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The Lasting Influence of Theodore Roosevelt's Naval War of 1812

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In 1882, twenty-three-year-old Theodore Roosevelt published his first book, *The Naval War of 1812*. Reviewers praised the book's scholarship and style, the recently established Naval War College adopted it for study, and the Department of the Navy ordered a copy placed in every ship's library.^[1]

Roosevelt wrote, as we all are fully aware, at a time when the U.S. Navy had reached a nadir. The number of ships in service had fallen to a low, and the ships in service were completely outmoded. With his *Naval War of 1812*, Roosevelt contributed to the movement for naval revitalization and modernization by hammering home the lessons of naval preparedness. He underscored the folly of relying on militia forces at the commencement of an armed conflict and the necessity for success of well-trained sailors and high-quality warships. It is doubtful that publication of Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* in 1882 had any influence on Congress's laying the foundations of the new steel navy in 1883, but the work did promote a more favorable attitude toward the navy among the reading public, establish Roosevelt's credentials as an expert in naval affairs, and presage the young politician's agenda that would see fruition decades later during his presidency in what some would come to call "Teddy Roosevelt's navy."

The subject of my paper today, however, is not the influence of Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* on the navy of Roosevelt's time—a subject perhaps more suited to the title of this session. Rather, my subject is the influence of the book on historians of the War of 1812. This subject, too, has its importance, since it behooves all of us as naval historians to reflect on the nature of our scholarship and the methods we use to pursue it.

Roosevelt's study of the War of 1812 influenced all subsequent scholarship on the naval aspects of the War of 1812 and continues to be reprinted.^[2] More than a classic, it remains, after 120 years, a standard study of the war. What is it, one may ask, that gives the book its persistent authority?

Roosevelt's sole subject is the tactics employed in individual naval engagements. For a discussion of the overall naval strategy of the War of 1812 and of the strategic importance of particular actions or campaigns, one turns to Alfred Thayer Mahan's 1905

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Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812. Denying that the famous ship duels on the oceans had any significance for the outcome of the war, Mahan eschewed the loving detail with which Roosevelt described each engagement. As Michael Crogan observes, “Roosevelt’s study had just that sort of technical orientation that Mahan strove so earnestly to overcome among his students at the Naval War College.” Mahan fostered a more exalted viewpoint and developed overarching issues such as how a larger if still modest American navy might have deterred a war with Britain and the effectiveness of the British blockade of the American coast.^[3] Today, most historians of naval warfare take for their field of purview an even wider array of concerns, which include, in addition to strategy and logistics, force structure, recruitment, administration, finance, and politics. Roosevelt says nothing, for instance, about how the U.S. government determined on the size, composition, and distribution of its fleet during the war; nor about the process by which the Secretary of the Navy issued sailing orders; nor about the wisdom of those orders. Yet, Roosevelt’s study of the narrow subject of tactics has had a persistent influence on the writing of the naval history of the War of 1812. For, as William Dudley observes, the tactical details “make his work . . . an essential reference for those working deeper in the subject.”^[4]

Despite his intense American nationalism, a tempered Anglophilia enabled Roosevelt to write with a substantial degree of objectivity toward the former enemy. Roosevelt believed in the superiority of the civilization of the English-speaking peoples and of the racial character they shared. He believed that the larger interests of Great Britain and the United States were the same, that working cooperatively the two nations could dominate world affairs, and that their world domination would benefit civilization as well as lesser peoples.^[5] Roosevelt strove for objectivity, avoiding the chauvinistic biases of earlier writers on the War of 1812, both American and British. Our interest at the moment, however, is not how Roosevelt differed from historians who came before him, but how he influenced those who came after.

Roosevelt examines each engagement between American and British naval forces during the War of 1812. He analyzes the absolute and relative strengths of the ships, crews, officers, and armaments, weighs the advantages and disadvantages of each side, describes the course of the engagement, evaluates the tactics employed, and assesses the merits of the actions taken by the opponents. Roosevelt did not invent the statistical approach; what sets him apart is his methodical persistence in applying the approach to every engagement and the use of the resulting data to make comparisons among engagements and draw general conclusions. The lasting value of his approach lies in the care he took to get the facts right, the consistency of his criteria for assessing the actions, and the judiciousness of his assessments.

For each engagement that Roosevelt narrates, both single-ship and fleet actions, he attempts to find out as accurately as the records allow the relative force of the

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antagonists. To gauge the relative force, he compares the tonnage of the vessels, the armament, and the crew size.

In analyzing naval actions, Roosevelt took a mathematical approach. He sought to determine the ratio between relative force and relative loss of the combatants and to explain the outcome of each engagement in terms of that ratio. The following, for example, is Roosevelt's table for the encounter between the U.S. sloop *Wasp*, Captain Johnston Blakely, and H.M. brig-sloop *Reindeer*, Captain William Manners, of 28 June 1814.

COMPARATIVE FORCE.					
	Tons.	Broadside Guns.	Weight Metal.	No. Men.	Loss
<i>Wasp</i>	509	11	315	173	26
<i>Reindeer</i>	477	10	210	118	67

Based on this ratio of force to loss, Roosevelt concludes that the British “yielded purely to heavy odds in men and metal,” and “the execution was fully proportioned to the difference in force.”^[6] When the results of any naval combat were disproportionate to the difference in force, he sought in the record evidence of differences in training, discipline, and courage of the crews, and in the skill and judgment of the commanders. Take, for example, the encounter between *Wasp* and H.M. brig-sloop *Avon*, Captain the Honorable James Arbuthnot, of 1 September 1814.

COMPARATIVE FORCE.					
	Tons.	Broadside Guns.	Weight Metal.	No. Men.	Loss
<i>Wasp</i>	509	12	327	160	3
<i>Avon</i>	477	11	280	117	42

“It is self evident,” says Roosevelt, “that in the case of this action the odds, 14 to 11, are neither enough to account for the loss inflicted being as 14 to 1, nor for the rapidity with which, during a night encounter, the *Avon* was placed in a sinking condition.” He judges that the *Avon*'s was a failure of gunnery, and that Blakely's behavior was exemplary.^[7]

Canadian historian Frederick C. Drake writes that “most writers still tend to determine the comparative value of ship actions by comparing the weight of metal thrown in any one broadside” and criticizes Roosevelt for taking this method to the extreme. Roosevelt,

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Drake writes, “compared the ratios of people killed between two vessels with the rate of the weight of metal thrown.” “Other factors, however,” Drake continues, “influence the

results of an action.”^[8] Roosevelt’s method was not so simplistic as Drake implies. Roosevelt took into account such factors as the mixture of long and short guns and the state of the seas. His use of the statistics of force and loss was not formulaic. Rather the statistics provided the basis for measuring the contribution made to victory and defeat of other factors, such as the maneuvers each commander ordered and the execution of their duties by the crews.

New studies and newly available records have proven Roosevelt wrong on details, and subsequent naval scholars have taken issue with many of his conclusions.^[9] My concern here, however, is not where Roosevelt was right and where wrong, but how his work influenced other historians.

Instances in which accounts of the War of 1812 in general and popular accounts of naval warfare in the War of 1812 incorporate Roosevelt’s findings are frequent. The true measure of the influence of Roosevelt’s *Naval War of 1812* on naval historiography, however, is the frequency of instances in which authors doing original scholarship into naval engagements of the War of 1812 take Roosevelt’s analyses into account.

Examples from the works of David F. Long illustrate some of the ways in which Roosevelt’s *Naval War of 1812* has influenced historical scholarship. In his 1981 biography of William Bainbridge, David Long determined the number of men who manned HMS *Java* during its encounter with *Constitution* using a method similar to Roosevelt’s, arriving at the same number. Long follows Roosevelt on the significance of the number, for on it rests the answer to the question of the number of casualties the Americans inflicted, a number on which the contemporary British and American accounts widely differed.^[10]

In his study of the life of James Biddle, Long concurs with Roosevelt that the contest between USS *Wasp* and HMS *Frolic* “had been between equals, and that the triumph of the Americans had been won by their more effective tactics and more accurate gunnery.”^[11] On USS *Hornet*’s victory over HMS *Penguin*, quoting Roosevelt’s statement that it was Biddle’s “cool skilful seamanship and excellent gunnery that enabled the Americans to destroy an antagonist of equal force in such an exceedingly short time,” Long says that Roosevelt “is only partially correct. . . . In this case seamanship was hardly an issue.” Given their short-range carronades, the two sloops had to fight at close quarters, with little opportunity for maneuvering. “But certainly Roosevelt is correct,” Long concludes, “when he stresses the *Hornet*’s ‘excellent gunnery.’”^[12]

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Among the hottest issues in the historiography of naval combat in the War of 1812 has been that of the respective merits of the opposing sides in the Battle of Lake Erie. Historians have debated the number of guns, the weight of broadside metal, the mix of long and short guns, the number and quality of men, the quality of the warships, and the tactics employed on each side. Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* has had a fair share of influence on the debate.

For the sake of illustration, consider the matter of the mix of long and short guns employed on each side. Roosevelt argues that Americans magnified the glory of Oliver Hazard Perry's victory well beyond what it merits. He points out that, given the fact that the American fleet outgunned the British fleet by a factor of two to one in the weight of metal they could throw, the American victory is not surprising. The American fleet's potential gunfire from its short carronades exceeded in weight that of the British by an overwhelming margin, and the potential gunfire from its long guns exceeded that of the British long guns by a factor of three to two. "With such odds in our favor," concludes Roosevelt, "it would have been a disgrace to have been beaten," and "it might be said that the length of the contest and the trifling disparity in loss reflected rather the most credit on the British." Roosevelt criticizes the American commander for rushing into combat in such a manner as to allow his ships to become greatly separated and for forming his line in such a way that the gunboats, with their heavy long guns, could not support *Lawrence*, armed principally with short-range carronades.^[13]

James Hannay's 1901 *The War of 1812*, a volume in *The Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society*, is an apology for the British war effort in Canada. Hannay cites Roosevelt as "an American writer, who has written a tolerably honest account of the naval operations of the war." Hannay embraced Roosevelt's conclusions concerning the Battle of Lake Erie and carried them a step further. He divided the battle into its three segments, the van, the center, and the rear. In each segment, the American broadside outweighed the British. In the van, the American superiority was a broadside of 472 pounds to 177 overall, or 320 against 204 pounds from carronades and 152 against 162 pounds from long guns. Despite being outgunned, the British won the conflict in the van, forcing the *Lawrence* to strike its colors.^[14]

In his 1913 biography of Oliver Hazard Perry, James Mills does some creative manipulation of the figures to argue that Perry had to fight at close range because the British fleet outgunned the American in long guns. Roosevelt concluded that the Americans had a potential broadside from long guns of 288 pounds to oppose that of the British of 195 pounds. Although Mills uses figures identical to Roosevelt's for the armament of the two fleets, he states "the most weight that could be thrown by the Americans by long guns was one hundred and fifty pounds." How Mills derived such a low figure from the table of armament of Perry's fleet that appears on the page opposite this statement, a table identical to that used by Roosevelt, is a mystery.^[15]

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In his 1935 biography of Perry, James Dutton also states that Perry had to fight at short range because of the discrepancy between the two fleets in the mix of long and short guns. He does not say, with Mills, that the British long guns fired more metal, but that the British had more long guns than Perry had. In addition, Perry “had been forced to place

many of his long-range guns upon his small schooners,” writes Dutton, and “they formed unsuitable platforms for the heavy guns and made good marksmanship impossible.” In a battle fought at long range, the British “could stand off and batter his ships to pieces.” Dutton fails to mention that, in the event, the battle was fought in smooth waters in which the guns on the small schooners could do good execution.^[16]

In their 1990 study, *HMS Detroit: The Battle for Lake Erie*, Robert and Thomas Malcomson analyze the tactical imperatives imposed by the mix of long and short guns in the opposing fleets. Since the preponderance of firepower in the American was in the two brigs, *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, armed with carronades except for a couple of long 12 pounders each, “an action at close quarters” best suited the Americans. The British would be at a severe disadvantage in a battle fought at short range, since the broadsides of the two principal American combatants, the brigs *Lawrence* and *Niagara*, alone outweighed those of the entire British fleet. Yet, in a battle fought at long range, the long guns of Perry’s schooners posed a significant danger to the smaller British ships. In a running fight, the British might be able to separate the American brigs from their smaller consorts and then fight them at long range with long guns.^[17]

In their 1997 study, *A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812–1813*, David Skaggs and Gerald Altoff agree with Roosevelt that the American fleet “enjoyed a broadside advantage in weight of metal fired” in long guns as well as in carronades. They analyze the tactical imperatives the mix of long and short guns imposed on Perry and his opponent, Robert Barclay. Perry, as all analysts agree, would have the greatest advantage at close range. Barclay’s *Detroit* would do best “to fight a running battle at long range and hope to damage Perry’s fleet without a close engagement.” But such a battle would “nullify the *Queen Charlotte*’s main armament” of carronades. Skaggs and Altoff speculate that Barclay “placed the *Detroit* in the van so she might damage one of Perry’s brigs with her long guns. Then the *Queen Charlotte*’s carronades and her soldiers [by boarding] could eliminate one American vessel while Barclay engaged the duplicate American brig at long range.” Like Roosevelt, Skaggs and Altoff criticize Perry for “impulsively bearing down on the British line, allowing the schooners to lag farther and farther behind.” They concur with Roosevelt that “Perry did not need to rush into battle without his long guns.”^[18]

This overview of one aspect of the historiographic debate on the Battle of Lake Erie demonstrates the continuing relevance of Roosevelt’s method in studying the naval

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combat history of the War of 1812. The questions he asked are still asked today and today's answers are frequently quite similar to his.

Roosevelt systematically used statistics to analyze naval engagements. No subsequent historian has matched his methodical consistency, and none has embraced his use of the ratio between force and loss as an analytical tool—other than a simple reference to

Roosevelt's own analyses. But the enduring success of Roosevelt's *Naval War of 1812* is not owing solely to its scientific approach.

The endurance of Roosevelt's book in the standard literature of the War of 1812 results from a marriage of cold science with warm passion for values the author held dear. Roosevelt's overriding concern, irrespective of which side won any encounter, was to determine where honor and credit lay. Having arrived at a judicious assessment, he employed vigorous, even passionate, prose to assign praise and blame. Consider his depiction of the death of William Manners, captain of HMS *Reindeer*:

Then the English captain, already mortally wounded, but with the indomitable courage that nothing but death could conquer, cheering and rallying his men, himself sprang, sword in hand, into the rigging, to lead them on; and they followed him with a will. At that instant a ball from the *Wasp*'s main-top crashed through his skull, and, still clenching in his right hand the sword he had shown he could wear so worthily, with his face to the foe, he fell back on his own deck dead, while above him yet floated the flag for which he had given his life. No Norse Viking, slain over shield, ever died better.^[19]

The reference to the Norse Viking, coming seemingly out of nowhere, recalls Roosevelt's theme of ethnic identity between the Americans and their British opponents and the shared values and racial characteristics of the rival forces. In a chapter on the Battle of New Orleans added to the second edition, Roosevelt dipped his pen more freely in purple ink. Through the original chapters of the book, however, Roosevelt maintains a balance between the dispassionate language of science and the impassioned endorsement of courage, judgment, skill, and honor, and condemnation of their opposites. *The Naval War of 1812* is a work that, while enlightening the mind, stirs the blood.

^[19] Edward K. Eckert, "Introduction," in Theodore Roosevelt, The Naval War of 1812: Or the History of the United States Navy during the last War with Great Britain to Which Is Appended an Account of the Battle of New Orleans (1882; reprint, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1987), xi–xxxii.

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^[2]Recent editions include a hardback from Da Capo Press and a Modern Library paperback. Theodore Roosevelt, The Naval War of 1812, with a new introduction by H. W. Brands (New York: Da Capo Press, 1999); Theodore Roosevelt, The Naval War of 1812, introduction by John Allen Cable (New York: Modern Library, 1999).

^[3] Alfred T. Mahan, Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812, 2 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905); Michael T. Crogan, "Mahan and Roosevelt: The Assessment of Influence," *Naval War College Review* 33 (Nov.–Dec. 1980): 89–97; William S. Dudley, "Alfred Thayer Mahan on the War of 1812," in The Influence of History on Mahan: The Proceedings of a Conference Marking the Centenary of Alfred Thayer Mahan's The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, edited by John B. Hattendorf (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 1991), 141–54; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), 40–41, 44, 46–48.

^[4]Dudley, "Alfred Thayer Mahan on the War of 1812," 150.

^[5]Howard K. Beale, Theodore Roosevelt and the Rise of America To World Power (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Press, 1956), 81, 100–101, 138, 142, 160–61.

^[6]Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 296–97.

^[7]Ibid., 301.

^[8]Frederick C. Drake, "Artillery and Its Influence on Naval Tactics: Reflections on the Battle of Lake Erie," in William J. Welsh and David Curtis Skaggs, eds., War on the Great Lakes: Essays Commemorating the 175th Anniversary of the Battle of Lake Erie (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1991), 19–20.

^[9]Contrast, for example, the accounts of the engagement between USS Wasp and HMS Reindeer in Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 293–97, and in Stephen W. H. Duffy, Captain Blakely and the Wasp: The Cruise of 1814 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2001), 202–16. Note the differences between the two historians' diagrams of the battle: Duffy shows Reindeer crossing Wasp's bow, during which the

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former gave the latter a raking broadside (eighteenth illustration between pages 150 and 151), a series of events totally absent from Roosevelt's version (page 296).

^[10]David F. Long, Ready to Hazard: A Biography of Commodore William Bainbridge, 1774-1833 (Hanover: University of New Hampshire, 1981), 155; Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 136–38.

^[11]David F. Long, Sailor-Diplomat: A Biography of Commodore James Biddle, 1783–1848 (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1983), 42–44; Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 111–17.

^[12]Long, Sailor-Diplomat, 54; Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 381–86.

^[13]Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 239–59, quotations from pages 252 and 254. Roosevelt did not originate these criticisms. Cooper wrote: “Captain Perry was criticised, at the time, for the manner in which he had brought his squadron into action, it being thought he should have waited until his line was more compactly formed, and his small vessels could have closed.” Cooper argues that Perry was correct to race into battle to prevent Barclay from escaping. The modern consensus, however, is that in the circumstances, it was Barclay who had to force an engagement, not Perry. James Fenimore Cooper, The History of the Navy of the United States of America, vol. 1 (Paris, 1839; reprint, Upper Saddle River, NJ: Literature House/Gregg Press, 1970), 291.

^[14]James Hannay, The War of 1812, vol. 11 of *Collections of the Nova Scotia Historical Society* (Halifax, N.S.: Nova Scotia Historical Society, 1901), 201–12.

^[15]James Cooke Mills, Oliver Hazard Perry and the Battle of Lake Erie (Detroit: John Phelps, 1913), 115–18

^[16]Charles J. Dutton, Oliver Hazard Perry (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1935), 137–38.

^[17]Robert Malcomson and Thomas Malcomson, HMS Detroit: The Battle for Lake Erie (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1990), 90–91.

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^[18] David Curtis Skaggs and Gerald T. Altoff, A Signal Victory: The Lake Erie Campaign, 1812-1813 (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 1997), 112–17, 127.

^[19] Roosevelt, Naval War of 1812 (Annapolis, 1987), 295–96.