

Scott Mobley. *Progressives in Navy Blue: Maritime Strategy, American Empire, and the Transformation of U.S. Naval Identity, 1873-1898*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2018. Pp. 432.

In clear and smoothly-flowing prose, Scott Mobley offers many compelling insights into the late nineteenth-century United States Navy. Most emphatically, Mobley argues throughout the work that the identity of the Navy transitioned from centring on an idea of the “mariner-warrior” to that of the “warrior-engineer” between 1873 and 1898. This earlier identity celebrated the nautical ability of its officers, as tested through sailing skills as well as knowledge of gunnery and landing parties. As the result of the new warrior-engineer mindset, however, strategic vision exemplified the acme of naval professionalism by 1898. For these officers, this focus largely entailed what we understand today as the operational level of war, or a focus on campaigning. Less developed was a sense of grand strategy. Although many naval historians have recognised the emergence of this strategic mentality in the early twentieth century, Mobley establishes its formation prior to the Spanish-American War. Unfortunately, it is difficult to demonstrate how widely this perspective suffused the Navy due to source limitations often encountered by cultural historians.

Mobley, a former surface warfare officer who graduated with a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin, also shows how this new and increasing concern for strategy coexisted with an emphasis on what he labels “mechanism,” or the technological components of the new steam navy. Rather than accept the more typical division of officers into camps of progressives and conservatives, Mobley splits officers into two so-called “cultures of advocacy” for strategy and mechanism. In other words, this was not a case of those with new ideas at odds with those seeking to maintain the old. Instead, it consisted of two novel perspectives that peaked in competition between 1885 and 1895 before amalgamating into a new “dichotomous” naval identity of the warrior-engineer (p. 5).

Mobley consistently contextualises these developments within the progressive movement, which he defines as “the use of specialists and professionalized experts, scientific method [...] and an ethos of efficiency” (p. 6). This leads him to challenge the work of earlier historians, who have argued that naval officers’ careers isolated them from larger society. On the contrary, naval officers helped pioneer

major improvements in graduate education along with far better-recognised institutions such as Johns Hopkins, sharing “common intellectual wellsprings” in terms of pedagogy and research (p. 184).

Mobley also takes on a difficult task in challenging the school of diplomatic historians as well as some naval historians who contend that the U.S. built a navy in the late nineteenth century as an active step in the pursuit of empire. First, the Navy had long existed to serve empire, albeit an informal one, with its peacetime mission centred on supporting national economic interests abroad. More controversially, he contends that the Navy’s *raison d’être* shifted during this period, not toward empire but rather toward national defence in response to perceptions of changing geopolitics. Some politicians, for example, now assumed the Navy must be prepared to wage war in a matter of weeks rather than months. This required the Navy to shift its focus from an orientation on single ships to one of fleets, as reflected in the increased strategic focus on campaigns. It subsequently took the Navy a few years longer to get the kind of ships capable of fulfilling this new vision of naval warfare. As Mobley argues, for example, the ABCD ships did not herald a new imperial navy; rather, they fulfilled the traditional focus on supporting national economic interests given their limited technical updates from previous ships (p. 143).

This defensive focus also required more planning as epitomised by the establishment of the Office of Naval Intelligence (ONI) in 1882. Strategy, some naval officers now argued, must no longer be envisioned “on the fly” (p. 27). In this vein, Mobley suggests that historians have overstressed the Naval War College’s role in shaping this strategic vision while not giving enough credit to the ONI, which began planning in peacetime for wartime contingencies in 1885. The ONI’s establishment also exemplified the application of progressive ideas because it provided a systematic and efficient method to formalise the transmission of intelligence throughout the Navy.

This solid work has a few minor flaws. Mobley defines culture as a “distinctive set of beliefs, values, ideas, and behavioral norms,” but his focus on the naval identity of officers largely restricts itself to a culture of professionalism (p. 185). As a result, his use of culture challenges aspects of some standard naval narratives even if it does not fully provide an alternative one. Elsewhere he eschews the opportunity to dig deeper into naval culture, such as by interrogating changing understandings of “heroic conduct” (p. 264). This might help add nuance to the somewhat broad and undifferentiated labels

of “mariner-warrior” and “warrior-engineer.” This reviewer also wants to know who has more agency in this story: the naval officers Mobley focuses most of his attention on or a handful of influential and energetic civilians.

Mobley’s focus on this particular interwar period offers many analogies to today, including a diminishing sense of physical space affording a nation with protection by virtue of geography. It also speaks to enduring debates about a more technocratic mindset as opposed to one of breadth, as at this time “brain work” increasingly displaced “drill work” (p. 249). Ultimately, this work challenges traditional narratives even if it could go further in providing deeper insights from the perspective of cultural history.

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