

A Global Forum for Naval Historical Scholarship

International Journal of Naval History

August 2008

Volume 7 Number 2

Howard J. Fuller, *Clad in Iron: The American Civil War and the Challenge of British Naval Power*. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2008. 285 pp. Notes, bibliography, index, and photo essay. Forward by Robert J. Schneller, Jr.

Review by John T. Kuehn, Ph.D.

U.S. Army Command and General Staff College

Howard J. Fuller has produced an ambitious and well-researched book that fills a gap in the literature on ironclad sea power during the American Civil War. All too often, he argues, this discussion is either a purely American discussion of naval operations during the Civil War or an international discussion focused on the Royal Navy's ironclad strategy of the period. Fuller claims that there has been very little discussion of the dynamics of how these two discussions interacted. This does not mean he focuses on a purely bi-national approach, but rather that he brings the interplay of European great power political and maritime calculations into his analysis.

In taking on this task he delves into the difficult area of framing force structure and design decisions within a dynamic strategic and political context. This approach takes Fuller's reader into the bureaucratic world of organizational history and beyond the simpler levels of analysis that often center on individual decision makers. Fuller uses a narrative approach that helps the reader understand the larger themes and arguments in play supplemented by occasional summaries. Fuller divides the book into three distinct parts that have to do with

the nexus of sea power in Anglo-U.S. relations. He caps each of the three sections with one or more summaries that refresh the reader on the larger issues. This is needed because the chapters often go into extreme detail about the flow of events.

Fuller employs the useful modern strategic concept of deterrence to frame the three major parts in the book. In the first part “Britannia” deters the United States/Union government up until the Battle of Hampton Roads (March 1862). This is captured best in Fuller’s discussion of the humiliation of Lincoln’s administration during the *Trent* affair when two captured Confederate diplomats had to be released. The perception, by the Union leaders, of superior British sea power explains the Union response. Fuller also shows how the potential for an Anglo-American conflict, and its attendant requirement for the Royal Navy to project power against Northern ports, drove British ironclad designs. He also shows how this impacted the Royal Navy’s ongoing programs vis-à-vis the French ironclad program, the desire to economize naval expenditures, and the requirements of policing a maritime empire.

The second part focuses upon the intrusion of reality into the strategic calculations of both Great Britain and the Union—the consequences of the ironclad duel at Hampton Roads. This is perhaps the strongest section of the book since Fuller shows to best effect here the integration of the two previously disparate ironclad discussions of the existing historiography. What is clear, and what may be surprising for many readers, is how clearly Fuller shows that it was the threat from Great Britain driving the ironclad design debate in the Navy Department of the United States and not, really, the Confederate threat or the needs of the conflict at hand. In other words, monitors were built to deter and dissuade Great Britain, both before and after the fight with the *Virginia (Merrimac)*.

The third section shows how the fortunes and misfortunes of war played out in the execution of the Union ironclad building program. Fuller demonstrates how the British came to understand that the balance of power had changed, but only in a limited sense. They could not dictate to the Americans as they did during the *Trent* affair, but their larger fears of being vulnerable to power projection and defeat by the Union Navy turned out to be baseless. Britannia *was* deterred by Union ironclads from interfering in the Civil War, but her lifeblood, the security of her maritime empire, was little affected. The larger and more important issue

of balancing the fleet for home defense (presumably against the French) and policing the Empire's maritime lines of communication again became the proper focus for the Admiralty. In this way, Fuller gives a very good preview—from this earlier time—of just the sorts of strategic and technological debates that would occur again about what to build for the Royal Navy in the period prior to the Great War.

Fuller's detailed narrative approach, while effectively serving the interests of his thesis, leads to the book's most significant weakness—its failure to really address what was taking place with the actual Confederate naval threat. This is a peripheral complaint since Fuller has shown that this threat, after Hampton Roads, was considered by the Union to be minimal. At times the book assumes a very high level of knowledge about events, ships' names, and naval theory. Nonetheless, such a discussion might have added to the value of the book. Regardless, prospective readers—especially military historians—are advised not to shy away from this worthwhile history.