

# Commanding Lincoln's Navy: Union Naval Leadership During the Civil War

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## Review

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**Taaffe, Stephen R.** *Commanding Lincoln's Navy: Union Naval Leadership During the Civil War*. Naval Institute Press, \$37.95 ISBN 9780807132746

### Lincoln and the Navy

*Commanding Lincoln's Navy* provides a broad examination of the Union Navy during the Civil War. Often thought as secondary to the overall war effort, Taaffe brings to light the important roles the navy fulfilled throughout the war. Not only did the blockade prove crucial in many areas, the navy's presence on inland waters was just as significant. In addition, the navy also provided amphibious support to the army that proved critical to the overall war effort. While President Lincoln had a strong command over the Union Army, he relegated such authority to his Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles. Taaffe's analysis of Union Navy efforts demonstrates the numerous obstacles Welles faced on many fronts. A lack of ships, supplies, and efficient commanders hindered Welles' ability to coordinate the navy's six different squadrons. Given Welles' devotion and determination to maintain a viable navy, the title of the book might better be called "Commanding Welles' Navy."

However, Lincoln did not ignore the navy entirely but he recognized Welles' growing ability and left much of the decision making in Welles' capable hands. Lincoln also realized he had little invested politically in the Navy because, as Taaffe states, "the Navy was simply not as lucrative a source of patronage as the Army" (255). Therefore Lincoln faced less political pressure with the Navy as he did with the Army. Welles' ability to find and appoint strong commanders also improved throughout the war and once he understood the available pool of men, he was able to balance ability and availability, with seniority, political connections, and loyalty.

Taaffe presents a lot of information in a readable format, available to all levels of scholarship or interest. His introduction lays out the navy's situation at

the beginning of the war and then he addresses each of the six squadrons. In doing so, Taaffe relates the unique problems Welles faced with each squadron and how the various commanders either succeeded or failed in their commands. Not surprisingly he gives more attention to the Atlantic or Mississippi squadrons but does an admirable job in placing the remaining squadrons in their proper context. Most of the chapters, though not all, have a short conclusion that highlights the chapter's main points. This conclusion will be most useful to the less experienced readers by letting them know, clearly, what points Taaffe wants to make.

Taaffe's research pulls from a variety of primary and secondary sources. Not surprisingly much of his primary research relies on the *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion* (1894-1921), *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Fox* (1918) (Lincoln's Assistant Secretary of the Navy) and Welle's published diary. Taaffe creates a fine balance between the variety of personal and official papers, and the numerous available secondary sources.

Anyone interested in maritime history, the Civil War, or military history in general will find *Commanding Lincoln's Navy* useful. Rather than a summary of naval events throughout the Civil War, Taaffe weaves together the issues of seniority, politics and individual egos into an easy-to-reference format. The information may be too complex for a freshman survey course but upper-level undergraduate and graduate students will find this book useful in the classroom. Professionals as well as anyone interested in the often overlooked Union Navy will find this book interesting and informative.

*Amy Mitchell-Cook is an assistant professor at the University of West Florida. Her specializations include nautical archaeology and maritime history. She is currently working on a manuscript concerning early American shipwreck narratives.*