanders" in the maintenance of their ships had created a pressing need for greater authority and enforcement within the Navy Department.³⁵ The board, it was hoped, would provide a greater uniformity of practice among officers, and crack down on the use of government resources by individual captains. There was a disconnect between Jones' proposal and what Congress finally created. While Jones wanted officers reined in on their use of government money, he at least implied in his draft of a bill creating the board that the most senior officers would assume for themselves the better part of the secretary's responsibilities. In his original recommendation, Secretary Jones vaguely specified that the board would "have the general superintendence and direction of the affairs of the Navy."³⁶

Congress refused to go this far. The legislation creating the board made it abundantly clear that the legislators had no intention of abandoning the nation's traditional views of

³⁵ William Reed, "Reorganization of the Navy Department," January 15, 1815, *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, I: 354.

³⁶ An Act for the better organization of the Navy Department, *American State Papers, Naval Affairs*, volume 1, 322-324.

civil-military relations. In their remarks on the proposal, Stephen Decatur and John Shaw both suggested that the secretary of the navy be the presiding officer of the board, not independent of it.³⁷ This would have placed the secretary on much more equal footing with officers, and opened the door for the naval officers assigned to the board to completely dominate the affairs of the navy. Congress would have none of it. The board was specifically designated as “attached to the office of the Secretary of the Navy and under his superintendence,” and assigned “all the ministerial duties of said office.” Exactly what the “ministerial duties” of the navy were was somewhat open to question. But Congress left no doubt as to its intended chain-of-command. The law ended by specifying that “nothing in this act shall be construed to take from the Secretary of the Navy his control of the naval forces of the United States.” In the coming months, it would appear the commissioners neglected to read that final clause.³⁸

Despite Congress’ clear intent, upon taking office, Crowninshield demonstrated that he was willing to defer to officers’ views. Among his first acts was to solicit John Rodgers’s opinion as to who should serve on the new Navy Board (that Rodgers would be one of them was a foregone conclusion). Rather than install the three highest-ranking officers to the board, Congress gave the secretary of the navy discretion as to who would serve, and Crowninshield immediately sought out Rodgers’s help. Rodgers returned a thoroughly candid assessment of his fellow officers. He informed the secretary that he regarded Isaac Chauncey as “better qualified for command at sea,” and readily admitted that Perry and

³⁷Decatur and Shaw “Opinions,” *American State Papers: Naval Affairs*, I: 356-357, 358.

³⁸ “An act to alter and amend the several acts for establishing a Navy Department, by adding thereto a board of commissioners,” Richard Peters, ed., *By Authority of Congress: The Public Statutes at Large of the United States of America from the organization of the government in 1789, to March 3, 1845* 8 volumes, (Boston : Little, Brown & Co., 1855-62), III: 202-203.

Macdonough, two heroes of the recent war had still never “paid so much attention to the naval service as to qualify. . .for such a situation.” In the end, Rodgers recommended that Bainbridge, Hull, and Morris be appointed to the board, and failing one of those he also strongly endorsed Porter. Bainbridge was, at the time, preparing for his Mediterranean cruise, but Crowninshield obviously took Rodgers’s advice to heart otherwise. The first three commissioners were Rodgers, Hull, and Porter.³⁹ While administrative ability, proven character, and careful attention to duty were certainly factors in this selection, martial success seems to have held influence as well. Outside of Decatur and Bainbridge, who were both busily preparing for a lengthy voyage to the Mediterranean, these were arguably the foremost heroes of the recent conflict with Britain.

Initially, the board members showed no interest in challenging the status quo of civilian control. On their first day, they assumed no responsibility for themselves other than writing Crowninshield that they were “ready to receive communications from the secretary of the navy” and promptly adjourned until such messages were received. Two days later, the board again convened, but, since they had not heard from the secretary, they again adjourned without conducting any business. In the interim, they established their own internal rules and regulations, which specified their hours, who could open their mail, and when members could leave the District of Columbia. They agreed that “while the Board is in session, no business of a nature not closely connected with the duties of them is to be introduced by any member.” There is no indication in their minutes as to what exactly they believed those duties consisted of, however.⁴⁰

³⁹ Paullin, *John Rodgers*, 301-303. Rodgers’ letter to Crowninshield is quoted in its entirety here.

⁴⁰ BNC, “Journal of Meetings,” April 25-27, 1815.

If it is unclear precisely what conception of their authority Rodgers, Hull, and Porter brought to their new office, Crowninshield did little to clarify the situation. His initial correspondence to the board has apparently been lost, but it would appear he allowed them to meet for a few days without contacting them in any way, adding to the murky arrangement already in place.⁴¹ In any case, hints of the commissioners' broader interpretation of their authority begin to appear very quickly in their outgoing correspondence. By the end of their first week, the board wrote a circular to the officer corps asking for lists of all officers under the command of each commander, as well as a record of "remarkable conduct, whether good or bad" by any junior officer. "[That] the character and qualifications of each member of our navy should be intimately known to the commissioners is obvious," they urged their fellow captains, and assured them that it should be equally obvious "that we are highly interested in cherishing merit, and in removing from the service those who do it no honor." They go on to reiterate their request for "a candid and impartial report of the character, qualifications, and remarkable good or bad conduct of each of the officers under your command"⁴² The commissioners obviously believed, not unreasonably given the language of the legislation, that they would oversee commissioning and promotion of officers.

There is no record of Crowninshield objecting to the circular mentioned above. In fact, a few days later he consulted them on whether a purser should be discharged from the service based on "the suspicions attached to his character as respects to his intentions of going over to the enemy during the late war – and facts of his having disobeyed orders and overrun his furlough, as well as his being in arrears to the government for a large amount."

⁴¹ The first volume of "Letters Received from the Secretary of the Navy" begins in 1820. It is unclear what became of the earlier letters.

⁴² BNC, "Circular to Navy Commanding Officers," April 29, 1815, "Letters Sent to Officers."

Not surprisingly, the commissioners agreed that he should be dismissed.⁴³ But it did not take long after this for a turf war to break out between Crowninshield and the commissioners.

The board members believed that they possessed oversight into the movements of squadrons, and could dictate not only which officers received assignments, but what those assignments were, leaving little need for a secretary of the navy at all. Crowninshield countered that the board was only to handle duties assigned it by himself, and act under his authority. When the board demanded that Crowninshield communicate to them the movements of a particular squadron, the secretary flatly refused, creating a deadlock in the Navy Department.⁴⁴

It fell to the president to settle the matter. For the next three weeks, the board daily met and, after noting in its minutes that it had received no reply from the president, promptly adjourned.⁴⁵ While James Madison considered the problem, Bainbridge wrote Porter that, should the president rule in Crowninshield's favor, the board members would find themselves "in the honorable status of Clerks to the Secretary's Clerks."⁴⁶ Madison felt otherwise, however, ruling that the Secretary of the Navy is an extension of the president, and as such "he is understood to speak and act with Executive sanction, or, in other words,

⁴³ BNC, May 11, 1815, Letters Sent – Secretary, NA.

⁴⁴ The actual correspondence between Crowninshield and the Board leading to this standoff has apparently been lost. The Board's journal records that, on May 20, that they wrote to Crowninshield "in reply to his letter of the 18th instant on the subject of the law authorizing the establishment of a Board of Navy Commissioners." On May 22, it records that they received a letter from Crowninshield indicating that he "has adopted a totally different construction" from the commissioners on their respective duties. On May 23, they wrote to Madison asking him to settle the matter. See: BNC, "Journal of Meetings," May 20, 22, and 23. See also: Charles Oscar Paullin "The Navy Commissioners, 1816-1842," *Paullin's History of Naval Administration, 1775-1911: A Collection of Articles from the US Naval Institute Proceedings* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1968): 171-172 and John Schroeder *Commodore John Rodgers: Paragon of the Early American navy* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2006): 149-151.

⁴⁵ BNC, "Journal of Meetings, May 24-June 14.

⁴⁶ Bainbridge to David Porter, June 5, 1815, quoted in David Long, *Nothing Too Daring: A Biography of Commodore David Porter, 1780-1843* (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1970): 176.

the Executive is presumed to speak and act through him.” The Board of Naval Commissioners would oversee internal matters, but policy formulation rested firmly in the hands of civilian authorities. “According to the terms of the law,” Madison concluded, “the Board is attached to the office of the Secretary of the Navy, and shall discharge all its ministerial duties under his superintendence.”⁴⁷ Madison seemingly settled the matter once and for all, not only regarding the board, but the entire officer corps. His unambiguous assertion in favor of civilian control seemingly clarified the civil-military relationship within the Navy Department.

Madison’s ruling was not as final as it appeared. The president in many ways merely ratified what had already become standard practice in the Navy Department: authority rested with the secretary of the navy, who had the power to delegate to naval officers as he saw fit. What Madison did not settle was what was appropriate for a secretary to pass along to his officer corps. Even when an agreement on this was explicit between civil and military authorities, there was still room for ambiguity. In the coming years, the board would assume for itself – with Crowninshield and his successor’s tacit consent – tremendous authority and influence over all matters relating to the officer corps.

Upon receiving Madison’s reply, the commissioners seemingly accepted defeat gracefully. Or at least two of them did; Isaac Hull resigned from the board shortly thereafter. In the meantime, they wrote the Secretary of the Navy “asking a conference to settle certain points of etiquette,” which was most likely meant primarily to clear the air and return to a harmonious working relationship. They agreed that the board should oversee matters of ship construction, procuring supplies, and other administrative matters, while the secretary would

⁴⁷ Madison to Benjamin Crowninshield, June 12, 1815 in *Letters and Other Writings of James Madison, Fourth President of the United States*, volume II, 4 volumes (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1865): 603-606.

have control over ship movements and officer assignments. The commissioners seem to have used this meeting as a bargaining session as well. Somewhat incongruously with the division of labor they agreed to, the minutes of the meeting note that it was “generally understood that the Secretary should consult this Board in the appointment of officers.” Even with Madison’s backing, Crowninshield agreed to defer, at least somewhat, to his officers on appointments and promotions.⁴⁸

Although no doubt disappointed with their reduced role, and despite having wrung some minor concessions from Crowninshield, there is no evidence the commissioners surreptitiously sought to seize power for themselves either. When Joseph Bainbridge wrote the board about matters they believed more properly Crowninshield’s responsibility, they immediately wrote that Bainbridge’s problems “being a subject however on which alone the secretary of the navy has the power of deciding they do not feel themselves at liberty to express any opinion relative to your claims without an official notice from him that such expression is desired.”⁴⁹ They also yielded on questions of “pay and subsistence of officers,” and immediately referred inquiries on this subject to the secretary.⁵⁰

There are, however, hints that the members of the board were frustrated by Madison’s ruling, and maintained their resentment for several months. The first hints of this frustration come through in somewhat testy letters sent to officers who communicated directly with the secretary on issues that were specifically delegated to the board. “The Secretary of the Navy

⁴⁸ BNC, “Journal of Meetings,” June 15, NA.

⁴⁹ BNC to Joseph Bainbridge, March 19, 1816, “Letters Sent to Naval Officers,” (hereafter “BNC Letters Sent”),

Volume 1: April 21, 1815-July 22, 1833, NA.

⁵⁰ BNC to Lieutenant Edgar Freeman, February 22, 1820, BNC Letters Sent.

has communicated an extract of your letter of the 12th, which ought, as you will perceive by this reference of the Department, to have been addressed to this Board,” they wrote to one officer when he failed to go through them to determine how much beef, bread, and pork he could take for a cruise. They made sure to protect their (now smaller) sphere of authority, sharply reminding another captain that any letters relating to supplies for the use of the navy “must be addressed to the Commissioners of the Navy.”⁵¹ Although Madison issued his ruling in June, by November the members of the board were still rankled enough to begin their report with a reference to the difficulties they struggled to work under stemming from “the reserve that unavoidably attends an exercise of powers which are doubted,” and contended that their murky legal status made it impossible to “extend as far as is desirable, their knowledge of matters connected with the naval establishment of the United States.”⁵²

There were, however, a host of matters which Crowninshield was only too happy to let the board handle, and Rodgers, Porter, and Decatur, who had replaced Hull, threw themselves into their official duties. The November report which began with a pointed reference to the recent spat between the board and Crowninshield went on to cover a wide variety of subjects, and make sweeping recommendations to Congress. Their report recommended shutting down several navy yards, dramatically expanding others, removing unsatisfactory officers promoted during the war, and setting up a more efficient educational apparatus for incoming officers.⁵³

⁵¹ BNC to [unclear], November 17, 1817; BNC to Captain Wadsworth, July 8, 1819, “BNC Letters Sent.”

⁵² “Report of the Board of Navy Commissioners,” November 25, 1815, Rodgers Family Papers, Box 4, LOC. The report in the Rodgers Papers is a typed transcript. An original report is also available in “Letters Sent by BNC to the Secretary of the Navy” (hereafter BNC Letters Sent – Secretary), volume 1, NA.

⁵³ “Report of the Board of Navy Commissioners,” November 25, 1815.

The commissioners' primary focus was on maintaining and overseeing the various navy yards, which successive secretaries delegated entirely to them.⁵⁴ The board also assumed near-complete control of ship maintenance and outfitting squadrons for cruises, again with the consent of the Navy Department.⁵⁵ Naval hospitals and the overall health of seamen also came under their purview, with generally positive results.⁵⁶

The members of the board took the public trust they held seriously. One of Decatur's earliest biographers recounts an episode in which a man proposed his invention of a new type of gun to the board. When Decatur appeared uninterested, the man offered him a bribe. An infuriated Decatur assaulted the would-be inventor, and had to be forcibly restrained by Rodgers as he threatened to kill the man.⁵⁷ On a more mundane level, the commissioners' substantial outgoing correspondence shows careful attention to detail and zealous oversight of subordinates and navy agents.

As already noted, no secretary felt the need to watch his back after Madison ruled against the Board; the commissioners did not actively seek to undermine their civilian heads or claim undue influence over the officer corps. Madison's ruling, however, also left open

⁵⁴ A sense of the where the board's attention was focused can be seen in its outgoing correspondence. It kept a register of every letter it sent, listing only the name of the recipient and date. The list of letters sent to Thomas Tingey, the longtime commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, extends for 26 pages. Isaac Hull, for many years the commandant of the Charleston Navy Yard, takes up 11 pages, and the various secretaries of the navy 10. No other correspondents fill up a page. "Register of Letters Sent, July 1817-August 1842," NA.

⁵⁵ "Journal of Meetings," Thursday, September 14, 1815; February 12, 1816; July 22, 1816; January 12, 1817; Tuesday, August 26, 1817.

⁵⁶ BNC Circular to the Surgeons of Hospitals, April 28, 1815, "Letters Sent; BNC, March 19, 1822, "Letters Sent – Secretary.

⁵⁷ Mackenzie, *Decatur*, 297-298. As noted in chapter 6, Mackenzie had access to personal interviews with Decatur's widow and several officers who served alongside him. He sadly did not leave behind a list of specific sources he consulted, so it is impossible to know where he heard this story. Rodgers was still alive when Mackenzie was conducting his research, and could easily have shared it with him. Decatur's most recent biographer, Spencer Tucker, accepts Mackenzie's account at face value. See: Tucker, *Stephen Decatur*, 173.

the possibility that the secretary of the navy could delegate any duties he desired to the commissioners, not just those administrative matters specified in the act of congress creating the Board. Although Madison's ruling asserted that the commissioners' sphere of responsibility did not include personnel, it was the Board, and not the secretary, who wrote the new rules and regulations for the navy in 1818. The proper conduct of officers, the consequences of deviation from that conduct, discipline of seamen, and matters of dress and ceremony were all spelled out for officers by officers themselves.⁵⁸

Another hint of the growing influence of the Board is Rodgers's ongoing refusal to become secretary of the navy. When Crowninshield resigned in 1818, James Monroe again offered the post to Rodgers. When he declined the first time, the nation had been at war and at least the possibility of additional laurels in combat with the British still existed. Moreover, Rodgers had foreseen the creation of some sort of navy board at this point, and he might reasonably have assumed that he would enjoy substantial influence within the navy without resigning his commission. By the end of Crowninshield's tenure, the board's subordination, on paper, to the secretary of the navy was firmly established, and the officer corps might have hoped to place one of their own in the secretary's office. Yet Rodgers again refused. "Whatever attractions the secretaryship might have held for him, they paled in comparison to the prestige, prerogatives, and financial security" that came with his commission as a naval officer, asserts biographer John Schroeder.⁵⁹ That is certainly true, but if Rodgers' position on the Board had truly reduced him to the status of "a clerk to the secretary's clerk," it is

⁵⁸ "Rules, Regulations, and Instructions, for the Naval Service of the United States: Prepared by the Board of Naval Commissioners of the United States, with the Consent of the Secretary of the Navy," Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia PA. For the board's activities and influence see: Spencer Tucker, *Stephen Decatur: A Life Most Bold and Daring* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2005), 170-173; and Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 159-204.

⁵⁹ Schroeder, *John Rodgers*, 149.

difficult to believe any degree of permanent financial security could have kept him from immediately seizing the promotion. Rodgers' decision to decline the secretaryship a second time indicates the growing influence of the Board, and the fact that the officer corps had come to believe the Navy Department was no threat to them.

Indeed, the existence of the Board, and its competent performance, freed presidents from having to worry about a potential secretary's knowledge of the sea and sailing. Crowninshield was the last in a series of Navy Department heads to come into the job with experience in maritime affairs. He was succeeded by a series of "legal and juridical" secretaries, whose ignorance of maritime affairs naturally served to increase the influence of senior officers.⁶⁰ Smith Thompson, who succeeded Crowninshield as secretary of the navy in 1819, had no experience whatsoever in maritime matters. That is not to say he was unsuited for a government post. He had helped write the New York state constitution, and served as chief justice of the New York Supreme Court for four years prior to becoming secretary of the navy. Following his tenure in the Navy Department, he served on the United States Supreme Court for almost two decades.⁶¹

Thompson was fifty when he took over the Navy Department. Having no prior maritime experience, he might have felt overwhelmed by the new responsibility, but it does not appear he expended much energy learning the new role. Referring to Thompson, John Quincy Adams noted that "the office sits easy upon his shoulders." Thompson and Crowninshield both made a practice of spending a limited amount of time in the nation's

⁶⁰ Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 161.

⁶¹ Edwin Hall, "Smith Thompson," Coletta, *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 123-130.

capital, and Adams was not entirely disapproving of their behavior, conceding that the “navy commissioners make the duties of that department comparatively light.”⁶²

Among the reasons Thompson’s duties were “comparatively light” was that the Board continued to assume responsibility, with the secretary’s tacit consent, for issues relating to officer disputes and duty assignments. In all cases, the secretary held final authority to approve the Board’s decisions, but Crowninshield and Thomson never overruled the Board on any matter of consequence. When Oliver Hazard Perry clashed with the commandant of a navy yard over authority, the matter was referred to the board, which ruled in Perry’s favor.⁶³ Likewise, when Thomas Macdonough, the hero of the Battle of Plattsburg, and Isaac Chauncey clashed, the secretary consulted the board on the matter, and they recommended in favor of Macdonough.⁶⁴ Later, Macdonough again came to the Board’s attention, when he was serving under Commodore Charles Stewart in the Mediterranean. Their feud became so intense that Stewart relieved Macdonough of command and sent him home. Thompson and president Monroe made the final decision to restore Macdonough to duty, but the Board advised the secretary in settling the matter, and John Rodgers especially seems to have stayed abreast of the situation and played an influential role in its outcome.⁶⁵ The commissioners later corresponded with Crowninshield on “not worthy officers to retire to private life.” Within a year of their clash with Crowninshield, the Board wrote him

⁶² John Quincy Adams, *Memoirs*, IV: 310-311.

⁶³ BNC “Letters Sent – Secretary,” December 4, 1815.

⁶⁴ BNC, “Letters Sent – Secretary,” September 14, 1815.

⁶⁵ Skaggs, *Thomas Macdonough*, 181-182, sees the episode as largely ending in vindication for Macdonough, while Stewart biographers Berube and Rodgaard, 131-132, praise their subject’s wise handling of the situation and imply that Macdonough eventually conceded that he was in the wrong. Berube and Rodgaard also do not mention the Board’s influence in the affair; that is taken from Skaggs.

unapologetically that Joseph Bainbridge had approached them, and not the secretary, about a duty assignment, and on their own authority they had informed him that there was no work for him to do at that time.⁶⁶ Crowninshield did not object, and the following year, he requested a detailed report and recommendations from the board on the “merit and qualifications...of candidates for promotion.”⁶⁷

Officially, the secretary of the navy made the final decision in all these cases. In practice, however, it is clear that the Board of Navy Commissioners had assumed a place of tremendous influence in all aspects of managing the navy. No case illustrated the influence of the board over the officer corps so well as James Barron’s desperate efforts to return to service following his suspension after the *Chesapeake-Leopard* affair of 1807. Although on paper, Barron’s status in the navy should have been a matter for the secretary to decide, even after Crowninshield showed his support for the disgraced captain, Barron found himself stymied by the Board of Navy Commissioners, and especially by Stephen Decatur, despite the secretary’s views. Barron’s subsequent duel with Decatur, while certainly in part a personal squabble, was also an outgrowth of the ongoing ambiguity of civil-military relations and the prevailing culture of honor within the officer corps.

The suspension had proven devastating for Barron. Unable to find work in the United States, thanks largely to the Jefferson Embargo’s crippling effect on merchant shipping, he travelled to Europe to try and support his family. His stay abroad proved of little value financially and he appears to have been miserable the entire time. London was “a detestable

⁶⁶ BNC, “Letters Sent – Secretary, February 6, 1816, March 22, 1816.

⁶⁷ BNC, “Letters Sent – Secretary, February 11, 1817.

place,” and its people insufferable.⁶⁸ The separation from his family added greatly to Barron’s misery. Barron, by all evidence an extremely devoted husband and father, regularly sent affectionate letters back to his wife and daughters. His pain intensified when he was forced to miss his eldest daughter’s wedding.⁶⁹ Commerce was stunted there as much or more than across the Atlantic thanks to Britain’s epic struggle with Napoleon, and Barron had to subsist off the limited income he received from various inventions, with most of this going back to his family.⁷⁰ Repeated efforts to return home during the course of the war proved futile. The most poignant account of his time in Europe comes from John Quincy Adams, who testified that Barron had settled all his affairs in Copenhagen and traveled from there to Gothenburg for the sole purpose of obtaining passage back to the United States on board the *John Adams* which carried the negotiators sent by the United States to treat with Britain. While immensely sympathetic to his plight, the captain felt he could not allow a former naval officer, whose suspension had technically expired, even if he had not been officially reinstated, on board and retain his status as a diplomatic vessel. Barron found himself stranded once again.⁷¹

Barron finally reached his native shore in 1818, and Crowninshield, concluding that the disgraced captain had served his suspension, readmitted him to the service. Barron was

⁶⁸ James Barron to Jane Barron, March 15, 1815, James Barron Papers, Box II, Earl Greg Swemm Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg Virginia.

⁶⁹ James Barron to Jane Barron, July 16, 1816, James Barron Papers, Box II, Earl Greg Swemm Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg Virginia.

⁷⁰ Barron was a prolific inventor throughout his life, though he never enjoyed much success. See William Oliver Stevens, *An Affair of Honor: The Biography of Commodore James Barron, USN* (Norfolk, VA: Norfolk County Historical Society, 1969), especially the chapter entitled “James Barron, the Inventor,” 173-182, for a discussion of this aspect of his life.

⁷¹ Statement by John Quincy Adams, February 22, 1819 in James Barron Papers, Box III, Earl Greg Swemm Library, College of William and Mary, Williamsburg Virginia.

indefinitely placed on half-pay, however, since he was not on active duty. Technically, it was for the secretary of the navy to determine whether to assign him a command. But by the agreement reached in the aftermath of Madison's ruling and subsequent practice, the board also held substantial power over assignments. It could only hurt Barron's chances that Crowninshield and Thompson were in the capital infrequently, placing him even more at the mercy of the board for a duty assignment. Stephen Decatur had never abandoned his dim view of Barron as an officer that he formed following the *Chesapeake-Leopard* episode, and he may also have carried a personal grudge against Barron. Whatever the reasons, he vigorously opposed allowing Barron any responsibility.⁷²

A feud soon developed between the two. While it appears Decatur kept his simmering quarrel with Barron a secret, the disgraced former officer clearly did not act alone. Jesse Duncan Elliott had been a lieutenant on board the *Chesapeake*, and had been one of the lone officers to side with Barron. The two were reunited soon after Barron's return, and appear to have consulted together throughout the controversy between Barron and Decatur. Elliott did not, however, act from purely disinterested friendship towards his former commander. In his ongoing spat with Perry, he had finally driven the hero of Lake Erie to initiate court-martial proceedings against him. Before he could do so, Perry died on a mission to South America, having entrusted Decatur with all the evidence against Elliott before leaving.⁷³ Rather than immediately hand all of Perry's materials over to the Navy Department, Decatur held on to them for a time, apparently contemplating whether to take any action against Elliott or not. His decision was questionable, at best, from a civil-military

⁷² Allison, *Decatur*, 200-205.

⁷³ Skaggs, *Perry*, 218-220; Guttridge, *Our Country Right or Wrong*, 199-210.

standpoint, and it played a significant part in his death. Rather than have to formally defend his conduct before a court-martial, Elliott merely had to get rid of Decatur, and most historians agree that he used Barron as a pawn to do so. “You have but one enemy in Washington,” Elliott wrote to Barron, though it seems more likely that Elliott had but one enemy in Washington that he needed Barron to fight for him.⁷⁴

Yet there are indications that Barron also intended to engage in a duel from the outset. When Decatur responded that “I . . . never could have been guilty of such egotism as to say that ‘I could insult you (or any other man) with impunity,’” the matter could easily have ended, with the demands of Barron’s honor satisfied.⁷⁵ Neither man was willing to let go, however. In the coming weeks, Decatur repeatedly insisted that his opposition to Barron’s return came from no disregard for Barron personally, only that he did not consider him entitled to a position in the navy, having been guilty of losing a vessel and remaining away from the country during a time of war. Barron, however, was after more than personal satisfaction. Believing Decatur to be his chief obstacle to returning to the navy, he chose to interpret every remark as being an insult, and clearly entered the quarrel intending it to lead to the dueling field. Upon receiving a belligerent missive from Decatur, Barron lashed back “I consider you as having given an invitation, which I accept,” and then boldly claimed to have the choice of weapons for the forthcoming duel.⁷⁶ Such a claim was patently absurd; Decatur in no way issued a challenge in his previous letter. In the ensuing correspondence,

⁷⁴ Elliott to Barron, dated only “Monday 29,” with no month or year included. James Barron Papers, Box 12.

⁷⁵ Decatur to Barron, June 17, 1819. Barron to Decatur, June 12, 1819. The Barron-Decatur correspondence leading up to the duel is reprinted in its entirety in Don C. Seitz *Famous American Duels, with some Account of the Causes that led to them and the Men Involved* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1966): 191-221. All quotations from the letters are taken from this work. I thank Benjamin Kunkel of the Stephen Decatur House for calling my attention to this resource.

⁷⁶ Barron to Decatur, October 23, 1819.

this would become a frequent theme, with Barron interpreting challenges where there were none, yet unwilling to take the step of issuing a challenge himself. “I have not challenged, nor do I intend to challenge you,” Decatur forcefully asserted in exasperation, “it will not be lost sight of, that your jeopardizing your life depends upon yourself, not upon me.” Decatur then spoke directly to the real issue, Barron’s desire for a duel was done “with a view of fighting your own character up.” Finally forced to make the call to the field himself, Barron responded that “whenever you will consent to meet me on fair and equal grounds . . . you are at liberty to view this as that call.”⁷⁷

The initial duel was delayed, however, as Decatur had no one to act as his second. Rodgers and Porter both flatly refused, and wisely counseled Decatur to avoid an affair of honor. It was at this point that Bainbridge, who had not spoken to Decatur since the episode in the Mediterranean four years prior, conveniently reappeared in his former rival’s life, hailing him on the streets of Washington one day as an old friend and working his way into Decatur’s home as a guest. Bainbridge, upon hearing of the feud with Barron, immediately consented to act as Decatur’s second, and the duel was accordingly arranged. The coincidence of Bainbridge’s opportunely timed return to Decatur’s life has prompted speculation that he may have been prompted by Elliott and Barron to insure that the duel took place. Historian David Long concludes that, while there is insufficient evidence to convict Bainbridge, there is also ample reason for suspicion.⁷⁸ Whatever the case, the duel was set for March 22, 1820 in Bladensburg Maryland.

⁷⁷ Decatur to Barron, December 29, 1819; Barron to Decatur, January 16, 1820.

⁷⁸ David F. Long, “William Bainbridge and the Decatur-Barron Duel: Mere Participant or Active Plotter?” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 103 no. 1 (January 1979): 34-52; and Long, *Ready to Hazard*, 227-246.

As they faced each other on the dueling field, Barron called out that he hoped, should the two meet “in a better world” that they would no longer meet as foes. Decatur poignantly responded, “I was never your enemy sir.” The seconds ignored the opportunity for reconciliation and historians will forever speculate if they did so deliberately. Bainbridge snapped that there was to be no communication between the participants until after the duel, and matters proceeded accordingly. Out of consideration for Barron’s poor eyesight, the two men fired from an almost suicidal range of eight yards. Both shots struck in the hip, but only one proved fatal. Barron sank to the ground with a bullet painfully lodged in his hip, while Decatur crumpled to the dirt, mortally wounded.

The Barron-Decatur duel created a sensation at the time, and it has been well-trodden ground by historians ever since. Most of the many historians who have studied the affair treat it as a personality clash between two proud men or as an example of the honor culture of the time. It was indisputably both of these. But it is impossible to overlook the fact that, despite having killed a national hero and prominent member of the naval establishment, Barron’s career turned around so dramatically with Decatur’s death. Following Decatur’s death, the administrative apparatus of the navy did not immediately turn in Barron’s favor, but he got most of what he hoped for within a short time. Decatur had been unwilling even to grant him a hearing, but within months of the duel he appeared before a court-of-inquiry. The officers did not recommend him for an assignment, but none of them carried the prestige and influence that Decatur had, and Thompson agreed to grant Barron command of the Philadelphia Navy Yard.⁷⁹ He retired in 1838 as the second-highest ranking officer in his country’s navy. Even Barron’s highly sympathetic biographer concedes that “the death of

⁷⁹ Allison, *Decatur*, 216; Watson, *Tragic Career*, 79-84.

Decatur removed the chief stumbling block that Barron had always encountered in his efforts to be employed again.”⁸⁰

The secretary of the navy is notable for his absence in Barron’s story. Thompson ultimately gave Barron an assignment only after the Navy Board and a court-of-inquiry reinstated him. Despite his supposed absolute authority in the Navy Department, Thompson was, in practice, a minor figure in Barron’s quest for reinstatement. That he rubber-stamped the officer corps decisions regarding Barron, and ignored Decatur’s death altogether, speaks to the diminished influence of the office of secretary of the navy just four years after Madison emphatically ruled that the secretary served as an extension of the president himself.

The Board of Navy Commissioners survived until 1843, when it was replaced by a set of independent bureaus. In its nearly three decade lifespan, the board repeatedly clashed with civilian officials, even contributing to one secretary’s precipitous resignation during the Jackson Administration.⁸¹ Thanks in part to the passive acceptance of Crowinshield and many of his successors, the board became a major force in settling officer disputes, disciplining problematic officers, and even duty assignments for senior captains. But if its influence exceeded the original intent of Madison and the Congress, it never quite grew to the extent the first three commissioners hoped for. Historian Craig Symonds exaggerates when he contends that although “the act [creating the Board] expressly stated that it was not to be construed so as ‘to take from the Secretary of the Navy his control and direction of

⁸⁰ Watson, *Tragic Career*, 83.

⁸¹ Paullin, *Naval Administration*, 173.

naval forces' that was precisely its effect."⁸² The board certainly diminished the secretary's power, but it did not, as the first three commissioners apparently hoped, supplant the secretary and leave the navy entirely in the hands of its officers. In its limited ability to diminish civilian control, the board was an extension of the naval politics that preceded it. For two decades prior to the board's creation, naval officers and successive secretaries of the navy had forged an ad-hoc working relationship, in which the authority of the secretary and the expertise of officers were both recognized, and the exact responsibilities of the two remained ill-defined. Like the officers who came before them, members of the Board of Navy Commissioners carved out a sphere of influence for themselves, always acknowledging the secretary as their superior, but never forgetting that his interests were not necessarily the same as theirs.

⁸² Craig Symonds, *Navalists and Antinavalists: The Naval Policy Debate in the United States, 1785-1827* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1980), 196.

Epilogue

Two courts-martial rocked the navy in the Jacksonian Era. One featured a successful officer who showed the kind of zeal and aggression the Navy Department had long prized, while in the other a relatively unknown peacetime captain ruthlessly slew three of his subordinates at sea without any kind of trial. Yet the first was convicted, reprimanded, and soon out of the navy while the second enjoyed a full exoneration. A variety of factors came into play in both cases, and both officers did much in the days leading up to their courts-martial to secure their fates, but the markedly different outcomes illustrate the rough agreement that had been forged regarding spheres of responsibility between civil and military authority.

David Porter was already frustrated with the Navy Department in 1824 when he sailed for his third cruise to the West Indies in two years, and the feeling was mutual.¹ He had come down with the dreaded yellow fever on his previous voyage, and was lucky to still be alive. Almost as frustrating as the disease-ridden environment were the ostensibly friendly Spanish officials Porter had to contend with. Overwhelmed with their own wars against colonial rebellions – or the Latin American Wars of Independence, as they would later be called – the Spanish had limited ability or interest in checking the rampant piracy Porter was sent to quash, and both Porter and his predecessor often seethed in frustration

¹ The discussion of Porter's sojourn into the West Indies is taken primarily from David Long's excellent biography, *Nothing Too Daring: A Biography of Commodore David Porter, 1780-1843* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1970), 20-255. Long, *Gold Braid and Foreign Relations: Diplomatic Activities of U.S. Naval Officers, 1798-1883* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 63-66 contains a good concise summary of the affair.

when they pursued pirates all the way to a Spanish shore, only to be denied permission to continue the chase on land.¹

Secretary of the Navy Samuel Southard realized the delicacy of the situation, where American commercial interests demanded an end to piracy in the area, but already tense relations with Spain required any commodore sent to the region to be skilled in the art of diplomacy – something no one would ever think of attributing to Porter.² Southard's instructions to the commodore were therefore extremely vague. Porter was to use every exertion against the pirates, while making equally great efforts to avoid offending the Spanish. What exactly would constitute inadequate measures against the former or unacceptably belligerent behavior towards the latter went unspecified.³

After two frustrating and largely ineffective cruises in the West Indies, one of which had almost killed him, Porter reacted badly upon being ordered on a third. He sent a belligerent and nearly insubordinate letter of protest to Southard. The secretary ignored it, but relations between the two men were further soured. When Porter arrived in the West Indies again in 1825, he was in no mood to exercise the careful diplomacy the geopolitical situation called for. The Spanish, for their part, soon added deliberate insult to their carelessness and lack of cooperation. When a U.S. Navy lieutenant, Charles Platt, went to the city of Fajardo seeking stolen property, he was detained by Spanish officials who refused

¹ Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 206.

² America had only recently endorsed Andrew Jackson's decision to enter the Spanish territory of Florida in pursuit of Indians, then later pressed Spain to surrender the territory to the United States. Furthermore, to Spain's annoyance, American policy generally favored Latin American independence. See George Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 144-149, 153-160.

³ Long, *Gold Braid and Foreign Relations*, 63; Edwin Hall, "Samuel Lewis Southard," Paolo Coletta, ed., *American Secretaries of the Navy, Volume 1: 1775-1913* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1980), 131-142.

to believe his identity and forced him to send his clerk back to the ship, twice, to bring evidence of his affiliation with the United States. Platt languished in a Fajardo jail for hours throughout the ordeal, and even when he was finally released he was treated to hissing and insults by “the ruff scruff of the place” on his way to the beach where a boat waited to return him to the *Adams*.⁴

Porter exploded when he heard Platt’s report on the ordeal. Gathering a force of 200 of his men, the commodore rowed back to Fajardo, scattered the Spanish soldiers guarding a small battery and spiked the guns. He then sent word ahead that if he did not receive an apology for the shameful treatment of his subordinate, he would march into town, seize those responsible, and burn the city to the ground at the slightest resistance. Spanish officials unhesitatingly offered profuse apologies, which Lieutenant Platt summarily accepted, and the matter seemed closed. Porter and his men returned to the *John Adams*. Porter’s biographer speculates that he “then settled down to await the commendation he expected the government to extend.”⁵ Such an expectation would have been in keeping with Navy Department practice in many ways. Porter had refused to brook insult and had defended his nation’s honor. Even the Spanish seemed to have felt he was within his rights, as they never formally protested.⁶

By this time, however, Porter had made a thorough enemy of Secretary of the Navy Samuel Southard, who considered him insubordinate and quarrelsome. Moreover, president James Monroe had only recently issued his famous doctrine against European meddling in

⁴ Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 227-228.

⁵ Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 229.

⁶ Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 233.

New World affairs. For all its rhetoric, the United States was ill-equipped to enforce the Monroe Doctrine, and the president looked askance at one of his officers giving Britain or France a pretext to insert themselves into US-Spanish relations. The Spanish already had ample reason for hostility towards the United States, as Andrew Jackson had only recently invaded their territory in Florida.⁷

Porter did himself no favors either, responding to questions about his handling of the situation with his usual complete disregard for tact. His letters to the department were combative; one even got him a separate charge of insubordination. Moreover, Porter published a defense before the court-of-inquiry even met, in which he excoriated the president (while also dedicating the pamphlet to him). It was likely the tone of this pamphlet that insured the Adams and Southard would have Porter charged with insubordination and disobedience to orders as soon as he returned to the United States.⁸

The court-martial ruled that Porter had indeed acted improperly and suspended him from the service, with pay, for six months. He responded by resigning, believing he could never again serve in the navy with any dignity. He went on to serve in the Mexican Navy for a time, and later represented the United States to the Ottoman Empire as a civilian ambassador. It was while in Turkey that Porter famously commented that, “a man of war is a petty kingdom, governed by a petty despot.”⁹ He may have been thinking back to his own ouster from the navy, and bitter that his authority was undermined. Regardless, events in the

⁷ Hall, “Southard,” 137; Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 234-235.

⁸ Long, *Nothing Too Daring*, 239-240.

⁹ David Porter, *Constantinople and its Environs in a Series of Letters, Exhibiting the Actual State of the Manners, Customs and Habits of the Turks, Armenians, Jews and Greeks as Modified by the Policy of Sultan Mahmoud by an American Long Resident at Constantinople*. 2 volumes (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1835), 10-11.

U.S. Navy were about to confirm his assessment. Alexander Slidell Mackenzie, an officer known more for his biographies of Oliver Hazard Perry than anything accomplished at sea, set sail in 1842 on a training cruise with a green crew and a junior officer who may have been insane.

That officer, one Phillip Spencer, the son of Secretary of State John Canfield Spencer, had already had a problematic naval career when he sailed on the *Somers* in 1842. Obsessed with secret societies – he founded Chi Psi Fraternity at Union College – Spencer was always a troubled student, abandoning more than one school that his father shipped him off to. The navy seemed a more promising road to building character in the boy and making something of him, and his father secured a midshipman's warrant for him in November of 1841. But the elder Spencer's hopes on this score proved in vain. Phillip struck a superior officer on his first cruise, an offense that could have easily resulted in his execution much earlier, but the navy declined to pursue it. Instead, apparently in deference to Spencer's connections, they overlooked the matter and sent him on a second cruise a few months later, only to have to send him home early for getting himself extraordinarily (even by naval standards) drunk while on duty. The captain accepted Spencer's resignation in lieu of court-martialing him, but once again the highest ranks of the navy chose to grant the boy another chance. In the fall of 1842, just a year after entering the navy, he was ordered to report to Captain Alexander Slidell Mackenzie for a training cruise on board the brig *Somers*.¹⁰

¹⁰ Spencer's personality, and much of the following discussion, is derived from Buckner Melton, *A Hanging Offense: The Strange Affair of the Warship Somers* (New York: Free Press, 2003), 25-39. James Fenimore Cooper, *The Cruise of the Somers* (New York: J. Winchester, XXX Ann-Street, 1844), provides a thorough contemporary account of the episode, but is extremely biased against Mackenzie, with whom Cooper already had a running feud at the time.

Already overstocked with junior officers, and disgusted by Spencer's reputation, Mackenzie sought to have him removed from the ship prior to sailing. His efforts proved fruitless, and he sailed still stuck with the arrogant and troublesome young midshipman.¹¹ Once at sea, Spencer's old habits reasserted themselves. Mackenzie describes Spencer as an odd man, who showed deference to his face but often "was loudly and blasphemously vituperative against me, and ... often abused me in the most outrageous and violent terms, and declared that it would give him real pleasure to roll me overboard from the round top."¹² Spencer's actions especially troubled Mackenzie since he was already overseeing an unusually unruly and insubordinate crew.¹³ Yet he never expected the chilling report he received from James Wales, a purser's steward, on the night of November 25. Wales claimed that Spencer had approached him and asked him to join in a mutiny; Spencer supposedly hoped to take control of the ship, kill the officers and any sailors who refused to join him, and begin cruising as a pirate vessel.¹⁴

Mackenzie immediately ordered Spencer's arrest and, lacking space belowdecks to confine the prisoner, had him kept in chains on deck. But this did not end his troubles. The crew continued to act insubordinately, and the loss of one of the sails the next day, what would have normally been seen as a careless but not uncommon incident, took on ominous implications. Shortly thereafter, Mackenzie had two other men arrested, Chief Bosuns Mate Samuel Cromwell and Seaman Elisha Small. Both had been implicated by a piece of paper

¹¹ "Proceedings of Court of Inquiry into the Somers Mutiny, with a Full Account of the of the Execution of Spencer, Cromwell, and Small" (New York: Greeley & McElrath, 1843), 8, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT.

¹² "Proceedings," 8.

¹³ Cooper, *Cruise of the Somers*, 11-17.

¹⁴ "Proceedings," 6; Melton, *Strange Affair*, 95-97.

found among Spencer's possessions that listed those whom he considered reliable in the upcoming mutiny.

Tensions continued to mount, and Mackenzie barely quelled what he feared was the beginning of an uprising two nights later. By this point, the captain was genuinely afraid. He had no way of knowing how many of the crew were in on the plot, and felt he could only trust his junior officers. He could have made for a foreign port, and disembarked Spencer there to await transport back to the United States for trial, but he feared embarrassing his country in the process. Finally, he concluded the only option left to him was the immediate hanging of Spencer and his two alleged co-conspirators.¹⁵ He informed the three men, much to their dismay, and gave them only an hour to prepare themselves to meet death. All were hanged from the yardarm, and their bodies buried at sea.

Mackenzie's revelation of what he had done upon returning to port sent shockwaves through the nation. Public sentiment was initially strongly against Mackenzie. The court, however, concluded that he had acted in the only way possible under the circumstances. Despite vehement protests from Spencer's father, the president endorsed the court's findings; Mackenzie suffered no official sanction or reprimand for the deaths of three men. John Tyler, in explaining his decision to sign off on the verdict, indicated his belief that he lacked the right to do otherwise. "If [the court] had ordered Mackenzie shot, I would not have interposed to save him," Tyler commented.¹⁶

Avoiding official sanction, of course, did not remove the cloud over Mackenzie's career, and he never again received orders that offered him a chance to distinguish himself.

¹⁵ Melton, *A Hanging Offense*, 142-143.

¹⁶ Quoted in Melton, *A Hanging Offense*, 242-244.

Still, the markedly differing treatment of the two officers reveals much about attitudes within and about the navy in Jacksonian America. A captain's authority over his own ship remained sacred. Even if the government frowned on Mackenzie's actions, the fact that he emerged from killing three men on his own authority without official penalty would have sent a clear message to any officer thinking of doing anything less to his crew. Likewise, any crew thinking of protesting what they perceived as excessively authoritarian treatment from their captain would have certainly given thought to Mackenzie's exoneration. Porter, on the other hand, had acted as a representative of the United States government in an international incident, one that might have embroiled the country in war. Crucially, Porter also evinced disrespect for the office of the secretary of the navy in the immediate aftermath of the incident, while Mackenzie, although defending his tremendous exercise of raw power on ship, remained respectful of the department upon his return. Still, even if the two had exchanged attitudes, they would not have exchanged verdicts. Porter's actions fell squarely in the realm of international relations, and defied the administration's explicitly-stated foreign policy. Mackenzie's actions related to a senior officer's handling of his subordinates and his ship at sea. While his actions were extreme, they nonetheless fit with long-established precedent that the civilian government, be it in the form of Congress, the courts, the secretary of the navy, or even the president, deferred to officers when it came to dealings with the men under their command.

Conclusion

The implicitly agreed upon spheres of authority illustrated in Porter and Mackenzie's courts-martial had been well established since the years immediately following the War of 1812. For internal matters and especially management of a ship at sea, the Navy Department was willing to defer to naval officers. In questions of American foreign policy and relations with other powers, however, officers had to act within the framework set by the president, and conveyed to them by the secretary of the navy. In Mackenzie's case, the cabinet, with the exception of the father of one of the hanged men, was willing to defer to the naval officers presiding over the court-martial, who granted the broadest possible discretion to the captain of a ship at sea. Porter, because his action ranged into international relations and arguably defied his instructions from the secretary, received no sympathy, including from his fellow officers who tried him. Although not formally established by Congress and subject to fluctuation with each new secretary of the navy, a rough division of responsibilities had evolved in the civil-military arrangement of the United States Navy. This arrangement was fixed in place during the first months of the Board of Navy Commissioners.

The power-sharing arrangement in the United States Navy after the War of 1812 contains hints of Huntington's objective civilian control, or the "normal theory of civil-military relations," in that the navy was largely given the freedom to manage its internal affairs as it saw fit, while the civilian government handled political and policy questions.¹

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957); Eliot Cohen, "The Unequal Dialogue: The Theory and

The secretary's authority, confirmed as an extension of the president's by Madison's ruling regarding the navy board, was theoretically pervasive, but in practice certain areas remained under the purview of the officer corps. The Navy Department expected its officers to oversee ship construction and maintenance, procurement and supply issues, and the training of junior officers. Congress established the size and financial resources of the navy, the president determined where and how it would be used, and the secretary issued directives to officers and served as a go-between of the officer corps and the government. The ultimate settlement between the secretary of the navy and the Board of Navy Commissioners only enhanced this situation, as the board increasingly became the sole authority over the use of navy materials.

Where the civilian government did assert its authority, the question of how officers could respond to disagreeable orders or oversight was more complicated. Throughout the first three decades of the navy's existence, naval officers attempted to guard their freedom of action in a variety of ways. Whenever an officer felt slighted or received orders that challenged his honor, for example, his first solution was usually a threat to resign. To their credit, secretaries of the navy proved increasingly less likely to tolerate such threats. Stoddert allowed Thomas Truxtun to remain in the navy after he resigned during the Quasi War, which almost certainly contributed to Truxtun's belief a few years later that he would not be punished for threatening to resign again under Robert Smith; he was mistaken. Likewise, Paul Hamilton tried to sooth James Lawrence's feelings when he threatened to resign during the War of 1812, but also indicated his willingness to call the aggrieved captain's bluff if it came to it.

Reality of Civil-Military Relations and the Use of Force," Peter Feaver and Richard H. Kohn, eds., *Soldiers and Civilians: The Civil-Military Gap and American National Security* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 429-458; and Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York: Free Press, 2002).

Officers could also resort to simply defying orders, but this was exceedingly rare. Although Barron and Rodgers threatened to ignore Smith's directives and fight a duel in 1806, they ultimately chose not to go through with it. Lawrence paid with his life for ignoring Jones's directives in the war with Britain, but his was an exceptional case. Officers could also make appeals to the secretary, but with mixed results. David Porter's efforts to gain greater control over his expenditures failed, but secretaries often acceded to what they considered reasonable requests.

Threats of resignation and outright defiance usually proved ineffective in checking the Navy Department's influence, but that does not mean civil-military relations in the early navy were always hostile. Naval officers maintained their autonomy best by cultivating cordial relationships with the secretary and proving themselves trustworthy. Secretaries proved willing to defer to their officers on a host of matters, and men like Thomas Truxtun and John Rodgers routinely acted with minimal oversight. Officers who lived up to the department's expectations earned a measure of autonomy while those like David Porter who clashed with the department no matter who was secretary suffered much closer scrutiny.

In part, there was considerable trust between secretaries of the navy and their officers. Most secretaries in this period came from military backgrounds, and had extensive maritime experience. The exception to this, Paul Hamilton, a South Carolina plantation owner with no ties to the sea, endured the most difficulty with his officers. Ironically, Hamilton was also, in ways, the most in line with objective control in his wartime leadership. He sent ships out with extremely vague orders during the War of 1812, granting tremendous latitude to officers in how they should take the fight to the enemy. This was, however, more a product of his administrative and strategic ineptitude than ideology. Hamilton was not particularly unique

though. All secretaries of the navy prior to the War of 1812 were perfectly happy to yield considerable autonomy to officers they trusted.

Naval officers' commitment to the office of the president transcended party. Although officers usually held sympathies to one party or another, they seldom engaged in overtly partisan behavior. They willingly complied with Jefferson's gunboat program, although some expressed private reservations about it. They likewise refrained from publicly commenting on the debate over whether or not to go to war with Britain, although all certainly felt the nation's honor was greatly aggrieved by its former mother country. The first generation of American naval officers stayed well clear of partisan politics.

But successive secretaries' reliance on the normal theory of civil-military relations lapsed considerably in wartime; Stoddert, Smith, and especially Jones plunged into every detail of managing the fight against America's enemies. The experiences of the U.S. Navy in the Quasi-War, Barbary Wars, and War of 1812 bear out Eliot Cohen's arguments in favor of active civilian oversight.² In all three conflicts, presidents and secretaries of the navy used their power to oversee (or meddle, depending on perspective) in all aspects of how the war was fought. Officers in both the Quasi War and the Tripolitan War were recalled or cashiered for failing to act with enough aggression. Strategy came from the president or secretary; the two usually spoke with one voice, so that it is difficult to determine where ideas originated). Stoddert, Smith, and Jones all felt no qualms about giving detailed orders and specific instructions on how to wage war, and the exceptions to this practice, such as Richard Valentine Morris in the Mediterranean, usually failed to achieve any real gains for the United States. The secretary who came closest to true objective control in this period was

² Cohen, *Supreme Command*.

Paul Hamilton in the first months of the War of 1812, and his oversight of the Navy Department courted disaster. Far from appreciating his loose oversight – which, as noted earlier, stemmed more from administrative incompetence than ideology – naval officers welcomed his departure and the installation of William Jones as his replacement. The welcome proved short-lived for many officers, who quickly began to push back against Jones's strict oversight and attempts at changing the naval culture.

Naval culture, however, was never purely a product of the officers. Every secretary of the navy worked to shape the culture of the officer corps, none more explicitly than Benjamin Stoddert. Stoddert laid the foundation of naval culture that was to follow, emphasizing the importance of action, courage, and honor. His successors, while less forthright about their expectations, all built on Stoddert's foundation. The Navy Department wanted officers who refused to accept insult, who pursued their nation's reputation at all costs, and who showed real courage in battle. Officers who failed to fit this mold found themselves unemployed or, if they were lucky, assigned to a post on shore that offered no hope of distinction.

This honor culture produced its share of negative consequences. Officers fought reckless, often foolish duels that deprived the navy of valuable subordinates. Secretaries of the navy had to devote considerable time to settling personal squabbles over perceived insults and relative rank among their senior officers. And in the case of Thomas Truxtun, one of the foremost heroes of the service left the navy over a question of honor. That the oversight from the civilian government was never particularly close only added to such problems. Yet issues over honor never prompted any secretary of the navy to greatly expand his oversight of the corps. Likewise, while officers openly proclaimed that honor mattered more than

subordination, very rarely did an officer defy orders for the sake of his reputation.

Secretaries of the navy understood, and encouraged, the officers' high valuation of honor and acted cautiously to avoid offending sensibilities; for their part, officers understood that they could only go so far in defense of their reputation.

Though their devotion in practice occasionally lapsed, naval officers never denied their commitment to civilian control, nor did the navy ever face any kind of large-scale rebellion from the officer corps. Officers and their civilian superiors reached arrangements, some explicit, some understood, on the division of responsibilities. Tensions arose on a regular basis, and compliance could be grudging, but the president's ability to issue orders was never challenged, and aside from the clash at the creation of the navy board, the secretary's ability to act as the voice of the president was likewise consistently respected. Despite the powerful personalities and often oversized egos of the earliest American naval officers, they bequeathed to future generations a staunch commitment to obedience to orders and service to the government. This, alongside the stirring victories over French, Tripolitan, and British vessels, ranks among their contributions to their country.

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