

*Hulls in the water* could soon displace *boots on the ground* as the most important military catchphrase of our time. But our Navy is stretched thin. How we manage dwindling naval resources will go a long way toward determining our future standing in the world.

BY ROBERT D. KAPLAN

# America's Elegant Decline

**B**eware pendulum swings. Before 9/11, not enough U.S. generals believed that the future of war was unconventional and tied to global anarchy. They insisted on having divisions to fight against, not ragtag groups of religious warriors who, as it turned out, fought better than state armies in the Muslim world ever did. Now the Pentagon is consumed by a focus on urban warfare and counterinsurgency; inside military circles, the development of culturally adroit foreign-area officers (FAOs) and the learning of exotic languages have become the rage. My own »



warnings about anarchy (“The Coming Anarchy,” February 1994 *Atlantic*) and my concentration on FAOs and Army Special Forces in recent books may have helped this trend. But have we pushed it too far? We may finally master the art of counterinsurgency just in time for it to recede in importance.

History suggests that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will be imperfect guideposts to conflicts ahead. The quaint Franco-Prussian War of 1870–1871 gave no intimation of World War I. Neither World War II nor Korea prepared us for Vietnam, which was more similar to the Philippine War of 1899–1902 than to its immediate predecessors. The ease of the Gulf War provided no hint of what an ordeal the Iraq War would be. Today, while we remain fixated on street fighting in Baghdad, the militaries of China, India, South Korea, and Japan are modernizing, and Russia has maintained and subsidized its military research-and-development base by selling weapons to China and others. Though counterinsurgency will remain a core part of our military doctrine, the Pentagon does not have the luxury of planning for one military future; it must plan for several.

“Regular wars” between major states could be as frequent in the 21st century as they were in the 20th. In his 2005 book, *Another Bloody Century*, the British scholar Colin Gray, a professor of international politics and strategic studies at the University of Reading, explains convincingly that these future wars will not require any “manifestation of insanity by political leaders,” nor even an “aberration from normal statecraft,” but may come

about merely because of what Thucydides recognized as “fear, honour, and interest.” Wars between the United States and a Sino-Russian axis or between the United States and a coalition of rogue states are just two of the scenarios Gray imagines.

Are we prepared to fight these wars? Our Army and Marine Corps together constitute the most battle-hardened regular land force in the world. But it has been a long time since our Navy has truly fought another navy, or our Air Force another air force. In the future they could be tested to the same extent that the Army and Marine Corps have been. The current catchphrase is *boots on the ground*; in the future it could be *hulls in the water*.

Democracy and supremacy undermine the tragic sense required for long-range planning. A “peaceful, gain-loving nation” like the United States “is not far-sighted, and far-sightedness is needed for adequate military preparation, especially in these days,” warned Navy Captain Alfred Thayer Mahan in 1890, a time when—although the Panama Canal was soon to be built and World War I lay just over the horizon—America was still preoccupied with land-based westward expansion (Wounded Knee, the last battle of the Indian Wars, was fought that year). Mahan notwithstanding, too few strategists at the time were thinking seriously about sea power. Today we are similarly obsessed with dirty land wars, and our 300-ship Navy is roughly half the size it was in the mid-1980s.

A great navy is like oxygen: You notice it only when it is gone. But the strength of a nation’s sea presence, more than

any other indicator, has throughout history often been the best barometer of that nation's power and prospects. "Those far-distant storm-beaten ships upon which [Napoleon's] Grand Army never looked, stood between it and the dominion of the world," Mahan wrote, describing how the British Royal Navy had checked Napoleon's ambitions. In our day, carrier strike groups, floating in international waters only a few miles off enemy territory, require no visas or exit strategies. Despite the quagmire of Iraq, we remain the greatest outside power in the Middle East because of our ability to project destructive fire from warships in the Indian Ocean and its tributary waters such as the Persian Gulf. Our sea power allows us to lose a limited war on land without catastrophic consequences. The Navy, together with the Air Force, constitutes our insurance policy. The Navy also plays a crucial role as the bus driver for most of the Army's equipment, whenever the Army deploys overseas.

Army units can't forward-deploy anywhere in significant numbers without a national debate. Not so the Navy. Forget the cliché about the essence of the Navy being tradition; I've spent enough time with junior officers and enlisted sailors on Pacific deployments to know that the essence of our Navy is *operations*: disaster relief, tracking Chinese subs,

one of the world's busiest waterways, the Strait of Malacca. In an age when 90 percent of global commerce travels by sea, and 95 percent of our imports and exports from outside North America do the same (even as that trade volume is set to double by 2020), and when 75 percent of the world's population is clustered within 200 miles of the sea, the relative decline of our Navy is a big, dangerous fact to which our elites appear blind.

#### THE END OF THE MAHANIAN CENTURY?

The best way to understand the tenuousness of our grip on "hard," military power (to say nothing of "soft," diplomatic power) is to understand our situation at sea. This requires an acquaintance with two books published a century ago: Mahan's *The Influence of Sea Power Upon History, 1660-1783*, which was written in 1890, and Julian S. Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*, which came out in 1911.

Few books have had more influence on military policy than Mahan's. It affected the thinking of Presidents William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt—as well as that of Germany's Kaiser Wilhelm II—and it helped prompt the naval buildup before World War I. Mahan showed

## The strength of a nation's navy has throughout history been one of the best barometers for gauging that nation's power and prospects. Our Navy is now half the size it was in the 1980s.

guarding sea-lanes, and so forth. American sailors don't care what the mission is, as long as there is one, and the farther forward the better. The seminal event for the U.S. Navy was John Paul Jones's interdiction of the British during the Revolutionary War—which occurred off Yorkshire, on the other side of the Atlantic. During the quasi-war that President John Adams waged against France from 1798 to 1800, U.S. warships protected American merchant vessels off what is today Indonesia. American warships operated off North Africa in the First Barbary War of 1801 to 1805. The War of 1812 found the Navy as far down the globe as the coast of Brazil and as far up as the North Cape of Scandinavia. Peter Swartz, an expert at the Center for Naval Analyses, observes that because operating thousands of miles from home ports is so ingrained in U.S. naval tradition, no one thinks it odd that even the Coast Guard has ships in service from Greenland to South America.

Great navies help preserve international stability. When the British navy began to decline, the vacuum it left behind helped engender the competition among major powers that led to World War I. After the U.S. Navy was forced to depart Subic Bay in the Philippines in 1992, piracy quintupled in the Southeast Asian archipelago—which includes

that because the sea is the great "commons" of civilization, naval power—to protect merchant fleets—had always been the determining factor in European political struggles. The strength of his argument lay less in its originality than in its comprehensiveness, achieved by numerous examples. He pointed out that there were no great sea battles in the Second Punic War, because Rome's mastery of the Mediterranean was a deciding factor in Carthage's defeat. He noted that George Washington partly attributed America's victory in its war for independence to France's control of the seas—even as several decades earlier France had lost the Seven Years' War partly because of its neglect of sea power.

Mahan believed in concentrating national naval forces in search of the decisive battle: For him, success was about sinking the other fleet. Mahan's aggressive sensibility perfectly matched the temperament of Theodore Roosevelt. As a result, it was in the quiet years before World War I that America became a great sea power—and consequently a Great Power.

Julian Corbett, a British historian, did not so much disagree with Mahan as offer a subtler approach, placing greater emphasis on doing more with less. Corbett

asserted that just because one nation has lost control of the sea, another nation has not necessarily gained it. A naval coalition that may appear weak and dispersed can, if properly constituted, have "a reality of strength." He called this a "fleet in being"—a collection of ships that can quickly coalesce into a unified fleet when necessary. This fleet-in-being wouldn't need to dominate or sink other fleets; it could be effective by seizing bases and policing

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

### THEODORE ROOSEVELT

Captain [Alfred Thayer] Mahan has written distinctively the best and most important, and also by far the most interesting, book on naval history which has been produced on either side of the water for many a long year ...

Captain Mahan's effort is to show the tremendous effect which sea power has had upon the development of certain of the great nations of the world, especially at momentous crises of their history ... He never for a moment loses sight of the relations which the struggles by sea bore to the history of the time; and, for the period which he covers, he shows, as no other writer has done, the exact points and the wonderful extent of the influence of the sea power of the various contending nations upon their ultimate triumph or failure, and upon the features of the mighty races to which they belonged ...

We need a large navy, composed not merely of cruisers, but containing also a full proportion of powerful battle-ships, able to meet those of any other nation. It is not economy—it is niggardly and foolish short-sightedness—to cramp our naval expenditures, while squandering money right and left on everything else, from pensions to public buildings.

"The Influence of Sea Power upon History," October 1890

choke points. Such a deceptively able fleet, Corbett argued, should pursue an "active and vigorous life" in the conduct of limited defense, by, for example, carrying out harassing operations. As it happened, Corbett's book came out after the British Royal Navy had reduced its worldwide presence by leveraging the growing sea power of its allies Japan and the United States.

A hundred years later, the Mahanian Century has ended. The period of 1890 to 1989 was about dominance: controlling vast oceanic spaces by making sure your national navy had more ships than those of your competitors. This era reached its zenith in 1945, when

the U.S. Navy and its vast fleet of supply ships numbered 6,700. With no peer competitor in sight, the president and Congress moved quickly to cut that Navy, along with the standing Army, considerably. By 1950, the United States had only 634 ships. The drawdown helped set the stage for the "Revolt of the Admirals," when a group of officers warned the nation of calamities ahead. (Indeed, two decades later the Soviet navy would be a near-peer competitor.) But in a 1954 article in *Proceedings*, the journal of the U.S. Naval Institute in Annapolis, a young Harvard academic named Samuel P. Huntington told the Navy not to feel sorry for itself:

The resources which a service is able to obtain in a democratic society are a function of the *public support* of that service. The service has the responsibility to develop this necessary support, and it can only do this if it possesses a strategic concept which clearly formulates its relationship to the national security.

Huntington recommended that the Navy emphasize its ability to support ground troops *from the sea*: Any battles with the Soviet Union were likely to be on land, so the Navy needed to play up the job it could do in a war with a great land power. The Navy took Huntington's advice, and it worked: For the remainder of the Cold War, the Navy was able to hold the line at roughly 600 ships, in part by arguing for its importance in supporting a ground war against the Soviet Union and its allies—it would be the Navy's job to get soldiers to the fight, and to soften up the battlefield with offshore firepower.

In 1991, the Gulf War provided a live-action demonstration of this capacity. Even so, by 1997, post-Cold War budget cuts had reduced the Navy to 365 ships. (In the Quadrennial Defense Review of that year, the Pentagon established a "red line" of 300 ships, below which the Navy would not go.) Of course the 300-ship Navy could still, in the words of Robert O. Work, vice president for strategic studies at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, in Washington, "pound the snot" out of primitive challengers like Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, because the precision revolution in weaponry enabled, for instance, a single wire-guided missile from a U.S. destroyer to accomplish what in Vietnam had required wave after wave of carrier-based planes.

Still, the fewer vessels you have, the riskier each deployment, because a ship can't be in two places at once. Due to the rapid increase in ship-borne trade, globalization favors large navies that protect trade and tanker routes. Additionally, while the United States remains a great naval power, it is no longer a maritime power; that is, we don't have much of a merchant fleet left to support our warships in an emergency. We've been priced out of the shipbuilding market by cheap-labor countries in Asia.

All of this puts us in a precarious position. History shows that powerful competitor navies can easily emerge out of nowhere in just a few decades. The vast majority of American ships that saw combat in World War II had not even been planned before the spring of 1941. The Indian navy, which may soon be the third-largest in the world, was not on many people's radar screens at the

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

### HENRY DAVID THOREAU

An English traveller ... tells us that "... The heavens of America appear infinitely higher, the sky is bluer, the air is fresher, the cold is intenser, the moon looks larger, the stars are brighter, the thunder is louder, the lightning is vividder, the wind is stronger, the rain is heavier, the mountains are higher, the rivers longer, the forests bigger, the plains broader."...

If the moon looks larger here than in Europe, probably the sun looks larger also. If the heavens of America appear infinitely higher, and the stars brighter, I trust that these facts are symbolical of the height to which the philosophy and poetry and religion of her inhabitants may one day soar ... For I believe that climate does thus react on man—as there is something in the mountain-air that feeds the spirit and inspires. Will not man grow to greater perfection intellectually as well as physically under these influences? ... I trust that we shall be more imaginative, that our thoughts will be clearer, fresher, and more ethereal, as our sky—our understanding more comprehensive and broader, like our plains—our intellect generally on a grander scale, like our thunder and lightning, our rivers and mountains and forests—and our hearts shall even correspond in breadth and depth and grandeur to our inland seas. Perchance there will appear to the traveller something, he knows not what, of *leta* and *glabra*, of joyous and serene, in our very faces. Else to what end does the world go on, and why was America discovered? ...

In Wildness is the preservation of the world.

"Walking," June 1862

close of the Cold War. Nor, for that matter, was the now-expanding Chinese submarine fleet. Robert Work told me that he believes the eventual incorporation of Taiwan into China will have the effect that the Battle of Wounded Knee had on the United States: It will psychologically close an era of national consolidation for the Chinese, thereby dramatically redirecting their military energies

outward, beyond their coastal waters. Tellingly, whereas the U.S. Navy pays homage to Mahan by naming buildings after him, the Chinese avidly read him; the Chinese are the Mahanians now.

Then there is the Japanese navy, which now operates 117 warships, including 16 submarines. In a sense, we're back to 1890, when a spark of naval competition among rising powers like Japan, Germany, and the United States left Britain unable to maintain its relative advantage.

#### THE 1,000-SHIP NAVY

By necessity, the American Navy is turning from Mahan to Corbett. "Where the old 'Maritime Strategy' focused on sea control," Admiral Michael Mullen, the chief of naval operations (recently promoted to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff), said last year, "the new one must recognize that the economic tide of all nations rises not when the seas are controlled by one [nation], but rather when they are made safe and free for all."

He went on: "I'm after that proverbial 1,000-ship Navy—a fleet-in-being, if you will, comprised of all freedom-loving nations, standing watch over the seas, standing watch over each other." Subtract the platitudes, and it's clear that Admiral Mullen is squaring a number of circles to contend with the difficult reality he's up against.

A grand maritime coalition that policed the seas and provided disaster relief would allow for such possibilities as joint American-Chinese antipiracy patrols in MALSINDO (the Malaysia-Singapore-Indonesia archipelagic region, as an American Navy acronym labels it). In fact, national navies tend to cooperate better than national armies, partly because sailors are united by a kind of fellowship-of-the-sea born of their shared experience facing violent natural forces. Such coalitions would likely get along better than the land-based ones we have seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kosovo. Requirements for membership would be minimal: Any navy could join, provided it were willing to share information. Leading a cooperative international enterprise like this to interdict terrorists, pirates, and smugglers in coastal waters and to deter rogue states would help the United States improve its deteriorating reputation in the wake of Iraq.

Mullen's emphasis on a coalition of freedom-loving nations is itself an indication of diminished resources. During the Cold War, we had crucial naval allies whose bases could always be depended upon—Japan, Great Britain, Denmark, Norway, Iceland, and several others. With their help, we held the Soviet navy in check under the polar ice. But given current public opinion in Europe, perhaps the only one of these allies we can rely on in the future is Japan, which—as an island civilization still hated throughout Asia and beset with security dilemmas of limited interest to Europeans—may be the loneliest country in the world except for Israel. (Experts I spoke to for this

article worried about the prospective loss of allied basing and advocated sea basing. One of the Navy's earliest proposed designs was a device resembling a self-powered oil rig with massive platforms for UAVs—unmanned aerial vehicles—and other air assets.)

With no core group of allies, commerce has to be protected by all, for all. That's no easy challenge. Whereas airplanes are monitored and regulated from takeoff to landing, merchant ships are on their own in the anarchic seas. But in a post-9/11 world, with the possibility

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

### HENRY WADSWORTH LONGFELLOW

So through the night rode Paul Revere;  
And so through the night went his cry of alarm  
To every Middlesex village and farm, —  
A cry of defiance, and not of fear, —  
A voice in the darkness, a knock at the door,  
And a word that shall echo forevermore!  
For, borne on the night-wind of the Past,  
Through all our history, to the last,  
In the hour of darkness and peril and need,  
The people will waken and listen to hear  
The hurrying hoof-beat of that steed,  
And the midnight-message of Paul Revere.

“Paul Revere's Ride,” January 1861

of nuclear terrorism abetted by ocean-based piracy and smuggling, the anarchy needs to be quelled, and the seas and the ports policed. Hence the benefits of a multinational piracy patrol.

Stanley Weeks is a Washington-based naval and defense-policy analyst for a Fortune 500 commercial consulting company. Over the course of his career, he has done everything from mentoring the new Albanian navy to advising U.S. combatant commanders about how to defend against missiles. When I spoke to him in his office in McLean, Virginia, he told me about other possibilities for Admiral Mullen's 1,000-ship fleet-in-being. “Boots-on-the-ground in most cases is a loser,” Weeks said. “On land, we're not playing to our advantage, because there is an endless demographic supply of young male religious fanatics.” He emphasized that naval operations can lower America's profile, since they attract less attention than Army operations, making our military less vulnerable to media attacks—and therefore also making it easier to carry out operations that might otherwise become lightning rods for criticism. Offshore maritime

capability also enables us to “take out selected individuals and insert small groups of special forces,” Weeks says, adding that leveraging other powers by operating as part of an international 1,000-ship navy would certainly help with all this.

A multinational fleet-in-being would also lead to greater intelligence sharing and allow us greater forward presence, closer to enemy shores. This would make it easier to identify key targets. In fact, the 1,000-ship multinational navy is essentially the seagoing equivalent of counterinsurgency.

But while the 1,000-ship navy would help cut down on smuggling and piracy, and possibly terrorism, it doesn't really deal with the basic strategic function of the U.S. Navy: the need to offer a serious, inviolable instrument for inflicting great punishment—a stare-down capability. Nor does it address the need to quickly transport troops and equipment to distant conflicts.

“The Navy is not primarily about low-level raiding, piracy patrols, and riverine warfare,” Jim Thomas, a former deputy assistant secretary of defense, told me. “If we delude ourselves into thinking that it is, we're finished as a great power.” Piracy, for example, has been a scourge for hundreds of years in some of the very same places we say it cannot be tolerated, like off the Horn of Africa or in archipelagic Southeast Asia. As the late Vice Admiral and Navy futurist Arthur Cebrowski once told me, with a dismissive wave of his arm, “Piracy is just part of the noise.” No matter how the Pentagon spins it, the reality is that development of a 1,000-ship international navy is not a way of maintaining our current strength; rather, it's a way of elegantly managing American decline.

But let's remember that while the relative decline of the British Royal Navy helped produce World War I, Britain and its allies still won that war, thanks in some measure to sea power—and that Britain would go on to triumph in an even greater world war two decades later. Our own growing relative weakness need not mean that our adversaries gain advantage. Decline can be overrated.

#### THE WEARY TITAN

**A**s noted, today we have only half the nearly 600 ships that the U.S. Navy had in the 1980s, when it was directed by Secretary of the Navy John Lehman; he observes that now, because we are building only five ships per year, “we're on the way to a 150-ship Navy.”

This attrition is partly a result of the high cost of the war in Iraq and the shrinkage of discretionary funds in the national budget, but it's also a function of the procurement process itself. The building of naval platforms offers a case study in how a vast and aged bureaucratic system is subject to disease and calcification—which are in part what doomed Pharaonic Egypt, Mayan Central America, and Soviet Russia.

To get this bureaucracy to agree on a new class of ship can take years—even decades—of studies and committee meetings, in which slowing down the process is easy and taking even the smallest risk is hard. Consequently, by the time a ship is launched, it is already dated. Yet because the ship must be equipped with every weapons system conceivable, the cost remains high. (To leave any weapon system out is to make the ship, to some degree, more vulnerable—and that means risk.) The Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer on which I was embedded in 2005 cost nearly \$1 billion. The new DDG-1000 Zumwalt-class destroyer, envisioned in one form or another for 12 years and beset with delays, could end up costing \$3 billion a ship—if any get built. The new Gerald R. Ford-class aircraft carriers could cost a whopping \$8 billion each—not including \$6 billion of research-and-development costs.

History can be cruel to such a geologic pace; this slowness is a recipe for vulnerability and nasty strategic surprise. We have a capital-intensive Navy consisting of vessels that cost tens of billions of dollars, and that must therefore each deploy for decades if they are to return the investment. Yet all a future peer competitor like China need do to greatly devalue our fleet is to improve its ballistic-missile technology to the point where we're forced to move our carriers, say, 100 miles east of their present positions

consider the financial burden of sustaining this Navy. Admiral Mullen was “hanging on by his fingernails” trying to keep current projects going, according to one expert. “It would take a Chinese-perpetrated 9/11 to give us the budget we need,” the same expert told me, “and the Chinese would never be that stupid. They will bleed us slowly, by just doing what they're doing.” On October 26, 2006, a Chinese Song-class attack submarine, equipped with Russian-made wake-homing torpedoes, reportedly stalked the USS *Kitty Hawk* Carrier Strike Group in the Pacific. The sub boldly surfaced within firing range before being detected only five miles from the carrier itself.

That incident might prove to be a better harbinger of the future than anything going on in Iraq. A second incident, this past January, provided another augury. When the Chinese destroyed an aging weather satellite with a missile-launched interceptor, “they ended two decades of restraint over the militarization of space,” as Vice Admiral John G. Morgan Jr., deputy chief of naval operations for information, plans, and strategy, told me. According to Stratfor, a consulting company that analyzes intelligence, the Chinese are developing a space-warfare capability that could allow them to limit U.S. naval power without a massive naval buildup of their own, by threatening our satellite-based intelligence-gathering and weapons systems.

## Pentagon spin aside, developing a 1,000-ship international navy is not a way of maintaining our strength; it's a way of managing American decline. Fortunately, decline can be overrated.

off the Asian mainland, to keep them out of missile range. Worse, a nuclear-radiation device arriving in a container in the harbor at, say, Norfolk, Virginia, could render these multibillion-dollar platforms suddenly unusable.

The coming technological era of precision and stealth will not be friendly to gargantuan objects like carriers. Consider the “supercavitation” torpedo, a torpedo that launches from a small boat and, by its ability to create a cushion of air between it and the surrounding water, can travel at 200 knots (regular torpedoes can travel at only 35 knots) and immobilize a carrier on detonation.

Fortunately, our defense bureaucracy is slowly rising to the challenge—not by eliminating such threats but by diminishing them. For instance, the new Ford-class carriers will be built with laser guns to kill incoming missiles, anti-torpedo torpedoes to deal with supercavitation technology, and electric catapults for launching UAVs in case fighter jets, with their human pilots, give way to enhanced remote-controlled Predators that can be refueled in the air.

Decline can be imperceptible. But if you think that what I have been describing does not constitute decline,

The danger isn't China per se. China's actions are merely a premonition of a future that will favor nations with dynamic start-up defense bureaucracies less careful and doubt-ridden than our own, unburdened by layers of committees and commissions, and willing to buy—or steal—cutting-edge technology.

To grasp what our military is up against, think of our defense bureaucracy as a great metropolitan newspaper, proud of its editorial oversight, accuracy, and formal English usage, yet besieged and occasionally humiliated by bloggers, whose usage is sloppy and whose fact-checking is weak, sometimes nonexistent. The paper soldiers on, winning awards and affecting the national debate, even as each half decade its opinion carries less weight. Now think of an \$8 billion Ford-class carrier surprised by dozens of jet-skis ridden by Iranians armed with shoulder-fired missiles—a scenario one expert described to me. Such an attack wouldn't destroy the carrier, but it might kill sailors and damage some of the radar and planes on deck, worth millions of dollars. Imagine the headlines. Riding through the Strait of Malacca with a carrier strike group

not long ago, I saw how easy it is for small fishing boats to draw suddenly alongside.

Another likely future scenario our Navy may have to confront, described to me by Ronald O'Rourke of the Congressional Research Service, is so distributive and networked that it's reminiscent of the Borg aliens in *Star Trek: The Next Generation* episodes, who are able, because of their collective mind, to simultaneously experience what only one of them witnesses. Instead of one big sonar device on a warship, there would be hundreds or thousands of hydrophones floating all over the ocean, each the size of a soda can, listening to submarines and sending information simultaneously.

#### FROM THE ARCHIVES

### WOODROW WILSON

In our stroke for independence we struck a blow for all the world. Some men saw it then; all men see it now ... Let us ponder our duties like men of conscience and temper our ambitions like men who seek to serve, not to subdue, the world; let us lift our thoughts to the level of the great tasks that await us, and bring a great age in with the coming of our day of strength.

"The Ideals of America," December 1902

And if the United States develops such technology, there is no guarantee that we could keep it from the open market. "Because of new surveillance measures, you could have whole zones of the ocean where you are unable to operate safely on the surface," Donald Henry, special assistant to the director of the Pentagon's Office of Net Assessment, told me. Technology and the risk of unconventional attacks "could drive navies underwater, unless carrier strike groups are protected by something we don't have yet." The faster technology progresses, the less likely people will play by our rules.

Meanwhile, as costs drive us toward that 150-ship Navy, we may need to delegate some tasks to private naval companies, in the same way that private contractors have been used on land in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to Navy Lieutenant Commander Claude Berube, who teaches at the U.S. Naval Academy, in an emergency we might even issue letters of marque, the way we did during the Revolutionary War, giving privateers the legal authority to act in our defense. Allowing privateers to help with, say, the drug-interdiction effort in the Caribbean would enable uniformed sailors to concentrate on the Pacific and Indian oceans.

More submarines might seem like a quick fix for many of these challenges. They operate under the surface. They are moving, underwater intelligence factories, able to listen to cell-phone conversations on land. They can launch missiles at targets on shore. Some are now being refitted so that they can clandestinely deliver Special Operations teams onto beaches. But the catch is that they are expensive. Each fast-attack, Los Angeles-class submarine costs easily more than \$1 billion in today's dollars, despite having much less general firepower than a comparably priced Arleigh Burke-class destroyer.

Today, the United States devotes 4.38 percent of its annual gross domestic product to defense. Before the Iraq War, it was 3.5 percent. Although two dozen or so countries spend more on defense than we do relative to GDP, we still spend more in absolute terms than much of the rest of the world combined. But if we are to maintain our current relative military advantage, we will have to spend at even higher rates. Admiral Morgan, the deputy chief of naval operations for information, plans, and strategy, told me that to maintain our naval primacy, we may need to devote close to 5 percent of GDP (assuming a growing economy) to defense. Yet it's unclear whether the American public will abide that.

During the Cold War, our 600-ship Navy needed to be in only three places in force—the Atlantic and Pacific flanks of the Soviet Union and the Mediterranean; we sometimes subcontracted out less-important tropical sealanes to other free-world navies (in this, Admiral Mullen's 1,000-ship fleet-in-being does have a recent precedent). Now we need to cover the Earth with less than half that number of ships. Decline can never be admitted as such until a rival makes demonstrable inroads into your power. But naval trends now appear to buttress political and economic ones that suggest that we are indeed headed for a world with multiple competing powers.

Of course, admirals will continue to march to Capitol Hill and declare that no matter the size of the budget, they will succeed in every mission. Managing decline requires "a degree of self-delusion," as Aaron Friedberg put it in his 1988 book, *The Weary Titan: Britain and the Experience of Relative Decline, 1895-1905*. "British statesmen," Friedberg observed, "continued to talk as if nothing of any significance" had occurred, even as they abandoned worldwide sea supremacy. Abandoning supremacy was, in Friedberg's view, a "prudent" and "sensible" strategy, given the economic and political realities of the time. And it didn't stop Britain from helping to save the world in succeeding decades.

We could do much worse. ▀

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