

Guide to the
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of the
**ANNUAL REPORTS OF THE
SECRETARY OF THE NAVY
1821—1901**

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Introduction

The *Annual Reports of the Secretary of the Navy* provides a comprehensive overview of the institutional and operational history of the U.S. Navy in the nineteenth century. The earliest reports, those for 1821 and 1822, are collections of disparate communications from the Navy Department to the Congress. They include the "Report of the Commissioners of the Naval Hospital Fund," a list of the clerks in the secretary's office, "Sundry Statements in relation to the Navy Pension Fund," a report of contingent expenses, "A Statement of Moneys drawn from the Treasury," "Estimates for the Naval Service," "The number and location of Naval Stations," "Documents from the Navy Department" (including the "Statement of Captures of Piratical Vessels . . . in the West Indies"), "A Plan on the Naval Peace Establishment," "A Catalogue of books purchased for use of the Navy Department for the last six years" (including the *Treatise on Expatriation*, Williams's *History of Vermont*, and six volumes of Franklin's *Works*), along with the "Annual Statements of the Appropriations and Expenditures," and a report on prize agents. By December 1823 the department began more standardized records in the form of the "Report of the Secretary of the Navy," which included a summary of departmental activities as well as attachments of extracts of correspondence received from various naval officers and a list of officers who had died since the first of the year. The 1824 report was expanded to include the first estimates of naval forces necessary in various circumstances and a proposed bill for the reorganization of the navy along with miscellaneous papers; henceforth, the annual reports provide an excellent source for the increasing involvement of the navy with both commercial and technological developments.

The reports also provide interesting miscellaneous information. Among the earlier documents, one can find material on the quantity of cordage manufactured from domestic hemp used by the navy since 1812, the "Statement of Contracts," information regarding the Pacific Squadron, documents that discuss the navy's efforts to suppress the slave trade, a report on real estate acquired by the federal government since July 4, 1776, information regarding taxes imposed on the Philadelphia Navy Yard, and a report on the loss of the *Chesapeake* in 1813. The report of 1831 even discusses U.S. property in Liberia.

The reports reflect the institutional changes and problems of the service. The first summary of courts-martial and courts of inquiry appears in 1826, and the secretary's report itself becomes more standardized after 1829. The report of December 1842 describes the reorganization of the department and the creation of the bureau system, including the Bureaus of Yards and Docks; Ordnance and Hydrography; Construction, Equipment, and Repairs; Provisions and Clothing; and Medicine and Surgery. Other bureaus, such as Navigation and Personnel, were added later. This was certainly the most important single organizational innovation in nineteenth-century U.S. naval history, because, in the absence of a naval commander in chief or a naval staff, it was the bureau chiefs who controlled the service throughout this period and continued to do so at least until the appointment of Admiral William S. Benson as chief of naval operations in 1915. Even today, the bureau chiefs remain powerful figures within the naval hierarchy.

Along with commerce and technology, the reports indicate the navy's long-standing interest in science and education. Various secretaries remarked on the Wilkes expedition, the search for Sir John Franklin, the exploration of the La Plata River, and early arctic expeditions, such as the doomed voyage of the *Jeannette*. The reports also discuss the development of the Naval Academy, the Naval Observatory, and the Naval War College.

Operational matters always occupied a certain amount of attention in the reports as the navy maintained squadrons in the Atlantic, Mediterranean, and Pacific throughout the entire period. Although these papers do not provide a detailed review of operations during the Mexican War, Gideon Welles's summaries of operations are probably the best capsule history of the navy during the Civil War. Welles stated in his interim report of July 1861: "Extraordinary events which have since transpired [following Lincoln's inauguration] have called for extraordinary action on the part of the government, demanding a large augmentation of the naval force, and the recall of almost the whole of our foreign squadrons for service on our own coasts." Welles increased the size of the navy by more than one hundred ships in the first six months of the war, and, by the time of his regular report in December 1861, he could comment on the enforcement of the blockade, operations along the Mississippi River, and the capture of Southern seaboard ports. The appendix to this, and subsequent reports, includes after-action accounts by various commanders. For instance, the 1861 report discusses the capture of Port Royal by Flag Officer Samuel F. Du Pont and that of 1862 the seizure of New Orleans by Admiral David Farragut, while the 1863 report gives prominent attention to the failure of Du Pont's attack on Charleston.

The demobilization of the navy, which started even before the final Confederate defeat, began almost twenty years of neglect. After the fall of Fort Fisher in February 1865, Welles sent letters to the various squadron commanders informing them of the Navy Department's plan to reduce costs by decommissioning vessels and releasing personnel. Early in May, within weeks of the surrenders of Lee and Johnston and before the surrender of Confederate forces in the West, Welles ordered commanders to reduce the existing domestic squadrons by one half. By the end of July, the blockading squadrons, which had contained hundreds of warships and auxiliaries, mustered no more than thirty steamers with storeships. The December 1866 report indicated that reduction of the fleet remained the first task of the department.

Despite the fact that the length and detail of the annual reports continued much the same as those of the war years—an indication of the nature of bureaucratic development—the navy remained small and increasingly obsolescent under both Republican and Democratic administrations. By December 1870 the fleet had 181 ships of all classes, from tugs to cruisers, from which it maintained stations in Atlantic, Pacific, Asiatic, and European waters; the European station had eight ships (129 guns), while the Asiatic had seven ships (88 guns). By 1880 the European Squadron was down to four ships and the Asiatic Squadron, six.

Secretary William H. Hunt's report of 28 November 1881 marks a major turning point in the history of the U.S. Navy. It began:

The condition of the Navy imperatively demands the prompt and earnest attention of Congress. Unless some action be had in its behalf it must soon dwindle into insignificance. From such a state it would be difficult to revive it into efficiency without dangerous delay and enormous expense. Emergencies may at any moment arise which would render its aid indispensable to the protection of the lives and property of our citizens abroad and at home, and even to our existence as a nation.

Secretary Hunt then included in the appendix to this rather alarming statement the finding of the advisory board, chaired by Admiral John Rodgers, which he had appointed the previous June. Even Admiral of the Navy David Dixon Porter, who throughout the postwar period had championed the continued use of sail, was compelled to state:

Our Navy has for some years past been in a rather inefficient condition, not altogether useless in time of peace when it is only necessary to have well-kept vessels to visit foreign countries, but for war purposes it is nearly worthless, reminding one of the ancient Chinese forts on which dragons were painted to frighten away the enemy.

Hunt served only thirteen months under Presidents Garfield and Arthur, which did not give him the opportunity to begin the building program recommended by the Rodgers board. His successors, William E. Chandler and William C. Whitney, did secure congressional support for the reduced buildup that led to what have come to be known as the ABCDs (the cruisers *Atlanta*, *Boston*, and *Chicago* and the gunboat *Dolphin*). Although the cruisers were rigged for sail in addition to their steam engines, none of the vessels performed up to its contract specifications, and the *Dolphin* was regarded as little more than a pleasure boat, this began a naval construction program that was producing "protected" cruisers of 7,500 tons and a maximum speed of 22 knots, along with modern battleships such as the *Maine* and the *Texas*, by 1891. Between March 1889, when the *Atlanta* was commissioned, and December 1891, thirteen ships had been added to the fleet. The report of that year stated that "the old wooden ships of the Navy have now practically passed out of existence. They no longer count even as a nominal factor in naval defense. The sole reliance of the United States to-day [*sic*] for the protection of its exposed seaboard is the new fleet. This has advanced slowly, but its development has been sure."

The Spanish-American War proved the efficacy of Washington's construction program, even though Spain did not rank as a first-rate sea power. The 1898 report provided a detailed account of naval operations in general and the extremely successful actions at Manila and Santiago in particular, as well as the normal administrative reports and recommended legislation. The war illustrated the power-projection capabilities of the fleet and presented the navy with an increasing number of strategic and technical problems.

The early years of the twentieth century saw significant changes in the international environment that would have serious effects on the mission of the U.S. Navy. The Russian defeats at Port Arthur and Tsushima, along with Japanese resentment over U.S. restrictions on Japanese immigration and Tokyo's apparent interest in the Philippines, led to the first of the Orange Plans for war between the United States and Japan. The passage of the First and Second Naval Laws by Germany signalled that country's intention to become a first-class naval and imperial power—an intention that posed a threat to the United States as well as to Great Britain and France. The launching of the *Dreadnought* in 1906 revolutionized the battle line and exacerbated the Anglo-German naval race; other changes in naval technology, such as the development of the submarine, the airplane, and the self-propelled torpedo, were to have even greater long-term effects. It was to face problems of this sort that the Navy Department organized the General Board in 1901. Although the General Board never developed into a naval general staff, its creation marked a distinct phase in naval planning and the end of the nineteenth-century U.S. Navy.

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