

### Now for the Contest: Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War

John Beeler

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

---

#### Recommended Citation

Beeler, John (2006) "Now for the Contest: Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.8.2.16

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol8/iss2/16>

## Review

Beeler, John

Spring 2006

**Roberts, William H.** *Now for the Contest: Coastal and Oceanic Naval Operations in the Civil War.* University of Nebraska Press, \$39.95 ISBN 803238614

Blockades, commerce, and amphibious assaults

Author braids together three major themes

**Now for the Contest**, by William Roberts, is the story of the naval war at sea during the Civil War. Roberts's narrative, however, does not take the usual shot and shell or great leaders approach to the naval war. Instead, he scrutinizes the conflict by identifying and examining three major aspects of the conflict. These campaigns, as he establishes them, are the blockade of the Southern coast, commerce raiding, and the projection of power ashore. With this orientation, his work is therefore, a book more about the Union navy rather than the Confederate navy. The author discusses these campaigns by taking an overall chronological approach, which allows him to view the three campaigns from the perspective of other events, battles and challenges faced by both navies. Throughout the book, Roberts discusses strategy, logistics, technology, personalities, and politics to embellish the narrative and to place the war in a perspective that is both clear and insightful.

A former Navy commander, Roberts weaves economic and technological threads into his account of the naval war. Picking up from his two previous books on ironclads, the author maintains that the war efforts of both the North and the South focused on technology as the means to an end for each to fight their adversary. Of course, economics greatly influenced the technological aspects of the war. Roberts relates how the economic and the industrial resources of both regions shaped the conflict as much as did strategy and politics. The North with its superior industry and technology eventually was able to defeat the industrially poor South. Simply, the South was too handicapped to implement many of the far-reaching and ambitious programs to build and acquire a navy. In

addition, the Union leadership made specific and focused efforts to stop specific activities such as overseas acquisitions. The South attempted to use innovative technology such as ironclads, torpedoes, and submarines to overcome the industrial disparity it faced. The use of innovative technology, however, failed to change the war's direction for the Confederacy because it was never able to surmount the overwhelming superior strength and capacity of Northern industry. The Confederates, however, did realize some successes with submarines and mines.

One of the author's reoccurring themes is ironclads. Both navies utilized much of their efforts and budgets building and deploying these warships. This, of course, influenced the strategy on either side. Roberts appraises the rapid technological changes in steam power, ordnance, and armor. The contrast between the highly technical Union monitors compared with the less technical and singular designed Confederate ironclads required different deployment strategies and tactical considerations. Fully discussed within the text is the ability of the Union and Confederate navies to utilize their specifically designed ironclads. Also throughout the narrative, the author compares both Union and Confederate strengths and weaknesses. He looks at their respective leadership, the bureaus and organizations, their conduct of the war, their political organization, and the success of their mobilization efforts. Overall, Roberts gives the Union leadership higher marks in their efforts to defeat the Confederacy.

Roberts maintains that the three major coastal and oceanic campaigns of the American Civil War were operationally much like the American Revolution and the War of 1812. He claims that like these previous wars, the dominant naval power was largely unhampered by the other and enjoyed relative freedom of operations, and he also concludes that the blockade stood out as the major effort that characterized the naval war. The blockade succeeded in destroying the economy of the South and this had a wide impact on the war effort. Roberts judges that Confederate commerce raiding, aimed to disrupt the Union blockade, was not relatively successful. He argues that while this effort diverted ships from the blockade as well as other military actions and combined operations, it never diverted enough ships to alter the Union Navy Department's strategy. Nor did commerce raiding keep merchant ships from reaching American ports in large enough numbers to harm the war effort. Roberts though, contends that the Union navy's efforts of projecting power ashore succeeded. The amphibious landings and combined operations served to keep the Confederate military leaders off balance. While Robert E. Lee's defense in depth slowed the Union's advance into

the interior, the Confederate field commanders still had to keep troops nearby to negate the advantages of mobility and fire support that the Union navy provided. The defense in depth also tempered Confederate strategy by forcing the Confederate Secretary of the Navy Mallory to utilize his naval force differently. Roberts determines that the use of ironclads by the Confederates had mixed results. He contends that they never successfully challenged the Union navy's aims to project power ashore nor did they did they succeed in contesting the Union navy's control of the coast.

Had Roberts included riverine operations, **Now for the Contest** would have been an important one-volume history of the naval war. This topic might have sufficed as the author's fourth general campaign. Roberts though, specifically elected to focus his study on oceanic operations. While brown water operations were outside the scope of the book, they consumed much of the budgets, resources and manpower of both navies, and significantly altered and affected the overall naval war depicted in the narrative. Operations on the Western rivers had a huge impact on strategic considerations and greatly altered the conduct of the war. This aside, Roberts has provided his readers with a thought-provoking and even-handed overview of the coastal and oceanic operations of the American Civil War. **Now for the Contest** is highly recommended for those looking for a book that is much more than a commonplace survey of naval operations during the Civil War.

*Robert M. Browning Jr. is the Chief Historian of the U.S. Coast Guard. He is the author of three books on the Civil War including: From Cape Charles to Cape Fear: The North Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War and Success is All that Was Expected: The South Atlantic Blockading Squadron During the Civil War. He is currently working on a book on the Western Gulf Blockading Squadron.*