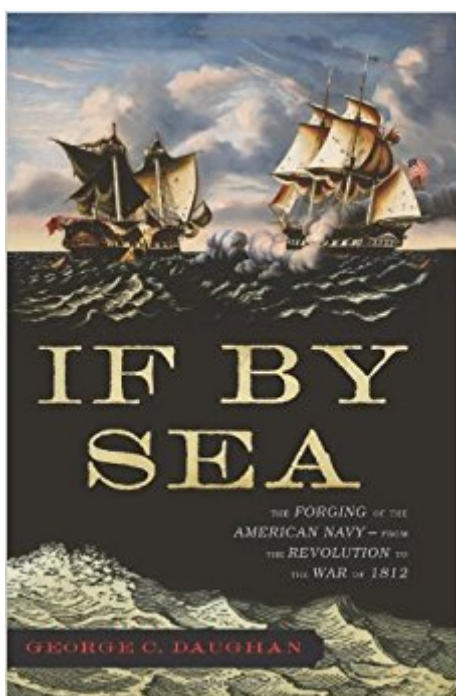


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# If By Sea: The Forging Of The American Navy -From The Revolution To The War Of 1812



## Synopsis

The American Revolution-and thus the history of the United States-began not on land but on the sea. Paul Revere began his famous midnight ride not by jumping on a horse, but by scrambling into a skiff with two other brave patriots to cross Boston Harbor to Charlestown. Revere and his companions rowed with muffled oars to avoid capture by the British warships closely guarding the harbor. As they paddled silently, Revere's neighbor was flashing two lanterns from the belfry of Old North Church, signaling patriots in Charlestown that the redcoats were crossing the Charles River in longboats. In every major Revolutionary battle thereafter the sea would play a vital, if historically neglected, role. When the American colonies took up arms against Great Britain, they were confronting the greatest sea-power of the age. And it was during the War of Independence that the American Navy was born. But following the British naval model proved crushingly expensive, and the Founding Fathers fought viciously for decades over whether or not the fledgling republic truly needed a deep-water fleet. The debate ended only when the Federal Navy proved indispensable during the War of 1812. Drawing on decades of prodigious research, historian George C. Daughan chronicles the embattled origins of the U.S. Navy. From the bloody and gunpowder-drenched battles fought by American sailors on lakes and high seas to the fierce rhetorical combat waged by the Founders in Congress, *If By Sea* charts the course by which the Navy became a vital and celebrated American institution.

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## Customer Reviews

Daughan brings a long academic career and solid command of his sources to this provocative

history of the origins of the U.S. Navy. Conventional wisdom has the navy beginning in the 1790s. Daughan instead traces its roots to the Revolution. The fleet established by the Continental Congress had a relatively undistinguished career, but Daughan demonstrates that the Americans gained technical experience, produced talented officers, trained seamen and developed a basic understanding of how a navy should be employed. The question then was whether a navy would concentrate too much authority in the central government and risk embroiling the new country in foreign quarrels. By contrast, a coastal defense force of small ships threatened nobody, foreign or domestic. Daughan traces the debate through four administrations, smoothly integrating political with external influences like the Quasi-War with France (1798–1800) and the campaign against the Barbary pirates. Not until the War of 1812, when the navy proved critical, did a national consensus emerge that preparing for war was the best way of avoiding one—a lesson that remains worth remembering. (June) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

The Journal of Southern History “[A] thoughtful and engrossing overview of American naval history from 1775 to 1815.”

George Daughan’s book *If By Sea: The Forging of the American Navy--from the Revolution to the War of 1812* tells the history of the troubled birth of the US Navy. During the revolution, the American rebels had to contend with the Royal Navy -- the greatest navy in the world. The thirteen American colonies faced the greatest Empire in world history which boasted overwhelming numerical superiority, strong leadership and secure naval bases around the globe. They did so largely with a mass of privateers -- merchant vessels that acted as for-profit commerce raiders against British shipping. John Paul Jones, born in Kirkcudbrightshire, Scotland, was the greatest naval hero of the American Revolution. He brought the American revolution home to British shores by raiding the town of Whitehaven where he stole the local Lord’s silverware and burnt a coal ship. This attack on the English coastline was loudly denounced as terrorism by the contemporary British press. On September 23, 1779, as captain of the *Bonhomme Richard* Jones fought and captured the Royal Navy *Serapis*. Harvard historian Daughan comments, "This battle had no strategic effect on the outcome of the war, but it had a huge political impact in France, America and England. The Admiralty revived more hysterical letters over its inability to deal with Jones than it had for any other matter in British history." It was French naval power that helped tip the scales in the American Revolution. The British surrender at Yorktown would not have been possible without a French navy,

led by the Comte de Grasse, cutting off the seaborne escape route of Lord Cornwallis' troops. After the war, the vessels for the Continental navy were sold. Only gradually did the Washington and Adams administration succeed in authorizing the development of a small but effective US Navy. In May 1794 War Secretary Knox appointed Philadelphian Joshua Humphreys "Constructor of the Navy of the United States." Humphreys was a gifted naval architect who designed the 44-gun (which could in fact carry over 50 guns) frigates such as the USS Constitution that were faster and more powerful than their European counterparts -- a typical British frigate had 32 to 36 guns. If you like *If By Sea* you will also enjoy *Â America Invades: How We've Invaded or been Militarily Involved with almost Every Country on Earth* by Kelly / Laycock and *Â Italy Invades*

After reading and reviewing George Daughan's recent book, *1812: The Navy's War*, I was drawn to his earlier work, *If By Sea*, which covers US Naval history from the Revolutionary War through the War of 1812. While the two books overlap in their coverage of the latter war, but no more than is necessary to allow each to tell its complete story without reference to the other. The Revolutionary War In the absence of an Executive Branch, the Continental Congress controlled all aspects of the Navy: funding, procurement, and operations. Unlike George Washington, who had established a degree of independence from Congress in the area of military operations, the naval commanders were completely subordinate to Congressional decisions that specified not only funding authorizations, but also the types and numbers of ships to be built and how they would be deployed. Congress had grand plans for a fleet of frigates and ships-of-the-line that could confront the Royal Navy, the undisputed ruler of the waves. Unfortunately, the grand plans of Congress greatly exceeded the funds available and the experience of the fledgling American Navy. (Not much has changed after two centuries.) Daughan presents a good argument that rather than spending scarce funds on expensive ships, Congress would have been better advised to buy a multitude of small, inexpensive row-galleys each fitted with one or two cannons in the bow. The galleys were more maneuverable in coastal waters, presented small targets to the large British guns, and were capable of taking on a large British ship when they attacked in large numbers. This strategy (called asymmetric warfare today) proved effective in the naval defense of Philadelphia, but the lesson didn't sink in. Congress persisted in funding the construction of large ships and, at the end of the revolution, all but two had been sunk or captured by the British. The American naval experience in the revolution, while ineffective at the time, did create a cadre of experienced and capable sailors who would form the nucleus of a future, more capable navy. The Quasi-War with France The US was fortunate that Britain and France were at peace from 1783 to 1792, giving the new nation a decade

in which to recover from the revolution and put its government in order. When the two European powers resumed war, US commerce was caught in the crossfire. Both Britain and France seized neutral US ships bound for the other's ports. Britain also aggressively impressed American sailors into the British Navy on the sometimes justified claim that they were British deserters. Jay's Treaty (1794) brought about a truce with Britain but aggravated France, resulting in the Quasi-War (1797-1800). Presidents Washington and Adams (1789-1801) sought to build up a credible US Navy but were opposed by Jefferson, Madison, and their Republican allies who opposed the cost, which was not unreasonable given the mountain of debt left from the revolution. In addition, the Republicans argued that a powerful navy (1) would lead to US involvement in European wars and (2) could also be used to oppress the US population. Washington and Adams countered the first argument with the position that weakness would invite an attack. I find the second Republican argument hard to understand - a government that sought to oppress its citizens could do some more readily with a strong army. Indeed, John Brewer in *The Sinews of Power* makes the opposite point that one of the foundations of British civil liberties was that Britain historically relied primarily on its navy for national security and maintained a comparatively small army. In any case, the debate over establishing a credible American navy dragged on until 1797 when the XYZ Affair and Quasi-War with France provided Adams with a brief period of popular support for building a navy. Adams seized the opportunity and had 54 ships active by the end of the Quasi-War in 1800. Curiously, many of these ships were outfitted with British cannons, and the US and British Navies operated in an informal and unacknowledged alliance against the French. The Atlantic coast was cleared of French naval vessels and privateers in a matter of weeks after the US demonstrated its determination to stand up to the French provocations.

**The Barbary Pirates** After the end of the Revolutionary War, American traders sought to renew their commerce in the Mediterranean, but ran into new difficulties. Without their former protection by the Royal Navy, their ships became prime targets for the Barbary States which seized the ships and enslaved the crews. The US paid an annual tribute to several of the Barbary rulers, but as time passed, the demands for tribute increased. Early in his presidency, Jefferson sent a small naval task force to threaten the Barbary states which only provoked further seizures and demands for tribute. Jefferson progressively increased the size of the fleet sent to deal with the pirate states and, on the third attempt succeeded.

**The War of 1812** President Madison requested that Congress declare war on Britain in 1812 in retaliation to British seizures of neutral US ships and impressment of American sailors. The country was woefully unprepared for war, especially war with the world's leading naval power. Throughout the Jefferson and the first Madison administrations (1801-1812), the only addition to the

US fleet was the building of small gunboats for coastal defense. While this strategy sounds similar to the use of row-galleys in the Revolutionary War (which Daughan supported), the strategy was inappropriate for the goals of the War of 1812. The goal of the Revolution was to establish American independence by defeating the British on American soil. The naval contribution to this goal should have been (paraphrasing Daughan's words) to interfere with and harass British naval operations in American coastal waters. When Congress extended that mission to challenging the British Navy on the high seas, the result was an abject failure. The goal of the War of 1812 was entirely different: To establish American rights to trade freely as a neutral nation, specifically to end British seizures of US ships and impressment of American sailors. This goal required a navy capable of standing up to the British fleet on the high seas. Remarkably, the US Navy did just that in the War of 1812. I won't go into the details of the War of 1812 which I hope I have adequately provided in my review of Daughan's 1812: The Navy's War. The significance of the war was that it marked the end of the Jeffersonian doctrine that a navy was an unnecessary expense and a potential threat to the American people. The result was a consensus in American strategic thinking based on the following: \* Maintaining a credible military force is the best strategy for avoiding wars and being prepared for those that cannot be avoided. \* A credible navy is a critical element of that force. \* The cost of establishing and maintaining these forces is preferable to the alternative and is consistent with the Constitution. In the short term, having a credible navy enabled the proclamation of the Monroe Doctrine and the collaboration with Britain in suppressing the African slave trade. The continuing importance of naval power as a foundation for US strategic thinking was highlighted by George Friedman of STRATFOR in his book The Next 100 Years where he summarized US geopolitical goals as: (1) Domination of North America, (2) Elimination of any threat to US power in the Western Hemisphere, (3) Complete control of the maritime approaches to the US, (4) Global naval dominance, and (5) Prevention of any challenge to US global naval power.

Comprehensive book about the Navy's start from scratch. Their contributions to the early wars, fighting for American independence and maintaining our pride throughout the glib. Surprisingly, the book weaves early political clashes between Republicans and Federalists into the birth of the Navy. Especially as the two workout a domestic and global strategy for the fledging Nation and its growing global commerce.

Excellent detail but a little slow up-front. It gets better the deeper the reader ventures into it. Most of the American Revolution is known only as a sort of shorthand -- Lexington, Concord, Bunker

(Breed's) Hill. This book provides startling information that gives it a sort of "headline" freshness. For example, who knew that the Patriot Minutemen of lore actually were well-trained, disciplined troops? Who knew that after Paul Revere's ride (and row) the Americans dramatically outnumbered the British? Through painstaking detail, the author shines a fresh light on these and other events, while illuminating the personalities of the early American leaders -- often through their own words. Anyone with an interest in the U.S. Navy will be fascinated with this intricate history of its founding, early missteps and eventual evolution. Those who are interested in American history will find fresh information to improve their understanding of the founding and early development.

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