

# *Sacred Vessels*

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*The Cult of the Battleship  
and the Rise of the U.S. Navy*

Robert L. O'Connell

*Westview Press*

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*To my mother and father,  
Dorothea O'Connell and Robert J. O'Connell*

Frontispiece photo courtesy of the U.S. Naval Institute.

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# *Sacred Vessels*

*“The psychology of the Navy Department . . . frequently seemed to retire from the realm of logic into a dim religious world in which Neptune was God, Mahan his prophet, and the United States Navy the only true church.”*

—Henry L. Stimson

*“It’s almost idolatry for me to feel this way about a piece of metal.”*

—Former crew member speaking of the  
USS Wisconsin on NBC’s *Today Show*,  
June 10, 1991



*America's dreadnoughts, ca. 1936.*

# Preface

Writing critically about something you have come to regard with affection must provoke mixed emotions. As I learned more and more about the modern battleship's shortcomings, I found myself, like so many before me, falling under its spell. I have traveled hundreds of miles to visit these wonderful ships, reverently preserved like a necklace of talismans around our nation's coasts. I have stood in awe under the great guns, wondering what it must have been like to hear them fire. Perhaps it is true that their sound and fury signified very little in terms of actual destructive power. But most people thought they did, and that was and still is important. Besides, for the most part, we were proud of those ships. Now we live in a time of weapons so terrible that we must actually hide them—beneath the ground and below the surface of the sea. But, like battleships, they keep the peace precisely because of what others think they can do. All things being equal, who would not prefer the dreadnoughts?

Few books are written quickly, or without help. This one took a very long time and received much assistance from colleagues, friends, and family. First in line for thanks is Joe Kett, who poked this thing along from masters thesis, to doctoral dissertation, and finally . . . into print. I owe Joe a lot. Peter Kracht, my editor, literally dragged the manuscript out of my bedroom closet, breathed life into it, and set me on my way revising and expanding. Truly, there would be no *Sacred Vessels* without him. I will probably never write as well as John Casey or Norman Graebner, but I want to thank them for providing me with encouragement and personal standards of excellence.

We are all busy, and frequently middle-aged and farsighted. Thus reading even the best-typed manuscripts—mine wasn't—constitutes a true act of kindness. With this in mind I want to thank Peter Karsten, Dennis Evans, Alex Roland, Elting Morison, Whittle Johnston, Gordon Bowen, Carl Brandt, and William McNeill—all of whom, at one point or another, waded through my collected thoughts on battleships and provided valuable guidance.

The research for this book was done mostly at the Library of Congress and the Alderman Library of the University of Virginia. The excellent staffs of both institutions were extremely helpful and generous with their time. I also want to thank the staffs of the Operational Archives of the U.S. Navy's Naval History Division, the Library of the U.S. Department of State, and the U.S. National Archives. I am additionally very grateful for the meticulous editing of Marian Safran and the skilled coordination of Beverly LeSuer, Senior Project Editor at Westview Press, and her replacement (Bev has moved on to law school), Michelle Starika. Thanks also go to Stephen Eitelman at the Foreign Science and Technology Center, who provided computer support for my index.

Finally, I want to thank my wife, Benjie, and my daughters, Jessica and Lucy, for their love and generosity in giving me the time to write. They are far more important to me than any book.

*Robert L. O'Connell*

# Contents

*List of Illustrations,* ix  
*Preface,* xiii

1. Introduction:  
A Fatal Vision, 1
2. In the Beginning:  
Traditions of the Naval World, 9
3. Upon This Rock:  
The Technological Revolution and the Prophet Mahan, 39
4. Crusaders in Blue  
and the Grail of Seapower, 73
5. Sacred Vessel: The Dreadnought, 101
6. The Evil Below . . . and Above, 139
7. Trial by Fire: Battle in the North Sea, 153
8. Crisis of Faith:  
Protecting the North Atlantic, 191
9. Martyrdom:  
Dreadnoughts in the Wake of Versailles, 233
10. Requiem:  
The Washington Naval Conference, 261
11. Life After Death:  
Rehabilitating the Dreadnought, 277



12. Conclusion:  
Vampires of Seapower, 317

*Appendix, 323*  
*Notes, 327*  
*About the Book and Author, 391*  
*Index, 393*

# Illustrations

- America's dreadnoughts, ca. 1936, *frontispiece*
- Admiral William Sowden Sims, 11
- "A fascination with ceremonialism itself." The USS *Texas*,  
ca. 1918, 20
- USS *Alfred*, the first battleship commissioned by the  
United States, 22
- Action off Cuddalore, 1783. Painting by August Louis de  
Rossi di Cerci, 34
- "The emergence of a sort of primitive, generalized battleship."  
USS *Massachusetts*, 1893, 46
- USS *Cumberland* versus the ironclad CSS *Virginia*, 52
- "The day ended in utter frustration." USS *Monitor*  
versus CSS *Virginia*, 53
- "Foundations of the modern American military-industrial  
complex." A naval gun factory, 62
- The naval prophet, Alfred Thayer Mahan, 63
- A symbol of power for the age. Magazine cover, 1917, 84
- "Squat and immovable as castles." USS *Minnesota*, 85
- "Remember the *Maine!*" 89
- Lithograph of the Battle of Manila Bay, 93
- USS *Michigan*, which along with sister ship *South Carolina*  
made up the first class of American all-big-gun battleships, 111

“The interference caused by the volume of funnel smoke . . . might easily result in the defeat of the superior fleet.”

USS *North Dakota*, 118

Admiral George Dewey, the rock upon which the church was built, 128

“Swelling battleship and the strategic hymen.”

USS *Missouri* transits the Panama Canal in 1915. USS *Idaho* passes through the canal approximately a decade later, 136

The end of the *Blucher*, 173

German U-boat, a cur among weapons, 210

USS *Arizona*, passing New York’s 96th Street Pier, during World War I, 227

The dreadnought and its enemies, the torpedo and the plane, 252

USS *Maryland*, sister to *Colorado* and *West Virginia*—all that would remain of the Phantom Fleet after the Washington conference, 268

The old battle line. The *Pennsylvania* and *Colorado* followed by three cruisers, 284

The new battle line—domesticating the carrier. The aircraft carriers *Langley* and *Ticonderoga* in line with the *Washington*, *North Carolina*, and *South Dakota*, followed by cruisers, 284

A dreadnought visits the Big Apple. Modernized USS *Colorado* (note catapult-launched spotter aircraft) off lower Manhattan in the early 1930s, 288

USS *North Carolina*, first of the U.S. posttreaty battleships, lets loose a full broadside, 305

Pearl Harbor, the end of the *Arizona*, 314

USS *Washington*, which (with the help of the  
*South Dakota*) was the only American dreadnought  
to sink an enemy battleship in combat, 318

Japanese surrender on the deck of the USS *Missouri*, 319

Back from the grave, the USS *New Jersey* in the 1980s.  
Note cruise missile launchers, 320

# 1

## *Introduction: A Fatal Vision*

### I

One day in the spring of 1921 a battleship recently surrendered to the American Navy by the vanquished German High Seas Fleet swung placidly at anchor in the middle of Chesapeake Bay. Several smaller craft soon arrived on the scene and took stations around the great warship. Aboard those latecomers were a number of important observers, including the civilian head of the Navy Department, a former secretary of war, several influential senators and representatives, a large body of admirals and other high-ranking officers, and numerous members of the press. All attention was focused on the German dreadnought, stolid and defiant, bristling with guns, aesthetically the very epitome of belligerence. Squatting there in the water, it must have seemed to most of the gathered dignitaries virtually invulnerable.

This quiet scene was soon interrupted by the buzzing of airplanes. As the squadron appeared over the horizon and drew closer, it was revealed to be made up of a number of frail biplanes, looking and sounding a bit like a swarm of flying insects. Presently, the aircraft gathered above the dreadnought and one by one dove down to drop bombs upon it. At first these sorties must have seemed no more menacing than mosquitoes attacking a rhinoceros. But soon the battleship was revealed to have suffered heavily—her superstructure was in shambles and the stern of the ship was almost entirely submerged. Relentlessly the planes continued the assault, their bombs throwing huge spumes of water and assorted chunks of dreadnought high into the air. Finally, after two particularly ferocious

hits, the great ship stood nearly straight up in the water and then slipped quickly beneath the waves.

Among most of the observers, reactions ranged from shocked silence to scarcely concealed glee. But in one quarter the response was considerably more demonstrative. Aboard the USS *Henderson* a group of admirals gathered on the deck were reliably reported to have wept openly for the martyred Teutonic dreadnought—a remarkable reaction considering that the United States had been at war with Germany just two and a half years before. Certainly it was true that these officers had staked a considerable portion of their professional prestige on the battleship's ability to survive this airborne assault. Yet these were men trained practically from adolescence to maintain an iron grip over their emotions in the face of adversity—to carry on with friends of a lifetime lying dead at their feet. Consequently, it seems probable that something more was involved there than simply a public demonstration of bad judgment. The destruction of this ship must have cut very deep into the naval soul.

When I first heard of the test and the emotions it provoked, it struck me as strangely universal and archetypical. There was something archaic, almost medieval, implied in that twentieth-century trial of arms. It hearkened back to the days when not only ships but also cannon and swords had names, when weapons of all sorts were embellished with elaborate decorative motifs and anthropomorphized as a matter of course. Nevertheless, this was a serious test of two of the reputedly most potent weapons then in existence. The machines involved were products of considerable technological sophistication and not supposed to be the subject of much emotion. But that was obviously not true in the case of the weeping admirals. The atmosphere was more theatrical than empirical, a melodramatic combination of joust and stress analysis, with the emphasis on the former. The admirals were innocent and honest enough to betray their emotions, but otherwise the staging was not so very different from contemporary tests. It seemed to say a lot about the way we value technology—how we manipulate it and how it manipulates us. Yet it is more important to understand why, to explore the causes and origins of those attitudes.

## II

The dreadnought sunk by the swarm of aircraft was as much a symbol as it was a warship, an armor-plated embodiment of the possibilities for compromise

between technology and tradition. For beneath the metallic flanks of that and every modern battleship beat the heart of a sailing ship-of-the-line. For hundreds of years those noble wooden vessels had epitomized virtually every aspect of naval life—its rituals, its social structure, its conceptions of power, courage, and fighting etiquette. The sailing battleship was the linchpin of an entire way of life, an existence so stable that it seemed virtually immutable.

But the coming of steam propulsion and explosive-shell fire left the wooden warship hopelessly obsolete in a matter of a few decades. And as the sailing warship went, so went the skills of the professional naval officers, who were, after all, experts at harnessing the wind with ropes and canvas. So, overwhelmed by what amounted to a tidal wave of technological innovation, naval officers fell into a sort of torpor, watching passively as their ships metamorphosed beneath them, with barely an idea of what this new world might bring. Their lassitude would stretch out over three decades, until finally, inspired by the writings of a fellow officer-turned historian, naval leaders would take stock of the new environment and conclude, with profound relief, that nothing fundamental had changed. The new ships in which they rode were judged entirely amenable to the rules that had governed naval warfare for centuries. These supposedly revolutionary vessels were simply steam-powered, armor-plated equivalents of what had come before. To virtually all concerned, it seemed that technology had been tamed and the traditional world of the naval officer saved.

Unfortunately what appeared to be salvation was ultimately based on self-deception. The battleship concept was an exercise in tunnel vision. In fact, the possible applications of technology to naval warfare were far broader than those defined by the simple interaction of big guns, armor plate, and steam propulsion, so in wartime the fate of the battleship would be that of tactical underachiever and victim. Nonetheless, the dominant element of virtually all the world's navies resisted this reality with all of their strength. And it could hardly have been otherwise.

Their attitude was not simply a matter of stubbornness and blind conservatism. To those men the battleship was the single most important artifact of their professional existence: It symbolized everything that was acceptable and orderly about naval life. It was at once a place to live and work and a bulwark against technology-induced anarchy—a true vessel of culture. Put in this context it is easier to see why the battleship was passionately defended in the face of all logic, why American naval officers could weep over the sacrifice of a single German dreadnought.

All of this might be considered somewhat quaint and largely irrelevant to anything other than naval sociology, were it not for the fact that those ships were perceived to be the ultimate weapons of their day. They had their detractors. But among the states owning them, dreadnoughts were generally considered the final guarantee against seaborne aggression. And in spite of numerous wartime disasters that dragged thousands of men to their deaths, the battleship's reputation as terror of the high seas persisted long beyond the point that pure logic might have dictated. Plainly, naval officers did their best to promote and perpetuate battleships. But in America and most other modern states the influence of the uniformed military is far from absolute. Nonetheless, politicians and the public, with a much smaller stake in the arguments and the ships, went along with them. That seems to say something very basic and timeless about the way weapons are chosen.

We live in a time that is at once similar and far removed from the point at which the members of sailing navies found their world being transformed. In our case the specter of nuclear weapons has also raised the most fundamental questions about the relevance or irrelevance of past experience, particularly as it relates to weaponry. On the face of it, the impersonal forces of technology appear to have complete control, the life-and-death dictates of our own security environment mandating the most efficient weapons possible. Indeed, the course of the great Soviet-American arms race, having sent the potential destructiveness of strategic weapons spiraling upward beyond even comprehension, seems to be *prima facie* evidence that this is in fact the case—that the operational imperatives driving arms development are absolute and devoid of human content. Yet consider the case of the Reagan-era Pentagon graphic that featured side-by-side comparisons of very large Soviet ICBMs with the relatively puny U.S. Minuteman III and MX missiles, in an effort to demonstrate that the United States was lagging in this area. Although the comparison said almost nothing about relative capabilities, it spoke volumes about the way people ultimately value weapons and, still more fundamentally, how the course of technology might be influenced by human preconceptions.

### III

At one level, of course, technology is immune to influences beyond those generated by its own internal logic; it is the equivalent of a mechanical mouse



following the path dictated by the line of least resistance. In that sense technology is not just a product of reason; it is reason activated and externalized from the human, its creator. But if the step-by-step progression of technology must blindly follow only the laws of possibility, that explanation fails to account for the peculiarly human element in so much of our machinery, even the most sophisticated examples. Rather it seems that humans, although unable to manipulate the stages of a particular process other than in accordance with the rules of feasibility, are nevertheless able to exert a generalized influence over the entire process. The force behind technology remains distinctively human, as well as a matter of pure technique. The relationship, however, is one of coexistence, not integration—an eccentric interaction, like a cam gyrating first in one and then in another direction. Human effectiveness in modifying technology is generally maximized at the beginning or end of a developmental sequence. Once the choice is exercised, however, the course of any process is henceforth determined by rules inherent to the procedure itself. Therefore, although the results of a particular chain of events may be directly opposed to the purposes and desires of humans, it is nonetheless true that choice has been exerted—just as Mickey Mouse undeniably set the brooms in motion in *Fantasia*, though he might not have planned or liked the outcome.

Meanwhile, the manner in which people alter the course of technology is subtly influenced by a number of characteristically human preconceptions and conventions, which are themselves often irrelevant or even inefficient and whimsical. Historians have noted the persistent check that aesthetic values exerted upon the potential destructiveness of preindustrial warfare. Weapons makers were artisans, and the beauty of their products was frequently as important as their deadlines. Similarly the manifest sleekness of so many contemporary weapons might be used to question whether aesthetic preferences have entirely disappeared from their design. Another example of this general phenomenon is the persistent, almost instinctive, equation of size with power in spite of the fact that the opposite often tends to be the case. The desire to recreate one's own being at times profoundly conditioned the course of invention. The telephone, for instance, was the result of a calculated attempt to imitate the operations of the ear. To point to specific examples oversimplifies a state that is really a ferment of cultural and emotional values operating on all levels. Elting Morison captured that spirit of multifaceted valuation that people use to appraise machinery in his description of the modern era's archetypical mechanism: