

Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Du Pont

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Review

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From Reformer to Relieved

Rear Admiral Samuel Du Pont

Rear Admiral Samuel Du Pont is best known for the abortive attack on Charleston, South Carolina in April 1863. That assault's failure, and the subsequent recriminations by Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles and Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox, cost Du Pont command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. Both Welles and Fox accused Du Pont of being anti-technology based on the Admiral's critical remarks concerning the Navy's newest warships, the Passaic Class monitors. In a biography that should appeal to academics and enthusiasts alike, Kevin J. Weddle, in **Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont**, successfully argues that Du Pont was not anti-technology and that he was one of the Navy's most influential Antebellum officers.

Weddle focuses his study almost exclusively on Du Pont's Navy career. After enlisting as an Ensign in December 1815, Du Pont spent nearly three years aboard warships in the Mediterranean Sea. Between other sea and shore duties, including long periods of time at home to care for his partially-invalid wife Sophie, Du Pont rose slowly through the ranks to become a Lieutenant in 1826 and then Commander in 1843, the same year he received command of the newly built brig *Perry*. However, illness forced him to give up *Perry* and it was not until September 1845 that Du Pont took his second command, the frigate *Congress*, to sea. The voyage from the East Coast to California proved Du Pont's seamanship by sailing around the treacherous Cape Horn.

Soon after reaching California in July 1846, Du Pont learned of the war against Mexico and took command of the eighteen-gun sloop *Cyane* for

independent operations along the Baja Peninsular. During the war, Du Pont conducted hit and run raids and joint operations with soldiers and Marines along the coast and blockade the Peninsular's numerous ports. While *Cyane* captured fourteen Mexican ships, the blockade proved unenforceable as the Navy assigned only two ships to the task. Du Pont's most notable action came during the relief of a small Marine and Navy garrison at San Jose del Cabo in February 1848. This operation, in which Du Pont personally led 102 handpicked sailors, officers, and Marines against upwards of 300 armed Mexicans, earned him wide-spread notoriety.

Although Du Pont won acclaim for his wartime actions, his most important service came while he was ashore. In the mid 1840s, he served on the board of officers who established the United States Naval Academy. In March 1851, Secretary of the Navy William A. Graham solicited opinions from a number of top officers on how best to modernize the Nation's coastal defense system and what role the Navy should take in defending America's shores. While most officers provided short, uninspired reports, Du Pont took the opportunity to argue that the Navy should act as the country's first line of defense by operating at sea in order to intercept hostile forces. To do this, Du Pont advocated modernizing the Navy by building steam-powered, propeller-driven, ships armed with shell-firing guns. While understanding that the United States could not hope to match European powers in terms of numbers, he believed that a smaller but technologically-superior force could defeat larger navies. Du Pont's report met with acclaim and further helped to solidify his position as one of the Navy's most forward thinking officers.

During the summer of 1854, Secretary of the Navy James C. Dobbin asked Du Pont to draft legislation that would restructure the Navy's Officer Corps. After much debate, Congress passed the bill that brought the Efficiency Board of 1855 into being. The Board represents the Navy first attempt at personnel reform by removing officers who could not perform their duty from active service. While the Navy still based promotions on seniority, the bill allowed promising officers more rapid promotions. The Board examined 250 of the 712 officers then in the Navy and recommended the removal of 201 men from active service. A political firestorm followed the Board's results and as the driving force and author of the Bill, Du Pont received most of the negative attention. In the end, Congress reinstated 62 of the 201 officers selected for removal by the Board.

After the furor of the Efficiency Board and Congress's seeming rebuff, Du Pont wanted nothing more than to return to sea. Weddle describes his subject as a man who cherished and protected his reputation above all else, and the attacks suffered after the Board's findings deeply affected Du Pont. To escape, he actively pursued command of *Minnesota*, that was then fitting out for a diplomatic trip to China. Du Pont received command and sailed for the Orient in July 1857. The trip was a remarkable success. China, as part of the Treaty of Tientsin, opened eleven ports to American merchant ships and Du Pont reclaimed some of his previous luster.

After his return from China, Du Pont received command of the Philadelphia Navy Yard. During this tour, Du Pont supported a number of experiments with steam engines, armor, and weapons including the Navy's first submarine, *Alligator*. At the outset of the Civil War, Du Pont received orders to Washington, DC, to act as the Chairman for the Blockade Board. The Board, comprised Major John G. Barnard of the Army Corps of Engineers and Navy Commander Charles Henry had two primary goals; determine how two squadrons could blockade the 3,000-plus miles of coastline and to study the best methods for seizing Southern ports for use as the blockading squadrons' logistical bases. The Board recommended that the Atlantic and Gulf Blockade Squadrons be split for better command and control. It also supported the taking a number of Southern ports through combined operations as coaling and provisioning facilities. Additionally, the Board furnished the Blockading Squadron commanders with detailed charts, including tide information, so that they could better carry out their duty.

In September 1861, even before the Board submitted all of its finding, Du Pont received command the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron and led Union forces in two major actions, the successful November 8, 1861 capture of Port Royal, South Carolina and the failed raid on Charleston, South Carolina. Before the second engagement, Welles and Fox told Du Pont that they wanted an all-Navy, all ironclad, operation against Charleston. Their reasons were twofold; first, they wanted their service to receive all the credit for taking the rebellion's epicenter and second they wanted to prove the power of the new *Passaic* Class ironclads.

Du Pont, a strong advocate of joint operations, resisted a Navy only assault. He felt that a combined attack was the only way to victory û something he put into numerous letters to Fox. Du Pont also found the *Passaic* Class wanting. While capable of fighting ironclads and blockade runners in calm seas, they

drew too much water and lacked the speed and maneuverability needed to cope with Charleston's tidal currents. Du Pont also had doubts about their armament. The *Passaics* mounted one XI inch and one XV inch gun in a revolving turret. Each ship, therefore, had to stock two types of ammunition so if one gun malfunctioned its shells could not be used in the other cannon. The XV inch gun itself caused Du Pont great concern. Its barrel could not fit through the firing port, so designers attached a chimney-like apparatus around its muzzle to funnel the smoke away from the turret. This, in turn, made the weapon difficult to load. In fact, the XV inch gun could fire only once every seven minutes, or only eight times an hour. While Du Pont believed that the *Passaics* had a place in the Navy, he believed that they would prove ineffective against Charleston's 200-plus guns. Du Pont went so far as to prove his assertion by ordering two separate attacks on a small, eight-gun fort called Fort McAllister. Both assaults failed and in doing so helped to prove that ironclads were not the answer to neutralizing fixed fortifications. Despite Du Pont's concerns about the *Passaics* and their proven inability to cope with even a small fortification, Welles and Fox insisted on an all-Navy, all ironclad, attack. Du Pont knew it would fail and on April 7, 1863, he proved himself correct.

While Weddle finds Du Pont's planning and conduct faulty, the author demonstrates that only through pure luck could the assault have succeeded. Du Pont's assertions concerning the guns and the ironclads' effectiveness against forts proved accurate. Even the ships' commanding officers found significant fault with their ironclads. However, because Welles and Fox had staked so much of the Navy's shipbuilding capacity and reputation on these monitors, they could not politically afford this defeat so Du Pont became their scapegoat. They accused him of being timid, anti-technology, and failing to use the ironclads to their best effect. The prideful Du Pont responded aggressively to these accusations and, in doing so, assured his relief and fall into ignominy.

Kevin Weddle effectively argues that Du Pont was not timid, anti-technology, or anti-ironclad. Welles' and Fox's accusations, asserts the author, stem from an attempt to deflect blame from themselves and their monitors. **Lincoln's Tragic Admiral** rightfully depicts Du Pont as a revolutionary figure within the Navy — an officer whose desire to improve the service led to some of the most important 19th Century reforms. If not for the politicking of the Navy Department's senior leadership, it is likely that Du Pont would now be remembered for his groundbreaking work that helped the Navy move from the age of sail and into the Industrial Age and not for his failed

assault on Charleston.

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