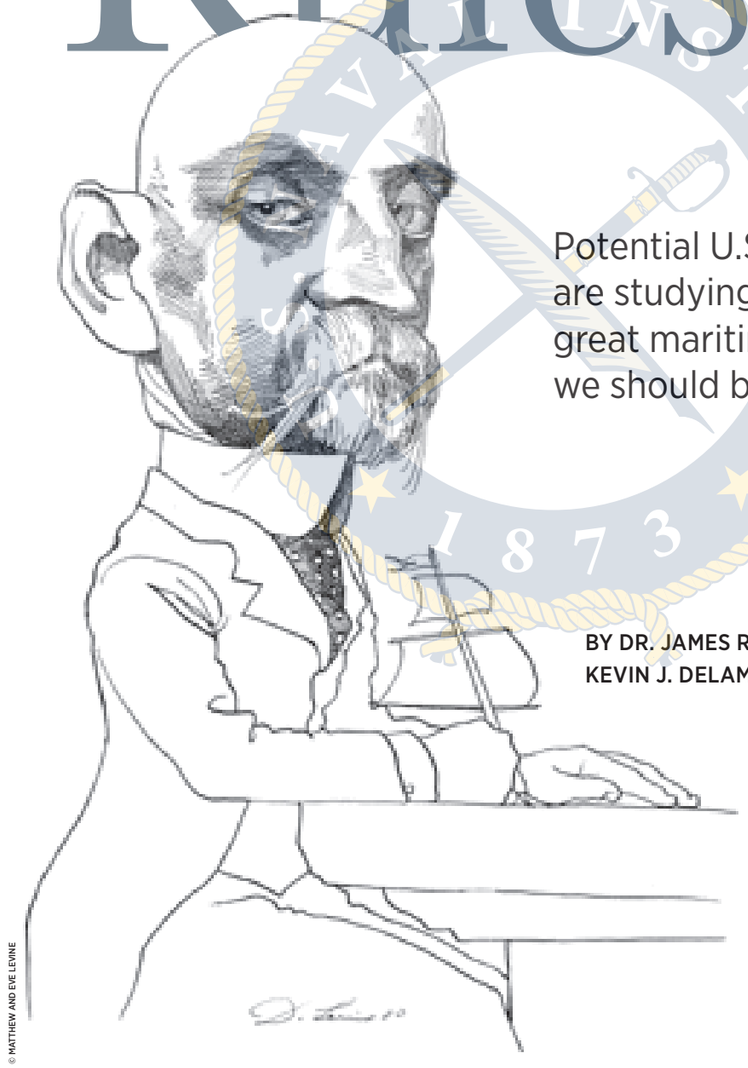
Mahan Rules



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Potential U.S. adversaries are studying the ideas of the great maritime strategist; we should be doing the same.

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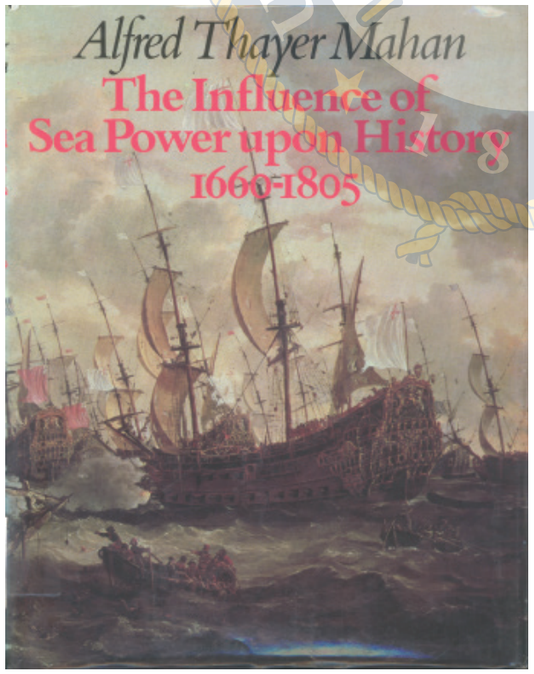
The outlook for U.S. maritime strategic thought is less than rosy, but 19th-century theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan can still help to mend the situation. Not only are his fundamental ideas encoded in the sea services' cultural DNA, but his works have attracted the interest of Navy leadership, notably that of Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson, who invokes Mahan in his "Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority." As well, rising powers such as China pay homage to and draw inspiration from the evangelist of U.S. sea power.[1] In light of this groundswell of interest, we espouse an ongoing renaissance in reading and debating Mahan's treatises while speculating about the asymmetries his ideas could foster between seafaring states that hew to his thought and those that do not.

Mahan himself conceded that his most ardent admirers resided overseas, including in Great Britain, Japan, and Germany.[2] Not until the Spanish-American War appeared to ratify his theories of marine supremacy—giving the United States a modest island empire to sustain foreign trade and commerce, all defended by a modern battle fleet—did Mahan become a household name for ordinary Americans. The naval historian also feared that the United States was not a natural seagoing nation. It straddled a continent, and thus had the luxury of turning inward. North America was abundantly endowed with natural resources. Unlike Britons, consequently, Americans had little need to venture seaward in search of prosperity.[3] Forgetfulness toward the sea might prevail without compelling incentives.



Mahan's classic *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* series represents just three volumes in a body of strategic thought that spans the globe. In a postcolonial world some of his ideas are obsolete, but the strategic underpinning—the importance of forward-deployed sea power—remains applicable in the complex contemporary environment.

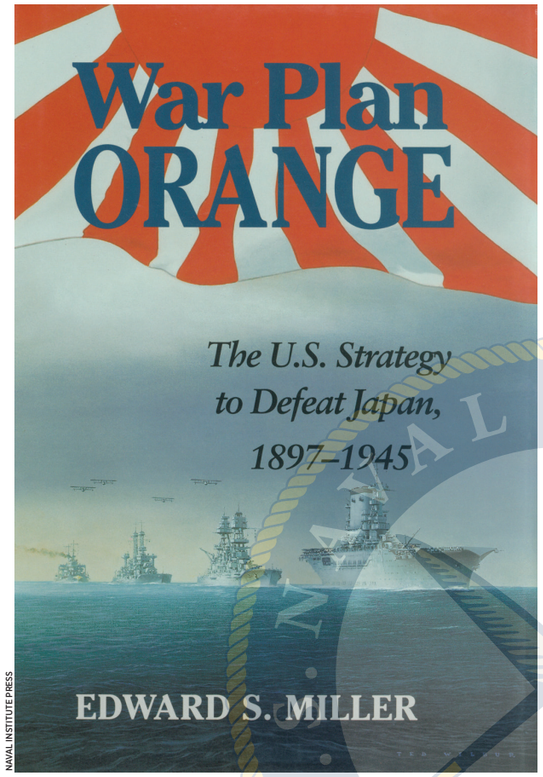
Today, aside from a dozen or so Advanced Strategy Program students each year, Naval War College students are exposed to Mahan and his writings in only cursory fashion.[4] They read from his landmark treatise, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, selections that establish his six "determinants" of maritime might and give his account of the Anglo-American maritime war of 1778.[5] At 140 pages, this is a slim selection from an author whose scholarly output was so prodigious that his bibliography alone fills a book.[6] And the Naval War College furnishes the *most* exposure to Mahan's sea-power theories of any service college or civilian professional school. Coverage elsewhere is even sparser. We aim to change that by demonstrating the theorist's continuing relevance to contemporary problems.

MAHAN'S HISTORY—AND THE MYTHOLOGY

In the past, Mahanian theory was intertwined throughout the Naval War College curriculum. Many lecturers had known him; context and operational concepts for war planning derived from Mahanian assumptions about the sea. The best example is War Plan Orange, examined by author Edward Miller, who showed how the College was integral to the "evolution" of interwar strategic thought and war planning for the Pacific. A Mahanian thread ran through all versions of War Plan Orange. War fleets, bases, concentration of force, and decisive battle were central to planning efforts.[7] Knowledge from Newport's theorist molded the core assumptions underlying study, wargaming, and planning.

But the three volumes of Mahan's *Influence of Sea Power upon History*—the first, then as now, being the most widely read and recognized—laid the foundation for readers' thinking about nautical matters. Few officers acquainted themselves intimately with Mahan's subsequent refinements of his theories, either as students at Newport or in staff positions. Readers knew about Mahan's six attributes that equipped states to become great naval powers. From this basis emerged a script whose acts and scenes involved amassing maritime commerce, building a battle fleet, and forward-deploying that fleet for decisive combat along enemy coastlines.

Mahan's alleged admonishment never to divide the battle fleet crystallized that wisdom—even though this is not precisely what he advised. Mahan actually opposed



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The author of *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* traced a Mahanian trend through all versions of the plan.

strategically subdividing the fleet into detachments weaker than enemy forces they were likely to encounter in high-seas battle.[8] This constituted risk management, not the fixed *tactical* precept found in the later mythology. The naval establishment distilled such concepts into a basic primer on uses of the sea. This primer did not arise from a thoroughgoing examination of Mahanian theory that spanned his vast corpus. A narrower version of his ideas—an abridged edition—formed the core of the curriculum at Newport.

Thus, it was a partial version of Mahanian theory that was central to early teachings at the college. Mahan was the institution's first lecturer on strategy, and his history-based approach informed much of the curriculum, as attested by his address at the opening of the 1888 academic year.[9] Mahanian theory, furthermore, became integral to the U.S. Navy as an institution. Leadership tapped the Naval War College to help plan for war with Spain in 1898, thereby tacitly affirming the practical value the establishment saw in Mahanian thought.

Scholars have taken note of this. Naval analyst Norman Friedman makes the point that detailed discussions of strategy have remained an exception in the U.S. Navy establishment ever since the years when Mahan was actively writing. Friedman suggests that most writings that are purportedly about U.S. maritime strategy are in fact tactical and operational in nature—and unfold *within the strategic framework erected by Mahan*, even when no one mentions that framework of axioms and intuitions about marine affairs.[10] Mahan's ghost wafts through strategic discourses even when no one invokes his name.

The abridged edition of Mahanian strategic ideas became embedded in the U.S. naval lexicon, whether or not anyone mentioned the "Copernicus" of sea power.[11] In the years before the United States entered World War I, for instance, Lieutenant Commander C. C. Gill developed a series of lectures on the conflict, delivering them to future leaders of the U.S. Naval Academy. Gill's lectures were subsequently reshaped into magazine articles and later published as a book—all with the approval and support of the Department of the Navy.[12] The book's introductory chapters describe sea power and sea control in terms directly reminiscent of Mahan—without giving him credit. Not just an abridged but a simplified Mahan became common parlance within a few years after his death in 1914, which should come as little surprise. Many Naval War College leaders in the generation succeeding the founders had been students sitting in lectures delivered by Mahan. Men including Dudley Knox and William Sims made his ideas their own. In turn these ideas, passed down by Mahan's intellectual progeny, shaped strategic discourses, operational planning, and force design throughout the interwar period.

Admittedly, these strategic ideas were not confined solely to the basic framework set forth in the *Influence of Sea Power* series. During the final two decades of his life, Mahan remained a prolific author. His interests transcended strategy, touching on international relations in books such as *The Problem of Asia.* He published a steady stream of articles in popular publications and professional journals, exploring more mundane issues that were important to the health and development of the nation's sea services. Mahan's later works were more nuanced. In the past he had railed against making *guerre de course* the centerpiece of U.S. maritime strategy; he wrote a history of the War of 1812 precisely to deliver a cautionary tale about the ills of commerce raiding. But later in life, his commentary on the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–05 demonstrated an appreciation for the value of interdicting commerce, even before a major fleet action had transpired.[13] The diverse array of subjects on which Mahan's pen alighted informed U.S. strategic decision-making at the margins up through World War II. Still,

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Chinese strategists clearly have digested Mahan's concepts and are pressing them into service, as the new carrier battle force demonstrated in January. This Chinese navy formation around the aircraft carrier *Liaoning* conducts military drills in the South China Sea.

these later works lacked the impact of the *Influence of Sea Power* treatises.

TODAY'S BOWDLERIZED MAHAN

Today, as noted, few naval officers read Mahan beyond a couple of selections from *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*, and this neglect of the modern Navy's intellectual founder is not new. Already by the early postwar years, faculty in Newport had taken to complaining about the Navy's loss of strategic vocabulary. In a 1951 letter to Chief of Naval Operations Forrest Sherman, college president Richard L. Conolly portrayed U.S. mariners as "a breed of fine seamen, of able airmen, efficient administrators, and of superb tacticians and technicians." Admiral Conolly nevertheless pronounced the service's "understanding" and "exposition" of "the undiminished and vital nature of Sea Power . . . dangerously superficial and elementary."[14]

Why? First of all, some of the ideas underlying Mahan's worldview fell out of favor in the postwar era. For him foreign commerce was king, while sea power was the handmaiden of commercial and imperial expansion. This imperialist vision, although uncontroversial in his day, was left behind the march of history by the postwar age of decolonization. U.S. naval and air forces remained permanently stationed overseas, mainly in Eurasia. Yet Washington now relied on alliances and bases leased from host nations as the struts supporting a forward-deployed naval presence. Colonies governed from afar were passé—or worse.

But while the inspiration behind Mahanian expansionism may have been discredited, his strategic ideas remained valid and should have continued to shape maritime policy and strategy. The United States enjoyed command of the seas, and unchallenged access throughout the global maritime commons has been a fundamental assumption underpinning strategic decision-making ever since. Naval forces, continuously forward-deployed, have always prepared to pummel enemy fleets in their home waters. All of these strategic choices conform to the Mahanian script. Yet the scriptwriter himself was less and less visible in U.S. strategic discourses. Few quarreled with or overtly rejected Mahan's ideas. They just left his works on the shelf to gather dust.

Second, generational change played its part. If the generation following Mahan absorbed from the master ideas about commerce, bases, and ships, that direct transmission ceased by the postwar years, as the second generation retired from the service. Without a concerted effort to keep Mahan's writings on the agenda at the Naval War College, on staffs, and in the fleet, his ideas simply began to fade. In a sense Mahan was a victim of his own success. His theories had become part of a standard vocabulary of sea power—and thus had largely disappeared from view. No one saw the need to revisit his works, ponder them anew, and refresh and adapt them for new times.

Finally, the tactical and platform-centric culture that Conolly bewailed inclined seafarers to dismiss Mahan, if they thought about him at all. By most accounts this is now a U.S. Navy trait of long vintage. Indeed, Mahan himself reported discounting the value of naval history as a young officer: "I shared the prepossession, *common at that time*, that the naval history of the past was wholly past; of no use at all to the present" (our emphasis).[15] In turn, amnesia about the past may have claimed Mahan as its victim.

By the post–World War II years, it was commonplace to equate Mahanian theory with steam-propelled battleships. But battleships had met their doom, yielding to aircraft carriers, the warbirds and guided missiles that carriers deployed, and nuclear-powered submarines. Why bother reading Mahan? Or, still less, why bother investigating such antiquarian writings as a resource to shape strategy and operations for the atomic age? Conflating Mahan with tactics and hardware—the "grammar" of naval warfare—thus came to obscure the larger strategic and grand-strategic "logic" suffusing his ideas about maritime strategy.[16]

INTO A MAHANIAN FUTURE?

Whatever the fate of Mahan's tactical ideas, his logic of sea power remains evergreen despite technological advances, changes to the geostrategic setting, and the onrush of time. It suffers from neglect despite a partial rediscovery during the "Turner Revolution" of the 1970s, when then–Naval War College president Vice Admiral Stansfield Turner oversaw a return to a curriculum grounded in history and strategic theory.[17]

Today Admiral Turner's project remains incomplete, at least as regards Mahanian thought, four decades after he set it in motion. Admittedly, in this article we interpret in rather dour terms the state of strategic thought in the sea services, and we attribute it largely to apathy toward Mahan's works. Things may not be that grim. The late Michael Handel observed that one need not read Carl von Clausewitz's *On War* to be Clausewitzian in outlook, and to arrive at the same basic precepts as did the Prussian master. Minds travel in certain well-worn grooves, suggests Handel, and reach similar destinations.[18]

Amnesia about the past may have claimed Mahan as its victim.

The same goes for Mahanian insights. Certain basic ideas from Mahan's corpus will likely endure, even if users of those ideas reach them independently—or glean them without knowing the source, to the extent that the sea-service lexicon remains Mahanian. The commons, sea control—*né* command of the sea—and the major fleet action may persist in U.S. maritime thought.

But there are perils to neglecting the strategic canon. For one, absorbing ideas into sea-service culture with little sense of their historical context deprives them of nuance. Worse, it can reduce them to dogma. Strategists including Bernard Brodie warn that a tyranny of maxims, or unquestioned truths, can grip military services to stultifying effect.[19] For another, Clausewitz explains that if strategists do not know strategic theory, they must start the intellectual process afresh every time they grapple with some relevant question.[20] They must reinvent the wheel, in colloquial terms. Becoming conversant with theory spares them that. It lays the foundation for critical analysis—and thus for strategic wisdom.

It is thus eminently worthwhile for today's naval leadership to push for a revival of strategic study in general and of Mahan in particular. Otherwise the sea services may have to face unfamiliar intellectual territory in an increasingly contested Asia-Pacific. Strategists in rising sea powers such as China have become great followers of Mahan. Chinese strategists read and digest his concepts thoroughly, and try to press them into service for today's postmodern world.

Today's Navy should ask itself what happens when a fervently Mahanian China confronts an erstwhile Mahanian power such as the United States. Clausewitz, Brodie, and Mahan himself might salute prospective foes' intellectual vigor—while doubting whether a post-Mahanian U.S. Navy had the capacity to compete. Let's dust off Mahan's works and compete on equal terms.

1. Margaret Tuttle Sprout, "Mahan: Evangelist of Sea Power," in Edward Mead Earle, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1943), 415–45.
2. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *From Sail to Steam: Recollections of Naval Life* (New York: Harper, 1907), 302–3.
3. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 39.
4. The Advanced Strategy elective program helps fill the U.S. Navy's need for maritime strategists. Rather than take a normal slate of electives, one per trimester, Advanced Strategy students devote all of their elective time to studying problems and opportunities relating to the sea. They are designated specialists in maritime strategy upon completing the program.
5. Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon History,* 1–89, 505–41.
6. John B. Hattendorf and Lynn C. Hattendorf, *A Bibliography of the Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan* (Newport R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1987).
7. Edward S. Miller, *War Plan Orange: The U.S. Strategy to Defeat Japan, 1897–1945* (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991), esp. 37–38.
8. Alfred Thayer Mahan, *The Interest of America in Sea Power, Present and Future* (1897; reprint, Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1970), 198.
9. "Address of Captain A. T. Mahan, U.S. Navy," Naval Institute *Proceedings* 14, no. 4 (1888), 621–38.
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11. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire, eds., *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, 3 vols. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1975), vol. 2, 342, 361.
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14. Naval War College Archives, Records of the Course of Advanced Study: President, Naval War College, letter to Chief of Naval Operations, A3-1 serial 2354-51, May 1, 1951, in John B. Hattendorf, "Introduction," J. C. Wylie, *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control* (1967; reprint, Westport: Greenwood, 1989), xxii.
15. Mahan, *From Sail to Steam*, 275.
16. James R. Holmes and Toshi Yoshihara, "Mahan's Lingering Ghost," Naval Institute *Proceedings* 135, no. 12 (December 2009).
17. Stansfield Turner, "Challenge: A New Approach to Professional Education," *Naval War College Review* 25, no. 2 (November–December 1972), 1-9.
18. Michael I. Handel, *Masters of War*, 3d ed. (London: Cass, 2000), 11.
19. James R. Holmes, "Strategy and the Tyranny of Maxims," *The Diplomat*, 23 February 2014, www.thediplomat.com/2014/02/strategy-and-the-tyranny-of-maxims/.
20. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, Peter Paret and Michael Howard, eds. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 141.

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