

REBEL PRIVATEERS-THE WINNERS OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

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A thesis presented to the Faculty of the U.S. Army
Command and General Staff College in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree

MASTER OF MILITARY ART AND SCIENCE

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by

MICHAEL SCOTT CASEY, LCDR, USN
B.A., Southern Connecticut State College, 1978
M.Ed., Providence College, 1986

Fort Leavenworth, Kansas
1990

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ABSTRACT

REBEL PRIVATEERS- THE WINNERS OF AMERICAN INDEPENDENCE

by Lieutenant Commander Michael Scott Casey, USN, 111 pages

This study is a quantitative analysis of rebel privateers commissioned by the Continental Congress during the American Revolution. Their documented contributions, primarily from primary sources, are compared to those of the Continental Navy. By developing an "average" privateer and Continental Navy vessel, the study conducts a cost analysis of these warships to Congress, as well as the number and dollar value of their individual prizes to the American war effort. The effect of privateers on the British economy as a whole and their impact on British naval, domestic, and diplomatic policy is also examined. This study concludes that privateering was the most cost-effective of the naval options available to Congress. More importantly, due to the infinite demands which privateers placed on the Royal Navy, while extracting a staggering cumulative toll on British commerce, privateers met nearly all the preconditions required for American victory. The study further concludes that previous works, particularly Mahan's, seriously underestimated the relative contributions of the American privateer. The quantifiable material available today indicates that privateers, not the French Navy, provided the decisive element of American rebel strategy.

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CHAPTER ONE

THE OPENING SALVO

The founding fathers of the American Republic were as select, and heralded, a group as it was possible to find in the late Eighteenth Century. Historians have credited them with drafting and enacting a document which not only serves this country well, but has also made it the envy of the world. That these men had the foresight to recognize the need for our Constitution, were able to develop it under less than ideal conditions, and then had the courage to support and defend it through its turbulent early years leads one almost inevitably to the conclusion that these were not ordinary men. The degree of prescience, if not omniscience, required to do what they did is impressive in itself. The fact that they were able to make decisions which have stood the test of time and are still valid after 200 years speaks for itself.

Many of these same men who drafted our Constitution were there in the first days of the revolutionary movement which began our Republic. As the first leaders they did just as much for the new nation on a less lofty plane as they would do as drafters and signers of the Constitution. They

almost concurrently established a federal government, organized an army which eventually would be competitive with that of the British, and saw to the daily operations of the largest political, military, and economic bureaucracy the new world had ever witnessed. The scope of their individual and collective responsibilities was staggering. Faced with the military might of the world's preeminent imperial power and the constant threat of personal economic ruin, not to mention the hangman's noose or the utter destruction of everything they held dear, the leaders of the Revolution were still able to overcome. Again, no mean feat nor ordinary men.

So if these men were extraordinary, and routinely did extraordinary things, does it follow that their often pivotal military decisions were also exceptional and just as correct? When the Continental Congress had to choose between relying on local militias or building a conventional army with which to fight the British, it opted for a conventional, traditional army. Congress selected George Washington to organize and train the army for a conventional defeat of the enemy on the battlefield. It was a European-style fighting force from the very beginning. And yet, when faced with the same choice in the naval arena, Congress opted for the unconventional approach. Why this contradiction between a conventional army and an unconventional navy?

Many members of the Continental Congress held very strong opinions that a powerful, European-style fleet was exactly what the situation demanded. Nevertheless, despite some intense political infighting and a tentative attempt at building at least a nominal fleet, the Continental Congress never wholeheartedly supported this idea. Rather than building, buying, or chartering a fleet capable of challenging the British fleet, the Congress chose to rely on an unconventional naval force. Congress itself issued, and authorized through the individual states, thousands of bonds, commissions, and letters of marque to privateers.

Would it have been wiser to put together a large fleet? Or was it the right choice to take the low-cost alternative- setting loose hundreds of privateers, often motivated at least as much by greed as by patriotism, and more than willing to avoid battle with any enemy merchant or warship which didn't appear to be easy prey? Was this a conscious decision on the part of Congress? Did they know what they were doing, or did they slide unknowingly into this reliance on privateering? Did these men, who made so many right choices for the young nation, make the correct decision given the national resources and their knowledge of the situation?

One of the most thorough investigations of the naval aspects of the American Revolution is included in The Influence of Sea Power upon History (1890), a book reputed

to have been as influential, in its own way, on subsequent world events as Darwin's Origin of Species (1859). Written by Captain Albert Thayer Mahan and published in 1890, this work used the years 1660 to 1783 in British history, a period which culminated in the American Revolution, as an historical example. Mahan gave a detailed account of the various naval actions of the American War, not just those off the North American seaboard, but worldwide, interspersed with his analyses of the historical lessons to be learned from these engagements.

Mahan made a name for himself by elaborating and selling the idea that command of the sea equals control of maritime commerce, which is only possible by deploying a fleet of capital ships to do battle with, and sweep from the sea, the enemy's fleet. Not for Mahan the *guerre de course*, the use of individual ships as commerce raiders. In Mahan's opinion, the history of the American Revolution clearly demonstrated that it is sea power that spells success in war, and it is a powerful fleet that, by sweeping the enemy's fleet from the sea, creates and maintains that sea power.

While acknowledging the contribution of American privateers in disrupting British trade, Mahan opined that this *guerre de course*, or commerce raiding, could never be conclusive by itself. *Guerre de course* must always be a secondary naval operation strategically, however important

it may be in a local theater. The primary and indispensable naval operation is to seek out and destroy the enemy's naval power in decisive battle.

According to Mahan, the two most important events of the American War were Benedict Arnold's stalling for time with his Lake Champlain flotilla which saved the rebellion and brought France into the war, and the victory at Yorktown, which was made possible by overwhelming French naval superiority. As regards developing any actual sea power of their own, Mahan undoubtedly considered our forefathers to be singularly lacking in vision.

Was Mahan correct, or did the privateers make a much more significant contribution than anyone, including Mahan, realized? If one accepts Mahan's premise, then there is no choice but to conclude that the Continental Congress failed to make the right move by not devoting all their resources to developing a major fleet of ships of the line, manning them with patriots from along the Atlantic seaboard, putting to sea in strength, and destroying the British fleet by themselves or in conjunction with their allies' fleets. Any other use of limited resources, such as commerce raiding, would have been wasted. The question, therefore, is whether Congress' decision to support a *guerre de course* was justified in terms of its ultimate contribution to the American war effort.

The significance of this study comes from the application of quantifiable values to the contributions of privateers. Unlike Mahan, who admitted to gaining his insight intuitively, this study will examine the accomplishments of the privateers and, by comparing them to those of the Continental Navy, will demonstrate that the use of privateers was the most effective option available to the Continental Congress.

In answering the many relevant questions already posed, this study will consider a number of factors including a cost comparison of building, buying, or chartering a naval vessel versus commissioning a privateer, a comparison by number and by dollar value of prizes taken by naval vessels versus privateers, a comparison of the rate of return on the monetary investment in naval vessels versus privateers, and a rise in British commercial marine insurance rates when correlated to losses at sea. Additionally, this study will examine such non-quantifiable factors as the reaction of both Parliament and the Royal Navy to privateers, and any recognizable modifications to British naval policy as a result of commerce-raiding by privateers.

While the primary method of collecting this data will be the review of cataloged primary and published secondary material, any discussion of Eighteenth Century naval warfare should begin with some operative definitions and background material.

A "Letter of Marque" is an armed cargo vessel which served a dual purpose as a "warship" when the opportunity arose. It gains its name from the way in which it was "commissioned" by the government.

A "Privateer", strictly speaking, is a privately owned vessel outfitted specifically and wholly as a "warship" as opposed to an armed cargo vessel. In the context of this study, "privateer" will be a term inclusive of both letters of marque and privateers since both types of vessels were "bonded" or "commissioned" by the Continental Congress or the various state governments.

Mahan was not the only one to consider the relative worth of privateers. It bears noting that history, or at least some historians, never thought much of the notion of privateering. Another eminent American historian, Barbara Tuchman, had the following to say on the subject.

Privateers were essentially ships with a license to rob issued to them by local or national governmental authority. The practice was a paradox in the development of law and order, which, as it progresses, is supposed to represent the advance of civilization. Privateers were fitted out for the express purpose of attack and seizure of commercial cargoes for the profit of owner and crews and of the authorizing power. In this business of maritime breaking and entering, the commission to a privateer authorized offensive action while letters of marque covered seizure of the cargo. Equivalent to a policeman giving his kind permission to a burglar, the theory was one of the happy hypocrisies that men fashion so ably when they want to combine law and greed. (1)

This attitude was not shared by our forefathers since privateering in their day was a common and internationally acceptable way to compete in the naval and economic arenas.

During the course of the war, the Continental Navy itself consisted of less than one hundred ships of various sizes, built, bought, or chartered by the Continental Congress or captured by one of its own. This "regular navy" was augmented by the navies financed by eleven of the thirteen states. In the context of this study, when we speak of the Continental Navy, we will be referring to the ships of the states' navies since several were, at least in part, paid for by the Congress. Additionally, most were, at one time or other, loosely incorporated into the Continental chain of command since, when operating as a group, the senior Continental Navy officer often took command. Neither did the British distinguish between these two types of navies.

The term "Fleet" has a number of meanings. In its largest sense, it can be synonymous with the word "navy". Often the word is used to connote any large group of warships. In this study, as well as in practice during the Eighteenth Century, a "fleet" consists of a group of ships-of-the-line, operating in concert under the tactical control of a single Admiral. By driving his line of ships close aboard that of the enemy and exchanging broadsides, each Admiral aimed to destroy the other's fleet in a single engagement. Due to these prevailing naval tactics of the day, only these largest ships-of-the-line, carrying sixty-four or more guns, were capable of surviving the hail

of shot and shell when two fleets did battle. In the conventional navies of the day, smaller vessels like frigates, served primarily as tenders for the larger ships, messengers for the Admiral, and occasionally to pounce on any severely damaged ship which might fall out of the enemy's line during battle.

When a group of vessels smaller than ships-of-the-line was formed, coordinated action of this "squadron" was still possible. Under the direction of the squadron's "Commodore", usually the senior Captain present, these smaller vessels conducted simultaneous individual combats until victorious, ordered to disengage, or unable to continue.

As things would turn out, the Continental Navy would only be able to commission a single ship-of-the-line during the entire war. *America*, carrying seventy-four guns, would not be launched until 1782, and was turned over to the French soon thereafter. The other ships of the Continental Navy ranged from eight to forty-four guns. This effectively limited Continental Navy tactics to squadron-sized engagements at best. Not until the arrival of the French and Spanish navies would larger, and possibly more decisive, naval battles be feasible for either side.

In order to understand how decisions were made during the Revolution, one must first understand how the Continental Congress functioned. The Continental Congress was hardly an homogeneous group of men and its composition

changed significantly during the course of the war. Naval affairs were directed at various times by Congress itself (1775), a **Naval Committee** (1775-1776), a **Marine Committee** (1776-1779), a **Board of Admiralty** (1779-1781), and an **Agent of Marine** (1781-1784). All these were staffed by a handful of selected Congressmen. Additionally, two separate Navy Boards, one for the Eastern Department and one for the Middle Department represented Congress in the two major regions of the Atlantic seaboard. Under these Departments, and yet able to report and complain directly to Congress when it suited them, were Continental Agents in the major seaport cities of America. Thus any reference to the Continental Congress is a reference to this broader, decision-making bureaucracy as a whole which exercised the legal authority to raise, finance, and direct the Continental Navy.

There are two important questions to be answered. First, was the British fleet in North America such an overpowering military machine that the rebels could never hope to challenge it? Second, did the Continental Congress understand the state of the Royal Navy and its potential when they were forming their own policies? These questions are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

As to the overall strength of the Royal Navy, at the time it was by far the largest and most professional naval force extant anywhere in the world. If it could have been

assembled at one place and time it could have crushed any maritime threat, certainly that posed by the colonies. Unfortunately for the British, their fleets could not concentrate; they were spread all over the globe, especially in the Mediterranean, Near East, and Far East, protecting British commercial interests. For the British to have left the rest of their empire defenseless would have been unthinkable. Therefore, the British Admirals who were employed to fight this war in North America were forced to fight with insufficient ships and sailors for the task at hand, a task made much more difficult by American privateers. Of forty-three warships available in North American waters, a snapshot taken in March 1776 shows the following dispositions: three refitting, eight on convoy duty, fourteen cruising, fifteen in port, two on messenger duty, and one engaged in surveying. (2)

Concerning accurate information on British strength and likely courses of action, we can safely assume that the Continental Congress had both a fairly complete picture of the forces on the assorted American stations and a healthy respect for the Royal Navy's capabilities. After all, it was this very same Royal Navy that had been protecting American commerce from piracy and privateers, and the Seven Years War was not so distant a memory that the Continental Congress didn't appreciate the contribution sea power made to the British victory over the French. Finally, prior to and

during the war, American decision-makers benefited from an impressive intelligence "network" which brought news almost immediately upon a British warship entering an Atlantic port or showing up on patrol off a coast.

Perhaps the best way to answer these two questions in summation is by quoting a British writer of the time in his editorial "defense" of Admiral Lord Howe in 1780. Howe had been the overall commander in North America from 1776 to 1778, but was then under political attack back in England for his conduct of the naval portion of the American war.

For this purpose it will be requisite to observe to them, that Congress were much better informed of the real state of our navy in America, at the beginning of this year, than the Lord at the head of the Admiralty acknowledged himself to have been. Its numbers and situation they represented to their new allies much more accurately than it suited his lordship's views and purposes to own to the English nation. They knew that the chief object of our armaments in the American seas, was the interruption of their trade, and the destruction of the small vessels they had been able to fit out. That for this service five sail of sixty-four gun ships, five fifties, with a certain number of frigates and sloops, were deemed amply sufficient, and were alone employed. That even this small force was constantly dispersed along the whole extent of the coast, as it must have been to answer its intent. That therefore an armament in force, planned with secrecy, and conducted with vigour and expedition, might warrant hopes of the most brilliant and decisive success. They might attack the British ships in detail, and defeat them piece-meal. The men of war being once destroyed, the transports and victuallers must fall of course. Cut off from every supply of provision, every means of retreat, the whole British army must fall an easy prey. The contest must be decided by a single blow, before the design could be suspected at home, or at least before any succours could be sent out to prevent the execution. (3)

Mahan couldn't have said it any better. If this London observer could, by looking at the "big picture", see the

advantages of building a fleet and destroying the limited Royal Navy assets available in North America, it is fairly safe to assume that this logic was not lost on our forefathers. And certainly there were some influential men in Congress and elsewhere who felt this way.

This becomes clear as we look at the discussion that was going on in the summer of 1775 between John Adams, a delegate from Massachusetts to the Continental Congress, and Elbridge Gerry, one of his supporters back in Marblehead.

Mr (Christopher) Gadsden of South Carolina whose fame you must have heard, was in his younger years, an officer on board the Navy and is well acquainted with the fleet. He has several times taken pains to convince me that this fleet is not so formidable to America as we fear. He says, we can easily take their sloops, schooners and cutters, on board whom are all their best seamen, and with these we can easily take their large ships, on board whom are all their impress'd and discontented men. He thinks the men would not fight on board the large ships with their fellow subjects, but would certainly kill their own officers. He says it is a different thing to fight the French or Spaniards from what it is to fight British Americans- in one case, if taken prisoners they must lie in prisons for years, in the other obtain their liberty and happiness. He thinks it of great importance that some experiment should be made on the cutters. He is confident that we may get a fleet of our own, at a cheap rate- and this would give great spirit to this continent, as well as little spirit to the ministry. (4)

The congressional delegates discussed the political, economic, and military pros and cons of building a large fleet made up of ships of the line on an almost continuous basis until the destruction of the feeble American fleet by the British. Naval intervention by the French in 1778 made the issue moot.

Some members of the Continental Congress considered the very idea of challenging the British at sea the height of folly, "...the maddest idea in the world", according to Samuel Chase of Maryland. (5) Many agreed. Later on, when it became clear that building, arming, and manning warships was more difficult than it first appeared, even more were inclined to see the futility of it. In March 1777, Isaac Smith, a long-time friend of John Adams, wrote to inform Congressman Adams of the sorry circumstances surrounding the Continental Navy ships then being fitted out in Boston:

I dont know of any more methods to be taken but what you have done to keep up the credit of the currency. I have heard you are about building some ships of 60 or 70 guns, which will come to a very large some of money and when built must lay by the walls. Whether such a sum that must be made for that purpose wont be a further means of lessening the value of the money. Such a ship can never be got to see from hence iff we are to judge by the dispatch lesser ones make. (6)

Obviously there were issues other than military which weighed heavily on the minds of the dissenters, in this case financial considerations. Throughout the war, the Congress kept coming back to the financial aspects and it may be that the question of which option would be cheaper would ultimately decide the fate of the Continental Navy. But in the early days of the war there were equally strong feelings on the opposite side, with John Adams as one of the spokesmen.

Adams, never known for his tact, or for keeping his opinions to himself, could be counted on to speak out loud

and clear with the other side of the argument.

I agree with you that in politicks the middle way is none at all. If we finally fail in this great and glorious contest, it will be by bewildering ourselves by groping after this middle way. We have hitherto conducted half a war; acted upon the line of defence, etc, etc. But you will see by tomorrow's paper that, for the future, we are likely to wage three-quarters of a war. The Continental ships-of-war, and the Provincial ships-of-war, and letters of marque and privateers, are permitted to cruise on British property, wherever found on the ocean. (7)

Ben Franklin seconded this idea in a letter he wrote to Silas Deane, another member of Congress, in August of 1775,

I lament with you the want of a naval force. I hope the next winter will be employ'd in forming one. When we are no longer fascinated with the idea of a speedy reconciliation, we shall exert ourselves to some purpose. Till then things will be done by halves... (8)

The debate in Congress could also be viewed in a regional context. New England was the center of American commerce in general, and of shipbuilding and other sea-based industries in particular. It was predominantly New England ports that would be protected and kept open by any future Continental Navy. It would be New Englanders brought up on the sea-going traditions of fishermen and merchantmen who would have to man the new navy.

And yet even New England, the hotbed of revolution, and the area that stood to gain the most from a powerful navy, and, conversely, the area that had the most to lose to an undeterred Royal Navy, was not completely behind the idea of building a strong fleet because it was also New England

that benefited the most from privateering. Since it was New Englanders who owned, commanded, or crewed so many of the privateers, they would be the ones striking it rich if only a single valuable prize could be taken, and it would be a New England port that would benefit when the prize was brought in for condemnation and sale.

The mid-Atlantic and southern states had fewer sea-going commercial interests and, therefore, much less to gain. Charleston, small compared to Boston, was the only commercially significant Southern port. The direct benefits which would accrue to Southern citizens, businesses, and political leaders would be much fewer and farther between. John Adams characterized the opposition on this point:

But there is great objection to this. All the trade of Pennsylvania, the Lower Counties, a great part of Maryland and New Jersey sails in between the Capes of Delaware Bay. And if a strong fleet should be posted in that bay, superior to our fleet it might obstruct all the trade of this river. Further the trade of Virginia and the rest of Maryland floats into Chesapeak Bay between the Capes of Henry and Charles where a fleet might stop all. Besides Virginia and Maryland have no navigation of their own nor any carpenters to build ships. Their whole trade is carried on in British bottoms by British, most of it North British, merchants. These circumstances distinguish them quite from New England, where the inlets are innumerable and the navigation all their own. They agree that a fleet would protect and secure the trade of New England but deny that it would that of the Southern Colonies. Will it not be difficult to persuade them then to bear the expence of building a fleet merely for New England? (9)

Throughout the war there were regional tensions, and it was out of political necessity that, later in the war when there were probably far better uses for their ships,

the Continental Congress felt compelled to periodically detach Continental Navy ships to cruise off the southern and mid-Atlantic coasts to mollify the southern and mid-Atlantic states. Unfortunately, this dispersion of effort would soon contribute to the virtual elimination of the Continental Navy as a viable fighting force. Through it all, the debate continued. A noted naval historian, William M. Fowler Jr., summarized the situation.

Nevertheless, keenly aware of the strategic implications of the war at sea, Congress went on dreaming and scheming. Some of their plans became hopelessly ensnared in a web of congressional politics that quickly snuffed out any hope for success. Others passed the political tests and then died for want of men and ships. Through it all, though, a few hearty souls held to the belief that the Continental navy could accomplish something more than conducting a *guerre de course* and running a dispatch service. (10)

The first move toward anything concrete came about by a proposal made by the Congressional delegation from Rhode Island, just the latest in a series of attempts by the "navalists" to sell the idea to Congress. This was a formal plea to the Congress to establish an American fleet to protect the coast. While this would become the vehicle by which a Continental Navy would come into being, the initial response of Congress was tepid at best.

While the debate in Congress continued, by late 1775 things were beginning to move of their own accord. In September General Washington commissioned his own "fleet" in order to capture desperately needed supplies from the British. When eventually "blessed" by the Continental

Congress, these vessels would become the nucleus of the upstart Continental Navy. The fact that a semi-official "Continental" naval force, albeit not much of a fleet, now existed, provided all the momentum needed by the navalists in Congress to gain enough support to sponsor the authorization of thirteen frigates in December of 1775.

While this appeared to be a large step toward the creation of a powerful fleet, it did not represent such an actual commitment. Thirteen frigates were no match for the Royal Navy in North America and the belated commissioning of ~~America~~ would not change the situation. Sensitive to the costs and difficulties involved, and constantly reminded of them as they grew in number and duration, Congress quickly looked to its other option and fully endorsed it by authorizing privateering in March of 1776. From this point, even prior to the Declaration of Independence, the Continental Congress would allow privateering to run its course by taking the war to the enemy.

The implication is not that the Continental Navy never developed into any more than a handful of ships. As things turned out, the Continental Navy not only continued to be supported by various people in Congress but it also continued to grow. The high hopes would last for quite awhile. John Adams had some of the highest hopes, and his use of romantic language probably swayed many to his point of view:

We begin to feel a little of a seafaring inclination here...I believe we shall take some of the twenty gun ships before long. We must excite by policy that kind of exalted courage which is ever victorious by sea and land- which is irresistible. The Saracens had it- the Knights of Malta- the Assassins- Cromwell's soldiers and sailors. Nay, New England men have ever had it hitherto. They never yet failed in an attempt of any kind. (11)

But even when combined with ships from the states' navies, the Continental Navy was rarely able to project sufficient naval power to accomplish much more than individual ship combat. An example of a larger mission was the "amphibious" assault on Bagaduce, a British stronghold on the Maine coast which was conducted in 1779 by three Continental Navy ships, two from Massachusetts, one from New Hampshire, and sixteen privateers! (12)

Despite this and other notable combat actions by the Continental and states' navies, it is clear that the vast majority of ships committed to the American war effort were privateers. Once the Continental Congress opened the floodgates, there was no stopping the privateering spirit which engulfed the colonies. The boost in morale and courage which John Adams had intended to see come from the Continental Navy came instead from this new source. Here was an idea whose time had come, one which the people could get behind. An 1823 chronicler of recent American naval heroes, S. Waldo Putnam, was to summarize for his readers the situation as the spirit of privateering caught hold:

Merchants and ship-owners, deprived of their wonted commercial pursuits, converted many of their heavier vessels into privateers, and the hardy sons of the deep impetuously rushed forward to lend their aid in repelling the cruel and implacable enemy who were devastating the country; and though with apparently feeble means, to chastise the insolent foe upon the element of which she claimed herself to be mistress. (13)

As it turned out, the competing strategies of privateering versus a strong fleet would become moot long before anyone expected. Following a number of British victories on land and at sea, the Continental Navy was decimated. As in the unsuccessful defense of Charleston in 1780, Continental Navy assets would repeatedly be frittered away or exposed to unnecessary risk. Upon the arrival on the scene of the French fleet, the Continental Navy for all practical purposes ceased to exist as an independent fighting force and its vessels were placed under the operational control of the French Admirals.

And yet, even John Adams, when he spoke of building a fleet, really wasn't talking about the same thing as Mahan. Adams had much more limited aims, and the "fleet" of which he spoke would never have been able to challenge the Royal Navy, only to harass it. It would be able to do the job of the privateer but not much more. The only difference would be the new American naval ensign flying at the stern:

What think you of an American fleet? I don't mean 100 ships of the line, by a fleet, but I suppose this term may be applied to any naval force consisting of several vessels, tho the number, the weight of metal, or the quantity of tonnage may be small. The expence would be very great- true. But the expence might be born and perhaps the profits and benefits to be

obtained by it would be a compensation. A naval force might be created which would do something. It would destroy single cutter and cruisers. It might destroy small corvets or fleets of these like (James) Wallace's at R. Island and Ld. Dunmores at Virginia. It might oblige our enemies to sail in fleets. For two or three vessels of 36 and twenty guns, well armed and manned, might attack and carry a 64 or a 70 or a 50 gun ship. (14)

Clearly then, the issue of fleet versus privateers, in the context of *guerre de main* (Mahan's view) and *guerre de course* (commerce raiding), is a moot point. Regardless of putting together a collection of ships called the "Continental Navy", by not actively pursuing fleet to fleet actions, Congress was, in effect, selecting to wage a *guerre de course* over a *guerre de main*.

Having looked in this chapter at both sides of the argument, a strong fleet versus privateers, we see that the Continental Congress never really attempted to challenge the British Royal Navy at sea. Certainly there was no arguing the many virtues of having a number of Continental vessels on hand, showing the new flag to the world in a way that privateers were unable to duplicate. But while many in Congress would agree that a large fleet of large ships would be nice to have, given the circumstances with which it was faced, the Congress elected, by consciously choosing not to support the other, more expensive option, to employ privateers as commerce raiders to achieve its broad goals at sea. Whether commerce raiding was going to give Congress "the biggest bang for its buck" is the subject of this study.

CHAPTER TWO

THE WAR AT SEA

The naval aspects of the American Revolution have come to be characterized in popular history by numerous heroic but mostly ineffectual individual ship actions. In fact, a significant number of squadron or fleet battles took place. Long before the French and Spanish weighed in on the American side, the Continental Navy, the states' navies, and privateers had been cooperating, or at least sailing in company, in an attempt to defeat the British and the Royal Navy. The American Revolution would be a naval war.

A look at the geography of the colonies illustrates why the rebels were driven to nautical endeavors. All the major population centers were found on the coast or connected to it by water, and the main lines of communications were by sea. Therefore strategic and tactical mobility on the sea was essential to win the war.

In order to evaluate the contribution of privateers, it is necessary to first look at the war at sea in its larger scope. This will allow us to place the privateers' contributions in their proper perspective. Even though privateers will play a part in this chapter, it must be remembered that the vast majority of privateers will not be

available to participate in fleet or squadron actions under the guidance of Congress or the Continental Navy. Instead, most privateers will be engaged elsewhere- conducting commerce raiding as and when they individually see fit. What follows, then, is an overview of the conventional war at sea.

This chapter will discuss chronologically the major and minor "battles" of the war, engagements in which more than two or three vessels fought a deliberate action rather than one brought about by their accidental meeting. The discussion will include significant developments on land, especially the actions of the Continental Congress. Finally, since the American victory at Yorktown ended the military phase of the war in America, even though peace was not concluded between all the belligerents until 1783, this discussion will only cover the period through 1781.

For the most part, the background information provided in this chapter is taken from Ships and Seamen of the American Revolution. Written by Jack Coggins, this book provides one of the most thorough, yet easy to read accounts of the naval aspects of the American Revolution. More importantly, it gives a balanced picture of the many sides to the war by neglecting none of its facets. The Continental Navy, British and French fleet actions, and the role played by privateers are all covered in depth. Additional sources of material will be indicated by individual footnotes.

Congress had a number of viable naval options available to it, given a competent naval force regardless of size. British reinforcements were thousands of miles or six to nine weeks away across the Atlantic throughout the war. Furthermore, the British lines of communications were particularly vulnerable to interdiction. Any American vessels seeking action need only wait a short while off the coast near the major seaports; their British prey would come to them. The valuable and vulnerable British-controlled fishing grounds off Canada were within easy striking distance of New England ports. Additionally, the riches of the West Indies were there for the taking as it was almost impossible for the Royal Navy to interdict the myriad small vessels which could be used there.

American ships, Continental Navy or privateers, could hide in any of the innumerable coves along the American coast, waiting to dart out to capture the traffic which must inevitably pass. Or they could organize limited expeditions designed to strike the British where least expected- all the way to the British Isles themselves. The British, on the other hand, were forced to spread their North American forces from Halifax to the Windward Islands. Matters were then made worse when they were further required to provide logistical support which would tie them to the Army and dedicate a large portion of their force as convoy escorts to limit the damage by privateers to British commerce. The deck should have been stacked in the Americans' favor.

Not everything went the American way, however. The lack of positive Congressional support for a strong fleet did more than just deprive the Continental Navy of the ships it would need if it was ever to mount a serious challenge to the Royal Navy. The rush to privateering also deprived the new Navy of the trained sailors and artisans it needed to build and man its ships. This was one of the toughest problems with which the naval bureaucracy had to deal. Even if it was able to overcome lack of money, lack of timber, lack of armament, and threats of British capture during construction- and this was by no means certain- the Congress was then faced with the prospect of seeing its new ships sit idly at the pier for months for want of crews. And privateering was to blame.

A review of the correspondence which surrounded the manning of the Continental frigate **Raleigh**, then laying in Portsmouth, New Hampshire provides a good example. When Captain Thomas Thompson, **Raleigh's** commanding officer, found himself unable to deal with the lack of seamen which plagued his ship, he looked to the State of New Hampshire for help.

Being informed by Congress that the Honorable the Council & Assembly for the State of New Hampshire had made a tender of their services to give every assistance in their power toward manning and equipping the **Raleigh** whenever she should be ordered to sea... what is most wanted at present is men. I therefore in the name of the United States of America beg your assistance...we should have man'd the ship with less difficulty than now, when trade and intercourse is free, but what most engages seamen's attention is privateers, not seeing the wages & other encouragements given by the Continent far exceeds any other service whatever. (1)

When a month had gone by with little help from New Hampshire in alleviating the shortage, the Portsmouth Committee of Safety tried to keep the pressure on state officials by submitting the following:

It is no little concern to us that the Raleigh, a Continental ship, is to this day unman'd, occasion'd by private armed vessels being man'd in this port & persons from other states coming here to carry away our men. (2)

It was with relief that William Whipple wrote to his friend, congressional delegate Robert Morris, of Raleigh's departure from Portsmouth:

I have the pleasure to inform you that the Raleigh has at last dropped down the river with about 150 men, and I think in a fair way of having her number completed in a short time, tho' I fear she will not be so well manned as I could wish, owing to the spirit of privatiering which still prevails & has carried off most of the seamen. She has not more than 20 seamen besides the officers. (3)

Such incidents were indicative of the problem faced by the Continental Navy throughout the war in its attempt to carry out what were often grandiose designs with clearly inadequate forces. It was not long before the pragmatists in Congress, forced to make hard military decisions, began to recognize the inherent limitations of their organized naval force. But a lot of water would pass under the keel first. In the meantime the Continental Navy was languishing and privateering was looking better all the time to the Continental Congress.

The year 1775 saw little in the way of fleet action, primarily because an American fleet hardly existed.

Nevertheless, this was an important year since the decisions made and the actions taken would essentially shape the war at sea and the Revolution itself. This year would see the first American success at sea and the creation of both an American navy and a Marine Corps. For the British, the war had not yet begun.

New England saw several initiatives. Not content to wait for the Congress, in June the state of Rhode Island commissioned two sloops to protect merchant shipping along her coast. In September, General Washington commissioned his own navy, in the form of a handful of schooners. Finally the Continental Congress formed the Naval Committee to oversee naval affairs in October, and established a Marine Corps in November. They followed with the Marine Committee to oversee it in December. At the end of the year Congress named Esek Hopkins as the first Commodore of the American "fleet" forming in Philadelphia. Even more importantly, it authorized the building of thirteen frigates, presumably for future offensive action against the British.

On the water, the patriots gained their first naval victory over the British in June when a large number of sea- and landmen from Machias, Maine, using two stolen British sloops, boarded and captured the armed schooner *Margaretta*. While this was a "spontaneous" act- it was not sponsored by the American revolutionary movement- the leaders of the action were soon endorsed by the State of Massachusetts, thus providing a degree of "legitimacy" to the enterprise.

Additionally, the first "bona fide" capture by a continental vessel came in September when Hannah, one of Washington's schooners, took a merchantman.

The colonies continued to progress toward what they hoped would be naval sufficiency in 1776. They would organize their first offensive by sea, and demonstrate an ability to strike an obvious British weakness- the West Indies. Also, privateering would be authorized. The British would abandon Boston, but counter by punishing New England for its disloyalty. They would also attempt to concentrate their ground forces by linking with reinforcing troops from Canada.

In March of that year a naval expedition was sent to New Providence, part of the Bahama Islands, where marines were landed to march on Nassau. Against light opposition they were able to capture a significant quantity of vital military stores. This landing marked the Marines' first foray into amphibious warfare.

The only setback of this important event came when a single Royal Navy warship fell in with the American squadron on a dark night during the voyage home. Before the shooting stopped, she had severely damaged not only the squadron but Continental Navy pride as well. What should have been an overwhelming American victory over the out-numbered and out-gunned HMS Glasgow netted the Americans nothing but a bloody nose. Still, the Americans were able to put on their

best face upon their return to port, for at Nassau they had accomplished more than anyone had expected.

In March, the British strategy began to take shape with the decision to abandon Boston and concentrate on New York. This effectively moved the war from New England to New York, New Jersey, and points south. General Washington responded in April by forming his second naval force, a Hudson River flotilla. While this flotilla was a necessary form of defense, it provided little deterrence to the British. Despite the unsuccessful submarine attack of Turtle, David Bushnell's ingenious submarine, on a British warship in New York harbor, British forces would later land and take Manhattan by mid-September.

Late in March the Continental Congress authorized privateering. Congress went on to publish an extensive list of do's and don't's for privateers. This constituted an attempt to maintain some semblance of control over the undertaking. The marching orders which the privateers received were fairly straightforward:

1. You may, by force of arms, attack, subdue, and take all ships and other vessels belonging to the inhabitants of Great Britain, on the high seas, or between high water and low water mark, except ships and vessels bringing persons who intend to settle and reside in the United Colonies; or bringing arms, ammunition, or war-like stores, to the said colonies, for the use of such inhabitants thereof, as are friends to the American cause, which you shall suffer to pass unmolested, the commanders thereof permitting a peaceable search, and giving satisfactory information of the contents of the ladings, and destinations of the voyages.

2. You may, by force of arms, attack, subdue, and take all ships and other vessels whatsoever, carrying

soldiers, arms, gunpowder, ammunition, provisions, or any other contraband goods, to any of the British armies or ships of war employed against these colonies. (4)

In October one of the key battles of the war took place. An American "fleet" under General Benedict Arnold challenged the British on Lake Champlain. Known as the Battle of Valcour Island, the Americans opposed a superior British amphibious force on its way to rendezvous with a second British force working its way up the Hudson. Despite a serious tactical defeat which resulted in the loss of the entire American force, this action proved to be far from futile for the fledgling nation as the British elected to retire to Canada to try again in the spring. This delay of the British assault contributed to the subsequent American victory at Saratoga, which in turn led to the French intervention. In retrospect, this may have been the single most decisive contribution of the official naval forces of the United States, even if it can not be credited to the Continental Navy per se.

The British did, however, keep the pressure on in the remaining days of 1776. In October, they burned Falmouth, Maine in retribution for the attack on Margareta. This opened a new phase in the war; from here on it would be increasingly difficult for anyone in the American colonies to remain neutral. Innocents, at least in the sense that they were not active rebels, even if they might have sympathized with the cause, were now being punished. American propagandists would make the most of it.

The British closed out the year by occupying Newport, Rhode Island. Newport was a major seaport, as well as a hotbed of revolt. Its loss was a serious blow to the rebel cause.

Throughout 1777, the Americans concentrated on keeping their army alive while building a naval capability. Ships of the Continental Navy would operate individually in European waters, but accomplish little. The British used most of the year to consolidate their position. In the autumn they were ready and returned to the offensive.

In September the British maneuvered the Americans out of Philadelphia, the seat of the rebel government. This action not only displaced the Continental Congress but also deprived the rebellion of yet another valuable seaport. The British, however, did not yet have Philadelphia secured. An American blockade of the Delaware River had been established consisting of man-made obstructions to navigation, several forts and prepared batteries, and an American naval squadron. The Americans, who had already lost the Continental Navy frigate *Delaware* in the fight for Philadelphia, now formed their squadron around the Pennsylvania State frigate *Montgomery*. Totalling between forty and fifty vessels, this motley collection under Commodore John Hazelwood of the Pennsylvania Navy included sailing ships, oared galleys, floating batteries, and "fire ships", used to torch enemy vessels.

The efforts of the American squadron came to nought. It was unable to prevent the British from overcoming American forces and positions in a piece-meal fashion. The British were able to slip supplies through to Philadelphia while moving against the Americans by water and by land. First Fort Mifflin, on Mud Island in the middle of the Delaware, fell on 15 November. This made the American position at Fort Mercer, on the east bank, untenable. On 20 November, the fort was abandoned by American troops. The last act in this American tragedy played itself out on the next day as American naval forces were forced to destroy their own ships to prevent capture by the British. Not only did the loss cover the ineffectual Pennsylvania squadron, but also included two Continental frigates then under construction upriver.

Had the Americans been able to maintain their blockade on Philadelphia, the course of the war might have run quite differently. Rather than keeping a stranglehold on the British, thus negating their victory in taking the city in the first place, the Americans came out of the encounter in far worse shape than anyone could have foretold. Their demonstrated inability to put together sufficient naval force when needed was going to impose strict limitations on American military and naval operations until the arrival of the French fleets.

The lone bright spot in an otherwise sad affair was provided by Bushnell, inventor of Turtle. Under the auspices

of Francis Hopkinson, then Chairman of the Navy Board, he developed a naval mine with which to attack the numerous British vessels then at anchor in Philadelphia harbor. Using munitions which the Americans would otherwise have had to destroy to prevent capture, Bushnell improved upon an earlier design of his which had previously resulted in the near-sinking of **HMS Cerberus** off the coast of Connecticut.

Bushnell's "Battle of the Kegs" led off the naval action of the new year on 5 January 1778. His submerged mines, buoyed up by the famous kegs, did not sink any British ships. However, despite the accidental deaths of several civilians by the mines, the affair proved to be a public relations bonanza for the rebels. Not only did the danger of floating mines result in many sleepless nights for Royal Navy captains and crews, it also forced them to engage just about every log and piece of flotsam which floated down the river. The spectacle was duly recorded in the American press and, for the moment, the Royal Navy was the laughing-stock of America.

The remainder of 1778 would see the French enter the war and John Paul Jones make a name for himself. The British would exercise their prerogatives in American waters by striking where and when ever they chose. Also the first significant fleet actions would occur when America's new ally, the French, challenged the British in the West Indies.

On 13 March 1778 the treaty with France was announced. France was still smarting from the loss of most of her North

American empire to the British during the Seven Years' War. While France had long provided covert aid and encouragement to the rebels, she now intended to inflict grievous harm on Britain while regaining as many of her past possessions as possible. The options now available to the allies, made possible by French seapower, were enticing. Furthermore, it was fairly common knowledge at the time that French intervention would almost inevitably include Spanish participation. The Americans had good reason to look forward to the upcoming year in the war at sea.

The events of April came as a shock to the British. At first, the war had been almost totally an American affair for them, to be fought in America. In March they had been forced to accept the belligerency of France, which moved the danger even closer to home. But Britain had felt secure in its home waters with few exceptions since 1066. On 23 April, Continental Navy Captain John Paul Jones led an American squadron in an attack on Whitehaven, in merrye olde Englande itself. Jones' initial force had consisted solely of the Continental sloop *Ranger*. Later on, once he had made a name for himself, it would be composed of his flagship, *Bonhomme Richard*, which had been paid for and fitted out by the French, three ships on loan from the French Navy, two privateers, and the Continental frigate, *Alliance*. Since this squadron was sailing under the American ensign and the commander was a serving Continental Navy officer, the credit

for Jones' adventures goes to the Continental Navy. And a great deal of credit it would be.

Striking where least expected, Jones raided up and down the British coast, taking numerous prizes, disrupting commerce, and shaking the Royal Navy to its core. He also created an uproar of indignation by the populace and the press as the Royal Navy responded in futility. A true hero of the rebel cause, Jones' exploits in battling HMS Serapis five months later, while more glamorous, would pale in comparison to the damage he did to British morale as a commerce raider. He also proved that the Continental Navy could effectively fight a "guerre de course".

In May much of the American advantage gained in April was subsequently lost in American "home waters". The British, at very little expense, put together a naval operation which did serious damage to American naval assets and rebel pride. An expedition sailed up the Delaware River, destroying rebel vessels as it went. With no naval force of their own with which to counter, the Americans were forced to watch as forty-four American ships were sunk, and the Royal Navy inflicted damage almost at will on rebel shipyards and towns.

This scenario was repeated several more times during the war. The Tory governor of Virginia, Dunmore, repeatedly ravaged the shores of Chesapeake Bay. In 1779 and 1781, the rebels would be rocked by the British naval forces. Against the 1781 raid, the Americans would field a squadron of more

than twenty Virginia Navy vessels under General Benedict Arnold. Tactically, the result would be the same as his outing at Valcour Island; his entire squadron was wiped out. Strategically, the British fared even better. They continued to exercise maritime superiority over the entire Chesapeake Bay. When this situation finally changed in the latter part of 1781, thanks to a French fleet, it would be enough to win the war for the Americans. In the meantime, the Americans learned that their Continental Navy, if not large enough to be forever in the right place at the right time, was unable to protect the coast from British attacks. Second, they learned that this was a shortcoming which privateers would be unable to correct.

In late July, one of the largest naval battles of the war took place. Not surprisingly, it occurred far from American waters and included not a single American vessel. Based on geography alone, it was almost inevitable that the British Channel Fleet would find itself opposed by the French fleet stationed in Brest. From 23 until 27 July, Admiral Augustus Keppel, with thirty ships-of-the-line attempted to overtake and bring to battle the French fleet of twenty-nine ships-of-the-line under Admiral the Comte d'Orvilliers. On 27 July Keppel was finally successful. Unfortunately for Keppel, sharp shooting and precise maneuvering on the part of the French combined with British confusion over tactical signals and lack of cooperation by

Admiral Hugh Palliser, Keppel's subordinate, led to an indecisive engagement.

Had the British handled the situation more competently, they had the opportunity at Ushant to deal the French Navy a crushing blow. Had they done so, it is unlikely the French would have risked sending so much of their navy to battle the British in North America. As it was, the French sailed away practically unscathed. This action influenced the naval war in North America by tying up so much British seapower in European waters, seapower that might have finally put down the rebellion if it had been available to the British admirals in North America.

In July, another French fleet, under the command of Admiral the Comte D'Estaing, arrived at the mouth of the Delaware, just two weeks after the departure of the British naval expedition which had wreaked so much havoc there. Moving on to Newport, Rhode Island, D'Estaing threatened British control of this vital port and maritime region. The British response to the threat was not long in coming. Admiral Richard Howe soon arrived with what ships could be scraped together in New York, and the stage was set for a decisive sea battle. Unfortunately for American interests, the fighting on 11 August was indecisive, and a gale forced the fleets to separate before battle could be rejoined. Following the indecisive action, D'Estaing took his fleet to Boston for refitting and provisioning.

Another opportunity had been lost by the allies, and months would go by before D'Estaing's fleet would again be a direct threat to the British. The fact that it existed and was in American waters, however, made it a force that the Royal Navy couldn't ignore. Every Royal Navy ship tied up keeping track of D'Estaing was one fewer that was available to attack the Americans. The feeble Continental Navy, with no ships-of-the-line, was never able to create such a distraction.

For the remainder of 1778 and the first half of 1779, the naval war shifted to the Caribbean. What followed was a series of actions that had no influence on the war in North America, except to the extent that it tied up Royal Navy assets. In September, the French took Dominica. In mid-December, an amphibious force under Admiral Samuel Barrington arrived to divest the French of Saint Lucia. D'Estaing, who had sailed south in November, arrived at Saint Lucia himself the very next day and tried to break the British hold on the island. On 15 December, a French naval attack failed. On 16 December, a ground assault failed. On the 29th D'Estaing took his ships and left. On the 30th the island fell to the British. Not until June of 1779 would D'Estaing go on the offensive again. On the 18th he took Saint Vincent, and, on 4 July, Grenada. The British would counter with a fleet under Admiral John Byron, Barrington's relief, but he could only manage a strategically indecisive engagement under the circumstances.

The Spaniards formally joined the allies that summer. Like France, Spain hoped to regain previous losses to the British, particularly Gibraltar. In August the French and Spanish fleets put together their most ambitious and threatening naval operation of the war. A combined fleet of sixty-seven warships spear-headed hundreds of transports and thousands of troops. They easily gained control of the English Channel as a prelude to invasion. The threat was real, and the British treated it as such. But already spread thinly, they were only able to muster the thirty-five ships of the Channel Fleet under Admiral Charles Hardy. Poor planning on the part of the French, evasive maneuvering by Hardy, and a fortuitous gale combined to frustrate the grand scheme. With nothing to show for it but the experience, the allied fleet returned to Brest.

The British were shaken and embarrassed by the fact that their mortal enemies could threaten them so. While the incident did not determine the outcome of the war, it certainly shifted the focus of the British war effort that much closer to home. Events in America, while still troubling, would never again cause so much anxiety.

The British, in an attempt to consolidate their position in New England, as well as to ensure a continuing supply of timber for Royal Navy masts, began a build-up on Penobscot Bay in the summer of 1779. With a fort already in progress, and secure lines of communications to Halifax, the British posed a serious threat to military and commercial

interests in New England. Spurred on by Massachusetts, which had the most to lose if the British were allowed to stay, an amphibious force made up of three Continental Navy warships, four from the states, sixteen privateers, twenty-two transports, and an estimated 2500 troops soon set out to drive the British into the wilderness.

The American siege had accomplished little by the time a British relief force arrived from New York. It could have been a fair fight, with British heft as exemplified by HMS *Raisonnable*, a sixty-four gun ship-of-the-line, offset by American numerical superiority. But the Americans, due in equal measure to lack of cooperation and lack of luck, were not up to the task and the action of 14 August quickly turned into a rout. The best the Americans were able to do was ground or torch their own vessels to prevent capture. Of the forty-odd ships in the American expedition, three were captured and the rest sunk by the British or burned by the Americans themselves. As Fowler summed it up:

The disaster down east was the greatest and last attempt by the Americans to do anything by way of naval squadrons. It had helped to make a shambles of an already weakened navy, a job that was practically completed a few months later at Charleston. (5)

In October, Admiral D'Estaing initiated an assault on Savannah. This was certainly not where the Americans wanted to be bringing their new-found naval power and strategic mobility to bear. General Washington still had his eye on New York. But American troops were committed none-the-less, if only as a gesture of support to their allies. The assault

was repulsed with heavy losses. What was worse for the Americans, D'Estaing had already been ordered back to France, making this his final engagement in North America that year. He soon packed up his troops and sailed for France, sending only a small part of his naval force to remain in the West Indies. The Americans were left in the lurch.

Also in October, Congress tried to overhaul the way in which naval affairs were conducted by establishing the Board of Admiralty. Already responsible for the vast majority of the direction of the war effort, Congress was finding itself sorely pressed to make the crucial decisions required of it as a national governing body while overseeing the day to day operation of the Continental Navy. This was a problem which had plagued Congress since the British had driven the Continental forces out of Philadelphia in September of 1777, forcing them to relocate. There was probably small consolation in the fact that the administrative burden would have been far worse for Congress had it instead opted to build a large navy. This administrative burden, particularly in regard to naval matters, was a topic of some discussion by the delegates at the time. Robert Morris, not realizing that in 1781 he would be chosen by Congress to handle naval affairs single-handedly as the nation's first Agent of Marine, remarked upon this problem to John Bradford:

The separation of Congress from many of their papers etc upon the late removal put things a little out of sorts and it is difficult to get the Committees

properly into their gears again. Or to speak more properly, Members of Congress are too much harrassed & have too much business to do it as it ought to be done... (6)

James Warren probably best summed up the feelings in Congress in regard to this as-yet unrewarded drain on their time and energy caused by America's maritime woes:

The commissions of the Navy Board or rather the instructions of the Marine Board arrived about a week ago. By them it appears we should be all three present in order to transact business. Mr Deshon (tho' we have expected him 10 days) is not yet arrived. I see the business is very large and extensive, must engross our whole time, & we are allowed but one clerk, which I think quite insufficient. While I remain at this Board I shall do every thing I can to answer the design of our appointment, & the expectation of my friends, but with you I sigh for private life and domestic felicity, & incline to resign. (7)

In 1780, the trends established in 1779 would continue. French strategic goals and seapower would determine the location of the fighting. The focus of the war in North America would shift south. America and France would be joined by a new "ally".

General Washington was eager to bring the combined weight of the American Army and the French naval forces in North America to bear in driving the British out of New York. But he was also anxious to maintain a positive relationship with his new allies, the French admirals. Washington was therefore willing to cooperate with the French as long as the British were being hurt somewhere. By letting the French set the agenda for the war, Washington was in effect shifting the focus of the war to the West Indies and the colonies of the South.

The first naval action of the new year, however, came far from American waters. Unfortunately for the new partners, Spain was about to demonstrate her lack of value as an ally in general, and that of her navy in particular. In reaction to the Spanish blockade of the British garrison at Gibraltar, Admiral George Rodney was diverted from a transit to the West Indies with his small squadron. Reinforced by a detachment from the Channel Fleet, Rodney arrived on station with twenty-two ships-of-the-line, fourteen frigates, and a huge convoy of supply vessels to affect the relief.

On 8 January 1780, Rodney's force encountered a Spanish squadron of twenty-two ships, which included a ship-of-the-line and six other warships. These were easy pickings for the British. With thirteen former enemy ships, including an ex-Spanish ship-of-the-line sporting a British naval ensign, Rodney's squadron scored its next coup.

On 16 January, the British encountered a second Spanish fleet of eleven ships-of-the-line and two frigates. Despite Spanish efforts to evade, the British were able to intercept and engage. The end result was that, when Rodney's force sailed into Gibraltar to relieve the garrison, they did it along with five new Spanish ships-of-the-line. Britain's enemies now had even more reason to fear her, and the Spanish would never again play a significant role in the war at sea.

Rodney was now able to apply himself to his original mission, to regain naval supremacy in the Caribbean. Arriving at Saint Lucia in late-March, he wasted no time in seeking out his French counterpart, Admiral the Comte de Guichen, who had also arrived that month with a force of sixteen ships. A series of indecisive engagements was fought between 17 April and de Guichen's departure for France in mid-August. While neither Admiral could claim a victory, both had accomplished something worthwhile for their individual sides. Rodney had tied down a French fleet which could have instead been used to conduct a joint operation with the Americans. He deprived them of the strategic mobility and local naval superiority which might, if General Washington had had his way, have allowed the Americans to strike the British center of gravity in New York and terminate the war.

De Guichen, for his part, managed to tie up a significant portion of the ships available to the British for all of North America. The already thin Royal Navy was spread that much thinner. While de Guichen's contribution, much like that of Rodney's, was modest, it was the fact that he had a fleet at all that allowed him to have an impact. Unfortunately, it was far too late in the war for the Americans to do anything about their lack of seapower. As things would turn out, the British would be able to put together just enough naval power, even without Rodney, to be

decisive in a major battle. What's more, they would all but destroy the Continental Navy in the process.

January through May 1780 saw an American squadron of four Continental Navy ships under Commodore Abraham Whipple employed in a defensive role at Charleston. They were attempting to prevent its capture by a large British sea and land force. Politically, the Continental Congress may have had no choice but to offer up these ships to fight alongside the South Carolina Navy in defending the only commercially significant seaport in the South. Tactically, it was not a wise decision. Not only were these ships, individually and as a group, eliminated as a threat to the British on the high seas, freeing up the very Royal Navy vessels which were assaulting Charleston. They were also placed in an indefensible position to boot. The Americans deliberately sank one of their ships in the channel in an attempt to block passage. The ploy failed. The other three, plus Whipple, their crews, and over 5500 Continental soldiers, were captured when the British siege succeeded. As was said later:

The surrender of Charleston was the worst American defeat of the Revolution, and it still ranks behind the Union capitulation at Harpers Ferry in 1862 and the fall of Bataan as one of the largest surrenders of troops in American history. It also pointed out the folly of using ships, whose greatest asset is mobility, as stationary gun platforms. The American navy lost four ships at Charleston for no good reason. (8)

A new French fleet under Commodore de Ternay arrived at Newport, Rhode Island, in mid-July. A British naval force

quickly imposed a blockade, sealing de Ternay in Newport until March of the following year. In August, a combined French and Spanish fleet came upon a huge British convoy enroute the West Indies. All told, the allies took fifty-five of the sixty-three merchantmen, depriving British forces in the West Indies of much-needed supplies.

The Americans would indirectly gain another ally in December when the British declared war on Holland. The Dutch, particularly those in the New World, had long supported and enjoyed trade with the American rebels. The Dutch Governor on Saint Eustatius had been the first foreign official to salute the self-proclaimed "United States of America" upon the visit of a Continental Navy warship to his island. But as to any real benefits to the American cause as a result of the Dutch now being in the war, there were none. When the British took Saint Eustatius in February of 1781, they would be denying the Americans a safe harbor for refuge, as well as a favored trading partner.

Naval events, and therefore the war in general, would move with increasing speed for the remainder of 1781. French and British fleets would face each other a number of times during the year. The Continental Navy would play no role whatsoever.

In March, the French fleet in Newport, now under Commodore Des Touches, attempted to sail south to the Chesapeake. It was quickly intercepted by Admiral Marriot Arbuthnot. The French clearly inflicted more damage on the

British squadron than they received, but they were forced to withdraw into Newport.

French Admiral the Comte De Grasse arrived at Martinique in April with twenty-four ships-of-the-line. He was engaged the next day by Admiral Samuel Hood and a force of seventeen ships-of-the-line. Hood was forced to retire. In June, the French were able to translate this temporary control of the Caribbean into the capture of Tobago. De Grasse then moved his fleet to Chesapeake Bay at more or less the same time that the French in Newport, now under Commodore de Barras, were transiting south to the same destination. The French fleets were about to concentrate.

In September, the American Revolution finally came to a head. On the 5th, the Battle of the Capes was fought. Both sides fought well under their commanders, De Grasse and Thomas Graves, the latest in a long line of British Admirals. Damage to both fleets was roughly equal. Graves, however, did not press the fight over the next several days while it might still have been possible to destroy De Grasse before the support of de Barras arrived. As de Barras sailed over the horizon, De Grasse wasted no time in affecting a rendezvous. When this combined force sailed into Chesapeake Bay and established naval superiority it sealed the fates of General Charles Cornwallis at Yorktown and the British empire in America.

The siege of Yorktown began on 30 September, and ended in American victory on 19 October, long before the British

could get a relieving naval force in place. With the victory at Yorktown fresh in his mind, but with uncertainty as to the termination of the war, General Washington wrote an illuminating letter to the Marquis de Lafayette, his trusted comrade-in-arms. His discussion of the value of French seapower, and what might have been, could easily be applied to the Continental Navy. Keenly aware of what would have been possible had the Americans been able to bring a powerful fleet of their own to bear at the right place and time, Washington's comments probably sum up the war at sea, and its lost opportunities, as well as can be done.

As you expressed a desire to know my sentiments respecting the operations of next campaign before your departure for France, I will without a tedious display of reasoning, declare in one word, that the advantages of it to America and the honour and glory of it to the Allied arms in these states, must depend absolutely upon the naval force which is employed in these seas and the time of its appearance next year. No land force can act decisively, unless it is accompanied by a maritime superiority; nor can more than negative advantages be expected without it; For proof of this, we have only to recur to the instances of the ease and facility with which the British shifted their ground as advantages were to be obtained at either extremity of the continent, and to their late heavy loss the moment they failed in their naval superiority. To point out the further advantages which might have been obtained in the course of this year if Count de Grasse could have waited and would have covered a further operation to the southward, is unnecessary; because a doubt did not, nor does at this moment remain upon any man's mind of the total extirpation of the British force in the Carolina's and Georgia, if he could have extended his cooperation two months longer. It follows then as certain as that night succeeds the day, that without a decisive naval force we can do nothing definitive; and with it every thing honourable and glorious. A constant naval superiority would terminate the war speedily; without it, I do not know that it will ever be terminated honourably. (9)

Undoubtedly the Continental Congress saw the value of seapower in this same light. That their best efforts at developing the Continental Navy had been insufficient to provide the naval forces required to ensure adequate defense or deterrence was readily apparent. But regardless of what point in the war Congress realized that the Continental Navy was not doing the job for which it had been created, Congress never really had the option of cutting its losses. With so much capital invested in building a navy, Congress had no choice but to keep that navy alive and hope for the best. Yet while these lessons were being learned by Congress, the privateers were waging a war of their own.

CHAPTER THREE

THE FACTS THAT COUNT

In order to arrive at any general conclusions as to the efficacy of the Continental Navy versus privateers, one must compare, if only in rough terms, their respective cost-benefit ratios to the war effort. Such a comparison can be derived by comparing the costs to the Continental Congress of commissioning, arming, and provisioning a Continental Navy vessel, as opposed to a privateer. It is also necessary to put a dollar value on the amount of damage each would inflict on the British and their commerce. The first comparison will be based on the average costs of building, arming, and manning each type of vessel. The second will involve a review of the captures made by each and the value of those captures.

One of the most difficult aspects of conducting this study is the dearth of quantified data. While it is the stated purpose of this study to alleviate this problem to a degree by quantifying the contributions of privateering, it is impossible not to become at the same time a victim of the problem. One of the reasons that two hundred years have gone by and no one has yet studied this era statistically is, perhaps, because it can't be done with any great precision.

There is a wealth of subjective information with which to evaluate the naval aspects of the American Revolution, but it is exceedingly difficult to correlate data to events in order to make an objective appraisal.

There are a number of reasons for this. First, no one at the time recorded the information. While by no means backward, the governments of the time were not nearly as large and well-staffed as they are today. How the Continental Congress was affected by overwork and limited administrative support has already been seen. The situation in Britain was not appreciably better. Virtually all the correspondence to and from the Admiralty during the war passed through the hands of a single man. It appears from the record that Philip Stephens, as the Secretary to the Admiralty, was responsible for receiving all incoming messages, ensuring they got to the attention of the proper Sea Lord, that action was taken, and a response sent. It is not surprising then that no one took the time to quantify the war in the way in which Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara would turn the Vietnam War into a scientific study.

While there were no government agencies specifically detailed to record and track this information, at least one commercial organization attempted to do so. Lloyd's of London, the association of British insurers, did as good a job as anyone of assessing the risk and correlating it to their profit margin. However there is also a problem here.

Due in large part to a gambling-related scandal in the 1760's, Lloyd's went through an extensive reorganization in the early to middle 1770's. The impact on this study comes from the fact that the only information available which is already cataloged is held in the Lloyd's "Committee Minutes" covering the period 1771 onward. "Loss and Casualty Books" and "Agency Records" only exist from 1837. While the "Subscription Books" of the various separate insurance companies which make up Lloyd's are extant, the exhaustive search of these records which would be necessary is beyond the scope of this study.

The next reason why it is difficult to apply statistical methods to the American Revolution is because this was actually a "World War" rather than simply an affair between the American rebels and their British masters. Long before France and Spain formally entered the war, French, and to a lesser extent Spanish, privateers had been attacking British shipping. By the time the war was over, the navies of France, Spain, and Holland would be involved, and battles would be fought as far away as India. In fact, the war went on among the European belligerents for two years after it ended in America. To sort out who lost which ship to whom is difficult enough. To show exactly whose captures drove up the price of sugar, for example, is not possible.

Of the secondary source material available, the trend appears to concentrate on the more glamorous aspects of the

war, to the detriment of the more mundane. Thus a great deal can be found on John Paul Jones. But there is very little on the privateer masters who combined to capture, over the course of a slow Atlantic Ocean transit, 74 of the 118 British merchantmen in a single convoy. (1) The lack of specific information on the less flashy privateers, who made up the majority, means that without an exhaustive search of the primary sources, the contribution of many of these patriots will never be known.

This study is not the first to suffer from these limitations. Mahan had the same difficulty, whether he knew it or not. His work, The Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence (1913), includes a short numerical summary of losses at sea available through the good graces of Lloyd's Secretary specifically for Mahan's book. (2) It is a short listing nonetheless, and fails to distinguish between British losses to Americans, or the other participants. While Mahan goes no further than providing the list- and he certainly doesn't appear to draw any conclusions from it- the fact that he saw the contributions of privateering as strategically insignificant may be explained, in part, by this lack of documentation.

Finally, one must remember in studying British records of the time that, to the British, all Americans were pirates! It is therefore not surprising when, especially early in the war, the British make no distinction between

the Continental Navy and the privateers. There are ample instances of this in the literature. Admiralty messages repeatedly used such terms.

You are to use every attention to protect the trade of His Majesty's faithful subjects, and to give them all the assistance in your power; to promote which the destruction of the piratical privateers of the rebels is to be one of your principal objects. (3)

The British point of view is put most succinctly in a letter from Vice Admiral James Young, currently commanding the Royal Navy in the Caribbean, to Count D'Argout, the French governor of Martinique. In it, Admiral Young complains of French protection of American vessels, in this case *Reprisal*.

Whilst the American vessels came into these seas unarmed, (tho' the traffic they were employed in was often very pernicious and dangerous), I did not in any instance suffer the ships under my command to attack them within the limits of any port in amity with Great Britain; however I presume your Excellency, as well as I do, will readily draw the line of distinction between vessels manned and armed for offensive war, and trading vessels; and that the neutrality and protection which was afforded and claimed by the latter, cannot be given the former; but they must be treated by all powers in amity with Great Britain as pirates. (4)

While the French were satisfied that she was authorized by Congress, there is no record of a Continental privateer named "*Reprisal*" at the time this letter was written, and she may have actually been a pirate (though she was more likely a state privateer). However, Admiral Young would not have seen the situation any differently had *Reprisal* possessed a piece of paper from the rebels in

Philadelphia "authorizing" her actions. Therefore, when it is not clear from an account what ship by name is being discussed, there is no way of knowing for sure to whom to credit it, the Continental Navy or a privateer.

Interestingly enough, the problem wasn't eased at all by a few Americans of the time. To most Americans, the Continental Navy and the privateers together made up "their navy". It is not surprising therefore, when attempting to immortalize the good ship Providence, which had distinguished herself against the British, a poet referred throughout his ode to Providence as the "Yankee Privateer". Unfortunately, Providence was a Continental Navy ship, but the fact was lost in the immediate popularity of the poem. (5)

For the purposes of this study, the definitive source of statistical information on congressionally bonded privateers, though not of their exploits, is The Naval Records of the American Revolution. This volume contains a record of the bonds issued by the Continental Congress for all the Letters of Marque for the period 1776 to 1783. Listed in alphabetical order by vessel name, it provides a wealth of statistical information. A sample entry follows:

Jul. 30 1779 **Dolphin**. Connecticut sloop. Guns: 10
Crew: 25 Bond: \$5000. Master: Joseph Smith
Bonders: Joseph Smith, [Middletown]. Ashbell Burnham,
[Middletown]. Thompson Philips.
Owners: Ebenezer Sage & Co., Middletown.
Witnesses: Elisha Clark, Arthur Magill.

While this example shows a complete entry, there are some, albeit only a small number, which are either missing portions of the information or portions are illegible. Even this very thorough record only provides information on vessels which went through Congress to get their commissions. Those who went through their various state governments, which was common early in the war, are not included. For the purposes of this study, the exclusion of the state privateers is unimportant because their existence and employment were outside the purview of the Continental Congress and its decision-making process.

The entry on *Dolphin* points out another of the difficulties in researching privateers. Over the course of the war, there were no fewer than twenty-five bonds issued to various privateers going by the name "*Dolphin*". And this was by no means unusual in the annals of privateering. There were also twenty-five named "*Betsy*", and twenty-three named "*Fox*" and "*Hope*". There are dozens of additional instances of names carried by multiple vessels.

In many of these cases, it is the same vessel posting a new bond. Close examination of the records indicates that 320 bonds were probably issued to vessels previously engaged in privateering. Generally this is due to either a change in ownership or some other reason requiring a renewal of the bond. The fact that there are more names in the record than there were American privateers only complicates the task of

defining their ultimate contribution. In any case, the 1697 bonds listed thus represent 1377 privateers "commissioned" by the Continental Congress.

While on the subject of names, the confusion caused by multiple vessels with identical names was not confined to privateers. Of the fifty-seven Continental Navy vessels which were commissioned or served during the war, thirty-two had counterparts with similar names among the ranks of the privateers. Continental Navy ships such as *Dolphin* had plenty of relatives, but so did *Ranger* (19), *Revenge* (17), and many others.

The privateers themselves, through their common tactics, often added to the confusion. The term "sailing under false colors" had its origin in a situation much like this one. If, through subterfuge or deception, a privateer could make his task any easier or safer, he would gladly do so. One of the easiest ways to surprise a potential prize was to fly a British ensign or paint out the ship's name on the transom and adopt an alias. Some masters went so far as to adopt the paint scheme of the Royal Navy. An account from a London newspaper of the day provides an example:

Yesterday afternoon Captain George Corney, of the *Nautilus*, of Liverpool, with part of his crew, were put ashore here, who came to this office and informed us, that on the 20th of July last...he was taken by a rebel privateer called the [American] *Tartar*, John Grimes, master, from Boston...The word *Tartar* was done in paint upon her stern; but having taken some paint out of the *Nautilus*, he (Grimes) brushed the name out: Captain Corney says he likewise painted her black and yellow, and tarred her sides, that she might look like a King's ship. (6)

More than a few merchant captains were fooled by such ploys, and it is not surprising that many a bewildered merchant crew found itself cast adrift in a longboat or left ashore somewhere not even knowing who its captors had been. The "John Grimes" mentioned above only appears in Continental records as the master of the privateer *Romeo*! Thus confusion remains two centuries later about who accomplished what.

This does not mean to imply that nothing can be learned from the statistics that do exist. The most readily apparent, and immediate, contribution of privateers was to give the rebels, if not a fleet, at least a large number of naval vessels with which to challenge the Royal Navy and British commerce in a piece-meal fashion. From 1775 through 1777, the Continental Congress would purchase twenty-one ships in order to equip the Continental Navy, and pay for the building and launching of sixteen more for a total of thirty-seven. During this same period, privateers, starting at least four months behind, would be able to bond, man, and put to sea over one hundred privateers (103).

For the remainder of the war, the gap between what could be deployed by the Continental Navy and by the privateers would continue to increase. By 1781, the end of the American phase of the war, the Continental Navy had had a grand total of fifty-three ships, while commissions to privateers totaled almost thirteen hundred (1292). While the

Continental Navy consisted of only thirteen ships still floating and under American colors, 550 privateers would be bonded in 1781 alone! Table 3.1 shows the breakdown of letters of marque issued by the Continental Congress, by year.

Table 3.1 Congressional Letters of Marque by Year

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>LETTERS OF MARQUE</u>
1776	34
1777	69
1778	129
1779	209
1780	301
1781	550
1782	383
<u>1783</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>Total</u>	<u>1697</u>

Source: Naval Records of the American Revolution (1906).

Table 3.1 shows the figures for privateers bonded with the Continental Congress only. The figures do not include those bonded by the various states. Although there are no definitive figures for states' privateers, Coggins has estimated their number as running "as high as 2000". (7)

As previously mentioned, privateers generally avoided danger, particularly in the form of the Royal Navy. There is a flip side to this issue. By its very nature, privateering was bound to spring up where the Royal Navy was not well represented and therefore least able to deal with the privateers. Only by maintaining a naval presence in a given area for most of the war were the British able to limit privateering there. British control of Newport and New York City held these previously thriving maritime regions to only

fifteen privateers from Rhode Island and five from the New York/New Jersey areas for the duration of the war. On the other hand, as soon as the British abandoned Boston, the number of bonds issued to privateers increased. By war's end Massachusetts would lead the colonies by providing over six hundred privateers! And while the British continued to concentrate their naval power in New England, investors in the mid-Atlantic states felt secure enough to risk their money on privateers from Philadelphia or the Maryland shore. Not even the devastation caused by periodic British sweeps up the Chesapeake or the Delaware could prevent Pennsylvania and Maryland from bonding 500 and 225 privateers respectively.

Admitting that privateering did more than just provide vessels to the American cause, can the value of the vessels alone be equated to a dollar figure? How much would it have cost for Congress to outfit all these vessels, had it been so inclined? How much money was saved by not having to pay for the vessels privateers brought to the war effort? What follows is an attempt to answer these questions.

Fowler gives an appreciation of the magnitude of the financial problem, which included wartime inflation, faced by the Continental Congress:

...in 1775 Congress estimated that it would cost less than \$700,000 to build and equip thirteen frigates. By 1780 Congress was asked to supply nearly one million dollars, not for a fleet, but merely to refit and supply one frigate.... Altogether between 1775 and 1783 the Congress allotted in the

neighborhood of eight percent of its total budget for naval expenditures, or somewhere between \$12,500,000 and \$13,500,000. (8)

For the purpose of establishing an average cost, there were forty-six Continental Navy vessels to be considered. This includes only the Continental Navy vessels bought or built by the Congress. It does not include those loaned by France (4) or Pennsylvania (2), or captured from the British (5). Using Fowler's figures, a typical Continental Navy ship cost the Continental Congress approximately \$271,000.

The cost of "building" the average warship would actually be lower because Fowler's figures assume that all of the money for procurement went into building ships. It also includes the cost of outfitting the ship. While arming and provisioning each ship represented a significant additional investment, a hulk wasn't a warship until this was done. Thus the "ready for sea" cost of each Continental Navy ship was probably very close to this \$271,000 amount. Also, as in Fowler's example above, the "average" Continental Navy vessel was also a frigate, carrying twenty-two guns and a crew of 200.

This was a far cry from the cost Congress would have to pay for a one hundred gun ship-of-the-line - \$1,500,000 to the British in 1776. But it was also a great deal more than what a privateer would have cost them, had it not been provided free. The "average" privateer was a sloop, with thirty-eight seamen to sail and man the nine guns she

carried. In her day, she would have cost approximately \$20,000.

This amount, multiplied by a total of 1377 privateer vessels, provides a dollar value of \$27,540,000. This is a substantial sum in any case, but it is also double the actual amount of \$13.5 million which Congress was willing to spend on a navy. By simply authorizing privateering in March of 1776, Congress was thus able to triple the dollar value of American naval vessels.

Furthermore, Congress was saving money by not having to pay the privateers. The average privateer of the American Revolution had a crew of thirty-eight men. The average Continental Navy ship carried a complement of about two hundred. In both cases this imposed a severe strain on the available manpower in any given area. The negative impact which privateering had specifically on the manning of the Continental Navy has already been discussed.

Based on crew size and the monthly pay scales enacted by Congress for the Continental Navy (\$32 for the Captain, \$15 for the First Mate, and \$6.67 for each "able bodied" seaman), each ship of the Continental Navy cost an average of \$16,416 in payroll each year. In fact, the payroll would have run much higher, because this estimate does not consider the usual composition of a warship's crew. Additional officers, based on ship's size, and specialists like the gunner, boatswain, and carpenter, were commonly found in a Continental Navy ship's normal complement.

On the other hand, the average privateer, had it actually been on the Continental payroll, would have cost approximately \$3,300 in payroll per year. This is computed using the monthly amounts of \$20 for the Master, \$15 for the Mate, and \$6.67 for each of the thirty-six seamen.

While precise figures are unavailable, secondary sources provide an adequate estimate of the length of active service, or service life, which could be expected for vessels of the time. Service life considers all the factors which might make a vessel no longer usable, whether due to age, accident, or enemy action. A typical Continental Navy ship had a service life of about three years. A typical privateer- for various reasons- had a service life of approximately one year.

Using these figures, the Congress spent \$2.8 million to man the Continental Navy during the war. Additionally, Congress would have paid \$4.5 million over the course of the war to the crewmen of the privateers had they been in the Continental Navy. The sheer number of seamen involved in privateering is staggering. Judging from the bonds posted for the nearly fourteen hundred American privateers, approximately fifty-two thousand seamen sailed, at one time or another, on privateers during the war. For Congress to avail itself of this trained manpower pool for no cost represents a savings of even more than the \$4.5 million in payroll money. The quality and quantity of sea-going

experience the new nation desperately needed was priceless, and most of it came from privateers.

Edgar Maclay penned and published A History of American Privateers in 1899. Maclay does not provide a source for much of his data, and as he wrote prior to the publication of The Naval Records of the American Revolution in 1906, there is no way of knowing whether his information is accurate or not. None the less, Maclay does provide some statistical data which may be of use. While Royal Navy ship losses to American vessels is clearly a side issue in this study, according to Maclay more Royal Navy vessels were lost to privateers than to the Continental Navy. He attributes twelve captures to Continental ships and sixteen to privateers and what he calls "private enterprise" (piracy?). (9) This is especially noteworthy because it has already been mentioned that, as a rule, privateers intentionally avoided any confrontation with the Royal Navy.

British commercial losses are much more difficult to pin down. As was pointed out earlier, there is no known list of British shipping losses broken down into losses to the Continental Navy, American privateers, and the various navies and privateers from France, Spain, and Holland. Based on figures from Lloyd's, Mahan was only able to divide British losses into merchants lost and British privateers lost. A composite of Mahan's published figures is shown in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2 British Shipping Losses 1775-1783

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>BRITISH VESSELS TAKEN</u>	<u>RETAKEN/ RANSOMED</u>	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>CUMULATIVE</u>
1775	0	0	0	0
1776	229	51	178	178
1777	331	52	279	457
1778	364	87	277	734
1779	516	111	405	1139
1780	596	262	334	1473
1781	625	217	408	1881
1782	416	99	317	2198
1783	99	14	85	2283
<u>1775-1782</u>	<u>3176</u>	<u>893</u>	<u>2283</u>	<u>2283</u>

Source: The Major Operations of the Navies in the War of American Independence (1913).

For the purpose of this study even these numbers are less than ideal. As discussed in Chapter Two, 1775 saw the first documented rebel captures at sea. Yet Lloyd's shows no losses during that year! Perhaps the Lloyd's records are incomplete. Or perhaps some, if not many, of the early rebel captures along the Atlantic seaboard were actually vessels owned by Americans (or Canadians or someone from the British West Indies) under hire to the British. If that is the case, there will be no way to account for them.

A second problem with these numbers is the RETAKEN/RANSOMED column. Clearly rebel captures which are retaken by the British shortly thereafter should be deducted from the number of total captures. But some of these "recaptures" came after the cargoes had already been disposed of. Others came after some of these vessels had been employed by the rebels as transports or even privateers. So to simply discount them denies the cost of their cargoes and use, at least for a time, to the British.

The "ransomed" vessels cause the same dilemma. They were in fact returned to the British, but not for free. There is no way of knowing how much ransom money was spent by the British to regain their vessels from privateers. To discount the value again denies the rebels their due.

Unfortunately, the total numbers of British losses provided by Lloyd's and Mahan must be used, and assumed reliable as far as they go, because no better figures are available. The task now is to decide which of these losses can be attributed to American privateers and which to the Continental Navy.

Maclay gives some help here. He notes that Continental forces (which included Arnold's flotilla on Lake Champlain), captured 196 British vessels during the war. Presumably this includes the twelve Royal Navy ships lost. It is unknown whether he was including the states' navies in this total. Maclay later ascribes 198 captures specifically to the Continental Navy, with no mention of Arnold, Washington's schooners, or the states. So, while the exact figure remains in doubt, a rough picture of the Continental Navy's contribution begins to emerge.

Maclay also provides a guess as to the number of British ships captured and destroyed by American privateers--"about six hundred". (10) Unfortunately his source is again unknown. But in view of the fact that he categorically stated that there were 792 American privateers, which is approximately 600 less than the records indicate and totally

ignores the privateers from the states, his figure for captures is also suspect.

Unfortunately, without any documented data, it becomes impossible to go any further in definitively establishing British losses to American privateers. Two possibilities are presented. The first is to not bother defining the problem any further- like Coggins, to provide a range, 600-3000, and say only "the number which fell victim to Americans must still have been very large". (11) The other option is to accept Mahan's and Maclay's figures at face value, while recognizing the inherent problems with doing so. This study will use the figure of 600 captures, while acknowledging that if the actual number was higher, so too was the contribution of privateers.

A grand total of 2283 British vessels were captured or destroyed during the American Revolution. Of those, 196 were lost to the Continental Navy. Of the remaining losses, apparently 600 were taken by American privateers. This works out to an average of over three captures (3.4) by each Continental Navy ship. The average for privateers is much lower, at slightly less than one-half (0.44) for each privateer. This is a misleading statistic, however, if one goes no further with it.

It is now necessary to translate these captures into a dollar value. The average value to assign to captured ships, as well as the separate value of their cargo, is difficult to identify. In the varied practices of the day, captured

ships and their cargoes were sometimes sold together to the highest bidder. Yet the next time a captured ship was auctioned off in the same seaport, the cargo would be sold separately. Finally, there were many instances where either the cargo or the ship might be retained for the consumption or use of rebel forces.

A random sampling of the prices paid for captured ships and for their cargoes was taken from accounts in The Naval Documents of the American Revolution. Values for ships ranged from \$825 to \$132,000. Values for cargoes ranged from \$0 to \$268,000. In many cases, the ship and cargo are considered together in the sale price. This adds to the difficulty of determining separate values. From this sample, however, the average value of a captured vessel itself was \$20,453. The average value of a single cargo was \$50,492.

The total value for cargoes, however, needs to be adjusted. It is based on the assumption that every vessel captured carried a cargo. While it was good business sense to carry cargo each direction on a cruise, given the exorbitant commercial rates to be paid, there is every reason to believe that only half of the captured ships carried a disposable cargo when taken. Especially in the case of coastal traffic along the European continent or in the West Indies, it makes sense that privateers would strike half the time while the merchant had a full hold and was enroute his destination, and half the time with an empty hold homeward bound. Thus a revised estimated average value

for a cargo is \$25,246. When compared to Maclay's estimate (again, no sources) of \$30,000, this appears reasonable.

Using this composite total of \$45,699 for each captured British vessel and its cargo, the 196 captures by the Continental Navy were worth \$8,957,000. The value of captures by American privateers are estimated at \$27,419,400. So the Continental Congress in effect invested approximately \$13 million in order to do \$9 million damage. Privateering did more than \$27 million, and the only expense to the government was the cost of printing the Letters of Marque.

Even though the results of the above computations were unknown to the Continental Congress during the War, individual members of Congress had an excellent idea of what privateering had to offer financially. Over the course of the war, numerous delegates invested in privateers, as can readily be seen from the records. John Adams, one of the loudest proponents of the Continental Navy, had an open financial interest in five privateers. Samuel Chase invested in eleven, William Smith in seventeen, and Robert Morris, soon to be Agent of Marine and thus totally responsible for the Continental Navy, led the pack with a financial interest in twenty-six privateers!

By examining the cost-benefit ratio of the Continental Navy versus that of privateers, this chapter has concluded that privateers made a larger contribution to the war effort, at great savings to the Congress. In effect,

privateering brought \$27 million into congressional coffers, and saved another \$4.5 million in personnel costs. The 1377 privateers (with 50,000 crewmen) captured approximately 600 British vessels worth \$27 million more. By every quantitative measure, the contribution of American privateers exceeded that of the Continental Navy.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE FINER POINTS

While the previous chapter examined the quantifiable contributions of privateers and those of the Continental Navy, this chapter will point out the difference in the effects these two naval forces had on the decision-makers in the British government and admiralty. By concentrating on the intangible aspects of privateering's contribution to the rebel cause, the impact of privateering on British trade, both domestic and overseas, will be discussed in detail. This discussion will further examine the resulting impact on British foreign and naval policy.

The first of these non-quantifiable contributions involves the advantage which privateering gave the Continental Congress in foreign affairs, while hindering the foreign affairs of the British. Much has been made of French, Spanish, and even Dutch assistance once these nations were ready to formally join in the war against Britain. Long before any of these countries openly declared for or allied themselves with the United States, however, they provided covert aid, often of a military nature. This

was their way of hurting the British without having to declare war. As long as the Americans used privateers, these foreign governments could openly aid, and even abet, while still denying any knowledge of the actual nature of the American vessels. When the British complained diplomatically of French or Dutch assistance to the Americans, the French or Dutch could simply feign ignorance, if not innocence.

Clearly, this infuriated the British government, citizenry, and Royal Navy, but Britain had little recourse short of war. Thus, the British government was forced to tie the hands of the Royal Navy by imposing unrealistic limits on naval operations while still demanding a stop to the depredations of the American privateers. The orders to Captain Dumaresq of **HMS Portland** were fairly typical:

...you are therefore directed to use your utmost endeavours to take, sink, burn, or otherwise destroy all such armed vessels and privateers belonging to the rebels as you can meet with at sea, but are not to attack them in the bays, harbours, or roads of any of the islands belonging to the European powers in unity with Great Britain, while under the protection of their ports... (1)

It is little wonder that so many complaints were written by Royal Navy officers regarding this very issue. Admiral James Young summarized the situation in the West Indies for his superiors at the Admiralty:

At present the French have only three frigates in these seas, and I do not hear they have a greater force at St Domingo. But their conduct in respect to the American rebels is now much more open and avowed than it was, as they not only suffer the American privateers to refit at their ports, but also to bring in their prizes and dispose of them... I have

repeatedly acquainted their Lordships that the American armed vessels and privateers were received with every mark of friendship at all the French, Dutch, and Danish islands in these seas, and are openly cleaned, refitted, and supplied with every thing they can have occasion for: even to men....I must likewise acquaint their Lordships that the French do undoubtedly fit out privateers for the American rebels in Europe. (2)

Incidentally, this is the same Admiral Young who had written directly to the French governor of Martinique in an attempt to solve this same problem, gentleman to gentleman. In neither case did he receive the satisfaction he sought. Young, and the entire Royal Navy, would be frustrated by this issue until France formally allied with the Americans. Royal Navy correspondence, official and unofficial, is replete with mention of this problem. For example, an unknown crewmember of HMS Pearl wrote:

We also boarded a French vessel laden with powder and arms, which Captain Wilkinson released, notwithstanding she was within ten leagues of the land; a plain proof that the French assist the Americans, and what is yet a greater mortification, that we dare not prevent it. (3)

This subterfuge was by no means confined to the French. The governors of other West Indian colonies, particularly Dutch, also took advantage of it. Young, a prodigious letter-writer, took the matter up with Johannes De Graaf, the governor of Saint Eustatia, a Dutch possession in the West Indies:

In addition to the foregoing complaint, I cannot avoid mentioning to your Excellency, that it is with equal surprize and astonishment I daily hear it asserted in the most positive manner that the port of St Eustatia has for some time past been openly and

avowedly declared Protector of all Americans and their vessels, whether on private trade or armed for offensive war...and that even the government of St Eustatia daily suffer privateers to be manned, armed, and fitted in their port... (4)

Unfortunately for the Royal Navy, this is not the only circumstance which would frustrate it. One of the most difficult problems with which the British admirals had to deal was the lack of sufficient naval forces to accomplish their mission. British commercial interests were world-wide; American privateers, it seemed, were everywhere; and the Royal Navy was expected to be everywhere also, to protect those interests. Long before it would have to face the French and Spanish fleets in battle, and even before being tasked to conduct large-scale convoy duty, the Royal Navy was spread dangerously thin. Once again, Young summarized the Royal Navy's plight in West Indian waters:

But thus far I must take leave to assure their Lordships these seas now swarm with American privateers, and several of them vessels of considerable force; which it is probable will do a great deal of mischief unless I am enabled to send out more cruizers to annoy them. I therefore hope their Lordships will think it necessary and with all expedition strongly to reinforce the squadron under my command and I must also intreat they will be pleased to augment the squadron with such ships as will sail well, or they will otherwise leave but little chance of taking the rebel privateers, which in general sail very fast, and are kept clean by refitting at the French, Dutch, and Danish islands...I hope my Lords Commissioners will pardon my further representing to them that I am firmly of opinion the King's service on this very extensive station cannot be effectually carried on (in the present state of matters) with less than fifteen sail of ships and some of them to be frigates of 28 and 32 guns. (5)

And while the Royal Navy was running hither and yon, attempting to minimize damage with inadequate naval forces, myriad American privateers were taking advantage of the situation by dealing repeated hammer blows to British commerce, particularly in the West Indies. These British possessions were subject to the worst of attacks by privateers, and constantly bemoaned their fate to their kinsmen back home via letters, letters duly published in the newspapers of the time. This is one letter from Dominica:

You can hardly conceive the hardships to which we are subject, from bad crops and the ravages of American privateers. To such a pitch of audacity have these gentry carried their lawless proceedings, that they very frequently make incursions upon our island, and carry off negroes and goods, for which they find a ready market at Martinico. (6)

Another letter, from Grenada, paints an even drearier picture for the folks back home:

Every thing continues excessive dear here, and we are happy if we can get any thing for money, by reason of the quantity of vessels that are taken by the American privateers. A fleet of vessels came from Ireland a few days ago; from sixty vessels that departed from Ireland not above twenty-five arrived in this and the neighboring islands; the others (as it is thought) being all taken by the American privateers. God knows, if this American war continues much longer, we shall all die with hunger. (7)

Such generic complaints notwithstanding, how was privateering actually injuring British commerce? In the first place, the price of nearly every commodity, especially in England and the West Indies, was driven up, in a few cases sky-high. Among the products most affected were wine, tobacco and slaves. But the impact on the British economy as

a whole can be seen in the record of British imports and exports before, during, and after the war. While annual data is unavailable, Table 4.1 clearly shows the drop in imports and exports during the war in general, and specifically, in 1779, at the height of the privateers' attacks.

Table 4.1 British Imports and Exports

<u>YEAR</u>	<u>Imports (Pounds)</u>	<u>Exports (Pounds)</u>
1759	9,528,864L	14,888,592L
1769	13,134,089L	15,001,289L
1779	11,537,012L	13,189,325L
1789	17,821,102L	19,159,471L

Source: The History of Lloyd's and of Marine Insurance in Great Britain (1876).

Commercial marine insurance rates also increased dramatically (approximately 400 percent) as the cost of doing business was driven up by the increasing number of losses to American privateers. The more vessels captured, the higher the insurance rate rose. As the insurance rate went up, so too did the cost of doing business to the British merchant. This problem was given repeated airing in the local newspapers:

Only 23 out of 118 sail of ships, which came under convoy from Jamaica, are yet arrived at the different ports in England, which gives great pain to merchants, there being such a swarm of American privateers out to intercept them; and the underwriters act with so much caution, that they cannot get one of them re-insured without a very large premium. (8)

...but notwithstanding all this, our shipping have suffered greatly, and consequently insurances get up, which reduce the profits much. (9)

...an account of the number of captures of vessels from Portugal, insurance has risen greatly, consequently wines will increase in price, and what generally happens in the country, treble the advance will be laid on. (10)

British commerce in general had long been vulnerable, and thus marine insurance in particular was, during every war, subject to broad increases. But the impact made by the American privateers far outdistanced any impact on the insurance industry that had been made in the past:

The convoy has arrived three weeks since, alone. This has raised the insurance from thence to 25 Guineas pr Ct with convoy, tho' in the last war it never exceeded 7 pr Ct. (11)

As the list of merchant ships lost to American privateers continued to grow, so too did the storm of protest among those same merchants, as well as the average British citizen. A propaganda war was waged on an almost daily basis in the newspapers between the government and its political opposition. The bone of contention was forever the relief, or lack thereof, being provided by the Royal Navy to commercial interests. The government's point of view frequently appeared in the *General Advertiser*, a "loyal" Liverpool newspaper:

Letters arrived yesterday from Paris declare it was asserted in that metropolis that Dr. Franklin had so far succeeded in his negotiations as to have obtained leave from Administration for several French privateers to act under the authority of Congress and make reprisals on the English... We are assured, whatever hostile intentions the French may adopt, they will never be able to carry them into execution by uniting in a maritime war with the Americans; as the British navy, from the unremitting attention of the noble Lord at the head of the Admiralty, is in a more respectable state than it has been at any time since the late war. (12)

But the *Public Advertiser*, a London paper, was representative of the political opposition's press. As each

new loss to the American privateers became known, its pages would carry not only the counter-argument, but also a harangue against the government or the Admiralty:

The capture of the Orange Packet is a complete refutation of what we have been so often told concerning the reduced state of the Americans. They have hitherto kept us in sufficient play on their own coasts, and now, in their turn, they even venture to assail ours. Old Twitcher <Lord Sandwich> may blush for once at having suffered such an insult so near our very doors, after such repeated but impudent boasts about the number and readiness of his ships. But his fleets seem to be literally fleets of observation only. (13)

The reading (and voting) public in London and most of the other large cities was kept both informed and entertained by a steady diet of like editorial pieces. The papers and the public often had information as up to date as the Admiralty itself. They followed the war blow by blow. The following series is indicative of the type of reporting which was common in London during the war:

As an instance how far the Americans are strenuous to become a naval power, we have certain accounts that seventeen ships, from ten to twenty-six guns, have been built at Rhode Island only in the course of two years. (14)

Two men of war are ordered from Portsmouth with the greatest expedition to cruise off the coast of Ireland, it being asserted as a fact, that two American privateers have for several days, previous to the accounts being sent to England to Government, been hovering off the coast, as it is thought to intercept the transports lading there with provisions etc for Lord Howe. (15)

The Lords of the Admiralty have given orders for two fourth rates to be stationed to cruise between Cape St. Vincent's and the Straights of Gibraltar, for the better protection of the trade from the Mediterranean against the American privateers, of which there are a great number cruising in those latitudes. (16)

And anytime the Royal Navy failed, for whatever reason, to suppress privateering, the cry was spread throughout the land:

The Americans call the West India Islands their plantations, and it appears, by the number of captures which have been taken within these six months, that they can call them so with as much propriety as Great Britain; for as many of their ships are carried to North America as are brought to England. (17)

In regard to the six hundred odd vessels captured during the war by American privateers, the resulting hue and cry, and subsequent British policy changes, greatly outweighed their dollar value. The British people in general were kept fully apprised of the ongoing American war, mostly by means of their newspapers. The British government was receiving feedback not only from the Royal Navy but also, and even more loudly, from British commercial interests. The pressure increased on virtually a daily basis, as the American privateers continued to strike at the heart of Britain, her commerce. Domestic commercial interests complained bitterly to their representatives in the government. Merchants overseas complained to their Royal Governors. Something had to give, and it turned out to be naval policy. The Royal Navy had no choice but to begin to escort convoys to and from Britain.

These orders, provided to a Royal Navy captain whose ship was being detached to conduct convoy duty, are fairly typical:

You are hereby required and directed to proceed in His Majesty's Ship **Mermaid** under your command to St

John's Road Antigua...and you are to order the masters of such of the transports as are ready to proceed on their voyage to put themselves under your command and accompany HMS Mermaid to New York, and to take the utmost care they do not lose company...and to the utmost of your power prevent any of them being taken by the rebel's cruizing vessels. (18)

Since the Royal Navy was already too spread out, it is not surprising that the initial attempt at large-scale convoying would fail due to a lack of assets. The admirals were reluctant to lose more valuable ships than absolutely necessary to convoy duty, but they soon discovered, that with so many American privateers, a single escort was clearly inadequate. Privateers did serious damage to British commerce during this period, as can be seen from the following dispatch from the Admiralty to Admiral Gayton, admonishing him for the inability of single convoy escorts to complete their missions successfully:

Their Lordships think it of consequence that I should acquaint you that notwithstanding the very great number of ships appointed to sail to England under convoy of the Pallas, the said ship arrived at Spithead without bringing home one of them; And that the Squirrel has since arrived without one of the ships with which she was charged; Which having occasioned great disappointments to the merchants concerned in the said ships their Lordships, to prevent as much as possible, the like happening in future command me to signify their direction to you to order the captains of the convoys which you may hereafter send home to be particularly careful for their safety... (19)

An excellent example of this entire process at work can be seen in a review of the situation and the correspondence surrounding the American privateers operating off the coast of Ireland. What follows is a portion of the

correspondence incident to the threat of commerce raiding by American privateers (and several Continental Navy ships which were known to be in the area) to the valuable linen trade of Dublin. With American privateers operating nearby, the local merchants petitioned the Lord Mayor of Dublin to obtain the protection of Royal Navy convoy escorts. The various dates in this account are a result of multiple letters being sent, a few since lost, and the delay in communications to and from London which raised doubt in the minds of the Irish merchants that anything was being done to help them in their plight.

Before this reaches your Lordships hands, you will have heard of three American privateers being in the Irish Chanell where they have taken fourteen vessels... & it is much to be feared that they are not yet left our Chanell, it would be therefore *imprudent* for the linen ships to leave Dublin without a proper convoy to bring them safe across the Chanell...we intend detaining them in port till we hear of our coast being clear of the privateers, if a convoy can be procured for the linen ships coming from Dublin to Chester, Your Lordship will do essential service to the trade of the city of Dublin by getting orders for the convoy that comes from Dublin to take our vessels (now detained here)... (20)

The Lord Lieutenant of Ireland, no doubt viewing the matter with equal concern, forwarded the request for a convoy to Lord Weymouth, the Secretary of State, in London. When nothing was heard in return, the Mayor of Dublin continued to keep the pressure on by writing to the secretary for the Lieutenant of Ireland:

I request you will be so kind to inform me whether his Excellency my Lord Lieutenant has had any account from the Lords of the Admiralty or whether the merchants may expect a convoy for the protection of

the vessels- the want of which is very justly complain'd of by them & especially by the linen traders, as the Chester fair is now over & they have lost the opportunity of their market, an hardship at present to them, but which in a short time will be severely felt by both kingdoms. (21)

In the meantime, Lord Weymouth had wasted no time in forwarding the request on to the Admiralty for appropriate action:

Having received a letter from the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland inclosing one from the Lord Mayor of Dublin, and another to him from Chester relative to rebel privateers, and requesting that the convoy which goes from Dublin to Chester may be directed to take under their protection upon their return to Dublin the vessels from Chester, I inclose to your Lordships copies thereof, that you may give such orders to the commanders of His Majesty's ships stationed for that purpose, as you shall judge proper and expedient for the security and advantage of that important trade. (22)

The Admiralty recognized the political, if not the commercial, necessity of responding expeditiously. Orders were quickly cut directing **HMS Wasp**, under Captain Richard Bligh, to carry out the actual convoy. Interestingly enough, unlike so many other sets of naval orders which survive bearing Philip Stephens' signature, these orders were signed personally by three of the British Sea Lords of the Admiralty, Palmerston, Lisburne, and Palliser:

Lord Viscount Weymouth, one of His Majesty's principal Secretaries of State transmitted to us a copy of a letter from the Lord Lieut of Ireland, inclosing one from the Lord Mayor of the City of Dublin, requesting on the part of the merchants of that city, that the linnen ships of that kingdom may be convoyed as far as the Isle of White (Wight); You are therefore, hereby requested and directed (notwithstanding former orders) to see the said linnen ships and any other trade bound from thence to England as far up the English Channel as the Isle of White

accordingly, and to continue to do so until you receive farther orders. (23)

Multiply this example a hundredfold, and the actual state of affairs begins to be clear. Demands for naval patrols and convoys were being made for the British Isles, the West Indies, Canada, the Mediterranean, the Baltic, and the Mississippi. The British Army demanded convoys for its transport ships. The British government and the Royal Navy were forced to make difficult decisions when prioritizing the various needs for convoy escorts. Thus with highest priority going to the demands with the greatest political visibility, it was inevitable that other areas would suffer. Soon the situation would get so bad that many merchants would have to wait for weeks, and even months, before an adequate naval escort could be provided. In some vital areas, British trade would be brought to a standstill. From a contemporary London newspaper account:

Letters from Newfoundland bring advice, that many of the ships which are loaded for England are detained there for want of convoy, for they dare not stir out on account of the number of American privateers... (24)

Not only the British merchants were paying increased shipping costs as a result of privateering. The British government itself was also being hurt financially. In order to ship stores to North America, mostly war supplies and food, the British government utilized two primary means of transportation. Individual ships could be hired to carry supplies by the ton on a single transit, or an entire ship could be chartered for government use, generally for a

year's lease. The costs increased in both of these areas at about the same rate costs were rising in the commercial sector. Table 4.2 shows the freight rates paid to individual ship owners to carry government merchandise.

Table 4.2 British Freight Rates

<u>DATE</u>	<u>COST PER TON (Shillings)</u>
prior to hostilities	9s
Nov 75	10s
Dec 75	11s
Apr 76	12.5s
Jun 76	11s
Mar 78	12s
Jan 79	11.5s
Jan 79	12s
Nov 80	12.75s
Summer 83	13s

Source: Shipping and the American War 1775-83 (1970)

This same increased cost is reflected in the annual costs (Table 4.3) paid by the British government to charter transport ships for military stores and troops, and "victuallers", which carried food to the British troops in America:

Table 4.3 British Charter Costs

<u>DATE</u>	<u>TOTAL AMOUNT (Pounds)</u>
1776	783,651L
1777	534,777L
1778	437,025L
1779	630,581L
1780	805,978L
1781	912,563L
1782	889,144L
1783	729,111L

Source: Shipping and the American War 1775-83 (1970)

Under the pressure caused by such damage to her commerce, Britain was forced to act on her naval problems. That there was a shortage of warships was undeniable. But Britain also lacked the seamen to man the current Royal Navy, let alone an enlarged one. To solve her manpower woes,

Britain turned to impressment. Long considered an acceptable way in which to make up manning shortfalls in ship strength, the Admiralty was driven to institute the practice again merely to survive. As a London newspaper reported:

Yesterday a full Board of Admiralty was held...at which the Right Hon. the Earl of Sandwich was present and several other Lords, when the returns of the number of men pressed into his Majesty's service on Monday...were laid before the Board, which proved to be 1100....the press for sailors was as hot on Monday in all the seaports in the Kingdom as in the Thames; and by accounts received of the number already got and entered, they amount to about 5000, which is half the number that is wanted. (25)

So with insufficient ships and inadequate crews, the Admirals of the Royal Navy looked at the only other possibility- to change their naval strategy. The British naval expeditions which swept up the Delaware and the Chesapeake, as well as the assaults on seaports from Connecticut to Charleston, resulted from the realization that there was no other way to deal with the American privateers given the insufficient naval forces at hand. Admiral Lord Howe, the British Commander in Chief in America, succinctly explained the necessary change in focus to his superiors in London:

You will receive herewith a particular of the captures made by this fleet since the commencement of the present year. Some ships with military and other stores are said to have arrived in, and some armed vessels escaped from, the different ports on this extensive coast. Such resources I presume to think unpracticable to prevent, more especially with respect to vessels of the smaller classes in each kind, until the enemy can be dispossessed of their posts. (26)

That this strategy would prove inadequate to halt the American privateers has already been seen, but the Royal Navy had no way of knowing that at the time. Before the picture was clear to the British, American privateers decisively limited British foreign policy options, nearly crippled Britain's economy, and drove the Royal Navy to desperation.

As has been mentioned, the widespread use of impressment was required to make up a huge manning shortfall as the Royal Navy attempted to "mobilize" in order to deal with the American privateers. The evaluation of this event which was made by the Continental Congress was the immediate result of their direct "access" to the British government. Doctor Edward Bancroft, an American "spy" in London, wrote the following account to Silas Deane, one of the American Commissioners in France:

I have procured an account from a certain infallible source, a source from which a great part of the contents of this letter is derived & from which most useful intelligence may be hereafter obtained if we do not imprudently use what is given us so as to lead to improper discoveries...The sudden press here was intended to intimidate France & partly to obviate the clamours of opposition respecting the defenceless situation of the kingdom- but few seamen are however collected by it, & of those the greatest part will be sent to Lord Howe who complains much of the deficiencies of his fleet- no such number of ships as is given out can be in any readiness for service. (27)

This account points out the weakness of the British position, both at sea and in public opinion. It also highlights the fact that, throughout the war, the Americans were receiving accurate information on the enemy situation

in general, and the effectiveness of privateering in particular. While Congress may not have known of the total number of captures made by the privateers, privateering's impact on the British economy was always known. Deane's duties, along with officially representing the United States to the French government and helping to enlist and fit out privateers, included forwarding valuable information like this to Congress in Philadelphia, as well as his interpretation of the situation in Europe. Deane, and Franklin too, did an excellent job of keeping his confederates in Congress in the know, and one of his common themes was the effectiveness of privateers:

Blank commissions are wanted here to cruise under your flag against the British commerce. This is a capital stroke...do not forget, or omit sending me blank commissions for privateers, under these, infinite damage may be done to the British commerce & as the prizes must be sent to you for condemnation, the eventual profit will remain with you. (28)

Arthur Lee, also representing the Continental Congress, forwarded from Europe the following status report to Robert Morris:

They have been driven to this necessity by the number and success of our cruizers in and about the channel; which has raised insurance so high, that their manufactures are in danger of being augmented thereby in their price too much for the European markets. (29)

Before very long, the American Commissioners in France were able to form their own opinion regarding the proper form which American naval strategy should take. As a group, the American Commissioners sent home the following summary

of the economic situation in Britain, and a suggestion to further American goals:

That which makes the greatest impression in our favour here is the prodigious success of our arm'd ships & privateers. The damage we have done their West India trade has been estimated in a representation to Lord Sandwich by the merchants of London at 1,800,000L sterling which has raised insurance to 28 P cent, being higher than at any time in the last war with France and Spain. This mode of exerting our force against them should be push'd with vigour. It is that in which we can most sensibly hurt them...As we are well inform'd that a number of cutters are building, to cruise in the West Indies against our small privateers, it may not be amiss, we think, to send your larger vessels thither & ply in other quarters with the small ones. (30)

Based on information and assessments like those above, it did not take the Continental Congress very long to realize that privateering had been, and would continue to be, the right way to proceed. As early as August of 1776, Congress was able to articulate its naval ambitions in this war with extraordinary clarity. The following letter was sent from the Committee of Secret Correspondence of the Continental Congress to Silas Deane, representing them in France:

Our small privateers and continental arm'd vessels have already had great success as the papers will shew you; and by abstaining from trade ourselves while we distress that of our enemy's, we expect to make their merchants sick of a contest in which so much is risk'd and nothing gained. (31)

This, in a nut shell, was the American naval strategy. It was a strategy which minimized American weaknesses and maximized American strengths while doing just the opposite to the British. This was a strategy which the Continental

Congress not only adopted early, but clung to tenaciously throughout the war. This was the key to the effective use of privateering. The damage privateers caused each year to the British economy was painful, but more importantly, it was cumulative. As the costs mounted, it became increasingly difficult for the British government to ignore the public outcry.

Thus, for the Continental Congress to stick to this strategy of commerce raiding by privateers was not especially difficult. Given the strategic naval intelligence available to Congress, there could be little doubt but that privateering was succeeding as planned. And succeed it did!

CHAPTER FIVE

MAHAN WAS WRONG

The original question posed by this study was, put simply, did rebel privateers contribute more to the American war effort than did the Continental Navy? In order to answer this question, this study has covered a great deal of material in the previous four chapters. The first two chapters provided the working definitions required to properly conduct the study and an historical backdrop for the study itself; concentrating on the fleet and squadron actions of the war, specifically those of the Continental and French navies, this background material allows the contributions of those organized naval forces, as well as the contributions of the privateers, to be put in their proper perspective. The recurring theme of this account was the repeated failure of the Continental Navy to confront the Royal Navy at sea and survive.

A statistical analysis of the available data on privateering discussed and compared the quantifiable contributions of the Continental Navy and privateers. Privateering provided the rebels 1377 vessels, worth over

\$27 million, and manned by fifty-two thousand seamen, sailors whom the Continental Congress did not have to pay. These privateers captured approximately 600 British vessels worth in the neighborhood of \$27 million. Privateers even captured or sank more Royal Navy warships than did the Continental Navy. By virtually every measure of effectiveness, privateers exceeded the contribution of the Continental Navy, and at no monetary cost to the Congress.

Finally, the impact of American privateers on the British economy was reviewed. Privateers cut British commerce to the quick. They drove up the prices of many commodities. Insurance and shipping costs soared. As the costs grew, the pressure brought to bear on the British government and the Royal Navy grew. As the British used up the few available options, the situation grew more desperate. The French entry into the war certainly upped the ante, but the greatest concern of the British merchant and citizen was the American privateer.

Mahan's study of this same period produced some very strong opinions upon which to build a naval strategy. Mahan acknowledged that a *guerre de course* could do serious harm to the enemy's commerce, based as it is on the "spirit of greed" and possessing the "specious attractions which economy always presents". (1) His ultimate conclusion, however, was quite different- there was no need for commerce raiders when the naval conflict could and would be won by a

strong fleet. In Mahan's words, the *guerre de course*:

cannot stand alone; it must be supported, to use the military phrase; unsubstantial and evanescent in itself, it cannot reach far from its base....Failing such support, the cruiser can only dash out hurriedly a short distance from home, and its blows, though painful, cannot be fatal. (2)

In Mahan's mind, "history" clearly supported the utility of investing in a battle fleet. While Mahan's view, coming when it did, had no impact on the development of the Continental Navy, his opinions had a huge effect on the development and employment of the modern United States Navy. That is why it is so critical to reevaluate the statistical evidence available today. And the statistical evidence is very clear.

After Yorktown, the British never returned. By the summer of 1782, the government was ready to sit down at the peace table. Though the actual signing of the treaty ending the American War of Independence would not take place until September of 1783, the war was essentially over.

Many reasons have been given as to why the British were now prepared to cede their right to America. But the essential reason, as demonstrated by this study, is that British commerce had already paid too high a price with nothing to show for it. The Continental Congress had known exactly how best to wage a naval war and the end result had been only a matter of time. As early as December of 1776, British merchants as a bloc had petitioned the government to

enter into a negotiated settlement with the Americans to cease the damage to the economy and allow "business as usual". (3) This had been the American strategy from the beginning, and it was the American privateers who had exacted that price.

This is not to say that American privateers delivered the punch which knocked the British out of America. That punch was thrown by Washington in his victory over General Cornwallis at Yorktown. But up to that point in time, the major contribution of the Continental Army had been to survive, thereby keeping alive the revolution itself. By thus prolonging the conflict, the Continental Army allowed the *guerre de course* of the privateers to exact its staggering cumulative price. The British had been willing and able to suffer the effects of the privateers only because they were certain that, could they only pin down Washington's Army, they could crush the rebellion in one fell swoop. Yorktown made it clear that the huge British expenses and losses since 1775 had been for nought, that there was, in fact, no light at the end of the tunnel. And with no hope of defeating the rebels on the ground, to continue to suffer grievously from the American privateers was simply unacceptable to the British for both economic and political reasons.

Thus, to give credit for the American victory to the French Fleet is a mistake. Not even the British of the time

believed that. As Solomon Lutnick said in his study of the British press during this war:

Despite these opinions, the majority of British newspapers reflected the fears of London merchants that the economy and the nation could not afford to carry the burden of a war against one of England's best customers.... English journals appeared to be overwhelmingly of the opinion that some merchants (like those in Manchester who supported the Ministry with their petitions) were blind to their own interests and that the state of British manufacture and trade could be accurately measured by the regular and ever-increasing lists of bankrupts in the London Gazette.... All political, economic, and military arguments considered, most newspapers agreed that Britain could not afford the war in America.... Englishmen wanted victory in America, but they feared that their Government could not afford to purchase it.... By the spring of 1776, the destruction of the American trade, coupled with fear for the safety of the Indies, was clearly reflected upon the London Exchange. The sagging prices of stocks led the Gazetteer to affirm that next to the "corporal sufferance" of the soldiers in America, British investors as a group suffered most because of the war. (4)

Clearly the Continental Navy and the French Navy made significant contributions, and Arnold's flotilla bought time. But Mahan was wrong. In the end, it wasn't the French fleet off Yorktown, or even Arnold on Lake Champlain, which won the American Revolutionary War. The war was won when the British people and their government lost the will to fight for America, and it was the American privateer who stripped them of that will. Privateers should be allowed to take their hard-earned place in American history: not merely as a side-show, but as the instrument by which American independence was won.

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