

International Journal of Naval History

August 2009

Volume 8 Number 2

Ari Hoogenboom, *Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008. 408 pp. 9 halftones, 10 line drawings.

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Over a thousand pages long, the 1896 *Naval History of the United States*, by Willis J. Abbot, typically does not even mention Fox. “The story of the naval operations of the civil war is a record of wonderful energy and inventive skill in improving and building war vessels,” the story goes, and by the end of the conflict “the navy of the United States consisted of six hundred and seventy-one vessels. No nation of the world had such a naval power. The stern lessons of the great war had taught shipbuilders that wooden ships were a thing of the past. The little ‘Monitor’ had by one afternoon’s battle proved to all the sovereigns of Europe that their massive ships were useless,” (685-7). Of course the perception here is deterministic; it was a matter of American ‘destiny’ that the North would triumph, or even that the Union Navy would become a leading ironclad power—whatever that meant. Heroic naval admirals like Farragut, Porter and Du Pont seemed to operate under orders issued from behind a mysterious curtain back in Washington, D.C. We don’t see those hidden, historic actors who actually designed and launched the fine naval force Union officers wielded throughout the Civil War (often with mixed results). But, as Ari Hoogenboom shows us in this excellent biography of the Assistant Secretary of the U.S. Navy, Gustavus Vasa Fox, it was not inevitable that the Union Navy would actually succeed in its various tasks, or that American naval history would evolve as it did. If nothing else, the quiet, persistent decision-making of this man-behind-the-curtain was itself at odds with a variety of factors and actors.

This means that the most remarkable aspect of this biography of Fox is that it has taken over 140 years to be written, while those of Abraham Lincoln are practically countless, and accounts of Union R. Adm. David Farragut or Confederate Capt. Raphael Semmes, for example, continue to remain popular today. And yet Fox was the “man most responsible for the U.S. Navy’s performance in the Civil War”, the veritable “chief of naval operations (a position that did not officially exist until the twentieth century),” (ix).

As the author demonstrates, Fox was the essential mediator and facilitator between the political will and the naval means of the North. He was able to quickly grasp the fundamental issues involved at almost every level of the American Civil War; a great listener as well as smooth talker. Much to the envy and dismay of many Union naval officers, only Fox had the ear of Lincoln as well as the supreme confidence of the Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles. Many of the North's most important victories by sea and river were the result of his vision, planning and implementation. From the beginning, it was Fox's scheme to relieve the Union garrison at Fort Sumter, and thereby satisfy Lincoln's wish not to surrender any more Federal installations to the Secession Crisis sweeping the nation. (Because of this attempt it was the South which fired 'the first shot of the war'—against Sumter—on April 12, 1861.) Even before his appointment as Assistant Secretary that August, Fox had outlined to Welles the specific needs of a vast Union blockade of the Confederacy, from '90-Day' gunboats to new screw sloops to coal depots and supply bases. The subsequent combined-arms attack on Port Royal, Georgia (which surrendered November 7, 1861) was a decisive, crucial victory for the North—at a time when the Army of the Potomac, by contrast, did nothing. The very next day, however, the infamous *Trent* Affair began, ending with a humiliating British ultimatum to Washington. The Federal blockade was obviously not only vulnerable to whatever ironclads the South could improvise—namely the C.S.S. *Virginia*—but to the Royal Navy. When Fox personally witnessed the duel of the *Virginia* against the U.S.S. *Monitor* (March 9, 1862), he saw the need for greater, 15-inch guns—mountable only on monitors—to neutralize further threats to the blockade from any direction. He also stepped up Union naval operations by advocating further direct assaults against fortified Southern ports—especially New Orleans, Mobile, Wilmington and Charleston. Here, it seemed, only monitors could successfully run harbour gauntlets and compel the surrender of cities beyond. It did not work out that way. Simple floating obstructions and the threat of mines kept Union ironclads out of Charleston harbour on April 7, 1863 and for the remainder of the war; while only Farragut's suicide run *through* a minefield at Mobile Bay (August 5, 1864) turned a potentially catastrophic repulse into a glorious Yankee victory. Having committed himself to faith in the monitors and their eccentric but dedicated civilian inventor, John Ericsson, the Assistant Secretary often bore the brunt of criticism of 'machines' from disgruntled naval officers. Yet time proved Fox right. Ironclads represented the frontline of American defence from foreign intervention during the Civil War; only 15-inch monitor guns could penetrate any armor afloat. Sent on a diplomatic mission to Russia in the summer of 1866, Fox steamed a double-turreted monitor, the U.S.S. *Miantonomoh*, right into Portsmouth harbour, England, to underscore that point. Everyone present could not help but take note.

Exactly *why*, therefore, Fox has taken so long to emerge from the shadows is an essential question that Hoogenboom does not ask. There is a suggestion on page 310 that had he, like Adm. David Dixon Porter, written his own *Naval History of the Civil War* (still in print today) his own, central role in that history would have appeared different. Perhaps the point is Fox didn't need to. "So far as my administration is concerned," he wrote, "I should wish no credit at the expense of truth from whatsoever source it emanates." Fox recognized that "exaggeration may be a necessary device of war, but not of history."

In this respect, Hoogenboom's biography of Gustavus Fox is arguably the most important work on the naval history of the American Civil War this past year. His research is superb, and significantly improves upon the two-volume *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox*, edited by Robert Means Thompson and Richard Wainwright (in 1918-19), which researchers familiar with the Fox Papers at the New York Historical Society, for example, know is woefully incomplete. Drawing upon an impressive array of primary sources, the author is to be commended for doing his subject a justice long overdue.



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