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Donald L. Canney, **Arica Squadron: The U.S. Navy and the Slave Trade, 1842-1861**. Washington DC: Potomac Books, 2006. xiv & 277, illustrated, maps, photographs and drawings.

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The troubled history of the United States Navy Africa Squadron is at heart a simple question of supply and demand. As long as states in the New World wanted to buy slaves, because slavery was legal, and African rulers were willing to exchange people for profit and power, any attempt to stop the trans-Atlantic trade route carrying system that linked them was perfectly hopeless. There is an analogy with current attempts to stop drug trafficking. While there is a supply side willing to sell, and significant demand, the trade will persist. Action to stop the traffic only raises the price of the commodity, and encourages illegal, violent action.

The supply side was stopped by the expansion of British colonial rule, while the end of the Brazilian slave trading followed domestic social change which removed the plantation owners from political power. The same thing happened in the United States, albeit in a more violent manner in 1861-65, which left Spanish Cuba, the last bastion of slavery, isolated and vulnerable to British pressure. Not quite clear is how that experience translates into 'lessons' for modern navies.

Two hundred years ago the British abolished their slave trade, and having achieved an unprecedented degree of naval control at Trafalgar, spent the next sixty years trying to stop everyone else trading in slaves. The campaign was costly in lives and treasure; it was waged at sea, and in diplomatic circles. It continued despite the covert or overt opposition of every other major maritime power. Despite each of these nations making slaving a crime, it was piracy under American Law and the penalty was death, few acted. As Donald Canney makes clear the big issue was the right to stop and search the merchant ships of other nations that were suspected of carrying slaves. The United States was the only nation that refused a reciprocal arrangement with Britain. This meant the British could not stop a slave ship if it flew the American flag, legitimately or otherwise, even if they could see it was loaded with slaves. Memories of the maritime 'outrages' that had preceded the War of 1812 had become a basic element of the national myth, and this enabled pro-slavery politicians to block such any such agreement. The inevitable result was that most of the slave ships used north of the equator were American built, usually Baltimore schooners, often with American officers, and a complex set of

interlocking national registry documents that enabled several flags to be deployed. The trade was heavily capitalised, highly profitable, and very well organised.

Forceful British action exposed the fraudulent use of the American flag by slavers, and embarrassed the Van Buren administration into acting. The Africa Squadron was set up to avoid conceding the right of search to the British, not to stop the slave trade. It was never given the whole-hearted support of the government, or the law courts, which released most ships seized without actual human cargo. Under such demoralising circumstances it is a wonder that anything was done, but these were professional officers, and they did their duty even if their sympathies were pro-slavery.

Only in 1859-1861 was the squadron given the steam ships, the advanced base and the political support it needed to be effective, resulting in a large number of captures. This action followed the humiliating episode of a slaver landing her cargo openly in Georgia in 1858. The Buchanan administration was forced to act and it made a difference that Secretary of the Navy, Isaac Toucey, was a northerner, the only one to serve a full term in post in this period. That other politicians in a deeply divided society on brink of Civil War tended to adopt sectional interests is not be wondered at, but the ease with which international treaties and national law were ignored still has the power to shock. The outbreak of the Civil War was soon followed by the concession of mutual rights of search to the British, and the abolition of the Squadron. One American captain was hung for slaving, and after the war Cuba was unable to sustain the trade under British pressure. By 1869 the Atlantic slave trade was over.

In this pioneering narrative history Canney provides a thorough record of what was done, and offers a promising avenue to integrate naval history with the wider political questions. A number of useful secondary sources have been left out, notably Christopher Lloyd's classic *The Royal Navy and the Slave Trade* and Leslie Bethell's account of the abolition of the Brazilian trade. Some details of British men and measures are suspect, for example life-long abolitionist Lord Palmerston was Foreign Secretary in the late 1830s, and he only became Prime Minister in 1855.

The American contribution to the end of the slave trade was the abolition of slavery, not the hard work of the Africa Squadron. It would be hard to disagree with Canney's concluding line: "the obvious lesson is that the service should not be required to perform a vital function for the nation, and then not be given the wherewithal to accomplish the mission." It would be equally hard not to reflect on the meaning of those words today.



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