

# Reflections on Canada, the State, the Nation and the Navy

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In the classic model of seapower the navy and the nation are fused into some single organic being. Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan, the most famous proponent of this concept, summarized this notion at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century as ‘navy, colonies and trade.’ The model works something like this: trading nations need access to the sea and markets and must have a merchant fleet to carry that trade; colonies provide markets, bases and resources; and navies protect it all.

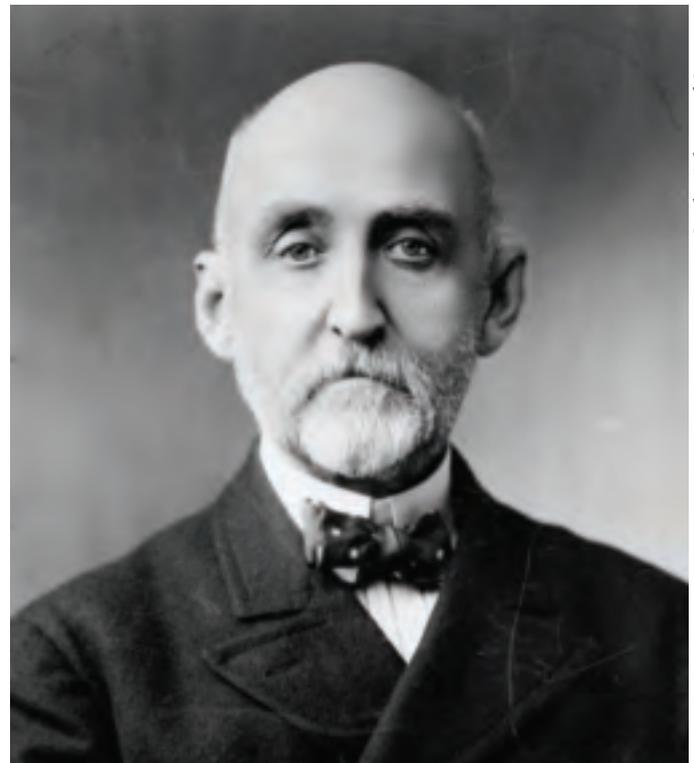
Mahan laid this out in his 1890 classic *The Influence of Seapower upon History 1660-1783*, which was immediately translated into various languages and issued to naval officers as their primer. It has proven to be a remarkably durable concept of how seapower ought to work.

Certainly the development of a fully integrated national maritime policy that includes shipbuilding, trade and a strong navy has long been the benchmark against which Canada’s experience of seapower has been measured. Canada remains highly dependent upon overseas markets (about 80% of Canada’s trade travels by sea), and is girded by three oceans and has the longest coastline in the world, but we have no Mahanist vision of our maritime role and even our naval policy is episodic. In that sense, it might be argued that Canada has not yet created the ‘correct’ relationship between the state and the navy – or even between the nation and the navy. And we do occasionally beat ourselves up over this apparent ‘failure.’

But the truth may be that we have been reading the wrong history. As heretical as it may seem, the experience that Canada needs to study is not that of Great Britain (which influenced Mahan’s ideas) but that of France – the other great seapower of the Age of Sail. In contrast to Britain, where seapower (especially after the execution of Charles I in 1649) was an expression of national will through the instrument of Parliament and the interests of the monied classes, French seapower was both widely regionalized – along the Biscay, or La Manche, or the Mediterranean coast – and remote from the seat of political power. The French capital was far removed from the coasts and from the country’s maritime economy. In absolutist France the exercise of seapower depended on the whim of the King and the personal strength of his Ministers.

A few examples illustrate the point nicely. The powerful French fleet which challenged both the English and the Dutch for maritime supremacy between 1660 and 1700

was built by one man, Jean Baptiste Colbert. He was Minister of just about everything: Controller General of Louis XIV’s finances; Minister of Commerce; Minister of Colonies; and Secretary of the Navy. Colbert believed in the fundamentals of mercantilism, in strong colonies, trade and a navy, and so he built an enormous fleet. But he also knew he had to institutionalize seapower if his navy was to survive him. This he failed to do, despite attempts to reform France’s system of trade and industry. Colbert died in 1683 and his fleet was largely destroyed in King William’s War from 1692 to 1700.



Credit: Library of Congress

Alfred Thayer Mahan (1840-1914) was an Admiral in the United States Navy.

In the absence of Colbert’s vision, the French navy reverted to its role as simply a weapon in the King’s arsenal, and a reflection of the power and prestige of the French monarchy. The situation for the navy – as distinct from local squadrons of privateers raised by the regional admiralties – was always precarious. France was primarily a continental power, with a strong national bias for the army, which was thought to be the only real guarantor of the state from both internal and external threats. And since seapower requires deep pockets, it was always hard for the state to sustain the navy in times of protracted war or extended peace.

Throughout the 18<sup>th</sup> century France remained a great maritime commercial state largely by inertia. With a vast and accessible coastline, a huge number of Frenchmen followed the sea and made trade connections around the world. Indeed, in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century France had the largest fishing fleet in the world and was the greatest supplier of sugar in Europe from its colonies in the Caribbean. Although naval historians make fighting France at sea look easy – usually by compressing a decade or so of war into a single decisive naval battle – reducing France to a point of vulnerability was an enormous challenge for the British, and it was not always possible to do so.

When Étienne François, duc de Choiseul, became Minister of everything between 1761 and 1770 – especially Minister of War and Secretary of the Navy – the French navy prospered again. It was Choiseul’s navy, and the astute guidance of French diplomacy, that settled the issue of American independence by 1783. The greatest naval battle of that conflict, the Battle of the Chesapeake in 1781, was tactically indecisive but very decisive strategically. This was, in many ways, the French way: seapower was a means to an end, not an end in itself. And rather typically, Choiseul’s fleet scarcely outlasted him, and was utterly undone by neglect and then revolution in the decades that followed.

The boom-and-bust cycle of French naval building in the Age of Sail and the precarious relationship between the French state and its navy may inform us better about our own circumstances than anything in British maritime history of that era. Like Paris, Ottawa lies inland and is remote from Canada’s three coasts. If you ever wonder about how remote most Canadians are from the sea, you need only consider the endless debate in Parliament over search and rescue aircraft, the need for long-range, all-weather helicopters, and the positioning of search and rescue resources along the coasts (or in the north). Such debate would never be as prolonged or as apparently futile if most Canadians could not solve their emergency problems simply by dialing 911. The essential fact is that Canada is not a maritime nation, it is a continental one: the bulk of the people, power and politicians live inland. For them water is a barrier, something to get over to get where you need to go. Moreover, the military tradition formed by the colonists of what is now Canada was continental. Like France, most of what Canada did was fight battles on the land frontiers of the country. The armouries scattered in towns and villages across Canada are silent testimony to that tradition.

There have been moments, nonetheless, when Canada verged on being a maritime state. The first was in the 1870s, when the young Dominion *was* a great maritime



Lord Anson’s victory off Cape Finisterre, 3 May 1747.

Credit: Samuel Scott

power, with pioneering and innovative steam auxiliary and sailing fleets operating from both the St. Lawrence system and the Maritimes. During the 1878 Russian war scare, when the British Admiralty informed Canada that no cruisers could be spared to defend shipping in Canadian waters, the new Dominion set out to build its own navy. The British Admiralty concluded that the Canadian navy, based on turning Canadian vessels into auxiliary warships, “would exceed in number and speed any force a European power at war with England could readily acquire on the Atlantic seaboard.”<sup>1</sup> The plan for a Dominion navy, built around *Charybdis*, a cruiser loaned to Canada by the Royal Navy, came to naught in 1882 but the reluctance of the Imperial government to defend Canadian waters and the size of Canada’s merchant fleet represented a tantalizing moment in naval history.

That moment passed, and Canada threw itself into continental development. Instead of modernizing its shipbuilding industry and making the transition from sail to steam, it built railways and settled the prairies. The Canadian shipbuilding industry was moribund by 1900 and Britain was even less eager to help with maritime problems.

Although there was momentary unanimity in Parliament when George Foster brought forward his motion in March 1909 to establish a Canadian navy, there was no subsequent agreement on why a navy was needed. This issue remains unclear for Canadians even today. After all, as Prime Minister Wilfrid Laurier rather smugly informed the 1897 Colonial Conference, Canada has no defence problems. *The Daily Star* of Montreal captured the public mood in 1906 when it commented – prophetically – that the withdrawal of the British forces from Canada did not matter because Canada was protected by the US Navy. Small wonder that Admiral Jackie Fisher, later First Sea Lord, muttered just after the turn of the century that Canadians were “an unpatriotic and grasping people who stick to us only for the good they can get from us ... we ought to do nothing whatsoever for them.”<sup>2</sup>



British *Pearl*-class screw corvette HMS *Charybdis* at Esquimalt, BC, May 1870.

The catalyst for Foster's proposal to Parliament that Canada build its own navy, and for unanimous support for his motion, was the pace of German naval building, which had just been revealed. Fear gripped the Empire. Prime Minister Laurier, who originally wanted simply a militarized Fisheries Protection Service, seized the moment and proposed a proper navy as both an instrument of state power and as an engine of industrial growth, primarily in Quebec where his support was waning.

Curiously, historians have dwelt upon the details of Laurier's plan for a local squadron, but not his attempt to build a *national* naval service and all that that implied. His final scheme, which added one *Boadicea*-class cruiser to the mix, would have required about 2,600 sea-going personnel, plus dockyard establishments, training support, a naval college, and headquarters and command personnel: in total nearly 4,000 regular force personnel and a budget of \$3 million. This would have made the RCN larger than the regular Canadian army, which numbered some 3,000 officers and men. In short, what Laurier proposed in 1910 was a navy big enough to be autonomous and an ambitious re-orientation of Canada's defence policy.

Laurier also saw the navy as an engine to drive Canada's moribund shipbuilding industry. Shortly after the *Naval Act* was passed in 1910 he convinced Vickers of Britain, one of the great armament manufacturers, to establish a shipyard at Maisonneuve, on Montreal Island, to build the new navy. Canadian Vickers opened in 1911, and played a key role in Canadian naval construction for the next 60

years. However, Anglo-Canadians in Ontario saw this as little more than a political boondoggle that would benefit Quebec. So Canadian naval procurement was shaped by politics from the outset, and Laurier's scheme illustrates the abiding and central role of Quebec – curiously enough – in the fortunes of the Canadian navy during its first century.



The Royal Canadian Navy *St. Laurent*-class destroyer HMCS *Fraser* (DDH 233) underway during Exercise Distant Drum, 19 May 1983.

Credit: USN

Canadians voted in a general election in 1911, an election in which naval policy played a key role for the only time in Canadian history. Laurier lost and Parliament decided it did not want his navy. As a result, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was virtually stillborn and by the time war broke out in Europe in 1914 Canada's navy was moribund. That left only one option when war came in 1914: throw the weight of Canada's continental military tradition – its soldiers and youth – onto the Western Front. The British consoled Canadians with the knowledge that if a maritime threat developed, the Imperial fleet would safeguard Canada's shoreline. When the U-boats finally arrived on the coast in 1917 it was undefended and the British were too busy to send help. Canadian politicians noticed. In fact they noticed two things: the murderous campaign on the Western Front which drove Canada to the brink of civil war in 1917; and the failure of the mother country to help in a time of naval need.

It fell to William Lyon Mackenzie King – the Prime Minister who Canadian military historians love to hate – to build the first real Canadian fleet. Canadian naval historians might want to venerate him as our equivalent of Colbert! In fact, Mackenzie King was unquestionably the father of the modern RCN. In the interwar years he built a fleet in a way no one has been able to do before or since: he bought it, offshore, with cash. In 1927 King's government ordered the construction of the destroyers *Saguenay* and *Skeena* from British yards: the first modern warships built for the RCN. When King returned to power after 1935 he bought a half flotilla of C-class destroyers from the British. By 1939 the RCN had a respectable little fleet of seven modern destroyers. This was not an expression of national will but an attempt by King to create alternative modes of response to the looming crisis in Europe. No one wanted a repeat of the casualties of 1914-1918 and the conscription crisis of 1917.

King even accepted – tentatively to be sure – ambitious plans for massive naval expansion on the eve of war. His January 1939 naval scheme called for the acquisition of nine large and powerful *Tribal*-class destroyers, 18 motor-torpedo boats, a small squadron of minesweepers, two depot ships and two secondary bases for the fleet. This, plus the seven *River*-class destroyers already acquired would have pushed the RCN from 1,800 all ranks to over 6,000. As with Laurier's 1910 plans, this would have made the RCN Canada's largest armed service. This expansion program formed the basis of fleet development in the Second World War, which in turn founded the modern Canadian navy.

Leonard Murray, Director of Naval Operations and Plans in 1939, later recalled that the only limit to fleet expansion



*The Canadian destroyer HMCS Algonquin (DDG 283) is shown underway, 18 February 2006. The aircraft carrier USS John C. Stennis can be seen in the background.*

during the winter of 1939-40 was whether all the money allocated could be spent in that fiscal year. The constraints on naval expansion at this time were therefore structural and industrial, and the government worked hard over the next few years to overcome these constraints. By 1945 shipbuilding was Canada's second largest industry – most of it concentrated along the lower St. Lawrence River – and Canada had built the fifth largest navy in the world.

It is clear that King hoped that a large navy would help deflect pressure to put the army into the field, and keep Canadians content about their war effort (he did the same with the air force by signing the British Commonwealth Air Training Plan agreement in 1939). It did not work. The navy did yeoman work in the North Atlantic but Canadians failed to identify with it. Moreover, the RCN was unable to defend the Gulf of St. Lawrence against U-boat attacks in the summer of 1942, and the resulting furor in Parliament hit King's government hard. The navy needed to be successful and it needed to be seen taking the war to the enemy. In 1942-43 it could do neither. King was forced to commit troops to the invasion of Sicily to placate an angry electorate, and eventually the Chief of Naval Staff, Vice-Admiral Percy W. Nelles was sacked. The myth and legacy of the Canadian Corps during the Great War was too much to overcome. Canada was a continental nation, and its military tradition revealed that. The navy was a creation of the state, not a manifestation of national will (and so it remains).

Among the legacies of the war effort was the Canadian maritime policy announced in 1944. This was a real attempt to build a lasting integrated maritime policy on the strength of wartime developments in shipbuilding, including a Canadian deep-sea merchant navy and a large



Credit: USN photo by CAF Sgt. Matthew McGregor

The Royal Canadian Navy *Halifax*-class frigate HMCS *Calgary* (FFH-335) departs Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, to begin the at-sea phase of the 2014 Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise, 8 July 2014.

and capable navy. The Canadian merchant fleet, however, was excluded from much of the post-war redevelopment trade in Europe, costly to operate and riven by labour unrest. The government sold it off to Britain in 1947. Shipbuilding and the navy were saved by the Cold War which thrust Canada back into a naval role building escorts and anti-submarine vessels in anticipation of WW III. A large, modern fleet – by 1960 about 100 ships of various types, including an aircraft carrier – was built in widely dispersed yards (although concentrated along the lower St. Lawrence) both to maintain capacity but also to ensure that it was dispersed under the new threat of nuclear war.<sup>3</sup>

But the maritime policy gradually faded until it was finally killed in the early 1960s by the advent of thermo-nuclear war and changing social conditions at home. A decade after the navy’s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary it was down to a core of 24 *St. Laurent*-type frigates in desperate need of modernization, four new DDH 280 destroyers, three submarines and three supply ships (AORs).

It would be great to say that the naval renaissance which delivered the current fleet of Canadian Patrol Frigates in the 1990s was the result of a groundswell of national sentiment, or the result of consistent pressure from Members of Parliament to keep the navy modern and capable. But there is no evidence of that. Most Canadians – then as now – have never even seen their fleet. The reasons for building the Canadian Patrol Frigates were entirely related to industrial, political and foreign policy calculations. It was thus a rational decision made by the state to build a

modern fleet. And the government – like the monarchs of 18<sup>th</sup> century France – built it as an instrument of statecraft.

In the end it would seem that the way Canada makes naval policy, builds fleets and the relationship among the navy, the people and the state is pretty much normal (although Canada seems to be uniquely bad at procurement). Navies are expensive to build and maintain, they require long lead times, they require enormous political capital, they have tremendous political ramifications, and the struggle to build and sustain them is never-ending. In that sense, uncertainty has always been a central feature of fleet planning. The navy’s key battleground has always been Ottawa, and it neglects the politics of procurement at its peril. As the French navy knew only too well, if you want to build a fleet you need to have the ear of the King. 🇨🇦

#### Notes

1. Gilbert Tucker, *The Naval Service of Canada*, Volume I, Ottawa, published under the authority of the Minister of Defence, 2010 edition, p. 63.
2. As quoted in Barry M. Gough, “The End of the Pax Britannica and the Origins of the Royal Canadian Navy: Shifting Strategic Demands of an Empire at Sea,” in W.A.B. Douglas (ed.), *The RCN in Transition*, Vancouver: UBC, 1985, p. 95.
3. See Michael Hennessy, “The Rise and Fall of Canadian Maritime Policy, 1939-1965: A Study of Industry, Navalism and the State,” Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of New Brunswick, 1995.

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