

Through the Lens of Sea Power and Maritime Strategy: Alfred T. Mahan and Julian S. Corbett on the Napoleonic Wars

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Both Alfred T. Mahan and Julian S. Corbett used the Napoleonic Wars to provide concrete illustrations of their theoretical arguments. This should not be surprising. When the two wrote at the dawn of the twentieth century, the Napoleonic Wars were the most recent great power conflict with a significant naval element. Though both explained the wars through a combination of naval, land, diplomatic, and economic tools of power, Mahan and Corbett weighted these instruments differently. This reflected Mahan's theory of sea power and Corbett's ideas about maritime strategy. Understanding how they explained the Napoleonic Wars and interpreted the outcome allows for a stronger understanding of their arguments and agendas while serving as a powerful corrective to land power-centric interpretations of those wars.

Alfred T. Mahan et Julian S. Corbett ont tous deux invoqué les guerres napoléoniennes comme illustrations concrètes de leurs arguments théoriques. Cette constatation n'a pas de quoi surprendre. Lorsque les deux auteurs étaient actifs à l'aube du 20e siècle, les guerres napoléoniennes étaient le plus récent conflit entre grandes puissances qui comprenait un élément naval important. Bien que Mahan et Corbett aient expliqué les guerres à l'aide d'une combinaison de visions navales, terrestres, diplomatiques et économiques du pouvoir, ils ont pondéré ces questions de différentes façons qui reflétaient la théorie de la puissance maritime de Mahan et les idées de Corbett sur la stratégie maritime. En apprenant à connaître leurs explications des guerres napoléoniennes et

leurs interprétations des résultats, l'on peut mieux comprendre leurs arguments et leurs raisonnements qui servent d'excellent correctif aux interprétations axées sur la puissance terrestre de ces guerres.

The dawn of the twentieth century witnessed a flowering of writing on naval history and strategic thought. Though numerous writers contributed to the rapidly developing canon, Alfred Thayer Mahan from the United States and Julian Stafford Corbett from Britain emerged as leaders in the field. As Winston Churchill later asserted, “The standard work on Sea Power was written by an American Admiral [Mahan]. The best accounts of British sea fighting and naval strategy were compiled by an English civilian [Corbett].”¹ Mahan wrote first breaking new ground in 1890 with *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660-1783*. He followed his seminal work with an expansive publication record that addressed topics ranging from naval history to contemporary affairs and even to his religious beliefs. He remained prolific to within months of his death in 1914. Corbett’s most important works on naval history and maritime strategy appeared in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In 1911, he published his most important work: *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Mahan and Corbett remain key naval and strategic theorists even today.²

Their conclusions often contrast starkly with those developed by military historians, especially those who focus on continental land powers. This led Mahan to contend, “I notice ... that the moment shore historians touch salt

¹ Winston Churchill, *The World Crisis* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1923), 1:93.

² Mahan and Corbett have received significant comparative consideration in Kevin D. McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett, and the Foundations of Naval Strategic Thought* (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 2021) as well as in two overviews of the history of strategic thought, see, Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: A History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Beatrice Heuser, *The Evolution of Strategy: Thinking War from Antiquity to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For the importance of respective theories of Mahan and Corbett, a selected list includes the following: John Gooch, “Maritime Command: Mahan and Corbett,” in *Seapower and Strategy*, eds. Colin S. Gray and Roger W. Barnett (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1989), 27; Jon Tetsuro Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy and Teaching Command: The Classic Works of Alfred Thayer Mahan Reconsidered* (Washington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1997), xi, 1-2; John H. Maurer, “Alfred Thayer Mahan and the Strategy of Sea Power,” in *The New Makers of Modern Strategy from the Ancient World to the Digital Age*, ed. Hal Brands (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2023), 169-172, 188-192; Andrew Lambert, *The British Way of War: Julian Corbett and the Battle for National Strategy* (New Haven: Yale, 2021), 13; Benjamin F. Armstrong, *21st Century Mahan: Sound Military Conclusions for the Modern Era* (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 2013), 1-2; Robert Kaplan, “America’s Elegant Decline,” *Atlantic*, Nov 2007; Admiral John M. Richardson, *A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority*, ver. 1.0, January 2016, pages 2, 4.

Alfred Thayer Mahan (Naval History and Heritage Command (NH 64579-KN)

water a mist comes over them, a mist and a haze which prevents their comprehending the things which they see.”³ Corbett echoed these words: “The tendency is to survey the field from the military and the political points of view, and to miss the striking and comprehensive new outlook which is almost always obtained from the sea. . . . Sometimes to view a European situation from the quarter-deck of a flagship at sea is little short of a revelation.”⁴



Both Mahan and Corbett used the Napoleonic Wars as a means to illustrate their broader theories and speak to the strategic positions faced by their respective countries in the early twentieth century. Comparing their overall conclusions about the Napoleonic Wars, provides a powerful means for understanding Mahan’s ideas about sea power and Corbett’s thoughts on maritime strategy.⁵

Alfred T. Mahan

The words “sea power” are inextricably linked to Mahan, and those words

³ Mahan to Laughton, 8 August 1902, *Letters and Papers of Professor Sir John Knox Laughton 1830-1915*, ed. Andrew Lambert (Aldershot: Navy Records Society, 2002), no. 224, 216-218.

⁴ Corbett, “The Revival of Naval History: Being the Laughton Memorial Lecture,” page 6, Corbett Papers, CBT 4/5, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich [hereafter NMM].

⁵ Mahan’s principal writings on the Napoleonic Wars include: *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812*; *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain*; *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*; *Types of Naval Officers: Drawn from the History of the British Navy* (please note, *The Life of Nelson and Types of Naval Officers* have less import to this article since they are naval leadership studies, but they do signify Mahan’s wider study of the wars). Corbett’s principal writings on the Napoleonic Wars include: *The Campaign of Trafalgar* and “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar.” Corbett also edited two volumes of *Private Papers of George, Second Earl Spencer: First Lord of the Admiralty, 1794–1801*, and *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* contains significant examples from the Napoleonic Wars.

highlight his approach to world affairs.⁶ Comprising the mutually reinforcing strength of commercial and naval power, sea power allowed states like Britain to exert influence out of all proportion to their relative size.⁷ Yet, sea power worked so quietly that it could almost be overlooked. Mahan concluded that it allowed for a state to prosper while slowly grinding down its opponents.⁸

Mahan wrote a series of volumes that addressed different aspects of sea power. *The Influence of Sea Power upon History* emphasized the period between 1660 and 1783 and sought to explain the relationship between commercial and naval power. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, he explained how sea powers win wars, especially wars against powerful continental states. *The Life of Nelson and the Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* outlined, primarily at the operation-level, the importance of leadership in attaining the rewards that sea power could offer. Finally, *Sea Power and its Relations to the War of 1812* served as a cautionary tale about what would occur if political leaders failed to develop sea power. For all but the first of his sea power studies, the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon served as the critical historical example. To Mahan, those wars held special significance because the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon were the most recent great power struggle that pitted the dominant sea power against the dominant continental power. How Britain, as the dominant sea power, emerged on the winning side allowed Mahan to truly explain the influence of sea power.

The struggle between Britain and France, as Mahan described it, was a war of “endurance.” He questioned “which nation could live the longest in this deadly grapple.”⁹ Britain’s geographic position allowed it to approach world affairs in a different way than France. As an island state, Britain did not need to spend money on a large army – instead, it could focus on commercial, financial, industrial, and naval power. Mahan saw these instruments of power as especially advantageous because they provided the means to sustain a prolonged economic struggle. He explained, “Towards that exhaustion Great Britain could on the land side contribute effectively only by means of allies, and this she did. On the side of the sea, her own sphere of action, there were two things she needed to do. The first was to sustain her own strength, by

⁶ Cyprian Bridge, *Sea-Power and Other Studies* (London: Smith, Elder, 1910), 4; McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 14.

⁷ Mahan, *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), 223.

⁸ Mahan, *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1890; reprint, New York: Dover, 1987), 275; *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793–1812*, 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1893), 2:298.

⁹ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:406.



Entrevue de Napoléon Ier et d'Alexandre Ier sur le Niemen. 25 juin 1807.
 Painting by Adolphe Roehn (1808). Napoleon and Russian Emperor Alexander I signed the first Treaty of Tilsit on 7 July 1807, when they met on a raft in the middle of the Neman river. (Wikimedia Commons)

fostering, widening, and guarding the workings of her commercial system; the second was to cut France off from the same sources of strength and life.”¹⁰

On the other side was France. During the French Revolution and the rule of Napoleon, it was able to harness power in ways heretofore unknown, but defeating Britain proved elusive. Mahan became especially interested in the period following the Treaty of Tilsit to explain how Napoleon at his apogee in 1807 came to utter ruin within just a few short years. To explain this, the commercial struggle between France and Britain took center stage.

A common misconception about Mahan’s writings is that they focus on offensive fleet operations and naval battles. Though he does address such topics, it is important to understand their place in Mahan’s overall sea power theory. Naval battles and fleet operations are but means to obtain control of the sea so that the sea power can more effectively maximize its commercial and economic power.¹¹ As a result, the general thrust of Mahan’s writings, especially when he addresses warfare at the national level, focused on the interplay of commercial and naval power. The case of the Napoleonic Wars is no exception.¹²

To this end, Mahan placed special emphasis on the Continental System which included an array of decrees and initiatives that Napoleon undertook to prevent Britain from trading with Europe. Napoleon’s objective was based

¹⁰ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:403-404.

¹¹ One of Mahan’s most succinct and articulate statements on the naval battles and their relationship to commerce and maritime communications can be found in “Possibilities of an Anglo-American Reunion,” *North American Review* 159 (1894), 561.

¹² Mahan, *Types of Naval Officers: Drawn from the History of the British Navy* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1902), 422; McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 251.

on the recognition that the European continent was Britain's largest trading block, and if it was excluded from those markets, the economic effects could be decisive. Mahan concluded, "I gained my conviction that the Continental System was the determinative factor in Napoleon's fortunes after Tilsit."¹³ In 1890, Mahan recounted how he could not find a systematic analysis of the System. "The subject," as he explained, "demands a book, and I am surprised if none has been produced, except that, as one man said, everyone connected with or affected by it would be glad to forget that it ever existed."¹⁴ Mahan took this project on himself in *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*. In the second volume of that work, the Continental System became the dominating event.

The Continental System, Mahan concluded, was "forced upon the French leaders by the evident hopelessness of reaching Great Britain in any other way.... In other words, Great Britain, by the strategic direction she gave to her efforts in this war, forced the French spirit of aggression into a line of action which could not but result fatally."¹⁵ In effect, the combination of the Royal Navy and Britain's insular geography forced Napoleon into a series of self-defeating actions of which the Continental System was, in Mahan's opinion, the most important factor. To trace this argument, Mahan does not provide a chronological history of the war following Tilsit; instead, an increasingly thematic illustration of economic warfare between Britain and France highlights the interplay of commercial and naval power.

Economic warfare between France and Britain predated the Napoleonic Wars. In fact, Mahan had chronicled much of this economic competition in his original sea power volume: *The Influence of Sea Power upon History, 1660–1783*. What Mahan realized as he studied the Napoleonic Wars was that the Continental System attempted far more than previous efforts at economic warfare. Napoleon demanded that areas under his direct control adhere to the System, but this was not enough. He needed all of continental Europe to join. This was only possible by compelling other areas to join through military victories and what could only be called diplomatic arm twisting. By these measures, Napoleon sought to defeat Britain and at the same time create a French economic sphere of influence on the continent. Implementation of the System required massive political, institutional, and economic reorganization. All this proved disruptive, made worse by the fact that in many areas the

¹³ Mahan, *From Sail to Steam: Recollections of Naval Life* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1907), 305.

¹⁴ Mahan to Luce, 20 December 1890, *Letters and Papers of Alfred Thayer Mahan*, eds. Robert Seager II and Doris D. Maguire (Annapolis: Naval Institute, 1975), 2:33-35.

¹⁵ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:400.

System was imposed on defeated peoples. Widespread evasion and smuggling occurred as a means of limiting the economic damage resulting from the exclusion of British trade. Though far from watertight, the Continental System did inflict economic damage on Britain, but it turned out to be far more detrimental to Napoleon.¹⁶

In an effort to enforce the Continental System, Napoleon became involved in intractable struggles in Spain and Portugal in what became known as the



Combat of la Corogne, 16 January 1809. Painting by Hippolyte Bellangé (1843). The Royal Navy was able to evacuate Sir John Moore's forces from Corunna – on the northern coast of Galicia in Spain – to England. (Wikimedia Commons)

Peninsular War. As Mahan explained, it was the location “where the British sea power had at last found the place to set its fangs in his side and gnaw unceasingly.”¹⁷ The theater surrounded on four of five sides by water proved geographically advantageous for the sea power’s small army to intervene. Mahan explained that British leaders could use their “petty army which had come from the sea, and which had only dared to make this move—well nigh desperate at the best—because it knew that, in the inevitable retreat, it would

¹⁶ The standard work on the Continental System is quite dated, see Eli F. Heckscher, *The Continental System: An Economic Interpretation*, ed. Harald Westergaard (London: Oxford, 1922). A recent overview of the system can be found in Alexander Mikaberidze, *The Napoleonic Wars: A Global History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 228-241.

¹⁷ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:318.

find in the sea no impassable barrier, but a hospitable host.”¹⁸ In this theater of operations, Britain could use its navy, its strongest instrument of war, as a tool to prevent catastrophic defeat on land. As long as the army could reach the coast, the navy provided a means for its escape.

It is important to understand the causality in Mahan’s argument. The decisive factor was the Continental System. Its enforcement resulted in Napoleon’s involvement in Iberia. Britain exploited Napoleon’s decision. Actions in Iberia were not by themselves decisive; rather, it was a symptom of the fact that the Continental System had already placed Napoleon in an unwinnable position.

Mahan made a similar argument regarding the 1812 Russian Campaign. For a moment consider that the full title of his book on the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon is *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire, 1793-1812*. The book effectively concludes in 1812 when Napoleon invaded Russia. As Mahan argued, “The inevitable end was already clearly indicated before Napoleon started for Russia.”¹⁹ Enforcing the Continental System proved economically devastating for Russia. Tsar Alexander decided that he could not continue to remain part of Napoleon’s plan. Mahan concluded that when the Tsar was given a choice between working with France and remaining part of the Continental System or breaking with the System and opening ports to trade, he chose the latter. This decision supported Mahan’s argument that “the British navy, and the way in which it was used in war, were more serious dangers to Russia than the French armies.”²⁰ This was in Mahan’s opinion a definitive sign of the influence of sea power.

Mahan considered the struggle between Britain and France as a contest between near equals. He asked, “Which of the two would make the first and greatest mistakes, and how ready the other party was to profit by his errors.” British sea power forced Napoleon into a series of self-defeating actions of which the Continental System proved the most important. This commercial struggle drew French armies into Iberia. The British took advantage of Napoleon’s over-confident actions in this theater by using its small army with great effect. Napoleon then compounded his mistake by dividing his attention between sustaining operations in Iberia while trying to enforce the Continental System in the Baltic. In that region, attempts to enforce the System eventually led to Napoleon’s invasion of Russia in 1812. Britain made miscalculations as well. Among these were actions that led to war with the United States in 1812,

¹⁸ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:296, 352.

¹⁹ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:343.

²⁰ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 1:17; Mahan, *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1905), 1:383.

but Napoleon's missteps were of greater importance.²¹

In the end, Mahan claimed, "The question between Napoleon and the British people became simply one of endurance.... Both were expending their capital, and drawing freely drafts upon the future, the one in money, the other in men, to sustain their present strength." To Mahan, a state possessing sea power like Britain could wage war differently than a continental state such as France. Britain had the ability to wage war with money generated through commerce. This protected the population who could continue to accrue additional wealth. Sea powers could actually grow wealthier in times of war, while continental land powers could not. Napoleon had to resort to using his army, causing his empire to bleed out. This blood tax eventually destroyed Napoleon's human foundation and the ability of Imperial France to generate wealth. "Like two infuriated dogs," Mahan concluded that Britain and France "...had locked jaws over Commerce, as the decisive element in the contest."²²

Julian S. Corbett

Though Mahan believed the Continental System was the decisive factor in the Napoleonic Wars, Julian S. Corbett was not so sure. A lawyer by training, he was an ardent believer in an inductive approach to problem-solving.²³ Corbett's historical writings were based on a deep understanding of available sources including archival documentation. Though Mahan undertook archival research, most notably for his volumes on the War of 1812, he admitted that his sea power thesis was the product of



Julian S. Corbett (Creative Commons)

²¹ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:201-202, 318-19. Mahan also wrote *Sea Power in Its Relations to the War of 1812*, a two-volume study about the war between Britain and the United States. It emphasized his economic line of argument by focusing on poor American preparation, the economic factors of the war, and how British sea power came close to dismantling the United States.

²² Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:199. He makes a similar argument in "The Hague Conference of 1907 and the Question of Immunity for Belligerent Merchant Shipping," in *Some Neglected Aspects of War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1907), 168.

²³ Corbett, "Methods and Discussion," *Naval Review* 8 (1920), 322-324.

deduction. He developed the outlines of his argument before delving deeply into the sources.²⁴ This approach caused Corbett to privately describe Mahan's ideas as "unsound."²⁵ Publicly, he explained, "Mahan's work was premature because the facts on which his generalisations could have been securely based were not ascertained when he wrote." Corbett then grudgingly admitted, "The wonder is that Mahan could build as well as he did on a foundation so insecure." He added, "Mahan with real skill and daring was building his castle on the sands."²⁶ Corbett did not believe that Mahan had based his conclusions on solid evidence. Even eight years after his competitor's death, Corbett contended, "Judged by the standards of modern historical scholarship, naval history between Trafalgar and Waterloo is a trackless desert."²⁷

Perhaps it is not surprising that Corbett found Mahan's sea power thesis incomplete. He claimed, "Of late years the world has become so deeply impressed with the efficacy of sea power that we are inclined to forget how impotent it is of itself to decide a war against great Continental states, how tedious is the pressure of naval action unless it be nicely co-ordinated with military and diplomatic pressure."²⁸ The reference to "sea power" called out Mahan in all but name. Unlike Mahan who extolled the significance of sea power, Corbett's arguments focused more on the "limitation of maritime power."²⁹

Corbett sought to explain why it took a decade after Trafalgar for Napoleon's final defeat. To make that argument required a more complex understanding of war. People live on land, and wars, especially ones as significant as the Napoleonic Wars, are fought over the land where people live.³⁰ Thus, to explain the defeat of Napoleon, Corbett sought to address how British naval power influenced events ashore. Specifically, he believed, "Where great empires are concerned wars cannot be concluded upon the sea." Rather, such wars require "the ordered combination of naval, military, and diplomatic force."³¹ The navy's role, according to Corbett, "has been threefold: firstly, to support

²⁴ Mahan to Marston, 19 February 1897, *Letters and Papers of Mahan*, 2:493–494; Mahan, *From Sail to Steam*, 277.

²⁵ Corbett's 1908 Diary, memoranda from 1907, Corbett Papers, CBT 43/9, NMM.

²⁶ Corbett, "The Revival of Naval History: Being the Laughton Memorial Lecture," page 2, Corbett Papers, CBT 4/5, NMM.

²⁷ Corbett, "Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar," *The Quarterly Review* 471 (April 1922), 238.

²⁸ Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War: A Study in Combined Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1907), 1:5.

²⁹ Corbett, *The Successors of Drake* (London: Longmans, Green, 1900), vii.

³⁰ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (London: Longmans, Green, 1911; Reprint, Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1988), 16.

³¹ Corbett, *England in the Seven Years' War*, 1:7.

or obstruct diplomatic effort; secondly, to protect or destroy commerce; and thirdly, to further or hinder military operations ashore.”³² While Mahan argued for sea power to give the navy a more decisive role, Corbett saw the navy as more of an enabler that worked to magnify the effects of other instruments of national power.

It would, however, be wrong to claim that Corbett and Mahan presented entirely different arguments: there is in fact significant congruence between their writings that is often overlooked. Part of the reason for this can be laid on Mahan, some of the explanation rests on Corbett, and a share can be placed on their readership. Mahan’s writings are often difficult to follow, and in 1911 when he wrote a book on naval strategy, it did not turn out well. Mahan even admitted that it was “the most perfunctory job I have ever done in book writing.”³³ A combination of being a difficult read and not encapsulating his entire theory in a single book has contributed to confusion about his arguments. Even though Corbett wrote after Mahan, he did not clearly outline where their conclusions aligned. This has required their readership to draw these conclusions themselves, but readers have generally not taken the time to dig deeply into their writings and their worldviews.³⁴ When this is done, it is clear that striking similarities exist in their descriptions of the sea lines of communication, the meaning of command of the sea, the ways to obtain command of the sea, and how states possessing command of the sea can use their command to regulate maritime commerce. If studying their writings from a more-narrow perspective of naval strategy, their theories demonstrate significant similarity.³⁵

Corbett, like Mahan, claimed that “so long as we maintained our dominant position at sea, Napoleon could not strike a decisive blow against us. The outlook, then, which they had to face was a war of exhaustion ... and the side that could endure the longest would be the side to win.”³⁶ Naval power secured the commercial trade upon which Britain sustained its financial position.³⁷ This was the defensive side of Britain’s war effort and allowed for the protraction of the war. With this part of their respective theories, Mahan and Corbett are

³² Corbett, *England in the Seven Years’ War*, 1:6.

³³ Mahan to Clark, 12 March 1912, *Letters and Papers of Mahan*, 3:447. The quote describes *Naval Strategy Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practice of Military Operations on Land*.

³⁴ For a description of the implications for Mahan, see Jon Sumida, *Inventing Grand Strategy*, 5, and for Corbett, see Andrew Lambert, *British Way of War*, 2-10.

³⁵ McCranie, *Mahan, Corbett*, 251-252.

³⁶ Corbett, “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar,” 243.

³⁷ Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar* (London: Longmans, Green, 1910), 3.

in almost lockstep agreement, though Corbett does not explicitly admit to this in his writings.

Their theories, however, show greater divergence at the national level where Mahan and Corbett address how naval power integrates with other instruments of power. The Napoleonic Wars are particularly effective at illustrating this divergence. First, consider the Continental System. Mahan saw this as the decisive element in the struggle following Trafalgar in 1805. Corbett does not deny the importance of the Continental System and even claimed, “For a great part of the period it turned on a mortal commercial struggle, the issue of which for many exhausting years hung in the balance.”³⁸ As the war



The Battle of Trafalgar, 21 October 1805. Painting by Clarkson Frederick Stanfield (1836).
(Wikimedia Commons)

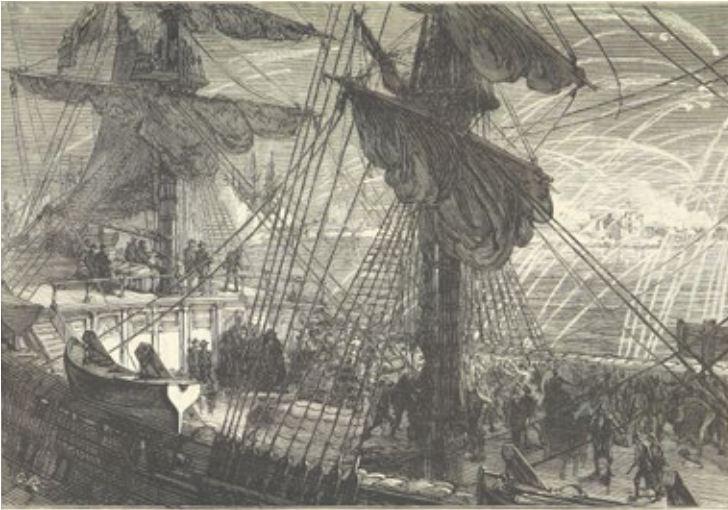
protracted following Trafalgar, Corbett admitted that the commercial struggle was significant. He did not, however, consider it decisive. Rather than the direct cause of Napoleon’s defeat, the struggle over commerce, including the Continental System, wore down both sides but weakened France more than Britain.

Corbett worried that relying on the interaction of the commercial and naval elements of power that comprised Mahan’s sea power theory could only allow naval powers to win wars against powerful continental states through protracted struggles where the sides slowly weakened each other. Since states involved in protracted attritional struggles are prone to suffer from unintended consequences, Corbett sought to explain how leaders of maritime states could

³⁸ Corbett, “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar,” 238.

accelerate outcomes. For this, he found the actions of British leaders after Trafalgar particularly instructive.

Corbett outlined British strategy following Trafalgar: “Looked at from the purely military point of view ... the course of the war seems to have violated all sound doctrine. Thus seen, it is a series of sporadic and apparently unrelated efforts in which our small army was used in dribblets nearly all over the world with no consistent policy.” Corbett claimed, “It all looks like amateurish child’s play ... Yet it was this child’s play that won.”³⁹ While there might not have been concentration of British forces on land, there was certainly concentration of effort as every operation aimed at perfecting command of



The British bombardment of Flushing during the Walcheren Campaign.
(Wikimedia Commons)

the sea by preventing Napoleon from rebuilding his navy. All one needs to do is follow a line of events. These include the attack on Copenhagen in 1807 to secure the Danish fleet, operations at Lisbon that prevented both the Portuguese fleet and a Russian squadron there from falling into French hands, through the remaining colonies of Britain’s opponents, to the attack on the French squadron at Basque Roads in 1809, and finally, that same year, to operations in the Scheldt, including the landing on Walcheren Island.⁴⁰

Of that last event, Corbett claimed, “Historians can find no words too bad for it. They ignore the fact that it was a step—the final and most difficult step—in our post-Trafalgar policy of using the army to perfect our command

³⁹ Corbett, “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar,” 239.

⁴⁰ Corbett, “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar,” 242.

of the sea against a fleet acting stubbornly on the defensive.”⁴¹ The 1809 British operation in the Scheldt sought to destroy one of Napoleon’s main fleet concentrations. It entailed a landing of the British army on islands in the estuary including Walcheren where there was a major naval base at Vlissingen (or as the British called it Flushing). From there, the British planned to work their way up the estuary using a combination of land forces and the powerful support from the Royal Navy. The ultimate goal was Napoleon’s main naval base at Antwerp. These lofty objectives were never entirely achieved, however. Though the British secured the base at Vlissingen, the operation stalled, sickness carried off thousands, and the British were forced to withdraw before capturing Napoleon’s main fleet at Antwerp.⁴² Yet Corbett argued, “The risks were still great, but the British Government faced them boldly with open eyes. It was now or never.” He maintained that this operation needed to occur to enable what would become Wellington’s campaigns in the Iberian Peninsula to bear their full effects. British leaders “were bent on developing their utmost military strength in the Peninsula, and so long as a potent and growing fleet remained in the North Sea it would always act as an increasing drag on such development. The prospective gain of success was in the eyes of the Government out of all proportion to the probable loss by failure.”⁴³

Mahan paid much less attention to Napoleon’s naval building program following Trafalgar and instead focused on his use of the Continental System as an economic weapon. Mahan paid even less attention to Britain’s actions against Napoleon’s fleet concentrations and the fleets of his potential allies. In *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, it is telling that Mahan looked at the Scheldt Estuary as a maritime commercial artery and did not mention the British expedition to Walcheren. Moreover, Mahan’s explanation of events at Copenhagen and in Portugal admit the importance Britain attached to securing the fleets in those locations, but he, instead, focused his argument on how these events interacted with the Continental System.⁴⁴

For combined British expeditionary operations, Corbett explained, “Most of the operations are regarded as useless pin-pricks.”⁴⁵ That was Mahan’s argument. Corbett disagreed, describing them as “a specially English device”

⁴¹ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 68.

⁴² Rory Muir, *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1807-1815* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 99-103; James Davey, *In Nelson’s Wake: The Navy and the Napoleonic Wars* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), 193-202.

⁴³ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 69.

⁴⁴ Mahan, *Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution*, 2:276-278.

⁴⁵ Combined Operations: Lecture 1, War College Lecture, Portsmouth, Spring 1910, Corbett Papers, CBT/31, NMM.

with “disturbing power out of all proportion to their intrinsic force.”⁴⁶ Such operations in Corbett’s view had the potential to provide “the insidious drop of poison—the little sting—that was to infect Napoleon’s empire with decay, and to force his hand with so tremendous a result.”⁴⁷ After Trafalgar, British leaders developed a sequential strategy that first focused on expeditionary operations to perfect command of the sea through seizing the colonies and the fleets of Britain’s opponents. Only after these operations to secure command of the sea could the British devote enough attention to obtain significant strategic effects in the Iberian Peninsula. “It was not till the Peninsular War developed,” Corbett explained, “that we found a theatre for war limited by contingent in which all the conditions that make for success were present.”⁴⁸ His terminology here was important. Though Corbett claimed that “war limited by contingent” is a term developed by Carl von Clausewitz in *On War*, that exact terminology was not present in the contemporary English translation of that work. Rather, Corbett used Clausewitz to inform his argument when he developed the idea of “war limited by contingent” and applied it to a maritime state like Britain. Corbett defined “war limited by contingent” not by the outcome or the desired end state but instead as a method of war using small expeditionary land forces to intervene at the right place and time to gain outsized strategic effects.⁴⁹

As long as British leaders viewed their force in the Peninsula as an auxiliary to the Spanish army, they failed to obtain their desired strategic effects, but when the army began to operate under the leadership of Wellington for the objective of weakening Napoleon’s empire, its operations in Iberia became more effective.⁵⁰ “So strong was the method here, and so exhausting the method which it forced on the enemy,” Corbett argued, “that the local balance of force was eventually reversed and we were able to pass to a drastic offensive.” Corbett recounted, “The real secret of Wellington’s success ... was that in perfect conditions he was applying the limited form to an unlimited war. Our object was unlimited. It was nothing less than the overthrow of Napoleon. Complete success at sea had failed to do it, but that success had given us the power of applying the limited form, which was the most decisive form of offence within our means.”⁵¹ The command of the sea that Britain had perfected since Trafalgar, allowed the Royal Navy after 1811 to lavish support

⁴⁶ Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, 174, 274.

⁴⁷ Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, 42.

⁴⁸ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 65.

⁴⁹ Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, 3 vols. trans. J.J. Graham (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1911); Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 60–63.

⁵⁰ Corbett did not specify when this transition actually occurred besides implying that it could be linked to Wellington’s leadership (see, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 65).

⁵¹ Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, 65–66.

on the army. In the Peninsula, he claimed, “The fleet henceforth was made subordinate to the army.”⁵²

While Corbett gave Wellington’s operations more credit in the ultimate defeat of Napoleon than Mahan, the same could also be said for the role of Britain’s coalition partners. Corbett viewed these as essential. He contended, “Offence against such a power as Napoleon’s was impossible single handed.”⁵³ Though Britain could survive without allies, protected from France by its watery moat, victory required an ability to directly engage Napoleon’s armies. Wellington’s operations in Iberia were a start, but his land force proved insufficient to defeat France. It is here that economic power gave Britain the ability to subsidize what really mattered, a coalition of great continental states that could offset Napoleon’s power. As Corbett outlined, “The vast armies of continental states balance one another approximately & as of old [Britain’s] small army acting from the sea may still turn the scale.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

Both Mahan and Corbett wrote with an agenda that influenced their interpretations of the Napoleonic Wars. Mahan attempted to convince Americans at the turn of the twentieth century to build a navy and engage with regions outside of the United States.⁵⁵ He developed the concept of sea power to illustrate this argument through a series of volumes, largely based on the Wars of the French Revolution and Napoleon. Corbett also developed a purpose driven argument aimed at British leaders in the early years of the twentieth century.⁵⁶ Whether Britain should become a sea power had been answered in the affirmative more than a century before Corbett lived. Thus, Mahan’s

⁵² Corbett, “Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar,” 254. With this argument, Corbett overstates his case about perfecting command of the sea. Though there is a good argument that Britain had created the conditions Corbett described beginning in 1809, Britain’s advantages were evaporating by 1812. A combination of the War of 1812, personnel shortfalls in the Royal Navy, and Napoleon’s naval building program stretched the navy to the point of breaking. However, Corbett’s overstatement does support his contention that the period was then a “trackless desert.” See, McCranie, “The War of 1812 in the Ongoing Napoleonic Wars: The Response of Britain’s Royal Navy,” *The Journal of Military History* 76 (October 2012), 1067-1094; S.A. Cavell, “A Second Naval War: The Immediate Effects of the American War on Royal Navy Operations, 1812-13,” in *The Trafalgar Chronicle*, New Series 5, eds. Judith E. Pearson, Sean Heuvel, and John Rodgaard (Great Britain: Seaforth, 2020), 161-174.

⁵³ Corbett, *The Campaign of Trafalgar*, 4.

⁵⁴ Corbett, Combined Operations Lecture, Undated, Corbett Papers, Box 2, Liddell Hart Centre Archives, King’s College, London.

⁵⁵ Maurer, “Alfred Thayer Mahan,” 170.

⁵⁶ Lambert, *British Way of War*, 182.

central argument about the importance of sea power, though comforting to the British people, was to Corbett unnecessary. Instead, at the turn of the twentieth century, almost a century had elapsed since Britain had fought its last great power war. Corbett worried that British leaders had lost their institutional knowledge of how their state had triumphed, so he sought to reacquaint British political, naval, and military leaders. He used history to explain how Britain had prevailed using an all instruments of power approach predicated on an island state possessing powerful financial and naval instruments in combination with a small land power component.

Both Mahan and Corbett wrote to drive security arguments in their respective countries; however, neither quite had the influence he sought to achieve. Mahan came closer. His writings were more popular in Britain than in the United States. In hindsight, this should not be surprising for Mahan told the British what they wanted to hear while tracing the development of British sea power as a kind of ideal type. *The Influence of Sea Power upon the French Revolution and Empire*, published in 1892, explained and justified what many in Britain had witnessed at the Naval Exhibition of 1891. According to one commentator, "People read it ... because it appealed to their awakened sympathies."⁵⁷ Only after the British bought off on Mahan's arguments did they truly resonate in the United States.

As war clouds formed on the European horizon in the years before the First World War, Corbett increasingly sought to influence the debate on how Britain should intervene in the case of war. He argued for a maritime approach reminiscent of British actions in the Seven Years' and Napoleonic Wars. He failed to convince leaders of his argument. In the last months of the First World War, he lamented, "It is a lamentable tale for me to tell.... It is the most bigoted 'soldier's' war we have ever fought, and this at the end of all our experience."⁵⁸ Following the First World War, he tried again. The result was his most articulate description of the Napoleonic Wars that appeared as an article in 1922 and served as a counterargument to the way the British fought the Great War.⁵⁹ He died just months later.

Mahan wrote first, breaking new ground. He explained what navies could do in isolation: after all his agenda was to encourage Americans to develop sea power. The nexus of economic and naval power allowed him to downplay

⁵⁷ John Knox Laughton, "Study of Naval History," *Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* 40 (July 1896), 797.

⁵⁸ Corbett to Fisher, 12 June 1918, *Fear God and Dread Nought: The Correspondence of Admiral of the Fleet Lord Fisher of Kilverstone*, ed. Arthur J. Marder (London: Jonathan Cape, 1952–59), 3:538–539.

⁵⁹ Corbett gave "Napoleon and the British Navy after Trafalgar" as a lecture in October 1921. It was published as an article in April 1922, and he died in September of that year.

the importance of land power. Focusing on the decisiveness of the Continental System served his purpose. Corbett followed with a more nuanced interpretation of maritime power that placed the navy in the role of the enabler. He agreed with Mahan that the navy had to fight to command the sea and then use that command for strategic effect, but he differed from Mahan in the ways Britain integrated its various instruments of power to attain victory. Corbett sought to accelerate the grinding attrition of economic warfare through a greater emphasis on expeditionary land operations like Wellington's in the Iberian Peninsula and having continental land powers including Russia, Prussia, and Austria fight for British objectives.

The previous pages have cast Mahan and Corbett's ideas at the level of national strategy, approaching what some would consider a grand strategic interpretation to their theories. At this level, both Mahan and Corbett employ naval, land, diplomatic, financial, and commercial instruments of power. Their views on naval power are broadly similar, but how they integrated the navy with other instruments of power produced different strategic effects and resulted in different interpretations on the course and outcome of the Napoleonic Wars.

Author's note: The positions expressed in this article are my own views. I do not represent the Naval War College, the US Navy, the Department of Defense, or the US government, and my views are not necessarily shared by them.

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