Sailing on History's Variable Tides:
U.S. Naval History in 50 minutes

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We observe this year the 250th anniversary of both the United States and the United States Navy. I have written a lot about the history of the Navy and am going to try to make some general observations about that history here today, but obviously it will be a brief overview, for as this slide suggests, there is simply too much that deserves attention and observation over that quarter of a millennium than I can cover here.

INSTEAD OF STARTING at the beginning, let me instead start with the present moment. Admiral McLane has just given us a "State of the Force". I'd like to piggy back on his remarks by adding my own observation that The United States Navy in 2025 remains the most powerful sea force on the planet, and, indeed, that it is the most powerful sea force that has ever existed. **[SLIDE]**

IT WAS NOT ALWAYS SO. In the early days of the Republic, it was by no means certain that the United States would have a navy at all, and for about half of our national history—until the last decade of the nineteenth century—there was fierce debate about it, a debate that went back and forth depending on the circumstances of the moment.

If I tried to draw a graph of The Navy's historical development, it would not resemble a steadily rising line; it would look more like a sine wave: oscillating between periods of quiet torpor punctuated by moments of frenetic, if temporary, expansion.

To start at the beginning, the American Revolution was principally a land war; the most important role played by Patriot sea forces, at least on salt water, was attacking British merchant shipping, an activity at which we proved especially adept.

A lot of that war on commerce was carried out by what were called privateers. In those days, a private citizen could apply for what was called a letter of marque, a permission slip, if you would, to attack merchant ships of the enemy. **[SLIDE]** Privateers were small, lightly armed vessels—often with only one mast, and perhaps only one gun, as is the case here—you can see it there amidships—and they were packed with men to serve as prize crews on the ships they hoped to capture.

They never fought a battle—at least not if they could help it—rather, their goal was to seize unarmed merchant ships. If they did, they got to keep the ship and everything in it. One or two such captures could make them rich men, which is no doubt why these fellows appear to be cheering—it was not just their patriotic

enthusiasm. During the Revolutionary War, some eight hundred American privateers put to sea, and they captured a total of six hundred British merchant ships. So obviously, not everyone got rich; but the **chance** to do so kept them going to sea.

This type of naval warfare—a war on commerce, or in the French phrase *guerre de course*—was economic warfare. It not only made a number of opportunistic Patriots rich, it wreaked havoc with British merchants, many of whom lost their ships and their cargoes, and all of whom had to pay dramatically increased maritime insurance rates. Naturally, they complained about it to Parliament, and that created pressure on the British government to end the war.

Many Americans at the time saw privateers as a kind of maritime militia. Like the militia, it was a military force that did not require a lot of government maintenance since all of the expenses were borne by the shipowners. It could be laid up in time of peace as privateering ships returned to their peacetime roles as merchant vessels. Even the men who manned the ships worked on spec: instead of being paid, they got a share of the profits. All the government had to do was print the permission slips. Thus, relying of privateers as the nation's primary sea force was like having a navy for free.

But, of course, there were limits to what such a force could do. It could not fight off an enemy fleet, for example, or deter an invasion, and there were many in early America who insisted that a REAL nation needed a REAL navy, one that could not only defend American interests, but show the flag overseas and protect American trade abroad; one that would command the respect of other nations. Privateers could not do any of those things; if you wanted that, you needed a navy of national warships, which in the Age of Sail, meant having ships-of-the-line. **[SLIDE]**

This French three-decker is an example of the kind of warship possessed by European navies, and some Americans insisted that the United States should have at least some of them as a symbol of nationhood. If you want to think of it this way, they were the aircraft carriers of the Age of Sail—the most powerful warships afloat.

The problem was that—like carriers today—they were enormously expensive. Even if the money could be found, there was no shipyard in America that could build one. And in any case the United States could not build enough of them to make a difference. It would be, in the words of one Congressional opponent of the idea, "like gold tossed into the sea."

The best the Americans of the revolutionary generation could do was build a smaller type of warship called a frigate. That's a frigate just beyond the bow of the ship-of-the-line. Here's another example **[SLIDE].** All frigates in the age of sail had a single row of cannons along each side. These were much smaller than ships-of-the-line, and just barely within the financial reach of Americans in the early republic.

During the Revolutionary war, the Continental Congress authorized thirteen of them, thus creating what was called the Continental Navy. Alas, this effort to build a REAL navy proved to be nothing short of a disaster. Seven of the thirteen frigates had to be burned on the building ways when the British captured the ports where they were being built. The other six did get to sea, but all six of them were almost immediately captured or destroyed by the British. Especially compared to the success of privateers, it seemed to be a sad story of overreach.

The Continental Navy did have one bright spot during the Revolution. It was provided by John Paul Jones, who gave the fledgling navy its most dramatic success when he won a signal victory over a British frigate off the coast of England when in command of a ship given to him by the French, the BONHOMME RICHARD. **[SLIDE]** That's the Bonhomme Richard on the right. This was the battle in which Jones responded to a demand to surrender by calling back: "I have not yet begun to fight," and then went on to win the battle. It was a feel-good moment for the Americans, and for the Navy—it still is for that matter—though it had little impact on the outcome of the war.

It is worth pausing here to note that Jones' crew on the *Bonhomme Richard*, like the crews on most warships of that era, was pretty eclectic. There were actually very few Americans in it. The ship was fitted out in France, after all, and crew members came from almost every nation in Europe and included Irishmen, Frenchmen, Portuguese, Africans, and even some English. Like ship captains from virtually all nations, Jones was willing to accept anyone who had two arms, two legs, and could haul on a rope or point a gun.

If the few American naval successes, like this one, had little strategic impact, what DID change the trajectory of the war was the French fleet. France became our ally after the American victory at Saratoga in 1777 convinced them that the upstart Americans actually a chance to win, and four years later, in what was called the Battle of the Capes **[SLIDE]** a French fleet—here on the left—drove the British away from the Chesapeake Bay. That kept Cornwallis trapped at Yorktown, and forced him to surrender to a Franco-American army under Washington. That . . ., and of course, those hundreds of little privateers whose predations sapped the will of the British to keep the war going, led to the British decision to call it off after Cornwallis surrendered.

After that, the American Navy simply ceased to exist. The few remaining warships were sold off, and the privateers all went back to being merchant sailors. To Americans in 1783 there seemed to be no good reason to have a navy in peacetime, and for ten years we had no navy at all. Here you can imagine the sine wave dipping downward rather dramatically.

What revived it, what sent the sine wave back up again, was a threat from the city states of North Africa who made a business out of seizing the merchant ships of western nations unless each nation paid a bribe, or tribute to the particular Barbary state. There were two ways to deal with the problem: one was to pay the tribute, the other was to fight back. It was only because Tomas Jefferson, among others, calculated that building some warships would actually be cheaper than paying the tribute, that in 1794, Congress authorized a Navy of six new frigates.

It is tempting to see this as the moment when the nation decided it needed a navy after all. In fact, however, it was NOT a decision to create a standing peacetime navy, because the ships were authorized for a specific task, and when that job was over, they were to be set aside. Indeed, the legislation that authorized them specified that if the pirates could be bought off, the ships would not be built at all.

And the pirates WERE bought off. After a year's worth of negotiations, we agreed to pay them a somewhat smaller annual tribute, and the war – if it was a war

– ended. Because three of the six frigates were almost finished, Congress agreed to go ahead and complete those three, but not the others.

So, for most of a century, a tiny permanent force of mostly small sloops and a few frigates carried out the quotidian duties of a constabulary navy—chasing pirates, stopping smugglers. Then when roused by an emergency—problems with the French in 1798, or problems with the British in 1812—the sine wave soared back up again, as the country built up a temporary wartime fleet to address the crisis. Then, when the crisis ended, the navy was generally discarded.

That pattern characterized the U.S. Navy and navy policy until the eve of the Civil War.

THE CIVIL WAR was a defining moment in American history for lots of reasons, and it was a pivot point in the development of an American navy, too. Partly that was because of changing technology. **[SLIDE]** This slide from Harpers Weekly, showing sailing ships, paddle steamers and what were called screw steamers—that is, propeller driven ships—suggests the eclectic and transitional character of the Navy in the 1850s.

Despite the new technologies, the U.S. Navy on the eve of the Civil War remained small by global standards. When the war began, there were a total of 42 US Navy ships on active service, and those not laid up in ordinary they were scattered all over the globe. Then—true to the historical pattern—the Navy dramatically expanded to meet the crisis of the Civil War. By the end of the war, it totaled 671 ships, making it one of the largest in the world.

It was that navy that conducted a blockade of the southern coast, fought alongside the army up and down America's great rivers, and chased down Confederate commerce raiders on five oceans. This time, the U.S. Navy was the dominant naval power in a war, and it made a significant contribution to Union victory. But, again, once the war ended, the navy contracted to its pre-war numbers. I noted that there were 671 Navy warships in 1865. Five years later in 1870 there were 52.

Much of the retraction made sense: of those 671 warships, 418 were converted merchant ships, useful in blockade duty, but of no real value in dealing with warships of European powers. Others were river gunboats and ironclads that could not serve on the world's oceans.

Even so, many critics, both at the time and later, saw this as a missed opportunity. For one thing, the post-Civil War navy seemed to retreat not only in size, but also in the abandonment of many of the technological innovations that had characterized the new style of naval war in the 1860s. You see all the steam-powered ships here. Most of the ships the Navy relied on after 1870 were like these, and called auxiliary steamers. Here's one. **[SLIDE]:** This is the USS Wachusett. It was essentially a sailing ship that had a steam boiler for use in emergencies. You can see the smokestack amidships.

It was not that navy leaders were obtuse—well, no more obtuse than usual. Rather it was because most of these ships would be serving on distant stations thousands of miles from a home port, and the United States did not possess any overseas bases where the ships could re-coal. That made a reliance on coal-burning

steam ships rather risky. Consequently, U.S. Navy ships moved about from place to place under sail, and fired up the boilers only in emergencies. Indeed, any captain who saw the need to light off the boilers was required to explain his reason in the ship's log **in red ink**.

Nor, as you can see, were these post-Civil War ships armored. Despite the milestone battle of the ironclads Monitor and Virginia (formerly the Merrimack) in Hampton Roads in 1862, America's ocean-going ships were wooden-hulled and unarmored. The sixty or so monitors that had been built during the war were all laid up in ordinary, what a later generation would call mothballs, and never used again in combat.

Though the champions of a big Navy insisted this downsizing was a mistake, most Americans at the time saw it in practical terms: the fifty or so ships we kept were all the country really needed for the limited jobs at hand. Why build and maintain an expensive warfleet, they asked, when there was no evident mission for them? Besides, having a big fleet could actually get us into trouble, and if trouble came nonetheless, why then we would simply build up the navy again as we always had.

THE MOMENT WHEN ALL THIS CHANGED came at the end of the nineteenth century. And there were three reasons for it.

First, the old ships, like the USS Wachusett here, were simply wearing out. It was evident that they would soon have to be replaced and it was only logical to replace them with ships that reflected the new technology, (**SLIDE**) like the USS Atlanta, see here. That in itself did not constitute a change in policy—not yet anyway—for the new ships were expected to perform the same tasks as the older ships.

A second reason, and a far more important one, actually had little to do with the navy at all. American attention in the thirty years after the end of the Civil War had been focused inward: either on the South, where Reconstruction issues dominated national politics; or on the West, where the Homestead Act opened new lands for settlement and the railroads made western lands more accessible. In 1875, Indian wars seemed a far more proximate threat than naval wars.

That changed around 1890. By then, Reconstruction had been resolved by what was essentially a Northern capitulation: worn out by passive and active resistance, northerners agreed to let Southerners make their own rules about race relations. That brought about the social arrangement known as Jim Crow, which soon became a national and not just a sectional protocol for American race relations.

And at about the same time, the national census indicated that there was no longer any part of the West that could be considered unsettled, no open frontier. It was not that the West was filled up, but it was no longer a blank slate. These altered circumstances encouraged Americans to begin to look OUTWARD to the oceans of the world, rather than INWARD.

A third influence that year was that an otherwise obscure navy captain named Alfred Thayer Mahan published a book based on his lectures at the Naval War College in Newport, Rhode Island, **[SLIDE]** in which he showed how the small island country of Great Britain had managed to become the greatest power on earth,

possessor of an empire on which the sun never set. Many of you have no doubt been required to read all or part of this book at some point in your careers. It is not exactly a page-turner, but the thesis is pretty simple: The secret to achieving national greatness, Mahan asserted, was seapower. England's fleet of battleships allowed it to secure the sea lanes, which brought wealth through trade, which brought power. Here was a pretty simple formula for anyone bold enough to follow it. Mahan's book did not **cause** the change in American policy. As I noted, larger national forces did that, but he offered a rationale and a justification for a naval expansion that was already starting.

Up to now, the controlling questions about what kind of Navy the United States should have were pragmatic in nature:

--If piracy was a problem, we built a squadron of swift sloops or small frigates.

--Smugglers? Then perhaps we needed some gunboats and harbor craft.

--For the Civil War, the need was for hundreds of lightly armed ships to conduct a blockade and a few swift vessels that could catch the blockade runners.

But Mahan insisted that nations could rise to the status of great power only by the possession of battleships. And it was battleships that we began to build in the 1890s. **(SLIDE**) By 1896 we had five of them—not for any particular purpose, but in the conviction that a great nation should somehow have some battleships. And in 1898 we used them to defeat Spain in what Secretary of State John Hay called "A splendid little war." (**SLIDE**) This contemporary painting depicts the Battle of Manila Bay on May 1, 1898.

The Spanish-American War is less remembered today than the longer and bloodier world wars of the twentieth century, but it was very much a milestone event in our history, for it marked America's coming out party as a great power. In two quick and decisive naval battles, the new battleships of the revived U.S. Navy utterly destroyed older and weaker Spanish squadrons at both Manila Bay in the Philippines and off the southern coast of Cuba at Santiago. These swift and easy victories led to peace settlement in which the United States acquired its first important overseas possessions. We had previously claimed the unoccupied atoll of Midway back in 1867, and now as a result of the Spanish-American War, we also acquired Puerto Rico in the Caribbean, and a chain of outposts in the Pacific (**SLIDE**) from Hawaii to Wake, to Guam, to the Philippines, almost like stepping stones to the great China markets.

These new American possessions not only provided the coaling stations that could keep our battleships fueled on distant stations, they also created an overseas empire and a new interest in protecting and defending it.

It was, as the saying goes, a sea change.

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY was the American century. From 1901 to 2000 the United States emerged from its self-imposed cocoon to become first an emerging power, then a dominant power, and finally the most powerful nation in the world. From the very founding of the country, the opponents of naval expansion had argued that the mere possession of a warfleet would drag us into the power squabbles of the great powers of Europe. That view had dominated for 125 years,

but by 1900 a majority now saw great power status not as something to be avoided, but as a prize to be pursued. Among them was the 20th century's first president, the young and vigorous Theodore Roosevelt. **[SLIDE]** Here he is, looking characteristically bellicose.

T.R. had been a navalist since boyhood when he had been a collector of all things naval. He even wrote his Harvard University thesis on the naval battles of the War of 1812—a book, which by the way, is still in print. Like Churchill, who in many ways he foreshadowed, Roosevelt was both a prolific writer and a champion of big navies. He had been Assistant Secretary of the Navy during McKinley's first term before becoming Vice President during his abbreviated second term. After McKinley was assassinated in 1901, Roosevelt presided over what was to that point the largest peacetime naval expansion in history.

Between 1906 and 1908, the United States commissioned no fewer than thirteen new battleships. And significantly they were not part of a buildup in anticipation of war—not part of the traditional sine wave of build-up and contract—but rather a manifestation of the nation's decision—or at least its willingness—to possess a permanent large combat fleet. In 1909 Teddy sent it around the world on what was advertised as a goodwill trip but which was in fact a declaration of America's arrival as a great power. Because the battleships were all painted in their peacetime white, it came to be known as the Great White Fleet. [**SLIDE**]

Apparently, we weren't especially worried about air pollution in those days.

When the first world war broke out in 1914, the United States immediately declared its determination to remain uninvolved, though inevitably, perhaps, the vortex of war drew us in anyway. Ostensibly the reason was American opposition to Germany's decision to employ unrestricted submarine warfare, but a larger reason was that by the early 20th century, the United States had become too prominent to remain uninvolved in the great power rivalries of Europe.

Ironically, once we did declare war, we learned that the ships most needed by the Allies were not battleships—the British actually had plenty of those—what they wanted and needed were escorts for the convoys to fend off the U-boats. The U.S. therefore set aside the half-completed battleships it had begun in 1916, and instead built hundreds of smaller warships—the old four-stack destroyers.

By the end of the war, the United had become the largest naval power on earth, or it would be as soon as it finished the battleships, still sitting on the building ways from the 1916 authorization.

But almost at once, in accordance with its traditional habits, the U.S. sought to divest itself of those ships. And it did, but it did so in a way that allowed it to maintain its global superiority. It invited the other naval powers to participate in a naval arms limitation conference in Washington in 1921 **(SLIDE)**. There, it succeeded in getting all the great powers to agree to a formula whereby the United States and Britain maintained an equal number of battleships, while Japan, France and Italy got to keep a lesser number. It was a remarkable achievement that, while it certainly did not prevent future wars, did save each participating country billions of dollars—or pounds . . . , or yen.

IT WAS IN WORLD WAR II that the U.S. Navy swiftly outpaced all other navies on the planet. After Pearl Harbor, the United States gave full reign to its unmatched industrial capability, and built ships in numbers and sizes previously unimaginable. **[SLIDE]** This is a photograph of one of nineteen Henry J. Kaiser shipbuilding yards in 1943. It shows the swing shift workers coming in to replace the day shift works, and they would be replaced by the night shift workers. During the war, men—and women—like these built literally thousands of ships, building them faster than the German U-boats could sink them.

Having entered the war with eleven active battleships and seven aircraft carriers, the United States emerged in 1945 with 120 battleships and heavy cruisers, and, counting escort carriers, nearly one hundred aircraft carriers. It was not only the largest navy on earth, it was three times larger all the other navies combined. Here the sine wave reached a previously unimaginable peak.

The sine wave did ease downward after 1945. In the eighteen months after V-J Day, the navy processed out three and half million men, and scrapped or mothballed thousands of ships. But it did not return to its traditional peacetime torpor. Due to the almost immediate onset of the Cold War, the United States kept more than a thousand ships on active service.

Since then, the navy has fluctuated between 300 and a thousand combat ships. Ronald Reagan, somewhat famously, tried to boost the number of combat warships up to 600, and though he never quite got there, the Navy did reach a peak of 592 ships in 1989, though that number included several refurbished older ships that were kept on active service. The numbers dropped back down to around 300 or so, and reached a low of 278 in 2007. Today, the number is just under 300, at about 296, though as we heard this morning, current plans call for a significant expansion.

Critics are correct to note that this number is still on the low end by 20th century standards. But that is a bit misleading. For example, we have far fewer destroyers than in 1945, but destroyers then displaced about twelve hundred tons, and today they can displace seven thousand tons. Moreover, in 1945 destroyers fired five-inch guns, and today they fire missiles with a range of over fifteen hundred miles. So, it is not an apples-to-apples comparison between the Navy of 1945 and that of today.

The real difference is that the United States today has accepted, and even embraced, the notion that we should not only have a powerful navy in peacetime, but that it should be—indeed, must be—the most powerful navy on earth, and that the United States should shoulder the responsibility of patrolling the world's oceans—a duty we did not believe fell to us before 1945. Whether that is a good thing, or a bad thing, or simply a fact of life is a conversation for another time.

I AM ALMOST FINISHED and then we can go to Q & A. But let me make one brief comment about the navy as an institution.

Like all large national and public institutions, the U.S. Navy is a mirror of our culture and our values, as well as our strength. And there are several ways in which the Navy today is dramatically different from what it was in the 19th century or even most of the 20th century.

In the age of sail, the principal duty of crewmen aboard navy ships was to move heavy objects around, which is why, especially in Britain, men were recruited for the naval service by simply banging them over the head with a marlinspike and dragging them on board. We were a bit more subtle in the United States, but still not particularly picky.

By the 20th century this was no longer the case, not only due to a more enlightened view of citizen rights, but also because service in the US Navy required much more of sailors. Today, as you all know, Navy enlisted ratings include Aviation electronics technician, information systems technician, and missile technician, though the traditionalists among you are no doubt glad that there are still boatswain's mates, and gunner's mates.

The Navy is demographically different, too. Blacks have served in the U.S. Navy from its earliest days—historically, Blacks have made up between 13 and 20 percent of all navy crewmen from the very beginning. For that reason, President Truman's executive order in 1947 that desegregated the U.S. military had less immediate impact on the Navy than it did on the army.

Even after World War II, Blacks and Filipinos were generally limited to service as cooks, servers, or in some other support role. That began changing in the 1960s and 70s, and there are almost no restrictions today. Still, it is worth noting that the first Black admiral pinned on his stars in 1971, and that there are only ten Black admirals on active duty today. That is roughly four percent of the 268 admirals on active service, whereas the enlisted force in the U.S. Navy is 20% Black.

And, of course, the navy is no longer all male. Women began serving in the navy as early as the Civil War when they acted as nurses. Interestingly, the initial call for navy nurses in 1862 was issued under the assumption that they would be all male. When women volunteered, there was no standing rule about it, and so their service was accepted.

During the world wars of the 20th century the navy's manpower needs were such that the navy reached out to women to serve in a wide variety of support roles. Initially accepted as secretaries and administrators, women soon began to perform in a wide variety of jobs, though still not on combat ships.

In World War II, the navy eagerly sought women for what was called the WAVES, an acronym for Women Accepted for Voluntary Emergency Service. By 1943 there were 27,000 women in the navy, and this time they served in a wide variety of duties including as pilots and air crews ferrying airplanes from the factory to the airfields.

By the 21st century, the Navy's enlisted force began to reflect the nation at large. As I mentioned, roughly twenty percent of Navy personnel identify as Black, which is a larger percentage than in the population as a whole, which is 13 percent. Latinos make up about 18 percent, which is nearly identical to the 19% of their representation in the country. Twenty percent are women, and many of the laws that previously barred them from combat have come down, too.

So that's a very short, and admittedly superficial, introduction to the history to the U.S. Navy, and I look forward to your questions. **[SLIDE]**