THE IDEA OF A "FLEET IN BEING" IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

John B. Hattendorf

The phrase "fleet in being" is one of those troublesome terms that naval historians and strategists have tended to use in a range of different meanings. The term first appeared in reference to the naval battle off Beachy Head in 1690, during the Nine Years' War, as part of an excuse that Admiral Arthur Herbert, first Earl of Torrington, used to explain his reluctance to engage the French fleet in that battle. A later commentator pointed out that the thinking of several British naval officers ninety years later during the War for American Independence, when the Royal Navy was in a similar situation of inferior strength, contributed an expansion to the fleet-in-being concept. To examine this subject carefully, it is necessary to look at two separate areas: first, the development of the idea of the fleet in being in naval strategic thought, and, second, the ideas that arose in the Royal Navy during the War of the American Revolution.

THE CONCEPT IN HISTORY

As a strategic concept, "fleet in being" became a point of discussion among naval strategists in 1891, with the publication of Vice Admiral Philip Colomb's book *Naval Warfare*.[1] In this work Colomb pointed to the origins of the phrase with Admiral Lord Torrington in his speech before Parliament explaining the rationale for his actions in the battle of Beachy Head (Cap Béveziers). In that action, the comte de Tourville, with seventy-five French ships of the line, had defeated the fifty-six ships of the Anglo-Dutch fleet under Torrington's overall command on 30 June/10 July 1690.[2] When Torrington was called before Parliament to explain his defeat, he reputedly declared, "As it was, most Men were in fear that the French wou'd invade; but I was always of another Opinion, which several

members of this Honorable House can witness: for I always said, that whilst we had a Fleet in being, they would not dare to make an Attempt."[3]

There is some question about the authenticity of the phrase "fleet in being" in that quotation, as it does not appear in the contemporary manuscript records of Torrington's speech;[4] it is known only from an anonymously prepared pamphlet that purports to be the speech, published twenty years after the event, in 1710.[5] In a preface to the reader, the publisher of the 1710 pamphlet explained, "The following speech falling into my hands by Accident, and being pleas'd with the History it relates; I thought it might give the World a great deal of Satisfaction if it were made publick."[6] Those words might well impress a skeptical historian as the tone of invention, but be that as it may. Whether or not Torrington actually used the phrase in 1690, it is one that has certainly taken on a life of its own during the three hundred years that have followed.

Among naval strategists, Philip Colomb was the first in the Anglophone world to draw attention to the idea as a broad strategic principle, and his thinking developed into an exchange of differing opinions between such well-known writers as Alfred Thayer Mahan and Sir Julian Corbett. Later writers, such as Herbert Richmond, Raoul Castex, Herbert Rosinski, and Geoffrey Till, have commented on their exchange and added their own thoughts in the process.

Colomb himself, in light of the controversy that he had raised in 1891, tried to clarify his thinking in a revised third edition of his work, eight years later: "Lord Torrington, in his definition of the principle, went no farther than to assert that while he observed the enemy's fleet with one certainly inferior, but yet not so inferior as to be debarred from offering battle on any advantageous circumstances appearing, it would be paralysed."[7] While this convoluted wording took into account some of the criticism that had been made of Colomb's initial understanding of the battle, he believed that the general principle should go farther: "'A fleet in being,' even though it was discredited, inferior, and shut up behind sand banks, was such a power in observation as to paralyze the action of an apparently victorious fleet either against 'sea or shore.'"[8] Stating the concept again elsewhere in the same work, Colomb wrote, "A 'fleet in being' has come into general use to denote what, in naval affairs, corresponds to 'a relieving army' in military affairs. That is to say, a fleet which is able and willing to attack an enemy proposing a descent upon territory which that force has it in charge to protect."[9]

Captain Mahan's biography of Admiral Lord Nelson included a telling criticism of Colomb's concept of the idea of a fleet in being. Writing about Nelson's 1794 landing at Calvi in Corsica, Mahan declared that Nelson's actions in that operation showed the weakness of the fleet-in-being concept. If Nelson had been in Tourville's place, Mahan wrote, Tourville would not have thought the opposing

English force, as a fleet in being, would be any kind of a deterrent to making a landing.[10]

Colomb responded by saying that Mahan misunderstood the fleet-in-being concept. He argued that Mahan himself, through his service as a member of the U.S. War Board during the Spanish-American War of 1898, had become associated with one of the most extreme examples in history of the potential effectiveness of a fleet in being when U.S. forces had been deterred for a time from capturing Santiago de Cuba by the Spanish navy's fleet in being, a squadron under Admiral Pascual Cervera.[11] Mahan, however, would have none of it. Using an example from the Peloponnesian War, Mahan pointed out that during the Athenian expedition to Syracuse, the Syracusans moved their inferior fleet to Tarentum. "The momentary safety of Syracuse would illustrate the influence of a 'fleet in being'; its subjugation after the fall of Tarentum would show the limitations of such a fleet, which, by definition, is inferior."[12] Mahan felt that "the exaggerated argument about the 'fleet in being' and its deterrent effect is, in effect, assuming that war can and will be made only without risk."[13] That is, "it was not the beaten and crippled English and Dutch 'fleet in being' that prevented an invasion of England. It was the weakness or inertness of Tourville, or the unreadiness of the French transports."[14] Underscoring a related general point, Mahan noted that when a fleet is tied to defending a position ashore that is otherwise inadequately protected by fortification or by an army, it is unable to concentrate or move freely and forcefully against an enemy.[15]

Sir Julian Corbett took a different stance when he pointed out that a fleet in being is a legitimate method of disputing command of the sea by assuming a defensive attitude. He argued that historical misunderstanding about the circumstances that had given rise to the phrase and the subsequent limitation of the concept to deterrence against an amphibious landing obscured the full significance of the strategic concept. "For a maritime Power, then," Corbett wrote, "a naval defensive means nothing but keeping the fleet actively in being—not merely in existence, but in active vigorous life."[16] In Corbett's interpretation, Torrington's intention was to act on the defensive and to prevent the enemy from achieving any result until such time as Torrington could consolidate his scattered forces so as to have a fair chance of winning a fleet engagement with Tourville's fleet. "The doctrine of the 'Fleet in being,' as formulated and practiced by Torrington," Corbett explained, "goes no further than this, that where the enemy regards the general command of a sea necessary to his offensive purposes, you may be able to prevent his gaining such command by using your fleet defensively, refusing what Nelson called a general battle, and seizing every opportunity for a counter-strike."[17] Corbett concluded that those who criticized Torrington at the time—as

well as those who had since used the historical example for developing a strategic principle—did not understand that the meaning of a fleet in being was at sea and in contact with an enemy.

Later commentators have continued this discussion but have achieved little resolution of the conceptual problems involved. Admiral Raoul Castex favored Mahan's argument over Corbett's.[18] Castex thought Colomb's argument exaggerated and Corbett an inexperienced civilian, harshly judging him as "an armchair strategist ignorant of the reality of war."[19] In contrast, Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond followed Corbett's view and added his own thoughts. "What Torrington meant is plain," Richmond wrote. "So long as he had an active fleet, prepared to seize any opportunity of slipping past the French and joining the score of [English] ships to the west, Tourville, despite his superior numbers, could not commit himself to a major operation."[20] An inferior fleet, Richmond pointed out, could not prevent a raid and could not be an absolute or complete safeguard, only a temporary one. However, in a situation where a superior enemy fleet needed to obtain a rapid and decisive victory, to disable completely an inferior fleet to carry out an invasion or some other larger objective, the inferior fleet can have a temporary deterrent effect. It does this by avoiding action until such time as conditions might be more favorable, as the English eventually did in that war two years after Beachy Head, in 1692, as well as afterward.[21]

In the next generation of naval strategic thinkers, the German American Herbert Rosinski started in the 1930s a comparative study of maritime strategic thinkers, of which he completed only the section devoted to Mahan.[22] In this work, Rosinski noted that Mahan agreed completely with Corbett that "'dispute of command,' if attempted at all, can only be achieved by the greatest display of activity and offensive spirit conceivable."[23] Rosinski went on to exclaim, "It is therefore more than astonishing to find [Mahan] throughout all his writings violently opposed to the concept of a 'fleet in being,' which when rightly understood, stands precisely for such a watchful and aggressive 'hanging on the enemy's flanks.'"[24] Looking carefully at Mahan's reasoning, Rosinski concluded that Mahan had taken Torrington to mean a passive retreat to safety—the very opposite of what Torrington had actually intended, an aggressive defense. One might add that Mahan's understanding was similar to that which the king, queen, and council expressed in 1690 and that led to Torrington's dismissal, imprisonment in the Tower, and trial.[25]

While naval historians and strategists have tended to study the concept as an abstract strategic idea, historians of the reign of King William III and the aftermath of the Revolution of 1688 are aware that there may have been other reasons why Admiral Herbert (that is, Torrington) did not fight the French, as he had

been ordered to do. As the historian Stephen B. Baxter summarized the range of possibilities, "He [Torrington] may have resented the orders of the cabinet council. He may have been involved in the political squabbles that were almost destroying the fighting capacity of the English navy. He may have been jealous of the Dutch. He may have played the coward or the traitor."[26] After all, there was a parallel in very recent memory, the failure of the English fleet under Lord Dartmouth to oppose William III's invasion of England in 1688.

To complicate the issue further, the concept of fleet in being has come to be used very loosely, for a range of related naval options. Understanding the term as employed in twentieth- and twenty-first-century naval discussion, Geoffrey Till has identified within the concept four different types of operations, ranging from moderated offense to passive defense:[27]

1. Obtaining a degree of command of the sea by temporarily avoiding a decision in battle.
2. Achieving positive strategic benefit by carrying out missions, such as attack on trade, while avoiding a decisive engagement with a superior enemy.
3. Using continuous harassment and evasion of the enemy as a means of denying a superior enemy the unfettered use of the sea.
4. Using actions designed merely to ensure the survival of a weaker opposing fleet.

The historian Jerker Widén has recently commented that these four variants constitute collectively a potential problem for the proper interpretation of the fleet-in-being concept. He argues that the fourth—actions merely to ensure a fleet's survival—is not a legitimate form of fleet in being, which requires maintaining an active and credible threat against a superior enemy. The second and third are similar to one another, but they incorporate Corbett's alternative method of disputing command of the sea—minor counterattacks. For theoretical purposes, Widén recommends keeping conceptually separate the ideas of disputed command and minor counterattack. The fleet in being, he writes, is a defensive deterrent strategy by a weaker naval power, while minor counterattacks constitute a limited form of offensive action within a defensive strategy. However, in practice, Widén notes, these two tend to coincide as separate elements of a single strategy.[28]

THE NAVAL WAR OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

It was the famous British naval historian and strategist Sir Julian Corbett who pointed out, in *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* that the War of the American Revolution provided further evidence about the meaning and application of the concept of the fleet in being.[29]

In the first three years of the war, between 1775 and 1777, Britain used its military and naval resources to try to end the rebellion in North America quickly, but those attempts failed. In this period, relatively few British warships were built, but with France's entry into the war in 1778 the Royal Navy began a building program to try to recover the superiority of warship numbers and tonnage it had let slip to France. It would take the Royal Navy years to recover that position.

The year 1778 witnessed not only the entry of France into the war but the departure of a French squadron under the comte d'Estaing to North America and then to the West Indies. The government in London now changed its strategic priorities and put home defense and the protection of the colonies in the West Indies at a higher level than the issues at stake with the North American colonies. Yet there were critics of this policy within the cabinet, notably the colonial secretary, Lord George Germain, who led efforts that, from time to time, diverted the ministry from its initial intentions. As a result of this and other factors, 1778 became a year of missed naval opportunities for both Britain and France, as each in its turn looked across the Atlantic.

The French navy had the opportunity in 1778 to achieve something close to parity in naval strength with the Royal Navy, even local superiority in European waters, by uniting the Brest and Toulon squadrons for a decisive battle. Instead, d'Estaing took the Toulon squadron to North America. At the same time, London, instead of using its strength to seek a decisive action with the French navy, dispatched Vice Admiral John Byron and twenty ships to chase d'Estaing across the Atlantic. In the following year and a half neither of those fleets had any strategic effect in North American waters or even in the West Indies, where the naval battles they fought were indecisive. Meanwhile, in European waters, in the first major naval battle of the war, a French fleet under the comte d'Orvilliers clashed, also indecisively, with a comparably sized British fleet in the first battle of Ushant on 27 July 1778.[30]

During the following autumn and winter the Royal Navy and Britain generally became further distracted by an argument that arose between two of the commanders at Ushant over their actions in that engagement: Vice Admiral Sir Hugh Palliser and his superior, Admiral the Honorable Augustus Keppel. This personal and professional dispute resulted in courts-martial for them both; in Parliament, vicious disputes between the supporters of the respective admirals created a political opposition to the government.

In the wake of all this, in the spring of 1779 the Royal Navy needed to prepare for a new campaign by finding a senior and experienced commander for the Channel Fleet, a fighting admiral who was a supporter of the government. Among the possible choices, there seemed to be no one who could meet all the necessary criteria. In the end, the selection fell on Admiral Sir Charles Hardy, a

very senior admiral who was above the political fray but had not been to sea in years. Although Hardy had a reputation as a good-natured man, the divisive atmosphere of the day led some officers to refuse to serve under him. To back him up the Admiralty turned to some untried officers who seemed to have potential. Two captains in this group were promoted to rear admiral and given subordinate commands in the Channel Fleet. Another, Captain Richard Kempenfelt, recognized within the navy as a thoughtful reformer and tactical innovator, was given the post of Hardy's captain of the fleet, a position that might be considered a precursor to a modern admiral's chief of staff.[31]

As the Channel Fleet prepared to put to sea in the spring of 1779, it was hampered by a shortage of seamen, a shortage largely caused by the impressment of men carrying infectious diseases.[32] At the same time, the strategic situation at sea was only gradually becoming clear to British leaders. In February, intelligence arrived in London that Spain was beginning military preparations in the vicinity of Gibraltar. In March, London learned that Spain was fitting out warships at El Ferrol, and France reportedly was preparing thirty-three at Brest. At first British observers did not understand the full significance of these reports. It took them some time to conclude that Spain was changing from a neutral mediator between Britain and France to an active supporter of France against Britain. It took even longer to understand that this Franco-Spanish alliance was tied strategically to the Spanish siege of Gibraltar and to a design to occupy part of England by amphibious assault to force Britain to release Gibraltar to Spain in future peace negotiations.[33] Thus, the entry of Spain into the war altered the strategic situation for Britain.[34]

By July 1779 British officials were aware that a superior Franco-Spanish naval force was heading toward the Channel, but things were left in strategic suspense until it actually appeared off the British Isles. Meanwhile, senior British officers expressed a variety of opinions on the impending situation. Some thought the enemy force would prove too unwieldy and ineffective to be a real threat in battle. In fact, the sixty-three-ship Franco-Spanish fleet would not actually be sighted entering the Channel until mid-August, by which time thirty thousand troops would be waiting in France to invade England. In the interim, Captain Kempenfelt was at sea with Admiral Hardy on board Hardy's flagship, HMS *Victory,* with some of the thirty-nine ships of the line of the Channel Fleet. On 27 July 1779 Kempenfelt wrote to his friend Captain Charles Middleton, the comptroller of the navy, reflecting on the strategic situation that he, as Hardy's fleet captain, faced:

> Much, I must say almost all, depends on this [i.e., the Channel] fleet; 'tis an inferior against a superior fleet; therefore the greatest skill and address is requisite to counteract the designs of the enemy, to watch and seize the favourable opportunity for action, and to catch the advantage of making the effort at some or other feeble part

> of the enemy's line; or if such opportunities don't offer, to hover near the enemy, keep him at bay, and prevent his attempting to execute anything but at risk and hazard; to command their attention, and oblige them to think of nothing but being on their guard against your attack.[35]

In the event, actions such as these, combined with the collapse of supplies and of the health of seamen in the Franco-Spanish fleet, as well as the random effects of chance, eventually prevented the Franco-Spanish fleet from achieving success.[36]

The war for America continued without major strategic gains on either side, with roughly equally matched fleets opposing one another, until 1781. In that year Britain was successful in slowing the flow of naval stores—including timber, pitch, iron, and copper—to the Spanish and French navies, thus raising their costs; otherwise the British blockade had little effect on the enemy. However, it did create a new naval enemy in European waters, the Dutch Republic, by interfering with Dutch trade to France. As a result, a British squadron fought the Dutch fleet off Dogger Bank. Celebrated (although in fact tactically indecisive) as a victory by both sides, Dogger Bank became a British strategic victory when the Dutch fleet failed to venture out again during the remainder of the war.[37] In 1781, the combined Franco-Spanish fleet returned to the Channel, again in strength too great for the Royal Navy's Channel Fleet to dare challenge.

Meanwhile, in September 1781, the strategic crisis of the war occurred when the comte de Grasse was able to seize and maintain local command of the sea off Virginia to control the waters around the Chesapeake Capes and in Chesapeake Bay for several weeks, preventing relief from reaching British forces ashore at Yorktown. General Lord Cornwallis's surrender eventually brought down the ministry in London and replaced it with a government that was pledged to ending the war. Yet it would be some time before all that happened.

In this situation, Lord Sandwich at the Admiralty and his professional advisers, who included Captain Charles Middleton, Captain Lord Mulgrave, and Richard Kempenfelt (promoted to rear admiral in 1780 and now in command of the Western Squadron of the Channel Fleet), proposed a dramatic new strategy. At this point, Britain's warship-building program, begun after the war started, was beginning to alter the strategic balance of forces between the combined French and Spanish fleets and Britain's. The numerical superiority of the Bourbon naval powers in capital ships in comparison to Britain's grew from 25 percent in 1775 to a high point in 1780 of 44 percent. From 1780 to 1785 it declined to a low of a 17 percent superiority.[38] The percentages in numerical superiority, however, do not reflect differences in fleet readiness. As the French navy increased in size, it experienced increasing difficulties in manning and funding.[39] Nevertheless, in the context of this overall situation, the Royal Navy's Channel Fleet remained

considerably weaker than that in the West Indies. The cabinet in London had made a deliberate strategic choice to attempt a victory in the West Indies rather than in European waters. Its rationale might be justified by Admiral Sir George Rodney's victory on 12 April 1782 over de Grasse at the Saintes, preventing the loss of Jamaica. Yet Rodney's victory was not the kind of stunning strategic victory that could end a war, despite its considerable moral effect. The high-risk strategy that brought it about left more serious vulnerabilities exposed at home.[40]

While the ministry placed priority on the West Indies and reduced naval strength in the eastern Atlantic and North Sea to do so, the Royal Navy at home still had essential duties to carry out as an inferior fleet in being, unable to conduct a major fleet battle. Most importantly, the government's decision meant that the Royal Navy could not maintain control of the Western Approaches to the Channel with a sufficient number of its largest warships. Such a force at that important naval strategic position at sea had traditionally served the multiple purposes of protecting British trade, attacking enemy trade, preventing invasion, and deterring French forces from leaving Brest for overseas missions.[41] At the same time, the war with the Dutch required a blockade of the Dutch coast to prevent the Dutch navy from returning to sea. Meanwhile, British warships in the North Sea served to blockade the eastern approaches of the Channel and to intercept merchant ships carrying contraband naval stores to France. In addition, the war with Spain called for a blockade of Spanish ports, as well as the convoying of supplies for the relief of Gibraltar during the Spanish siege. All of this needed to be done while avoiding a major, decisive fleet battle. The Royal Navy met this conundrum on an operational level by shuttling ships back and forth between the North Sea and the Channel as the situation required and by maintaining superior ship-to-ship fighting capabilities.[42]

As for the broad, strategic level, however, Rear Admiral Kempenfelt explained his views of the theoretical aspects of the situation in early January 1782, after receiving Admiralty orders for his Western Squadron. In comparison with Torrington's single-sentence statement, Kempenfelt's thoughts, as Sir Julian Corbett considered, represented the "developed idea of the 'fleet in being'" that showed how the concept had matured in British naval thinking some ninety years after Torrington:[43]

> When the enemy's force by sea [are][a] superior to yours and you have many remote possessions to guard, it renders it difficult to determine [what may be][b] the best manner of disposing of your ships.

a. The 13 January version replaces "is" with "are."

b. The 13 January version adds "what may be."

[When the enemy's designs are known],[c] in order to do something effectual, you must endeavour to be superior to them in [such parts][d] where, [if they should succeed in their design],[e] they would most injure you.

If your fleet is so divided as to be in all places inferior to the enemy, they will then in all places have [the probability][f] of succeeding in their attempts.

[If a squadron of sufficient force cannot be formed to face the enemy at home, it would be more eligible to let the number of that squadron be yet less, that thereby you may be enabled to gain a superiority elsewhere].[g]

When inferior to the enemy, and you have only a squadron of observation to watch and attend upon their motions, such squadron should be composed of two-decked ships only,[44] as [to answer its purpose][h] it must have the advantage [in sailing of the enemy, otherwise in certain circumstances they may be forced to action or to give up some of their heavy sailers.][i]

It is highly [expedient][j] to have such a flying squadron to hang [about][k] the enemy's large fleet, as it will prevent their dividing into [squadrons][l] for intercepting your trade [or other purposes],[m] or spreading [and extending][n] their ships for a more

c. The 13 January version replaces "When you know the enemy's designs" with the words between brackets.

d. The 13 January version replaces "some part" with the words between brackets.

e. The 13 January version replaces "if they succeeded" with the words between brackets.

f. The 13 January version replaces "a fair chance" with the words between brackets.

g. The 13 January version creates a new paragraph here and replaces "If a squadron cannot be formed of sufficient force to face the enemy's at home, it would be more advantageous to let your inferiority be still greater, in order by it to gain the superiority elsewhere" with the words between brackets.

h. The 13 January version replaces "as to ensure its purpose" with the words between brackets and eliminates the period after "purpose."

i. The 13 January version replaces "of the enemy in sailing; else, under certain circumstances it will be liable to be forced to battle" with the words between brackets. "Heavy sailers" refers to slow, cumbersome, unweatherly ships, rather than simply large ones.

j. The 13 January version starts a new paragraph with this sentence and replaces "necessary" with "expedient."

k. The 13 January version replaces "on" with "about."

l. The 13 January version omits the word "separate" before "squadrons."

m. The 13 January version adds the words between brackets.

n. The 13 January version adds the words between brackets.

extensive view. [Such a squadron will be always at hand ready][o] to profit from any accidental separation or dispersion of their [ships][p] from hard gales, fogs or other causes. [They][q] may intercept supplies, intelligence, etc. to them. In fine, such a squadron will be a check and restraint upon their [activity],[r] and thereby prevent [much][s] of that mischief they otherwise might do.

When the enemy are near the Channel, I should suppose the best situation for such a squadron would be to keep without them to the westward[, as more favourable to protect your ships coming into the Channel. The squadron will also be more at liberty for its operations to approach or keep distance from the enemy as they may find convenient, and not liable to be forced into port and blocked up].[t]

When the enemy [perceive][u] your design of keeping the North Sea free by a stout squadron for your trade to return home that way, it may be supposed they will detach from [their][v] Grand fleet as many ships as the inferiority of your Western squadron will allow to endeavour, in conjunction with the Dutch, to turn in that sea, the balance of power on their side.[45] [But probably they will penetrate into this scheme of ours time enough to prevent its good effects this ensuing summer, and other projects they may have in view to attempt with their Grand fleet may divert their attention from it.][w]

The enemy I conceive [have][x] at this time two grand designs against us: the one, the conquest of our West India Islands; the other, at home, not confined merely to the interception of our trade, but to favour by [the superiority of their fleet][y] a formidable

o. The 13 January version replaces "You will be at hand" with the words between brackets.

p. The 13 January version replaces "fleet" with "ships."

q. The 13 January version replaces "You" with "They."

r. The 13 January version replaces "motions" with "activity."

s. The 13 January version replaces "a good deal" with "much."

t. The 13 January version adds the section between brackets, ending the paragraph with the additional words.

u. The 13 January version replaces "perceives" with "perceive."

v. The 13 January version replaces "the" with "their."

w. The 13 January version adds the sentence between brackets.

x. The 13 January version adds the word "have."

y. The 13 January version replaces "their superiority" with the words between brackets.

descent upon Great Britain;[z] and I [would][aa] suppose the blow would be directed where it would be most felt by us, either against the Metropolis or Portsmouth. I should rather think the latter, as [more practicable][bb] from the nature of the navigation.

They will with some reason conclude that [one][cc] of those designs will succeed; [knowing][dd] that we cannot, by our naval power, guard against both, and that if we employ a force sufficient to defeat their design in one place, we must necessarily leave the other exposed to them.

[It may be (or might have been) in our power to send such a force of ships to the West Indies as would frustrate their designs there, but at home I imagine, with our outmost exertions, we must remain inferior by sea and trust our defence from a descent to our land forces.

As our ships are now all coppered, they are always ready for service; therefore, when the enemy's fleet at the end of the campaign returns into port, which hitherto has been always early in the fall, you are then at liberty to send what number of ships you might think proper to act offensively or defensively in the West Indies during the winter months, and have them again at home in sufficient time for summer service.

There is great advantage upon such occasions in letting ships slip out singly, as their voyage is thereby rendered much shorter, and your design a secret.][ee]

On the first of the two drafts of Kempenfelt's document, Sir Charles Middleton had written a short note that clarified the reasoning and was later incorporated in the final version sent to Lord Sandwich: "As something must [be] left exposed, it appears to me that Great Britain and Ireland are now more capable of defending themselves than our colonies; and that the present year will probably pass over before they discover our design in the North Sea. It behooves us thus to make the best of the time allowed us."[46]

To Sir Julian Corbett's way of thinking, Kempenfelt had already demonstrated, practically and "in the most positive and convincing manner," the positive side of the fleet-in-being theory a few weeks before drafting his memorandum.[47] Fifty-three leagues (approximately 159 nautical miles, or 294 kilometers) southwest of the Ushant on 12 December 1781, Kempenfelt's Western Squadron had

z. The 13 January version omits "and Ireland."

aa. The 13 January version replaces "should" with "would."

bb. The 13 January version replaces "less difficult" with "more practicable."

cc. The 13 January version replaces "one or the other" with "one."

dd. The 13 January version replaces "well knowing" with "knowing."

ee. The 13 January version adds the three final paragraphs, shown here within brackets.

encountered a French hundred-ship convoy sailing, under the escort of the comte de Guichen, from Brest with military supplies and reinforcements for the East and West Indies. Observing that de Guichen and his escorting warships were over the horizon, hull-down to leeward, Kempenfelt attempted to cut them off from the transports. Partially succeeding in this, Kempenfelt avoided a major action and took nine transports from among the hundred ships, as well as, on the following day, an additional five stragglers.

A number of critics of the action—including King George III, Rear Admiral Sir Samuel Hood, and Admiral Lord Rodney—thought that Kempenfelt should have followed the French squadron and taken more ships, even to the extent of going all the way to the West Indies to tip the naval balance there, rather than returning home. At the tactical level, Kempenfelt's skillful action in using an inferior force to embarrass the enemy and to take prizes in the presence of its escort was remarkable, but strategically it had little effect.[48] The strategic effect related to the convoy was caused by the weather on Christmas Day, five days after Kempenfelt returned to Spithead, when a violent storm forced most of the French convoy back into port and prevented the rest from reaching its intended destination.

Word of Kempenfelt's action, along with the news of the surrender of the British army at Yorktown (and the failure of the Royal Navy to relieve it), had arrived at London in late November and led to political attacks in the House of Commons on Lord North's ministry for naval mismanagement. Eleven days after Kempenfelt submitted his memorandum to Lord Sandwich, the House voted "to inquire into the causes of the lack of success of his Majesty's naval forces during this war, and more particularly in the year 1781," the first of a series of resolutions and charges that on 20 March 1782 forced Lord North's ministry from office, along with Lord Sandwich as First Lord of the Admiralty.[49] During the course of the debates, the young opposition politician Charles James Fox pointed out that the government's strategy had been the reverse of what it should have been. That is, he argued, having limited naval resources it sent major squadrons to distant stations and left home waters exposed when it should have concentrated in European waters, where it could have controlled enemy forces at their source while at the same time providing for home defense.[50]

Kempenfelt's and Middleton's thinking showed that their defensive, fleet-in-being strategy was based on a number of factors related to the specific context of the strategic situation in late 1781 and early 1782. At the tactical and operational levels, their thinking depended on a growing sense that the enemy's naval strength was becoming weaker in size and less unified in action.[51] In proposing more daring moves they were depending on this trend, as well as on easy strategic maneuverability of their own naval forces from one theater of operations to another; on subterfuge; on the enemy's limited ability to guess what they were doing

and counter it; and on the (at least marginal) technological superiority provided by copper sheathing of the underwater hulls of ships, as well as on the adoption of carronades, which would prove their value as a new form of ordnance during the battle of the Saintes.[52]

At the strategic level, the application of the concept that Kempenfelt and Middleton were advocating abdicated the Royal Navy's traditional role as Britain's first line of defense, leaving home defense to the British army and to the militia at the beaches. It also assumed that the constraining effects of wind, weather, and inefficiency on the enemy's naval force would be less for the British. At the same time, it abandoned a strategic idea that had been proved valid in the past and would later be proved again in subsequent wars—that by maintaining naval superiority in European waters the Royal Navy could eliminate or reduce (as Fox argued on the floor of the Commons) the threat to overseas possessions at the source, by preventing French and Spanish forces from sailing to distant stations.

This discussion should not lead a reader to think that the idea of the fleet in being was one that was widely understood or discussed in the Royal Navy of the eighteen and nineteenth centuries. Admiral Kempenfelt was certainly a very unusual naval officer, a man whose thinking was not widely reflected in the British naval officer corps.[53] The instances and documents mentioned here are the only known examples to have existed before Colomb opened the idea for wider discussion as a general strategic concept in 1891. In both the 1690 example and that of the War of the American Revolution, the Royal Navy's use of the fleet-in-being concept resulted in severe political repercussions for those who were held responsible. In 1690, the commanding admiral was blamed, in 1782 the government. To the extent that the Royal Navy employed a fleet in being, it was not a war-winning strategy but a delaying gambit, or a device to protract the war at sea so as to achieve other objectives. At Beachy Head, its apparent success for the English navy was due largely to the inefficiency of the enemy and other factors within the larger context of that war. During the War of the American Revolution, however, a strategy of fleet in being in home waters had a role in allowing the Royal Navy to strengthen Rodney's fleet in the West Indies to the point that he could win the battle of the Saintes on 9–12 April 1782.

The ideas on a fleet in being that Richard Kempenfelt and Charles Middleton discussed during the final phase of the War of the American Revolution certainly represented an elaboration of an idea that had been only hinted at in Admiral Lord Torrington's single sentence. Their elaborated concept is more than an expansion on the original idea, and it expresses a much more precise meaning than Philip Colomb and a number of other commentators have allowed. An enemy cannot, as a strategic matter, entirely ignore such a fleet, presenting as it does an active threat that requires a significant response. In the context of a strategic

situation involving naval forces dispersed in several geographic areas, an active and aggressive fleet in being can potentially serve as a temporary deterrent in one area, if for a very limited time, simultaneously maintaining morale and operational skills within that fleet and gaining time to concentrate forces in another area where a larger threat exists. The historical experiences that have been discussed here suggest, however, that it is a high-risk strategy to deal with particular circumstances, to be considered only when resources are strained and threats dispersed in different geographical areas, not to be expanded into the rationale for a general strategic naval posture.

NOTES

This article is the written text of a lecture given extemporaneously to the Military History Seminar at All Souls College, Oxford, on 30 January 2013 and on 8 February 2013 to a conference, "Navies in the War of the American Revolution," sponsored by the Société des Cincinnati de France and the Université Paris-Sorbonne (Paris IV), at l'École militaire in Paris. It is scheduled to be published in French in Olivier Chaline, Philippe Bonnichon, Charles-Philippe de Vergennes, eds., *Les marines de la guerre d'indépendance américaine (1763–1783)* (Paris: Presses de l'Université Paris-Sorbonne), volume 2 (forthcoming).

1. Vice Admiral P. H. Colomb, *Naval Warfare: Its Ruling Principles and Practices Historically Treated* (London: W. H. Allen, 1891). References in this article are from the reprint of the 1899 third edition, with an introduction by Barry M. Gough, Classics of Sea Power, 2 vols. (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989). On the concept of fleet in being, see vol. 1, pp. 5–9, 154, 170; and vol. 2, pp. 502, 550, 556–60.

2. For nearly a century, the standard account of the battle in English was William Laird Clowes, *The Royal Navy: A History from the Earliest Times to 1900* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1893), vol. 2, pp. 333–41. For recent scholarly accounts of this battle, see E. Taillemite et P. Guillaume, *Tourville et Bévezіers* (Paris: Economica, 1991); Daniel Dessert, *Tourville* (Paris: Fayard, 2002), pp. 233–40; and N. A. M. Rodger, *The Command of the Ocean: A Naval History of Britain, 1648–1815* (London: Allen Lane, 2004), pp. 145–46, 159.

3. *The Earl of Torrington's speech to the House of Commons, in November, 1690.: Occasion'd by the ingagement at sea on the 30th of June that year, between the confederate and French fleets. To which is prefix'd, a draught of the line of battel, curiously engraven on copper* (London: n.p., 1710) [hereafter *Earl of Torrington's speech*], p. 29.

4. Printed in J. B. Hattendorf et al., eds., *British Naval Documents, 1204–1960,* Publications of the Navy Records Society (Aldershot, U.K.: Ashgate, 1993), vol. 131, document 131: The Battle of Beachy Head, 1690, pp. 223–25, manuscript SOU/2, pp. 27–29, Phillips-Southwell Papers, National Maritime Museum (NMM), Greenwich, United Kingdom.

5. *Earl of Torrington's speech.* John Ehrman believes that the fact that similar concepts and wording of some of the statements in the pamphlet are also found in the manuscript summaries gives credibility to the thought that the pamphlet might be the full text of the speech that Torrington presented; *The Navy in the War of William III, 1689–1697* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953) [hereafter *Navy of William III*], pp. 323–24 note 6. The contemporary manuscript report on Torrington's speech that Ehrman cited in 1953—as Bibl. Phill, Admiralty Papers, vol. iv, ff. 101–108, NMM—is the same document as that cited in note 4 above. When the Phillips Library manuscripts at Greenwich

were later divided into separate groups, this one was given a new archival designation: SOU/2, Phillips-Southwell collection, NMM. On Torrington's court-martial, see also Peter LeFevre, "The Earl of Torrington's Court-Martial, December 1690," *Mariner's Mirror* 76 (August 1990), pp. 243–49.

6. *Earl of Torrington's speech,* p. 3.
7. Colomb, *Naval Warfare,* vol. 2, p. 550.
8. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 154.
9. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 5. This quotation is from the preface to the second edition of 1895.
10. A. T. Mahan, *The Life of Nelson: The Embodiment of the Sea Power of Great Britain* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, 1897), vol. 1, p. 137.
11. Colomb, *Naval Warfare,* vol. 2, pp. 558–59.
12. John B. Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan on Naval Strategy: Selections from the Writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan,* Classics of Sea Power (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1991), p. 205. The quote originally appeared in Mahan's *Naval Strategy: Compared and Contrasted with the Principles and Practices of Military Operations on Land* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1911), chap. 9, pp. 200–42.
13. Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan on Naval Strategy,* p. 209.
14. Ibid., p. 247, from Mahan, *Naval Strategy*, chap. 10.
15. Hattendorf, ed., *Mahan on Naval Strategy,* p. 263.
16. Julian S. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* ed. Eric J. Grove, Classics of Sea Power (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1989), p. 212.
17. Ibid., pp. 224–25.
18. Raoul Castex, *Théories Stratégiques* (Paris: Société d'Éditions Géographiques, Maritimes et Coloniales, 1933), vol. 4, pp. 140–49. Excerpts in English published in Castex, *Strategic Theories,* trans. and ed. Eugenia C. Kiesling, Classics of Sea Power (Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1993), pp. 336–43.
19. Hervé Coutau-Bégarie, "Corbett and Richmond in France," in *Mahan Is Not Enough: The Proceedings of a Conference on the Works of Sir Julian Corbett and Admiral Sir Herbert Richmond,* ed. John B. Hattendorf and James Goldrick (Newport, R.I.: Naval War College Press, 1993), p. 283; J. J. Widén, *Theorist of Maritime Strategy: Sir Julian Corbett and His Contribution to Naval and Military Thought* (Farnham, Surrey, U.K.: Ashgate, 2012), p. 133.
20. Sir Herbert Richmond, *The Navy as an Instrument of Policy, 1558–1727* (Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1953), p. 215.
21. Ibid., p. 216.
22. Herbert Rosinski, *Commentaire de Mahan,* preface by Hervé Coutau-Bégarie (Paris: Economica, 1996). Originally written in English in about 1938, it has been published only in French. The original typescript document is in Manuscript Collection 91: Herbert Rosinski Papers, box 7, folder 3: "Mahan, 1938," Naval Historical Collection, Naval War College, Newport, R.I.
23. Rosinski, *Commentaire de Mahan,* pp. 71–72 (English typescript pp. 33–34).
24. Ibid. See A. T. Mahan, *Lessons of the War with Spain* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1899), pp. 78, 123–24; Mahan, *Life of Nelson,* vol. 1, pp. 136–37; and Mahan, *Naval Administration and Warfare* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1908), p. 149.
25. Ehrman, *Navy of William III,* pp. 349–52; *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography,* s.v. "Herbert, Arthur, Earl of Torrington (1648–1716)," by John B. Hattendorf (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004), available at dx.doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/13017 (January 2008).
26. Stephen B. Baxter, *William III and the Defense of European Liberty, 1650–1702* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1966), p. 267.
27. Geoffrey Till, *Seapower: A Guide for the Twenty-First Century,* 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 173.
28. Widén, *Theorist of Maritime Strategy*, pp. 132–33.
29. Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* p. 222.
30. N. A. M. Rodger and Daniel A. Baugh, "The War for America, 1775–1783," in *Maritime History,* vol. 2, *The Eighteenth Century and the Classic Age of Sail,* ed. John B. Hattendorf (Malabar, Fla.: Krieger, 1997), pp. 205–206.

31. David Syrett, *The Royal Navy in European Waters during the American Revolutionary War* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1998) [hereafter *Royal Navy in European Waters*], pp. 61–62.

32. Ibid., p. 66.

33. For further background see Stetson Conn, *Gibraltar in British Diplomacy in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1942), chap. 8, pp. 174–98, and John Lynch, *Bourbon Spain, 1700–1808* (Oxford, U.K.: Basil Blackwell, 1989), pp. 319–22.

34. Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters,* p. 69.

35. Kempenfelt to Middleton, 27 July [1779], in *Letters and Papers of Charles, Lord Barham, Admiral of the Red Squadron, 1753–1813,* ed. John Knox Laughton, Publications of the Navy Records Society (London: Navy Records Society, 1907) [hereafter *Barham Letters and Papers*], general series vol. 1, vol. 32, p. 292.

36. Rodger and Baugh, "War for America, 1775–1783," p. 206.

37. Jaap R. Bruijn, *The Dutch Navy of the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1993), p. 157; Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters,* pp. 131–32.

38. Jan Glete, *Navies and Nations: Warships, Navies and State Building in Europe and America, 1500–1860* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1993), vol. 1, p. 276.

39. Jonathan R. Dull, *The French Navy and American Independence: A Study of Arms and Diplomacy, 1774–1787* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), pp. 143–44, 256 note 30, 278–79; Henri Legohérel, *Les Trésoriers généraux de la Marine (1517–1788)* (Paris: Editions Cujas, 1965), p. 341.

40. N. A. M. Rodger, *The Insatiable Earl: A Life of John Montague, 4th Earl of Sandwich* (London: HarperCollins, 1993), pp. 273, 292.

41. Michael Duffy, "The Establishment of the Western Squadron as the Linchpin of British Naval Strategy," in *Parameters of British Naval Power, 1650–1850,* Exeter Maritime Studies, no. 7 (Exeter, U.K.: Exeter Univ. Press, 1992), pp. 75–76; A. N. Ryan, "The Blockade of Brest, 1689–1805," in *Les Marines de Guerre Européennes, XVII–XVIIIe siècles,* ed. Martine Acerra, José Merino, and Jean Meyer (Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1987), p. 184.

42. Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters,* p. 167.

43. For the Corbett quotation, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* p. 221. There are two published versions of this document that follows. The text quoted here follows the second, more complete version. The first, which Corbett used, appears to be a draft, made a week before the second; it is in "Admiral Kempenfelt's observations on the arrangements given to him by Lord S[andwich]," in *Barham Letters and Papers,* ed. Laughton, vol. 1, pp. 361–62 (copy in Middleton's hand, 6 January 1782). The second text appears as "Admiral Kempenfelt's Ideas about the Mode of Carrying on the War," 13 January 1782, in *The Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, 1771–1782,* ed. G. R. Barnes and J. H. Owen, Publications of the Navy Records Society (London: Navy Records Society, 1938), general series vol. 78, vol. 4, pp. 80–82. The later document makes changes to the wording of the draft that appears in *Barham Letters and Papers* and adds several points, as well as three new paragraphs at the end. See the footnotes for the exact differences between the two documents, as well as glosses on certain terms.

44. The seventy-four-gun third rate was the typical example, being both heavily armed and highly maneuverable, but there was also a large, two-deck, eighty-gun third rate and a small, two-deck, forty-four-gun fifth rate. See David Lyon, *The Sailing Ship List: All the Ships of the Royal Navy, Built, Purchased and Captured 1688–1860* (London: Conway Maritime Books, 1993), chap. 5, "The American War of Independence 1776–1783," pp. 214–16.

45. "Return home that way": an allusion to a long-standing British wartime trade-protection strategy of having British merchant ships return home not through the western entrance to the Channel but "north about" Scotland, then south to London and other ports through the North Sea.

46. "Mem. By Sir C.M.," in *Barham Letters and Papers,* ed. Laughton, vol. 1, pp. 362–63.

47. For the quotation, Corbett, *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy,* p. 222.

48. Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters,* pp. 149–50.

49. For Lord Sandwich's statements defending his actions as First Lord, see ibid., pp. 271–364. House of Commons movement quoted in Barnes and Owen, eds., *Private Papers of John, Earl of Sandwich,* vol. 4, p. 271.

50. Syrett, *Royal Navy in European Waters,* p. 152.

51. Rodger, *Insatiable Earl,* p. 294.

52. Ibid., pp. 294–99.

53. For a general evaluation of Kempenfelt see *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, s.v. "Kempenfelt, Richard (1718–1782)," by J. K. Laughton, rev. Nicholas Tracy, available at www.oxforddnb.com/ (January 2008).

John B. Hattendorf is Ernest J. King Professor of Maritime History and chairman of the Maritime History Department in the Center for Naval Warfare Studies at the U.S. Naval War College. He is author, coauthor, editor, or coeditor of more than forty volumes, including England in the War of the Spanish Succession *(1987);* Naval History and Maritime Strategy: Collected Essays *(2000);* The Evolution of the U.S. Navy's Maritime Strategy, 1977–1986 *(2004);* and U.S. Naval Strategy: Selected Documents *(2006–2008); and is the editor of* Oxford Encyclopedia of Maritime History, *4 vols. (2007). His most recent publications are* Talking about Naval History: A Collection of Essays *(2011) and* Marlborough: Soldier and Diplomat *(2012). His academic work has been recognized by an honorary doctorate from Kenyon College, the Caird Medal of the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the Dartmouth Medal of the American Library Association, and the U.S. Navy's Superior Civilian Service Medal, as well as the Alfred Thayer Mahan Award for Literary Achievement from the Navy League of the United States and the Samuel Eliot Morison award from the USS Constitution Museum. In 2011, the U.S. Naval War College named in his honor the endowed Hattendorf Prize for Distinguished Original Research in Maritime History. In 2012, the Naval Order of the United States awarded Hattendorf the Admiral of the Navy George Dewey Award for his lifetime contributions to naval history.*