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Book Review by Arthur Herman

FROM SEA TO SHINING SEA

Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II, by Paul Kennedy.
Yale University Press, 544 pages, \$37.50

Who Can Hold the Sea: The U.S. Navy in the Cold War, 1945–1960, by James D. Hornfischer.
Bantam Books, 480 pages, \$36

To Rule the Waves: How Control of the World's Oceans Shapes the Fate of the Superpowers, by Bruce D. Jones.
Scribner, 400 pages, \$28 (cloth), \$18.99 (paper)

The Blue Age: How the U.S. Navy Created Global Prosperity—And Why We're in Danger of Losing It, by Gregg Easterbrook.
Public Affairs, 304 pages, \$30

Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans, by James Stavridis.
Penguin Press, 384 pages, \$19 (paper)



Cartoon from the New York Herald Tribune, 1943

“Already Americans can enforce respect for their flag, soon they will be able to make it feared.... They are born to rule the seas, as the Romans were to conquer the world.”

—Alexis de Tocqueville,
Democracy in America (1835)

THOUGH THE REPUBLIC WAS BARELY half a century old in 1835—and just a mono-coastal country facing onto the Atlantic—Tocqueville had no doubt that

America was destined to be a maritime nation, ready to compete with the most powerful maritime empire in history, Great Britain. It was American seafarers who carried nine tenths of the goods from the Western Hemisphere to Europe and three quarters of Europe’s exports to the Americas—while English ships in New York Harbor, he observed, were “a pitiful handful.” “Seafaring and sea-trading,” he declared, “brought out the heroic in the American character,” its dangers and

uncertainties drawing the typical American into “obeying an impulse in his nature.” That sea-tested heroism made America “a land of wonders” and would give the United States its future spirit.

Nearly two centuries later, historians, scholars, and policymakers are rediscovering the importance of the sea in American history and culture. Sea power was not only vital to American history in the 20th century, including World War II and the Cold War,



but will be more important than ever in the 21st century.

We find ourselves today tested by a powerful geopolitical rival—China—for control of the world's oceans. This testing is about more than military power and the relative strength of the U.S. Navy vis-à-vis our Chinese adversary, as significant as those issues are. It's also about the importance of global maritime trade for the future of the U.S. economy—one can even say for the future of civilization and freedom.

THREE NEW BOOKS ON SEA POWER—Paul Kennedy's *Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II*, James D. Hornfischer's *Who Can Hold the Sea: The U.S. Navy in the Cold War 1945–1960*, and James Stavridis's *Sea Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans*—help us to rethink America's role in the world. They also show how the virtues Tocqueville identified with his ideal American can still translate into leadership of the democratic maritime nations in peacetime, as well as in war.

Each book fosters an appreciation of how command of the seas is crucial for acquiring and maintaining superpower status. Naval strategists and politicians in the British Isles understood this, going back to William Pitt the Elder and even Sir Walter Raleigh, who wrote in 1629 that “whosoever commands the seas commands the trade; whosoever commands the trade commands the riches of the world, and consequently the world itself.”

Alfred Thayer Mahan, an American professor at the Naval War College, translated this insight into modern terms in his classic, *The Influence of Seapower Upon History* (1890). Captain Mahan of the U.S. Navy understood that sea power was about more than great navies. Rising to the challenge of being a great nation meant turning America's extensive Atlantic and Pacific coasts into a series of entrance ramps into the world's ocean-going trade, and then dominating that trade so extensively that America's supremacy could never be challenged or reversed—while building a navy able to protect those sea lanes wherever they were threatened.

First as navy secretary and then as president, Theodore Roosevelt took up Mahan's challenge. Roosevelt used Mahan's insights to promote the creation of a modern American battle fleet able to cruise the oceans and crush the last remnants of Spain's empire in the Western Hemisphere. Two other rising power rivals, imperial Germany and Japan, took up the Mahan challenge and devoted themselves to building strong navies. But America's

combination of maritime geography and industrial power would give the United States what it needed not only to fight but to prevail decisively in two world wars.

WORLD WAR II HISTORIANS HAVE ALWAYS known that the United States Navy was a central actor in the Pacific Theater, from Pearl Harbor to Midway and Leyte Gulf. Yale historian Paul Kennedy, author of the classic *Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987), takes this general proposition a step further in his new, beautifully illustrated book (with original watercolors by maritime artist Ian Marshall). Kennedy points out that victory in World War II rested with whoever commanded access to the world's oceans, which was a matter not just of naval vessels but also maritime capacity to ship and transport goods and manpower overseas. In Kennedy's view, World War II was fought and decided “on every sea,” but especially in the waters of the Atlantic and Pacific. Despite the image we have of American G.I.s fighting a land war in France and Italy, and Marines slog-ging it out with Japanese soldiers in Iwo Jima and the Philippines, those soldiers would not have been on those beaches without America's overwhelming superiority at sea.

This was not a predestined outcome. In 1939 the U.S. was one of six major sea powers, alongside Germany, Japan, Italy, France, and, above all, Great Britain. Since Theodore Roosevelt, American presidents had absorbed the idea that sea power was the key to world power. But Great Britain—the power from whose example Mahan had drawn his historical and strategic lessons—still dominated the waves. The most important challenges it faced at sea came from Germans, Japanese, and, in the Mediterranean, Italians.

But by 1945 the United States Navy was without doubt the most powerful in the world, with the once-dominant Royal Navy steadily falling astern. Twenty-five years later the Royal Navy would shrink to a shadow of its former self, with only three carriers instead of the 12 it held in 1950, and half the number of destroyers. The U.S. Navy, once the “second service,” dominated every major sea and ocean.

America's newfound dominance came with the unleashing of its industrial might. One of Kennedy's best examples of what our maritime-industrial complex could achieve is the *Essex*-class carriers, which transported American naval air power across the vast stretches of the Pacific with decisive effect. The carriers were not only faster than their pre-Pearl Harbor predecessors but possessed an immense operating range. They also carried more combat aircraft: 36 Grumman Hellcat

fighters, 36 Curtiss Helldiver dive bombers, and 18 Grumman Avenger torpedo bombers. Many of those torpedo bombers were built at the General Motors facilities in New Jersey. The naval projection of airpower simply overwhelmed the Japanese in a series of lopsided victories that cleared the skies over the Pacific and prepared the amphibious landings that brought the war directly to Japan.

Kennedy also hails the smaller, *Casablanca*-class carriers designed and built by the construction engineer genius Henry Kaiser. Kaiser had built Hoover Dam but, before starting on his famed Liberty ships (1941-45), was so ignorant of nautical matters that he didn't know the bow from the prow. Between November 1942 and July 1943, Kaiser yards at Vancouver, Washington launched 50 *Casablanca*-class escort carriers. By war's end, they'd launch more than 125. Faster than their bigger *Essex*-class counterparts, Kaiser's “baby flat tops” provided essential air support for operations across the blue waters of the Pacific, from Tarawa to Iwo Jima and Okinawa.

THE STORY IS SIMILAR FOR THE MASS production of submarines and destroyers, as well as the landing craft that brought soldiers and Marines from North Africa to the home islands of Japan. None of this would have been sustainable, however, without the logistical support of a vastly expanded merchant marine. By 1944 American yards were turning out 50 new cargo vessels a day, each ready to carry food, equipment, planes, tanks, and oil cargos anywhere the Allies were fighting.

The long-term impact of this rapid expansion was significant. It is astonishing that when Mahan wrote his *Influence of Seapower* there was no U.S. merchant marine worth mentioning. The two world wars changed the landscape. Kaiser's Liberty ships laid the foundation for an American civilian shipbuilding industry and merchant marine that would only gradually be overtaken by South Korea, Japan, and China.

Kennedy dates the big change from 1943. That was the year the tide of war decisively shifted to the Allies. It was also the year, Kennedy writes, “in which the sheer productive muscle of the United States...at last realized itself in all the arenas of the world war.”

“It was not just a story of more and more warships,” Kennedy adds; “it was also a tale of a new international order emerging” from U.S. shipyards and ports. America not only won the war but came to dominate the peace that followed. America didn't depend on an overseas empire but on cooperation with other nations in a vast trading network, pro-



tected and defended by the U.S. Navy—arguably the most powerful military force in the world. By 1945, it had grown to nearly 1,200 major combatant ships, including 99 aircraft carriers, eight “fast” battleships, and ten prewar “old” battleships. It could also count on 377 destroyers, 361 frigates (there were none in the U.S. Navy before the war), 232 submarines, and over 2,500 amphibious craft (another category of U.S. naval vessel that didn’t exist before the war). Even after 1,896 naval vessels were moved into inactive reserve with demobilization, the fleet was large enough to offer overwhelming global dominance.

THE LATE NAVAL HISTORIAN JAMES Hornfischer’s final work, *Who Can Hold the Sea: The U.S. Navy in the Cold War 1945–1960*, takes up the story in the immediate postwar years. Hornfischer describes how admirals who had won World War II—like Chester Nimitz and William Halsey—emphasized the importance of maintaining that dominance to Congress and the Truman Administration, even though America’s new opponent, the USSR, did not aspire to naval power. The war had proved that the mere existence of the Atlantic and Pacific oceans could no longer safeguard America. Still, properly utilized, they provided rich opportunities for the U.S. to dominate the waves in future.

Like Tocqueville, Nimitz understood the importance of the sea to the American character, even to American exceptionalism. Hornfischer quotes the admiral at the National Geographic Society: “Sea power has its roots deep in the core of our country.” Those roots, Nimitz continued, “draw nourishment from the farms and ranches that feed our men. They derive from our mines, our logging camps, our mills and factories. There is scarcely a village in the geographical center of the continent which does not contribute in some way to American sea power.”

Drawing from the experience of World War II, Nimitz warned that “[n]o nation can wage successful war which fails to utilize its industrial capacity to the fullest. It is not enough to have a great industrial plant. That plant must be mobilized, supplied, and made an integral part of the war machine.” A navy that wasn’t fully supported by that manufacturing and shipbuilding base wouldn’t be able to do its job in the postwar era.

Although Nimitz and his fellow admirals understood what was needed to meet a future threat, it was James Forrestal, the wartime navy secretary and the nation’s first secretary of defense, who understood the magnitude of the danger the Soviet Union would pose. As Hornfischer describes, Forrestal turned George

Kennan’s famous Long Telegram (1946) about the nature of the Soviet threat into an action plan for shaping America’s newly merged armed services into an effective deterrent force, starting with the U.S. Navy—despite the 80% reduction from its 1946 expenditures.

Forrestal, Hornfischer writes, “was willing to fight not only for Nimitz’s vision of sea power as deriving from every activity in American productive life, but for a vision of America’s role...as both leader and organizer in a fractious world arena.” Forrestal saw the army and navy as “complementary assets.” Their continuing competition for funding and resources in the new Defense Department would produce original thinking and enterprise, “breakthroughs that never would have seen the light of day had one side been able to bulldoze the other.”

THE STORY OF HOW THE NAVY TURNED competition into strategic and technological breakthroughs occupies the rest of Hornfischer’s book. A quartet of heroes emerges from his narrative, starting with Admiral Arleigh Burke, the navy’s chief of naval operations (CNO) from 1955 to 1961, who pushed hard for the technologies that would maintain the navy’s dominance at the global level, and Admiral Richard Connolly, who convinced his superiors of the importance of an American naval presence in the Mediterranean as Britain steadily retreated from its global commitments.

Then we have Hyman Rickover, the ultimate outsider and cantankerous genius behind the creation of the USS *Nautilus*, and for more than 30 years the overseer of America’s nuclear submarine fleet. His uncompromising attitude toward superiors and subordinates alike (job candidates interviewed in his office, including future president Jimmy Carter, often found that Rickover had shortened the front legs of their chair to increase their discomfort) and his maxim, “Good ideas are not adopted automatically; they must be driven with courageous impatience,” transformed America’s submarine fleet into a major strategic asset—and established a safety record for nuclear power that became the envy of the world.

The book’s fourth hero is Admiral William Raborn, who was in charge of the Polaris program, the world’s first submarine-launched ballistic missile. As Hornfischer describes him, Raborn was as driven as Rickover but more beloved than feared by subordinates. He was careful to build a strong working relationship with his staffers’ families and make them feel part of the team: “Wives and children were given to understand that Polaris would open a

new capability in national defense, that it was for their individual protection.” Raborn’s success—the Polaris program took less than five years to complete—was helped immensely by the blank check CNO Burke gave him to cut through bureaucratic inertia.

Ironically, it was during former five-star general Dwight D. Eisenhower’s presidency that the U.S. Navy emerged as a major player at the strategic table. By June 1956 the navy numbered 670,000 personnel, with 404 combatant ships and 22 aircraft carriers, including new supercarriers like USS *Forrestal*. For Admiral Burke, “The war in Korea revealed that America could do nothing on the far side of an ocean without control of the sea.” “Every U.S. airfield and U.S. division stationed overseas,” he told Congress, “is a vote of confidence in the U.S. Navy’s ability to supply and maintain it.” Mahan’s vision had become institutionalized as part of America’s permanent defense posture.

By the end of *Who Can Hold the Sea* we can see the shape of the U.S. Navy that would impose a naval blockade on Cuba, conduct a transoceanic war in Vietnam, and hold a trump card in the nuclear arms race with the Soviet Union—as America’s fleet of nuclear-armed ballistic missile submarines (SSBNs) became the most versatile and stealthy part of its nuclear triad.

HORNFISCHER DIED BEFORE HE COULD write of the rebuilding of U.S. naval supremacy under Ronald Reagan in the aftermath of Vietnam and in the face of growing Soviet naval aspirations. Two shifts in military strategy allowed America to win the Cold War. The first was Reagan’s Strategic Defense Initiative, launched in 1983. It convinced Mikhail Gorbachev that the USSR couldn’t engage in a high-tech weapons race without major economic and political changes. Attempting these changes ultimately led to the Soviet Union’s collapse.

The other, less heralded, shift was Sea Plan 2000, the American Navy’s response to the Soviet’s bid for maritime supremacy. The post-Vietnam Soviet challenge had led the Carter Administration to adopt a defensive crouch from Latin America to Africa, choosing to deploy the navy’s dwindling assets to guard America’s Mediterranean and Atlantic approaches. Sea Plan 2000 proposed instead an aggressive strategy, with the U.S. pushing the envelope where it was outnumbered (by 1980 the Soviet sub fleet had grown to alarming proportions) and outclassed.

At a dinner in June 1977, future secretary of the navy John Lehman (like Forrestal, a former Wall Street banker), navy secretary Graham Clayton, counsel to the Senate

Armed Services Committee James Woolsey, and military writer Bing West sketched the strategy on a paper napkin. It marked the rebirth of the U.S. Navy's global dominance, usually described as "the 600-ship Navy." After his election, Reagan tasked Lehman with implementing the strategy.

Lehman got as far as 594 ships. But those ships included next-generation Aegis cruisers and destroyers with advanced antimissile systems, and Ohio-class nuclear submarines. The navy also built more *Nimitz*-class aircraft carriers. By 1985 it was clear to the Soviets that they could not win the naval arms race. Once again, America's industrial shipbuilding might had come to the rescue of America's sea power dominance.

That dominance suffered eclipse with the end of the Cold War. Budget cutbacks starting in the 1990s became an inevitable part of cashing in on the post-Cold War "peace dividend." Though the navy remained large and resilient enough to support major overseas operations like Desert Storm and Iraqi Freedom, it moved to the sidelines as a strategic weapon. As for its Marine Corps, it found itself drawn away from its expeditionary warfare role—"the projectile fired by the Navy"—to take over the burden of counterinsurgency.

THE WORLD, MEANWHILE, WAS WATCHING the rise of a new challenger to America's seapower dominance—namely, China—on a scale previous strategic thinkers would find hard to contemplate. Aristotle was the first to propose that the oceans are one. Centuries of subsequent exploration turned theoretical speculation into empirical fact. It was therefore inevitable that the fundamentals of sea power would grow to a global scale, first through great empires, then through the economic system that rules today, which renders the world's nations as dependent as ever on the flow of trade by sea.

Two recent books try to address how the U.S. should adjust itself to this global scale. Both Bruce D. Jones's *To Rule the Waves* and Gregg Easterbrook's *The Blue Age* rightly worry about the decline of U.S. sea power and the rise of China as a maritime and naval power. But both wrongly think the answer is to be found in a progressive globalist agenda.

Since 2005 Chinese leadership has focused on building a merchant fleet second to none, alongside its commitment to become a naval power ready to challenge its American counterpart. Today China's merchant marine is the largest in the world, with the port of Shanghai handling 40 million container drops a year compared to just 9 million for its closest U.S. rival, Los Angeles. Nearby Jiangnan shipyard,

which opened in 2008, built more than 206 cargo vessels in 2021, more than one fifth of the total global output, as well as getting to work on China's third aircraft carrier.

This is part of a comprehensive strategy for Beijing. It is the maritime component of China's "One Belt, One Road" policy, a re-drawing of the map of the world with Chinese characteristics, e.g., dotted by ports built with Chinese money and Chinese facilities servicing the Chinese merchant fleet as well as ships and submarines for the Chinese navy. What Beijing has carried out in the South China Sea is now fully underway as far away as South America, the west coast of Africa, Mogadishu on the horn of Africa, Pakistan, and even at the port of Haifa in Israel.

IN THE FACE OF THIS CHALLENGE, THE Brookings Institution's Jones demands that the U.S. Navy mobilize its resources to the utmost—to fight climate change. *The New Republic's* Easterbrook advocates a similarly disastrous shift of focus, staking our future not on a strong navy but on reconcili-

Whether global cop or shining city on a hill, the United States can't escape its maritime destiny.

ation with China and increased world governance of the seas. Underlying both Jones's and Easterbrook's answers to China's threat is the larger mistake that liberals usually make, of assuming that geopolitical competition is the result of misunderstanding and not deeper, irreconcilable disagreements and conflicts.

A more conservative perspective would be that there are sometimes differences between great states that can be managed, but not massaged away. It's the duty of the statesman and strategist to devise ways to manage those differences, including with the use of force. What China wants from its maritime grand strategy, and what we and our democratic allies will need from ours, are two very different things.

The proof is what's happening with Taiwan. If there's any place where the American ability to not just project power but to *fight a sea war* is at stake, it's Taiwan. As the U.S. and China increasingly square off over the fate of the island nation (which supplies 90% of the world's high-end semiconductors), the question of whether the United States has the means (not to mention the will) to pre-

vent a Chinese blockade or invasion becomes a question about the future of the entire global economic system. Yet Easterbrook barely mentions Taiwan; Jones grasps the naval stakes involved, but not the larger economic ones.

ADMIRAL JAMES STAVRIDIS'S *SEA Power: The History and Geopolitics of the World's Oceans* contains a much clearer understanding of what sea power is about, and what's ultimately at risk. Stavridis provides a *tour de horizon* of the world's major oceans, starting with the Pacific and ending with the Arctic, the most recent arena of great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China. He explains how trade and navies shaped the history of nations since (in the case of the Mediterranean) the Phoenicians and King Minos. Each chapter also supplies an account of how America became a power operating in sometimes remote waters, often against its inclinations—usually to support allies against tyranny, but increasingly (as in the case of the South China Sea) to protect our own national interests.

But the heart of the book is Stavridis's last chapter on "America and the Oceans," in which he is as forthright as Forrestal, or even Mahan: "National power derives from engagement via the world's oceans along three key vectors: production (which leads to the need for international trade and commerce), shipping (both merchant and naval), and colonies and allies spread across the globe, forming a network of bases from which to project sea power." This summary of Mahan defines the parameters within which America-as-superpower must operate, arising from its dependence on global trade.

For example, our 133,000 kilometers of coastline, writes Stavridis, "afford immediate access to the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic oceans, as well as the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea to the south." This is "an enviable position for developing and exploiting sea power," both as defensive shield and springboard to power projection. Great American statesmen understood this, from Alexander Hamilton to Theodore Roosevelt, and from Franklin Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan.

Although Stavridis acknowledges many international law of the sea issues (he is concerned, for example, about the threat of malign actors to the undersea cables on which the internet and cyber depend), he never wavers in asserting that sea power is ultimately about naval power. "The United States is a global maritime power. This is as true today as it has been since the beginning of the Re-



public.” “If the United States is to prosper and lead in this century,” Stavridis writes, “we need a coherent national strategy”—one could even say a blue-water strategy that also keeps us out of expensive and protracted land wars. A navy that shrinks to less than 350 “significant battle force ships” imperils that mission.

THAT MISSION HASN’T CHANGED WITH the end of “endless wars” and a scaling back of America’s role as global cop. After Iraq and Afghanistan, a growing element of conservative opinion understandably demands a more modest role for the United States in the world. It is impatient with open-ended commitments to supporting a distant land war in Ukraine, or a future war in the Taiwan Strait. The “Little America” wing of the Republican Party has a point, but it must recognize that the key to keeping the United States out of distant conflicts is a navy that’s large enough, flexible enough, and powerful enough to keep those threats away from our shores by dealing with them *in situ* when they first arise. If the United States and NATO had had a maritime presence in the Black Sea, would Putin’s invasion of Ukraine still have happened?

Whether global cop or shining city on a hill, the United States can’t escape its maritime destiny. As Stavridis explains, “This means supporting a reasonably sized civilian merchant marine, a powerful capable navy, a robust shipbuilding industry, a competent fishing fleet; efficient posts and infrastructure;

ice-breaking capability for the Arctic, and the ability to conduct broad area surveillance of the ocean approaches to our nation.”

That’s a tall order. The Trump Administration tried to tackle at least one of those requirements, namely navy shipbuilding. The Future Sea Force plan released by the Trump Department of Defense in 2020 attempted to restore American naval supremacy through its goal of a 355-ship navy. Yet that plan had to rely on a maritime industry, both naval and commercial, which has significantly less capacity than the world’s other leading shipbuilding nations—South Korea, Japan, and, ominously, China.

When Reagan became president there were 22 large shipyards in the United States. Today there are fewer than ten. The U.S. contributes less than 1% of global commercial shipbuilding by tonnage. Only six shipyards—five of them belonging to either General Dynamics or Huntington Ingalls Industries—are able to construct large warships for the U.S. Navy.

Even so, in 2020 the Defense Department delivered no less than ten ships. It was a testament to what can be accomplished even with a sharply diminished shipbuilding capacity—and a harbinger of what can be done with a modest expansion of that capacity.

STAVRIDIS IN EFFECT RETURNS US TO where we started. In the end, the capacity to reverse the decline of U.S. maritime and naval power rests on the force of political will as an expression of national

character. As Tocqueville recognized, and Mahan reaffirmed, that character has been built “around the instinct for commerce, bold enterprise in the pursuit of gain, and a keen scent for the trails that lead to it”—a character around which an American maritime future can be reimagined and rebuilt.

“No other nation in the world possesses vaster, deeper, or more secure ports for commerce than the Americans,” Tocqueville explained. Yet it’s a mistake to describe Americans’ surge in seagoing enterprise as a matter of geographic advantage. It depends instead, he wrote, “on purely intellectual and moral qualities”:

The American...sets sail while the storm is still rumbling; by night as well as by day he spreads full sails to the wind; he repairs storm damage as he goes; and when at last he draws near the end of his voyage, he flies toward the coast as if he could already see his port.

Are we still the people the astute Frenchman saw as destined to rule the seas? Hard to say. But by rediscovering the sea’s importance for our past and future, we can find out who we are and who we can be.

Arthur Herman is a Pulitzer Prize finalist in history, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and the author, most recently, of The Viking Heart: How Scandinavians Conquered the World (Houghton Mifflin).

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