EVOLUTION OF THE EXECUTIVE OFFICES OF THE
CONTINENTAL NAVY

APPROVED:

[Signatures]

Hugh M. Ayer
Major Professor

[Signatures]

Minor Professor

[Signatures]

Director of the Department of History

[Signatures]

Dean of the Graduate School
EVOLUTION OF THE EXECUTIVE OFFICES OF THE CONTINENTAL NAVY

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the North Texas State University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

Charles T. Prather, B.A.

Denton, Texas

January, 1969
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .................................................. 1

**Chapter**

I. Congress Creates a Navy .................................. 4

II. Marine Committee Administration and Robert Morris .......... 27

III. Marine Committee Administration Continues, 1777-1779 .......... 51

IV. Board of Admiralty Administration, 1779-1781 ............... 73

V. Robert Morris and the Agency of the Marine ................. 96

VI. Conclusion ..................................................... 120

**Bibliography** .................................................. 126
INTRODUCTION

The Continental Navy played a relatively small role in the American War for Independence. Very few of its actions have been deemed worthy of mention in American history textbooks. Aside from the exploits of John Paul Jones, very few of the navy's operations have even been mentioned.\(^1\) Although the American navy was small, it could have made a greater impression upon the course of the war than it did. Altogether, more than fifty armed vessels flew the Continental Navy's colors during the course of the war. At one time, during the winter of 1776-1777, it had no less than twenty-six armed vessels in commission.\(^2\) The record of the navy, however, almost belies the fact that it reached this size.

Examination of the operations and administration of the Continental Navy reveals that, to a large extent, it was the ineffective executive direction of that service which caused its ignominious demise. During the period in which the navy had squadron strength (at least three to five vessels) in

---


commission, the executives in control squandered the available naval strength on wasteful and dangerous missions.

Three executive offices in turn directed the Continental Navy: the Marine Committee, the Board of Admiralty, and the Agency of Marine. The Marine Committee was composed of thirteen members of Congress, each from a different state. It directed the navy from 1776 until the end of 1779. The Board of Admiralty replaced the Marine Committee in December, 1779. The Admiralty Board consisted of five commissioners selected by Congress. Two of the commissioners were selected out of Congress. The Board of Admiralty directed the navy until mid-1781 when it was disbanded and its place taken by the Agency of Marine. The Agency of Marine consisted of a single official, the Agent. Robert Morris was the only person to hold this office. He served from mid-1781 until the end of the war.

The navy reached its maximum size during the winter of 1776-1777; it then began to decline, reaching its lowest strength in mid-1781, at which time the Admiralty Board was replaced. The decline of the navy was in large measure due to the operations of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty. Agent Morris was able to begin rejuvenation of the navy, but the war ended before he could restore it to squadron strength.
This study consists of five chapters. Chapter I is a study of the motives and intent of Congress in creating a navy. Chapters II and III examine the operations conducted by the Marine Committee, Chapter II being devoted to its early operations and Chapter III to its later operations. Chapters IV and V examine, in turn, the work of the Board of Admiralty and the Agency of Marine.
CHAPTER I

CONGRESS CREATES A NAVY

On October 3, 1775, Samuel Ward, of the Rhode Island delegation, submitted to the Second Continental Congress a resolution of the Rhode Island House of Magistrates urging the Continental Congress to raise an American navy.

... this assembly is persuaded that the building and equipping of an American fleet, as soon as possible, would greatly and essentially conduce to the preservation of lives, liberty, and property of the good people of these colonies.1

The resolution went on to plead that a navy should be employed by the Congress to "effectually annoy our enemies and contribute to the common defense of these colonies." This motion was tabled to the next Friday, when it was again tabled. It was not brought to a vote for several months.2 Two days after the original motion was introduced, however, the continental assembly passed a motion to fit out two ships to intercept British supply vessels en route to Canada.3

---


2 Journals, III, 274, 281, 283, 348-349.

3 Ibid., p. 275.
Despite the colonies' reluctance to create a continental navy, a naval force of some kind was essential if they intended to oppose Great Britain with force. The coastal situation of the colonies, and the seapower and geographic location of Great Britain, were factors that made a naval force essential to the colonies. Nothing indicated more clearly the need for a continental navy than the fact that irregular colonial sea forces sprang up wherever actual combat situations occurred during the early months of the fighting. The origin of these rebel naval forces varied. Sometimes they were created by colonial assemblies in response to specific situations. Whatever their origin, these de facto navies formed wherever colonials clashed with British military forces. 4

The first irregular colonial naval force was not sanctioned by a colonial assembly but was developed by a militia detachment in response to an immediate need. After aiding Ethan Allen in the capture of Fort Ticonderoga, Benedict Arnold, then a colonel in the Massachusetts militia, borrowed a schooner from the merchants of Skenesborough, New York. With his "regiment of thirty five men" on board, Arnold sailed this schooner up Lake Champlain to the British military

4Charles Oscar Paullin, The Administration of the Continental Navy of the American Revolution (Annapolis, 1905), Chapter 11, is devoted to a discussion of the rise of the state navies and their early histories.
post at St. John's, where he destroyed several boats and captured an armed royal sloop. The schooner which Arnold used was never named in his dispatches. It was not judged part of any colony's armed forces, and Arnold held no naval rank either before or after the expedition. Nevertheless, the St. John's expedition was a water operation and it did involve an armed force. It may be considered the first recorded incident of naval warfare in the War for Independence and the borrowed schooner as the first American naval vessel.

Most of the state navies, the sea forces sanctioned by the separate colonies, were created for defense. As tension in the various colonies increased, fear of attack by British naval vessels grew. As early as April, 1775, the revolutionary councils in Connecticut expressed worry over the vulnerability of their colony's coast to naval sorties. By June, the officials of Rhode Island and Massachusetts were voicing the same fear. One reaction to this fear was the creation of either state navies or irregular naval forces.


7 Ibid., pp. 656, 1112.
Rhode Island was the first of the New England colonies to establish a state navy as an answer to its problems of coastal defense. In an act of June 12, 1775, the Rhode Island Assembly ordered two small boats to be fitted out for coastal defense.\(^8\) Two weeks later, the governor of Rhode Island wrote to the Massachusetts Congress suggesting that Massachusetts do the same.\(^9\) By that date, however, an irregular naval force had been formed in Massachusetts.

On June 2, the people of Machias, Maine, then part of Massachusetts, after a brief exchange of cannon fire, boarded and captured a British Navy schooner in the town harbor. The townspeople stripped the schooner, the Margaretta, of her guns and mounted them on one of their own local schooners, which they rechristened the Machias Liberty. This vessel was sailed up and down the coast of Maine in company with another armed schooner fitted out by the citizens of Machias, the Diligent.\(^10\) The Massachusetts General Court gave a certain legal status to this impromptu naval force. On June 26, it thanked the people of Machias, "for their courage and good conduct" in capturing the Margaretta, and allowed that schooner to remain in their control "for them to improve as

\(^8\)Ibid., p. 1118.

\(^9\)Governor Cooke to the Massachusetts Congress, June 27, 1775, ibid.

\(^10\)Ibid., III, 346-354.
they shall think most fit for their and the public advantage.\textsuperscript{11} By that date the citizens of Machias had already made improvements upon the Royal Navy schooner. The two vessels manned by the Maine townspeople barely deserved to be called ships, and for some time they were controlled solely by the Machias Committee of Safety. Nevertheless, they effectually constituted a Massachusetts naval force.

On July 1, 1775, the Connecticut Assembly resolved that their colony should have a navy, and in the next month they created one by purchasing and commissioning two small vessels.\textsuperscript{12}

South of New England, colonial naval forces did not appear until after mid-1775. In early June the South Carolina Congress heard a proposal that it fit out a fifty-gun ship for the defense of its coasts, but this proposal was argued down. Henry Laurens, one of the leaders of the resistance movement, spoke for the opposition. He considered the idea of a ship for coastal defense to be one born out of "fear and zeal in a delerium."\textsuperscript{13} However, in August the Charlestown Committee of Safety heard of the approach toward Savannah of a British supply ship loaded with gunpowder. Fearing that

\textsuperscript{11}Collections of the Maine Historical Society, VI, 132, cited in Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 12.

\textsuperscript{12}Clark, Naval Documents of the American Revolution, I, 613.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid., pp. 628-629.
this powder was intended for the loyalists and Indians in South Carolina and Georgia, the committee armed a schooner, intercepted the ship, and captured most of its cargo. On July 6, 1775, Pennsylvania authorized the building of row-galleys to defend the Delaware River. These galleys were not constructed until the fall.

By the fall of 1775, not only were there several irregular colonial naval forces in operation, but also the colonial resistance movement had become nearly a full-scale rebellion. Sufficient commitment was lacking on the part of the rebellious colonies to continental government for Congress to organize a continental navy at this time. There was a certain degree of unity between the colonies by the summer of 1775, as the continuation of the Continental Congress and the growth of the Continental Army during that period show, but a navy needed a much stronger national government to support it than an army did. To a greater extent than an eighteenth century army, a navy depended upon a specialized industry and a great deal of manufactured goods—almost all

---


15 Clark, Naval Documents of the American Revolution, I, 903.

of which would be almost impossible to acquire without funds. The army, moreover, was constructed from colonial militias, already existent institutions. A navy, the irregular colonial navies notwithstanding, would have to be created from scratch.

Sufficient commitment to the continental government would not come while the colonies were still ready to accept some sort of conciliation with Great Britain rather than press for independence, as they were through 1775. Congress reflected its reticence to break all ties with Great Britain in its reaction to Benjamin Franklin's "Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union," when he showed this document to certain members early in the summer. Thomas Jefferson recorded the general reaction to this plan.

... he shewed it to others. Some thought as I did and were for it but others were revolted by it. We found that it could not be passed and the proposing it to Congress as the subject for any vote whatever would startle many members so much that they would suspect we had lost sight of reconciliation with Great Britain, ...17

John Adams remarked of this period that the "vast machine" of the United Colonies as yet was "barely functioning."18 When


these circumstances are taken into consideration it is not surprising that the continental assembly did not create a navy.

Despite Congress' reticence concerning the creation of a navy, an intercolonial navy of sorts did come into existence during the fall of 1775. George Washington raised a small squadron of armed ships that became known as "Washington's Navy." The general raised this force with neither aid nor urging from Congress but because he found it expedient to have it.¹⁹

The Continental Army lay before Boston, badly in need of supplies and low in spirit. Washington recognized that the creation of a small naval force could provide an answer to the problems of supplies and morale and be of value to him in the siege of Boston as well. Accordingly, he began to arm a few small vessels. He informed Congress of his work only after he had actually created the fleet.

I have given orders for the Equipment of some Armed Vessels to Intercept the Enemy's Supplies of Provision and Ammunition. Nothing shall be omitted to secure Success; a fortunate Capture of an Ordinance Ship would give new Life to the Camp and an immediate turn to the issue of this Campaign.²⁰


The General used whatever ships were at hand and obtained crews for them by calling for volunteers from his regiments. The first ship to be armed and equipped was a small, rented schooner, the Hannah. Washington ordered this ship to sea on September 2, 1775. The career of this first vessel was ingloriously short. Three days after receiving his orders, Captain Nicholas Broughton ran the ship aground to avoid capture by pursuing British men-of-war. Washington, however, did not let this failure discourage him from forming a naval force. On October 4, he ordered Colonel John Glover of the Massachusetts militia and Stephen Moylan from his own staff to procure two schooners, "prime sailers," arm them as quickly as possible, and send them out to "cut off enemy supplies." He also authorized these two officers to appoint prize agents in the principal ports of New England to see to the supplying of these vessels and the disposition of their prizes.

21 Ibid.
22 Instructions to Captain Nicholas Broughton, September 2, 1775, Writings of Washington, III, 467-469.
24 Instructions to Colonel John Glover and Stephen Moylan, October 4, 1775, Writings of Washington, IV, 6-7.
25 Ibid., p. 7.
Through the diligent work of both himself and his appointed subordinates, the General's navy grew in size. By the end of November he could report to Richard Henry Lee that he had "fitted out six ships, two [of which] are upon the Cruize directed by Congress; the rest [of which] ply about Cape Cod and Cape Ann." Although Washington confessed in the same letter that his navy was "as of yet of little purpose," it had begun achieving notable success even as he wrote. In the last week of November, army captain John Manly made the most successful cruise ever taken by the army's fleet. On the 24th of November, he captured an ordnance ship, the Nancy. By any definition this ship was a valuable prize. It carried a cargo of two thousand muskets, thirty-one tons of musket shot, and great quantities of other military supplies, including badly-needed gunpowder. The capture of this ship was more than a boon to the Continental Army; it was also a serious loss to the British. This single capture alone proved the value a navy might have to the colonies.

---

26 Washington to Richard Henry Lee, November 27, 1775, ibid., p. 117.
27 Washington to the President of Congress, November 30, 1775, ibid., 130; Clark, Washington's Navy, p. 70.
As the siege of Boston continued into 1776, Washington's navy continued to be successful and to increase in size. In a letter to John Hancock, written early in December, Washington estimated that his flotilla had captured prizes and prize goods amounting to approximately £15,000 market value. In January, 1776, the fleet had become so large that he appointed John Manly Commodore and gave to him the responsibility of caring for the fleet.

While the Continental Army's fleet expanded in size, the general tempo of the war at sea was increasing. Ships from the state navies, as well as from Washington's fleet, roamed the New England coast harrying British shipping. This activity did not go unnoticed by the British. British Rear Admiral Molyneaux Shuldham, who had just assumed command of British naval operations in North America, reported in his first dispatch to the Earl of Sandwich:

Your lordship will be surprized and concerned to learn how fast the armed vessels of the rebels have multiplied . . . and how many of our store-ships and victualers have been taken, and how successfully they have defeated all our force, vigilance, and attention by their artifices.

---

29 Washington to the President of Congress, December 5, 1775, Writings of Washington, IV, 149.

30 Washington to Commodore John Manly, January 28, 1775, ibid., p. 204.

31 Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 69.

Despite the surprising success of the irregular American naval forces, the naval situation was not entirely satisfactory to the Americans. From its beginning, Washington's navy was a source of trouble to him. The crews were generally undisciplined and often unruly. In November, 1775, the crew of the brigantine Washington mutinied. The Army's prize agent at Plymouth, William Watson, wrote to Washington concerning this affair.

The people aboard the Brigantine Washington are, in general, discontented. . . . They say that they Inlisted [sic] to serve in the Army, and not as Marines. . . . I am very apprehensive that little is to be expected from Fellows drawn promiscuously from the Army for this business.

Despite its troubles, Washington's naval force remained the only naval force which could be considered "national" in any sense until the end of 1776. Through late 1775 and most of 1776 Congress, still hopeful of conciliation, did not make any decision concerning the creation of a continental navy. However, there was a movement growing among certain of the American patriots calling for the creation of just such a navy.

Most of the earliest proponents of a national navy came from New England. John Adams was probably the first important

---

33 Washington to the Owners of the Ship Unity, September 5, 1775, Writings of Washington, III, 513.

person to consider its creation. In his notes of questions that he assumed would be considered by the Second Continental Congress, written before its convening, he speculated upon some tax plan to support a navy: obviously, he had already arrived at the conclusion that the Congress would find a navy necessary.

Adams was not the only early proponent of a navy among the New England patriots. In the summer of 1775, James Warren corresponded with Adams concerning the size of navy which the United Colonies would need. Warren suggested that it would be very good if the Continental Congress had as many as forty "very good going sloops, with from 10 to 16 guns each." It will be remembered that the resolution for a continental navy had been introduced to Congress by Rhode Island. That colony probably developed the idea without any prompting from Massachusetts, the colony of Adams and Warren. As early as June, 1775, the Governor of Rhode Island wrote to the Congress of Massachusetts urging cooperation between the two colonies on the matter of coastal defense. Only one non-New Englander, Christopher Cadsden, the firebrand from South


37 Governor Cooke to the Massachusetts Congress, June 27, 1775, American Archives, 4th Series, II, 118.
Carolina, was identified with the movement for a navy before introduction of the Rhode Island resolution.  

The reaction to the Rhode Island resolution and the general idea of a navy in Congress in the days following that resolution's first introduction verified that the support for a navy existed chiefly among New Englanders and radicals from other sections.  

Edward Rutledge of Virginia vociferously opposed the idea and called it "the most wild, visionary project ever imagined." He warned that it would not aid the American protest movement but rather would "completely ruin American commerce." For the colonies to oppose Great Britain on the seas, he warned, was like "an Infant . . . taking a mad bull by the horns." Pennsylvania's Nathaniel Ross stood against the creation of a navy because he doubted that Congress could procure the seamen necessary to man it. To prove his point he referred to Pennsylvania's problems with its navy. "We [Pennsylvania] cant get seamen to man 4 vessells. We [Continental Congress] could not get Seamen to mann our Boats, our Gallies." Samuel Zubly of Georgia feared that the creation of a sea force by the colonies would

---


39 John Adams, "Notes of Debates," Journals, III, 471-503. Adams records the arguments that faced Congress during this period—including those concerned with the creation of a navy.

40 Ibid., p. 483.  

41 Ibid., pp. 485-486.
be considered a direct affront by Great Britain and therefore would cause unnecessary escalation of the war. 42 Many delegates from the colonies to the south of New England doubted that a continental navy would help anyone but New England. John Adams recorded their complaints in a letter to James Warren.

All the Trade of Pennsylvania, the Lower Counties in a Great Part of Maryland and N. Jersey Sails in between the Capes of Delaware Bay . . . If a Strong Fleet should be posted in that Bay by the British [they argue] . . . it might obstruct all the Trade of this River. Further, the Trade of Virginia and the rest of Maryland Floats into the Chesapeak Bay . . . where a British Fleet might stop all . . . They agree that a Fleet would protect and secure the Trade of New England but deny it would that of the Southern Colonies. 43

Samuel Chase of Maryland heartily approved of the creation of a continental navy, but his argument had no compelling logic behind it. "It is the maddest idea in the world," he said, "to think of building an American fleet; its latitude is wonderful; we should mortgage the whole Continent to support it." 44 As long as only New Englanders and a few radicals supported the idea of a navy, it would not be created.

Despite the criticism offered by the more conservative elements in Congress and the continued postponement of the

42 Ibid.
Rhode Island resolution, the advocates of a navy did not give up. They hammered on the fact that the United Colonies needed a navy. One advocate called on both history and practicality to justify creation of a continental fleet.

Why should not America have a Navy? No maritime Power, near the Sea Coast, can be safe without it. It is no Chimaera. The Romans suddenly built one in their Carthaginian War. Why may we not lay a Foundation for it. We abound with Furs, iron ore, Tar, Pitch, Turpentine. We have all the materials for the construction of a Navy.45

Congress' worry over American trade throughout the fall of 1776 made reference to the need for a navy easy, and the navy advocates exploited every chance to expound upon the need for and the feasibility of a navy. In one debate over the feasibility of closing American ports to British trade, Gadsden of South Carolina managed to inject into the argument his views concerning a navy. As was the case with Chase's speech, Gadsden's speech had a certain illogic about it.

I have argued for the shutting of them [American ports] untill We hear the Event of our Petition to the King, and longer untill the Congress shall determine otherwise. I am for a Navy too, and I think that shutting our Ports for a time will help us to a Navy. If we leave our Ports alone, warm Men will have their ships seized.46

The oratorical logic of some of the navy advocates notwithstanding, their cause began gaining support. The determining

46 Ibid., p. 501.
factor which made a navy seem more feasible was the deterioration of relations between the colonies and Great Britain that began taking place during that period.

Royal Governor Lord Thomas Dunmore of Virginia began ordering attacks on the coastal settlements on the Chesapeake Bay. As a result of these depredations, heretofore lukewarm southern delegates, such as Samuel Zubly of Georgia and Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, began to favor the concept of a continental navy.47

On October 5, the delegates at Philadelphia learned of the British dispatch of ships to Canada "laden with arms and powder." Certain that this powder was intended for use against themselves, the Americans resolved the arming of two ships. Thus at least a temporary victory was gained by the navy advocates.48

On October 11 Congress received word of the King's rejection of the Olive Branch Petition.49 This news demolished nearly all of Congress' hopes for peace. Samuel Ward wrote to his brother that day concerning Congress' attitude: "... all hopes of a speedy reconciliation are given over, and we unanimously determine to push the war with greatest

47 Ibid., p. 486.
48 Journals, III, 275.
The next day Xubly declared that the establishment of a navy was imperative. Curiously, he advocated its establishment on the same basis that Southern delegates earlier had used to protest against a navy: the vulnerability of Southern and Middle Colony coasts.

Twenty men-of-war may block up the harbor of New York, Delaware River, Chesapeake Bay, the Carolinas, and Georgia. Whether or not we can raise a navy is an important question. . . . [T]o carry on the war we must have a navy.  

Nineteen days after the reception of the stunning news from England, Congress resolved to arm two more vessels "for the protection and defense of the United Colonies." Congress increased the membership of the committee originally appointed to oversee the resolution from three to seven members. The original members were Silas Deane of Connecticut, Samuel Langdon of New Hampshire, and Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina. To this committee Congress now added John Adams of Massachusetts, Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island, Richard Henry Lee of Virginia, and Joseph Hewes of North Carolina. Although the task of the Naval Committee was only to care for a supposedly temporary naval force, it effectually created

50 Samuel Warren to Joseph Warren, October 11, 1775, Letters of Members, I, 302.


52 Journals, III, 311-312.

53 Ibid.
the nucleus of the Continental Navy. Following the creation of this committee, the no-longer reluctant patriots continued to build their naval establishment. On November 2 Congress authorized the Naval Committee to commission officers and enlist seamen for its ships. Eight days later the continental assembly created a Marine Corps.

On November 25 a further step toward institution of a Navy was taken; Congress authorized the licensing of privateers by the state governments and authorized state and continental privateers to attack all British shipping; specific permission was no longer needed. This action was taken in reaction to the rumors that the Royal Navy had orders to burn all towns in rebellion. There were never such orders, but Congress reacted to these rumors as though they were true.

The Naval Committee did not remain inactive during this flurry of activity by Congress. In November it purchased four ships to be converted into men-of-war. These ships were named the Cabot, the Columbus, the Alfred, and the Andrea Doria. On the same day that Congress passed the resolution allowing the licensing of privateers, the Naval Committee

54 Ibid., p. 316.  
55 Ibid., p. 348.  
56 Ibid., pp. 371-375.  
asked John Adams to draw up a set of rules and regulations for their sea force.  Adams complied with this request, and on November 28, Congress accepted his "Rules for the Regulation of the Navy of the United Colonies."  

In December Congress continued this drive to create a navy. On the eleventh it again took up consideration of the Rhode Island resolution for a naval defense force. This time it appointed a committee of thirteen delegates, one from each colony, to consider "ways and means for furnishing these colonies with a naval armament." Two days later this committee made its report. On consideration of its recommendations Congress ordered the building of thirteen frigates. On the next day, December 14, Congress appointed a committee of thirteen to oversee the construction of these frigates. This committee was to become known as the Marine Committee. Its membership was almost identical to that of the committee of


61 Ibid., p. 428.
December 11. Just why Congress gave this duty of supervision to a new committee of thirteen rather than the Naval Committee is nowhere explicitly explained; probably it was to satisfy the principle of representation of each of the colonies.

On December 22 Congress instructed the Naval Committee to equip its fleet in preparation for receiving orders. This order led to the actual commissioning of the first units of the Navy. Approximately three weeks later, Lieutenant John Paul Jones raised the rattlesnake flag aboard the Alfred, the flagship of the squadron raised by the Naval Committee. This brief ceremony of commissioning the Alfred marked the creation of the Continental Navy.

The Continental Navy was fated to perform only mediocre service for Congress and the United States. The continental government was able to create only a very small fleet. Of course even a small fleet could have accomplished a great deal, but the American navy was never to have the necessary strategic direction for success.

62 Ibid., John Adams and William Paca were the only members of the original committee not to serve on the Marine Committee. Adams' place was taken by John Hancock and Paca's place was taken by John Houston.

63 Ibid. p. 444.

64 Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 92-93.
Congress, when it created the Continental Navy, had only a very loose conception of naval strategy. It envisioned the Continental Navy as acting in some manner to defend the American coast and American shipping but it did not make its thoughts clearer than that. If the original proponents of a continental navy had thought much about the potentials and possibilities for their navy, they would have realized that it could never be effective as a purely defensive force. The long coastline of the thirteen colonies would have been difficult for a much larger navy than the Continental Navy to defend. The American navy could have given protection to American shipping in an indirect manner: had it been used on raids on other parts of the Empire and in concerted prize cruises in areas where American privateers would not have dared to do, it would have caused the British navy to spread its own war vessels throughout the Empire, thus making that navy's concentration off the American coast impossible. But, either because of general confusion during the last months of 1775 or because of simple ignorance of naval strategy, no one in Congress seems to have made this reasoning. Strategy for the navy remained to be defined when it came into existence. This failure to define the role of the navy would be repeated by its own executives to fatal effect.

The Continental Navy's fate notwithstanding, the very fact that it had been created was important. By creation of
a national navy, the colonists demonstrated not only that they were determined to resist Great Britain, but also that they were going to remain united—this determination would eventually result in creation of the United States under a relatively strong federal constitution.

The members of Congress probably did not recognize that their creation of a continental navy was a step toward the creation of a federal nation, but they do seem to have recognized the significance of their creation of a navy as far as resistance to Great Britain was concerned. Joseph Hewes of North Carolina wrote to a friend in November of 1776:

Several other matters which together with some ships and vessels that are fitting out at the Charge of the Continent will enhance our expenses amazingly, by which you may judge we have but little expectation of a reconciliation.65

---

65 Joseph Hewes to Samuel Johnson, November 9, 1775, Letters of Members, I, 251.
CHAPTER II

MARINE COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATION AND

ROBERT MORRIS

Congress assigned the duties of naval administration to the Marine Committee rather than the older Naval Committee. The older organ was allowed to disappear from the scene quietly. Congress gave it its last assignment in January, 1776: the committee was to direct the squadron it had raised upon any mission which it felt was needed and feasible.\(^1\) In September, Congress ordered the Naval Committee accounts transferred to the Marine Committee.\(^2\) Assignment of administrative duties of the younger body probably seemed logical. The Marine Committee, containing one member from each of the colonies, was a more representative body than the Naval Committee. Moreover, by 1776 there were only three members left on the Naval Committee and all three were also members of the Marine Committee.\(^3\)

The duties of naval administration were conferred upon the Marine Committee in a desultory manner. Originally the

\(^1\)Journals, IV, 90. \(^2\)Ibid., V, 783-784. \(^3\)Ibid., p. 838; VI, 1064.
committee had only the assignment to build the thirteen frigates authorized by the December 14, 1775, resolution of Congress. In April Congress empowered the committee to choose Continental Agents for American ports; these officials would handle the local administrative duties of the Navy. During the first half of 1776, the committee was upon several occasions authorized to purchase vessels for the Navy. Congress never formally assigned the duty of directing ship operations, but by September the Marine Committee was exercising this responsibility.

The Marine Committee was an historically significant institution. That Congress picked a committee from its own membership to attend to naval affairs indicates the contemporary colonial conception of what form the central government should take, and of what relationship it should bear to the colonies. Unfortunately, despite the validity the Marine Committee had as a historically representative body, it showed itself to be inefficient very early in its administration.

The committee assigned the construction of the thirteen frigates, the first duty assigned to it by Congress, to various colonies according to their shipbuilding capacities.

---

4Ibid., XIV, 283. 5Ibid., pp. 201, 238, 592.

6The official records of the Marine Committee begin in August of 1776. C. O. Paullin, editor, Out-Letters of the Continental Marine Committee and Board of Admiralty, 2 vols. (New York, 1913). (Hereafter cited as the Out-Letters.)
The colonies in turn appointed "frigate committees" to do the actual building of the ships.\(^7\)

In too many instances, the Marine Committee failed to provide the necessary supplies to the frigate committees. The two frigates built by Massachusetts, the Boston and the Hancock, were both launched before midsummer of 1776, but for lack of cannon they could not be commissioned for several months. William Whipple, a Massachusetts delegate to Congress not on the Marine Committee, charged that the cannon shortage was due to that body's negligence.

It grieved me that the frigates cannot be got to sea, which I am sensible they might before this had proper attention been paid to the cannon in season. I have been a long time endeavoring to draw the attention of the Marine Committee to the regulation of the Navy, but without success.\(^8\)

This charge was not the only one leveled against the committee. In the fall of 1776, Josiah Bartlett, a member of the Marine Committee, wrote that the armament problem of the New Hampshire frigate committee would have gone untended had it not been for the industry of a single member of the Marine Committee, Robert Morris.\(^9\) The committee showed signs of negligence in areas besides that of supply.


\(^8\) William Whipple to John Langdon, July 8, 1776, Letters of Members, II, 5.

\(^9\) Josiah Bartlett to John Langdon, October 7, 1776, ibid., p. 117.
On April 17, 1776, Congress resolved that the Marine Committee should choose continental agents for the navy. These agents were to be the extremely important local administrators for the navy. They would handle the sale of ships and goods captured by the Continental ships and act as disbursing and supply agents for the fleet. Moreover, they would supervise importation and exportation of goods for the Secret Committee of Commerce and its successors. The committee dutifully submitted to Congress a list of ten appointees on April 23. Then, however, the committee failed to supervise these agents properly.

John Bradford was appointed agent for Massachusetts. As late as July the committee had yet to send him official notification of his appointment. Because he lacked this notification, Bradford could not draw funds from the loan office in Boston. He wrote of his plight to Robert Morris, vice chairman of the committee: 'I have great occasion for money, seeing no prospect of getting any out of the State.

10 Journals, IV, 289.

11 Outletters, I, 52. This is a commission to another continental agent (not one of the first ten) but it can be assumed that the first agents had the same duties.

12 Journals, IV, 301.
Agencies for want of my commission." This failure to follow through on Bradford's appointment was especially serious; Boston was a major port.

The continental agents as a whole acted only slowly in their disposition of prizes. This slowness infuriated navy officers; seamen were loath to serve in the navy when their shares of prize money were so slow forthcoming. The officers complained constantly of this slowness on the part of the agents to members of the committee and other members of Congress. There is no record of any reaction to this problem on the part of the committee.

The Marine Committee's direction of strategy was poor. The committee gave the navy essentially two duties: supply procurement and protection of American commerce. Completely accurate records are lacking, but several ships, including

13 John Bradford to Robert Morris, July 16, 1776, Correspondence of Robert Morris, reel XII of Papers of Robert Morris, 1776-1820, 12 reels (Library of Congress, Microfilm, 1967) [n.p.]. (Hereafter cited as Correspondence of Robert Morris.)


15 Before September of 1776 Congress allowed the Secret Committee of Correspondence to direct Continental vessels on supply cruises. Beginning in that month, however, the Secret Committee had to direct its requests for vessels through the Marine Committee. Journals, IV, 423, 592; Outletters, I, 10.
the Lexington, Hornet, Mosquito, Andrea Doria, Independence, and Sachem were sent on one or more missions each to the West Indies during the fall of 1776. The committee allowed these ships to take prizes while in transit, but it carefully instructed them to remember that the procurement of supplies was their first duty. Other ships, including the Fly and Wasp, and when they were commissioned, the frigates Boston, Hancock, and Warren, were ordered on short cruises along the American coast to protect American shipping from harassment by British privateers and small navy vessels.\(^\text{16}\)

The Marine Committee strategy with respect to coastal cruises deserves criticism; it was poor planning. The Continental Navy was far too small to protect all American shipping. The main result of its attempts to do this was the dispersement of what force it did have. There was a better way to utilize the ships of the Continental Navy—one which also would have helped relieve American shipping of the menace of the British Navy. In 1776 British shipping was especially vulnerable to attack by American sea forces. Even on the short cruises ordered by the committee and Commodore Hopkins on his own authority, navy vessels captured some sixty prizes.\(^\text{17}\) A concerted effort at prize cruising would have

\(^{16}\)Ibid., pp. 3-52.

\(^{17}\)Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 183.
forced the British to use their naval vessels to protect British shipping. An even better use of the Navy would have been to send its units on joint expeditions to unprotected parts of the British Empire. Such expeditions would have forced the dispersal of units of the Royal Navy throughout the Empire. Very probably the Marine Committee ordered coastal patrols for one reason: members of Congress whose colonies' coasts were under British harassment appealed for such operations. It would have been to the best interests of the navy had the Marine Committee possessed enough strategic aptitude to resist these demands.

In nearly all of its operations the Marine Committee performed poorly. It failed to keep track of supplies; it failed to keep watch on local administrative units; in operational strategy it contented itself with ordering what ships it could spare from the crucial supply missions on wasteful coastal patrols.

Explanation for the committee's poor performance may be found in its very structure. Marine Committee members were

---

18 This is also the view of prominent naval historians: Charles O. Paullin, "Classes of Operations of the Continental Navy of the American Revolution," United States Naval Institute Proceedings, XXXII (1937), 153-162; Morison, John Paul Jones, xiii-xiv.

Congressmen; their first concern had to be the representation of their respective electorates in Congress. Moreover, because Congress took upon itself all the duties of central administration, the committee members were saddled with many other duties besides care of naval affairs. Collectively, the thirteen original members held 139 positions on committees of major and minor importance. Even considering that the majority of these appointments were on temporary committees, they nevertheless represented a large burden.

The burden which multiple duties imposed upon Marine Committee members can be seen in the case of the committee's chairman, John Hancock. Not only was Hancock chairman of the Marine Committee, he was also president of Congress. Hancock's attempts to meet his obligations as president ruinously impaired Marine Committee operations. Josiah Bartlett, writing to John Langdon in October, 1776, complained of Hancock's constant absences in committee meetings. "I sincerely wish that he did not belong to the Marine Committee but would Confine himself to the affairs of Congress which is Business abundantly sufficient for one man," Bartlett wrote.

The Congressional nature of the committee prevented growth of expertise on the part of its members. The constant

---

20 Journals, III, 319-351.
21 Josiah Bartlett to John Langdon, October 7, 1776, Letters of Members, II, 117.
changing of representations in Congress meant a constant shuffle of committee members. Also, committee members continually resigned from the committee for other reasons. In 1776 alone, the thirteen places on the committee were held by no less than twenty-two different members of Congress. Moreover, the fact that the members were chosen, not on the basis of their knowledge of naval and maritime matters, but for their representative nature—one member from each state—certainly contributed to the lowering of efficiency.

Certain contemporary observers of the navy's situation not only noticed the committee's inefficiency but also identified the basic problem. William Whipple, in his letter to John Langdon complaining about the difficulties of arming the Hancock and the Boston, summed up his complaint declaring that "the present establishment certainly needs amendment." Eldbridge Gerry advocated that the navy be directed by a board of admiralty, a commission of persons knowledgeable in naval affairs and not members of Congress, rather than a congressional committee. Samuel Chase concurred with the

---

22 *Journals*, IV, 1065. During its existence, the Marine Committee had a total of 65 changes in membership. Ibid., VI, 1065; IX, 1079; XII, 1276; XV, 1446.


opinions of Gerry and Whipple. "The Business of Congress," Chase wrote, "must be placed in different hands. Distinct and precise departments ought to be established." 25

The committee did contain at least one good administrator, Robert Morris. Although he is best known for his work in the area of financial administration, Morris also did much work in naval administration. 26 Indeed, the record of his contributions to naval administration during the committee period was outstanding. Before going into an account of Morris' performance in naval administration, it is necessary to study his background. Not only did it influence his contribution to the committee but also it was to have a direct effect upon the navy later in the navy's history.

Morris had what too many of the members of the Marine Committee lacked—a capacity for and a knowledge of maritime affairs. 27 Before the war, as well as during its first years, Morris was junior partner in the Philadelphia shipping firm of Willing and Morris. The firm was not especially large before the war, but it did have mercantile connections, not only in the middle and southern colonies, but also in the

25 Samuel Chase to John Sullivan, December 27, 1776, ibid., p. 185.


27 Ibid., pp. 5-19.
West Indies and in Great Britain. Morris began in the firm as an apprentice; he did not inherit his partnership but earned it.

Morris and his senior partner in business, Thomas Willing, played significant roles in the growth of the independence movement, both in Pennsylvania and in national politics. They both were members of the Pennsylvania Committee of Safety. In 1775, Morris served as vice president of that body and contributed much time and effort to its work. The Philadelphia business partners also were important members of the Pennsylvania delegation to the Continental Congress. Willing was one of the original members of the Secret Committee of Correspondence and Morris was an original member of the Marine Committee. Willing and Morris also contributed to the war effort through their company. Willing and Morris ships carried the dispatches between Congress and its London agents during the last tumultuous months of 1775. Willing and Morris sold the ship The Black Prince to the Naval Committee, which renamed it the Alfred; this ship was the flagship of the Naval Committee’s squadron and served the navy well for several years. The partnership also made

29 Journals, IV, 1064. 
30 Ibid., III, 368.
contracts to supply gunpowder to the Continental Congress—
contracts, it might be added, which gave a good profit to the
Philadelphia company. 32

In the first month of 1776, Morris eclipsed Willing in
the degree of service he rendered. Willing pleaded inability
to attend the night meetings of the Secret Committee of Corre-
spondence and was excused from that body. Morris was ap-
pointed to represent Pennsylvania on that committee in his
place. 33 This appointment gave Morris membership on two of
the Congress' standing committees and put him in a position
of outstanding influence in its operations.

Morris also served on several minor committees. In
January, 1776, he accepted membership to a committee to
organize trade. 34 In the same month he was appointed to a
committee to consider the propriety of establishing a war
office. 35 In March he was chosen member of a committee to
find "ways and means of raising necessary supplies to defray
the expenses of war for the present year over and above the
emission of the bills of credit." 36 This latter appointment
was the first he held that dealt with national finance, the
field in which he was destined to make his most outstanding
contributions to his nation.

32 Journals, III, 253-255.  33 Ibid., p. 423.
34 Ibid., p. 65.  35 Ibid., p. 63.
36 Ibid., p. 694.
Despite his heavy involvement in other affairs, Morris found time to administer to Marine affairs on the local level. Pennsylvania, through the offices of its Committee of Safety, had been given the task of building four of the thirteen frigates authorized by the previously-mentioned Congressional resolution of December 14, 1775. The Pennsylvania Committee of Safety in turn gave the problem to Morris. He responded to the task with characteristic efficiency. He created "The Philadelphia Frigate Committee" to supervise the details of construction. The frigate committee consisted of twelve commissioners and Morris as chairman. Three commissioners were assigned to each frigate to be constructed; one commissioner was to supervise the construction of the hull, one the procurement of masts and armament, and one the procurement of supplies. M. V. Brewington, in his article, "Design of Our First Frigates," credits Morris and his committee with remarkable efficiency in view of the tremendous shortages it faced. 37

Although Morris was one of the original members of the Marine Committee, his name did not become associated with the work of that committee until late in the spring of 1776. This late appearance probably was caused by his occupation with the Philadelphia Frigate Committee, as well as his many other

tasks. Once his name did appear, however, it appeared extensively.

Morris primarily became associated with the committee's ship procurement activities, which included the purchasing of ships as well as the supervision of construction. Washington once assured an unnamed correspondent that he, the correspondent, did right in buying a ship for the Marine Committee because "Mr. Morris had asked for one." When the committee bought two galleys for the defense of the Delaware River, Robert Smith recorded in his diary that it was Morris who handled the transaction. In the aforementioned letter of Bradford's concerning his lack of a formal commission, it was Morris to whom he wrote, and it was Morris whom he later thanked for clearing up the situation. When the New Hampshire Frigate Committee reported that it lacked cannon for its frigate, the Raleigh, it was Morris who attempted to procure the weapons.

38 George Washington to [n.n.] [n.d.], Writings of Washington, V, 1024. This letter, or more properly, note, appears to have been written in late spring, 1776.

39 Diary of Robert Smith, Letters of Members, I, 411.

40 John Bradford to Robert Morris, July 16, 1776, Correspondence of Robert Morris [n.p.]; John Bradford to Robert Morris, August 11, 1776, ibid. [n.p.].

41 Josiah Bartlett to John Langdon, October 7, 1776, Letters of Members, II, 117.
The importance that Morris came to have in the Marine Committee by the fall of 1776 can be inferred from an episode in the Secret Committee of Correspondence. In the early fall, Silas Deane, the American commissioner to the court at Versailles, sent word that the French were going to send the United States approximately two million livres worth of badly needed supplies. The goods would be shipped under the front of bogus trading companies to the French West Indies. The Americans would then have to furnish ships to run the supplies into their own harbors. It was essential, whatever plans the Americans might make, that the entire operation remain secret. The imperative need for secrecy prompted the Secret Committee of Correspondence to make special plans for the reception of these shipments. Usually in order to secure ships, or funds to charter ships, the committee needed Congressional approval. Now, however, the committee decided that it would use Morris to bypass Congress.

We are of the opinion that it is unnecessary to inform Congress of this intelligence at present because Mr. Morris belongs to all of the committees that can properly be employed in receiving and importing the expected supplies . . . and will influence the necessary measures for that purpose. . . . Mr. Morris will . . . apply to the Marine Committee to send . . . armed ships.

---

42 Memorandum in Secret Committee to Paris Commissioners, October 1, 1776, Francis Wharton, editor, Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States, 6 vols. (Washington, 1899), II, 152.

43 Ibid.
Morris was influential enough in the Marine Committee to be able to order ships on missions without much explanation. Despite Morris' membership on the Marine Committee, the committee was inefficient. As long as the Marine Committee remained the executive of the marine, the efficiency of the Continental Navy would be impaired immeasurably.

In late fall, 1776, Congress made attempts to help the navy and its administration. The focus of congressional actions were to extend the offices of administration. In late November, Congress created "a Board of Assistants to execute the business of the Navy under the Marine Committee." This board, known as "The United States Navy Board," was to consist of three members who were not members of Congress but knowledgeable in naval affairs. Presumably, it was to act as executor of the committee decisions. Also, it was to sit in Philadelphia.44

Congress also created a navy office in Europe. In October it gave the Paris commissioners powers to appoint agents in continental ports of their own designation, to create a Court of Admiralty in France, and to direct naval and privateering operations in European waters.45

44 Journals, VI, 929.
45 Secret Committee to the Paris Commissioners, October 24, 1776, Wharton, Diplomatic Correspondence, II, 179-182.
The creation of the two new offices, the United States Navy Board and the Paris office, however, were not to have much effect upon the navy's situation in regard to administrative problems. The United States Navy Board was in essence a tactical board, but it was based in Philadelphia while the majority of the Continental Navy's ships and offices were in New England. The board was too far away from its subordinate offices to be of much help either to them or the Marine Committee.46 No navy ships on other than supply missions would visit European waters for the next two years and, despite John Paul Jones' episodes there, they would never be the scene of much American activity. Even had the offices been of immediate use, moreover, their creation still would not have changed the basic situation of the navy in regard to its executive; its executive was still tied inexorably to Congress, a fact which was to cause further trouble. In early December, when Congress left Philadelphia, the Marine Committee also deserted marine administration. But for the actions of Morris at this point, the navy might have suffered serious harm.

By December, 1776, the Continental Army had suffered a successive string of defeats and had retreated from New York to Pennsylvania. Because of this, the mood of Congress was

46 Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 37, 411.
so dark that when it received word, on December 12, that the British intended a raid on Philadelphia, it adjourned immediately and fled to Baltimore. The only provision made for taking care of administrative matters in Philadelphia was the granting to General Washington of permission to use all powers necessary for "the operation of the war." Washington, of course, had his hands full with his army. Fortunately for the war effort, and for the operation of the navy in particular, Robert Morris stayed in Philadelphia and stepped into the administrative vacuum left by the fleeing Congress.

On the night Congress left Philadelphia, Morris opened a letter from Washington addressed to the Marine Committee. Washington warned that if the British raided Philadelphia he could not supply troops to save either the town or the ships anchored in the Delaware above Philadelphia. Morris immediately began making the necessary arrangements to have as many of the navy vessels as was possible fitted out for sea. Morris and the Navy Board worked all night. Due to their quick and brave action (for all anyone knew, the British could have descended upon Philadelphia at any hour), the frigate Randolph and the smaller ships Hornet, Security, and Fly were well on their way to sea by the next day. Morris also speeded up construction of the frigate Delaware, which was not quite ready to sail. He loaded that ship and several

47 Journals, VI, 1027. 48 Ibid.
private merchantmen anchored in Philadelphia harbor with
government tobacco, which had been stored in warehouses, and
prepared them for quick flight should British troops appear.
He also had the frigates Washington and Effingham, both of
which were not yet remotely ready for sea, towed further up
the river from Philadelphia. 49

While dealing with immediate naval problems, Morris
found himself having to handle all the other executive
affairs that Congress had abandoned in its flight to Baltimore.
Morris chose to stay in Philadelphia and attend to these
affairs.

I have so many complaints and see so much con-
fusion from other quarters that I am obliged to
advise in things not committed to me. Circum-
stanced as our affairs now are I conceive it
better to take Liberty's and assume some
powers

than to let the General Interest suffer. 50

On the same day that Morris wrote this letter to Hancock,
the President of Congress, the continental sloop Independence
arrived in Philadelphia with badly-needed army supplies. Al-
though the supplies were consigned to the Secret Committee of
Correspondence, Morris immediately sent them to Washington's
army. A few days later he informed Congress of this

49. Robert Morris to the President of Congress, December 14,
1776, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, 3 vols., Item 137,
Papers of Continental Congress, III, appendix [n.p.].

50. Robert Morris to the President of Congress, December 16,
1776, ibid.
unauthorized action and apologized for it.\textsuperscript{51} Congress was far from disgruntled with his actions; it instructed Morris to establish an executive committee in Philadelphia to continue caring for Continental business. This committee, known as The Philadelphia Committee, or the Executive Committee in future correspondence, was to consist of Morris as chairman and two other members, John Walton and George Clymer. Walton and Clymer were also Pennsylvania members of Congress.\textsuperscript{52}

Despite his vast duties, Morris found time to attend to Navy affairs closely. As soon as a Continental Navy ship would arrive in Philadelphia with a cargo from the West Indies, he would have it unloaded and sent back either to the West Indies for another cargo or to Boston, a safe port. In the last week in December, when a British fleet blockaded the mouth of the Delaware, he began planning the best course to take in order to save the Continental ships in the harbor and get them out to sea.\textsuperscript{53}

In his administration of naval affairs outside of the Philadelphia area, Morris cooperated closely with the Marine

\textsuperscript{51}Robert Morris to the President of Congress, December 21, 1776, ibid.

\textsuperscript{52}John Hancock to Robert Morris, December 23, 1776, Letters of John Hancock and Miscellaneous Papers, Item 58, Papers of Continental Congress [n.p.].

\textsuperscript{53}Robert Morris to the President of Congress, January 30, 1776, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, III, appendix [n.p.].
Committee, which was now meeting in Baltimore. In the orders he sent to ships outside of his own immediate area, he carefully instructed the receivers that his orders should be disregarded if they were contradicted by orders directly from the Marine Committee.\(^5\) For its part, the Marine Committee always sent its orders to vessels outside the immediate Baltimore area through Morris.\(^5\)

Morris did more than simply convey messages between the Marine Committee and the subordinate navy offices and vessels. After gaining permission from the Marine Committee in February, Morris ordered John Paul Jones to take several of the ships of the navy on a concerted raid into the Caribbean. The orders injected something quite new into naval operations—aggressive strategy. Morris included in these orders the reasoning behind them.

> It has long been clear to me that our Infant fleet cannot protect our own coasts and that the only effectual relief it can afford us is to attack the enemies' defenceless places and thereby oblige them to station more of their ships in their own countries, or to keep them employed in following ours, and either way we are relieved.

Jones was ordered first to raid the island of St. Kitts, then the British port at Pensacola. Finally, Jones was to proceed to the mouth of the Mississippi and raid British shipping

---

\(^5\)Outletters, I, 68-69.  
\(^5\)Ibid., pp. 59-88.
there. Whatever prizes he took were to be sent to prize agents in the southern states, because "the Southern colonies wish to see part of their navy." 56

How different this plan was from the plans usually proposed by the Marine Committee. Several ships were to be put under the command of an aggressive leader and sent to raid the British in a distant part of the British Empire. But for the lack of such spirited planning, the Continental Navy might have waged effective war at sea. 57

Morris and the Executive Committee acted as administrative executive until the first weeks in March. Sometime between March 4, when Congress adjourned from Baltimore, and March 12, when it reassembled in Philadelphia, they relinquished their duties. 58 The service that Morris had rendered both to the navy and to the nation as a whole was inestimable. Congress might have re-established administration in Baltimore, but in the confusion that doubtless would have resulted, much time would have been lost. More important, administrative

56 Ibid., pp. 65-71.

57 The operation Morris proposed never came about because of administrative confusion. The orders to Commodore Hopkins to release his fleet to Jones did not reach Hopkins until February 28, by which time he had sent most of the units under his command on short missions. Esek Hopkins to Robert Morris, February 28, 1776, Letters of John Hancock and Miscellaneous Papers, Item 58, Papers of Continental Congress.

affairs might have become hopelessly entangled while left unattended through the winter.

Certainly as far as naval administration is concerned, Morris did a highly effective job. The transport of the first supplies from the Independence could well have been a vital operation. The direction of naval units to new operations or other ports, as well as the general assumption of administrative duties for the navy that Morris undertook, kept the navy in operation. Because the navy achieved no startling successes during this period, the effect of Morris' direction can be underestimated. Nevertheless, he provided an example of how administration should function.

Morris never received any official thanks from Congress for his work in Philadelphia, but it did not go unnoticed. In April, 1777, when Hancock announced his intention of resigning from the presidency of Congress, the post was offered to Morris, whose wife related the story to her mother.

Mr. Hancock intends to resign his seat in Congress. They mean to have complimented Mr. Morris with the presidency, but he told the gentlemen who informed him he could not serve, as it would interfere with his private business.59

Such an excuse sounds strange for a patriot, but it must be admitted that Morris was first and always a businessman. In

59 Mary White Morris to Mary White, April 1, 1777, quoted in part in Charles Henry Hart, "Mary White--Mrs. Robert Morris," Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography, II (1882), 157-158.
that day, when the republic was hardly nascent, it probably seemed provident to him to tend his own fortune before hazarding government service, which tended to be thankless and financially unrewarding.

Although Morris turned down the presidency of Congress, he remained an important member of Congress for at least one more year. In the spring of 1778 he took a leave of absence to attend to personal business matters. He returned to Congress for a while that fall, but resigned from that body permanently before the beginning of 1779. During this later period Morris' name does not appear with the same frequency as previously in Marine Committee affairs, but he remained active in naval affairs. A friend of John Paul Jones wrote to that naval commander in November, 1778:

"They have raised the frigates the Washington and the Effingham, scuttled in the winter of 1777-1778 but God knows when they will be Repaired. They have no carpenters no Ships Shipwrights? nor nothing dowing but what Mr. Morris does. ... Mr. Morris has left the Marion and everything is going to the devial as fast can. ..."

---

60. Ver Steeg, Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier, pp. 28-29.

CHAPTER III

MARINE COMMITTEE ADMINISTRATION CONTINUES,
1777-1779

In mid-December, 1776, Robert Morris had warned that "no man living can attend the daily deliberations of Congress and do executive parts of business at the same time." His warning, like the previous criticisms of the Marine Committee's inefficiency, went unheeded. When Congress returned from Baltimore in the spring of 1777, it did nothing to reorganize any of the executive bodies. The Marine Committee returned to Philadelphia to remain at the head of the Marine Department for almost three more years. The committee did bring an initial vigor back with it, but it continued to fail to comprehend the navy's limited capabilities. It continued to plan missions poorly. Consequently, while the Continental Navy reached its highest level of activity within the next three years, the successes it gained could not offset what it lost; by the end of that period its strength was markedly declined.

1 Robert Morris to the President of Congress, December 16, 1776, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, III, appendix.
Congress did make one significant change in naval administration: it created a navy board to oversee naval affairs in New England. This new navy board was badly needed. New England had always been the main area of Continental Navy activity and the United States Navy Board, stationed in Philadelphia, was too far away from the New England states to oversee subordinate naval activity efficiently. The fact that the board in Philadelphia was too far away to handle affairs in the northeastern states was illustrated dramatically in the spring of 1777, when problems that had been developing there finally came to a head. A violent quarrel erupted between Captain John Manley, commander of the frigate, Hancock, and Captain Thomas McNeil, commander of the frigate Boston. At this time both ships were preparing to sail together from Boston but the quarrel made cooperation between them impossible. In Providence, Rhode Island, Continental Navy vessels were having tremendous trouble enlisting sufficient seamen to man their ships. Nearly all the navy captains were furious at the various Continental Agents, whom they believed were too slow in disbursing prize money to the crews and in outfitting their ships. James Warren wrote of the many problems the Navy faced in New England.

The Hancock, Boston, Alfred, and Cabot are all in yesterday, but they remain here in Boston yet. I fear the consequences of their going out single . . . but McNeil and Manley it is said like the Jews and the Samaritans will have no connections or intercourse; they will not sail together. I
believe McNeil is near ready for sea. I am told that he and agent Cushing had had a breeze; but I am not acquainted with the particulars or how it terminated. I have still a worse account of the situation of your frigates at Providence. I don't know the officers but understand ... that they are not agreeable to the people and never can man their ships.²

Warren concluded that Congress must do something about the situation of naval affairs in New England and suggested the creation of a navy board. "You must fall on some new plan for conducting your Naval affairs at a distance from you. . . . Perhaps . . . establish a Board."³

Late in the spring several of the navy captains, including John Paul Jones, McNeil, and Manley, lost all patience with some of the continental agents and publicly charged them with dishonesty.⁴ The situation finally became too much for Congress. In May, on a motion by John Adams, Congress resolved to create a "Board of assistants" for the New England area.⁵

The structure and functions of the new board were very similar to those of the navy board in Philadelphia. It was to be officially known as the Navy Board, Eastern Department.

³ Ibid., p. 306.
⁵ Journals, VII, 281.
to sit at Boston, and to consist of three members. Congress felt that the principle of geographical representation ought to be adhered to in choosing the three commissioners. Hence, it chose them from different states in the New England area. The duties of the Boston board, as it came to be known, were similar to those of the board in Philadelphia, which henceforth bore the designation "middle board." The Boston board was to supervise all construction committees and continental agencies in the New England area. Further, it was to direct the distribution of continental funds to the agencies and committees and see to the construction of arsenals and magazines throughout New England. This board, however, soon came to have more duties than did the middle board. In July, 1777, it received from the Marine Committee temporary power to direct continental navy cruises emanating from its area.

We authorize you to send them [naval ships] out . . . as fast as they can be got ready, directing the Commanders to such Latitudes as you shall think there will be the greatest chance of success. . . . We shall leave the judge of the time for which each vessel is to cruise to you.

Although the Boston board was accorded more power than its sister board in Philadelphia, Congress continued to treat the two as equal. In December it gave both boards the right

---

6 Ibid., p. 331.  
7 Ibid., p. 281.  
8 Outletters, I, 152-153.
to suspend naval officers. In January, 1778, both were given the duty of keeping records of all naval officers stationed in or living under their respective jurisdictions. In the summer of 1778 both were given the right to institute boards of inquiry. Thus, although each of the boards came about as a result of existing circumstances, rather than conscientious planning, and although there was not any thought of establishing a board system when either board was created, the creation of the Boston board nevertheless effectively put the navy under a three-tiered administrative system. At the highest level of marine administration was the Marine Committee; at the middle level were the two boards; and at the local level were the continental agencies and the construction committees. Ideally, decisions emanated from the Marine Committee, were transmitted to the pertinent board, and were finally carried out by the agencies or passed on to the ships.

The addition of the Boston board to the navy's administrative structure, however, did not solve all the problems that the navy faced. The board was able to expedite the outfitting and maintenance of naval vessels in its area, and it

---

9 Journals, IX, 1066-1067. 10 Ibid., X, 173.

11 Ibid., p. 189.

was able to handle many essentially administrative problems that heretofore had impeded operations, but it could not solve the major problems of the navy. The navy still was opposed by the British navy, an enemy of immense size. The American navy was still very small and very poor; it was still limited in the number and size of missions that it could undertake. Moreover, the Marine Committee was still its executive; that organ remained basically insufficient to its tasks.

The Marine Committee reassumed control of naval administration in March, 1777. In the first week of April it ordered several ships, including the frigates Delaware, Raleigh, and Randolph, and the smaller ships Alfred, Providence, Fly, and Columbus, on prize cruises. The orders to these vessels left the choice of course up to the individual captains—with one reservation: each ship was to spend two weeks cruising the sea lanes leading to New York.13

By stipulating that these ships make short patrols on the New York sea lanes, the committee recognized certain strategic possibilities. New York was the principal British base in the colonies and the disruption of its supply lines could well affect the course of the war. By asking only for short patrols, the Marine Committee gave the ship commanders

---

13 Outletters, I, 94-100.
a helpful degree of freedom; if the cruisers would not find prizes within that time, they still would have enough provisions to cruise in other, more profitable areas. These orders, however, revealed one weakness: they all were orders for single ship prize cruises. Too often this type of cruise proved to be fatal.

Late in April the Marine Committee demonstrated an advance in its conception of naval strategy. It planned a large, concerted expedition to intercept the British sugar fleet. The committee knew that the annual British West Indian sugar harvest was sent to England in a single, escorted convoy in midsummer. Further, the committee knew that the men-of-war chosen to escort the convoy were always those that were too nearly worn-out for further fleet duty and that they were invariably undermanned. Knowledge of these factors as well as recognition that "the Continental Navy was still in its Infancy and a few Brilliant Strokes in this era would give it a Credit and importance" made the committee determine to intercept the sugar fleet.\(^\text{14}\) Orders were sent to the Randolph, Alfred, Surprise, and Fly to rendezvous at the island of Abacoa in the Caribbean by July 23, and form a joint expedition under command of the senior captain present. On their way south these ships were to inform other

\(^{14}\)Ibid., p. 119.
Continental Navy ships which they met of the expedition.\textsuperscript{15}

To handle the large number of prizes that it expected the expedition to capture, the Marine Committee appointed John Dupuy, a merchant at Mole-Saint-Nicolas, Haiti, to be Continental Agent in that place and instructed him to take charge of all prizes that should come into his port.\textsuperscript{16}

Throughout the spring of 1777, the committee attempted to dispatch all the other Continental ships on either single or joint cruises. It authorized the Boston and the Hancock to be outfitted by Boston merchants and make a short cruise in Massachusetts Bay on behalf of these merchants. The bay was infested with British privateers who terrorized American commerce there. The Committee had been unable to obtain funds to outfit these ships itself.\textsuperscript{17}

The Marine Committee continued planning more aggressive naval operations into the summer. In June it gave John Paul Jones command of the sloop Ranger and ordered him to sail for France and conduct cruises there pursuant to orders from the Paris commissioners.\textsuperscript{18} The Raleigh and the Alfred received similar orders.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., pp. 117-123. \textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p. 124.
\textsuperscript{17}Sidney C. Morse, "The Fleet," The American Neptune, V (1945), 177-193. This article tells the whole story of the venture.
\textsuperscript{18}Outletters, I, 143-144. \textsuperscript{19}Ibid., p. 176.
Most of the committee's planning of operations in the first half of 1777 went for naught. The expedition to intercept the sugar fleet never materialized. The funds to fit out most of the ships to be used apparently were not available. The Hancock was captured by a British naval squadron a few days after the Boston parted company with her. The Raleigh did not receive cannon until after midsummer and thus was unable to cruise until after that time. The Randolph captured several prizes off the coast of the Carolinas but was dis-masted in a September storm. If the other ships ordered on missions in the early summer had any success, it is not recorded.\(^{20}\)

The ships ordered to Europe fared little better than those in American waters. Operations in European waters in 1776 were left to the direction of the Paris commissioners. Until the fall of 1777, when the Raleigh and the Alfred arrived in a French port, no American fighting vessels had visited Europe. Benjamin Franklin, who handled the Commissioners' naval duties at that time, felt that it was too soon to commence depredatory operations upon British shipping from French ports; France was not yet so favorable toward the war as to countenance such operations. Franklin therefore ordered the two vessels to return to American waters by

way of a cruise off the coast of Africa. While on this voyage, the two ships ran upon a well-escorted British convoy and the Alfred was captured.21

Although the Ranger had been ordered to France before the Raleigh and the Alfred, a lack of funds prevented her from reaching France until December. Franklin, apparently reversing his earlier feelings, allowed this ship to stay in European waters. Jones spent several months overhauling the Ranger and then, in the spring of 1778, made a voyage into the Irish Sea. Besides attacking British shipping, he made raids upon British coastal towns. This cruise, especially the coastal raids, terrified the British populace.22 The entire operation was solely Jones' ideas, but it was the Marine Committee's decision to send him to Europe that made it feasible. Therefore, the Marine Committee's direction of European operations did have some success.

Despite Jones' successful cruise, naval operations in 1777 yielded far too little in relation to the energies expended upon them. The Marine Committee must be held responsible to a large extent for these poor results; its orders revealed a lack of coordination. If it had not ordered the several short cruises in the early spring but

21 Ibid., p. 299.
22 Morison, John Paul Jones, pp. 156-157.
had concentrated all its efforts upon intercepting the sugar fleet, that excellent plan might not have failed. The coastal cruises, moreover, were at best a poor idea. British shipping normally travelled American waters only in convoy. Continental warships could search for days without finding prizes, and if there were any waters where British warships were in great numbers, it was in those off the American coasts. Luckily for the ships of the Continental Navy in 1777, they did not run into British naval vessels. Nevertheless, their patrols were largely wasted efforts.

The Continental Navy was never again to have quite the same opportunity to serve the war effort as it did in 1776. In the fall of 1777 it received a heavy blow; in September, the British army under General Howe captured Philadelphia. Coming both by land and sea, Howe's forces trapped several units of the Continental Navy in the Delaware River. All of these ships ultimately were destroyed. The Delaware was sunk while attempting to defend the city. The Continental Army burned the Andrea Doria, Surprise, and Fly, along with several merchant ships in Philadelphia harbor, when it retreated from that city. The unfinished frigates Washington and Effingham were towed upstream to Bordentown, New Jersey, then scuttled to prevent capture. These ships later were raised, only to be destroyed by a British raid in 1778.  

---

23 Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, I, 351.
The British Navy was very active along the middle American coast in late 1777 and early 1778. During this time the Congress and the Marine Committee were again in exile, this time in York, Pennsylvania, and very little attempt was made to direct American navy action. Continental vessels continued sailing along the coast, but too often they encountered superior British forces. The Randolph blew up unexpectedly in the midst of a naval engagement off the South Carolina coast. While trying to run a British blockade, the newly-constructed frigate Virginia went aground in the Chesapeake Bay and was captured. The Columbus ran aground off Rhode Island while trying to escape a British patrol. The frigates Warren and Providence managed to escape the blockades of their respective coasts, and the Warren captured one prize. 24 This was small success, however, in the face of the losses that the navy was experiencing.

In addition to suffering heavy ship losses in the early months of 1778, the navy also encountered increasingly serious financial problems. For example, the Boston board, which had jurisdiction over nearly all of the navy at this time, reported that it was impoverished. 25

The navy's financial problems were caused by the circumstances of the continental financial situation. The

continental government as a whole lacked funds. Adding to this basic problem was the tedious system of fund procurement and disbursement utilized by Congress. Congress set aside a part of its annual budget for the navy, but it released these funds only upon specific, itemized request, and each request had to be voted upon.\textsuperscript{26} Even after the navy had received a specific authorization it was by no means certain of getting money. Congress based its annual budget upon its estimates of what it would receive from the states; state contributions were always slow in coming in and always smaller than what had been requested. Doubtless this financial system was necessitated by the government's continued impoverishment and the length of time that was required to collect funds from the states, but whatever the reason, the navy suffered. For instance, in May, Warren wrote to Samuel Adams that the Boston board's continental warrants were worthless; the Continental Loan Offices in Massachusetts had yet to receive any money.\textsuperscript{27} Further adding to the navy's financial worries was the serious problem of inflation. In October Warren wrote that inflation was about to force the Boston board to suspend operations entirely. He fitfully complained:

\textsuperscript{26}Journals, VIII, 535, 714; IX, 898, 937; X, 240, 338; XI, 529, 589.

"the truth is the money fetches so little that I am sick with seeing Bills brought into this office."  

Even the entrance of France into the war added to the strain upon navy finances. As part of the benefit from the Franco-American alliance, Congress expected the French to send a fleet to American waters. It directed the Marine Committee, therefore, to arrange for logistic support of the French fleet when it arrived. Through the autumn of 1778 the committee worked ceaselessly toward this end. Ultimately, the expenses it amassed were to be paid by the French, but in the meantime the committee itself bore them.  

Partially because of its economic difficulties the Marine Committee ordered little action of the fleet in the last half of 1778. In September it ordered three ships, the frigates Deane and Raleigh, and the newly-acquired brig Resistance, to sweep the coast of Virginia of British privateers. Again the Continental vessels were ordered on their missions singly. The result of these orders was further loss for the American navy. A pursuing British squadron drove the Raleigh aground and captured her.  

---

29 Outletters, I, 261-290; II, 1-10.  
The navy did receive some reinforcement in 1778. After the conclusion of the Franco-American alliance, the Paris Commissioners managed to have built and fitted out two frigates for the Continental Navy, the Deane and the Queen of France. In the United States two frigates, the Confederacy and the Alliance, and one sloop-of-war, the General Gates, were launched and commissioned. Nevertheless, 1778 was not a good year for the American navy. Indeed, its fortunes during that year were so poor that several Congressmen objected to naval appropriations for the next year.

William Whipple wrote:

Our ships have been so unfortunate that many gentlemen . . . very reluctantly consent to the appropriation of money to that service; however there are those who think differently. . . . These different sentiments have a tendency to procrastinate matters which may be sometimes of great importance.

Despite congressional dissatisfaction and the misfortunes of the navy, the Marine Committee continued its basic strategy into the next year, 1779. Again it sent ships out on coastal patrols. This time, however, the ships had good luck. In March the committee ordered the Warren, Deane, Queen of France, and Ranger to cruise south from "Cape May

---

31Ibid., p. 285.  
32Ibid., II, 701, 702.  
33William Whipple to John Langdon, February 16, 1779, Letters of Members, IV, 72.
to the Charlestown bar" and clear that coast of British privateers. Before the middle of April, the Warren, Queen of France, and the Ranger returned to port with eight prizes between them.

These successes had a great impact upon Congress. The assembly at Philadelphia was so pleased that it voted extra money to the navy. William Whipple reported to John Langdon:

The successes of the Warren, Ranger, and Queen of France has given such credit to the Marine Committee that we have been able without any difficulty to obtain a grant of 500,000 dollars for use in the Eastern department which will be sent forward as soon as possible.

Through the summer of 1779, Continental Navy vessels repeatedly sailed on prize cruises, and prize after prize reached port safely. In one instance, the frigates Providence and Queen of France, and the sloop Ranger met in the waters off New York and then came upon a British convoy of over 150 merchant ships. This convoy was the 1779 British "sugar fleet." The convoy was so huge and so poorly guarded that the cruisers were able to sail within it for days, all the while capturing merchantmen. The cruisers finally broke

---

34 Outletters, II, 47-49.


37 Outletters, II, 66-87.
contact with the convoy when they could no longer make up prize crews to take prizes into port. Eight of their prizes, collectively worth over one million dollars, reached port. 38

Although the successes of the navy put that service in a favorable position relative to money and vessels, the Marine Committee failed to attempt any offensive operations. The committee saw its way clear to commit ships to only one offensive operation—and that one was not of its own making.

In the summer of 1779 Massachusetts authorities gathered together a militia expedition to raid a newly-established British base on Penobscot Bay, in what is now Maine. Upon application from those authorities, the Committee furnished the frigate Warren, the sloop Providence, and the newly-acquired brig Diligence for the expedition. 39 The expedition ended in catastrophe. The commanders of the American land and sea forces quarreled among themselves and protracted the siege of the British post too long. Every ship in the expedition, including the continental vessels, was caught in the bay when a British relief expedition arrived and broke the siege. 40

38Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, II, 385.
39Outletters, II, 66.
The losses in the Penobscot expedition notwithstanding, the Marine Committee should have planned offensive expeditions. That particular expedition ended in disaster because of poor leadership on the part of the militia generals and ship commanders involved. Its failure did not necessarily disprove the feasibility of offensive operations—especially offensive operations in waters outside the American war theater. Never again would the Continental Navy be as strong as it was during this period. Instead of organizing offensive operations, the Marine Committee continued committing its ships to defensive operations. In late 1779 it sent four ships, the frigates Providence, Boston, and Queen of France and the sloop Ranger, back to the South Carolina coast. These orders were issued in response to the continuous pleas of the Congressmen of South Carolina, who had declared that the Continental Navy had been showing favoritism to the New England states. It is unfortunate that such pressure was allowed to determine naval operations, and the fact that these particular orders were issued is especially regrettable. None of the four vessels assigned to the southern waters was

41 Ibid.

42 Henry Laurens to the President of South Carolina, January 31, 1779, Letters of Members, IV, 50-51; Henry Laurens to John Laurens, September 21, 1779, ibid., pp. 428-429.
to return. In February, 1780, the squadron was trapped in Charlestown harbor by British forces besieging the city. 43

In late fall of 1779 the Marine Committee, on its own recommendation, was dissolved by Congress, and the Board of Admiralty was instituted in its place. In view of the success that the navy vessels had been having up to that time, the change of naval executive came as a surprise. The navy had had a particularly successful year as far as prize captures were concerned, and, as far as Congress knew at that time, its ship losses had been low.

The change came because of factors other than ship operations. The committee system had fallen into disfavor of members of Congress. Henry Laurens once described the incessant committee meetings that he, as well as all other members of Congress, had to attend as "an unavoidable drudgery." Many in Congress felt as he did. 44

The Marine Committee met three times a week, at eight o'clock in the evening. 45 Meetings had to be scheduled at this hour because of the duties of members to other committees. Besides the direction of ship operations, the Marine Committee

44 Henry Laurens to James Duane, April 7, 1778, Letters of Members, IV, 155.
45 Diary of John Fell, ibid., IV, 90, 93, 103, 104, 105, 108, 114, 118, 124.
had other and more tedious duties. It handled the navy's requests, including those for funds from Congress. This was an onerous duty because, as mentioned before, Congress allotted funds to the navy only as they were specifically requested. The committee also acted as receiving office for the numerous requests and petitions concerning naval affairs that came through Congress. Meetings invariably were poorly attended. As early as June, 1777, Congress allowed the committee to consider five members to be a quorum. Even so, the committee was forced, at times, to adjourn for lack of a quorum.

By spring of 1778 Congress recognized the necessity for changing the form of the navy's executive. But, as Josiah Bartlett explained, the continental assembly was too caught up in immediate business to consider any specific reformation of naval administration.

As to Marine Affairs, Congress are very sensible that very essential alterations are necessary and seem determined to attend to it, as soon as the confederation and some other very important problems are finished.

In the spring of 1779, Congress began measures to reform the naval executive. At that time Congress contained men who

46 Journals, VII, 312, 352, 361; VIII, 3-4, 385, 386, 387, 407.
47 Ibid., VIII, 424.
49 Josiah Bartlett to William Shipple, June 20, 1778, ibid., IV, 308.
felt that a firmer, more efficient national government was needed. These men were not averse to letting executive affairs be handled outside of Congress. On June 9, John Dickenson moved "that the management of all business relating to the marine of the United States be vested in commissioners." Congress appointed a committee consisting of Dickenson, William Whipple, and John Collins to prepare the plans for this reform. Nothing came of this action. As late as October 1 the committee had not made any reports or suggestions. John Jay had blamed the previous congressional reticence toward executive department reform on the Lee family; he charged that the Lees opposed reform because it would remove them and their allies from positions of influence. Two members of the marine reform committee, however, were outspoken reform advocates, Dickenson and Whipple. It was simple inertia, not any cabal, that impeded administrative reform.

50 Jennings B. Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789 (Chapel Hill, 1935), pp. 4-5.

51 Journals, XIV, 508.

52 John Jay to George Washington, April 26, 1779, Letters of Members, IV, 167-177.

53 Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments of Continental Congress, p. 49.
On October 1 Congress discharged the committee and directed the Marine Committee itself to "prepare and report a plan of regulations for conducting the naval affairs of the United States." Approximately three weeks later the committee brought in its report. It suggested that Congress establish a "Board of Admiralty" consisting of three non-Congressional members and two Congressional members to "superintend the naval and marine affairs of these United States." Congress approved this report and created the Admiralty Board as suggested.

An assessment of the Marine Committee must conclude that it was only a mediocre administrative body. It never showed the proper interest or capability to handle naval affairs. It too often committed Continental vessels to dangerous coastal operations. Later investigations by the Board of Admiralty (to be discussed in the next chapter) showed that the committee had been lax in its supervision of subordinate administrative units. It cannot be shown, however, that the committee's faults were the results of the character of its members. The main weakness of the committee lay in its structure; Congressional delegates had too much to do to direct naval affairs properly.

54 Journals, XV, 1133.
55 Ibid., pp. 1204, 1216, 1218.
CHAPTER IV

BOARD OF ADMIRALTY ADMINISTRATION,

1779-1781

One reason that the Board of Admiralty and other, similar executive boards were created was to relieve Congress of the burden of executive administration. It would be in order, therefore, to comment on their success in doing such. In the first months of 1780 Eldbridge Gerry wrote to John Adams that:

Since the Treasury, Admiralty, and Court of Appeals have been put into Commission, Congress have not been troubled much with their respective Concerns and for several Days past have adjourned, before the usual Time for a want of business.1

In this letter Gerry made no comment concerning the effect of the Admiralty Board upon the navy. Nevertheless, his comment does suggest that the Admiralty Board was a success as far as its effect upon Congress was concerned. The Board's success with naval problems was almost a different problem entirely, and the Board cannot be judged without examination of its administration of naval affairs.

---

1 Eldbridge Gerry to John Adams, May 5, 1780, Letters of Members, V, 126.
Congress gave the Board of Admiralty complete control of the navy. In its resolution of October 28, 1779, Congress commissioned the board "to superintend the naval and marine affairs of these United States," to keep records of all stores and supplies in the marine department, and to make annual reports to Congress. Further, the Board of Admiralty was to "form proper plans for better regulating the Navy and its offices." It was to sit in Philadelphia and be directly responsible to Congress. The board was to consist of five commissioners, only two of which were to be Congressmen; the other three were to be chosen by Congress from outside of that body. No two commissioners were to be from the same state.  

It took more than a month for Congress to choose the first commissioners. Congress determined that each section, New England, the Middle Atlantic states, and the South, should be represented on the board.  

On November 26, John Waring of South Carolina and William Whipple of New Hampshire were appointed to two of the non-Congressional posts. A few days later George Bryant of Pennsylvania received appointment to the third lay position. The first two Congressional members were then elected: William Floyd of New York and

---

2 Journals, XV, 1216-1218.

3 The President of Congress to Thomas Waring, November 29, 1779, Letters of Members, IV, 528.
James Forbes of Maryland. These initial appointments, however, did not stand. Bryant declined his appointment; Congress then appointed Francis Lewis of New York to take his place. This appointment occasioned further change in Board membership; Lewis and Congressman Floyd both were from New York. Congress ruled Floyd ineligible for the board and chose William Ellery of Rhode Island in his place. When Ellery accepted his appointment, the board finally had a quorum of members in Philadelphia, Lewis being there before his appointment, and it held its first meeting some time in the second week of December.

The board was never able to muster more than a bare quorum. Waring and Whipple both turned down their appointments. Because of their distances from Philadelphia (Waring was in South Carolina and Whipple was in New Hampshire) Congress did not receive word of their decisions until March. There is no record of Congress appointing any other non-Congressional commissioners. On at least two occasions, it is recorded that due to the absences of the Congressional commissioners, no meetings of the Admiralty Board had been

4 Journals, XV, 1319, 1330, 1339.
5 Ibid., pp. 1340, 1360, 1365, 1366.
possible for two or three weeks. Throughout its tenure, the Admiralty Board lacked an identifiable leader. None of the commissioners ever distinguished themselves in naval administration, as Morris had done for a period during the committee period. Lewis was elected chairman and served in that capacity throughout the board's active period. **Doubtless he played the major role in its actions, but existing records do not justify crediting him with outstanding influence.**

From its first day in office the Admiralty Board showed itself to be competent in administrative matters; it immediately began organizing the internal resources of the navy. In its first official message, to the Boston navy board, it asked that board for an inventory of all its district's supplies, prize goods, and funds. This attempt to inventory led almost directly to a reorganization of subordinate administration.

The Boston board and the Continental Agents of the eastern naval district had handled the bulk of the prize and

---

8 Board of Admiralty to Congress, November [n.d.], 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, 1776-1781, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, pp. 337-338; Board of Admiralty to Congress, May [n.d.], 1781, ibid., p. 503.

9 Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments of Continental Congress, pp. 42-50.

10 Outletters, II, 137-138.
prize goods sales of the previous year, but the board reported itself to be virtually bankrupt. Its money had gone toward fitting out later voyages of Continental ships, construction and supplying units of the French fleet. The Boston board reported that the records of several of the Continental Agents, moreover, were in great confusion.\textsuperscript{11}

Obviously, in the absence of pressure from the Marine Committee, the subordinate units of naval administration had allowed their own records to fall into confusion. The Admiralty Board took steps to correct this situation.

In February of 1780, the Board of Admiralty appointed two auditors, William Demming and John Brown, to make complete inspections of the financial situations of the continental agencies.\textsuperscript{12} The auditors' investigations continued through the first half of 1780 and exposed much irregularity as well as inefficiency. Two Pennsylvania-based agents, identified simply as Nixon and Nesbitt, refused to show their books to the auditors.\textsuperscript{13} Three Virginia-based

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{11}Report of the Naval Board, Eastern Department, January 7, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, 1776-1781, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 215. Evidently French payments for their supplies came only later.
\item \textsuperscript{12}Journals, XVI, 142.
\item \textsuperscript{13}Memo to Congress, August 14, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 291.
\end{itemize}
agents identified only as Eewas, Smith, and Allen, the Admiralty Board believed, were responsible for thefts from their own warehouses. Agent John Bradford in Massachusetts was never able to give a clear accounting of his records.

In the late summer of 1780, the Board of Admiralty initiated action in regard to the discoveries of the investigations. In August it asked Congress to relieve Dixon and Nesbitt of their duties. Congress complied. In September the Admiralty Board requested the removal of the Navy Board, Middle District, based in Philadelphia. The Admiralty Board explained to Congress that the middle board had very few duties and that it itself could perform them. Congress again complied. Later in September the Admiralty Board requested and received the removal of Agent Bradford. The request does not mention why Bradford's relief was desired, but good reasons did exist. Bradford was agent in Boston, where the Navy Board, Eastern District, was also based. Also, Bradford kept poor records. Congress assented to this request, and Bradford's duties were given to the Boston board. These reforms were practical and did remove some inefficiency and potential sources of waste. Had they been effected

---

16 Journals, XVII, 744. 17 Ibid., XVIII, 823.
18 Ibid., pp. 838-839.
sooner, perhaps the navy would not have been as destitute as it was at that time.

Throughout the period of investigation and reorganization of subordinate naval administration, the Admiralty Board also was aware of the financial problems of the navy. Because of the lack of surviving records, it is impossible to reconstruct the complete story of the Admiralty's search for funds, but there is enough evidence to indicate that the board did make extensive attempts to find money.

The one large source of money within the marine department itself was the unsold prize goods still in the hands of the Continental agents. The initial confusion in administration made complete utilization of these funds impossible, but the Admiralty Board did what it could. In early spring of 1780 it announced to the continental agencies that it was taking over the disposition of funds and the sale of prize goods: heretofore the agencies had handled these matters independently.\(^\text{19}\) Throughout the spring the board attempted to trace down all funds and prize goods which were in the hands of the various agents. This was a complicated job because at the time the auditors had not yet finished their inspections of agency records.\(^\text{19}\)

\(^{19}\) *Journals*, XVI, 142.

\(^{20}\) *Outletters*, II, 199-214, et passim.
The Admiralty Board also made efforts to save or gain money for the navy through other methods. In February, agent Bradford was directed to ship his prize goods from Boston to Philadelphia. Boston, the most popular prize port in the United States, was glutted with prizes, and the Admiralty Board estimated that prize goods might bring twice their Boston price in Philadelphia. In January, 1780, all inactive officers were dropped from naval paylists. This was not as slight a measure as it might seem. In the winter of 1776-1777 there had been twenty-seven vessels in Continental service; by early 1780 there were only eight in commission.

Despite such measures, the navy faced poverty constantly throughout the Admiralty Board's administration. In November, 1780, it had to petition Congress for funds to pay a harbor pilot for bringing a French frigate into Philadelphia harbor. In February, 1781, the board reported the navy to be 802,000 dollars (continental) in debt.

The Continental Congress was less than helpful to the naval administration in its search for money; on some occasions

---

21 Ibid., pp. 182-183.  
22 Journals, XVI, 86.  
24 Memo of the Board of Admiralty, February 7, 1781, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 355.  
25 Journals, XIX, 7-8.
Congress actually impeded that search. In April, 1780, and then again in August, Congress directed the funds resulting from the sale of Agent Bradford's prize goods to be given to the Continental Army. In 1781 it twice directed that armament from the America be used for various harbor fortifications in Rhode Island. Also, the direct aid which Congress gave the navy was insufficient. The largest grant which it made to the navy during 1780 was 700,000 dollars. The cost of repairing the Confederacy, which had been dismasted in a storm, alone was 965,000 dollars.

In the fall of 1780 Congress attempted to give the navy a permanent source of income, but the attempt failed because of its lack of power. On August 22, 1780, Robert Livingston of New York proposed that a two and one-half per cent tax be levied on all prizes and prize goods brought into the United States. Proceeds from this tax were to go directly to the navy. Congress approved this support and incorporated it into the Impost Act of 1781. This act, however, failed to become law. By fall, 1782, it had been ratified by all

26 Ibid., XVII, 470-471, 719. 27 Ibid., XX, 463, 481.
28 Ibid., XVII, 670. Total money given to the Navy that year was 985,000 dollars; ibid., XVIII, 1221.
29 Board of Admiralty to Congress, July 21, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 273.
30 Journals, XVII, 758-759.
states except Rhode Island. Then, Virginia repealed her ratification of it. According to the articles of Confederation, it had to be ratified by all the states. Thus the attempt by Congress to provide permanent income for the navy failed.

By the end of summer, 1781, the Board of Admiralty had exhausted all its funds. Even though it suspended construction, the board found it could not support operations. It finally turned to Robert Morris, then Superintendent of Finance, for financial aid. This appeal preceded the collapse of the Board of Admiralty by only a few weeks. In view of this ignominious end, it should be reiterated that the Admiralty Board did well to sustain naval operations as long as it did. It had to contend with many difficulties in the area of finances: the constant indebtedness of the navy, the lack of aid from Congress, and confusion and outright corruption in subordinate administration. Final frustration of its efforts was inevitable.

The Admiralty did demonstrate a capacity for administrative work in areas other than naval finance. Through the


32 Diary [of Robert Morris], reel I of Papers of Robert Morris; 1776-1820, I, 6; Report of the Committee [for inspecting the state of the America], Reports of Various Committees, Item 28, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 145.
course of its tenure it was assigned, or volunteered for, other tasks beyond those dealing strictly with the navy. Its work at these tasks was also to its credit.

The first extra duty that the admiralty took on was the establishment and maintenance of a packet service between the United States and Europe. Packets were ships used to carry official dispatches between a nation and its emissaries. By 1780 the United States had emissaries in three European nations and, in the opinion of the board, definitely needed its own packet service. On February 1, 1780, the admiralty commissioners announced to Congress their intention of establishing such a service. Information concerning this service and its history, however, is limited. Two ships, the brigs Mercury and Active, were purchased for packet duty. In addition to service as government messengers, these ships occasionally served as supply vessels and patrolled the Delaware Bay for short periods.

On April 27, 1780, Congress assigned to the Admiralty Board the power to issue letters of marque. Previously this duty had been handled by the Secretary of Congress, but by

34 Board of Admiralty to the President of Congress, February 1, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 237.

35 Board of Admiralty to the President of Congress, December 19, 1780, ibid., p. 451; Outletters, I, 212.
1780 it was too large a task for him.\footnote{36} The Admiralty Board took this duty seriously. In the fall it revised the form of the letters. The previous form did not provide for a description of the ship it was issued to or its captain. Consequently, if a privateer were captured, its commission could be used by the enemy. This problem was compounded by the fact that many privateers were only weak merchant vessels. Letters of marque were issued to any ship owner who wanted one, regardless of the strength of his vessel.\footnote{37} In November the Admiralty Board stipulated that henceforth the letters would contain a description of the privateer and its captain.\footnote{38}

In one instance the Board of Admiralty was able to use its control over privateers to help the navy. Privateers seriously impeded the navy's recruiting of seamen. Because of the shortage of able-bodied seamen, Continental Navy vessels often were forced to take on inexperienced landsmen, and sometimes even British prisoners of war, in order to fill their crews.\footnote{39} Late in the spring of 1780, the Admiralty

\footnote{36 Congressional Resolution, April 27, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 225.}

\footnote{37 Comte de la Luzerne to the President of Congress [n.d.], Wharton, Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution, IV, III.}

\footnote{38 Instructions to Privaters, November 9, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, 1776-1781, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 531.}

\footnote{39 Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, II, 546-549.}
Board issued instructions to privateers that at least one-third of each privateer's crew had to be landsmen. It is not possible to estimate how closely this regulation was enforced, but it was a good attempt to ameliorate a poor situation.

In July, 1780, the Admiralty Board assumed yet another task of some importance when it volunteered to draw up permanent prize regulations. Originally the Court of Appeals was assigned this duty but, by the fourth full year of the war, it had not acted. The Admiralty Board, however, was faithful to this task. In April, 1781, it presented the new prize regulations to Congress.

Unfortunately for the future of the Continental Navy, the Board of Admiralty did not show a capacity for strategic direction of naval operations complementary to its capacity for handling purely administrative matters. Like its predecessor, the Marine Committee, it showed, in its direction of ship operations, very little understanding of the limitations or capacities of the Continental Navy. Like its predecessor

40 Instructions to Privateers [n.d.], Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, 1776-1781, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 237; see also, Journals, XVII, XIX, 363.

41 Ibid., XVII, 661-662; Board of Admiralty to Congress, July 24, 1780, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, pp. 277-278.

42 Ibid., XIX, 361-365.
it mainly ordered short, coastal cruises of an ultimately defensive nature: anti-privateer patrols, escort missions, and short prize cruises. As was the case with the Marine Committee, the Admiralty Board made a major mistake in ordering such cruises. Until midsummer, 1781, the Continental Navy possessed at least four cruisers (three frigates and one sloop-of-war) and therefore was still capable of joint operations. Moreover, the British Navy was unable to provide protection for all the Empire and its trade. 43 There is no record that the commissioners of the Admiralty Board ever considered any strategy to take advantage of the British Navy's weakness. As a result of its adherence to defensive strategy, its fine work in the area of finances and supply was wasted; the navy continued to decline in strength from the beginning of the Admiralty Board's tenure.

Almost immediately after the Board of Admiralty assumed control, the navy suffered a disaster which was mainly due to the same strategy which the Admiralty itself later pursued. In February, 1780, the British laid siege and blockade to Charlestown and trapped in that harbor the squadron of Continental ships that the Marine Committee had sent south. The Marine Committee must bear the responsibility for sending the squadron to the dangerous Southern waters, and the commander of the squadron, Commodore Whipple, must bear some of

the responsibility for not withdrawing his ships from the harbor; he knew of the threatened invasion for some time before it actually came. The Admiralty Board also must bear some of the guilt; it had been in office for over two months before the British invested Charlestown—plenty of time to order the ships out of southern waters or on offensive missions. The Board of Admiralty failed to learn anything from this disaster; it continued to order coastal missions.

Through the spring of 1780 the Admiralty made plans for a joint cruise of all the remaining ships of the navy along the American coast. In April, it issued orders for the Saratoga, Deane, and Trumbull to cruise the southern waters together. When recruiting and financial difficulties made this joint cruise impossible, the commissioners ordered the Trumbull to sail alone. The initial plan at least had the redeeming feature of calling for a joint cruise, while the decision to send the Trumbull out alone was a definite mistake. Before the Continental frigate had a chance to get further south than the coast of Delaware, it encountered the British privateer Watt. A fierce battle between the vessels ensued, and both were so badly damaged that they had to

\[\text{Ibid., II, 487-488.}\]  
\[\text{Ibid., p. 499.}\]  
\[\text{Outletters, II, 282.}\]
return to port. Sending the Trumbull out alone wasted a mission.

In midsummer, 1780, Congress made important intervention into naval affairs. It ordered the ships of the Continental Navy placed under the control of George Washington. This was done in order to expedite the Continental Navy's cooperation with the French fleet, which Congress and the General expected any week. Washington intended that the vessels should act as a scouting and liaison squadron with the French fleet. This assignment of the navy's vessels to Washington's command for him to use in conjunction with Franco-American military plans was a wise move on the part of Congress. Unfortunately the French fleet did not arrive that summer and participate in any military campaigns. One half of it was blockaded in Rhode Island harbors, and the other half was not able to sail from France until the end of the summer. Finally, in August, when it was obvious that the French fleet would not arrive, Washington relinquished control of the navy vessels.

When the Board of Admiralty resumed its control of the Continental Navy, it also resumed its old, disastrous strategy. Throughout the fall it ordered navy vessels on short coastal

47 Board of Admiralty to General Washington, August 11, 1780, Reports of the Marine Committee and the Board of Admiralty, Item 37, Papers of Continental Congress, p. 315; Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, II, 507-508.

48 Journals, XVII, 665.
cruises. The results of these cruises was only disappointment. The Trumbull and the Deane cruised off the South Carolina coast for weeks but captured no prizes. The Saratoga spent her time further north and captured four prizes, but all were recaptured before they reached prize port. The Confederacy was sent to the West Indies for a cargo of military supplies and was not able to take prizes on either the trip there or back. 49

Refusing to be daunted by the poor results of the operations in 1780, the Board of Admiralty continued its same basic strategy in 1781. In the first half of the new year, all the cruisers were sent to sea. The Alliance was sent to France on a diplomatic mission. The Confederacy, and, later in the year, the Trumbull were sent to the West Indies. The Deane and the Saratoga were sent on separate prize cruises. The results of these missions was disaster for the navy. The Confederacy was captured in the spring while escorting a convoy back from the East Indies. The convoy it escorted escaped capture, but this was poor consolation for the loss of that frigate. The Deane returned to Boston late in the spring empty-handed. The Saratoga disappeared at sea after escorting some merchant ships out of Delaware Bay.

The *Trumbull* was not able to sail until early August. It was dismasted in a storm its first night out of Philadelphia harbor and subsequently captured.\(^5^0\) By the end of August the Continental Navy's strength was reduced to two commissioned vessels, the *Alliance* and the *Deane*, and two ships still under construction, the *Bourbon* and the *America*. Moreover, by the end of the month the navy was also bankrupt. Both commissioned ships lay idle in Boston harbor, and work on the ships under construction was suspended for lack of funds. Congress was so unsure about ever being able to finance the construction that it seriously considered selling the two ships.\(^5^1\)

The disaster caused by the Admiralty Board's naval strategy helped bring about the final change in naval administration. For some time prior to summer, 1781, Congress had been desirous of instituting another naval executive in place of the Admiralty Board. The condition of the navy at that time provided the impetus for the contemplated reform.

The story of this last reorganization of naval administration is complicated, and it had little to do with the performance of the Admiralty Board. Ever since the beginning of 1779 there had been a growing conviction among certain of


\(^5^1\) Diary of Thomas Rodney, *Letters of Members*, VI, 144.
the American patriots that the war and independence could be won only by a strengthening of the institutions of the national government. By mid-1779 these reformers, many of whom were later to be identified as nationalists, were gaining large support in Congress. By 1780, they were strong enough and coherent enough in aims to begin planning the changes which they intended in continental government. Their primary objective at this time was to create executive organs which would be sufficiently independent of Congress to function efficiently. Primarily, the reform movement was a reaction to situations in departments other than the marine department. By 1780 both the Continental Army and continental finances were in desperate condition, and the respective executives, the Board of War and the Treasury Board, were responsible to a large extent for these conditions. The nationalists seemed not to have made any discursive study of the Board of Admiralty. Apparently they simply assumed that if the other executives needed reform so did the navy's.

The nationalists made their first significant step toward reform in August, 1780, when Congress resolved that

---

52 Sanders, The Evolution of the Executive Departments of Continental Congress, pp. 4-5.
a "committee for making changes in the executive departments" be formed. In the months following its creation, the committee experienced an almost complete changeover in membership, but it did not lose sight of its purpose. On February 7, 1781, it submitted a plan for reform of the executive departments.

The committee called for the creation of executive organs which would be more independent of Congress than any previous executive had been. Each executive department (the Departments were War, Finance, and Marine) was to be presided over by a single executive, a superintendent. These superintendents were to be chosen by Congress. They were to keep records of their operations and submit annual reports to Congress. The Superintendents of War and Marine were to be responsible to and dependent upon the Superintendent of Finance in all matters of finance. Congress accepted this plan.

In February, Congress chose the Superintendents of Finance and Marine. Robert Morris was chosen for the former office and General Alexander McDougall for the latter. General McDougall, however, declined his appointment. Congress

54 Journals, XVII, 740.
56 Journals, XIX, 126-127. 57 Ibid., p. 203.
refused him permission to keep his commission and field command in the army while serving as superintendent. The assembly at Philadelphia was unable to agree upon any other person for the Superintendency of Marine, and the Board of Admiralty continued to administer naval affairs through the summer.

In late summer Congress finally was forced to select a new navy executive. The initial impetus for this was provided by the resignation of the chairman of the Board of Admiralty, but the final impetus was the continued decline of the navy. In the first week of August Chairman Lewis resigned. With his resignation the Board lost its quorum, as well as its most active member, and thus lost its capacity to function. When Congress received letters concerning naval business that the Boston board had sent to the Admiralty, it created a temporary executive to handle them. It appointed a three-member committee to deal with these letters and other marine business. This provisional marine committee did more than handle marine business; it also took up the problem of instituting a new naval administration. In the first week of September it proposed a reorganization of naval administration on much simpler lines than was currently the case. All existing administration would be abolished when

---


59. Journals, XX, 756.

60. Journals, XXI, 913.
the new executive took over, he and a clerk would constitute the whole of naval administration. The executive himself would be termed an "agent" instead of a "superintendent." Congress, and not the agent, would be responsible for the deployment of Continental ships. The agent's duties would consist of primarily the supervision of supplies and the outfitting of ships. This proposed reconstruction of administration and demotion of the naval executive doubtless was a reaction to the decline in the navy's fortunes. Congress accepted the committee's plan.  

Although the provisional committee did not suggest a person to be appointed as Agent of Marine, Congress soon did. In the first week of September, following the loss of the frigate Trumbull, Congress appointed Robert Morris, the Superintendent of Finance, temporary Agent of Marine. Contemporary letters show that it was the loss of the Trumbull which prompted this appointment. The New York delegation reported to the Governor of New York:

Since our Arrival here the Plan for choosing an Agent instead of a Secretary Superintendent of Marine has been adopted, but the Number of our ships still decreasing by a recent Loss and being reduced to two we have transferred the Business at present to the Financier.  

61 Ibid., p. 919.  
62 Ibid., p. 943.  
Thus the final effect of the Board of Admiralty's disastrous strategy in its deployment of Continental Navy vessels was the evolution of a single-executive naval administration.

Despite the decline of the navy under its tenure, the final assessment of the Board of Admiralty must be that it was not wholly a bad executive for the navy. Originally it was organized to relieve Congress of the duty of naval administration. This the Admiralty Board did, and in the process it provided the navy with better administration than had the Marine Committee. The Admiralty Board instituted a badly-needed reorganization of subordinate naval administration. It not only readily dealt with problems of marine affairs but also took on additional responsibilities. The effects of its failure to deploy Continental ships properly, or to follow a proper strategy, were magnified by two conditions: the poverty of the United States and the overwhelming size of the British Navy.
There was little reason to hope that the new Agent of Marine, Robert Morris, could reverse the declining fortunes of the Continental Navy. Indeed, creation of the new administrative agency and appointment of its executive seemed to be further steps in the continuing deterioration of the Navy.

The Agency of Marine was not a true single-executive administrative organ. In creating the agency, Congress reserved to itself the important right to initiate ship operations.

RESOLVED, that an agent of marine be appointed with authority to direct, fit out, and employ the ships and vessels of war belonging to the United States according to such instructions as shall be received from Congress.¹

In addition to weakening the Agent of Marine, this reservation also directly boded ill for the fleet. Congress had proven all too well during the Marine Committee's tenure that it was unable to give proper attention to direction of ship operations.

Moreover there was reason to suspect that Morris would not prove to be a strong administrator. He was Superintendent

¹Journals, XXI, 319-929.
of Finance, and he regarded his obligations in that department as more important than his duties in the marine department. He warned Congress of his predisposition toward financial affairs when he accepted the position of Agent of Marine.  

If the new executive presented cause for worry about the future of the navy, the very state of that service was further reason for pessimism. By September, 1781, the American fleet consisted of only two frigates, and as the recent history of the navy had shown, two ships could quickly be lost. Equally serious was the worsening financial condition of the Continental Navy. Total suspension of both the construction and operations would have been necessary in the summer of 1781 had it not been for the aid of Morris, who was not then officially connected with the Navy or its administration. There was little hope that this financial situation would ever improve because the nation itself was too close to bankruptcy.  

The Continental Navy, however, did not succumb to its ills immediately after the Agency of Marine was instituted. Dissolution came only during the interim between Congress'  

---

2Morris to the President of Congress, September 9, 1781, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, I, 133-134.

3Burnett, The Continental Congress, Chapter 22.
recall of armed ships and the actual end of the war. In the remaining period of the war, the Continental Navy grew somewhat in size, and, more important, continued to contribute service to the war effort. Much of the credit for the navy's survival belongs to Morris. His predisposition toward financial affairs notwithstanding, he gave the navy a type of leadership and administrative sustenance which partially compensated for its lack of more material resources.

From the day that he was appointed to his position, Morris showed a concern for the navy and an earnest desire to solve its problems. He spent his first day in office discussing the problems of the navy with John Brown, then secretary to the outgoing Board of Admiralty. Brown was probably the most knowledgeable man concerning naval administrative affairs in the continental government. He had served as secretary to both the Board of Admiralty and the Marine Committee and had been one of the auditors appointed by the Board of Admiralty to examine the records of the Continental Agencies in February, 1780.

Agent Morris' first undertaking after he accepted office was to obtain control of ship operations from Congress. The assembly at Philadelphia traditionally was hesitant to

---

4 Diary, I, 54.
5 Sanders, Evolution of the Executive Departments of Continental Congress, pp. 43, 68; Journals, XVI, 424.
relinquish the powers which it held, but Morris was equal to the task. As described in the previous chapter, he had taken over the duty of fitting out the frigates for prize cruising before his official appointment as Agent of Marine. On September 10 he suggested to Congress that it would be of overall benefit to the nation if he were allowed to continue directing ship operations.

I gave directions for fitting the Alliance and Deane out and sending them on a cruise not knowing the Determinations which Congress might make and being convinced that while they lay in Port an useless Expençe must . . . be incurred. Should there be any particular Object in the Contemplation of Congress wherein to employ these Frigates or should they disapprove of . . . my Directions . . . I shall be happy to be favored with their Orders, and on the other hand if it is intended that I should employ these Ships from Time to Time as may to me appear most for the Public Interest I shall submit whether it might not be proper that such Intention . . . be explicitly declared.6

The continental assembly was well aware of the government's serious financial crisis. It had continually professed a desire for economy in the preceding months, and it could hardly reject this proposal to prevent wastage of money.

On September 15, Congress gave the Agent all that he had asked for.

RESOLVED, that the superintendent of finance be, and hereby is, authorized and directed to fit out and employ the ships of war of these United States

in such manner as shall appear to him best cal-
culated to promote the best interest of these
United States, and that all necessary expenses
... be defrayed by the United States. 7

Through the final years of the war, Congress left most execu-
tive control of naval affairs to its Agent of Marine. It made
only one request for a voyage; in October, 1781, it ordered
Morris to prepare the Alliance to transport General de la
Fayette to France. 8

In June, 1782, Congress created two committees to over-
see Morris' operations as Superintendent of Finance and Agent
of marine. These two committees existed as long as Morris
held the respective offices, although they were never given
formal names. 9 The committee for the marine department did
not interfere in the internal affairs of the navy to any
notable extent. The committee supervising Morris in his
capacity as Superintendent of Finance, however, made several
inspections of all of Morris' records, including those in
conjunction with marine affairs. 10 These inspections probably
were made at the insistence of Arthur Lee. Lee hated Morris

7 Journals, XXIII, 953. 8 Ibid., XXI, 1135.

9 Ibid., XXIII, 74; ibid., XXIV, 37, note, contains a
convenient list of all members of both committees. The
original members of the committee for marine affairs were
Samuel Wharton, David Howell, W. L. Gervais, Abner Nash, and
J. T. Gilman.

10 Diary, II, 170, 183, 341, 343, 357.
fiercely, and the inspections began in the spring of 1782, after Lee joined that committee.\textsuperscript{11}

The entire Lee-Adams clique had come to be bitter enemies of Morris during the middle years of the war. The original reason for their enmity was the fact that Morris had been a business partner of Silas Deane while Deane was commissioner to the Court at Paris. In early 1779, Henry Laurens, then closely associated with the Lees, accused Morris of using his position on the Secret Committee of Commerce to enrich the firm of Willing and Morris. Morris was able to clear himself of most of the specific charges, but due to the general confusion in the records of the Secret Committee, he was unable completely to exonerate himself.\textsuperscript{12} The Lees and their allies remained foes of Morris after this incident.\textsuperscript{13} That the several inspections of Morris' records never uncovered any important inconsistency no doubt irked Arthur Lee.

After gaining control of ship operations, Morris lost no time in ordering the navy's two remaining ships to sea.

\textsuperscript{11} \textit{Journals, XXI}, 357.

\textsuperscript{12} The best account of the quarrel between Morris and the Lees is in Ver Steeg, \textit{Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier}, pp. 22-27; "A Member of Congress to [n.n.] [n.d.], 1783, Letters of Members, VII, 156. This letter is attributed to Arthur Lee and is the best example of his hatred and suspicion toward Morris.

\textsuperscript{13} Ver Steeg, \textit{Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier}, pp. 22-27.
Less than a week after Congress gave him the right to direct ship operations, the agent ordered the Alliance and the Deane to make a joint prize cruise. The expedition was to be under the command of Captain John Barry of the Alliance. In his orders Morris stipulated that Barry had complete freedom to make decisions as to the course and the length of the cruise. These orders were changed only slightly by Congress' requisitioning of the Alliance; the Deane was to make its cruise alone, and the Alliance was to begin cruising after taking La Fayette to France. These orders set the tempo of Morris' naval strategy; he intended to continue promoting prize cruises. Whereas earlier executives had erred in ordering prize cruises, Morris was justified in so doing. By the fall of 1781, the Continental Navy was too small for any other type of operation.

Through the last years of the war, there was considerable pressure upon Morris to use the frigates on general escort missions and upon anti-privateer patrols. After their defeat at Yorktown, the British had increased their activity against American shipping. American merchants appealed to the central government for protection. Morris, although

---


16 Ver Steeg, Robert Morris: Revolutionary Financier, p. 114; Diary, II, 35, 37, 85.
himself a shipping magnate, resisted this pressure to use the frigates on these dangerous and essentially defensive missions. Instead, he sought naval protection from America's allies. In May he met with Comte de la Luzerne, the French minister, and requested that the French provide escorts for American shipping bound for the French West Indies. Luzerne agreed to this request and transmitted it to the French court, which also agreed. By August the French were escorting convoys to the Indies and also patrolling the middle coast of the United States.\(^{17}\) Morris also sent a request to the Spanish governor at Havana for escorts for American shipping entering and leaving that harbor, but the results of this request are not known.\(^{18}\)

Morris' search for allied escorts in the summer of 1782 was partially necessary because neither American frigate was in American waters at the time.\(^{19}\) Later, however, when the frigates returned to home waters, Morris ordered only one escort mission, and the nature of the ship and cargo involved in that mission made the escort mission necessary.

\(^{17}\) A Plan to Protect Commerce, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, I, 451-455; Diary, II, 74; Notebook of Charles Thompson, August 6, 1782, Letters of Members, VII, 427.

\(^{18}\) Diary, II, 74.

\(^{19}\) Allen, A Naval History of the American Revolution, II, 603-605.
In the fall of 1782 Morris had dispatched the *Duc de Lauzune*, a cargo vessel, to Havana to secure Mexican gold dollars to be used in the minting of Continental specie. The *Alliance* was ordered to escort the *Duc* back to the United States. 20 Considering the special nature of the *Duc*’s cargo, Morris was justified in risking the *Alliance* for her escort.

Morris' prize-cruising strategy did not change the course of the war. Each of the two frigates made two voyages. The *Alliance* captured no vessels on her first cruise, but on her second she captured seven. The *Deane* captured four vessels on her first voyage but none on her second, undertaken under the name of the *Hague*. 21 Two frigates were hardly a large enough force to strike a decisive blow at the merchant fleets of Great Britain. The frigates kept in action by this strategy, however, did cause some damage to the enemy and, moreover, were not captured because of it. But the prize-cruising strategy was not one of Morris' more significant administrative contributions, despite its suitability for the navy. It was actually only an extension of past strategy, and its only novel feature was Morris' determination not to deviate from it.


Morris devoted most of his energies in naval administration to fields more mundane than the planning of strategy. He concerned himself extensively with the various aspects of logistics and support of operations, organization of his administration, and encouragement of naval construction projects. His interest in these relatively unexciting areas of administration was indicative of his perception of the true scope of the task of the administrator.

Soon after he attained office, Morris established his administration and began work upon administrative problems of the navy. On September 19 he made the decision to retain John Brown as his secretary and also ordered Brown on a mission to Boston. The secretary was to make a complete inspection of the general conditions of the eastern naval district and examine the accounts of the now-disestablished navy board of that district. Brown also was to appoint a qualified person to serve as Deputy Agent of Marine for the Eastern district in replacement of the Boston navy board. Finally, he was to direct naval affairs in the eastern district until he found a deputy agent. Assignment of Brown to this mission removed him from immediate contact with Morris, but the agent made provision to keep in as close contact with his secretary as possible by hiring a messenger.

22 Diary, I, 65; Morris to John Brown, September 19, 1781, Letterbook A, pp. 385-388.
to ride continuously between Boston and Philadelphia. On October 10 Morris commissioned James Reed, ex-commissioner on the defunct Board of Admiralty, to inventory stores and supplies in the navy's middle district. Throughout this period, Morris also continued examination of navy records in Philadelphia. It should be noted that these surveys were not attempts to balance records or settle navy accounts, but rather to inventory what supplies and goods the navy had on hand. Morris did not initiate the task of settling naval accounts until mid-1783.

In addition to bringing order to naval logistics, the supply surveys also located some hitherto unused supplies and revealed some unfavorable situations. In Boston, Brown found that the navy board not only had no supplies or stores on hand but also that it had gone deeply into debt sustaining ship operations in its district during the past years. Brown received very little cooperation from ex-navy administrators in Boston and, moreover, was unable to find anyone qualified and willing to serve as deputy agent for the eastern district. Boston of course was the home of both of the Adamses, who were quite averse to Morris and who may

---

23 Diary, I, 169.  
24 Ibid., p. 79.  
have been responsible for the lack of cooperation. In Baltimore, Reed found a quantity of unused stores in a navy warehouse.

Morris ordered Reed and James Wharton, another ex-commissioner, to hold a public auction of these goods. Indicative of the firm control Morris intended to exercise over navy affairs was that this order for an auction was so detailed as to specify that the auctioneers should circulate agents in the crowd at the auction to make minimum bids upon the articles offered.²⁶

Morris himself discovered that the continental agent in Cape Francois, a Monsieur Bernard Sauvand, still had Continental prize money in his keeping. During the previous year, this merchant had disposed of several Continental prizes, but the Admiralty Board had been dissolved before it had a chance to collect the government's share of the prize money. Morris ordered this money applied to navy debts in the West Indies.²⁷ In neither the case of the Baltimore auction nor of the Hispaniola funds do surviving records mention the exact amounts of money involved. It is recorded only that Morris was able to pay officers and seamen of the navy three months' back wages out of the proceeds of the Baltimore auction.²⁸

²⁶Ibid., I, 37. ²⁷Ibid., p. 75. ²⁸Ibid., pp. 130-131.
Morris' strategy for supporting navy operations was to make every effort to see that navy funds and material resources were spent or used wisely. All ship commanders and agents were required to submit expense reports to Morris' office after their return from each mission. The agent also made use of subordinate professionals' knowledge to save money and to spend it wisely. Until well after the end of hostilities, Morris held conferences with his captains whenever possible. Matters discussed at these meetings ranged from the advisability of specific equipment purchases to speculation upon the general future of the navy. While there are no minutes of these meetings or mission reports in existing records, these innovations undoubtedly helped the situation. The Navy's desperate financial situation made any amount of money badly needed. Even with these innovations, as will be seen, the navy nearly ran out of money before the end of hostilities.

Morris worked diligently to alleviate the problem of manpower shortages. His attempts in this area were characterized by a readiness to spend money, which of course was necessary in order to attract men to Continental service. In the fall of 1781, when the Alliance and the Deane both

28 Ibid., II, 325.
experienced trouble filling their crews, Morris introduced a bounty system to their recruiting attempts. Under this system recruits received twenty dollars in Continental currency immediately upon their enlistment.\(^{31}\)

Morris also tried to safeguard the welfare of Continental sailors. As mentioned before, he used the proceeds from the Baltimore auction to pay Continental Navy officers and seamen to whom it was owed at least three months back pay. Two points are worth noting concerning this action. First, Morris could have applied these funds to payment of navy debts. Second, while Congress had proclaimed that three months back wages were due to troops in the army, extension of that principle to the seamen in the navy was Morris's own idea.

In the summer of 1782, Morris petitioned Congress to correct a fault which had arisen in the system by which navy personnel were paid. It had become the custom that the states in which the Continental ships were based would pay the wages of the crews, the money thus expended being counted as a part of the state's contribution to the central government. Morris complained that navy personnel disliked this system; they preferred Continental currency, which while not

steady in value had more worth than did most state currencies.\(^{32}\)

There is no record of Congress taking any action upon this complaint, but the fact that Morris presented it indicates that he was looking for ways in which to make Continental service more attractive to prospective recruits and already-enlisted sailors alike.

Equally as important to the future of the navy as its current operations was the expansion of the fleet. In the past, it had been expanded by two methods, purchase of ships and construction, but by the time of Morris' administration there was not enough money in continental coffers for the purchase of ships.\(^{33}\) In the fall of 1782 Morris did obtain the packet General Washington from the state of Pennsylvania, but not by purchase. Pennsylvania loaned the packet to the continental government for payment of its insurance and operating expenses.\(^{34}\) This packet, moreover, was used only for messenger service and can only be considered an indirect reinforcement to the Continental Navy. The only feasible means for adding ships to the navy was through continuance of construction efforts.

\(^{32}\) Journals, XXIII, 735.  
\(^{33}\) Diary, II, 176.  
\(^{34}\) Morris to the President of Congress, September 9, 1782, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, I, 749; Diary, I, 71-72.
Morris appreciated fully the importance of the construction of the Bourbon and the America to the United States. He believed that these ships could be completed and their strength added to the American fleet to make it approximately what Congress had intended it to be—a navy force of at least minimal effective size. When in the spring of 1782 it appeared that Congress was losing interest in the construction projects, Morris came to the defense of those projects.

There is a . . . degree of dignity in carrying through such measures as Congress once adopted. . . . The present circumstances of these United States should induce our attention to the establishment of a Naval force although the former attempts have proved unfortunate. . . . We must not take it for granted that its future essays will be unsuccessful . . . .

As in his support of naval operations, Morris determined to reduce construction costs as much as possible. Also as in his support of ship operations, Morris sought to accomplish this goal partly through dependence upon proficient subordinates. In February he appointed Captain James Nicholson to act as inspector to the Bourbon. This appointment emulated Congress' appointment of John Paul Jones to supervise the construction of the America, which had been made in the fall of the preceding year. Jones had proven to be a

---


36 Diary, I, 218.
very conscientious and capable supervisor; Morris doubtless hoped that Nicholson would prove to be the same.  

In the last week of April, Morris proposed to Congress a radical change in the mode of construction of the Bourbon. He asked that the project be put up for bids from private contractors, the lowest bidding contractor to finish that frigate's construction. Morris maintained that only in this manner could the nearly-completed frigate finally be completed. Congress complied with this request.

Throughout the rest of the spring and summer of 1782, Morris sought funds for the construction projects, but by the end of the summer he had exhausted all possible sources of money. Although the America was nearly ready for launching, the central government did not have the funds to continue work on either that ship or the Bourbon. In the last week of August, Morris proposed to Congress that the America be given to the French to replace a ship-of-the-line of equal size that had been lost off the Massachusetts coast in the summer. He explained that there was no hope of being able to afford to fit out the America, the largest ship ever

---

37 Morison, John Paul Jones, p. 326.
39 Diary, II, 125, 139, 156, 193, 203.
planned for the Continental Navy. On September 3, Congress consented to this proposal. With this decision, the last chance for a renaissance of the Continental Navy disappeared. The loss of this ship did not end the construction program entirely; work was resumed on the Bourbon in the following spring. But before that ship was launched, the Continental Navy had begun to disintegrate.

On March 13, 1783, Congress received a draft of the treaty to end the war. In the last week of the month Congress also received word that the French had ordered their army and navy to suspend hostilities. Accordingly, Congress ordered the recall of all American armed vessels. Cessation of hostilities and reception of the proposed treaty did not mean the end of the war, but the assembly at Philadelphia proceeded to act as if they did. It began to involve itself in internal and essentially post-war matters. One delegate recorded that by early fall the prime subject in Congress was the division of western lands among the states. Not

Notebook of Charles Thompson, August 24, 1782, Letters of Members, VI, 468, note; Journals, XXIII, 543.

Diary, II, 238.

Journals, XXIV, 210-211.

Burnett, Continental Congress, p. 563.

North Carolina Delegation to the Governor of North Carolina, October 22, 1782, Letters of Members, VI, 516.
only did the national assembly relegate external matters to secondary consideration, it also began to think of the national military institutions as being expendable.

To many in Congress and to many involved in the war effort in the states, the Continental military institutions were justifiable only in time of war. Because the war now seemed over, in the early spring of 1783, interest in the upkeep of the navy, and even the army, slackened into simple apathy or changed into a desire to demobilize these forces as rapidly as possible. One Congressional faction, which for this and related reasons can be called anti-nationalist, saw the military institutions as positive dangers to the freedom of the states. The Lee family, which regularly saw plots in central government, was at the center of this anti-nationalist faction.45

Through the waning months of the war there was also a movement in Congress to establish peacetime national military institutions. This movement was headed by a small group of men who would later lead the fight for a new federal constitution. Among its members were James Madison, James Wilson, and Alexander Hamilton.46 This nationalist faction was a

45 Jensen, The New Nation, pp. 63-74. While the Lees did make contributions to the Revolution, they consistently played a negative role in the last years of the war.

minority in Congress. In June, and again in October, 1783, its members presented a motion before the body at Philadelphia calling for the establishment of permanent military institutions. Both times Congress refused to approve the motion. Without Congressional support the navy was doomed to have no future. Before October, however, the actual physical disintegration of the fleet had begun.

In the spring of 1783 the navy's sources of financial support completely dried up. The French cessation of hostilities meant that the Continental government would receive no more foreign military aid; without this aid, naval operations were nearly impossible. Morris was forced to suspend all ship activities except for packet operations, and even the packet was reduced to operating with a skeleton crew.

At the same time Morris' measure to fund the national debt was refused by Congress. This defeat implied to him that the states would no longer continue the war effort, and he began decommissioning naval ships. On July 2 he asked

---

47 Journals, XXV, 732-745.
48 Robert Morris to the President of Congress, March 17, 1783, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, II, 301.
49 Diary, II, 345, 348, 380.
for and received congressional permission to put the Hague (ex-Deane) up for sale. On July 22 he requested permission to sell the Bourbon. The Bourbon had been launched and her fitting out begun, but Morris estimated that at least $20,000 more would be needed to get her ready for sea. Because this amount of money was not available and because there was little prospect of the war continuing, he asked that the frigate be sold. Congress agreed to all these requests. In August, Morris sent the Alliance on a voyage to the Netherlands with a cargo of tobacco, but the frigate sprang a leak just out of Philadelphia harbor and had to return. Although she was repaired, she never again sailed in Continental service. By October only the General Washington remained in service.

Also by October administrative operations in the marine were considerably reduced. In June Morris had given the task of straightening out navy records to a special auditor, Joseph Pennell. As mentioned before, Morris was the object

51 Journals, XXIV, 438.
53 Marine Office to the President of Congress, September 1, 1783, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, III, 746.
54 Morris to the President of Congress, June 19, 1783, Letterbook E, reel VII of Papers of Robert Morris: 1776-1829, p. 37.
of considerable suspicion on the part of a large faction of Congress; by letting an outside accountant settle records, he hoped to avoid suspicion. The agent’s main occupation in the following months was the processing of numerous petitions that deluged his office from those who had claims against the navy.55

In January, 1784, Congress finally ratified the treaty to end the war. The treaty was then sent to England by way of a merchant ship; the packet Washington, only recently arrived from Europe, could not be prepared for sea in time to transport it.56 After this dispatch of the ratified treaty, it was only a matter of time until the navy was completely abolished. On March 19 Morris suggested to Congress the discontinuation of the packet service and the sale of the Washington. He explained that the packet was in need of repair and would "neither answer the Purposes of a Packet much longer nor warrant an Expenditure ... which is now inconvenient." He suggested that the United States henceforth make use of French and English packets for all communications with American missions overseas.57 Realizing

---


that discontinuation of the packet service would end naval operations completely, Morris commented: "As to a Marine we must for the present give up the Idea.... Whenever the... Finances will permit, we can certainly build better ships than any we yet have had." Congress agreed to the decommissioning of the packet.

The Continental Navy was never officially dissolved. In November Morris resigned from his positions in government. Pennell continued audit of navy records into 1787. The Alliance was put under the care of the Board of Treasury (which replaced the office of Superintendent of Finance) and was not sold until mid-1783. Nevertheless, the Navy can be considered to have been disbanded with the decommissioning of the General Washington.

It is ironic that the Continental Navy should have dissolved while under the administration of the Agent of Marine. The Marine Agency, with Morris as Agent of Marine, was probably the best of the three administrative-executives which controlled the navy, although a thorough comparison

---

58 Ibid., p. 484.
60 Ibid., XXVII, 653; Morris to the President of Congress, November 7, 1784, Letters and Reports of Robert Morris, Item 137, Papers of Continental Congress, III, 753.
61 Journals, XXXII, 233-234.
62 Ibid., XXIX, 422.
between it and the two preceding administrations is impossible because of the rapidly changing situation. Before Morris accepted the position of Agent, and thus activated the Agency, the Navy was close to complete collapse; the fleet was at its smallest size ever; and neither construction nor operations were in progress. The contemporary executive office, the Board of Admiralty, was deserted. Almost immediately after the Marine Agency was activated, the Navy's condition began improving. Morris centralized all executive power in the office of Agent of Marine and helped to relieve the immediate financial crisis of the navy to some extent by consolidating and exploiting the still-existing sources of income within the navy. He revived naval construction and defended the concept of an American navy before Congress. Had Morris and his programs had sufficient time, undoubtedly they could have rebuilt the Continental Navy to at least squadron strength.
The navy's executive troubles began in Congress while the idea of a navy was being conceived. Congressional proponents of a navy never developed a clear idea of either the limitations or the potential of the proposed navy. They simply believed that the circumstances of war with Great Britain made a navy necessary, and as their resolution to rebellion matured, their determination to create a navy increased. The Continental Congress finally created a navy, but it never developed any real concept of strategy for its navy.

The first naval executive, the Marine Committee, inherited Congress's strategic lethargy and, in addition, developed an administrative lethargy of its own. It failed to supervise any of the navy's operations properly. It did not retain firm control over its subordinate agencies—the various boards, frigate committees, and continental agents. Consequently, some of these agencies also became lax while others became corrupt. The committee failed to handle many of the logistics problems that impeded ship construction, with the result that the Continental fleet did not grow as
rapidly as it might have. Finally, the committee failed to develop an effective operational strategy. Repeatedly it committed navy vessels to short patrols and single ship operations in American waters. These missions had the effect of disseminating the American navy in the very face of the British navy, which was also concentrated in American coastal waters. It would have been far better for the future of the navy had the committee directed its ships upon joint expeditions to parts of the British Empire outside of the American theater of war, or at least simply upon joint expeditions. Whether in the form of coastal raids or shipping raids, cruises in other parts of the Empire would have caused the British navy to spread its ships all over the Empire and thus largely away from American waters. Joint expeditions would have given Continental vessels at least the safety of numbers.

During only one period of the Marine Committee's administration was the navy provided with competent executive leadership. During the winter of 1776-1777, in anticipation of a British invasion, the committee fled to Baltimore with Congress. Robert Morris, a member of the committee stayed behind to attend to the welfare of Continental vessels left in Philadelphia harbor. Morris decided to remain in Philadelphia, where he not only acted as executive for the navy but also conducted business for Congress as well. He handled
local naval affairs with dispatch and efficiency. He tried to organize an expedition for units of the navy in New England, although Congress returned before much could be done concerning this proposed expedition.

Reason for the Marine Committee's failures can be found in the nature of its organization. It was a committee created by Congress out of its own membership. Thus, the primary responsibility of committee members was to Congress, not to the navy and its affairs. At best, naval affairs were of secondary interest to them; and this secondary interest was further diluted by their responsibilities to other committees. Moreover, committee members rarely had much knowledge concerning naval or marine affairs. They were chosen for the committee because of their representative capacity, not because of their skill or interest in marine affairs.

In the fall of 1779 the Marine Committee was disbanded and a new executive for the navy was created. This development occurred because Congress was exasperated with the committee style of executive.

The Board of Admiralty was the organ created to replace the Marine Committee. It was composed of five commissioners, only two of whom were Congressmen. This board was a far more simple unit than its predecessor, and from its first days in office it also demonstrated itself to be a better administrative and executive unit.
Almost as soon as it was instituted, the Board of Admiralty took steps to bring order to naval finances. When these steps disclosed the confusion and corruption existent in its subordinate units, the Admiralty Board also began investigation and reorganization of these subordinate units. While engaged in these operations the Admiralty also took on associated marine problems. It assumed the duty of issuing letters of marque from the Secretary of Congress. It drafted a new set of prize regulations to be followed by Continental Navy vessels and privateers alike. It instituted a packet service between the United States and Europe for Congress and the American foreign legations.

The Board of Admiralty made one serious mistake. Like its predecessor, it failed to give effective direction to ship operations. It continued the practice of letting Continental ships be wasted in minor operations and voyages of essentially little consequence. This continued exposure of the navy to unnecessary danger finally had fatal results. In August, 1781, the Continental Navy was reduced to two commissioned vessels, both of which were in harbors because of lack of funds.

The failure of the Board of Admiralty to direct ship operations effectively remains largely unexplained. Records of its activities, outside of its official orders, are virtually non-existent. One cannot avoid the conclusion that
inexperience on the part of its members was its basic weakness. None of them had been in any way connected with the British navy during the colonial days. Certainly the board was competent in all areas other than ship operations.

The Admiralty Board dissolved in mid-1781 when its chairman resigned. Congress replaced it with the Agency of Marine. This office consisted of a single officer, the Agent of Marine. Congress appointed Robert Morris to be Agent.

Morris probably could have revived the navy had he been given sufficient time. From his first operations in this office he showed an interest in and a capacity for naval affairs. He first won from Congress the right to direct ship operations. Congress had reserved to itself this right when it created this office. He initiated inventory operations within the navy in order to find any available sources of money. He defended the idea of a navy before Congress, which had grown skeptical that the Continental Navy could ever be revived. He resumed construction of naval vessels, which had ceased when the Board of Admiralty ran out of money in the spring of 1781. Throughout his tenure he constantly foiled the attempts of the Lee family to discredit himself and his operations. Unfortunately for the navy, time ran out for Morris. In early 1783, hostilities were suspended.
and Congress subsequently lost all interest in sustaining the war effort.

There were factors other than executive misdirection that contributed to the decline of the navy. The continental government was continually impoverished. The United States lacked the necessary industrial and technical base upon which to build the navy envisioned by Congress. These, however, were factors that had their main effect in limiting the size of the navy, not in preventing its operations. The fact thus remains that the decline of the navy was due in large part to the ineffectiveness of the first two naval executives.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Primary Sources

Unpublished Materials


Public Documents


U.S., Department of State, Revolutionary Diplomatic Correspondence of the United States, 6 volumes, edited by Francis Wharton, Washington, Government Printing Office, 1889.


Memoirs, Autobiographies, and Published Correspondence


Crayton, John, editor, The Memoirs of William Henry Drayton, 2 volumes, Peter Smith, Charleston, South Carolina, 1820.


Sherburne, Andrew, Memoirs of Andrew Sherburne, Utica, New York, William Williams, 1828.


Sparks, Jared, compiler, Diplomatic Correspondence of the American Revolution, 12 volumes, Hale, Gray, and Brown, 1829-1830.


Secondary Sources

Books


Morison, Samuel E., John Paul Jones, A Sailor's Biography, Boston, Little, Brown, and Company, 1939.


Articles


