

## ADMIRAL RICHARD G. COLBERT

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### Pioneer in Building Global Maritime Partnerships

*John B. Hattendorf*

Most people who serve in navies or devote their days to writing and thinking about naval power take almost for granted the concept that navies are an expression of national power and therefore, in modern terminology, reinforce nationalism. We have become almost hypnotized by the idea that there is a continuum from national policy to naval strategy and tactics. Indeed, that is one powerful thought that lies at the foundation of Alfred Thayer Mahan's writings and Sir Julian Corbett's analysis. Yet it is not the only way to view the matter. Mahan and William S. Sims in the U.S. Navy of the early twentieth century had

thought about possibilities for an Anglo-American maritime alliance. But there is an even older thought: the idea that there is an essential commonality among those who go down to the sea in ships. Richard Colbert has been one of a very few senior admirals in the U.S. Navy to champion this other view. At the first International Seapower Symposium, in 1969, an occasion that brought together for the first time many heads of free-world navies, Colbert outlined his own view:

The experience of this conference has strongly confirmed what all of us already knew by instinct and experience: that the common aspects of so many of the problems we each face in operating at sea creates a strong fraternal bond. This unites all of us in blue suits who share similar professional concerns.

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We recognize that there are political problems and interests which sometimes limit our co-operation. But it is equally clear that the broad interests of the world community we serve are enhanced by bringing our common perspective to bear on common problems. Much can be done on a Navy-to-Navy basis.<sup>1</sup>

An acquaintance of Colbert's in the Italian Navy defined the concept even more sharply when he wrote, "Probably the underlying philosophy lies in the *idea of considering navies of the world as a social system* to a degree separated or divorced from the states they defend."<sup>2</sup> In other words, it is possible to discern a kind of global brotherhood of naval officers, indoctrinated with a concept of international naval cooperation and nurtured by close, personal relations.

In a sense it seems an idealistic concept, founded on a belief in peace and friendship on a global scale that should be the basis for all human relations.<sup>3</sup> Yet at the same time, Colbert's notion can be viewed as a realistic, pragmatic strategy for the free world as the United States and its allies faced Soviet naval power.<sup>4</sup> As some of his contemporaries noted, Colbert was not a theoretician given to working out new concepts in abstract form, but once someone else had formed a concept, he was superb at developing it further and bringing it to fruition.<sup>5</sup> It is in this sense that Colbert was accurately described in an honorary degree citation as "Sailor-Statesman of the Navy, creator, innovator, educator."<sup>6</sup>

In the thirty-six years of his naval career, Colbert slowly but increasingly became interested in concepts and ideas relating to international naval cooperation. By the time of his death in 1973 he had reached the rank of full admiral and had truly earned the title that Admiral Elmo Zumwalt gave him: "Mr. International Navy."<sup>7</sup>

## EARLY CAREER

Colbert came from an unusual family background. He was born in Brownsville, Pennsylvania, on 12 February 1915, the son of Charles F. Colbert, Jr., and Mary Louis Benford Colbert. His father, a prominent leader in the coke, coal, and alloy business, was president of the Pittsburgh Metallurgical Company. Colbert attended Shady Side Academy, an established college preparatory school in Pittsburgh. During his years there he developed a passionate desire to become a naval officer, despite his father's fond hope that he would join the family business. Young Colbert decided to test out his desire and, with his father's help, obtained a berth on board the steamship *Robert Luckenbach* for the summer of 1931, on a voyage from New York to Seattle and back via the Panama Canal. It was an eventful trip that gave Colbert the experience of a hurricane and of hard work at sea. At the end of it, having firmly established his love for ships and the sea, the sixteen-year-old boy wrote in his diary, "I can honestly say I have never enjoyed a summer as much as this one."<sup>8</sup>

After proving himself at sea, the next hurdle was to obtain an appointment to the Naval Academy following his graduation from school in June 1933. It was no easy task. Starting more than a year in advance, his father began writing letters to friends, business associates, local politicians, and his congressman asking their help. Disappointingly, they all replied that no appointments were available that had not already been promised to other, equally good candidates.<sup>9</sup> Finally, in desperation, a friend of the family and the chancellor of Syracuse University, Charles W. Flint, wrote to President-elect Franklin D. Roosevelt asking his assistance. Roosevelt gave Flint the formula that eventually won the boy his commission.

“The only chance for young Colbert,” Roosevelt wrote, “is to find some other Congressman or Senator who has a vacancy and who would be willing to have him move into the district or state in which the vacancy exists for the purpose of establishing a residence there, even though it be a temporary one.”<sup>10</sup> In the end, Colbert did not have to look too far afield. Congressman Harry A. Estrep of Pennsylvania’s Thirty-fifth District appointed Colbert to the U.S. Naval Academy in the class of 1937. This early incident is illuminating because it reveals the Colbert family’s ease in approaching influential people, a skill that Richard Colbert often used later in life.

Colbert was a Naval Academy midshipman from 1933 to 1937; his class started with 440 and graduated 331. On graduation, he stood only 247 in the class. He was neither a great scholar nor an athlete, but he clearly stood out as a leader and as someone well trained in the social graces. He commanded the 3rd Battalion of midshipmen in the first third of his senior year and again for the final third of the year, when the best and most successful leaders of the class were chosen. Throughout his academy years he was busy in extracurricular activities, particularly social ones. On one occasion during the Midshipman’s Practice Cruise in 1936, Colbert was selected from among the other midshipmen on board the flagship USS *Arkansas* to receive distinguished civilian guests. “I seem to be getting a name for being a Majordomo,” he wrote to his father.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, he served on the hop committee and the Christmas card committee, was codirector of the musical clubs show, and finally, served as chairman of the most important social event of his four years at Annapolis, the Ring Dance.<sup>12</sup> Those experiences and social training helped Colbert develop his approach and style, so important later in his life.

While social events were prominent, one can find even in his midshipman days the first traces of his interest in foreign affairs.<sup>13</sup> He reflected this in a speech he prepared for the academy’s public-speaking group, the Quarterdeck Society, in January 1935. The prizewinning speech, entitled “The War Peril,” reflected for the first time Colbert’s appreciation of foreign opinion. In his speech, he

declared that there was one great overwhelming fear in Europe, the fear of a war that, no matter where it started, would spread and destroy the Western world. “America cannot afford to be indifferent to this universal opinion of Europe,” Colbert concluded.<sup>14</sup> It was a thought that echoed throughout his career.

Upon graduation from Annapolis in June 1937, Colbert went to his first sea assignment, the commissioning crew of the new aircraft carrier USS *Yorktown*. In 1939, he was reassigned, this time to the Asiatic Fleet, where he received orders to the flush-deck four-piper USS *Barker*. Colbert served in *Barker* for five years, rising from junior ensign to lieutenant commander and commanding officer. The ship saw duty in Southeast Asian and Australian waters as well as escort duty in the Atlantic and as part of the carrier USS *Core*’s successful hunter-killer group. His years in *Barker* brought him the first experience of cooperation with other navies. In early 1942, *Barker* was one of the ships in ABDA-FLOAT (American-British-Dutch-Australian), the Allied naval command under Admiral Thomas C. Hart, USN, and later under Vice-Admiral C. E. L. Helfrich, Royal Netherlands Navy. *Barker* served in the striking force along with British, Dutch, and Australian ships in the unsuccessful attempts to intercept the Japanese invasion fleet off Bali and Bangka Island in February 1942. The experience of those actions impressed Colbert, who was then the ship’s communications officer. Despite the current view of historians who see the Java Sea campaign as a mismanaged affair, Colbert often discussed with his colleagues how relatively smoothly he believed the ship-to-ship communications between ships of different navies had functioned in that critical situation.<sup>15</sup>

Despite the defeat of the ABDA command, Colbert’s memory of his experience stayed with him and convinced him not only of the practicality of multinational forces but also of the real advantage that multinational arrangements had for securing the seas. Looking back in 1966, he argued against those who wished to replace NATO with a series of bilateral treaties, saying that such treaties had not worked in “slow-motion” wars such as the Second World War. They could not be responsive to the complex, fast-moving events that could lead to nuclear war. Thinking of the events leading up to the Second World War naval engagements in the Dutch East Indies, Colbert commented that those were “desperate times, and I saw this lesson first hand. It was a bitter lesson.”<sup>16</sup> Through that experience, Colbert came to believe that there was greater potential for success through the combined efforts of many nations than through following only the individual interests of single nations.

From *Barker*, Colbert went on to command the destroyer *Meade* in both the Atlantic and the Pacific, remaining in command until the end of the war. Promoted to commander, Colbert was assigned after the war to the Bureau of Naval Personnel, where he worked on plans for the postwar naval reserve. During that

period, he also served as a social aide in the Truman White House. He kept up his interest in foreign affairs through membership in the United Nations Club, but in these years he had not settled down fully to concentrate on international issues.

#### MATURATION OF A CONCEPT

The real turning point in Colbert's career came in 1948, when he was selected as aide and flag secretary to Admiral Richard L. Conolly, USN, Commander in Chief, U.S. Naval Forces Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, based in London. Commenting on his new orders, Colbert told a friend, "Am not sure whether I like it or not. I guess I will find out."<sup>17</sup> He did like it, and Conolly's ideas and approach came to have a marked influence on Colbert.

Conolly was a superb negotiator, and Colbert accompanied him in meetings with naval leaders in most of the Western European and Mediterranean nations and learned much from the way Conolly handled problems and dealt with other leaders. One incident in particular seemed to summarize Conolly's approach and influenced Colbert's way of thinking. During a cruise in the Mediterranean on board his flagship in 1949, USS *Columbus*, Conolly arranged a tabletop war game in which he posed the problem of an allied naval command in the Mediterranean; it was one of the first steps in the arduous process of creating what would become the NATO Mediterranean naval command. In order to examine carefully the issue of whether the command headquarters should be afloat or ashore and what forces should participate, Conolly gathered senior officers from a number of countries. Each cooperated but clearly showed his national bias. Conolly finished the exercise without solutions but made all who participated feel that they were part of a team dealing with a common problem.<sup>18</sup> That was a theme basic to Richard Colbert's way of thinking.

By all accounts, Colbert's association with Conolly provided the basic insight upon which Colbert built his later work. At the same time, there was a parallel and personal development that helped to shape his international outlook further. At a New Year's ball in 1949, Colbert met Prudence Ann Robertson, daughter of E. J. Robertson, the managing director of Lord Beaverbrook's newspapers the London *Daily Express*, the *Evening Standard*, and two Scottish newspapers. A Canadian who had gone to live in London after the First World War, E. J. Robertson nurtured Colbert's instinctive feeling for international cooperation as the most viable means of achieving world peace, and Colbert returned his interest with admiration and devotion. At the end of Colbert's tour of duty in London, he and Prudence Robertson were married at St. Paul's Church, Knightsbridge. Throughout their married life, Colbert felt that England was his second home; at the same time, he learned

from his wife how to be sensitive to differences in points of view between Europeans and North Americans.<sup>19</sup>

### COLBERT IN WASHINGTON

Leaving England in December 1950, Colbert accompanied Admiral Conolly to his new position as President of the Naval War College, then Colbert moved on to his own new assignment in the political-military affairs division of the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations.

Shortly after Colbert's arrival, the division received a new director, Rear Admiral Bernard L. Austin. Colbert obviously liked the work in his new assignment under Austin, much of which was dealing with foreign issues and with people of other nationalities.<sup>20</sup> During this period Admiral Austin became concerned with the problem of providing instruction for naval officers from nations who wanted training in the United States. There had already been a move to put service education on a more systematized basis through the establishment of the NATO Defense College in Paris, but this was not sufficient to meet all the demand. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, there were many requests made to the U.S. Navy for use of its service schools, but no regularized arrangements had been made. In light of this, Austin directed Colbert to make a staff study of the best way in which a course could be developed for foreign naval officers.<sup>21</sup> This work was the seed from which much would grow later in Colbert's career.

While Colbert was at work on this and other projects, he came to the attention of Admiral Forrest Sherman, Chief of Naval Operations. Sherman selected Colbert to become his aide later in the year, undoubtedly on Admiral Conolly's recommendation. Before that could become a permanent assignment, however, Sherman needed Colbert as an experienced and knowledgeable aide on temporary assignment with him for overseas trips. One important assignment came in 1950–51, when Sherman was a member of an interallied committee negotiating how the new NATO military commands would be structured. After each negotiating session, Sherman would relax with his aides and unwind by discussing the events of the day. Through this method Sherman taught Colbert about national sensitivities and current issues as well as successful methods of international negotiation.<sup>22</sup>

In July 1951, another issue arose in which Admiral Sherman used Colbert's experience and expertise. Some years earlier, while with Admiral Conolly, Colbert had been closely involved in the staff work leading to the U.S. proposal for obtaining American naval-base rights in Spain. As early as 1948, Franco had said that he would make bases available, but President Truman and the National Security Council had initially rejected the proposal.<sup>23</sup> Despite qualms about associating their country with fascist Spain, Sherman and Conolly, among others,

believed that NATO's southern flank would be vulnerable without friendly bases in Spain. As the only member of the Joint Chiefs to take this view, Sherman went ahead, having finally persuaded Truman that it was an important strategic issue.<sup>24</sup> With Colbert at his side, Sherman traveled to Spain for talks with Franco, and afterward he filled in the details and the rationale behind all his agreements in discussion with his aide. Continuing on from Spain to Naples for further talks with European leaders, Admiral Sherman suddenly died of a heart attack before he could prepare any written reports of his conversations. Colbert was the U.S. naval officer with the most thorough knowledge of what Sherman and Franco had agreed upon, and thereby Colbert became a direct link in the chain that led to the U.S. Navy's use of Rota, Spain, as a naval base.<sup>25</sup>

#### COLBERT AT THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

Upon completion of his tour of duty in Washington, Commander Colbert reported to the heavy cruiser USS *Albany* as executive officer. During his two years on board, *Albany* served as flagship for Commander, Battleship-Cruiser Force, Atlantic, and was deployed to the Mediterranean. Colbert distinguished himself as an exceptionally capable administrator, a good shipmate;<sup>26</sup> as one of his commanding officers recalled, he was "the best executive officer any ship had had (or the good fortune to have)."<sup>27</sup>

Upon completion of his sea duty, Colbert had to choose between assignment as either head of an academic section at the Naval Academy or a student at the Naval War College. Seeking advice, Colbert wrote to his old boss, Admiral Conolly, who was by then retired. Conolly gave him sound advice that was to prove remarkably true. "In regard to the possibilities for duty," Conolly wrote, "I would say by all means take the Naval War College if you have the opportunity. . . . I have always considered it a turning point in a naval career."<sup>28</sup> In the autumn of 1955, Colbert reported to the Naval War College as a student in the naval warfare course. Recently promoted to captain, Colbert stayed on for two more years as a staff member.

The background for Colbert's new assignment stretched back to the early 1950s, when he had done his staff study on training foreign naval officers under Admiral Austin in the political-military affairs branch. In 1955–56, the President of the Naval War College was Vice Admiral Lynde McCormick, who had taken up the College presidency after having been the first Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic. In this role, McCormick had commanded several NATO exercises, including MAINBRACE, the largest allied peacetime exercise up to that time. These experiences taught McCormick the fundamental need for developing better understanding among NATO navies. His experience paralleled that of Admiral Arleigh Burke.

During 1955, Burke's first year as Chief of Naval Operations, he began to lay the groundwork for closer coordination between the United States and other NATO navies. At the same time, he saw the need for similar coordination with friendly navies in Asia, Africa, and throughout the Americas. In addition, he wanted to create a way in which naval officers from nations that had fought against the United States during the Second World War could shed their unspoken sense of inferiority following defeat and become full-fledged allies.

One of the options Burke saw was the chance to offer a year's study at the Naval War College, modeled upon the lines of the curriculum already in place for the first year of the naval warfare course. Burke made contact with the leaders of several allied navies, who were generally enthusiastic about this idea. By the spring of 1956, twenty-three navies had accepted Burke's invitation, with Admiral McCormick's full cooperation in implementing the course at the Naval War College.

At the time these plans were coming to fruition, Colbert was just finishing his first year as a student in the naval warfare course. When Burke selected Colbert to head up the new course, there was some jealousy on the part of others at the College. But Burke had full confidence in Colbert, having known him while he was in the political-military affairs division, where his office had been directly across the hall from Burke's.<sup>29</sup>

Colbert's first task was to choose a name for the course. He was firmly opposed to the idea of using the word "foreign" in the name, wanting instead to select a name that would reflect a positive and mutual goal. After about a month, he selected the name "Naval Command Course for Free World Naval Officers."<sup>30</sup>

The purpose of the course was multifaceted. Basically it was to prepare officers for higher command responsibilities within their own navies while at the same time familiarizing them with U.S. Navy doctrines, methods, and practices. But its purpose was much broader than that, as Professor August Miller reflected after his first year's experience under Colbert's direction:

At the Naval War College in an atmosphere of complete freedom of thought and expression, the foreign officers both symbolize and interpret their own navies and their countries not only to Americans but to each other; and on the basis of this free inquiry it can be readily recognized that such an open exchange of ideas will help to allow friendly nations to cooperate with one another in maximum efficiency in time of world stress.<sup>31</sup>

Colbert himself was well satisfied with the course and privately wrote to a friend, "All goes well—almost too smoothly. The capability of the students is far beyond our expectations—they really look like the 'future CNO's [Chiefs of Naval Operations] of the Free World' as Admiral Burke describes them."<sup>32</sup>

Colbert took great pains with the course, designing an appropriate curriculum and nurturing close personal contacts among the students. The social side of the course was an essential element, and the Colberts spent a large sum of their own money to ensure that all went well, not only with cocktail parties but also with flowers for sick family members or small farewell gifts. For all of this, Burke consistently gave Colbert full credit for the course's success. As he wrote to Colbert privately a decade later, "The idea was good, but a lot of good ideas come a cropper, and this one did not, because of you. You were the man who started it properly, who nursed it and nurtured it along the proper lines."<sup>33</sup>

Yet in this period, Colbert's ideas were very much in the process of development. The experience of being the director of the Naval Command Course for its first two classes very clearly became the foundation upon which his later career was built. At this stage, however, he did not seem to have a clear vision of what could practicably be done with the cooperation he was then nurturing.

#### EXPERIENCE IN INTERALLIED AND INTERAGENCY NAVAL ASSIGNMENTS

After three years at the Naval War College, Colbert left for Washington, where he was assigned to the staff of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in the Long Range Plans and Basic War Plans Branch. In 1960, Colbert became commanding officer of the Sixth Fleet's general stores ship USS *Altair*, based in Barcelona, Spain. This proved a formative and influential phase of his career, which reinforced some of his experience with the Naval Command Course. The ship spent much time at sea in support of the operations of the Sixth Fleet and in developing an early approach to vertical replenishment at sea by helicopter; Colbert's experimentation with this new idea was a major contribution to its use and led to its becoming standard for ships at sea. While engaged in these operations, Colbert was also intensely concerned with his ship's relationship to its home port and in developing cooperation with the Spanish Navy. This, he thought, was a key element in the alliance system.

When word reached him that the very small U.S. naval facility at Barcelona might be abolished and the fleet supported by a more "cost-effective," larger base, Colbert objected strongly. His reasoning reflected his growing belief in the importance of personal relationships across national and cultural boundaries. He pointed out to his superiors that it was important for the U.S. Navy's sailors and their families to develop close relationships with the peoples of the countries in which their bases were located, through an appreciation and recognition of their hosts' customs and ways of life. *Altair's* home port in Barcelona gave such an opportunity. "It would appear," Colbert wrote, "that every opportunity should be grasped by the U.S. Navy to establish and maintain more small

unobtrusive United States representation of this type in friendly countries, rather than closing them and concentration at installations which already are criticized as large and conspicuous overseas bases.”<sup>34</sup>

Colbert was selected for his major command while still in command of *Altair*. He had asked for assignment to “a cruiser out of Boston,” and the Bureau of Naval Personnel had obliged by giving him command of the guided-missile heavy cruiser USS *Boston*. Under Colbert’s command, *Boston* deployed to the Mediterranean and, for a brief period, served as the flagship for Commander, Sixth Fleet. Admiral David L. McDonald later recalled that “Colbert and his crew in the *Boston* went out of their way to make their ship a most outstanding Flagship.”<sup>35</sup>

It was while in command of *Boston* that Colbert decided he wanted to develop his experience further in political-military affairs. In 1962, Colbert became interested in the possibility of obtaining one of the two military billets on the State Department’s Policy Planning Council, then headed by Walt W. Rostow. The council had been established in 1947 by Secretary of State (and General) George C. Marshall to be a long-range planning and advisory staff whose task would be to analyze major foreign policy problems. Among its functional responsibilities the council was particularly charged with coordinating political-military policy and interagency planning.

Rostow wanted to fill his military billets with the best-qualified officers. Because he did not want to accept just any officer that the Department of Defense might assign, Rostow wanted to have a competition that would produce “real Rhodes Scholarship type of thinking.” During this search, Rostow interviewed Colbert in November 1962 and later received from him what Rostow described as “a very moving letter.” Rostow later recalled that Colbert wanted to have the experience that the Policy Planning Council assignment would give him, but Colbert was aware that the Navy’s personnel bureau did not think it was good for his career. However, Colbert persisted in applying, believing that military and naval officers needed to have a deep knowledge of the problems of diplomacy. In his letter to Rostow, Colbert remarked that at the Naval War College he had been closely involved with officers from other countries and that the experience had had a marked effect on his attitude. Above all, he wanted to build upon the sense of fraternity that he had experienced.<sup>36</sup>

In 1962, Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs Paul H. Nitze was particularly interested in getting high-caliber military and naval officers into other agencies of the government, particularly the State Department. A dozen years earlier, Nitze had headed the Policy Planning Council and knew well its importance and its role. The Navy had never sent an officer to the Policy Planning Council, but Nitze’s assistant, Captain Elmo R. Zumwalt, Jr., USN, shared Nitze’s view and also wanted to see the Navy increase its influence.

Both Zumwalt and Nitze believed that an assignment to the State Department would be career broadening. Colbert too shared this belief, but the detailing officers in the Bureau of Naval Personnel consistently told him that such an assignment would irreparably damage his career. Colbert's ability obviously impressed Rostow, while within the Department of Defense, Zumwalt as Nitze's aide "pulled the necessary levers" and got Colbert the assignment he wanted.<sup>37</sup>

Colbert's work ranged widely and deeply in foreign policy issues during his two years with the Policy Planning Council, including work on topics such as multilateral forces, Vietnam, the Inter-American Military Force, a U.S.-Australian squadron, and nuclear arrangements east of Suez in the face of a Chinese communist nuclear threat.<sup>38</sup> The Inter-American Military Force was an idea that specifically reflected Colbert's ideas; it was a subject on which he wrote a number of papers. Colbert had in mind a force that, though primarily naval, included army and air components. As he visualized it, the force would be of modest size, involving a few thousand people drawn from seven or eight countries in Latin America, with U.S. participation limited to no more than 15–20 percent of the total force. In Colbert's view "it would be important that the U.S. not be any more than just a partner in the project."<sup>39</sup> Colbert envisaged that its primary mission would be ocean surveillance and sea control, but it could also be a peacekeeping force, thus providing a place for the participation of armies. An important aspect of this force was its training; significantly, Colbert believed that it would be provided by the force itself at a base set up in some convenient place in Latin America. This would have an advantage in keeping the force's training independent of the United States and in limiting the number of officers who would be brought into the United States for training.<sup>40</sup>

In 1964, at the end of his State Department duty, Colbert began to be involved in developing the concept for the Multilateral Force, a concept that he believed might be attractive to NATO countries whose navies had surface ships but no aircraft carriers. Colbert believed it would form a much less costly alternative to American nuclear submarines, by placing Polaris missiles in merchant ships, manned by mixed NATO crews with joint responsibility among all NATO nations for nuclear deterrence. This proposal, which implied that the nuclear nations would delegate a certain amount of their sovereignty to an allied committee, was never implemented.

The idea of mixed manning was tried out, however. Colbert was one of the small group with Rostow that recommended to Secretary Nitze that the U.S. Navy demonstrate the feasibility of manning a single ship with officers and men from different nations. The short-term experiment was successfully carried out by the USS *Claude V. Ricketts* in 1964–65.<sup>41</sup>

Reflecting on their time together in the State Department, Colbert and his colleague Colonel Robert N. Ginsburg, USAF, wrote:

To participate in the work of the Council . . . can be an exhilarating experience for the military man who follows the path and precepts of George C. Marshall. For the Council's work is almost daily vindication of the dedicated military officers' unuttered creed. It is not, he knows, the man that is important, nor is it the idea, nor the military service or branch of government, nor the government itself. It is only the Republic and its perpetuation that really matter.<sup>42</sup>

While Colbert was off in the depths of the State Department, some of his fellow officers thought he had been forgotten by the Navy, but it was not so. In May 1964 he was one of five of his class selected for rear admiral. Also, to show the importance of his work, the Navy promoted him while still on the Policy Planning Council rather than waiting for him to assume his next naval command.

In June 1964, he reported as Commander, Cruiser-Destroyer Flotilla 6, based at Charleston, South Carolina. The fifty or so ships under his command gave him the responsibility, as one friend commented, equivalent to the commander in chief of a smaller navy. A year later, Colbert became deputy chief of staff and assistant chief of staff for policy, plans, and operations to the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic (SACLANT), Admiral Thomas H. Moorer.

Colbert's first assignment after he reported to SACLANT was to establish the Iberian-Atlantic Command. When Moorer became SACLANT in April 1965, he had pointed out that NATO had agreed several years before to establish a command covering the sea approaches to the Strait of Gibraltar but that neither the money nor the men necessary to carry this task out had been authorized. Moorer told the NATO Military Committee that he wished either to have the directive canceled or to receive the resources necessary to do the job. The committee agreed to provide what was needed, and this task, in turn, was given to Colbert. In short order, Colbert brought IBERLANT (Iberian-Atlantic Command) into being. In Moorer's words, "This action not only significantly enhanced the capability of NATO to deal with naval operations in the area, but also significantly increased the morale, prestige and overall interest of the Portuguese allies. I give Admiral Colbert all of the credit for this important move."<sup>43</sup>

Simultaneously, Colbert began to develop a proposal to create a Standing Naval Force, Atlantic. For three years NATO had run an operation called MATCHMAKER, in which ships of various allied navies joined in an exercise for a six-month period. In late November 1966, Colbert, as a result of a discussion with Admiral Moorer, prepared a concept paper that proposed a permanent MATCHMAKER force that could serve as a naval contingency force for the Allied Command, Atlantic.<sup>44</sup> In May 1967, the NATO Defense Committee agreed in

principle to establish a standing naval force, and this was approved in a ministerial meeting in December 1967. The force was activated in January 1968. In Colbert's view, this was only the beginning. He had already written that

with this as a prototype conceivably we can follow suit with similar forces in time in the Mediterranean, the Indian Ocean, the Western Pacific, and very importantly Latin America. As the Soviet Union continues to expand its sea power world wide, I can think of no more pragmatic and meaningful counter to their activities than the United States participating as partners with friendly countries in their various areas.<sup>45</sup>

In Colbert's mind, the crisis that led up to the June 1967 Arab-Israeli War would have been the ideal proving ground for a multinational standing naval force. "If a few of the maritime nations had formed a squadron of destroyers and contested the closure of the Gulf of Aquaba—perhaps by escorting an Israeli ship through—in support of the principle of freedom of the seas and Innocent Passage, the situation there might have been pacified and the Arab-Israeli war, such as it was, averted for a time or altogether."<sup>46</sup>

#### PRESIDENT OF THE NAVAL WAR COLLEGE

After the activation of the Standing Naval Force, Atlantic, and its first visit to the United States, in the spring of 1968, Colbert was unexpectedly selected to be President of the Naval War College. Promoted to vice admiral in a sudden jump over some ten of his classmates, Colbert was delighted to be returning to Newport. "It is a dream come true—a dream that I would never have mentioned to anyone, for fear of being precocious," he remarked.<sup>47</sup>

As President of the Naval War College Colbert made a remarkable imprint on the institution. He was largely responsible for implementing new plans to expand the scope of the College's academic programs as well as to improve its physical plant. Like other colleges, the Naval War College had several academic chairs named for distinguished naval men in specific subject areas. Colbert continued the policy of that time by inviting distinguished civilian academics to hold these positions for a short time. He also wanted to increase the number of academic areas they represented.

In particular, Colbert took special interest in two of the civilian academic chairs that had been proposed by his senior academic adviser, Professor Frederick H. Hartmann. Colbert's interest in these particular positions reflected his deep-seated appreciation for different cultural outlooks. First he brought to fruition the proposals to establish the Claude V. Ricketts Chair of Comparative Cultures. He appointed an anthropologist, John M. Roberts of Cornell University, to hold this chair in 1969–70.<sup>48</sup> Second, and for similar reasons, he supported an unsuccessful proposal to establish a chair in oriental studies. Explaining his

view, Colbert wrote, “There are some leading contemporary thinkers who believe that the twenty-first century will be the Asian Century.” With this increased awareness of the importance of the Far East in world power politics, economically, socially, and strategically, such a scholar “would be able to add perspective to every point on the Asian scene where we as a nation have been and remain very much involved.”<sup>49</sup>

Then, after expanding the civilian faculty, he and his staff established a number of military chairs that were designed to extend the concept of the civilian academic chairs and ensure that the best-qualified officers in each area of professional naval interest were brought to the College as instructors in those areas.

In developing the curriculum, Colbert continued along the lines of his predecessors, but he stressed the historical importance that the Naval War College had placed on international law since its founding in 1884. In the pages of the *Naval War College Review*, Colbert asked rhetorically, “Why should the Naval War College alone amongst service colleges, place such emphasis on the study of international law?” The answer was obvious to Colbert, for at sea, “international law is the only law.” But also, “the inter-relationship of legal, political, economic and social factors which are operative on a global scale and increasing significance of our international commitments require a clear understanding of the rules governing the relations between states.”<sup>50</sup>

In the specific area of international naval cooperation, Colbert took four major initiatives at the Naval War College. He established the first of several exchange visits between the presidents of the U.S. Naval War College and the Royal Naval College, Greenwich, supplemented by a week-long visit of forty U.S. Naval War College students to Greenwich in 1970.<sup>51</sup> Second, he proposed the establishment of a Naval Staff Course for middle-grade free-world naval officers, complementing the Naval Command Course but at a lower level and emphasizing the participation of smaller navies that did not have comparable educational facilities. Colbert particularly had in mind that this course would primarily develop the professional and managerial skills for the student officers to use in their own navies, emphasizing the naval decision-making process, naval planning, and the broad understanding of the roles of sea power. At the same time, it could familiarize the students with the methods, practices, and doctrines of the U.S. Navy while developing an international bond among the graduates.<sup>52</sup>

Third, Colbert built on the long-standing desire of the Naval Command Course graduates to have a reunion in Newport, combining it with the successful rise of so many of them to flag rank. He wished to use it as a means to create at the senior flag-officer level “areas of mutual interest, co-ordination, and co-operation that could pay substantial dividends for the future.”<sup>53</sup> The result

was the International Seapower Symposium of November 1969, the first in a series of meetings bringing together the chiefs of navies and other naval leaders to discuss, in an academic setting, current naval issues of mutual concern.<sup>54</sup> Out of the conference came much constructive and valuable thinking that led to the development of further regional discussions on the implication of Soviet maritime expansion. But most important for Colbert, senior naval officers at the conference became aware of their common outlook. As Canadian vice admiral Harry Porter wrote to Colbert after the meeting, “I have come away from it with an increased realization of the brotherhood of the sea and comforting knowledge that most naval officers share the same problems, the same aspirations, and the same feelings about the importance of sea power on countries and mankind as a whole.”<sup>55</sup>

The last of Colbert’s contributions at the Naval War College consisted of projects that he designed as practical contributions to promote international naval cooperation. For example, he gave to the students in the Naval Command Course the mission of designing a “Free World Frigate,” a modern, efficient, and economical ship of frigate or corvette size. The basic idea in Colbert’s mind was to have officers from a variety of friendly nations “design” a ship that could provide the basis for commonality and standardization in multinational naval forces, such as the Standing Naval Force, Atlantic. Eventually he hoped to see a squadron of such escort ships with the same hull design, using components for many nations, each flying a different national flag. The resulting design found support from key leaders in the United States such as Admirals Elmo Zumwalt and Isaac C. Kidd, Jr., but nothing came of it. Colbert was deeply disappointed that it seemed impossible to break down nationalistic barriers in building warships.<sup>56</sup>

Colbert’s final effort at the Naval War College was developed from a point in Zumwalt’s “Project SIXTY,” the action plan for his term as Chief of Naval Operations. Colbert created the detailed plan of action Zumwalt used to persuade allied navies to improve and expand their antisubmarine warfare capabilities, the better to counter the growing Soviet Navy.<sup>57</sup>

#### FINAL ASSIGNMENTS

In June 1971, Colbert left the Naval War College to become chief of staff to the Supreme Allied Commander, Atlantic. He was delighted with the prospect of continuing his work with NATO. “It will be like ‘going home,’” he wrote.<sup>58</sup> Taking a circuitous route from Newport to Norfolk, Virginia, Colbert prepared himself for his new position and laid the groundwork for the second International Seapower Symposium in 1971 by visiting the chiefs of navies in Italy, Greece, Turkey, Belgium, West Germany, the United Kingdom, and Portugal. In

this Colbert acted as Admiral Zumwalt's personal representative as well as the prospective SACLANT chief of staff.<sup>59</sup>

Later, at the SACLANT headquarters, Colbert was deeply involved in the daily work of allied naval cooperation. A year later, he was promoted to admiral and appointed Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe. During his final years as a NATO officer, both in Norfolk and Naples, Italy, Colbert rounded out his series of practical initiatives to support international cooperation by recommending additional multilateral naval forces for the Indian Ocean and the Mediterranean. Recognizing too the deep expertise needed by naval officers who work within alliances, Colbert drafted a proposal to establish a NATO postgraduate school to train recently commissioned officers under the guidance of the NATO international staff.<sup>60</sup> Within the U.S. Navy, Colbert recommended that a NATO career pattern be laid out for selected officers, who would then be fully aware of NATO procedures, problems, and programs. His plan was rejected, but too often, he believed, U.S. naval officers came to NATO on short tours of duty without enough international experience, engrossed in the paths their careers would take within the U.S. Navy and lacking much of the expertise, knowledge, and sensitivity to alliance problems that extended experience would have brought. "Techniques for dealing with foreign personnel require more thoughtfulness, understanding, and patience," Colbert wrote, characteristically putting the issue in terms of personal relationships. In an international setting, a tactless remark displaying insensitivity to another viewpoint, he believed, was often far more difficult to repair than it would be within a single nation's staff.<sup>61</sup>

As Commander in Chief, Allied Forces Southern Europe in 1972–73, Colbert's principal concern was to reduce the tension between Greece and Turkey. Under his leadership the Naval On-Call Force, Mediterranean was started and expanded with the hope of developing it into a standing naval force using Greek, Turkish, Italian, British, and U.S. ships. Colbert had more success in his initiatives to develop cooperation between the French Navy and NATO, working out a treaty allowing annual exercises. Through the combined efforts of Colbert and French admiral Jean Guillou, a large Franco-American naval exercise took place off the coast of the United States in 1973.<sup>62</sup>

During Colbert's tenure as commander in chief he discovered that he had an incurable case of cancer, but he remained at his post until a week before his death, at the age of fifty-eight on 2 December 1973. As Admiral Giuseppe Pighini, Commander, Allied Naval Forces Southern Europe under Colbert, put it, he was "a man dedicated to his duty till the last breath of life."<sup>63</sup>

Colbert's highest duty, as he saw it, was clearly revealed in a letter he wrote to Chaplain Henry Duncan, only a few months before he died:

I am a realist and know that I am on borrowed time. I am convinced that the Lord has decided to give me some extra time to do some things in this, my last command, which might better insure a safer world. That is the gist of my prayers. All I ask is just a bit more time to carry on and establish some concepts—multinational NATO forces which will strengthen our Free World against what I am convinced is a desperate threat, despite all the talk of detente.<sup>64</sup>

### REFLECTIONS ON A CAREER

Richard Colbert's entire naval career was developed around a gradually growing and strengthening commitment to international naval cooperation. He never worked out or developed his thoughts on this subject in any complete way, but as one reflects on his various statements and the innovations he made during his career, one can discern a philosophy that bears much of enduring value. It was a philosophy grounded in a sense of the need for cooperation, close personal ties, loyalty, camaraderie, and social grace in day-to-day life. He was a friendly, outgoing man with an understated style—a man who assumed that cordial cooperative behavior was the best way to accomplish things.<sup>65</sup> In the life of a career naval officer, this meant leadership and personal responsibility. Colbert reflected these concepts in a letter he wrote near the end of his career to a young officer just taking up his first command. Referring specifically to Admiral Zumwalt's innovative reforms in the U.S. Navy, Colbert advised,

Old Navy or New, long hair or short, it seems to me what ultimately makes the difference in readiness and effectiveness is the sense of camaraderie and respect that come from personal involvement and identification on the part of all hands. I fear that a lot of Navy men never got the underpinning message behind many of the recent innovations: the emphasis on personal responsibility.<sup>66</sup>

This point was an essential aspect of his philosophy, not only in shipboard command but also in forming bonds with other countries and other navies. The key was personal responsibility and, through it, personal relationships. In opening the first International Seapower Symposium, he stressed “the pure professional naval competence which each of us can bring . . . [to] provide threads of a cloth which might well be woven into a durable and serviceable fabric.”<sup>67</sup>

Colbert believed that the highest professional naval competence arises from two equally important sources: practical experience and war college education. “War colleges have always been the storehouses of the military arts,” Colbert said, “but nowadays they must prepare officers to function outside the confines of purely operational expertise, in an era of transition, of apparent detente, of new structuring of international politics.”<sup>68</sup>

The international courses played an essential role in this. Colbert believed that such courses stressed the “undiluted, the small, close, intimate nature” of

the relationship built during a year's study together.<sup>69</sup> It was nothing that could be mass produced but was created slowly and surely over time by a delicate formula: a small group, one officer only from each country, interacting with the entire group of carefully selected students and well-chosen staff, teaching a curriculum that takes into account the foreign officers' diverse backgrounds and letting them develop together where they would not be overwhelmed or at a disadvantage as they came to understand something of life not only in a foreign country but in one so very different from their own.<sup>70</sup> The result of this, Colbert found, was a created bond. "Once one has become part of that special fraternity," he wrote, "neither time nor distance can dissolve the unique ties it forms among its members."<sup>71</sup>

These kinds of ties were the basis, he believed, for the kind of partnership among nations that was urgently needed in the modern world. After the Second World War, the United States responded to the urgent and practical needs of its allies with the Truman Doctrine, the Marshall Plan, and other forms of assistance. But these led to domination. With full economic recovery from the war, these policies were no longer appropriate. "Domination leads to dependence," Colbert believed, "while true 'partnership' encourages the independence, pride and dignity of our sovereign allies."<sup>72</sup>

Further developing this idea, Colbert saw that there was an alternative to previous U.S. foreign policy, one that encouraged and supported regional cooperation and partnership in various areas. The growth of Soviet maritime power presented a challenging problem "which no one country is able to resolve itself."<sup>73</sup> In this situation, Colbert saw many advantages in a policy and strategy founded on partnership among allied and friendly nations. This could best be achieved through multilateral naval forces designed for major regions of the globe. The advantages of such forces were clear to him: the cost, financially and politically, was low, and they avoided the internal political dissent caused by massive or overwhelming commitment by the United States, while at the same time increasing the effectiveness of such a force by being the symbolic and real expression of several nations united in a common effort. Moreover, the general maritime interests of the free world could be served by multilateral naval forces, which could give rationale and justification for navies in countries where these interests were under attack.<sup>74</sup> In all of this Colbert clearly perceived the forms of naval expertise that regional and small navies provided that complemented the expertise within larger navies concentrating on global-scale naval operations.

In a career intertwined with ideas of international, naval cooperation, Richard Colbert sought to achieve four important objectives.<sup>75</sup> First, he believed that naval officers were particularly competent in solving international problems. For navies, the sea is the same good friend or cruel foe all over the world. Because

of this, naval officers have naturally developed a similar way of thinking and can easily discuss mutual problems, apart from national prejudices. With this in mind, Colbert sought out successful senior naval officers as responsible representatives of different free-world societies and tried to motivate them to learn through each other's perspectives the value of freedom. He did this in the Naval Command Course by creating an academic environment of mutual respect and candor where the American political system and way of life, and those of each country represented, were openly discussed.<sup>76</sup>

Second, through the International Seapower Symposium he sought to establish a forum where the highest naval leaders could exchange with their professional peers knowledge, concepts, views, and opinions about naval technology, tactics, strategy, and the importance of sea power. Through this he hoped to foster deeper understanding and appreciation of different national perspectives.<sup>77</sup>

Third, in all his proposals for international cooperation, he hoped to establish among naval officers a deeper awareness of the need for mutual reliance as a key element in every nation's national interest.

Fourth, he sought to establish rapport across cultural boundaries and to develop personal knowledge and understanding for different national views as expressed by naval officers. In doing this, Colbert wanted to create a group of knowledgeable naval leaders who could ensure that the effectiveness of multinational forces would not be jeopardized by any failure to understand one's own ally.

Although Richard Colbert was an officer in the U.S. Navy, his vision was clearly wider than the ordinary officer's. His vision has certainly touched the officers and men of all ships who have served in the Standing Naval Force, Atlantic; the senior flag officers who have attended the International Seapower Symposia; and the faculty and students of the Naval War College.

In all of his objectives, the unifying theme is the mutual experience of the naval profession, which reaches beyond cultures and nations to establish its own fraternity. Few naval officers have seen this vision so clearly as Richard Colbert, and few have done so much to foster it. Those who would follow in his wake must share his notion that no measure of international leadership can replace trust and understanding among allies and a sound appreciation of common goals.<sup>78</sup>

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#### NOTES

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Douglas, ed., *RCN in Transition, 1910–1985* (Vancouver: Univ. of British Columbia Press, 1988), pp. 233–53. It was then revised and

reprinted in the author's *Naval History and Maritime Strategy: Collected Essays* (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 2000), in which it appeared as chapter 10.

Since this article was written, the Colbert Papers in the Naval War College's Naval Historical Collection have been reorganized. See Dr. Evelyn Cherpak, *Register of the Richard G. Colbert Papers*, rev. ed. (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College, 2002).

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2. Cdr. Falcon Accame, Italian Navy, to RGC, 10 November 1971, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 19, file 382.
3. Capt. Henry A. Ceulemans, Belgian Navy (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 27 August 1985.
4. Adm. Thomas H. Moorer, USN (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 27 August 1985.
5. Capt. Allan P. Slaff, USN (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 6 September 1985; Capt. Clarence O. Fiske, USN (Ret.), Oral History 9, NHC, NWC, p. 68.
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13. RGC to Charles Colbert, 5 March 1935, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 1, file 19.
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19. Mrs. Prudence Colbert Mackall to Hattendorf, 23 September 1985.
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46. RGC to Capt. W. P. B. Barber, RN, 18 July 1967, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 16, file 365.
47. RGC to Vice Adm. C. K. Duncan, 2 August 1968, Colbert Papers, series 1, file 302.
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51. E. R. Zumwalt to Rear Adm. Colin C. Dunlap, 8 September 1970, Colbert Papers, series 2, box 17, file 375.
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53. Moorer to Hattendorf, 27 August 1985; quote from RGC to Capt. Stansfield Turner, aide to the Secretary of the Navy, memo, Colbert Papers, series 2, box 19, file 46.
54. The Eighteenth International Seapower Symposium met at the Naval War College, September 2007.
55. Vice Adm. H. A. Porter to RGC, 27 November 1969, Colbert Papers, series 2, box 19, file 57.
56. RGC to Scott Terrill, 10 April 1973, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 13, file 265. For detailed information on the design, see Harrison T. Loeser Papers, NHC, NWC, Ms Coll. 57.
57. President, Naval War College to CNO, OO/rbm, serial 0015, 2 April 1971, forwarding "The Newport Study: A Plan to Persuade Allies to Improve and Expand Their ASW Capabilities," in *The Chiefs of Naval Operations*, ed. Love, pp. 372–75.
58. RGC to W. W. Rostow, 12 April 1971, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 10, file 222.
59. "Trip Report 12–29 July 1971," Colbert Papers, series 1, file 313.
60. RGC to E. R. Zumwalt, 21 December 1971, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 10, file 318; and RGC to Vice Adm. T. Lewin, RN, 10 January 1973, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 12, file 257.
61. RGC to E. R. Zumwalt, 2 November 1971, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 12, file 250.
62. Adm. Giuseppe Pighini, Italian Navy (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 23 September 1985; and Adm. J. Guillou, French Navy (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 12 January 1986.
63. Pighini to Hattendorf, 23 September 1985.
64. Quoted in Capt. Henry C. Duncan, CHC USN, "A Tribute to Admiral Richard Colbert" (eulogy, Arlington Cemetery, 5 December 1973).

65. Professor Vincent Davis to Hattendorf, 28 August 1985.
66. RGC to Cdr. Spencer Johnson, 3 August 1973, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 13, file 279.
67. RGC, "Address to First International Sea Power Symposium," *Naval War College Review* 22, no. 6 (February 1970), p. 2.
68. RGC, "War College Education and the Future," U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings* 99, no. 11/849 (November 1973), p. 109.
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70. RGC to E.R. Zumwalt, 14 June 1973, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 13, file 271.
71. RGC to Lt. (j.g.) August C. Miller III, 1 June 1973, Colbert Papers, series 1, box 13, file 270.
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73. Unpublished draft article, "The Indian Ocean Enigma," Colbert Papers, series 2, box 18, file 41.
74. Remarks by RGC, not dated, Colbert Papers, series 3, box 20, file 20.
75. The following is based largely on a letter from Cdr. Humberto Cancio, Jr., Cuban Navy (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 2 October 1985, and a letter from Rear Adm. Christer Kierkegaard, Royal Swedish Navy (Ret.), to Hattendorf, 1 October 1985.
76. In 1972, the "Naval Staff Course" proposed by Colbert was established as the Naval Staff College (NSC), a six-month course for midgrade officers, later complemented by a ten-month course that integrated midgrade international officers more fully into the course of study followed by U.S. students. As of early 2008, a total of 129 nations had sent students to these programs. Of the 1,702 graduates of the Naval Command College as of then, 866 have become flag officers and two hundred chiefs of their navies, thirteen of them currently in office. Of the 1,720 graduates of the Naval Staff College have emerged 272 flag officers and ninety-seven service chiefs, sixteen of them still in that office. Two graduates of the Naval War College's international program have become presidents of their states.
77. *International Seapower Symposium XI* (1991), *XII* (1993), *XIII* (1995), *XIV* (1997), *XVI* (2004), *XVII* (2006), and *XVIII* (2008 forthcoming), all *The Proceedings of the Conference*, edited by Hattendorf and published in separate volumes by the Naval War College. Copies are available in some naval and research libraries.
78. For another view of Colbert, see Joel Sokolsky, *The Fraternity of the Blue Uniform: Admiral Richard G. Colbert, U.S. Navy, and Allied Naval Cooperation*, Historical Monograph 8 (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1991), and Sokolsky's essay in John B. Hattendorf and Bruce A. Elleman, eds., *Nineteen-Gun Salute: Case Studies of Strategic and Operational Leadership during the 20th Century* (forthcoming).