

DIGESTS OF SELECTED ARTICLES AND DOCUMENTS

MILITARY CONSERVATISM

By Rear Admiral Wm. S. Sims, U. S. N. An address delivered to the graduating class of the U. S. Naval War College, 1921. 16 pages.
—*U. S. Naval Institute Proceedings*, March, 1922, p. 346.

This interesting address, delivered to the graduating class of the U. S. Naval War College, deals with the question of military conservatism, a "polite term often intended to imply a dangerous class reluctance to accept new ideas."

The dangers of military conservatism are analyzed, and the possible disastrous results of the continuation of this quality among those who sit in the seats of the mighty in the naval organization, are clearly pointed out. Although intended to apply specially to the case of the Navy, the paper is also of interest from the Army standpoint.

Starting on the basis that military men are conservative, and that this conservatism is fraught with national danger, Admiral Sims indicates the necessity of so training the military mind in logical thinking as to eliminate, or at least minimize, this danger, and states his hope and belief that the training given at the Naval War College will have that effect.

To illustrate the influence of conservatism in the past, and to show its dangerous effects, the speaker gives numerous instances from the history of warfare, and also refers especially to more recent instances as showing how the conservatism of the past still tends to influence the military mind of the present. He takes up in chronological order the introduction of new weapons and methods of warfare in history, and shows that conservatism refused to accept the newer and better weapons and methods until convinced of their value by some disaster—defeat alone being accepted as a final demonstration.

Among the primitive weapons the bow was vastly superior for warfare to the sword, mace or pike, but almost

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without exception was never accepted as a proper arm for a knight or warrior. It was not until near the decline of the Roman Empire that the bow was finally used by the Romans. Similarly the cross-bow was an advance over the bow in power and efficiency, but it never became the predominant arm. The article then touches on the introduction of gunpowder and the development of artillery, and shows the reluctance of the military minds of the time to accept that arm, as, in the opinion of the military experts, artillery would never supplant the sword and the pike. Even as late as the 18th century the lance and pike were considered superior to the gun.

The change from oars to sail and from sail to steam is discussed, and the same opposition to change is noted. The writer dwells particularly on the latter change and cites numerous instances and authorities tending to show that "the parting with sails as the motive reliance of a ship of war, was characterized by an extreme conservatism," steam being accepted first as an auxiliary, for towing, etc. "The discovery that steam could be profitably used for the propulsion of ships, and the tardy adoption of the screw, did not for many years materially affect the construction of war vessels." The reluctance shown by naval authorities in general to the adoption and adaptation of steam to war vessels is shown by numerous quotations, from naval authorities of that period, showing the undesirability and danger of the change. In the fifties, Congress ordered the building of "six first-class steam frigates." They were full-rigged ships, with ridiculously small steam power. "It was deemed a sufficient concession to admit steam on any terms."

How military conservatism tends to prevent the acceptance of new inventions is illustrated by the cases of Fulton's floating battery (*The Demologos*), and Ericsson's *Monitor*, in which it required the pressure of war necessity, or strong political influence, or both, to insure even a hearing. There was the same reluctance and opposition in the case of iron ships, armor for war vessels, breech-loading guns, improved projectiles, etc.

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Having shown that the military minds of the past were dangerously conservative, the author then takes up the records of the present day.

The difficulties of establishing an efficient system of gunnery training in our Navy, and the adoption of the all-big-gun type of ship and of the submarine—against the military conservatism of our high naval authorities—are strongly emphasized, and the fact is noted that in the case of gunnery training its establishment required a peremptory order from the President, directing that the system should be put in practice at once, so great was the opposition by the majority of senior officers.

When, in 1903 and 1904, the gunnery training demonstrated the accuracy of the heavy turret guns at distances beyond the effective range of secondary batteries, thereby rendering useless their "smothering effect," and when, in consequence, a number of junior officers opposed the building of any more mixed-caliber ships and recommended the all-big-gun type, the recommendation was successfully opposed by most of the senior officers until its adoption was forced by President Roosevelt.

Although American designers are responsible for most of the principles upon which the success of the submarine depends, it was not well received by our Navy, and as late as our entry into the World War the capabilities of this type of vessel were seriously misunderstood. The same is true to an even greater degree of the airplane. While foreign countries were appropriating large sums of money for airplane development, our naval authorities were actually resisting its introduction.

The foregoing are quoted as examples of the deadly effect of unreasoning conservatism—and it is noteworthy that the more important and fundamental the improvement advocated, the more strenuous and prolonged has been the opposition and, consequently, the greater the delay in giving it impartial and unprejudiced consideration.

The present attitude of the Navy towards the submarine and the airplane, especially the latter, is characterized as being the same old military conservatism—a decided

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reluctance to admit their capabilities and the great possibilities of development. Admiral Sims states his fear that a consideration of the influence of these revolutionary weapons is not being approached in a judicial frame of mind. "In spite of adequate experiments clearly showing that airplanes could make a certain percentage of hits upon ship targets, a secretary of the navy expressed his disbelief in the ability of bombing planes to injure a vessel by affirming his willingness to stand on the bridge of the *Ostfriesland* during the proposed bombing experiments. It is of course not remarkable that a civilian should have made such a statement; but it is very significant that this statement was based on similar statements by naval officers and upon the assurance of naval advisers who were suffering the blighting influence of conservatism to an extent not exceeded by that of any of the examples just cited from history and from recent experience."

The article closes with an appeal for a change in the mental attitude with which all innovations have hitherto been received—unless the errors of the past are to be repeated—and with a warning against the dangers of lack of vision and of lack of confidence in conclusions derived from a candid and logical examination of the significance of established military facts.

LECTURE NOTES ON THE PRINCIPLES OF THE (BRITISH) FIELD SERVICE REGULATIONS

By Bt. Lt. Col. L. V. Bond, R. E. 9 pages.—*Royal Engineers Journal*, March, 1922, p. 141. (Reproduced from the July, 1921, *United Service Institution of India*.)

These notes refer to the British F.S.R. Part I (1914 reprint), in which the principles of war were not specifically enumerated. The author's views are briefly condensed below:

We are constantly told to base instruction on *principles*, to enforce and practice the *principles* of the Field Service Regulations. "The fundamental principles of War," say