

War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865

Robert M. Browning Jr.

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Review

Browning, Robert M. Jr.

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McPherson, James M. *War on the Waters: The Union and Confederate Navies, 1861-1865.* University of North Carolina Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8078-3588-3

New Comprehensive Analysis of Civil War Naval History

In August 1863, Abraham Lincoln wrote to his long-time friend James Conklin, summing up the US Navy's all-encompassing role in the war effort. While the president noted that the army had received most of the notable accolades, Lincoln penned "Nor must Uncle Sam's web-feet be forgotten. At all the watery margins they have been present. Not only on the deep sea, the broad bay, and the rapid river, but also up the narrow muddy bayou, and wherever the ground was a little damp, they have been, and made their tracks." Dr. James McPherson, professor emeritus of history at Princeton, and a Pulitzer and Lincoln Prize winning historian, reflects Lincoln's sentiments. He believes that the naval efforts have not received the attention they deserve and he assesses the roles of the Union and Confederate navies during the Civil War.

Organizationally, McPherson divides the naval war into five overlapping parts and he approaches the narrative in chronological fashion. He maintains that the US Navy, in particular, deserves more credit for its wartime achievements and notes that the armies garnered the public's attention during the conflict and cornered most of the historical writing afterwards. Due to this indifference, he contends that Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut should get the same recognition that generals William Tecumseh Sherman and Ulysses S. Grant each have received for their prosecution of the war.

The navy served as a pivot for the Union's war effort—the longer the war lasted, the more force the sea service brought to bear on the Confederacy and the more impact it had on the war's outcome. The Union naval forces did score some significant victories for the Union cause without the army's assistance—Cape Hatteras, Port Royal, New Orleans and Mobile Bay to mention

a few. The service also realized notable defeats such as at Charleston and Vicksburg. McPherson relates in some detail the story of the Charleston campaign and the repulse of the ironclad fleet and the subsequent mired campaign to capture the "cradle of secession." This exemplifies well, the interservice rivalry and a lack of cooperation that cultivated a dysfunctional relationship and limited the successes of the military branches. Illustrative as well are instances in 1862, when the army would not make available troops necessary to capture Vicksburg or the fortifications of Drewry's Bluff. The navy was prepared to operate against these strong positions and would have required relatively few army resources to capture these points. Despite the fact that victory was in the best interest of both military branches, the requests went unfulfilled.

McPherson relates how, for the navy, it was truly a worldwide conflict. He weaves into the narrative information on the most important international issues. The Confederacy had agents in Europe to buy war material and to build a fleet of commerce raiders, blockade runners, and warships. The world's seaways were also active with Confederate commerce raiders and the Union cruisers that chased them around the globe. His account of the depredations of the raiders *Alabama* and the *Shenandoah* reveals the reason for the "flight from the flag" of American commercial vessels and the destruction of many more, including a large percentage of the US whaling fleet. Also covered is the delicate issue of the blockade at Matamoros.

McPherson also considers the leadership of both sides. Farragut comes out well, but others such as Rear Admiral Samuel Francis DuPont did not. The author gives both naval secretaries high marks for their work during the war. He commends Gideon Welles for transforming the US Navy into one of the world's most powerful forces afloat by war's end. Stephen Mallory rates well for his use of innovation, technology and ingenuity to overcome the Union's preponderance of ships, men, and industrial capacity. Chronicled are the use of submarines, mine warfare, ironclads and torpedo craft by the Confederates to diminish the advantages of the Union navy and to set back the Union cause.

The author only minimally discusses the blockade, the *raison d'être* for the navy's entry into the conflict. McPherson contends that the success of the Union blockade be measured by the goods and war material the warships stopped by its existence rather than how much commerce passed through the cordon of ships. While relating that this was the primary task of the navy, the narrative never

fully engages the reader with the scope and complexity of the blockade, the assets required to sustain the ships on station, and how all this affected the naval war effort. The author saves for the conclusion a discussion of the blockade's importance, but then in these final pages fails to balance this with the perspective of the navy's incredibly important operational work with the army, something he discussed throughout most of the book.

The naval component was an integral part of the larger struggle and the ebb and flow of the war on the battlefields continually influenced the decisions made by the leaders of both navies. The narrative would have been more complete if the author had better explained how the naval operations correlated to the overall war effort. For example, we know from the text that Wilmington, North Carolina and Mobile, Alabama were both important naval targets early in the war. Joint operations against these important blockade running ports, however, did not occur until late in the war. McPherson never relates that the attacks languished until the army wanted to use these ports as potential bases for its operations.

McPherson's book is well researched and enjoyable to read. His main reliance on primary sources helps flesh out the story with first-hand accounts. The good illustrative maps throughout are extremely helpful. His overarching goal was to show how the navies shaped the outcome of the war. His argument that the Union navy gave the United States a great value, comparing its actual cost in men and budget, matched to the army's resources, is on point. The Confederates on the other hand did the best with what they had. Generally, McPherson feels that the US Navy did not win the war, but that the Union would have lost the war without its naval arm. This is the best single volume available to acquire a cogent overview of the Civil War at sea, and the place for readers to begin their quest to learn about Abraham Lincoln's "webbed feet."

Robert M. Browning Jr. is a historian with the United States Coast Guard.