

Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography

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Review

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Hoogenboom, Ari *Gustavus Vasa Fox of the Union Navy: A Biography*. Johns Hopkins University Press, \$40.00 hardcover ISBN 9780801889868

The Union's Naval Command

The recent string of books on the Union and Confederate navies demonstrates a resurgence of interest in this periodically neglected area of study. Most of these books, particularly Craig Symonds's *Lincoln and His Admirals* (2008), highlight the importance of Gustavus Vasa Fox. Drawing on his extensive work in the Fox papers and other archival collections, Ari Hoogenboom has produced a detailed and much needed study of Fox, who as Assistant Secretary of the Navy during the Civil War performed the duties of a modern Chief of Naval Operations. Fox organized the Union navy for war, help craft its strategy, and directed its operations. He became the nexus of contact between Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles, other government officials, naval contractors, and the navy's squadron and fleet commanders.

While the bulk of the book covers the Civil War, Hoogenboom devotes its first five chapters on Fox's early career. Following a fairly typical career in the antebellum navy, which featured patrols in East Asia and service in the Mexican War, Fox arranged with his superiors to serve on civilian mail steamers, one of which he commanded. He left the navy in 1855 to marry his true love, Virginia Woodbury, who did not want an absent husband. Fox worked for civilian shipping lines and then in the textile industry managing a factory. He benefited from his wife's political connections, particularly through her brother-in-law Montgomery Blair, who supported Abraham Lincoln in the 1860 election and became his Postmaster General, and her father Levi Woodbury, a presidential contender until his death in 1851.

Following the 1860 election, Fox developed a plan to relieve Fort Sumter. Blair brought it to Lincoln's attention and helped secure its acceptance against considerable opposition from other cabinet members. Administrative confusion

and disorganization delayed the launch of Fox's expedition, which arrived at Charleston as the fort capitulated. Rather than reinforcing it, Fox evacuated its small garrison. Despite this failure, Fox's energy and organizational ability impressed Lincoln who appointed him Assistant Secretary of the Navy shortly afterward. As Hoogenboom notes, this failed effort may have contributed to Fox's later fixation on Charleston, which clouded his judgment and led him to order several poorly planned and coordinated assaults on that city's defenses.

Hoogenboom describes Fox as "ebullient, impulsive, enthusiastic, optimistic, and full of faith;" traits that well complemented Welles, who was "austere, shrewd, deliberate, cautious, and suspicious" (213). Welles relied on Fox for his knowledge of nautical matters and naval operations and generally deferred to him on technical matters. Fox championed ironclads and larger ordnance as the keys to victory by seizing control of the Confederate coast and inland waterways. He played a critical role in planning and organizing the Port Royal expedition, which proved a model for later Union operations that tightened the Union blockade of the southern coast. Hoogenboom lauds Fox's strategic insight, operational oversight, and his direction of the blockade, which he credits with causing the Confederacy serious hardship. Like Fox, he denigrates the effectiveness of Confederate commerce raiding. The *Alabama* and her sister ships were distractions that contributed little to the outcome of the war.

Equally important as his direction of naval operations and promotion of talented, aggressive officers to squadron and fleet commands, Fox oversaw the tremendous expansion of the navy and the introduction of new ships. Fox became the leading champion of John Ericsson's monitors and the river ironclads designed by James B. Eads. The timely arrival of these new ships to check the CSS *Virginia* and support the attacks on Forts Henry and Fort Donelson was largely due to Fox. Throughout the war, he monitored the construction and modernizations of these ships, coordinating the efforts of often touchy civilian and naval engineers.

Coordinating joint operations with the army, proved more difficult. As Hoogenboom notes, Fox, who declared in mid-1862 that "my duties are two fold: first, to beat our southern friends; second, to beat the Army," was part of the problem (152). A little more analysis of the problems of joint operations during the Civil War would have improved this book. Similarly, Welles sometimes receives short shrift as Hoogenboom establishes Fox's critical importance to the Union war effort. Along with Hoogenboom's occasional

digressions into excessive detail, such as noting the weight of the Foxes' luggage on one of their trips, these are minor quibbles that hardly detract from the author's much needed assessment of Fox and his role in guiding the Union navy to victory. The book is essential reading for anyone interested in Civil War naval operations or the development of the Union navy.

The author of From Torpedoes to Aviation: Washington Irving Chambers and Technological Innovation in the New Navy, 1876 to 1913, Stephen K. Stein teaches at the University of Memphis and directs its Online History Program.