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Abstract of McMullen Naval History Symposium 2017 Lecture,
U.S. Naval Academy.
September 15th 2017.

‘The Abolishment of the British Admiralty and Its Correlation with Reform of the United States Department of the Navy 1945-1964.’

James W.E. Smith

This abstract provides an overview of a lecture delivered on September 15th 2017 at the McMullen Naval History Symposium, U.S. Naval Academy.

Overview:

The creation of the British Ministry of Defence [MoD] and the United States Department of Defense [DoD] are often overlooked in the history of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy [USN]. The process in which they were created and the changes they forced upon the two navy's form a critical juncture in their narratives. These organisational changes covering the civil-military relationship, higher decision-making, command, control and procurement went on to impact and shape every aspect of defence in the United Kingdom and the United States in the rapidly changing post-Second World War order. The naval perspective provides not only an account of the ongoing evolution and amendments to sea and naval power but a journey to our root understanding and debates on the higher organisation of defence that resonates with questions and issues across a broad platform of matters in defence and security for both nations till this day.

Surveying post-1950s Anglo-American naval history, an often overlooked era of the field, you will find a spectrum of debate covering matters ranging from grand strategy, naval warfare and study of every minute detail of technology. It can be no surprise that many modern defence organisations in the West have turned their backs on the study of history. Some historians frivolously discarded Professor John Laughton's warning that for their voice to be heard in modern defence debates, they must continue to write with relevance and interest for the navies of today and tomorrow. An example of this can be found of the complex modern problem of the management of the vast monolithic style defence departments that exist in the machinery of the British and American governments. Strikingly apparent in both tackling the challenge of running modern defence is also the shape, scope and strategy of the Royal Navy and the United States Navy and their relationship with the creation of unified defence.¹ Ignoring administration and organisation with particular emphasis on the higher organisation of defence hampers our ability to analyse and reflect on the efficiency and effectiveness of the military and those who manage it by placing an unknown variable in a mission critical environment. The success of the naval service, not only depends on practitioners but the manner in which the Department of Defense and Ministry of Defence think and communicate

¹ Commonly termed in the United States as ‘The Pentagon’.

to the public and government. Knowledge and education of how the Department of the Navy became part of the Department of Defence and how the British Admiralty was abolished are vital to understanding the narrative of either navy in the decades that follow and their actions, the mantras, people, products and every other aspect of their business to this day.

At a glance, the post 1945 narrative for Navy's might appear to be particularly dull with the first phase of the cold war, the triumph of Sea Power in the Falklands War and whatever the more recent years can be called, but I can assure you this period it is full of intrigue as much as you will find in any other century of naval warfare. It is also worth considering that humans are engaged and intrigued with living memory and media where they can reason with influences and factors of the era they live in than those they are neither responsible for or understand of the past. Both public, military and decision maker engagement on the basis of more recent times, particularly as the world war two generation has nearly been extinguished is a pertinent reminder of the value of studying history with the signs and portents it can offer.

The ability to nurture intellectual discussion, continually prod navies to progress and tackle the many challenges of today and tomorrow often forgets that the organisational environment which includes matters such as policy, research, history, command and control and administration is undoubtedly been a factor in the fighting effectiveness and efficiency of many navies particularly the Royal Navy and United States Navy. Yet in some courses studying 400 years of naval history it seems to come to an abrupt end in 1950 so it is little surprise that there is much, if not more than other centuries, still be clarified and recorded of recent decades and an audience to get re-engaged. Understanding the process and impact of the abolishment of the British Admiralty and the integration of the US Department of the Navy into the Department of Defence lays out that to understand naval history and wider military events that follow right up until today require us to understand this massive, expensive and monolithic state departments. This includes how our military goes about its business, the way our civil servants and military think, write and speak and how nations conduct the range of operations we have seen transpire since the Second World War. To frame this on a bigger context most of the speakers at the conference and wider research community do so under the backdrop of the existence of the British Admiralty.

Studying the final years of the Admiralty and Department of the Navy I have found allows you to view them, both in their strengths and weaknesses in a broader more meaningful context than the often narrow-mindedness that focuses on some event or interaction with them. Organisations that would follow on from them would influence many to have a less than positive few and you can see that played out in literature of the past few decades. You cannot also ignore that an agenda to discredit service ministries is the product of those who keenly like to distract many from scrutinising the Pentagon and Ministry of defence today. In simple terms, it is useful and insightful to know the end of the narrative as much as the beginning or interim to get a more comprehensive, well rounded and balanced perspective. By exploring the fundamental structural changes that happened to either navies with the higher organisation of defence, control and civil-military relationship provides the vital starting point and most effective platform to both analyse and interrogate the performance of maritime strategy and the navies in the latter 20th century and beyond.