Quest for glory: The naval career of John A Dahlgren, 1826-1870

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Quest for glory: The naval career of John A. Dahlgren, 1826–1870

Legg, Thomas James, Ph.D.
The College of William and Mary, 1994

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QUEST FOR GLORY:
THE NAVAL CAREER OF JOHN A. DAHLGREN, 1826-1870

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia
In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

by
Thomas James Legg
1994

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APPROVAL SHEET

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

John Dahlgren is among the most famous officers in the history of the United States Navy. One of the first officers to hold the rank of admiral, which was first established during the Civil War, Dahlgren's career is prominent in almost every written account of the nineteenth-century American navy. But unlike most famous naval figures who are usually recognized for their achievements in battle, Dahlgren is best known as an ordnance specialist. When he is mentioned in naval histories, it is almost always in connection with the large cannon that he designed in the decade or so prior to the Civil War. Shaped like a giant soda-bottle, wide at the breech and tapered narrow at the muzzle, the distinctive Dahlgren gun was the navy's primary weapon on its ships during the Civil War, and the main source of Dahlgren's prominence.

I was initially interested in John Dahlgren for two reasons, neither of which had anything to do with his ordnance career. I was intrigued by his friendship with President Abraham Lincoln during the Civil War. I also knew that Dahlgren had kept a personal Journal, which I had seen printed excerpts of in numerous places, especially in Dahlgren's Memoirs, and in various volumes of The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies of the War of the Rebellion. It was my hope that his Journal would v

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provide fresh insights into the workings of the Lincoln administration.

Not knowing what to expect when I arrived at the Syracuse University library where the complete manuscript copy of Dahlgren's journal is located, I was nearly overwhelmed by the magnitude of the document. Having started it in 1824, at the age of fifteen, the journal is in fifteen volumes, containing a total of more than two thousand pages. Dahlgren was especially prolific in his journal writing during the Civil War. For those four years, the journal encompasses seven volumes and more than thirteen hundred pages. Despite periodic revelations about Lincoln and his administration, however, I discovered that Dahlgren's journal lacked the overall depth of information contained in other important Civil War diaries, like the one kept by Lincoln's secretary of the navy, Gideon Welles.

Although I was disappointed that Dahlgren's journal did not provide the type of information that I had hoped to find, as I read Dahlgren's personal account of his life and career, I became increasingly intrigued by the man. I quickly realized that Dahlgren's career merited attention on its own.

First and foremost, this dissertation is an account of John Dahlgren's long naval career. Beginning with his appointment to the navy in 1826, as an anonymous sixteen year old midshipman, it details his climb from obscurity to vi

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the relative fame and recognition that he enjoyed by the end of his life as one of only a handful of officers who reached the rank of admiral during the Civil War. His career demonstrates how many military men clawed their way up through the ranks, through whatever means they could. Dahlgren's Civil War career is also extremely revealing, especially his involvement with the Union's military campaign against Charleston. This campaign demonstrates the absolute obsession that the North, especially the Navy Department, had with trying to destroy this city. Additionally, Dahlgren's Civil War career shows the Navy Department in an entirely different light than the one in which it is usually seen. Compared to the War Department, the Navy Department has generally been viewed as being relatively flawless during the war, and its few failings have been portrayed as innocent and well meaning mistakes. The circumstances surrounding Dahlgren's assignment to, and subsequent command of, the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron shows that this was not the case, as Dahlgren was primarily a pawn in the Navy Department's and the Lincoln administration's battles with their Congressional enemies.

This dissertation is also the story of Dahlgren the man. It details the private side of his obsessive quest for personal glory and analyzes the ways in which he struggled to reconcile his insatiable ambition with the realities of his career. While he enjoyed the outward trappings of
success, a reputation as a brilliant ordnance expert and the highest rank in the navy, Dahlgren died a bitter and disappointed man; that was because he never experienced victory in battle, which was the ultimate measure of greatness for a naval hero. Thus, Dahlgren's lifelong quest for glory was never completely fulfilled.

Before I began this project, whenever I read the acknowledgements section of a book I often wondered how an author seemingly engaged in a solitary pursuit could owe so much to so many. Now I know.

My first and greatest thanks belong to my wife and best friend, Judy Ridner. Quite simply, if it was not for her, I never would have completed this dissertation. By the time I reached the end of my last chapter, I am sure that she came to dread hearing the question, Can you read this? But despite working on and completing her own dissertation in history, she always managed to find the time to read and comment on my work, as well as to offer countless words of encouragement. While I would not recommend that any couple try to complete two Ph.D.s at the same time, I will forever cherish receiving our degrees at the same graduation ceremony.

I will also always owe a debt of gratitude to Professor Ludwell Johnson. I came to William and Mary a Yankee hoping to learn about the Civil War from the other side. Despite my northern heritage, which he graciously,
suggested was no fault of my own, he willingly accepted me as a student. I am indeed fortunate. Time after time he has taught me to consider things from as many perspectives as possible, and while we may disagree on some things, we certainly agree on much more. As an advisor for this dissertation, he has been simply marvelous, always helpful, and even more importantly, always patient.

I also offer my thanks to three other William and Mary historians. Professors Richard Sherman, Ed Crapol, and Phil Funigiello agreed to the onerous task of serving as readers. Thanks to all three for their prompt attention to my needs in the midst of everything else that they had to do.

The history graduate student community at William and Mary is indeed a special one. My Ph.D. classmates, Julie Richter, Wade Shaffer, Ann Smart Martin, Chris Hendricks, and Mary Ferrari, by finishing their degrees, provided me with extra incentive to keep on going during my most trying moments. Mark Fernandez, John Barrington, Todd Pfannestiel, and Mary Carroll Johansen are just a few of many others who made my stay in Williamsburg one of the happiest in my life. How can I ever forget having a room named in my honor? or, winning the "Bubba Smith" award? I hope that the spirit of comraderie and cooperation which has characterized the program for the entire time that I have been here will continue.

I had the good fortune to enjoy a one-year stay with
another group of historians. Judy allowed me to tag along while she was a fellow at the Philadelphia Center for Early American Studies. Special thanks go to Director Richard Dunn, Rose Beller, Donna Rilling, Jim Williams, John Majewski, Anne Verplanck, John Hart, Roderick McDonald, Thane Bryant, and Wayne Bodle for always making me feel like a part of the group. Most of all, I would like to thank Allen Guelzo. From the moment that I met him, Allen treated me as an equal colleague. Our long luncheon discussions about the "War" were not only a welcome relief during my second stay in a bastion of colonial American studies, but also valuable in helping to sharpen my own thinking about many complex and controversial issues. Further thanks are necessary for his agreeing to serve as the outside reader for this work. His incisive comments can only serve to improve the quality of it. I only hope that someday I will be able to read as fast as Allen seems to write.

Of course, this project could never have been completed without the assistance of many librarians, historians, researchers, and archivists. I want to thank the staffs at the Earl Gregg Swem Library at William and Mary, the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, the New York Historical Society, the New York Public Library, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, the Duke University Library, the Army War College, and the National Archives. I owe special thanks to the research specialists, archivists,
and librarians at the Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, especially Mike Klein, Fred Bauman, and Chuck Kelly. While they were not able to make my six months of camping on the outskirts of Washington enjoyable, the daily comraderie they offered certainly made the experience more bearable.

Finally, I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, Helen and George Legg. Their love and support, in all of its many forms, was always unconditional. What more could any child ever hope to receive? And Mom, I finally have the answer to the question you asked me again and again: The "paper" is finished.
This dissertation is, first and foremost, an account of John Dahlgren’s long and often controversial naval career. Beginning with his appointment to the navy in 1826, it details his climb from obscurity to the relative fame and recognition that he enjoyed by the end of his life: first as the noted designer of the distinctive, bottle-shaped Dahlgren gun, which was the navy’s primary cannon during the Civil War, and, second, as one of only a few officers to attain the rank of admiral during the Civil War.

Dahlgren’s career, both as an ordnance specialist and as a line officer, demonstrates how many officers scrambled up the military ladder. Using whatever means they could, including developing and utilizing political connections as well as conducting personal public relations campaigns, success often had little to do with true professional merit.

Dahlgren’s Civil War career is also extremely important. His involvement with the Union’s military campaign against Charleston reveals the absolute obsession that the North, especially the Union navy, had with trying to destroy this city. Additionally, Dahlgren’s war career shows the Navy Department in an entirely different light than the one in which it is usually seen. Compared to the War Department, the Navy Department has generally been viewed as being relatively flawless during the war, and its few failings have been portrayed as innocent and well meaning mistakes. The circumstances surrounding Dahlgren’s appointment to, and subsequent command of, the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron shows that this was not the case, as Dahlgren was primarily a pawn in both the Navy Department’s and the Lincoln administration’s battles against their Congressional enemies.

This dissertation is also the story of Dahlgren the man. It details the private side of his obsessive quest for personal glory and analyzes the ways in which he struggled to reconcile his insatiable ambition with the realities of his career. While he enjoyed the outward trappings of success, a reputation as a brilliant ordnance expert and the highest rank in the navy, Dahlgren died a bitter and disappointed man. Because he never experienced victory in battle, which was the ultimate measure of greatness for a naval hero, Dahlgren’s lifelong quest for glory was never completely fulfilled.
QUEST FOR GLORY:

THE NAVAL CAREER OF JOHN A. DAHLGREN, 1826-1870
CHAPTER I

Before the War

"I have long since dear Mary given up hope of being a great man myself."

John Dahlgren's navy career began out of necessity. Born in Philadelphia on November 13, 1809, he was the oldest child of Bernard Ulrich Dahlgren and Martha Rowan Dahlgren. As a young boy he received the benefits of a classical education, as had his father, who was a graduate of Uppsala University in Sweden. But in 1824 his father died suddenly, ending the youngster's formal education. Fortunately, John Dahlgren was not, as one of his father's business associates told the secretary of the navy, left "to establish his own fortunes," and the political influence of family friends won him a difficult-to-secure midshipman's appointment, which he accepted on February 1, 1826.

Because the Navy Academy did not exist at this time, a midshipman's education came from serving on board ship under the watchful eyes of experienced officers. Dahlgren served his first two cruises aboard the U.S. Frigate Macedonian of the Brazil Squadron and the U.S. Sloop Ontario of the Mediterranean Squadron. Shortly after returning to the
United States in early 1832, he took the midshipman's qualifying exam along with the rest of the 1826 appointees. The results confirmed the rigorous nature of the exam; only 31 of the 70 who took it passed, with Dahlgren ranking ninth overall.2

After a brief tour of duty aboard the receiving ship Sea Gull located at the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Dahlgren received orders to report to the United States Coast Survey. This appointment changed his career. The idea of a general and comprehensive survey of the country's coastline had originated with the members of the American Philosophical Society who recognized the needs of the nation's burgeoning commercial interests. First recommended to President Thomas Jefferson, the survey had experienced a number of false starts but was firmly established by the early 1830s.3

Assigning navy officers to the "Survey," as it was commonly called, served a dual purpose. First, in an era of an extremely small peacetime navy, it provided duty for some of the navy's excess officers. Second, it provided them with scientific, mathematic, and survey training. The superintendent of the Survey in the 1830s was Ferdinand Rudolph Hassler, a world renowned mathematician and geodist. He insisted, according to A. Hunter DuPree, "that the Survey be a true contribution to science and not just a compiled map." He also believed and made it known to everyone that
as a scientist he should not be subject to interference of any kind.  

Dahlgren worked closely with the brilliant but temperamental Swiss scientist while he received training in proper surveying techniques. Hassler’s skill at political maneuvering in Washington was not lost on the junior navy officer. Typically, navy officers assigned to duty on the Survey served a two year tour, afterward returning to the navy for regular duty. Moreover, while assigned to the Survey, officers continued to receive the standard pay for their rank. Hassler and Dahlgren fought a long-running battle to exempt Dahlgren from both practices. Hassler appealed all the way to President Martin Van Buren, who in March 1837, approved a pay raise for Dahlgren from his midshipman’s salary of $750 to the rather princely sum of $3,000 "aggregate annual compensation." Dahlgren also stayed on the Survey past the usual two years.  

Along with the gigantic pay raise, Dahlgren received a promotion to the rank of lieutenant. Within months, however, neither seemed very important. Long hours of tedious, eye-straining work had apparently taken a toll on his vision. The problem apparently became so severe that in the spring of 1837, Dahlgren requested a medical leave of absence from the Survey.  

Through the summer of 1837, Dahlgren and Hassler kept in close contact. Hassler told Dahlgren that his condition
"is very painful to me" and if Dahlgren could "come upon some idea by which I can do something to assist you[,] I should be glad to do it." Dahlgren did have something in mind. He asked Hassler to intervene on his behalf to secure approval for a trip to Paris where he could seek medical advice and to continue his $3,000 annual salary, based on the claim that his condition had been caused by his work on the Coast Survey. Hassler agreed to Dahlgren's proposal and arranged Treasury Department approval. Officially, however, Dahlgren was going to Paris to purchase surveying equipment not available in the United States.7

The trip to Paris failed to cure Dahlgren. Moreover, he also failed to purchase any survey equipment, the ostensible purpose for the trip. When Hassler learned of this he flew into a rage. He told Dahlgren, "It puts me in a bad predicament." What was he to say if anyone "asked me what you did for the C.[oast] S.[urvey] in Paris?" Although Dahlgren apparently proposed to return the salary he received while in Europe, Hassler warned him, "You must not say a word about giving up your compensation, it is all over, provided nothing is said, otherwise it may have very disagreeable consequences."8

The advice came too late. The first thing that Dahlgren had done on his return from Europe was to report to the Navy Department, which was normal procedure. The meeting with Secretary of the Navy Mahlon Dickerson quickly
became the center of controversy. According to Dickerson, Dahlgren requested a seven day leave in order to visit his home in Philadelphia. Because Dahlgren asserted that his eyesight had not improved enough to resume regular duty, Dickerson gave him a medical leave of absence effective at the end of his seven day leave. This removed him from the Coast Survey and his $3,000 salary. More than likely Dahlgren also admitted to Dickerson that he had not purchased any survey equipment while in Paris, because the secretary of the navy spoke to his counterpart in the Treasury Department who immediately wrote to Dahlgren questioning whether he was entitled to any pay for his trip to Europe. Afterward, Dahlgren told Hassler of his predicament and the head of the Coast Survey went to see Dickerson. After hearing Dickerson's version of events it was apparent to Hassler that Dahlgren had not followed his advice. He told Dahlgren that he should not have done "so much talking" to the Secretary "as he thinks you unfit." Fortunately, Hassler told Dahlgren, Dickerson had said that Dahlgren could reapply for the Coast Survey "and he will grant it." Dahlgren, however, disagreed with Hassler's assessment of events and apparently told Hassler so. At this Hassler seemed to lose all confidence in Dahlgren, telling him that he was "almost rather inclined" not to do "anything else." Despite his inclination Hassler did plead Dahlgren's case,
again going to President Van Buren; but this time the President sided with the Secretary of the Navy. Dahlgren was put on a leave of absence and told to report for duty in January 1839.10

A new secretary of the navy, James K. Paulding, was appointed during Dahlgren's medical leave. When Dahlgren reported for his next assignment as ordered he told the secretary that his eyesight still prevented him from returning to active duty. Paulding asked Dahlgren to request a furlough, the attraction of this for the secretary of the navy was that Dahlgren's pay would be cut in half to $600. This suggestion initiated a lengthy and acrimonious exchange between Dahlgren and Paulding, with the navy secretary finally admitting that while he could not force Dahlgren to go on furlough, it would be becoming to him as an officer to request it. Dahlgren refused, as was his right. His refusal created a stalemate, although Paulding told Dahlgren that any requests for leave in the future must be accompanied by a navy surgeon's certificate attesting to his disability.11

Dahlgren was not sitting still. Just prior to requesting another leave he had married Mary Bunker, and he wrote to Hassler that he was not about "to live, or rather, starve on $1,200 a year." Could Hassler, Dahlgren asked, assist him in securing a government pension, and "if granted," he told Hassler, he would resign his commission.
Again Hassler intervened on his behalf. Hassler "went to the Capitol" and convinced Congressman Seargent Smith Prentiss of Mississippi to present a claim for Dahlgren. But because it was so late in the session Prentiss did not have time to lobby for support and the proposal failed.12

Dahlgren tried everything he could to get the secretary of the navy to relent; ultimately he was successful. On May 31, 1839, Paulding wrote to Dahlgren demanding to know if he had gone to President Van Buren again. Dahlgren responded that he had told some people of his plight, but only in passing conversation. He had not asked anyone, Dahlgren claimed, to intervene on his behalf. If anyone had, he stated innocently, they had done so without his knowledge or authorization.13

Someone had indeed gone to President Van Buren. On May 25, John A. Quitman wrote to the President that his "young friend" Dahlgren had told him of his problems and being well acquainted with his "most respectable family" he hoped the President could do something for him. Quitman, the former governor of Mississippi, lived in Natchez, the home of Charles Dahlgren, John Dahlgren's younger brother. Quitman obviously had influence with the President as Van Buren told Secretary of the Navy Paulding, "Mr. Quitman's representations are entitled to full confidence." While furious, Paulding also realized that Dahlgren had out maneuvered him and as a result he continued to grant him
leaves of absence at regular three month intervals until he left office in March 1841.14

It is hard to say with any degree of certainty how badly Dahlgren’s eyesight had deteriorated. Certainly Hassler’s comments and behavior suggest that he believed Dahlgren was experiencing some kind of eye problems. But Dahlgren certainly never lost his vision entirely and there are a number of indications that Dahlgren may have exaggerated his condition. During his trip to Paris he became acquainted with the ordnance experiments of General Henri Joseph Paixhans and shortly after returning to the United States, Dahlgren published an English translation of Paixhans’s treatise on naval ordnance. Also, during the entire time while on medical leave he maintained his professional correspondence with the Navy Department and others as he tried to continue his leave and to secure a government pension. During this time he also continued writing in his private journal and he successfully ran a small farm.15

There are a number of possible explanations why Dahlgren might have exaggerated his vision problems. He clearly enjoyed the technical work of the Coast Survey. It is possible that he thought that he might keep working on the Coast Survey as long as he could not perform regular navy duties. His experience on the Ontario provides another possible explanation for his refusing to leave the Survey.
During his second naval cruise his ship was almost lost at sea. Dahlgren wrote repeatedly about this close brush with death. Could the near disaster have soured him on a life at sea? In addition, by this time he was courting Mary Bunker and the two of them were married on January 8, 1839. Staying with the Coast Survey would have allowed him to remain with his wife. His devotion to her would be the major reason for his seeking shore duty later in his career. Finally, after being awarded the pay increase to $3,000, he was receiving more than twice the salary for a lieutenant on regular duty. Any, or all of these factors could account for Dahlgren exaggerating his condition.16

Whether he exaggerated his condition or not, his fondest memories of this period in his life had nothing to do with his victory over Paulding. After marrying Mary Bunker, the daughter of a Philadelphia businessman, the newlyweds purchased a small farm in Bucks County, just outside Philadelphia. There, he and his wife began life as a small independent farm family. The farm kept Dahlgren busy and in his journal entries he expressed the concerns of every farmer, the weather, his quest to find inexpensive and dependable help, the price of supplies, and the price being paid for crops became his daily concerns. The great joy of these years were the births of his first three children, Charles, Elizabeth, and Ulric, whom he affectionately called Charley, Lizzie, and Ully. He did not record a word about
the navy in his journal; it was almost as if that part of his life was over.17

Dahlgren continued to receive three month leave extensions through March 1841. In June the situation changed. On June 23, he informed the Navy Department, "[m]y prospects of being able once more to return to duty are happily confirmed by the improvement which my sight has received." What had happened? Had he suddenly regained his eyesight? Did the replacement of Secretary of the Navy Paulding in March have anything to do with this change? Whatever occurred, one thing was sure, Dahlgren was not willing to go back to active duty, not yet, lest, as he told the new secretary of the navy, George E. Badger, his vision, still susceptible to deterioration, would once again be impaired. Thus he requested yet another leave, cautioning if he did not receive it he might become "an invalid for life."18

Dahlgren's request was granted and he remained on leave status until the spring of 1842. Finally, almost a year after admitting that his vision had improved, he returned to active duty. Amazingly he did not have to go back to sea; instead he was again assigned to the receiving ship in the Philadelphia Navy Yard. Back on active duty, Dahlgren sold the farm and he and his family moved to Wilmington, Delaware. From there he made a difficult daily trip to Philadelphia, out of the house at 5:30 a.m. not to return

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until 7:00 p.m. Dahlgren, knowing better than anyone the difficulty in keeping duty on shore, continued this routine for more than a year without complaint. It was also not possible, he knew, to stay at the Philadelphia Navy Yard forever. In the summer of 1843 he began to angle for the best billet he could get. He requested duty as flag lieutenant on the Missouri, but perhaps because of all the years of being out of the normal duty rotation, his request was denied. Although "exceedingly disappointed," later that summer he received orders for service afloat aboard the U.S. Frigate Cumberland, assigned to the Mediterranean Squadron.19

The Cumberland cruise was his first as a married man, and when he left his home on September 26, 1843, he left behind his pregnant wife and three young children. Both husband and wife felt the separation intensely. On the day he left, Mary Dahlgren started writing entries in her husband’s journal and continued doing so until his return more than two years later. "My dear husband left at noon today for Boston, to join the ship. The very heavens seem to join me in the general sorrow & it is indeed a most melancholy day--surely the saddest one of my life. Alas! But partings should ever come!" John Dahlgren was just as heartbroken about leaving home and he wrote often to his wife to explain why he was forced to go to sea. "In meeting this great evil I am satisfied that I am only discharging a
duty to you and to our little ones, and this must be done to
the best of my abilities."20

Leaving behind his wife and children weighed heavily on
him. In his letters home he continually bemoaned his
absence and called himself the "weary wanderer." As the
cruise lengthened his letters took an increasing tone of
despondency concerning his ability to take care of his
family. As early as January 1844, he began to mention
possible ways of avoiding sea duty in the future. Perhaps
this was just the normal talk of a sailor away from home,
but in the spring his planning became more than just mere
rhetoric. On May 23, 1844, he received word that his son
John, born on November 19, 1843, the same day the Cumberland
sailed from Boston, had died. He became sullen and bemoaned
his past and the prospects for the future. "I have long
since dear Mary given up hope of being a great man
myself--there was some vague shadowing of the kind before
25--but that you know is past some time since, and now if I
can put my little ones in the way of being useful to their
fellow beings as James Watt, it will do." Clearly his
comment about "being a great man" referred to his time as
Hassler's assistant, but now his only concern was getting
home and being with his family. As the Cumberland's return
to the United States became less and less certain because of
the growing possibility of war with Mexico he grew even more
despondent. At one point he considered asking his
commanding officer, Commodore Joseph Smith, to send him home on an outgoing stores ship, but then thought better of it.  

The *Cumberland* cruise marked a turning point in Dahlgren's career. It convinced him he needed to find a way to stay close to his family; at the same time he recognized that he only had the navy to depend on for a career. But then he hit upon the perfect solution and he detailed his idea to his wife. "When I do return, as it is now clear that there is to be nothing but the Navy pay, it will not do to attempt renting a farm, for I should soon be ordered to sea and must go, as the furlough pay of $600 would not support us. Now there is a comfortable place in the Ordnance line which I could have. It is in Springfield, Mass. about 100 miles west of Boston on the R.I R[ail] Road to Albany. And if you could make up your mind to settle there, I could keep clear of salt water for five years." He admitted to his wife that this scenario would be improved if he could secure a post in Philadelphia, as he had done in 1842, but they had to choose from the "least of evils."  

While it would be more than nine months before Dahlgren would return to the United States, he had decided to try to secure a position in the ordnance department. Shortly after arriving back home, Dahlgren received a letter from his former commander informing him that he had recommended him for ordnance duty. While nothing materialized from this, later that year Smith again asked Dahlgren if he wanted him
to try to secure an appointment in ordnance for him. A few months later Dahlgren received orders to report to the Washington Navy Yard for special duty connected with ordnance research.23

While personal factors were the overriding motive behind Dahlgren's decision to seek a position in the Navy's Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography, he also had professional reasons for doing so. Through the early nineteenth-century, neither naval guns nor battle tactics had changed much for centuries. Until this time the standard ship battery consisted of a combination of different size smoothbore cannon which primarily fired solid-shot; the basic formula for a vessel's strength was the number of guns it carried and the total weight of metal it fired in a single broadside. In this era of wooden ships and solid-shot, captains attempted to maneuver their vessels across the enemy's bow or stern where there were few guns, and tried to overwhelm their opponents with the weight of their broadside. Because the guns fired solid-shot few ships were actually sunk. Rather, victories were achieved by the destruction of masts and rigging, making the vessel unmaneuverable, and by killing and wounding the crew of the enemy vessel. The employment of these tactics thus led to the construction of increasingly larger vessels carrying more and larger guns.24
Under these conditions, the British Navy, with its great advantage in both the number of large ships and guns, was the world’s leading naval power. But in the aftermath of France’s defeat in the Napoleonic Wars, French General Henri Paixhans argued that France could contest Britain by revamping its fleet. Paixhans’s plan had many components, but his greatest influence was in ordnance, especially in pioneering the use of shell-guns on naval vessels.

Explosive shells had been experimented with and used on a sporadic basis from at least as early as the fourteenth-century but they had never been widely adopted for naval use. While the advantages of using explosive shells in lieu of solid-shot appear obvious enough, a number of factors, including the difficulty of safely storing shells on board ship, and their propensity not to explode, or even worse, to explode prematurely thus threatening the ship which fired them as much as the vessel which the shells were intended to destroy, kept navies from adopting shell-guns. All of these problems were largely a consequence of poor fuze design. Paixhans helped to correct the problems with explosive shells and after demonstrating the destructive capabilities of the weapon against some old hulks, France began to employ some shell-guns on its ships.

Both Britain and the United States eventually followed the French lead. The United States adopted new ordnance
regulations in 1841 and 1845 which placed 8-inch shell-guns on American vessels and simplified ship ordnance by making the 32-pounder the only solid-shot gun used. Like France and Britain, however, the United States only used shell-guns on a limited basis, and the guns were strictly considered an auxiliary weapon to the primary system of solid-shot 32-pounders. Thus, in 1845, an American first-class frigate carried a battery of eight shell-guns of 8-inch bore and forty-two solid-shot 32-pounder cannon.\textsuperscript{27}

Dahlgren first became acquainted with Paixhans’s work while in France in the late 1830s. He was so impressed with his ideas that he translated Paixhans’s treatise on shell-guns into English. Like Paixhans, Dahlgren was very concerned with his navy’s strength compared to Britain. Dahlgren believed that by taking Paixhans’s ideas one step further, and employing an all shell-gun battery, the United States would better be able to challenge its larger and more powerful rival. From the moment that he stepped foot in the Washington Navy Yard, Dahlgren began what turned out to be a seven and a half year effort to get the navy to abandon its system of armament which relied primarily on solid-shot guns and only a few shell-guns and to replace it with a system which exclusively utilized shell-guns.\textsuperscript{28}

When Dahlgren first joined the ordnance department in January 1847, his goal was to replace the navy’s solid-shot 32-pounders with the existing 8-inch shell-guns. Dahlgren
quite rightly argued that the larger explosive projectile from the shell-gun was superior to the smaller solid-shot projectiles fired from the 32-pounders. But even though most of the problems associated with explosive shells had been solved by the late 1840s, he still faced opposition. This had less to do with technical matters and instead was more a consequence of the long held fears about shell-guns held by many of the navy's older officers, who, as one naval historian recently noted, "opposed progressive reform and technological innovation because they held very traditional ideas about the Navy and its role." 29

Not long after he joined the ordnance department, however, Dahlgren's goal changed from simply wanting to do away with the navy's shot-guns to replacing all of the navy's guns with a gun of his own design. The Dahlgren gun, as his gun quickly came to be called, offered a number of advantages over the navy's other guns, both 32-pounder shot-guns and 8-inch shell-guns. Because of principles of ballistics the low velocity Dahlgren guns offered slightly improved accuracy over the higher velocity shot-guns. While the navy's existing 8-inch shell-guns also offered this advantage, Dahlgren's guns were of nine-inch and eleven-inch bore, giving them greater striking power. It was another feature of his guns altogether, however, and one which he did not even mention when he first proposed them, that most distinguished them from other guns. In the mid-1840s, army
ordnance specialist Colonel George Bomford discovered that the pressure inside the barrel of a gun when fired was much higher than previously believed and rather than declining at a steady rate as the projectile moved down the barrel, the pressure fell off rapidly as soon as the projectile moved. Dahlgren designed his guns to conform to Bomford's discovery. His guns thus had a unique soda-bottle shape, the advantage of which was that it concentrated the metal in the gun to correspond with the interior pressures. This made the gun less susceptible to bursting, a relatively common occurrence in the nineteenth-century. The unique shape of the Dahlgren gun had another benefit. It gave it a more favorable weight-of-gun to weight-of-projectile ratio than the navy's other large guns. The importance of this fact was that replacing the existing batteries with a battery of Dahlgren guns of the same total weight resulted in a heavier weight of metal fired in a broadside.30

Dahlgren exhibited the same resourcefulness in overcoming opposition to shell-guns, including his own, as he did in his earlier struggles with the Navy Department. He used his proximity to government leaders in Washington to great advantage. Soon after joining the ordnance department he made it a regular practice to invite anyone who might be in a position to help him down to the Washington Navy Yard to witness the test firing of the various naval guns. The list of people who visited Dahlgren was a veritable who's
who of prominent leaders. President after president, cabinet members, members of both houses of Congress, foreign dignitaries, and journalists, all came down to the yard during Dahlgren’s tenure. The ability to present his ideas in private to these influential leaders without other ordnance specialists to offer contrary opinions was probably the greatest advantage he had in getting his plans implemented. Dahlgren and his strange looking gun became the talk of Washington, proving what so many military officers already realized, that one tour of duty in Washington was worth much more than many successful tours anywhere else.\footnote{Dahlgren’s most valuable political contact in the early 1850s was Congressman Frederick P. Stanton of Tennessee, Chairman of the House of Representatives Committee on Naval Affairs. Dahlgren secured an introduction to Stanton through his navy colleague Matthew Fontaine Maury, Superintendent of the Naval Observatory. Dahlgren sought to meet Stanton for more than the obvious reason that he was the chairman of an influential committee. Stanton had been engaged in a long standing effort to reduce naval expenditures under the Congressional buzzword, “efficiency.” As Dahlgren pointed out often, since his guns were so much larger than the navy’s other guns, ships would carry fewer of them, thus fewer men would be needed to work a vessel’s armament, resulting in a decreased payroll. Dahlgren’s}

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first meeting with Stanton showed Dahlgren at his lobbying best. Stanton, along with Congressman Hugh White from New York who was also a member of the Naval Affairs Committee, visited Dahlgren at the Washington Navy Yard eight days after Dahlgren asked Maury to introduce him to the Congressman. Dahlgren did all that was humanly possible to impress his influential guests. He took them down to the "Experimental Battery," which was what Dahlgren, ever with an eye toward image, called the firing range that he had laid out at the yard. There he allowed both Congressmen, neither of whom had ever seen a shell-gun fired before, to fire a IX-inch Dahlgren gun at a target set out in the river. Of course Dahlgren conveniently had the target only 550 yards from the gun, which made it improbable that Stanton and White would miss. Firing the massive weapon and seeing the shells strike the target had the desired effect, because not long afterward Stanton sponsored legislation for appropriations to arm the navy's ships with Dahlgren guns. Of course while Stanton praised the guns for their technical merits, he reserved his strongest and warmest comments for the economic benefits, which according to his calculations would amount to savings "annually something like two millions of dollars."32

Although Stanton's bill did not pass, Dahlgren's lobbying efforts eventually paid off. In April 1854, when Congress finally approved appropriations for the
construction of six all-new auxiliary steam frigates, the proposed batteries consisted entirely of shell-guns. Dahlgren had succeeded in completely changing the thinking about arming vessels.33

Dahlgren’s success was not as complete as he desired or thought it should be. While all of the advantages of the Dahlgren gun and armament plan for navy vessels had merit, not all of his navy colleagues thought that they added up to as great an advantage as Dahlgren suggested. Like the guns it was designed to replace the Dahlgren gun was a cast-iron, muzzle-loading smoothbore cannon. Therefore the Dahlgren gun had a relatively short range, and while indeed more accurate than the navy’s existing guns, it was only marginally so. Also, in an era when human muscle supplied all of the power to load large weapons, the one hundred and thirty-six pound shell Dahlgren’s XI-inch gun used, along with the gun’s weight of 15,700 pounds, greatly slowed the loading, positioning, and firing process. Additionally, because of the size of the guns, ships could carry far fewer of them than other guns. While the smaller number of guns was a distinct advantage when speaking to budget-minded congressmen, critics pointed out that the ability to carry many more of the smaller guns, combined with the ease and much shorter time needed to load and fire the smaller pieces, offset some, if not all, of the purported advantages of the XI-inch Dahlgren gun.34
The main opponent of using the XI-inch gun at sea was Commodore Charles Morris, who was named the Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography in November 1851. Until this time Dahlgren served under Lewis Warrington. While Warrington was among the navy's most respected officers (he was a naval hero from the War of 1812 and two time secretary of the navy on an ad interim basis), he was not an ordnance specialist. Warrington deferred to Dahlgren on most technical matters and he had not made him conduct many tests to demonstrate that his guns and armament plan were as greatly superior as he claimed. This led to an astounding situation. In August 1852, as Congressman Stanton tried for the second time to win Congressional approval to reorganize the navy's ordnance on Dahlgren's plans, Dahlgren's entire experience with his shell-guns rested on the casting of two guns, one IX-inch gun which had been test fired a total of 218 times and one XI-inch gun which had only received its proof tests.

Morris, like Warrington, was among the navy's most respected officers. Captain John Rodgers, perhaps the most distinguished American navy officer of the nineteenth-century, described Morris as "a man of 'strong discriminating mind, of considerable science, ... [who] unites perhaps as much, if not more, theoretical and practical knowledge than any man of his age in the service.'" Morris was also an ordnance specialist and early
on and he ordered extensive trials to test Dahlgren's IX-inch gun. The first of these were conducted by David G. Farragut. He praised the strength of the gun, but he expressed concern about handling the gun at sea. Farragut's reports on the difficulty of handling the sizeable IX-inch gun spelled doom for the even larger XI-inch gun. Although Morris was instrumental in getting the navy to adopt an all shell-gun battery for the new frigates, in 1854, when the navy announced the batteries for the new frigates, instead of the batteries of IX-inch and XI-inch guns as Dahlgren wanted, the navy equipped them primarily with the older 8-inch shell-guns and Dahlgren's IX-inch guns as Morris recommended.35

There was one exception to this. The navy decided to build one of the six frigates on a different pattern. As an experiment to test the applicability of adapting features used in commercial clipper ships the navy asked George Steers, famous for the yacht-schooner America, to design one of the six vessels. Steers's main priority in designing his vessel, the Niagara, was speed. Thus he did not want to utilize the two deck armament system of a traditional frigate because its overall weight would compromise the vessel's speed. Dahlgren convinced Secretary of the Navy Dobbin to allow him to work with Steers to arrange the Niagara's armament, but as with the other frigates he was only partially successful. Steers agreed to place twelve of
Dahlgren's XI-inch guns on the spar deck but despite all of Dahlgren's lobbying Steers would not consent to the placement of any guns on the main deck or more of the XI-inch guns on the spar deck.  

The debate over arming the frigates brought out the worst in Dahlgren. He viewed and subsequently portrayed the decision against adopting his complete plan for the frigates as a consequence of the same traditionalism which delayed initial acceptance of shell-guns and he ignored Morris's legitimate concerns with the XI-inch gun. Dahlgren became bitter that none of the ships were based on his complete plan and he complained in his private journal, "So after all that is the result that the Bureau takes my place for the Gun deck--and Steers takes the spar deck--they dividing me between them."  

After the navy refused to arm the frigates exactly as he wanted, Dahlgren campaigned successfully to have a vessel armed with both IX-inch and XI-inch guns for tests at sea. This resulted in his securing the Navy Academy's training ship Plymouth. Armed with the first XI-inch Dahlgren gun to go to sea, as well as IX-inch Dahlgren guns, Dahlgren sailed the Plymouth to Europe and back in the summer and fall of 1857. In a carefully worded report of the sea trials of the Dahlgren guns, he argued, he had proven that the criticism of the guns, especially the XI-inch gun, were without merit because he had been able to exercise the XI-inch gun at sea.
He declared, "there should be no objection to restoring that part of my plan of armament which assigned a tier of eleven-inch guns to the spar decks of screw frigates." Even as carefully worded as his report was, however, Dahlgren conceded that neither of his guns could be fired as rapidly as the navy's smaller guns; and though he tried to make the difference in firing time seem insignificant, Dahlgren's Plymouth cruise was not enough to get his XI-inch guns on the spar deck of all of the navy's frigates.38

Dahlgren's bitterness did not decrease with time; if anything it increased. Because the Niagara's first years in service were spent in non-traditional roles--its initial assignment was to assist in the first attempt to lay the trans-Atlantic cable, followed by a cruise to Liberia to return 280 Africans freed when the slave ship Echo was captured--it did not receive its battery of XI-inch guns until 1859. On that occasion Dahlgren renewed his protests over the armament of all of the steam frigates. His plan had been "mutilated," and therefore none of the vessels were as strong as they could have or should have been, he complained. He was filled with the most "inexpressible mortification" for fear that the frigates should meet up with any of Britain's frigates. But as much as he was worried about the fate of the ships he was also concerned about his own reputation. "I only wish," he concluded, "now that the Niagara is about to be brought before the service
as a regular cruiser, with a battery which I am to be held responsible for,—to state what I am responsible for." 39

Despite failing to get the frigates armed the way he desired, Dahlgren's public reputation soared by the late 1850s. One reason for the acclaim that he received was the success a number of Dahlgren guns had in tests designed to check their endurance. Dahlgren repeatedly bragged of the first XI-inch gun cast, which endured 1,958 rounds before falling. This was indeed remarkable considering that the normal service life for large cannon was 1,000 rounds. Of course Dahlgren did not often publicly mention that the first lot of Dahlgren guns which were cast for the new steam frigates, failed miserably during their initial proof tests and that most of the guns had to be rejected. 40

Bragging about the durability of his first XI-inch gun comprised just one part of a well-designed public relations campaign that Dahlgren engaged in to promote himself and his guns. Dahlgren also took his case to the public. By writing and publishing a series of books on naval ordnance at his own expense, Dahlgren became widely known to the general population. These works, the most important of which was his Shells and Shell-Guns, were not, as one might well expect, critical assessments of the field of naval ordnance, but rather highly subjective works supporting his own opinions about the subject. 41
Dahlgren did not devote his considerable promotional abilities solely to getting his guns and his other plans for reorganizing the navy's ordnance department adopted. Between the time that he joined the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography and the outbreak of the Civil War he successfully engineered three pay raises for himself so that he was paid well above what other officers of his rank received. The first of these came in early 1848, when he petitioned for an additional yearly salary of $500 claiming that he and his family could not afford to live in Washington on the regular pay of a lieutenant. Dahlgren's bid for additional pay was not unprecedented. In 1845, Lieutenant Matthew Fontaine Maury, who was named superintendent of the Naval Observatory, received a housing subsidy of $350 until the navy completed construction of the superintendent's house. But Dahlgren's request was indeed bold; not only did he ask for more money than Maury received, but Dahlgren was equating his position as a newly appointed assistant inspector of ordnance to that of Maury, who because of his scientific mapping of the ocean's wind and water currents was perhaps the most internationally renowned officer in the United States Navy.42

Approval of Dahlgren's request only brought a monetary increase. In time this proved inadequate for Dahlgren's driving personal ambition. In late 1850 he began to push to have his position officially equated with Maury's. Again,
however, he had to content himself with a monetary reward. On the same day that Congressman Stanton first introduced legislation to have a vessel built and armed along the plans of Dahlgren's proposing, another bill was introduced before the House, which stated in part, "That the officer charged with experiments in gunnery at the navy yard at Washington, shall hereafter receive the compensation of a commander at sea." When this bill failed to pass, a provision along the same lines was inserted into the annual navy appropriation bill; and on March 3, 1851, passage of the bill provided that Dahlgren receive an annual salary of $2,500, the pay of a commander at sea rather than the regular salary of $1,500 for a lieutenant on duty.43

Dahlgren continued to receive the pay of a commander at sea for the rest of the 1850s--Dahlgren had been promoted to commander in 1855. In 1860 his cherished pay status was threatened. The new Navy Pay Bill being discussed in Congress had a provision in it which ended the practice of paying any officer a salary above what other officers his rank received. Dahlgren put all of his lobbying skills and political contacts to use to defeat this provision. Dahlgren wrote to the numerous senators and representatives who had been influential in the naval buildup of the 1850s and whose efforts he had supported with his frequent testimony before Congress. Dahlgren asked them if there had been any shortcomings in his service since 1851 when he had
first received pay not commensurate with his rank. If it had been acceptable to Congress to pay him $1000 above his rank in 1851, he asked, "why damage me so seriously now?"

He again equated his services with those of Maury. Since Maury continued to live at the Naval Observatory for free, why not, Dahlgren asked, pay him a cash amount equivalent to Maury's housing? Dahlgren also claimed near impoverishment as another reason to continue his higher salary. "Nor is it asked upon slight consideration," he told F. H. Morse, Chairman of the House Committee on Naval Affairs, "For after being 34 years in the Service, I am about one month's pay richer than when I entered: from which fact literally true, your Committee may be assured that the compensation granted from the first has been barely equal to the demands of a strictly economical mode of living." While Dahlgren may have indeed been only one month's pay richer than when he joined the service, his assertion that he had followed the most "economical mode of living" contrasts sharply with his reputation of being an active Washington socialite.44

Dahlgren's efforts paid off, and an amendment proposed by Senator Rice was added to the pay bill calling for the continuation of the practice of paying Dahlgren at the rate of the next highest rank. With the support of Chairman of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee Stephen Mallory, and all of the other prominent Democratic Senators who had led the effort to build up the navy, the amendment passed. On July
2, 1860, Dahlgren happily noted that he received his first check under his new pay rate of $4,200 a year, which was that of a captain at sea, then the highest rank in the navy.45

As with his attempt to arm all United States Navy vessels only with his guns, Dahlgren’s efforts at personal aggrandizement also fell short of his goal. Since 1841, the Navy Department had been administered by a system of five bureaus, under the overall direction of the secretary of the navy. One of these was the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography which Dahlgren was assigned to as an inspector of ordnance. In late January 1856, the chief of the bureau, Charles Morris, died and Dahlgren tried to secure the position for himself. At first glance Dahlgren appeared a logical candidate. While not everyone agreed with all of his ordnance ideas, he more than anyone else was responsible for the navy’s adoption of the more powerful shell-gun battery for the new steam frigates. He also certainly had ability in the technical side of ordnance design. Morris, while he opposed using the XI-inch shell-gun at sea, recognized Dahlgren’s value to the ordnance department, and one of the first things he did after being named head of the bureau in late 1851 was to make Dahlgren’s appointment to ordnance permanent. Dahlgren, however, was not eligible for Morris’s position because by law the post had to be held by a captain and he was only a commander. According to
Dahlgren, Secretary of the Navy Dobbin "did not know a Capt.[ain] that he could prefer to me." Since it was impossible to make Dahlgren a captain because promotion in the navy was strictly a function of seniority until midway through the Civil War, Dahlgren, in his classic style, proposed another solution. Why not separate the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography into two parts. Then attach the latter to the Naval Observatory and make Maury the head of it, and make himself the chief of the now separate Bureau of Ordnance. The obvious reason for this proposal was that by reducing the overall responsibilities of each position Dahlgren hoped that the posts would be opened to commanders as well as captains, thereby making himself eligible. But whatever administrative benefits there may have been in separating ordnance from hydrography, there would be no reorganization of the bureau system at this time.46

Dahlgren was as bitter at failing to secure the command of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography as he was at not seeing the frigates armed the way he desired. He again tried to secure the post for himself in late 1859 by once again proposing the separation of the bureau; but as in 1856, he was unsuccessful. A colleague consoled him that while he had not received the promotion that he had pushed so hard for, "you have with money at least," referring to Dahlgren's pay raise in the spring of 1860, "received a
certificate that you deserve it." But Dahlgren had never been content with partial victories and he was far from satisfied. Events a few months later only increased his dissatisfaction. In September 1860, Captain Duncan Ingraham who had served as Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography since Morris's death in 1856, stepped down. Again, Dahlgren had to watch as someone from the list of captains was chosen to fill the position.47

Thus on the eve of the Civil War, Commander John A. Dahlgren was among the most prominent and influential officers in the United States Navy and simultaneously among the least happy and least satisfied. Widely hailed for reorganizing the navy's ordnance and designing the unique bottle-shaped cannon that bore his name, he was generally viewed as the United States Navy's leading authority on ordnance. Besides seeing the navy's newest and most powerful vessels armed entirely with shell-guns, Dahlgren also chalked up a creditable list of other accomplishments during his tenure at the Washington Navy Yard. These included laying out a firing range on the Anacostia River, the design of a series of small bronze howitzers which could be converted from use on board small vessels and ship launches to use on land as conventional field pieces, and the construction of the navy's first gun factory. He was also well established in Washington's highest social circles and he enjoyed the company of the some of the nation's
leading political figures. At the same time, however, Dahlgren's successes were tempered by the knowledge that not all of his plans for ordnance had been implemented and because of the organization of the Navy Department, he was not eligible for the position of Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. Not only would have the appointment allowed him to implement all of his ordnance plans it also would have given him the official recognition he so badly wanted and thought he deserved.48
Notes to Chapter I

1 John Dahlgren, "Memoir," 45 page script document dated June 29, 1866, in, John Adolphus Dahlgren Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., hereafter cited as JADLC; Judge Richard Peters quote in, Peters to Navy Department, October 23, 1824, Ibid.; Dahlgren's first application was rejected but when renewed it was approved. His two applications included testimonial letters from teachers, prominent Philadelphia business and political leaders, and a recommendation from the Pennsylvania State General Assembly, all contained in, Ibid.; for the difficulties in securing a midshipman's billet, see, Charles Oscar Paulin, Paulin's History of Naval Administration. 1775-1911: A Collection of Articles from the U.S. Naval Institute Proceedings (Annapolis, MD, 1968), pp. 194-95.


5 Hassler to Dahlgren, April 6, 1835, JADLC; Dahlgren to Dickerson, August 11, 1835, Ibid.; Hassler to Dahlgren, August 11, 1835, Ibid.; Dickerson to Dahlgren, September 23, 1836, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Dickerson, September 26, 1836, Ibid.; Hassler to Van Buren, March 5, 1837, excerpt in Ibid.; Woodbury to Hassler, March 27, 1835, excerpt in Ibid.; Woodbury to Van Buren, March 18, 1837, excerpt in Ibid.; Woodbury to Van Buren, March 22, 1837, excerpt in Ibid.; Treasury Department quote in, Treasury Department to Captain Swift, March 27, 1837, Ibid.; it is difficult to pinpoint why Hassler went to such lengths for Dahlgren. It may have been a matter of Hassler being impressed with Dahlgren's work and the two men having become close friends. The cantankerous Hassler, however, was forever fighting
with Congress over alleged slights and his support for Dahlgren was more likely simply another in the long series of fights he had with his superiors. The lack of any personal correspondence between the two men in either Hassler's or Dahlgren's private papers dating to the years after Dahlgren left the Survey supports the latter argument.

6Hassler to Dahlgren, May 19, 1837, Ibid.; according to a navy surgeon, Dahlgren "suffered from incipient Amaurosis," which is a loss of eyesight with no observable change in the eye itself, see Naval Medical Certificate, October 14, 1838, Ibid.

7Hassler quote in, Hassler to Dahlgren, June, illegible, 1837, Ibid.; Hassler to Dahlgren, August 2, 1837, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Hassler, September 10, 1837, Ibid.; Hassler to Dahlgren, May 19, 1838, Ibid.; Hassler to Dahlgren, October 12, 1837, Ibid.; Woodbury to Hassler, October 31, 1837, Ibid.; Ferguson to Butler, November 4, 1837, Ibid.

8Hassler quote in, Hassler to Dahlgren, May 19, 1838, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Paulding, August 31, 1838, Ibid.; Ferguson to Van Buren, August 12, 1838, Ibid.

9Hassler to Dahlgren, June 20, 1838, Ibid.; Ferguson to Van Buren, August 12, 1838, Ibid.; Dickerson to Dahlgren, June 16, 1838, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Paulding, August 31, 1838, Pickett to Dahlgren, June 16, 1838, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Pickett, June 18, 1838, Ibid.

10First Hassler quote in, Hassler to Dahlgren, June 20, 1838, Ibid; second Hassler quote in, Hassler to Dahlgren June 25, 1838, Ibid.; Ferguson to Van Buren, August 12, 1838, Ibid.; Hassler to Paulding, August 22 1838, Ibid.; Ferguson to Dahlgren, August 20, 1838, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Paulding, August 31, 1838, Ibid.


12Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to Hassler, February 1, 1839, Ferdinand Rudolph Hassler Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia; Hassler quote in, Hassler to Dahlgren, February 7, 1839, JADLC; Hassler to Dahlgren, February 12, 1839, Ferdinand Rudolph Hassler Papers, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia; Prentiss to Dahlgren, February 18, 1839, JADLC.
Paulding to Dahlgren, May 31, 1839, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Paulding, June 4, 1839, Ibid.


Dahlgren would often recall the near disaster on the Ontario. The most vivid account he ever gave was on the 15th anniversary of the event, September 8, 1844, see Dahlgren to Mary Bunker Dahlgren, Journal Letter, August 21-October 3, 1844, John Adolphus Dahlgren Papers, Naval Historical Foundation Collection, Library of Congress, Washington, D. C., hereafter cited as JADNHFC.

There is a three page description of the farm contained in the Naval Ordnance section of Dahlgren’s papers, Box 20, JADLC; for Dahlgren’s descriptions of his life during these years see the corresponding years of his journals, JADSU.

Dahlgren to Navy Department, June 23, 1841, JADLC.

Upshur to Dahlgren, May 3, 1842, Ibid; Dahlgren, June 9, July 1, 31, September 4, 1843, Journal Entries, Vol. 5, JADSU, Dahlgren quote from July 31 entry.

Mary Dahlgren quote in, Mary Dahlgren, September 26, 1843, Journal Entry, Ibid.; John Dahlgren quote in, John Dahlgren to Mary Dahlgren, September 29, 1843, JADNHFC; for more on Dahlgren’s emotions about leaving home, see, John Dahlgren to Mary Dahlgren, September 30, 1843, October 4, 1843, October 15, 1843, October 26, 1843, November 15, 1843, Ibid.

John Dahlgren to Mary Dahlgren, February 5, 1845, in Journal Letter, January 1-March 6, 1845, Ibid.

Smith to Dahlgren, January 21, 1846, JADLC; Dahlgren, August 28, 1846, Journal Entry, Vol. 5, JADSU; Navy Department to Dahlgren, January 6, 1847, JADLC; years later Dahlgren gave a very different account to explain his motivation for joining the ordnance department. "My main purpose in seeking Ordn. Duty was to fit myself more fully for sea service--In so doing I have become more interested in the pursuit than intended at the outset." Dahlgren to unidentified, February 7, 1856, Ibid.

Spencer Tucker, Arming the Fleet: U.S. Navy Ordnance in the Muzzle-Loading Era (Annapolis, MD, 1989), pp. 19-50; Tucker provides a good introduction to the technical side of American naval ordnance through the end of the Civil War.


Tucker, Arming the Fleet, pp. 146-52, 180-96; D. K. Brown, Before the Ironclad: Development of Ship Design, Propulsion and Armament in the Royal Navy, 1815-60 (London, 1990), p. 36; in the United States navy, shot-guns were characterized by the weight of shot they fired and shell-guns by the diameter of their bore. The 32-pounder had a 6.4-inch bore and fired a 6.3-inch solid shot of 32.5 pounds. It also could fire a shell of about 26 pounds. The 8-inch shell-gun fired a 7.9-inch diameter hollow shell which when filled with gunpowder weighed 51.5 pounds. The 8-inch shell gun did not have a solid shot designed for it. The reason for the slightly smaller diameter projectile than bore was to ease the loading of the gun.

It is difficult to date precisely when Dahlgren first proposed to rearm vessels with an ordnance system comprised solely of shell-guns. His first official report proposing this measure was dated February 15, 1849, well after he joined the ordnance department in January 1847. See, Dahlgren to Warrington, February 15, 1849, JADLC; there is evidence, however, that he wanted to reconfigure the ordnance of the navy even before he joined the ordnance bureau. After returning from the Cumberland cruise, he maintained a steady correspondence with his crewmate, and
one of the few close contemporary friends he had in the navy, Andrew Hull Foote. Unfortunately, few of Dahlgren’s letters to Foote have been found, but Foote’s answers to Dahlgren’s letters give an indication of Dahlgren’s ideas about ordnance before he joined the ordnance department. In his May 18, 1846 letter, Foote told Dahlgren that he wholeheartedly agreed with his ideas concerning the reconfiguration of the armament of the frigates in the fleet. While Foote did not provide specific details, the actions Dahlgren took as soon as he joined the ordnance department to displace shot-guns, the official report he submitted in February 1849, asking to arm a vessel solely with shell-guns, and the battle he fought in the early 1850s to arm the navy’s new frigates entirely with shell-guns, make it probable that the suggestions he made to Foote followed along these same lines. See, Foote to Dahlgren, May 18, 1846, Ibid.; a few of Dahlgren’s letters to Foote are printed in, James Mason Hoppin, Life of Andrew Hull Foote, Rear-Admiral United States Navy (New York, 1874).


30 The origin of the Dahlgren gun is widely misunderstood. His original reason for proposing it was the potential of greater accuracy and striking power. This can be discerned from, Dahlgren to Warrington, October 15, 1849, JADLC. No published account of Dahlgren mentions this report, but Robert Schneller in a recent dissertation correctly identifies and explains the technical reasons behind the proposal of the Dahlgren gun. Schneller provides good technical analysis of this and other technical aspects of Dahlgren’s career. See, Robert John Schneller, "The Contentious Innovator: A Biography of Rear Admiral John A. Dahlgren U.S.N (1809-1870): Generational Conflict, Ordnance Technology, and Command Afloat in the Nineteenth Century," (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1991); This present work is not primarily a technical analysis of Dahlgren; rather it is mostly concerned with Dahlgren’s Civil War career. It is necessary, however, to have an understanding of Dahlgren’s technical career and the methods he used to get his plans implemented in order to see him in proper perspective.
For an indication of Dahlgren's visitors, see, Dahlgren, Journals, Vols. 5 and 6, JADSU; Dahlgren's prowess at politicking has been admired by one naval historian, see, Robert Greenhalgh Albion, Makers of Naval Policy, 1798-1947, ed. Rowena Reed, (Annapolis, MD, 1980), p. 164.

Dahlgren to Maury, December 24, 1850, misfiled in 1866 folder, JADLC; the account of Stanton's visit, which took place on January 2, 1851, is reconstructed from Maury's report to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis on the state of American coastal defenses. See, M. F. Maury, "Report to the Secretary of War, August, 1851," in, U.S., Congress, House, H. Ex. Doc. 5, 32nd Cong., 1st Sess. Dahlgren was also asked to report to Secretary of War Jefferson Davis and he used this as another opportunity to push for the adoption of his guns. See, Dahlgren to Secretary of War Davis, September, 1851, Ibid.; F. P. Stanton, H. R. 473, A Bill to Increase the efficiency of the naval service, February 20, 1851, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess.; Stanton quote in, F. P. Stanton, U.S., Congress, House, House Report 35, "To Accompany Bill H.R. No. 473," February 20, 1851, 31st Cong., 2nd Sess.

For information on the new steam frigates, see, Donald L. Canney, The Old Steam Navy, Volume One: Frigates, Sloops, and Gunboats, 1815-1885 (Annapolis, MD, 1990), pp. 45-59. The six frigates were known as the Merrimac class, and also included the Colorado, Roanoke, Wabash, Minnesota, and Niagara.

The heaviest 32-pounder weighed 6,300 pounds and the heaviest 8-inch shell-gun weighed 7,000 pounds. The Dahlgren IX-inch gun weighed 9,000 pounds and used a 8.9-inch diameter hollow shell weighing 72.5 pounds when filled with gunpowder.

To follow the debate between Dahlgren and Morris, see, Dahlgren, Naval Reorganization Report No. 1, August 10, 1852, JADLC; Morris to Secretary of the Navy, August 13, 1852, National Archives, Washington D. C., Record Group 74, Entry 1, "Letters Sent to the Secretary of the Navy and Chiefs of Bureaus," hereafter cited as NARG74-1; Morris to Secretary of the Navy, August 19, 1852, Ibid.; Morris to Secretary of the Navy, May 30, 1853, Ibid.; Dahlgren, Naval Reorganization Report No. 2, May 31, 1852, JADLC; Dahlgren, Naval Reorganization Report No. 3, December 9, 1853, JADLC; Morris to the Secretary of the Navy, December 19, 1853, NARG74-1; Dahlgren, Naval Reorganization Report No. 4, JADLC; Morris to Secretary of the Navy, January 30, 1854, NARG74-1. Schneller follows this argument but he dismisses Morris's objections as a consequence of traditionalism and
ignores the very real concern of the slow rate of fire of the large gun and the problem of handling it at sea. This would be a real concern throughout the Civil War and later in the war there was a move away from the use of such large guns for just these reasons. See, Canney, *The Old Steam Navy*, pp. 122-23; For Stanton's efforts, see, F. P. Stanton, "Improvements in the Navy," Speech before the House of Representatives, August 17, 1852, copy in, JADLC; F. P. Stanton, Offering Amendments on the Naval Appropriations Bill, August 17, 1852, *Congressional Globe*, 32nd Cong., 1st Sess.; For Farragut's tests and comments, see, Morris to Farragut, September 3, 1852, Farragut Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D. C.; Farragut to Morris, May 28, 1853, Ibid.; Farragut to Morris, June 25, 1853, Ibid.; Faragut to Morris, July 8, 1853, Ibid.; Farragut to Morris, August 3, 1853, Ibid.; Farragut to Morris, August 9, 1853, Ibid.; Farragut to Morris, August 31, 1853, Ibid.; Rodgers quoted in, Paullin, *Naval Administration, 1775-1911*, p. 169.

36 For Dahlgren's efforts with Steers, see, Dahlgren, May 12, July 8, 11, 28, 29, August 5, 8, 23, 1854, and March 29, April 9, 1855, Journal Entries, Vol. 5, JADSU; the exact battery for the other five steam frigates was twenty-eight IX-inch guns on the main or gun deck, twenty 8-inch guns on the spar or upper deck, and three X-inch guns for pivot chase guns on the spar deck. Canney, *The Old Steam Navy*, p. 46; this X-inch gun was a compromise by Morris. He continued to believe the XI-inch was entirely too large for effective use at sea so he allowed Dahlgren to design a X-inch gun to replace it. Dahlgren did not see this as an acceptable compromise.

37 Dahlgren, July 29, 1854, Journal Entry, Vol. 5, JADSU.


39 For the early history of the Niagara, see, Canney, *The Old Steam Navy*, p. 56; Dahlgren, Report on Niagara's Armament, May 19, 1859, JADLC, underline in the original.

40 John A. Dahlgren, *Shells and Shell-Guns* (Philadelphia, 1856), p. 15; Dahlgren to Morris, October 31, 1855, JADLC; there was a great deal of controversy over the failure of these guns. After the Navy decided to arm the new frigates with shell-guns, contracts were let with various founders. Dahlgren had developed strong views on
proper casting methods and he demanded strict specifications for the contracts. The reason for all of the specifications was to attain guns with iron of high tensile strength and density because there had been some evidence that these characteristics predicted the durability of a gun. After the guns failed, tests were made which showed the metal met or exceeded the specifications. Dahlgren then blamed the failures on a variety of other factors, but as the various founders pointed out Dahlgren had to at least share in the blame. See, Tucker, *Arming the Fleet*, pp. 70-71; Parrott to Morris, November 15, 1855, JADLC; Knap and Wade to Morris, January 17, 1856, Ibid.; Schneller follows this controversy in great detail, see, Schneller, "The Contentious Innovator," pp. 206-27.

Next to Stanton, Dahlgren's most important political ally in the 1850s was James C. Dobbin who was Secretary of the Navy from March 8, 1853 to March 6, 1857. See, Harold D. Langley, "James Cochrane Dobbin," in, ed. Paolo E. Colletta, *American Secretaries of the Navy*, 2 vols. (Annapolis, MD, 1980), 1:279-300; John A. Dahlgren, *System of Boat Armament in the United States Navy: Reported to Commodore Morris* (Philadelphia, 1852); Dahlgren, *Shells and Shell-Guns*; these works along with, John A. Dahlgren, *Memoir of Ulric Dahlgren*, ed. Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, (Philadelphia, 1872); and Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren, *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren, Rear-Admiral United States Navy* (Boston, 1882); have been the sources of a great deal of misunderstanding about Dahlgren's career.

Dahlgren's pay raise has generally been portrayed as resulting from his immediate superior's initiative. It is true that Lewis Warrington, Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography, requested the pay raise for Dahlgren, but only after Dahlgren's urging; see, Dahlgren to Warrington, February 10, 1848, JADLC; Dahlgren, March, 1848, Journal Entry, Vol. 5, JADSU; Dahlgren to Mason, February 10, 1848, JADLC; Warrington to Dahlgren, March 9, 1848, Ibid.; Frances Leigh Williams, *Matthew Fontaine Maury: Scientist of the Sea* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1963), pp. 156-62; William Stanton, "Matthew Fontaine Maury: Navy Science for the World," in, ed. Bradford, *Captains of the Old Steam Navy*, p. 46; The Naval Observatory was also commonly known as the National Observatory.

Most likely, it was Stanton, and Dahlgren thanked him for his efforts almost a decade later when he was involved in another attempt to increase his pay; see, Dahlgren to Stanton, March 30, 1860, JADLC; it also could have been Hugh White of New York, however. On January 11, 1851, Dahlgren wrote to White asking him to support legislation for expanding the Ordnance Department. See Dahlgren to White, January 11, 1851, Ibid.; Dahlgren wrote a similar letter to the Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee as well. See, Dahlgren to Thomas H. Bayly, January 13, 1851, Ibid.; see also, Dahlgren to Robert Toombs, January 14, 1851, Ibid.

44Dahlgren, October 11, 1855, Journal Entry, Vol. 5, JADSU; first Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to Pearce, February 20, 1860, JADLC; second Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to Morse, March 31, 1860, Ibid.; for additional material on this event, see, Dahlgren to Toombs, February 16, 1860, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Green, March 27, 1860, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Stanton, March 30, 1860, Ibid.

45Dahlgren, March 27, July 2, 1860, Journal Entries, Vol. 7, JADSU, quote from July 2 entry.

46Paullin, Naval Administration, 1775-1911, pp. 205-47; Morris to Secretary of the Navy, February 4, 1852, NARG74-1; Dahlgren, January 30, February 1, 5, 7, 1856, Journal Entries, Vol. 6, JADSU, Dobbin quoted in February 5 entry.

47Dahlgren, December 24, 1859, Journal Entries, Vol. 6, Ibid.; Percival Drayton quote in, Drayton to Dahlgren, May 27, 1860, JADLC.

CHAPTER II

Loyalty Rewarded

"Congress has by law authorized the President to give [Navy] Yards to Commanders....[the law] originating entirely from reasons personal to myself."

Early in his adult life John Dahlgren began to keep a private journal. While primarily an account of his daily activities, on every New Year’s Day he generally devoted at least a few lines to reflect about the events of the old year and the prospects for the new. In this respect, his January 1, 1861, entry was no different from any other New Year’s Day entry he had ever written. The events of the previous few months, however, made this New Year’s Day entry anything but typical.

A memorable New Year’s day,—for one of the Stars has dropped from the Constitutional firmament, and the process of further dissolution is going on. The public mind begins to be impressed by the nature of the crisis, but by no means to the extent required to avert the evil. In fact the Federal Gov.[ernment] proves to be a shadow in presence of State power, and there is apparent everywhere an utter want of loyalty to the National Union.¹

Fourteen years of duty at the Washington Navy Yard combined with the numerous political contacts that he had

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developed while lobbying to implement his ordnance program
gave Dahlgren an ideal vantage point for viewing the
heightening sectional struggle between the North and South.
He had ties to "men from all sections" of the country, he
boasted to one of his sons. Moreover, "Most of the
prominent men I know intimately." On a recent day, he
continued, he had met with a Republican Senator, who
displayed "no misgiving" at all about the crisis. "[H]e &
his friends behold the coming tempest with firm hearts."
Then afterwards he met with "Jeff Davis & c.," and "I am,"
he told his son, "perhaps the only outsider they speak [to]
freely."2

In a better position to watch events than most people,
like many Americans he had conflicting feelings about what
the dispute between the North and South meant for the United
States. Although a northerner by birth, Dahlgren's
sympathies rested with the South. In late 1859, he had
written to a navy colleague who had inquired about his
feelings: "The mere form of Union may not disappear at this
time, but it is certain that the good feeling which is in
reality the Union has been sadly shocked." And while "It
has always been my earnest wish never to live so long as to
witness" the breakup of the Union, he told his colleague,
"there seems more danger of civil strife by keeping together
than by [severing] the ties at once." Of course it was
"painful" for him "to entertain such a sentiment--But
madness rules the hour and fanaticism stalks unrebuked in the North—hand in hand with blasphemy—God help them!" In another letter, to his son, he wrote, while "In the North there is no personal servitude, ... there is Slavery of the classes." Moreover, Southerners had a "duty to the Negro," and by "what right," he asked, did the "Northern man ... infringe on his [Southern slaveholders] admitted duty." Instead, "Let him [Northerners] see to the starving laborers in Kansas and elsewhere."³

Perhaps it was Dahlgren's pro-Southern sympathies which led his closest friend in the navy, Andrew Hull Foote, to write to him in early 1861 and ask, "I know your opinions are no less than fixed than mine, and a little more so on many subjects. I wish however that you would give me your views in full, and what you think is to be the result of the crisis, as you are in intercourse with leading statesmen of all sections of the country." Dahlgren's answer, like the letters he sent to his son Ulric, showed that he embraced the most prevalent pro-slavery arguments of the day. First, he pointed to biblical evidence for supporting the institution of slavery. "[A]nd I cannot believe it would have escaped our Saviour's denunciation," he told Foote, "if a tithe were true that is now urged against it." Moreover, the slavery spoken of in the Bible included the enslavement of white men by white men, "whereas with us it is the Slavery of an inferior race, developing resources of rich
soils, which white men cannot work." There were certainly problems with slavery, Dahlgren admitted, but "[t]he abuses of a system are no argument against the system itself." The main concern of the moment, however, was not "to enquire who is to blame for the present troubles--But to endeavor to allay them in such a manner as to preserve the rights of all sections, under the Constitution." And, he concluded, when it came to preserving the rights of each section of the country, "it is not to be forgotten that the North can yield more than the South, because the latter are exposed to a perilous liability in case their Negroes become excited."4

Despite his northern birthright and upbringing, it was not at all surprising that Dahlgren had such strong pro-Southern sympathies. During his years of campaigning for the reorganization of the United States Navy's ordnance, most of his support had come from Southern Democrats who led the charge for the naval buildup which occurred in the 1850s, and he had developed personal relationships with many of his supporters. But he had other reasons as well. His younger brother Charles had moved to Natchez, Mississippi, after their father's death in 1824. There, Charles Dahlgren worked himself into the ranks of the Mississippi planter aristocracy. In 1860, Charles Dahlgren's plantation boasted a harvest of 1,000 bales of cotton, a substantial sum even for the extremely wealthy and large plantations of the Mississippi Valley. Additionally, following Mary Dahlgren's
death in 1855, Charles Dahlgren had helped to take care of John Dahlgren's children, which included supporting Ulric Dahlgren as he read to become a lawyer. In the late 1850s, Ulric, who was unquestionably John Dahlgren's favorite child, lived in Natchez with his uncle. When Ulric came to the North to visit his father in early 1860, John Dahlgren noted that his son, "shows the Southern climate in lack of color: But prefers it and the prospects there to all I can hold out elsewhere; So I shall not cross what seems to be his fixed inclination." Was it any wonder then that John Dahlgren felt the way that he did?5

While Dahlgren embraced Southern arguments, he fervently wanted to avoid war. That was why in late 1859 he had suggested the separation of the North and South, believing that keeping the two sections of the country together offered a greater potential of "civil strife." The problem was, as he told his son, there were "Southern extremist[s]," like "Tombs [sic]," and "old fogles" like Charles Sumner in the North who "argue [about] the abstract right of secession." "No American with the feelings of a man can fail to regard the present crisis with the deepest solicitude." But rather than resorting to war, the crisis must "be avoided peaceably." As late as the last month of 1860, he still believed that there were "practical men [who] will deal with facts."6
Dahlgren's optimism about the ability of Northern and Southern politicians being able to find a peacable solution began to fade during the first weeks of January 1861. Following South Carolina's secession, rumors began circulating that a band of secessionists from the surrounding slave states of Maryland and Virginia were plotting to attack Washington. On January 8, 1861, Franklin Buchanan, Commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, informed Dahlgren that he had just learned that these secessionists had plans for "securing the arms and ammunition now in the Armory and Magazine to be used in preventing the inauguration of Mr. Lincoln." Buchanan told Dahlgren, "you will ... prepare for the defense of the Yard all the Howitzers now available in the Ordnance Department with as much secrecy as possible." Furthermore, he told Dahlgren, "This yard shall not be surrendered to any person or persons except by an order from the Hon.[orable] Secretary of the Navy, and in the event of an attack, I shall require all officers and others to defend it to the last extremity...."7

Dahlgren, along with just about everyone else in the capital, took the talk of these secret plots very seriously. The day after receiving Buchanan's "Strictly Confidential" orders, Dahlgren wrote to a friend in his hometown of Philadelphia. "The apprehension gains ground that this place is likely to be the scene of a row," and although "the Government is making preparations against such a
contingency," the threat seemed genuine. "A number of ugly-looking customers are to be seen about the streets," and although "no one knows whence they came or on what errand, ... like the stormy petrels they are generally seen in advance of trouble." Providing details of events in Washington was not his purpose in writing, however; taking care of his finances in the event of war was. He thus asked his friend to open a bank account for him, with the money "to be had in specie if necessary," and "above all," he wrote, make sure the account was "perfectly secure."®

There were other reasons for his concern. On the same day that he was seeing to his financial affairs, Mississippi followed South Carolina's lead and passed an ordinance of secession. Five other Southern states, Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, and Texas, quickly did the same, so that by February 1, seven states in all had seceded. Then, in the first weeks of February, representatives from the seceded states met in Montgomery, Alabama, where they rapidly adopted a provisional constitution, elected a provisional president and vice president, converted the constitutional convention into a provisional legislature, all of which transformed the seven seceded states into Confederate States of America.®

Dahlgren gave little indication of how he felt about the formation of the Confederacy. On February 11, he noted simply in his Journal, "The Union has lost the Cotton
States, who have just confederated and elected Mr. Jeff.[erson] Davis President." In fact, in the weeks immediately following this, he gave few clues about how he felt about anything. On March 4, he attended Abraham Lincoln's inauguration. He made only a brief notation in his journal: "Witnessed the Inauguration of President Lincoln, which went off quietly enough in spite of ominous forebodings."10

Within days of Lincoln's inauguration Dahlgren's intentions finally became clear. On March 13, Lieutenant Badger, a junior officer who had served under him on the Plymouth, wrote and asked about the possibility of once again serving with Dahlgren in the event of war. Dahlgren immediately wrote back and his answer showed not a hint of equivocation. "You are altogether right," he stated assuredly, "I am for maintaining the integrity of the old flag under which we have so long served and I feel that it will be maintained; At all counts," he continued, "I shall ... do my duty as I have from the first--and as for any bias," he said in sharp contrast with what he had been saying to family members and to his closest friends, "that is naturally to the North, because I am a Northern man by birth, habit & residence when ashore."11

Just as it was not surprising that Dahlgren held such strong Southern sympathies, it is also not surprising that he ultimately cast his lot with the North. He was indeed,
as he told his navy colleague, "a Northern man by birth ... [and] residence." But perhaps even more important, Dahlgren's strongest ties were to the United States Navy. As he told his wife Mary Dahlgren in the 1840s, they only had the navy on which to depend. During the decade and a half prior to the outbreak of the Civil War he had ceaselessly struggled to make his fortune in the navy, and by early 1861 Dahlgren enjoyed prominence and influence matched by few of his peers. To have made any decision other than stay with the United States Navy would have meant giving up everything which he had striven so hard to attain. This was a choice that Dahlgren could never seriously contemplate.12

Even after he clearly stated his intentions to Badger, Dahlgren remained uncharacteristically quiet about the important events taking place all around him. After noting President Lincoln's inauguration, the next entry in his journal came on March 31, when William Howard Russell, the famous London Times war correspondent, visited him. Russell had only recently arrived in the United States to report on the war which seemed likely to erupt between the North and South at any moment. His trademark reporting style was to meet and talk with all the prominent political and military leaders. His visit to the Washington Navy Yard gives some indication of the level of prominence that Dahlgren had risen to by 1861; and realizing this, Dahlgren was quite
pleased with Russell’s visit. He wrote, "Mr. Russell the celebrated correspondent of the London Times visited me and remained two hours or more. He is very clever."13

Russell’s comments about Dahlgren were similarly positive for the most part. "In a modest office, surrounded by books, papers, drawings, and models, ... we found Capt.[ain] [sic] Dahlgren....All inventors, or even adaptors of systems, must be earnest, self-reliant persons, full of confidence; Captain [sic] Dahlgren has certainly most of these characteristics." But Dahlgren also exhibited another of his personality traits. As he showed Russell around the navy yard, Dahlgren, according to Russell, lashed out at "the navy department, ... the army, ... [navy] boards, ... [navy] commissioners," as he recounted the acrimonious battle he had waged with his superiors throughout the 1850s to get his guns and other ordnance plans adopted, or as he would have termed it, as he tried to establish the proper organization of the navy’s ordnance. When Russell’s diary was published in 1863, Dahlgren reacted angrily. "He [Russell] relates all he sees & hears[,] not omitting private conversations--I am brought out in five or six places, whenever he met me and what I say is given without scruple."14

The Washington Navy Yard had an even more important visitor a few days later. On April 2, in an unannounced visit, President Lincoln came to the yard. The President
had apparently heard much about Dahlgren and his big guns
and he reportedly had come hoping both to meet the famous
ordnance expert and to see a demonstration of his equally
famous guns in action. Unfortunately, as Dahlgren recorded,
"It was 3 1/2 PM and I had left half an hour before."¹⁵

Besides wanting to see Dahlgren give a demonstration of
his guns, the President may have had an ulterior motive for
visiting. The following day Dahlgren attended the wedding
of Captain Franklin Buchanan's daughter. The President was
also invited to the wedding and while he arrived too late to
give away the bride, as had been arranged, he did come to
the reception afterwards. The President's presence at the
wedding quite probably had more significance than simply
adding to the "very brilliant party" that Dahlgren described
the event as being. When Russell received an invitation to
the wedding, he noted in his diary: "The superintendent of
the Washington Navy Yard is supposed to be very little
disposed in favour of this present Government; in fact,
Capt....Buchanan may be called a secessionist." One Lincoln
scholar has suggested that Lincoln may have agreed to "give
away the bride" as a means of trying to keep Buchanan loyal
to the Union. Of course, if this were true, it also might
have meant that President Lincoln had similar motives for
seeking to meet Dahlgren the day before. Dahlgren had quite
openly announced his sympathies for the South to his fellow
officers. Additionally, the Washington Navy Yard was
generally viewed as being a center of pro-Southern sentiment, and by virtue of being stationed there Dahlgren's loyalty had to be at least somewhat suspect, as was everyone's who worked there.16

Whether or not the President had ulterior motives for his visits, the wedding provided an opportunity for Dahlgren to meet the President; and when introduced, according to Dahlgren, Lincoln "took my hand in both of his--spoke freely,--conversed for half an hour." Circumstances brought Dahlgren and Lincoln together again the following day, April 4, but this time there meeting was purely business. Earlier that day, Dahlgren received a telegram from his friend Andrew Foote, who was then the executive officer at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, asking him to send ten boat howitzers with ammunition to New York. Rather than telling Dahlgren what the guns were for, Foote told him, "Refer to the President." Dahlgren immediately "posted to the White House;" but the President told him, "'I know nothing about it,'" and suggested that Dahlgren go and see Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles. But like the President, the secretary of the navy did not know anything about Foote's request and he asked Dahlgren to return "early to-morrow" while he tried to find out what Foote's telegram was all about.17

What was going on was that President Lincoln had decided during the last days of March to try and maintain
control of the few federal properties which federal forces still held in what was now the Confederate States of America. At the moment this amounted to a handful of forts, the most important of which were Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, and Fort Pickens in Pensacola, Florida. But in incredible behind the scenes bungling which was taking place in the Lincoln administration, Secretary of State William Henry Seward diverted some of the ships, weapons, and men, originally intended for Charleston to Pensacola, as he tried personally to control the federal government’s policy at this crucial point. As requested, Dahlgren reported to the Navy Department early on April 5. When he arrived, Secretary Welles was meeting with Commodore Silas Stringham whom Welles had recently named as his assistant in charge of the important responsibility of detailing the duty of officers. When Stringham left Welles’s office he stopped to speak to Dahlgren and stated, "‘You had better see the Secretary about those Howitzers, I have explained it to him.’" Dahlgren then "went in,—the Sec.[retary] said five or six [howitzers] would do, and added[,] ‘I tell you in confidence that these are to go to Charleston in the Powhatan.’" Dahlgren asked when will the Powhatan sail? Welles responded, "Sunday morning," April 7.18

The Powhatan’s diversion from Charleston to Pensacola did not matter. The Lincoln administration’s decision to try and relieve the federal garrisons became readily
apparent to Confederate leaders as the relief expedition was being outfitted in New York. If that was not enough, and it was, on April 6, Lincoln directed Robert S. Chew, a State Department clerk, to deliver the following message to Governor Francis Pickens of South Carolina:

I am directed by the President of the United States to notify you to expect an attempt will be made to supply Fort-Sumpter [sic] with provisions only; and that, if such attempt be not resisted, no effort to throw in men, arms, or ammunition, will be made, without further notice, or in case of an attack upon the Fort.

Chew delivered his message on Monday, April 8. Rather than waiting for the expedition to arrive, which would at the very least delay the evacuation of Fort Sumter, Confederate authorities gave the order to open fire, which occurred in the early morning hours, April 12, 1861.19

News of the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter reached Washington by telegraph the same day it began. Dahlgren’s first thoughts were about the ability of the federal garrison to withstand the attack and he was anything but optimistic. Even "If the Fort were fully manned and armed it would be reducible by proper means. But the garrison is so feeble ... that every disability counts." As for the relief effort that had been sent, even not knowing that Seward’s interference had diverted the Powhatan to Pensacola, Dahlgren held out little hope of success. "[T]he large [ships] ... could not enter and those that can would
not pass the fire of the batteries, if they were efficiently served,—and a proper parole [patrol] of armed steamers would prevent any attempt by boats to introduce men or stores."20

Dahlgren's feelings about the fate of Major Robert Anderson and his tiny garrison were correct. After enduring a fierce bombardment for approximately thirty hours, Anderson ordered his colors be taken down and he surrendered. By the evening, April 13, word reached Washington of Anderson's surrender. As news of the loss of Fort Sumter spread in the capital, there was a mixture of emotions. On one hand, as Dahlgren noted, there was "Great excitement." At the same time "people [were] almost stunned by the news."21

President Lincoln moved quickly after the fall of Fort Sumter. After meeting with his Cabinet on Sunday, April 14, he issued a Proclamation calling for 75,000 militia, whose "service," the President declared, "will probably be to re-possess the forts, places, and property which have been seized from the Union." Lincoln also announced a special session of Congress, to convene on the most patriotic of American holidays, July 4. Telegrams from Northern politicians and citizens poured into the capital announcing support for the proclamation. Offers of troops far outstripped both the President's request and the government's ability to outfit them.22
While public reaction in the North exhibited widespread support for Lincoln's actions, public feeling in the South, in marked contrast, was almost universally against the President's request for troops. Two days after the President's proclamation, the Virginia legislature responded by passing an ordinance of secession, reversing an earlier vote against secession; and other Southern slave states which had not yet seceded took actions which made it seem likely that they would quickly follow suit. In addition, the Virginia militia seized the federal arsenal at Harper's Ferry made so famous by John Brown little more than a year earlier, and seemed poised to do the same with the navy's Gosport Navy Yard in Norfolk, the navy's largest and most important base. To prevent this, on April 19, Welles sent all of the available ships and troops in Washington to Norfolk.23

Up to this point Commander Dahlgren had primarily been an observer; but just as the uncertainty surrounding the fate of the Norfolk expedition reached a climax, he suddenly found himself called into action. On the morning of April 22, Dahlgren was as usual busy doing his ordnance work in his office located at the Washington Navy Yard. Suddenly, one of Secretary Welles's sons rushed in. Undoubtedly out of breath and exhibiting a great deal of excitement, young Welles told Dahlgren, "there was something going on in the Yard," and he had orders for him from his father. "You will
assume temporary command of the Washington Navy Yard," the orders read; furthermore, "Discharge all suspected persons upon satisfactory evidence of their disloyalty to the Government, and place the yard in the best possible state of defence [sic]."24

Dahlgren did not have to wait long to find out what was "going on." Shortly afterward, the commandant of the yard, Captain Franklin Buchanan, sent for him. Buchanan, one of the navy's most respected officers, as bespoke his selection as the United States Naval Academy's first superintendent, was a Marylander by birth and an ardent supporter of states rights. He believed Maryland would follow Virginia's lead and also secede and being unwilling to take up arms against his native state, Buchanan had agonizingly decided to resign the commission that he had held ever since the last days of the War of 1812. Dahlgren, by virtue of being the highest ranking officer assigned to the yard after Buchanan received command of the post.25

By this time, Washington had been isolated. The city was in a state of panic as rumors flew all around that the capital would be attacked at any moment. Despite the numerous promises from Northern governors that troops were on the way, none had yet arrived and President Lincoln agonized aloud, "Why don't they come? Why don't they come?" Almost as quickly as the panic arose, however, it ended. The day after Dahlgren took command, elements of the
expedition to Norfolk began returning. Although they failed to save the Gosport Yard, the 700 marines and 400 sailors made a welcome addition to Washington’s defenses. On April 25, the Seventh New York Regiment finally arrived in Washington via Annapolis, Maryland; they were followed two days later by the Seventy-First New York Regiment. By nightfall of April 27, about 10,000 troops in all had arrived and more were arriving every day.26

Dahlgren had never exhibited any bashfulness about using political influence to promote his own career and he was not about to start now. Even though he had only met President Lincoln on a few occasions—first at Nannie Buchanan’s wedding on April 3, and briefly again each of the next two days while trying to make sense of Andrew Foote’s request for howitzers—on Sunday, April 28, Dahlgren traveled the two miles or so from the Washington Navy Yard up to the White House and boldly asked to see the President. If his past lobbying efforts provide any clues to his behavior, Dahlgren was undoubtedly prepared with a well-orchestrated presentation. Despite few similarities either in its strategic importance or the danger it was really in, Dahlgren probably compared the Washington Navy Yard and his actions to “save it” with the events at the Gosport Navy Yard. Dahlgren told the President that because of his actions since April 22 he was entitled to both Franklin Buchanan’s post and to his commission.27
It is not certain how the President initially felt about Dahlgren's bold request because the only account of the meeting comes from Dahlgren's personal papers. According to Dahlgren, the President "received" his "claims...very favorably." But if actions speak louder than words, the President may not have been nearly as favorable as Dahlgren suggested, because neither of his requests were honored, at least not then. In reality Dahlgren had not done very much. Although he had remained loyal while many other officers were resigning their commissions, this hardly warranted a promotion. Moreover, the Washington Navy Yard had never been physically threatened—In contrast, at the Gosport Navy Yard a body of the Virginia militia was actually present outside the yard and at one point General William B. Taliaferro, who commanded the Virginia troops, demanded the yard's surrender—and all Dahlgren did was to take command after Buchanan resigned.28

Even though he was only the temporary commander of the yard, Dahlgren performed his work with industry and vigor; and the job was an important one in the early days of the war. With the secession of all of the coastal states from Virginia south, the yard was the southernmost navy base securely in federal hands, and it was quickly transformed from a relatively quiet and unimportant installation that to a center of the Union war effort. In the first days after the fall of Fort Sumter, when many people in the
capital believed Washington would be overrun at any moment, the War Department seized four private steamers which plied the local waters and sent them to the navy yard where Dahlgren outfitted them with ordnance and crews. These vessels, along with the few navy vessels in home waters at the outbreak of the war, were designated as the Potomac Flotilla, whose assignment was to prevent any movement of enemy troops from the Virginia side of the Potomac and to make sure that navigation of that river remained open.

While he did not command the Potomac Flotilla himself, as commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, Dahlgren's job was to make sure that the vessels were supplied and equipped with whatever they required. Furthermore, to better facilitate communications between the Navy Department and the Potomac Flotilla, as well as with blockading vessels along the Atlantic and Gulf Coasts, a telegraph line was established linking the Navy Department and the Washington Navy Yard. In this way, Dahlgren's office became the central communications center between Washington and vessels at sea. Besides these tasks, Dahlgren remained in charge of the ordnance production facilities at the yard. With the outbreak of war the demands for guns and ammunition rapidly exhausted reserves, especially with the loss of so many navy bases and federal arsenals located throughout the South.

Dahlgren quickly put the yard's ordnance factory on a wartime production schedule, with work beginning early every
morning and carrying on well into the night, Sundays included. This last decision of Dahlgren's led someone to complain to President Lincoln, to which Dahlgren could only respond:

[I]t has been my wish to have no work executed on Sunday that could be avoided,...[with the work being done] chiefly embracing the manufacture of cannon and the repairs of vessels of the [Potomac] Flotilla, or the equipment of others fitting for sea....I am sure no man can regret more than myself that a necessity exists for putting the sabbath to other uses than those for which it is designed.29

All was not work for Dahlgren during those first few weeks he commanded the Washington Navy Yard, however. On May 9, Lincoln again visited the Navy Yard, this time at the invitation of the commander of the Seventy-First New York Regiment, whose troops were temporarily being housed there, to hear a concert performed in the President's honor. While Dahlgren may not have invited the President, he certainly knew how to take advantage of his presence. After the concert he took the President and his entourage aboard the U.S.S. Pensacola so that they could witness the firing of one of his XI-inch guns. According to John Hay, one of Lincoln's secretaries, the display was "'novel and pleasant'" and the "'Prest. was delighted.'"30

A few days later Lincoln was back, this time to take a short voyage down the Potomac with Secretary of State Seward and his powerful ally from New York, Thurlow Weed. The
cruise was probably intended to assuage Seward and Weed, both of whom felt that the President had been ignoring the powerful New York State party boss. Less than a week later Lincoln and Seward were back again, now to inspect the ordnance facilities at the yard.31

Through the late spring and early summer, for one reason or another, the President's visits to the yard became more and more frequent. The Washington Navy Yard became a refuge for the President, a place for him to escape the pressures of the presidency and the constant work that confronted him at the White House. He seemed to enjoy nothing better than making short excursions up and down the Potomac River. While almost all of the President's early visits to the navy yard had something to do other than specifically to see Dahlgren, after a time this began to change. As historian Robert Bruce argued persuasively, Lincoln, who has generally been characterized as the rail-splitting pioneer, in temperament also had much in common with the "engineer[s] or scientist[s]" who were bringing mid-nineteenth-century America into the "Machine Age." From early in his life he exhibited a fascination with the technical and mechanical advancements of the day. With the outbreak of the Civil War this translated into a deep personal interest in weapons. Dahlgren represented the very embodiment of the spirit which so characterized the Lincoln that Bruce described; and thus in Dahlgren,
according to Bruce, "Lincoln had found his chief advisor on the tools of war."32

But if the President had found something in Dahlgren, the reverse was also true. Dahlgren continued to hold the temporary command of the Washington Navy Yard through the early summer. Officially, however, Dahlgren was not eligible for the position because by law it required the rank of captain, just like the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. Sometime that summer a number of captains who apparently wanted the position for themselves pointed this out. By the time this occurred, the President had befriended Dahlgren, and when Lincoln learned of the other officers' desires, he reportedly stated, "The Yard shall not be taken from [Dahlgren] ... he held it when no one else would, and now he shall keep it as long as he pleases."33

While the President may have wanted Dahlgren to keep the post, the legality of this still remained. To solve this, on July 26, Charles B. Sedgewick who chaired the House of Representatives Naval Affairs Committee, and who was known for his cooperation with the Navy Department, introduced a bill to amend the law which stipulated that the Washington Navy Yard could only be commanded by captains. With the chairman's support and influence the bill sailed through the House.34

It was a different story in the Senate. The bill was introduced to the Senate on July 30. But when it was
forwarded to Naval Affairs Committee, the bill was shelved with the understanding that it would not be considered until the next regular Congressional session, scheduled to begin in December. This created a flurry of behind the scenes activity that became obvious the next day. When the Senate reconvened the following morning, two senators arose simultaneously to ask that the bill be reconsidered for open debate before the full Senate. Although he was the second one to propose the motion, Senator James Dixon of Connecticut, Secretary of the Navy Welles's home state and an ally of Welles and the Navy Department, he was the first senator to explain his reasons for wanting debate reopened. Recalling the events surrounding Dahlgren's temporary appointment to the position, Dixon made an emotional appeal for reconsideration of the measure, saying to do otherwise would in effect be a censure of Commander Dahlgren, who "was almost the only officer who remained faithful to his duty." The Senate agreed to reconsider the bill. Two amendments were immediately introduced. The first, offered by Senator John Sherman of Ohio, proposed that the command of all navy yards be opened to commanders as well as captains. Senator James Grimes of Iowa, another staunch supporter of the Navy Department, followed with his own amendment, proposing that the measure to open command of navy yards to commanders also be extended to include commands of navy bureaus, such as the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. This proposal,
according to Grimes, resulted from his being "approached by those who were very intimately connected with the Navy, and who have expressed the opinion that the public interests would be more promoted by having commander Dahlgren at the head of the Bureau of Ordnance than in any other position in the Government." Suddenly at debate was the very position that Dahlgren had coveted ever since Commodore Morris's death in 1856. But not everyone agreed with what was taking place. After Grimes had proposed his amendment, Senator John Hale of New Hampshire, who chaired the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, addressed the Senate. Hale, a longtime member of Congress, had achieved notoriety for himself with his early opposition to the spread of slavery into the Mexican Cession, which won him the nomination of the Liberty Party as a presidential candidate in 1848. During the Civil War, however, he would constantly oppose Welles. Hale had been the first person to propose that the original bill be reconsidered. That morning, he now startlingly revealed to the Senate, he had a visit from none other than Commander Dahlgren, who wanted to talk to him about the shelved bill. That visit was why he proposed that the bill be reconsidered; but unlike Dixon it was not to pass it, but to defeat it. In an obvious attempt to make the bill so outrageous that it would be rejected, he asked, why not open the yards and bureaus to lieutenants? But why did Hale want the measure defeated? Ever since he had been a member of
the Senate, Hale explained, "the Navy Department have had a set of pets....who, some by law and some without law and against law, have been paid extravagant salaries, altogether beyond what belonged to them by the rule which their fellow-officers were paid, and Commander Dahlgren has been among the men who have been paid these extravagant sums."

Hale acknowledged that Dahlgren had never received any extra pay without the sanction of the law behind it, but that did not mean that he believed that Dahlgren came by his extra pay innocently. Hale recalled another and long forgotten debate in Congress that occurred in 1851, when then Lieutenant Dahlgren successfully lobbied to receive the pay of a commander at sea. Hale had argued against that as well; but, he remembered, "While I was endeavoring to impress my views on the Senate in open session by as fair considerations as I could suggest, lobby agents came and looked in my eyes and winked, and took out Senators and lobbied them, and got them to vote for the proposition which I was endeavoring to combat in the Senate. That I have seen; and I have seen it in the case of this very Mr. Dahlgren."

He had witnessed enough of this type of behavior, especially in Dahlgren's own case, Hale argued. "[I]t is," he concluded, "time to stop this special legislation for Commander Dahlgren." And if the Senate was concerned about rewarding Dahlgren, Hale assured his colleagues, that was "fully met long ago, in the fact that
you have paid him what you have never paid anyone else—not
the highest sea-service pay of the grade to which he
belongs, but the highest ... of the grade next above him."35

Hale did not find much support for his proposal. Other
senators gave emotional appeals on Dahlgren’s behalf. The
most notable one was made by Senator Henry M. Rice, who had
authored the bill for Dahlgren’s pay raise in 1860. Rice
told the Senate, that as officers all around him were
leaving, "Commander Dahlgren stood by his flag. Mutiny was
inaugurated there [at the Washington Navy Yard], and he met
it manfully; and for eight or ten days and nights that man
never took off his clothes. He labored incessantly." Rice
concluded his appeal by giving overblown significance to
Dahlgren’s actions: "if to any one man more than another we
owe the safety of the city of Washington, it is to Commander
Dahlgren."36

Hale seriously miscalculated if he thought he could
stop the move to reward Dahlgren. Where the day before a
bill simply asking to make Dahlgren eligible to keep command
of the Washington Navy Yard was quickly removed from
consideration, the following day the bill was reintroduced
and passed with the proviso that Dahlgren also be made
eligible for the command as a bureau chief. The bill, with
the Senate amendment, then went back to the House where
again it did not face any opposition, being approved on
August 1. The next day, President Lincoln signed the bill into law. 37

Despite Senator Hale's strong feelings against the effort to reward Dahlgren, once the President signed the bill it would be hard to argue that it did not make perfect sense to appoint Dahlgren to the position of the Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. On August 3, Secretary Welles telegraphed Dahlgren in his office at the yard and asked him to "Report to the Department in person as early as convenient" to do just that. Remarkably, Dahlgren declined the secretary's offer. While there is no record of Welles's immediate response, it would not be surprising if he was dumbfounded. Furthermore, it would not be at all surprising to find that Welles was more than a little bit angry because he had obviously played a large part in having the bill reintroduced and amended so that he could appoint Dahlgren to head the ordnance bureau. But Welles, if he had lost his composure, obviously regained it and he asked Dahlgren to "consider further & answer in the morning." Dahlgren agreed to reconsider. 38

On the face of it, Dahlgren's decision seemed to defy all logic. First of all, the appointment was a prestigious one and would have provided a ringing endorsement for his past ordnance work, which had not engendered the complete approval of his colleagues. Furthermore, and maybe even important, as head of the Bureau of Ordnance and
Hydrography, Dahlgren no longer would have been subject to interference from above and would have had a more or less free rein to determine the direction of American naval ordnance in the future. But it must be remembered that Dahlgren always did what was in his greatest self interest, and this was certainly the case now.

What explains Dahlgren’s answer? First of all, by declining the bureau, Dahlgren did not stand to lose any influence at all regarding ordnance matters. Since late April the bureau had been run by Captain Andrew Harwood, who had been appointed to fill the vacancy temporarily. Harwood was not only a good friend of Dahlgren’s, he was also not an ordnance specialist. Consequently, since Harwood’s appointment, Dahlgren had already enjoyed ultimate authority in the ordnance department. With Dahlgren’s refusal, Welles would more than likely simply keep Harwood in place, insuring Dahlgren’s continued dominance of the ordnance department. 39

There were other factors which contributed to Dahlgren’s decision. If he turned down the ordnance post, he would not walk away empty-handed because the Washington Navy Yard still needed a permanent commandant. While certainly less prestigious, command of the yard had benefits which more than compensated for any loss in status. The position at the yard gave Dahlgren unparalleled prominence. As has already been described, the Washington Navy Yard
quickly became one of President Lincoln's favorite places and the President made it a regular routine to take excursions upon the local waters. As commander-in-chief, many of Lincoln's trips can be characterized as official military voyages as he personally wanted to see the extent to which Confederate batteries along the Virginia side of the Potomac affected navigation. Besides these more or less official military reconnaissances, the President more frequently used the navy yard and its vessels to entertain and impress cabinet members, important politicians, visiting dignitaries, and friends. Dahlgren usually went on these trips and he was often the center of attention because a cruise almost always included a demonstration of the famous Dahlgren guns, fired by the famous inventor himself. Underscoring what Dahlgren stood to lose if he accepted the ordnance bureau, while he was still considering the offer, Secretary of State Seward brought Prince Joseph Charles Paul Napoleon to the yard for a tour. If he accepted the bureau Dahlgren would have surely missed out on this type of public exposure.40

Dahlgren had another reason for turning down the ordnance bureau, and this may have been the most important one. Since he had been in command of the Washington Navy Yard he had been involved in prosecuting the war. Besides his role in "saving Washington" and his serving as intermediary between the Navy Department and the Potomac
Flotilla, which at least gave Dahlgren the opportunity to propose operations along the Potomac, Dahlgren had also been involved in the army's first move into Virginia. After Washington proper was secured with the arrival of troops in late April, one of the first things that Northern military leaders wanted to do was to move troops south across the Potomac River in order to protect the capital from being bombarded by artillery fire and to keep the Potomac River clear. But because Virginia's secession ordinance did not become official until May 23, when its citizens voted to approve the legislature's action, no troops were moved across the river before then. As soon as Virginia officially seceded federal troops were ready to move, which they did on the night of May 23. Dahlgren personally led the small flotilla that transported the First New York Zouave Regiment sent to occupy Alexandria, Virginia. This operation would have created little notice except for the death of Colonel Elmer Ellsworth, a former student in Lincoln's Illinois law office. Dahlgren, by virtue of having remained off of Alexandria, transported the colonel's body back to the Navy Yard. His report of the death of Ellsworth, who he said was "deliberately murdered by one of the inhabitants" after taking down a Confederate flag which was flying over one of the town's buildings, was probably the first one to reach President Lincoln, who reportedly...
broke down into tears when he learned of Ellsworth's death. 41

That was not the only time that the motley assortment of vessels that Dahlgren had at his disposal were utilized that summer. In early July, Dahlgren helped to ferry some of General Irvin McDowell's troops across the Potomac River as the main and ill-prepared armies of the North and South prepared to meet in the first major battle of the Civil War. Like everyone else, Dahlgren awaited word of the outcome, and in his journal he wrote expectantly, "And thus the North and South are at last face to face,--with all the armed strength each has been able to collect to this time....What is the question to be decided!" Writing those words on the morning of July 21, Dahlgren's question was quickly answered. At about 7 p.m. that evening, Dahlgren received an emergency telegram asking him to send any vessels he had to Alexandria in order to help stop a possible advance of the Confederate army, which seemed all too likely in light of the rout of the Union forces earlier that day in the Battle of Bull Run, or, as Southerners called it, the Battle of Manassas. Fortunately for the North and Washington, victory disorganized the Confederate army as much as defeat disorganized the Union army; and the only warship that Dahlgren had his disposal, the obsolete brig Perry which he had towed to Alexandria, was not needed. 42
As minor and indirect as his participation may have been in all of these military operations, they undoubtedly still gave Dahlgren the feeling that he was playing an active role in the war; and this, he had to have realized, would have completely disappeared if he accepted the post to head the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography. Not surprisingly then, Dahlgren "Went to the Secretary," he noted in his journal, "and declined fully the Bureau,—he had given me [to] the last minute, as the Senate had but one and [a] half hour[s] to sit." 43
Notes to Chapter II

1Dahlgren, January 1, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.

2John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, December 24, 1860, JADLC.

3Dahlgren to Drayton, December 21, 1859, in Schneller, "The Contentious Innovator," p. 259; John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, December 18, 1860, JADLC.

4Foote to Dahlgren, January 17, 1860, Ibid., this letter is misdated and should read, January 17, 1861, and it is filed in the 1860 folder, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Foote, January 23, 1861, in Schneller, "The Contentious Innovator," pp. 260-61.

5For an overview of the naval buildup in the 1850s and the reasons behind it, see, Kenneth J. Hagan, This People's Navy: The Making of American Sea Power (New York, 1991), pp. 125-60; Stephen Howarth, To Shining Sea: A History of the United States Navy, 1775-1991 (New York, 1991), pp. 153-78; the information on Charles Dahlgren's cotton production is from, Ulric Dahlgren to John Dahlgren, January 1, 1861, JADLC; Dahlgren quote in, John Dahlgren, Journal Entry, April 21, 1860, Vol. 7, JADSU; for Dahlgren's feelings toward his son, see, John A. Dahlgren, Memoir of Ulric Dahlgren, ed. Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren (Philadelphia, 1872). There is very little known about Charles Dahlgren. In his own memoirs, John Dahlgren never discussed Charles. Like his brother, however, Charles Dahlgren tried to make a career in the military, but he gave this up by the mid-1830s. John Quitman's intervention on John Dahlgren's behalf in 1839 (see Chapter I), indicates that Charles was in Mississippi by the late 1830s. Based on average crop yields and labor requirements for cotton cultivation, his cotton harvest for 1860 suggests that he would have had at least 75 to 100 field hands, who at this time were valued at approximately $1,800 each. In order to produce 1,000 bales of cotton he would have needed at least 750 to 1,000 acres in active production, and this would have only represented a portion of his land holdings. The cash value of his harvest for 1860 was $75,000 based on the going rate of cotton of 15 cents a pound in 1860. These figures place Charles Dahlgren among the elite of Southern slaveholders. See, Clement
Charles Dahlgren enjoyed sufficient prominence and influence that he was made a general in the Confederate Army at the beginning of the Civil War. He served in the Mississippi Valley through late 1863, when he resigned, because, in true Dahlgren family fashion, he took offense when someone was placed in command above him. The little that is known about Charles Dahlgren is gleaned from passing references in the Dahlgren family pre-Civil War correspondence, John Dahlgren's Journals, and a few references in The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies 128 vols. (Washington D.C., 1880-1901), hereafter cited as OR; see, Charles Dahlgren to Jefferson Davis, December 3, 1863, OR, I, 52, pt. 2, pp. 568-69; Charles Dahlgren to Joseph E. Johnston, December, 1863, Ibid., pp. 569-70.

6John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, November 26, 1860, JADLC; John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, December 24, 1860, Ibid.


8Dahlgren to Paul, January 9, 1861, JADLC; in another letter, Dahlgren wrote, "I am hoarding the little I have in order to keep afloat as long as I can." See, John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, December 24, 1860, Ibid.


11Badger to Dahlgren, March 13, 1861, JADLC; Dahlgren to Badger, March 14, 1861, JADLC, underline in the original.

12Ibid.; John Dahlgren to Mary Dahlgren, February 5, 1845, JADNHFC.


14Russell, My Diary North and South, pp. 3-4, 54-55; Dahlgren, January 30, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.

15Dahlgren, April 2, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.


20Dahlgren, April 12, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.

21Dahlgren, April 13-14, 1861, Journal Entries, Ibid.  

Buchanan had obviously been contemplating resigning for some time. On February 26, he asked Secretary of the Navy Toucey whether or not Dahlgren should be considered attached to the yard in the event of Buchanan being absent. In his endorsement, Toucey told Buchanan that Dahlgren was considered attached to the yard; thus when Buchanan resigned, he handed over the yard to Dahlgren, see, Buchanan to Toucey, February 26, 1861, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 45, Entry 34, Letters From Commandant Washington Navy Yard, hereafter cited as NARG45--Entry 34, Buchanan to Dahlgren, April 22, 1861, National Archives, Washington D.C., Record Group 45, Entry 35, Washington Navy Yard Order Book, hereafter cited as NARG 45--Entry 35; Dahlgren, May 3, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; in an ironic twist, Maryland did not secede and in early May, Buchanan tried to withdraw his resignation. Secretary of the Navy Welles refused and Buchanan eventually joined the Confederate States navy, where he won fame as the commanding officer of the C.S.S. Virginia, better known as the Merrimac, and after this vessel was scuttled, in command of the C.S.S. Tennessee used in the defense of Mobile Bay. See, Charles M. Todorich, "Franklin Buchanan: Symbol For Two Navies," ed. Bradford, Captains of the Old Steam Navy, pp. 102-03.


Dahlgren, May 3, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; Dahlgren, "Memoranda from letters & c." April 28, 1861, filed in Box 26, JADLC.

Dahlgren apparently also pressed his claims with Secretary of the Navy Welles, see, Dahlgren, May 3, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; West, Mr. Lincoln's Navy, pp. 40-41.

For the history of the Washington Navy Yard during the Civil War, see, Peck, Round-Shot to Rockets: A History of the Washington Navy Yard, pp. 111-57; regarding the
telegraph line between the Navy Department and the yard, see, Dahlgren, May 3, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; for Dahlgren’s response to the criticism of working on Sundays, see, Dahlgren to Welles, October 9, 1861, NARG45—Entry 354; to follow Dahlgren’s daily activities at the Washington Navy Yard, see, NARG45—Entry 34, Letters From Commandant, Washington Navy Yard; as well as, NARG45—Entry 354; Dahlgren’s relationship to the Potomac Flotilla has been misinterpreted by historians. One historian wrote, "Until 1863 the Potomac rested largely on the ships under his command." See, Schneller, "The Contentious Innovator," p. 269. Dahlgren never commanded the squadron and his primary involvement with it was to supply the vessels and to transmit messages between the Navy Department and the commanders of the various vessels. The first commander of the Potomac Flotilla was Commander James H. Ward, who was killed on June 26, 1861, while conducting operations along the Potomac. Ward was temporarily replaced by Lieutenant Foxhall Parker until Commander Thomas Craven was appointed. The early operations of the Potomac Flotilla can be followed in Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies in the War of the Rebellion, 31 vols. (Washington D.C., 1894-1922), hereafter cited as ORN. all references to Series I, see ORN, 4.


32Dahlgren, May 24, June 9, 1861, Journal Entries, Vol. 7, JADSU; Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day, III, pp. 43-50; Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War, pp. 3-21. Bruce follows Dahlgren’s and Lincoln’s relationship from the presidential inauguration onward. Bruce contends that from the very first meeting of the two men at Nannie Buchanan’s wedding on April 3, 1861, the President "took an immediate fancy" to Dahlgren. I disagree with Bruce about the nature of the relationship of Dahlgren and Lincoln, at least at its very outset, which can be discerned from my description of their first meeting earlier in this chapter. While the two men did indeed develop a very close friendship, there is no evidence to support Bruce’s assertion of Lincoln’s feelings for Dahlgren until the latter conclusively demonstrated his loyalty to the Union.
33 Lincoln, quoted in, Dahlgren, August 4, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.


35 Senate debate, July 30, 1861, 37th Cong., 1st Sess., The Congressional Globe, Vol. 31, p. 332; the debate in the Senate can be followed in, July 31, 1861, 37th Cong., 1st Sess., The Congressional Globe, Vol. 31, pp. 358-61; for Grimes's relationship with the Navy Department, see, Niven, Gideon Welles, p. 376; for Dahlgren's lobbying efforts for personal pay raises, see, Chapter I of this dissertation.


38 Welles to Dahlgren, August 3, 1861, Telegram, JADLC; Dahlgren, Journal Entry, August 5, 1861, Vol. 7, JADSU.

39 Niven, Gideon Welles, p. 346; West, Mr. Lincoln's Navy, p. 49; Bruce, Lincoln and the Tools of War, pp. 16, 19-20.

40 Dahlgren was not very impressed with Prince Napoleon, who was the nephew of, as Dahlgren described him, "the Napoleon." Dahlgren, August 5, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU, underline in the original; between the time that Dahlgren took temporary command of the yard and when he turned down the Bureau of Ordnance, President Lincoln, with numerous guests in tow, visited the Washington Navy Yard no less than fifteen times on the following days, May 9, 12, 18, 21, 24, 30, June 2, 11, 14, 19, 30, July 7, 14, 21, 24, 1861, see, Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day, III, pp. 41-56.

41 Dahlgren's role in the operation is detailed in, Peck, Round-Shot to Rockets, pp. 123-24; see also, Leech, Revelle in Washington, pp. 80-82; Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, pp. 269-70; Secretary of the Navy Welles said that Dahlgren did his job well, see, Welles to Edgar Welles, May 25, 1861, Reel 19, Cont. 19, Welles Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D. C., hereafter cited as WellesLC; for Dahlgren's own view, see, Dahlgren, May 24-25, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.
Ellsworth's death was the cause of one of Lincoln's first visits to the Navy Yard. As soon as he learned that Ellsworth had been brought to the navy yard, Lincoln, along with his wife Mary Todd Lincoln, immediately drove to the yard. Ellsworth's body had not yet been prepared for viewing, and Dahlgren rode in the President's carriage and gave his view of what had occurred.

42Dahlgren, July 21, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU.

43Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren, August 6, 1861, Journal Entry, Ibid.; the position of bureau chief was a presidential appointment and thus required Senate approval. By turning down the ordnance bureau Dahlgren was made permanent commandant of the Washington Navy Yard; Andrew Harwood was retained as the Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography.
Chapter III
Stuck in Washington

"it was perhaps my last chance for a flag"

At first, Dahlgren's routine at the Washington Navy Yard did not change after he was named the permanent commandant. The yard remained as busy as before. Requests for cannon and ammunition continued unabated, keeping the ordnance factory working at full bore. And in the immediate aftermath of the Battle of Bull Run, concern about keeping the Potomac River open also remained of the utmost importance, and therefore Dahlgren's responsibility to keep the Potomac Flotilla well-supplied and equipped demanded constant attention. "I am occupied incessantly," he noted, "but am none the worse for it." This changed quickly, however.¹

While the first major battle of the Civil War did not end the conflict between the North and South, as most people either hoped or expected, it did have dramatic impact. Within four days of the battle, President Lincoln signed two bills authorizing the recruiting and enlisting of a total of 1,000,000 three-year volunteers. The President also summoned General George Brinton McClellan to Washington to
train and lead these new troops.²

McClellan, who in his own exaggerated words had "annihilated two armies" in western Virginia, was an ideal person for what was needed; first, to rally the demoralized troops already in Washington; and second, to organize the thousands of men who were flooding Northern recruiting offices in response to the President's call. He quickly demonstrated his abilities as a superb organizer and administrator, and with dramatic flair McClellan took Washington by storm. Rather than living with his army in the field, McClellan took up residence in Washington. It became a common sight around the capital to see the general dashing around to and fro in a seemingly mad frenzy, with his staff following behind in a struggle to keep up with the young and energetic army commander. Within days of his arrival in Washington, William Howard Russell who had disparaged the rag-tag army that General McDowell led into battle, remarked that there had been much "improvement in the look of the men." McClellan was also promised something that McDowell had not received, time; and he used this time to begin organizing the tens of thousands of troops arriving monthly into a well-trained and well-disciplined army.³

Even though McClellan did not put his army on the offensive, the situation in and around Washington changed considerably. In late September, Confederate forces withdrew from one of the most forward positions they had
taken after Bull Run. This relieved some of the tension in the capital, which had a pronounced effect on Dahlgren's schedule. Where only a short time before he was "occupied incessantly," military duties no longer occupied so much of his time that he had to forgo participating in Washington's active social scene. His Journal entries give an indication of both the extent of the capital's social life and his participation in it. On September 23, Dahlgren was at the Brazilian Minister's, who gave a party in the honor of Prince de Joinville, who had just arrived from France. While happy to meet the Prince, Dahlgren noted despondently that the party "was an exhibition of the melancholy wreck of our social circle,—only a half a dozen ladies could be mustered." The following night Dahlgren attended another party, this one at Secretary of State Seward's house, "where," Dahlgren noted, "we had besides de Joinville, the Count of Paris[,] heir to the French throne[,] and the Duke de Chartres[,] his brother." Then on September 25, "I [Dahlgren] dined at the President's with some of his friends,—the only notability there was Mr. Holt, late Secretary of War to Buchanan." The following day was "[t]he fast day proclaimed by the President,—the first day in which there has been a suspension of labor in this Yard since I took command." While the yard may have been absent its workers, Dahlgren was busy at the yard entertaining the Duke de Chartres. Later that evening, Dahlgren took a
friend who was visiting him from Philadelphia to Seward’s, where "we talked with the ladies, and were soon joined by the French Princes and Mr. Seward: then came in the President and we had a very chatty evening."4

Dahlgren’s account of the Washington social scene in the early fall suggests just how dramatic a transformation had occurred in the capital since Bull Run. Still, like most people in Washington, Dahlgren quickly focused his attention on General McClellan’s lack of activity. Early in September Dahlgren noted in his journal, "Matters progressing with little or no change in the state of affairs." A few days later he wrote, "Every thing quiet on the river and the lines." If Dahlgren was beginning to question McClellan, this changed on October 4, when the general paid him the honor of an "informal visit." Dahlgren suddenly only had glowing words for McClellan. "Though rather below the average size, he is of martial figure,—the countenance open and not impressed with any one characteristic, but harmonising much intelligence and manliness....You reconize mind, and firmness and a fine disposition, but no one of them too dominant. He is," Dahlgren continued, "well educated and bred; without the least assumption in manner, but winning in his address." Dahlgren also wrote to one of his sons to tell him of McClellan’s unexpected visit. McClellan, he told Ulric Dahlgren, "came in last evening about dark, took tea and
staid until 11OC....We had a cosy time....We parted very good friends and I was much pleased with him--he is a fine fellow."5

The general's visit made Dahlgren much more optimistic, and by mid-October it appeared to him that after months of preparation, the Army of the Potomac, as the Union army under McClellan was now named, was about to move forward. On October 13, just as he did before Bull Run, Dahlgren wrote expectantly, "So, here we are again, on the verge of a decision. Mighty hosts will soon be in collision, to decide more than was decided on the 21st of July, though that was no small matter." But the following day McClellan unexpectedly visited again, and their conversation left Dahlgren anything but sanguine. McClellan complained to Dahlgren that General-in-Chief Winfield Scott was continually interfering with his plans. He further explained that the cause of the inactivity of his army the past months rested entirely with Scott. "He says," as Dahlgren recalled his conversation with McClellan, "Scott does not want to fight, but considers delay the policy." McClellan further suggested to Dahlgren that he had a very different view and that if he was allowed to exercise command by himself he would move the army forward immediately.6

Dahlgren accepted McClellan's allegations completely, and he sided with the young general. "Scott has," Dahlgren
stated, "tried his plan and nearly lost the Capital,—McClellan] should act freely and be assisted."
"I could not but feel apprehensive," Dahlgren concluded, "when I found that on the eve of another trial the real leader was to be paralyzed in this way." "What Madness!"

McClellan's revelations to Dahlgren were probably not some happenstance event. "I am firmly determined," McClellan wrote the day before to his wife Mary Ellen McClellan, "to force the issue with Genl Scott--a very few days will determine whether his policy or mine is to prevail." And while Dahlgren never made any mention of whether he spoke to Lincoln on McClellan's behalf, on November 1, the President, after months of trying to work out a compromise between the aging general-in-chief and the ambitious commander of the Army of the Potomac, finally accepted Scott's resignation, first tendered on August 9. Hearing this news, Dahlgren noted with relief, "Gen.[eral] Scott finally retires."

McClellan's promotion to General-in-Chief of the Army did not lead to any sudden offensive operations. But even as McClellan and the Army of the Potomac went into hibernation for the winter, Dahlgren found plenty to occupy his time. Administrative duties at the navy yard took up much of his days, and the active Washington social scene helped to fill his evenings. Dahlgren also spent much of the fall providing informal charter service for Lincoln and
others. Besides providing the President a chance to escape the mounting pressure facing him in Washington, especially with General McClellan's inactivity, these junkets also gave Dahlgren numerous opportunities to press his own interests. Permanent command of the Washington Navy Yard had not satiated Dahlgren's hunger for personal aggrandizement. Even before he accepted the post he had renewed his request to the President to be promoted to captain. To be promoted, however, required a vacancy in the ranks above; the result of retirement, resignation, or death. Many spots had opened since the beginning of the war, but promotions were accorded strictly by seniority and Dahlgren was too far down the list of commanders to benefit.9

One memorable cruise in mid-November showed that Dahlgren had the President's support. This particular trip, which included Lincoln, Seward, Welles, Secretary of War Simon Cameron, Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, and Illinois Senator Lyman Trumbull, had quickly developed into "a very hilarious party," according to Dahlgren, as the President poked fun at Seward about a story making the rounds of the capital that he had "got drunk." Besides chiding his secretary of state, Lincoln also brought his desire to promote Dahlgren to Welles's attention. "'I will,'" Lincoln told the secretary of the navy, "'make a Captain of Dahlgren as soon as you say there is a place.'" The wine which had been served on the trip had apparently
flowed very freely because Cameron followed the President's declaration by exclaiming that if the President transferred Dahlgren to the army ordnance department, he would put Dahlgren "at the head of it and make ... [him] a Brigadier General." 10

Dahlgren was not willing to accept a transfer to the army, even for a promotion. Within weeks, however, Dahlgren thought he might get his promotion anyway. The condition of the navy officer corps had concerned Welles since the start of the war. He felt that there were too many inefficient officers in the upper ranks because the navy had no formal system of retirement. At the end of the special session of Congress held in the summer of 1861, Welles managed to push legislation through Congress establishing a board of officers whose task was to examine all those on the Navy Register to see if they were fit for duty, and to retire any "incapacitated by old age, ill health and the enervation incident to service in the old navy." Unfortunately, a variety of factors, not the least of which was that the board members were close friends of the officers they were examining, resulted in few officers actually being retired. When the new Congressional session opened in December, Welles renewed his effort to purge his department of what he considered deadwood. This time, instead of an examining board, a bill was proposed to make retirement mandatory for any officer who had served for forty years. 11
Dahlgren was extremely interested in the bill because the retirement of older officers ahead of him on the Navy Register meant that their slots would be opened. On the other hand, the bill automatically retired an officer after forty years of service, regardless of age, and Dahlgren would be slated for retirement in 1866, when he would only be fifty-seven. Dahlgren went to work to get the bill amended. As he had been so often before, he was successful. When the bill was signed by President Lincoln on December 21, Dahlgren proudly noted in his journal that he had gotten one Senator "to extend it to 45 [years of service before retirement]. Then 60 years of age was added," as a mandatory retirement age regardless of the number of years of service, and "I got [Congressman] Sedgwick to amend [that] to 62 years." As soon as the bill passed, Dahlgren renewed his request for promotion to captain because the bill had opened fifty slots.12

Secretary Welles's purpose in getting this legislation passed had nothing to do with promoting Dahlgren. Instead, he intended to reform the Navy Department, and the retirement bill was just the first in a series of legislative reforms he had planned. Therefore, for the time being, he left the many vacancies unfilled, to Dahlgren's chagrin.13

Shortly after the retirement bill passed, the second and third parts of Welles's legislative package came before
Congress, and again Dahlgren showed his ability to shape legislation to his advantage. The first of these was a straightforward bill which called for adding two new bureaus to the department. But when the bill was sent to the Senate Naval Affairs Committee for review, it was completely rewritten and renamed "An Act to Reorganize the Navy Department." Instead of simply adding two new bureaus, the new bill reorganized the existing five bureaus into eight. Among the most significant differences in the revised bill was that the Bureau of Ordnance and Hydrography was divided into two separate bureaus, the Bureau of Ordnance and the Bureau of Navigation. Dahlgren had been calling for this since 1856. Furthermore, between the time that the Reorganization Bill was introduced and the bill was revised, Dahlgren wrote to the chairman of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee, and outlined a plan for a separate ordnance department, emphasizing how this would save the government money. Dahlgren's handiwork was evident in another part of the bill. Among its original provisions was one calling for the chiefs of all of the bureaus to receive an annual salary of $3,500. This was less than Dahlgren was already being paid, and he obviously pointed this out. During debate on the bill, Senator Grimes offered an amendment, which passed both Houses of Congress, to allow any new bureau chief who was already receiving a higher salary than that provided for by the current bill be allowed to keep it. "My purpose in
offering this amendment," Grimes told the Senate, "is to leave the President, if he sees fit to employ the services of Captain [sic] Dahlgren at the head of a bureau, the privilege of doing so without any diminution of the salary to which he is now by law entitled."14

While debate on the Reorganization Bill was just beginning, the third part of Welles's legislative package was introduced: House Resolution No. 280, "An Act to Establish and Equalize the Grade of Line Officers of the United States Navy." This bill has been described by one naval historian, at least as far as navy line officers were concerned, as "the most important naval legislation of the Civil War, or indeed the most important since the navy was founded." Prior to the war, there were only four officer ranks in the navy, midshipman, lieutenant, commander, and captain. Navy personnel had complained about this for decades. Among the loudest of their complaints was the lack of any rank above captain—officers who commanded squadrons were accorded the unofficial title of commodore. Prior to the Civil War the main problem with having no rank above captain was that it put American squadron commanders at a disadvantage in the number of guns fired in salute when encountering squadron commanders of foreign nations, who were in most cases admirals—an admiral was entitled to a thirteen gun salute while a captain received nine guns in return and in the highly ritualized navy this was hardly
considered irrelevant by most officers. The Civil War exposed a more serious problem. The war brought the army and navy into closer contact than at any other time before, and combined operations were conducted from the earliest stages of the conflict. In the navy, squadron commanders were captains, whereas in the army, commanders of armies were generals. Because a navy captain only equated with an army colonel, this created an awkward question of authority when naval and army forces worked together. Since the beginning of the war this difficulty had been dealt with on an unofficial basis, but Welles wanted to eliminate the problem officially.15

Like most navy officers, Dahlgren wholeheartedly supported the creation of a rank above captain. He also agreed with the second major provision of the bill, which called for a partial introduction of a merit-based promotion system to replace the existing seniority-only system. Still, Dahlgren believed one component of the bill needed amending. This section, he noted, pertained to himself, and he only most "reluctantly" brought it up; but, as he pointed out to Charles Sedgewick, who was both the Chairman of the House Naval Affairs Committee and the author of the bill, as it was then written, he would not be eligible for the new rank because admirals were to be "selected from the Captains and Commanders for distinguished conduct in battle." Dahlgren felt that this provision was unfair to himself. In
a letter to Congressman William Kelly, Dahlgren wrote, "the present bill bears upon me with peculiar severity." By taking command of the Washington Navy Yard, Dahlgren argued, he had "rendered an important service...at the most critical period of the Rebellion." Then, because he had remained at this post, he argued, he had not been able to serve afloat. "It would be cruelly unjust," Dahlgren concluded, "to render these circumstances to disfranchise from the highest grade of my profession and pass junior officers over my head. All that I ask is to have these conditions amended so as to include that of 'other meritorious conduct.'"16

The Navy Grade Bill interested not only navy line officers, it was also very important to members of Congress because one of its key provisions dealt with control of midshipmen slots in the Navy Academy. Debate over this issue dragged on for months as congressmen fought jealously to protect their prerogatives. Because of the overall importance of the bill, however, as Congress drew to a close certain legislative procedures were waived in order to make sure that the bill came up for a vote. Normally, before a bill is brought up for debate in the full House or Senate, the bill is printed, which allows the legislators to read the exact provisions being debated. But because of the length of debate in committee there was no time for printing the bill. Therefore, the proposed bill was simply read
aloud in its entirety and then debate began before the full House.

The reason why this was not normally done soon became apparent, which in turn also exposed Dahlgren's effectiveness in lobbying Congress. As already noted, Dahlgren had been writing to various legislators trying to alter the language regarding promotion eligibility. One person that he had written to was Congressman Phelps of Missouri. When the House reached the section listing the eligibility requirements for admiral, Phelps rose and objected because it excluded "all who shall not have distinguished themselves in battle." There was one, not so slight, problem with Phelps's objection, and Sedgewick, whom Dahlgren had also written to as he worked to reword the bill, quickly pointed it out to him. "The bill," Sedgewick told Phelps, "has been altered in that particular." It now read, "That nine rear-admirals may be commissioned, who shall be selected, during war, from those officers ... who have heretofore distinguished themselves, or hereafter distinguish themselves by courage, skill, and genius in their profession." In other words, Sedgewick was telling Phelps, Commander Dahlgren was now eligible for the higher rank.17

In the military, rank and position determine one's status. Thus the fact that Dahlgren wanted to amend any bill before Congress that affected his rank is hardly
surprising. What is surprising is Dahlgren's uncanny success in shaping almost every piece of legislation that affected him. At the very least, his success in doing so illustrates how influential he had become. What was the source of Dahlgren's influence? One explanation is that Congress seems to have wanted to reward Dahlgren for his loyalty. Dahlgren certainly utilized this theme in his campaign with individual congressmen. He repeatedly recalled the circumstances surrounding his taking command of the Washington Navy Yard, which in his own words was done "at the most critical period of the Rebellion," and which, in his interpretation, had saved the Union from disaster. While this was an overblown analysis of his contributions, it seemed to have a positive effect with members of Congress. There was at least one other factor involved. In both the special session of Congress held in the summer of 1861, and the regular session of Congress that began in December 1861, one of the bills passed involved the administration of the navy's ordnance department. In the debate over each bill, Dahlgren was specifically mentioned in connection with this post. While Dahlgren's ideas may have been controversial, by the beginning of the Civil War he was recognized as the navy's leading ordnance authority. It was logical therefore, to make him eligible to hold the position of chief of ordnance.
Of course, neither the legislative debate on naval reform nor Dahlgren's lobbying efforts took place in a vacuum. By the time that the Reorganization Bill and Navy Grade Bill were just reaching the Congressional floor for the first time, after months of relative inactivity, Union forces began offensive operations. These included the combined operations of navy and army forces under Captain Andrew Foote and General Ulysses Simpson Grant, who moved against the Confederate forts which controlled the Tennessee and Cumberland rivers. The first of the forts, Henry, fell quickly to the guns of Foote's flotilla of gunboats on February 6. Foote and Grant then moved rapidly to assault the second Confederate stronghold, Fort Donelson, and while it proved tougher to capture than Fort Henry, it fell on February 16.18

The Union successes at Henry and Donelson brought Foote and Grant an avalanche of praise. Dahlgren was happy for Foote, who was his longtime friend, but the Union victory at Fort Donelson also concerned Dahlgren. When he began his lobbying efforts to make himself eligible for promotion to admiral it was far from certain that he would succeed. As the legislation then stood, the only sure way to be eligible for the new rank was "for distinguished conduct in battle." Even more important, as far as Dahlgren was concerned, Foote's and Grant's victories marked the beginning of the end of the war. "After the capture of Fort Donelson,"
Dahlgren wrote to one of his sons, "I allowed 60 days for the final denouement--things move rapidly now." In other words, Dahlgren believed that time was quickly running out for him if he was going to get promoted. 19

While the fall of Henry and Donelson were indeed important for the Union war effort, the main reason for Dahlgren's optimism was that after months of inactivity, McClellan's Army of the Potomac finally appeared ready to move. Amidst growing pressure to begin a campaign, which finally led President Lincoln to issue General War Order No. 1 ordering all "Land and Naval Forces" to begin a "general movement" on February 22, McClellan revealed his plan for a campaign that he believed would end the war. It involved transporting his army via ship up the Rappahannock River and landing at Urbanna, Virginia. McClellan argued that this would put the Union army between General Joseph Eggleston Johnston's army which was entrenched near Centerville, Virginia, and Richmond, and would force Johnston to withdraw. McClellan believed that he would then be able to either capture Richmond before Johnston could react, or be in the position to meet Johnston's army out in the open at a place of his own choosing rather than having to attack Johnston's strong defensive position. President Lincoln opposed this plan because of his fear that the movement would expose Washington to a swift Confederate offensive,
but he ultimately agreed to it provided McClellan leave
enough forces to keep the capital "entirely secure." 20

President Lincoln gave McClellan final approval for his
campaign on March 8; but that was not the only thing of
importance which took place that day, especially as far as
Dahlgren’s future was concerned. For months, rumors had
circulated throughout the North that the Confederacy had
raised the Merrimack, which had been scuttled when the
Gosport Navy Yard was abandoned in April, 1861, and had been
working on converting it into an ironclad vessel. The
rumors were true. On what ranks among the most successful
shakedown cruises of any warship in history, the Merrimack,
newly rechristened C.S.S. Virginia, steamed from its berth
on the Elizabeth River into Hampton Roads. The Confederate
warship, captained by Franklin Buchanan, the former
commandant of the Washington Navy Yard, headed straight for
the Union fleet of wooden warships that lay at anchor. The
Virginia was slow, deep in draft, and extraordinarily
cumbersome, but the Union’s wooden ships were no match for
the iron-plated vessel. Within a matter of hours the Union
fleet was in shambles. Of the five major Union ships-of-war
which guarded the entrance to Hampton Roads, Cumberland was
sunk, Congress lay burning and would explode and sink shortly, Minnesota was run aground. Only the coming
darkness and the falling tide saved the Roanoke and St.
Lawrence, both of which had taken refuge under the guns of Fort Monroe.21

News of the Virginia's dramatic success reached Washington by early the next morning, Sunday, March 9. President Lincoln immediately asked for all of his Cabinet members to assemble at the White House. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, recently appointed to replace Cameron who resigned amidst controversy, and Welles were among the first to arrive. The two Cabinet members proceeded to engage in a heated argument as Stanton predicted that the Confederate warship was probably just then on its way up the Potomac River to bombard the Capitol, before proceeding on to destroy New York and Boston. Welles dismissed Stanton's prediction, telling everyone that the vessel drew too much water to reach Washington and was too unseaworthy to venture out on the open ocean. Furthermore, Welles told Stanton and the President, the Union's own ironclad had just reached Hampton Roads and was probably already well on its way to destroying the Virginia. But Welles's description of the Union's two-gun Monitor did little to allay anyone's concern, especially Stanton's, and the deep sense of foreboding was only amplified by the inopportune failure of the Washington-Fortress Monroe telegraph line which broke down that morning.22

Perhaps growing tired of listening to Welles and Stanton argue, or wanting to hear a professional navy
officer's opinion, Lincoln called for his carriage and along with Senator Orville Hickman Browning, he headed for the Washington Navy Yard to see Dahlgren. Although it was a Sunday morning, the President found him in his office, when, Dahlgren recorded somewhat apologetically in his journal, "he should have been in church." The President told Dahlgren that he had "frightful news," as he recited the events of the previous day's catastrophe in Hampton Roads. Moreover, Lincoln wondered if the Virginia "might not have a visit here which would rather cap the climax."23

Lincoln probably hoped that Dahlgren would confirm Welles's assurances that Washington was safe from attack from the Confederate ironclad. Dahlgren certainly was in the position to offer as much of a positive assurance as anybody could. Only two days earlier, Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox had telegraphed and asked Dahlgren what was the "greatest draft which can be brought up" to Washington? In response to Fox's query one of Dahlgren's assistants informed the Navy Department that twenty-two feet was the maximum. The Merrimack was originally designed to draw no more than twenty-three feet of water, but when it was built in 1854 it actually drew twenty-three feet, nine inches. This had led to a great public controversy because with this deep a draft the vessel could not enter more than ninety percent of the ports in the United States, including Washington. While one could not be absolutely certain how
much water the rebuilt vessel drew, one could be fairly confident that replacing the upper portions of the vessel with an iron-plated casemate had not improved its draft by almost two feet. Dahlgren, however, did not give any assurances. Instead, he recalled, "I could give but little comfort: such a thing might be prevented," he told the President, "but not met." Instead of assurances, "If the Merrimac[k] entered the [Potomac] river," Dahlgren told Lincoln, "it must be blocked[,] that was about all which could be done at the present." 24

While Dahlgren had not given the assurances that he had probably could have, his suggestion that something could be done to prevent the Virginia from attacking Washington apparently had somewhat of a calming effect on the President. As they rode up to the White House from the navy yard, Dahlgren noted that Lincoln "was in his usual suggestive mood;" though as he followed him inside the White House, he also noted, "poor gentleman, how thin & wasted he is." While the President had been to see Dahlgren, many more people had arrived at the White House and the earlier discussion was renewed in its full vigor. "There was," Dahlgren recalled, "a hasty and very promiscuous emission of opinion from everyone without much regard to rank[,] and some interesting talking which [was] rather confused." Among the more recent arrivals was McClellan who worried what the Virginia's presence meant to his proposed campaign.
As long as the Confederate ironclad remained unchecked, transporting his army by water was out of the question. Stanton wanted to cancel the campaign immediately, stating bitterly that it should never have been approved in the first place. At some point during the discussion Dahlgren renewed his earlier proposal to block the Potomac River ship channel. This drew the enthusiastic approval of Stanton, and because Welles had momentarily left the meeting to conduct some related business, the President directed Dahlgren, Quartermaster-General Montgomery Meigs, who had been called in to provide advice from the army’s perspective, and McClellan to make the necessary arrangements. The three officers, along with the secretary of war left the meeting and proceeded to arrange for the filling of a number of river barges with stone so that they could be sunk in the Potomac ship channel. Later that afternoon, Dahlgren took both Stanton and Seward down the Potomac and advised them on the best spot to sink the barges. Dahlgren also arranged for erecting batteries at a number of spots along the river. At about 9 p.m., Dahlgren telegraphed Lincoln "that all the measures were in progress & ready for use."25

By the time that Dahlgren informed Lincoln that he could obstruct the Potomac River whenever he ordered, the situation in Hampton Roads had changed dramatically. The Virginia had been affecting Union naval policy since the
previous summer. As soon as the first rumors reached Washington that the Confederacy was converting the wooden Merrimack into an ironclad, Welles had asked for a special appropriation so that the navy could initiate its own ironclad building program. In August 1861, Lincoln had signed a bill authorizing the construction of three experimental ironclads, resulting in the construction of the Monitor, Galena, and New Ironsides. The Monitor, designed by John Ericsson and built at the Continental Ironworks in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, was the first of the three built, and after extremely limited trials the vessel was taken under tow from New York to Hampton Roads on March 6. After a frightful voyage, the strange looking little craft arrived in Hampton Roads on the night of March 8, just as the Congress exploded and sunk. When the Virginia ventured down the James River to complete the grisly task it had begun the day before, the Monitor lay waiting; and during the morning hours of March 9, the Union and Confederate ironclads fought their historic stalemate.

The telegraph link between Washington and Fort Monroe was reestablished by the evening of March 9, and the first reports detailing the battle between the two ironclads, while sketchy, provided enough details to assure everyone in Washington that the Virginia would not be seen steaming up the Potomac that night. Welles felt vindicated by the success of the Monitor in checking the Virginia, and the
next day when everyone again gathered at the White House he made his feelings known. He was extremely upset about the plans that had been put into motion to sink obstructions in the Potomac River. He had not been a party to this operation and he only became aware of it when Dahlgren informed him along with the President that the river barges could be sunk at any time. This had led Welles to "rouse" Dahlgren at 2 a.m., and he ordered him to "suspend further operations for blocking the channel." Welles demanded to know who had ordered obstructing the river, and he pointed out that this ran counter to what the navy had been trying to do since the beginning of the war, namely to keep the Potomac River open for navigation. Somewhat sheepishly, Lincoln admitted that he had approved Stanton's desire to carry out the operation, believing "no harm would come of it, if it did no good." Lincoln's admission was amazingly similar to the one that he made regarding Seward's detaching the Powhatan from the Fort Sumter expedition in April 1861; but Welles, rather than expressing anger at the President, appeared most upset with Stanton, which was undoubtedly the result of the latter's dismissal of Welles's assurances the previous day.27

Besides being furious at Stanton, Welles was also extremely disappointed with both Dahlgren and Melgs. Both officers had been called in to provide military advice during the crisis, and Welles felt that they had failed.
"Dahlgren and Meigs were both intelligent officers and in their specialties among the first of their respective professions," Welles recorded in the diary that he kept, "but neither of them was endowed with the fighting qualities of Farragut or Sheridan, and in that time of general alarm, without information or facts, they were not the men to allay panic or tranquillize the government officials. They were," Welles continued with his criticism, "prudent, cautious men, careful to avoid danger and provide the means to escape from it." Moreover, Welles noted, the two officers, had proven "powerless" during the crisis "and in full sympathy with Stanton in all his fears and predictions." Welles made one final observation about Dahlgren: he had become so "attentive" to the President, that he behaved more like a "courtier" than a military advisor.  

The observations about his character could not have come at a worse time for Dahlgren. The only serious casualty on the Union ironclad was its commanding officer, Lieutenant John Lorimer Worden, who was temporarily blinded when a shell from the Virginia struck the Monitor's pilot house while Worden was looking out of it. The ever-ambitious Dahlgren, believing that the war was rapidly drawing to an end and knowing that the only sure route to the rank of admiral was for "distinguished conduct in battle," asked Welles that he be allowed to "take command of the Monitor."
Welles refused his request, which was not surprising after Dahlgren's performance on March 9. Dahlgren probably did not help his cause any with Welles when he engaged in a game of I-told-you-so with Welles. When the first rumors reached the North in late January that the Virginia was about to attack the Hampton Roads Squadron, Dahlgren had submitted a memorandum detailing a list of things which could be done to prevent this from occurring. Among his suggestions were: obstructing the Elizabeth River channel; erecting a floating battery within range of the obstructions; preparing some vessels as rams, including suspending heavy anchors from their yard arms to drop on top of the Virginia; and finally, he suggested that the best way to neutralize the Confederate ironclad was to launch a land attack on Norfolk, which he argued would force the Confederates to abandon both the navy base and the vessel.

While there was merit in some of Dahlgren's proposals, it is hard to believe that reminding Welles about them now, especially in front of the President, won him any gratitude from Welles. Fortunately for Welles, he had a graceful way to refuse Dahlgren's repeated requests to command the Monitor. He simply told him that his work in the ordnance department was too important to give him duty afloat.

As if not securing command afloat was not bad enough, in the aftermath of the historic battle between the Monitor and Virginia, Dahlgren also found himself in the middle of
Assistant Secretary of the Navy Fox had gone to Hampton Roads as soon as he heard that the Confederate ironclad might attack. Fox witnessed the battle between the two ironclads from the deck of a nearby vessel. As he watched he could see the projectiles from each ship bounce off the sides of the other, apparently doing no harm. In reality, the shots were not as harmless as they appeared, especially the Monitor's against the Virginia. The iron plating of the Confederate ironclad had been cracked in a number of places and after the battle the vessel went into dry dock for repairs and modifications, not emerging until April 4. Of course Fox had no way of knowing this at the time. He wondered what could be done to insure that the Monitor would destroy the Virginia in the event there was another battle, which everyone anticipated. The Monitor's armament consisted of two XI-inch Dahlgren guns, which were capable of firing both explosive shells and solid-shot. The 136 pound shells the gun fired were intended primarily for use against wooden vessels, while the 170 pound cast-iron solid-shot were intended for battering solid targets, such as masonry forts, or in this case, the iron-plated sides of the Virginia. Besides the standard cast-iron shot the Monitor also carried a supply of heavier, and somewhat harder, 185 pound wrought-iron solid-shot. Despite the apparent ineffectiveness of the lighter shot, Worden had refrained from using the heavier projectiles since he had
received a directive from the ordnance department ordering not to because it was not known whether the guns could withstand the heavier projectiles without bursting. Shortly after the battle, Fox wired Dahlgren and asked him for permission to use the wrought-iron shot, stating, "It is the only thing that will settle the Merrimac(k)."

Despite Fox's emphatic suggestion that only the wrought-iron shot could insure the Monitor's victory, Dahlgren refused to approve their use, telling him that they were "dangerous to the gun." Nothing would have probably come of this except that in the aftermath of the battle, a number of newspapers printed articles that included information about the Union ironclad's wrought-iron shot. Much was made about the effort that had been taken to fabricate the special projectiles, and how each cost forty-seven dollars. Dahlgren took special offense at an article in the New York Herald. While aimed primarily at Welles's administration of the Navy Department, the Herald reporter suggested that if Worden had been allowed to use the heavier wrought-iron shot, the Virginia would have been sunk.

Always sensitive to criticism of any kind, Dahlgren prepared a long written statement to rebut the newspaper stories. But Lincoln, whom Dahlgren asked to read and comment on his statement before he sent it out for publication, counseled Dahlgren not to send it, telling him,
"too much attention would be drawn to whatever ... [he] wrote." The President was right. Dahlgren might logically argue that the danger of bursting a gun inside the turret of the Monitor outweighed the possible advantages of using the heavier wrought-iron shot. The public, however, did not want to hear logical arguments, they wanted to see the Virginia sent to the bottom of the Chesapeake Bay. Heeding the President's advice, Dahlgren did not publish his rebuttal. 33

The ordnance controversy did not end there. Fox's request to use the wrought-iron shot had only been a stopgap measure in his mind. He also had a long term solution. From his vantage point, the battle between the Monitor and Virginia demonstrated that the Union ironclad's armament was clearly inadequate. As chance would have it, as Fox landed at Fort Monroe, he just happened to see a 15-inch bore gun lying on the ground. Having not supported the construction of Ericsson's vessel initially, Fox did a quick about face. In the same telegram in which he pushed Dahlgren for permission to use the wrought-iron shot, he also told him, "we must have more of these boats," and instead of XI-inch guns, they must be armed with "fifteen inch Guns." "You must," he implored Dahlgren, "go ahead with your furnaces at once to make [15-inch guns] ... to stand solid shot." 34

The reaction in the Navy Department to the battle between the Monitor and Virginia has been aptly described by
one historian as "Monitor Mania." Fox became especially enthusiasm for the vessel, and he boasted to a friend shortly afterwards, "We have about $25,000,000 for iron vessels, thanks to our disaster at Old Point." Even before Congress had officially appropriated these funds, the Navy Department had decided to build more monitors. On March 17, it informed Dahlgren that it required "for the class of vessels like the 'Monitor' at least 20 15-inch guns; and for another class at least 10 of 20 inches diameter;" and that Dahlgren needed to produce them "in the least possible time." 35

Dahlgren did not have any inherent objections with the idea of a fifteen inch gun. In his January 31 memorandum to Welles in which he listed ways to combat the Confederate ironclad, Dahlgren had himself proposed using a "15 in gun on a Raft properly plated." But now he listed a series of objections about manufacturing more fifteen inch guns. The 15-inch gun that Dahlgren had recommended using was the same gun that Fox had seen. It was also the only gun of its type yet made. Designed by Dahlgren's army counterpart, Major Thomas J. Rodman, it had only been fired using shells, a total of 504 rounds. In great contrast to his own arguments more than a decade earlier to adopt his IX-inch and XI-inch guns before even one had been cast, Dahlgren argued it was a mistake to order full-scale production of a weapon that had not fully proven its endurance. Dahlgren
also detailed some other concerns against casting fifteen-inch guns at this time, but all of his technical reasons were secondary to his main argument. "Using all despatch," he told the secretary of the navy, "it would be impossible to fabricate the first 15-inch gun in less than seventy or eighty days, whilst the present urgent necessity must pass away in the third of that time, and cannot arise again for a considerably longer period--having reference, of course, to foreign nations." In other words, Dahlgren believed that the war would be over before the first 15-inch gun could be ready, and it was unlikely that the guns would be needed in a war against a foreign nation anytime in the foreseeable future.  

Welles did not share Dahlgren's optimism about the war rapidly drawing to an end, and so despite his ordnance expert's continued protests, the navy secretary ordered production of the guns. Because the navy did not have a foundry large enough to cast the guns itself, the main thing that Dahlgren had to do was to design them. He completed his drafts in early April; and when he submitted his plans, he washed his hands of the 15-inch gun, telling Welles that he would not bear any responsibility for any accidents that might occur with them.

Even as he argued with his superiors in the Navy Department about the proper armament for future monitors, a disgruntled Dahlgren remained convinced the war would be
over soon. "[E]vents," he recorded in his journal on April 9, "are hastening rapidly to a consummation." Many northerners shared Dahlgren’s optimism. Stanton was so confident that he actually shut down all of the North’s recruiting offices. From its earliest moments, however, McClellan’s campaign developed problems. His original plan of landing at Urbanna, which lay on the south side of the Rappahannock River, was thwarted by Johnston’s decision to withdraw his forces to below the Rappahannock. Then, the appearance of the Virginia almost destroyed McClellan’s "worst coming to the worst" contingency plan of landing at Fort Monroe which lay at the tip of the James-York Peninsula and marching on Richmond from there. While the Monitor’s timely arrival in Hampton Roads allowed McClellan to proceed with this plan, as soon as Union forces met slight resistance near Yorktown, he decided to establish siege lines rather than to attack the Confederate lines directly. 38

McClellan’s decision became the center of a storm of controversy. He maintained that he did not possess an adequate force in the face of greatly superior numbers. He was especially critical of President Lincoln’s decision to withhold about one-third the number of troops that he had called for in his original plan. The President withheld these troops because his approval of the campaign had been conditional on there being a sufficient force left to defend
Washington. Unfortunately, some calculation mistakes in McClellan's report of the number of troops he left behind, an over secretive McClellan who refused to provide civilians the details of his plans, including those for the defense of the capital, and an overly worried President who became almost obsessed that the Confederates were about to attack Washington, led to the President's decision to withhold some of McClellan's troops, primarily McDowell's corps. 39

McClellan subsequently came to view and portray Lincoln's decision as part of a conspiracy to destroy him. The general, however, was not the only one speaking about conspiracies. While Lincoln had never liked McClellan's plan of operations, the President's Cabinet, excepting Postmaster-General Montgomery Blair, and numerous prominent Radical Republicans were downright hostile to both the Democratic McClellan and his plans. The complaints against him had begun in the fall, and had really picked up momentum with the creation of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War established with the opening of the Congressional session in December 1861. By April 1862, criticism of McClellan was reaching a crescendo. Now, the complaints about his lack of aggressiveness escalated into charges that McClellan was a traitor and that his campaign was a deliberate attempt to expose Washington to an enemy assault. 40

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Dahlgren’s command of the Washington Navy Yard and his important political contacts gave him a bird’s eye view of the controversy. Ferrying Lincoln and his Cabinet back and forth between Washington and the front lines where they met frequently with their military commanders, Dahlgren had the opportunity to hear, and even to participate in to a degree, the debate about McClellan. On one trip Dahlgren made with the President, he got to see firsthand the partisan nature of the debate. After being retained in northern Virginia, McDowell had slowly advanced toward Richmond via Manassas and Fredericksburg, which was the line that Lincoln had wanted McClellan to take. The President, along with Stanton, Chase, and Dahlgren, met with McDowell near Aquia Creek on April 19. Dahlgren had also begun to criticize McClellan. He believed that the general had made a mistake by moving up the Peninsula without first taking the Confederate batteries at Gloucester Point on the York River, just opposite Yorktown. Dahlgren now believed that the Union’s best hope for success was to reinforce McDowell so that he had "100,000 men here in front and [to] move straight down to Richmond." Dahlgren privately told McDowell that he had been pressing this plan on "the President for ten days." The main problem with this idea was where to secure the needed troops? Chase, who was a strong supporter of McDowell as well as an opponent of McClellan, suggested that General John C. Fremont and his
army be brought east. Fremont was a darling of the Radical Republicans. The Pathfinder had been the first Republican nominee for president. At the start of the war he was placed in command of the Union forces in the West. From the outset, however, he was mired in controversy. He clashed with the professional soldiers under his command and he proved an incredibly inept military leader. More important, one of his first acts was to issue a proclamation that included a provision which freed all the slaves of persons who resisted the government. Radicals cheered the act; but Lincoln, who was trying desperately to maintain the loyalty of the border slave states was aghast. He quickly rescinded Fremont's proclamation and shortly afterward removed him from command. But the rise of the Radical Republicans in the winter of 1861-1862 forced Lincoln to reappoint Fremont, and he placed him in charge of the Mountain Department, which was created just for him and partially supplied with some troops originally promised to McClellan. Lincoln's appointment of Fremont was a clearcut effort to assuage the Radical Republicans, but he would not bring him east. The President reacted strongly to Chase's suggestion. He would not do it, "there is the political trouble." Part of the problem was that Fremont outranked McDowell, and thus would then be in command of McDowell's troops. Chase countered that the President had the authority to place McDowell ahead
of Fremont. But the President said that he could not do it, "there would be an outcry."41

Chase did not give up in his attempt to do something about McClellan. Two days later, he approached Dahlgren privately. He tried to convince the navy officer that the President was "indecisive between McC[lellan]--who ... represent[ed] the Demo[crat] wing and Fremont who stood for the Repub[lican]s." The obvious answer, according to Chase, was to give the President an alternative. Since Dahlgren himself had been arguing to reinforce McDowell, he asked Dahlgren to meet with him the following morning and go to the White House to press on President Lincoln the need to make McDowell's force the main body attacking Richmond. While this was exactly the kind of political intrigue that Dahlgren excelled at when it came to promoting his own interests, he "thought [he] better not" assist someone else.42

Chase's attempt to use Dahlgren dramatically illustrates the level of influence that people around Washington had come to believe that Dahlgren had with the President. The entire affair, however, also shows the tightrope that Lincoln was walking between the Radical Republicans, and the moderates and conservatives both in his party and in the North as a whole. The President tried desperately to convince McClellan to advance. But no amount of cajoling was about to force McClellan to move before he
was ready. In four days his estimate of the enemy's strength had risen from 15,000 to "not less than one hundred thousand." Eventually, preparations for his siege stretched on for more than four weeks. Then, just before McClellan said his siege was ready to begin, the Confederates abandoned their lines. This victory, with hardly a shot fired, "satisfied" McClellan "of the correctness" of his campaign. "Our success," he wrote to Washington, "is brilliant & you may rest assured that its effects will be of the greatest importance."43

After the Confederate withdrawal Dahlgren quickly reappraised McClellan. His "strategy seems ... conclusive. He forced the Confeds. to leave Manassas without a blow--and now to abandon their formidable lines at Yorktown--But the battle impeds....they must now accept battle or give up their Capital." Dahlgren also noted, however, "The extreme Repubs. are persistent ... in their attacks on McC[lellan] as if nothing but a battle would content them--in reality they would dismount McC[lellan]--who will however be safe enough if he reaches Richmond with battle or without."44

Excepting the mood of the Radical Republicans, the North was exuberant. The Confederate withdrawal from Yorktown came on the heels of a number of other Confederate losses, including the surrender of New Orleans, and at Shiloh. The evacuation of Yorktown also made Norfolk untenable for the Confederacy and they evacuated that city.
shortly afterward. This led to the loss of the Virginia, because efforts to reduce the ironclad's draft sufficiently to allow it to be taken up the James River to Richmond were unsuccessful and the vessel was thus destroyed rather than to allow it to fall into Union hands. Official Washington seemed on the move to the Peninsula to watch firsthand what they believed was the end of the war. While Dahlgren was not at the navy yard on May 6 when the President, along with Stanton and Chase sailed for the Peninsula, he did take Welles, Seward, Attorney-General Edward Bates, and their "guests and ladies" to see McClellan a few days later. Ironically, while McClellan claimed he was too busy to meet with the President, as soon as the General learned of the most recent arrivals from Washington, he "came on board and there was a long talk." McClellan also arranged for the party to go ashore and view "the troops at even parade." While Dahlgren only had the warmest descriptions for McClellan's hospitality, the General had a very different view of the visit. "We had quite a visitation yesterday," he wrote to Mary Ellen McClellan, "in the shape of Secy. Seward, Gideon Welles, Mr. Bates, Fred Seward, Dahlgren," and some others. "I went on board their boat--then had some ambulances harnessed up & took them around camp--was very glad when I got thro' with them--such visits are always a nuisance." The next day Dahlgren took the party to Norfolk. On the 16th, they went up the James. On the way up river
they passed the sunken hulks of the *Congress* and *Cumberland*. As they moved further up the river they encountered some of the vessels which had moved on Richmond the previous day, only to be turned back at Drewry’s Bluff. Dahlgren noted that up until this point, "Our party has been in most buoyant spirits." But news of the rebuff at Drewry’s Bluff changed this. "Curious," Dahlgren wrote in his Journal, "to see how they were quelled by a little reverse and Mr. Seward began to remember reasons for returning." 45

On May 22, after Dahlgren arrived back in Washington, he received orders to prepare a vessel for that evening. To Dahlgren’s surprise his passenger was the President. Lincoln, now comfortable about the security of the capital, had reversed his decision about McDowell’s corps. He now wanted McDowell to cooperate with McClellan by moving simultaneously with the Union army on the Peninsula. But before McDowell moved, Lincoln wanted to confer with him. 46

Even before McDowell moved, the President reversed his decision again. The reason for the sudden reversal was General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson’s activities in the Shenandoah Valley. After evacuating Yorktown, Confederate forces fought a brief delaying action near Virginia’s colonial capital of Williamsburg, before eventually falling back behind the Chickahominy River, the last natural obstruction before Richmond, less than ten miles to the west. McClellan slowly moved his forces up the Peninsula
and as he did before Yorktown, he began preparations for a siege. The Confederate leadership did not want to allow McClellan to utilize the superior force and artillery he had at his disposal to lay siege to their capital because they realized this was a battle they were destined to lose. As McClellan was beginning his methodical preparations, General Robert E. Lee, who had been brought to Richmond by President Jefferson Davis to serve as his military advisor, recommended that Jackson begin an offensive to try to keep the Union from shifting forces from northern Virginia to the Richmond area.47

Jackson's "Valley Campaign" had been under way since early May, but it really began to heat up on the same day that Lincoln met with McDowell, May 23. On that day, Jackson defeated a portion of General Nathaniel Prentiss Banks's force at Front Royal, Virginia. Banks, another of Lincoln's political generals and who proved as militarily inept as Fremont, had been assuring Washington that Jackson posed no threat. Two days later, Jackson's army won another victory at Winchester.48

When Dahlgren, the President, and Stanton, had returned from their secret visit to Fredericksburg in the early morning hours of May 24, there was an important message waiting at the dock for the President. More than likely it was a report of the battle at Front Royal. Lincoln immediately canceled McDowell's move and ordered the
divisions that had just rejoined his army from the Shenandoah Valley, to return posthaste. The battle at Winchester the next day really threw Washington into a panic. After this battle, Banks and the remnants of his shattered force retreated north to Harper’s Ferry, which seemed Jackson’s next target. Harper’s Ferry sat along the Potomac River and was just a short march from the capital. It suddenly appeared to the President that Washington could very soon be under attack.49

While Jackson’s campaign was having tremendous impact upon Union military strategy, it also looked like a godsend to Dahlgren. Thoughts of his need to distinguish himself in battle if he was going to receive consideration for promotion was never far from his thoughts. Suddenly, here was another chance. On May 25, orders arrived at the Washington Navy Yard asking that Dahlgren send all his available heavy cannon to Harper’s Ferry. Dahlgren immediately went to see Stanton and volunteered to go along with the guns, and to command the artillery there. Stanton agreed to the proposal, telling Dahlgren that he would make him "Chief of Artillery." There was one condition, Stanton told Dahlgren that he could go provided that Welles agreed. While Dahlgren had not pursued an earlier offer to take a land command, this time was different; he was getting desperate. Dahlgren and Stanton went in search of Welles; but when they found him, he predictably refused. Dahlgren
did not give up, and he asked that they go and ask the President. The trio of men now went off to look for Lincoln, whom they found in the War Department, undoubtedly waiting for news from Harper's Ferry. The President wanted to support Dahlgren, but in the face of determined opposition from both Welles and Fox, who again renewed their argument that Dahlgren was more important in Washington, he would not overrule his navy department.50

While Dahlgren may not have gotten what he wanted for himself, the crisis at Harper's Ferry was not a total loss for the Dahlgren family. After not being allowed to go to Harper's Ferry himself, Dahlgren sent his son Ulric Dahlgren along with the cannon. Having returned to the North at the start of the war, Ulric had begun the study of law in Philadelphia. In late April, he became his father's assistant at the Washington Navy Yard. Ulric Dahlgren came back to Washington on May 29 in order to gather needed ordnance supplies for the guns just sent to Harper's Ferry. Rather than sending his son right back, Dahlgren instead took him to see the President to give him a firsthand report of the situation there. Besides wanting to give the President a fresh report, the elder Dahlgren had another motive. He gave "a hint" that his son needed an official "position ... to give him authority." The hint had the desired effect. Fox offered to make Ulric Dahlgren an "Act.[ing] Master's App.[rentic]." Stanton did the navy
offer one better, and he offered to make Ulric a captain. Despite his more than thirty years of service in the navy, John Dahlgren never even hesitated. The latter offer "was the best," the career navy officer noted, "when we left the War Dep.[artment] Ully was a Capt.[ain]--not having had the most remote idea of it when he entered."\textsuperscript{51}

If Dahlgren felt any parental concern about his son’s returning to Harper’s Ferry the following day, he did not express it. Nor, as events quickly demonstrated, did Dahlgren have much need for concern. Jackson’s move toward Harper’s Ferry was exactly what both General McDowell and General McClellan tried to convince President Lincoln it was, a feint to draw attention and resources from the front near Richmond.\textsuperscript{52}

This became obvious to everyone, including the President, on May 31. Johnston suddenly launched a major attack against McClellan’s forces on the Peninsula. Although the battle at Seven Pines or Fair Oaks was militarily inconclusive, it had very important results. The Confederate attack took McClellan completely by surprise and convinced him more than ever of the need to be fully prepared for his own offensive. After the battle, he returned with renewed vigor to his ever methodical preparations to place Richmond under siege.\textsuperscript{53}

There was at least one other significant consequence as a result of the Battle of Seven Pines. Johnston was
seriously wounded. His replacement was General Lee. McClellan could not be unhappy with this. About a month earlier he had characterized the new commanding general: he "is too cautious & weak under grave responsibility," and "likely to be timid and irresolute in action." Nothing could have been further from the truth. As McClellan continued with his seemingly endless preparations, Lee quickly prepared his own plan. On June 26, on what was the second day of what would become known as the Seven Days Battles, Lee's forces, which now included Jackson who had managed to avoid the three Union armies trying to trap him in the Shenandoah Valley, attacked as Lee tried to destroy the Union army. Over the next six days the opposing armies fought, first at Beaver Dam Creek, then Gaines's Mill, followed by Savage's Station and Frayser's Farm, and finally, at Malvern Hill.54

All allusions that the war was coming to an end came crashing down with the Seven Days' Battles. After Gaines's Mill, McClellan retreated to Harrison's Landing on the James River. President Lincoln told McClellan, "save the Army at all events." Even when the fighting on the Peninsula was not renewed after July 1, saving the Army of the Potomac remained paramount in the President's mind. Early on the morning of July 5, Lincoln sent word that he wanted to see Dahlgren.55
Dahlgren received the President's message at about 9 a.m. His optimism had been shattered by the Seven Days' Battles. No longer boldly predicting the end of the war, he now fretted that Union forces everywhere were about to be overrun. Dahlgren dropped his work and rushed from the navy yard.56

Entering the War Department, Dahlgren sensed that the President was "anxious." Lincoln told Dahlgren that the most pressing concern was keeping the James River open and he asked him "if it could be done[?]" Dahlgren probably could not believe his ears. "I would guarantee it," he told the President, "if [you] ... would send me in command there & [give] ... me the means."57

After months of listening to his generals give him every manner of ambivalent answer, Lincoln was more than glad to hear this kind of decisive talk. Lincoln and Dahlgren went over to see the secretary of the navy. The President went into Welles's office by himself and spoke to him for a few minutes, and then left. Welles then called Dahlgren in. Immediately, Dahlgren recalled, the secretary "objected....said I could not be spared--the ordnance would not go on without me--my services were more important where I was." Dahlgren had heard this same argument before. He pleaded with Welles to give him this chance to serve afloat. Fox, who had joined the meeting, pointed out to Dahlgren that if his request were honored the department would have
to find two men to replace him, one as the commandant of the
Washington Navy Yard, and another to take over the direction
of ordnance experiments. Dahlgren shot back, "I am ... 
will ing to give up both for the command in the James River."
But Fox had not pointed out Dahlgren's dual role to ask him
if he was willing to give up both jobs; rather, it was Fox's
way of seconding Welles's assertion that Dahlgren was too
valuable where he was to send him out to sea.\textsuperscript{[58]}

Despondent, but not yet without hope, Dahlgren left
Welles's office. He headed straight back to see the
President. He tried in vain to convince Lincoln to overrule
Welles; but reluctantly, Lincoln told Dahlgren, he "did not
see how it could be" done. Someone else would have to get
the command.\textsuperscript{[59]}

As had been the case when Dahlgren tried to secure
command afloat before, Welles never had any intentions of
favoring his request. He believed he knew exactly where the
navy officer belonged. That evening Dahlgren and Welles saw
each other again. They talked, but not about service
afloat. Earlier that day President Lincoln had signed the
Navy Reorganization Bill, which had finally made it through
Congress. The bill had passed with Dahlgren's long desired
amendment, a separate Bureau of Ordnance. Heading the
navy's ordnance was what Welles had been pressing on
Dahlgren now for almost a year. Welles asked Dahlgren if he
would take the post. Dahlgren knew that once installed as a

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bureau chief the likelihood of being offered a fleet command would be almost non-existent; now, however, rather than refusing the position, he responded in the tones of a defeated man. "I would leave that," he told the secretary of the navy, "to the Depart[ment]."60

Dahlgren's answer sounded like that of a man who had given up the fight. Less than two weeks later he was officially appointed to head the Bureau of Ordnance. In his journal entry recording his feelings about being named a bureau chief, he tried to make the best of it, noting that "being [only] a Commander in the Navy I have been Commandant of Yard and Chief of Bureau, which no other officer of that rank had done." No matter how he painted it, however, being named chief of ordnance marked a defeat in his effort to secure duty afloat and a coveted promotion to rear-admiral. And it quite possibly was a fatal one, as Dahlgren recognized when he wrote about Welles denying him the James River Squadron: "it was perhaps my last chance for a flag."61
Notes to Chapter III

1Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren, August 18, September 12, 1861, Journal Entries, Vol. 7, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, August 20, 1861, NARG45—Entry 34; Dahlgren to Welles, August 22, 1861, Ibid.


4Dahlgren, September 26, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; the withdrawal of the Confederate forces led to a major embarrassment for McClellan. When Union forces occupied the Confederate position on Munson's Hill, instead of finding large cannon, they found logs cut and painted to look like cannon. These "cannon" were quickly dubbed "Quaker guns." See, McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, pp. 361-62.

5For Dahlgren's early criticism of McClellan, see, Dahlgren, September 12, 15, October 4, 1861, Journal Entries, Vol. 7, JADSU, underline in the original; McClellan to Dahlgren, October 4, 1861, JADLC, Dahlgren endorsed this letter, "The general] got down about 9 and staid till 11 pm;" John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, October 5, 1861, Ibid.

6Dahlgren, October 13, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; Dahlgren, October 14, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, Ibid.; John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, October 17, 1861, JADLC.

7Dahlgren, October 14, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU.

8McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, October 13, 1861, in Stephen W. Sears, ed., The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan: Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865 (New York, 1989), p. 107; Scott to Cameron, August 9, 1861, Collected Works, V, n., pp. 10-11; Lincoln to McClellan, November 1, 1861, Collected Works, V, pp. 9-10; Lincoln to Scott, November 1, 1861, Collected Works, V, pp. 10-11; McClellan
first arrived in Washington on July 26, and while he and Dahlgren both attended the same party on at least one occasion, Dahlgren gave no indication that he ever met the general before October 4, and his reaction to McClellan's October 4th visit suggests it was the first time he met him. After their October 4 meeting, Dahlgren and McClellan met three more times before Scott's resignation, see, Dahlgren, October 14, 21, 24, November 1, 1861, Journal Entries, Vol. 8, JADSU, Dahlgren quote in November 1 entry.

Dahlgren first renewed his request for promotion on August 5, see, Dahlgren, August 5, 1861, Journal Entry, Vol. 7, JADSU; for the details of some of Dahlgren's Potomac River trips, see, Dahlgren September, 15, 1861, Journal Entry, Ibid.; Dahlgren, October 19, November 15, 26, December 27, 1861, Journal Entries, Vol. 8, Ibid.; September 14, October 19, November 15, 23, December 27, 1861, Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day, III, pp. 66, 72, 77-78, 85; the day after Scott resigned, McClellan wrote, "I cannot move without more means... It now begins to look as if we are condemned to a winter of inactivity;" McClellan, quoted in, McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, p. 363;

10Dahlgren, November 15, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU.

Paulin, Naval Administration, 1775-1911, pp. 299-300; Senator James Grimes, S. Bill No. 82, "to promote the efficiency of the Navy," December 9, 1861, Congressional Globe, Vol. 32, pt. 1, p. 26; for debate on S. Bill No. 82, see, December 12, 1861, Congressional Globe, Vol. 32, pt. 1, pp. 71-75; there was a provision in the bill which allowed officers to be exempted from the mandatory retirement.


13Dahlgren would also have his hand in this other legislation and it will be detailed below.


Dahlgren to Charles B. Sedgewick, February 26, 1862, JADLC, underline in the original; Dahlgren to William Kelly, May 25, 1862, Ibid.; when Sedgewick introduced the bill the new rank was called flag officer, but as the bill was debated this was changed to admiral; for simplicity's sake I will always refer to the rank as admiral.

Debate on H.R. 280, "To Equalize the Grade of Line Officers," can be followed in Congressional Globe. 32, pts. 1-4; for the specific incident involving Congressman Phelps, see, June 16, 1862, Congressional Globe 32, pt. 3, pp. 2740-44; Dahlgren to Phelps, June 3, 1862, JADLC; Dahlgren to Sedgewick, February 26, 1862, Ibid.

Milligan, "Andrew Foote," in, ed. Bradford, Captains of the Old Steam Navy, pp. 128-33; for the most recent account and analysis of the Henry and Donelson campaign, see, Benjamin Franklin Cooling, Forts Henry and Donelson: The Key to the Confederate Heartland (Knoxville, Tennessee, 1987).

Milligan, "Andrew Foote," in, ed. Bradford, Captains of the Old Steam Navy, pp. 128-33; John Dahlgren to Ulric Dahlgren, March 11, 1862, JADLC.

Parish, The Civil War, pp. 163-67, 173-75; McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, p. 423; the tension between Lincoln and McClellan can be followed in Lincoln's correspondence, see, Lincoln, President's General War Order No. 1, January 27, 1862, Collected Works, V, pp. 111-12; Lincoln, President's Special War Order No. 1, January 31, 1862, Ibid., p. 115; Lincoln to McClellan, February 3, 1862, Ibid., pp. 118-19; McClellan to Stanton, January 31, 1862, Ibid., n. pp. 119-25; Lincoln to McClellan, February 8, 1862, Ibid., p. 130; Lincoln, President's Special War Order No. 2, March 8, 1862, Ibid., pp. 149-50; Lincoln, President's General War Order No. 3, March 8, 1862, Ibid., p. 151.


23 Dahlgren, March 9, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU; Lincoln quoted in Ibid., underline in the original; Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 404-06.

24 Dahlgren, March 9, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU; Fox to Dahlgren, March 7, 1862, NARG45—Entry 34; Parker to Fox, March 7, 1862, Ibid.; Canney, The Old Steam Navy, pp. 46-50; even though the Confederates had rechristened the Merrimack, most northerners continued to refer to it by its former name.

25 Dahlgren, March 9, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU; Dahlgren to Lincoln, 3 p.m., March 9, 1862, Telegram, JADLC; Dahlgren to Lincoln, 9 p.m., March 9, 1862, Telegram, Ibid.


27 Dahlgren to Welles, 9 p.m. March 9, Telegram NARG45—Entry 34; Dahlgren to Welles, March 10, 1862, Ibid.; Dahlgren, March 10, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU; Welles, Welles Diary, Vol. I, pp. 61-69, Lincoln quoted in Ibid.; Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 404-08.

28 Welles, Welles Diary, I, pp. 62-64.


30 Dahlgren to Navy Department, January 31, 1862, NARG45—Entry 34; Dahlgren, March 13, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU.

31 Fox to Dahlgren, March 11, 1862, JADLC; Dahlgren to Fox, March 17, 1862, NARG45—Entry 34.

32 Davis, Duel Between the First Ironclads, p. 145; Jones, The Civil War at Sea, II, p. 8; Dahlgren, March 16, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU; there was also a controversy over the size of the charge used in the Monitor's guns. Commander S. Dana Greene, who was the executive officer on the Union ironclad, wanted to use a double charge to increase the velocity of the projectiles, but directions from the ordnance bureau did not allow it. Later experiments showed that the XI-inch guns could withstand the heavier charge. See, S. Dana Greene, "In the 'Monitor' Turret," in, Battles and Leaders of the Civil War, 4 vols. (New York, 1884-1887), I, pp. 719-29.
Dahlgren, March 16, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 8, JADSU.

William N. Fowler, Under Two Flags: The American Navy in the Civil War (New York, 1990), pp. 84-93; Bern Anderson, By Sea and By River: The Naval History of the Civil War (New York, 1962), pp. 78-79; Jones, The Civil War at Sea, II, pp. 6-14; Fox to Dahlgren, March 11, 1862, JADLC.


Dahlgren to Navy Department, January 31, 1862, NARG45-Entry 34; Dahlgren to Harwood, March 19, 1862, JADLC; an excerpt of this report is also in, "Heavy Ordnance," p. 128; a number of historians have suggested that Dahlgren's primary objection to the fifteen-inch gun was that it was designed by Rodman. The two ordnance specialists used different methods to cast their guns. Dahlgren cast his guns as a solid cylinder, boring out the muzzle and lathing the outside of the gun to its final dimensions. Rodman cast his guns hollow, cooling the gun from the inside with water. Each believed his method was superior for creating durable guns and they argued about this continuously through the 1850s and early 1860s. But by the early 1860s most ordnance makers were coming to believe that Rodman's method was superior for large guns. Even Dahlgren appeared to give support to this because as he argued against the immediate production of 15-inch guns he proposed using a modified version of his 9-inch guns for the new monitors, cast on Rodman's hollow casting principle, and reinforced with a wrought-iron band shrunk over the breech like that used on some other guns. Thus it appears that Dahlgren's belief that the war was coming to an end was his primary objection to casting additional 15-inch guns at this time. See Dahlgren to Harwood, March 19, 1862, Ibid.; for the technical details of Dahlgren's and Rodman's casting methods, see, Tucker, Arming the Fleet, pp. 68-71, 218-21; for contemporary support of Rodman's casting method over Dahlgren's, see, Alexander L. Holley, A Treatise on Ordnance and Armor, (New York, 1865); for a different perspective on

37 Harwood to Dahlgren, March 20, 1862, excerpt in, "Heavy Ordnance," p. 128; Dahlgren to Harwood, March 26, 1862, excerpt in, Ibid.; Harwood to Dahlgren, April 4, 1862, excerpt in, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Harwood, April 7, 1862, excerpt in, Ibid., pp. 128-29; Dahlgren to Fox, May 8, 1862, NARG45—Entry 34; since the Navy itself did not have the capacity to cast 15-inch guns, it contracted with the Fort Pitt foundry, which had cast Rodman's 15-inch gun.


39 Sears, Young Napoleon, pp. 168-75; McClellan to Adjutant-General Lorenzo Thomas, April 1, 1862, in, Civil War Papers of McClellan, pp. 222-29; besides McDowell's men, Lincoln withheld Blenker's division, about 10,000 men, see, Lincoln to McClellan, March 31, 1862, in, Collected Works, V, pp. 175-76; McClellan expressed his "regret" at this, but also wrote to the President, "I fully appreciate, however, the circumstances of the case, & hasten to assure you that I cheerfully acquiesce in your decision without any reservation." See, McClellan to Lincoln, March 31, 1862, in, Sears, Civil War Papers of McClellan, pp. 219-20.

40 Sears, Young Napoleon, pp. 175-78; T. Harry Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals (Madison, Wisconsin, 1941), pp. 77-140; Hans L. Trefousse, The Radical Republicans: Lincoln's Vanguard for Racial Justice (New York, 1969), pp. 180-96; Elbert B. Smith, Francis Preston Blair (New York, 1980), pp. 324-26; at the heart of the Radical Republicans attack on McClellan was his political party affiliation. As a Democrat he was immediately suspect. Adding to the opposition by Radical Republicans to McClellan were the numerous statements he made against tying the war to slavery; this, coupled with his military decisions sealed his fate with the Radical Republicans.

41 The entire discussion about bringing Fremont east is in, Dahlgren, April 19, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU; for additional details, see, Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals, pp. 38-42, 48-50, 105-09; Trefousse, The Radical Republicans, pp. 175-77, 192; Frederick J. Blue, Salmon P. Chase: A Life in Politics (Kent, Ohio, 1987), pp. 175-76; McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 424-25.
Dahlgren, April 22, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.

Trefousse, Radical Republicans, pp. 192-93; McClellan to Stanton, April 4, 1862, in, Sears, Civil War Papers of McClellan, p. 227, McClellan to Stanton, April 7, 1862, in, Ibid., pp. 232-33; McClellan to Lincoln, April 7, 1862, in, Ibid., pp. 233-34; McClellan to Stanton, May 4, 1862, in, Ibid., p. 254; see also, Lincoln to McClellan, April 6, 1862, in, Collected Works, V, p. 182; Lincoln to McClellan, April 9, 1862, in, Ibid., pp. 184-85.

Dahlgren, May 5, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU, underline in the original.

Dahlgren, May 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 1862, Journal Entries, Ibid.; Sears, Young Napoleon, p. 185; McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, May 15, 1862, in, Sears, Civil War Papers of McClellan, p. 267.

Dahlgren, May 22, 23, 24, 1862, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU.


Dahlgren, May 25, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.

Dahlgren, April 26, May 29, 1862, Journal Entries, Ibid.


For recent accounts of this battle from the perspective of the respective generals in charge, see,

54McClellan to Lincoln, April 20, 1862, in Sears, *Civil War Papers of McClellan*, pp. 244-45; for an analysis of Lee's strategy in the Seven Days' Battles, see, Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, II, pp. 108-250.

55Lincoln to McClellan, July 1, 1862, *Collected Works*, V, p. 298; Dahlgren, July 5, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.

56Dahlgren, June 29, July 2, 3, 5, 1862, Journal Entries, Ibid.

57Dahlgren, July 5, 1862, Journal Entry, Ibid.

58Ibid.

59Ibid.

60Dahlgren, July 5, 1862, Journal Entry, Ibid.; a few days after this, Dahlgren thought better of his answer and he tried to withdraw his nomination. In describing the position, Dahlgren stated, "however useful[ , it] is still to be considered as inferior" to command afloat. Welles, however, already had the answer that he wanted from Dahlgren, and he refused to withdraw his nomination. See, Dahlgren to Welles, July 12, 1862, JADLC; Dahlgren, July 11, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.

61Dahlgren, July 5, 21, 1862, Journal Entries, Ibid.
Chapter IV

The Failed Coup

"I ask for no addition to my present rank, ... that of Captain is quite sufficient."

Dahlgren was not the only one to receive a setback during the summer of 1862. The Union's military prospects, which seemed so promising in the spring, had changed dramatically by mid-summer. McClellan's failed Peninsula Campaign was just one part of the turnaround. General John Pope, who had been brought to the East after building a reputation as a bold, aggressive fighter in the West, proved an utter failure. Pope became the second Union general to suffer a defeat along the banks of Bull Run. In the West, Union forces under Grant in Mississippi and General Don Carlos Buell in Kentucky, bogged down in their respective campaigns. The navy had its string of seemingly uninterrupted successes broken during the summer when Farragut failed to capture Vicksburg. After his successes against McClellan and Pope, Lee marched the Army of Northern Virginia into Maryland, throwing Washington and the rest of the North into its most intense panic yet. Where Lee was and what were his intentions were unknown, which only added
to the disquietude which enveloped the North. But the Navy Department had a solution to these problems: to capture Charleston, South Carolina. This campaign would have enormous implications for Dahlgren and in order to understand them fully it is necessary to follow in some detail the Navy Department's policy toward Charleston since the start of the war.

During the Civil War the Union navy was administered essentially by a two-man team. At the top was Gideon Welles, the secretary of the navy. Welles was a classic political appointment. The former Jacksonian-Democrat from Connecticut made a perfect addition to the Cabinet in Lincoln's effort to achieve geographical and political balance. That Welles had administrative experience in the Navy Department as the Chief of the Bureau of Provisions and Clothing during the Polk presidency was all the better. Intelligent, efficient, hard-working, Welles proved to be, in the estimation of naval historians, "one of the ablest Secretaries in ... [U. S. Navy] history." This historical judgement, however, comes with the benefit of viewing Welles long after his tenure in command had ended. His contemporaries had no such vantage point from which to judge him, and at the outset of the Civil War few people believed that the long-time journalist from Hartford was up to the task of administering the Navy Department.
The other half of the naval administrative team was Gustavus Vasa Fox. Like Welles's, his route to the Navy Department also requires explanation. Fox was the superintendent of a mill in Lowell, Massachusetts, when in early January 1861 he heard about the first expedition to relieve Fort Sumter. A former navy officer, he rushed to New York and visited Marshall Roberts, president of the steamship company which owned the Star of the West, the vessel that the government chartered for the expedition. Fox knew Roberts from his navy duty. He asked Roberts to allow him to lead the operation, but Roberts told him that a commander had already been assigned. But when the Star of the West was driven off by cannon fire on January 9, 1861, Fox had another opportunity to offer the federal government his services. While most of Lincoln's advisors were counselling the President to evacuate Fort Sumter, Fox was telling Postmaster General Montgomery Blair, his brother-in-law, that he had a foolproof plan to reinforce Sumter. Blair brought Fox to Washington; Lincoln liked what he heard and placed Fox in charge of the operation to resupply Fort Sumter. But Fox's expedition arrived off Charleston in the early morning hours of April 12, just in time to witness the bombardment of Fort Sumter.2

Despite the failure, Lincoln thought highly of Fox. The President told him, "I most cheerfully and truly declare that the failure ... has not lowered you a particle, while
the qualities you developed in the effort have greatly heightened you, in my estimation." Lincoln offered Fox a commission in the navy. Neither Fox nor Postmaster General Blair thought that a command at sea was a good thing, "especially," Fox told his wife, "as the naval war will be one only of blockade." Rather than being lost somewhere on blockade duty, Blair suggested an administrative spot in the Navy Department. Unlike today's bureaucratic giant, the pre-Civil War Navy Department consisted of the secretary of the navy, a chief clerk, and a handful of assistant clerks, draughtsman, and messengers. The obvious position for Fox was the department's second highest post of chief clerk which was more like that of assistant secretary than it was a clerk's position, but Welles had already selected someone else for the job. A compromise proposed by Blair was worked out by creating a new post in the department, that of assistant secretary of the navy, to be given to Fox. Besides being an obvious reward to Fox, this arrangement, according to Welles's biographer John Niven, was designed to split duties in the Navy Department. Welles would "supervise office management, official correspondence, and routine administration....Fox would have primary responsibility for professional matters--operational planning, communication with squadron commanders, direct supervision of fleet movements, and the blockade." In other
words, Fox as assistant secretary of the navy was the driving force behind Union naval strategy.  

Despite exhortations to "starve, drown, burn, [and] shoot the traitors" of Charleston, the necessity of establishing the blockade precluded Fox from ordering an attack against Charleston in the early part of the war. This did not mean than Fox forgot about Charleston altogether. In the spring of 1861, Fox had organized a board of officers to help him develop a plan for blockading the Confederacy. Among the board's recommendations was a suggestion to block access to North Carolina's inland waters by sinking stone-filled hulks in the passes through the Outer Banks. Fox seized on the idea and proposed to do the same thing in the shipping channels of some of the Confederacy's major ports. Not surprisingly, the first port he suggested was Charleston.

There were sound reasons for not attempting to obstruct Charleston's ship channels. While the inland waters of North Carolina had mild tidal fluctuations and currents, at Charleston both the tides and currents were exceedingly strong. Most naval experts believed that either the vessels would be washed away, or new channels would form. Captain Samuel Francis DuPont, who was in command of the Union's South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, considered the operation "a thorn in the flesh," an "elephant," that he wanted to "dispose of so soon as I can find means." But no matter how
he felt privately, he admitted that the plan "was a hobby of Fox's which nothing could put out of his head."  

The question of probable success was not the only concern that people had about the operation. Perhaps the modern mind, long tempered by the concept of total war, views the permanent blocking of a harbor with obstructions as within the rules of war, but the same could not be said of military leaders in the mid-nineteenth century. Many were aghast. Captain Charles Henry Davis, the Union navy officer in charge of sinking the "stone fleet," as it was called, decried his participation, "[t]his is disagreeable duty, and one of the last I should have selected."  

General Lee, in charge of establishing the Confederate defenses along the south Atlantic coast at the time, bristled at the Union operation. Reporting the event Lee noted, "The achievement, so unworthy any nation, is the abortive expression of the malice & revenge of a people which they wish to perpetuate by rendering more memorable a day hateful in their calendar."  

The Northern press viewed the "stone fleet" very differently. Rather than objects of scorn, the old battered whaling ships used in the operation were the "mediums" of "righteous retribution" which had finally begun against this most detested of southern cities.  

Even though Fox had wanted to attack Charleston since the first days of the war, he believed that it would require
a large combined navy and army expedition. Fox's thinking changed with the success of the Monitor in March 1862. The ironclad had, according to Fox, eliminated the need for army cooperation. "[S]o soon as the Merimack is disposed of," Fox told Captain DuPont, "We can give you the Monitor and Galena, ... the former can go up to Charleston and return in perfect safety....What do you say to it," he asked, "and what should you require besides these vessels?" He could send DuPont at least another "dozen vessels," but with the Monitor these should not be necessary. He assured DuPont that with the Monitor he could strike the war's "crowning act of retribution."9

Fox believed that DuPont was the perfect man for the job. Probably the most distinguished officer in the navy at the beginning of the Civil War, DuPont had become one of Fox's most important advisors, including heading the blockade board. Not surprisingly, when Fox assigned commanders to the separate squadrons which the blockade board had recommended as the best way to implement the blockade, Fox gave DuPont command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, which included Charleston. His command to date gave Fox only more reason to believe that DuPont would now capture Charleston. In November 1861, he had captured Port Royal, South Carolina, which now served as the Union's major base of operations on the southern Atlantic coast. But just as important to Fox, DuPont had the proper
views about the Civil War and South Carolina. Never an anti-slavery advocate before the war, DuPont changed his mind once he landed on the southern coast. Writing to a friend after his first visit to a plantation, he wrote:

may God forgive me for the words I have ever uttered in its [slavery’s] defense as intertwined in our Constitution. I have been a sturdy conservative on this question, defended it over the world, argued for it as patriarchal in its tendencies, which I believed it to be in the old cotton states, particularly in this [South Carolina]; the condition of the slaves was far in advance of the race in Africa, etc. Oh my! What a delusion—there are no swine in Massachusetts not better cared for. The Dahomeys and Congos are better off—these cotton lords who have been boasting of their wealth and power, . . . have never spent a dollar in ameliorating the condition of these people physically.

DuPont wanted to return the southern states to the Union, and "hope[d it] not far off now." But South Carolina "will be the exception," he noted grimly, "and she will have to be dealt with as Cromwell recommended as the only true policy for Ireland." 10

From the time that he began to consider operations against Charleston, DuPont believed that it would require a combined navy and army operation to take the city. A sailor from the "Old Navy," he was not as enthralled with the Monitor as was Fox. DuPont also worried that Fox had been misled by other naval victories, especially Farragut’s running past forts St. Philip and Jackson at the mouth of the Mississippi, which allowed him to take New Orleans.

"Think coolly and dispassionately on the main
object—remember there is no running the gauntlet, night or day,—no bombardment of a week to fatigue and demoralize—the defenses of Mississippi the merest sham in comparison." Charleston’s harbor was ringed with batteries, he reminded Fox, and the vessels would always be under fire, as if "in a ‘cul de sac’ or bog. I merely allude to all this," DuPont told Fox, "that your own intelligent and brave mind may not be carried away by a superficial view of recent events, where the results have been[,] thank God for his mercies, so great that the difficulties have been naturally overrated. I only have to add on this subject," he closed, "that if the enemy do their duty as we expect to do ours, then it must be a ‘do or die’ work."11

With his new found confidence in the Monitor, Fox had no intention of making the attack on Charleston a joint navy-army operation. When he received DuPont’s letter, Fox immediately responded that while a navy-only assault "may be impossible, ... the crowning act of this war ought to be by the navy. I feel," showing incredible bitterness toward the army, "that my duties are two fold; first to beat our southern friends; second, to beat the Army." He concluded by reminding DuPont of Port Royal and New Orleans. In both places, he happily noted, the army "looked on" as the navy received the accolades.12

Interservice rivalry was one thing, but even more important to Fox was the destruction of Charleston. He was
convinced the war was coming to a close, "which leaves Charleston for the closing act...." Fox assured DuPont that the Monitor was "absolutely impregnable," and with it he could "go all over the harbor and return with impunity." He then closed with his strongest statement about Charleston yet, "I pray you give us Charleston ... for the Fall of Charleston is the Fall of Satan's Kingdom."13

As Fox implored DuPont to destroy Charleston, military events elsewhere made this a secondary consideration. While in early May Fox was positive that Richmond was about to fall, by early July all of the Union military plans in the East had unraveled. With McClellan's reverses on the Peninsula, rather than being sent the Monitor, DuPont received orders to send as many ships as he could spare to Hampton Roads. Fox told DuPont that the "reverse at Richmond has forced us to pack [the] James River with gunboats to save the army. 26 of our best craft are there." It was "unfortunate," Fox lamented, but a "necessity."14

Fox characterized the summer as the "Dark days" for the North. Despite this, Fox was anything but pessimistic. In fact, he may have been the most optimistic person in the North. While admittedly upset about the Union's recent defeats, which had even brought Confederate flags within sight of the Capitol building again, Fox showed supreme confidence. He told DuPont, "we shall come out of it....we shall strike the flood soon." What was necessary, Fox
realized, was a military victory. He also had the perfect place for one, Charleston. Thus, on September 10, orders were sent to DuPont to report "in person" to the Navy Department "as soon as practicable."15

Fox was not the only person in Washington who anxiously awaited DuPont's arrival; so too did John Dahlgren. Within a week of accepting the Ordnance Bureau position, Dahlgren realized that he might have made a fatal mistake in his effort to become an admiral. While he had succeeded in getting the admiral's bill altered so that distinguished service other than in battle also qualified an officer for the new rank, one other significant change had been made in the bill. Only those officers who received a "Vote of Thanks" for their service during the war could be considered for promotion to admiral. Dahlgren's friendship with Lincoln meant that he certainly did not have to worry about the President recommending him for this honor; but that by itself was not enough. The President's recommendation was just that, a recommendation; and it required the approval of both houses of Congress. Dahlgren did indeed receive the President's recommendation, but when it came before the Senate Naval Affairs Committee it was blocked. Furthermore, Dahlgren learned that the reason for this was because one influential committee member believed that the rank of admiral was intended only for those officers who distinguished themselves in battle. It was clear to
Dahlgren that the only sure way to win the promotion that he so greatly coveted was to secure a command afloat and to win a battle.16

As soon as Dahlgren learned that DuPont had been ordered to Washington, he put a plan into action to try to secure his command for himself. On October 1, 1862, Dahlgren submitted a most remarkable request to Welles.

Sir: I am induced by circumstances to renew my request for service afloat, in command of the forces that are to enter the harbor of Charleston, which will probably occur very soon. How far my antecedents justify so great a trust I respectfully leave to the consideration of the Department, without remark from me. I must say, however, that the operation will be almost entirely restricted to the application of the ordnance, and in this I should be able to claim some advantage.

There could hardly be any special exception as regards rank, because the acting rear-admiral of the Northern Atlantic Squadron (Captain Lee) is only the fourth officer above me, and it is understood that Commander Porter, who is an entire grade below me, is to command the Mississippi Flotilla with suitable rank.

As Rear-Admiral DuPont is now about to leave his command, I beg leave to suggest the opportunity as convenient; this distinguished officer has had, and well used the occasion offered, and would, I presume, offer no objection to some respite.17

As reasonable as he tried to make it appear, Dahlgren knew his request was anything but that; and by itself, it would never be approved by Secretary Welles. But if Dahlgren had learned anything in his more than thirty-five years in the navy, it was how to promote his own interests. The same day that he made his formal request for command of
the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Dahlgren also wrote to President Lincoln.

I have submitted a formal application to the Navy Department for command of the sea forces that are to attack the Charleston Forts.

Two officers now have Flag commands, one of whom (Captain Lee) is the fourth above me and the other (Commander Porter) is of a rank below mine. I only mention the facts to show no objection can be made to my rank and not that I question the propriety of their appointment which I believe to be well deserved.

The command that I ask for is responsible, but not more so than that of this Yard which I held under critical circumstances, and the Bureau of Ordnance which I now occupy.

The work to be done belongs almost entirely to the Ordnance of our ships, and I may be permitted some consideration on this account.

As Admiral DuPont has reaped so many laurels, I am sure he would not object.

May I ask, if you entertain any proposition at all, that I may be favored with an early decision. For Battle is only the harvest of preparation, and much of this remains to be done.

I ask for no addition to my present rank, in order to perform this duty—that of Captain is quite sufficient.18

While similar in most respects, there was one significant difference between Dahlgren's letter to the President and the one that he sent to the secretary of the navy. When writing to the President, Dahlgren made a pointed reference to his command of the Washington Navy Yard. This was a not so subtle reminder to the President that he had remained loyal to the Union at a time when many other officers were leaving it. Of course, the unstated, but implicit point he was making was that now, in his hour
of need, he could expect the President’s loyalty, could he not? 19

Dahlgren’s effort to try and seize command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron was carefully timed. Planning for the naval assault against Charleston had been under way for more than a year and it looked like the active campaign would begin shortly. To discuss final plans, DuPont had been ordered to Washington, and he arrived in the capital on October 2. Dahlgren’s move coincided perfectly with DuPont’s arrival. 20

One of the more notable similarities between the letters that Dahlgren sent to Welles and Lincoln was his assertion that DuPont would willingly step aside to allow him to take command. In his two letters Dahlgren referred to DuPont as having already “distinguished” himself, and having “reaped so many laurels;” therefore, he argued, “I am sure he would not object” to being relieved. This would be very difficult for Welles and Lincoln to believe, unless of course, DuPont suggested it himself. Amazingly, Dahlgren set out to get DuPont to do just that. Besides the obvious problem of personally asking DuPont to step down in favor of himself, Dahlgren did not enjoy a close relationship with him. Thus it did not make sense for him to try to persuade DuPont personally. But they did have a mutual, and highly respected friend, Andrew Hull Foote, and Dahlgren did not have any problem in asking a friend to help him in his
cause. In a letter to Fox, DuPont recounted how Dahlgren's
effort materialized. He told Fox:

I forgot to tell you the other day, because I
never had a chance to see you alone, that Foote ...
made a most extraordinary appeal to me to give
up my command to Dahlgren. I was astounded, but
as to what passed I will reserve until we
meet--simply observing that Dahlgren is a diseased
man on the subject of preferment and position. As
I told Foote, he chose one line in the walks of
his profession while Foote and I chose another; he
was licking cream while we were eating dirt and
living on the pay of our rank. Now he wants all
the honors belonging to the other but without
having encountered its joltings--it is a disease
and nothing else.

Dahlgren may have believed that he could convince DuPont to
step aside, but this belief may properly be described as
nothing more than a delusion on his part. 21

The full extent of Dahlgren's efforts did not reveal
themselves until a few days after he submitted his initial
request to Welles. President Lincoln left Washington at 6
a.m., on October 1, to visit General McClellan and the Army
of the Potomac then at Harper's Ferry, Virginia, and he only
returned to the capital at 10 p.m. on October 4. Therefore,
in all probability, the President was not in a position to
know of Dahlgren's request any earlier than October 5.
DuPont himself did not arrive to see Welles until October 2,
so the meeting between him and Foote could not have taken
place at least until that day. 22

Not yet knowing the full details of Dahlgren's actions,
Welles recorded his feelings about Dahlgren's request.
"Dahlgren," he wrote, "has asked to be assigned the special
duty for capturing Charleston, but DuPont has had that
object in view for more than a year and made it his study.
I cannot, though I appreciate Dahlgren, supersede the
Admiral in this work." Ironically, that same day Welles
had decided to replace Rear-Admiral Charles H. Davis, who
commanded the Mississippi Squadron, with Commander David
Dixon Porter, and Welles believed that this decision would
infuriate Dahlgren. Furthermore, Welles believed this would
involve Lincoln because, Welles noted, "the President will
sympathize with Dahlgren whom he regards with favor while
he has not great admiration or respect for Porter." Perhaps
if he had known about Dahlgren's October 1 letter to the
President, Welles may have had even sharper comments to
record in his diary. But still, considering the audacity of
Dahlgren's letter, Welles's remarks are remarkably free of
passion, although he noted that Dahlgren's request had to be
rejected and DuPont would retain his command.23

Welles finally had an opportunity to see the President
at the Cabinet meeting on October 6. While Welles made no
mention in his diary of having discussed either Dahlgren or
the Charleston command, events during the next few days
suggest that the President had indeed broached the subject;
and during this meeting the two of them appeared to have
reached a compromise on how to deal with Dahlgren.24
Two days later Welles finally responded to Dahlgren's request. He told him that DuPont had indeed "been called to Washington to concert measures for this attack[;]" but, "the Department can not consent to deprive him of the honor of leading and directing these forces." All was not lost for Dahlgren, because, Welles continued, "Your natural desire ... is appreciated, and if you desire it, you can have orders to an ironclad that will take part in the attack, as ordnance officer to this special force." Welles attached one condition, Dahlgren had to retain his "position as Chief of the Bureau of Ordnance." 25

The unlikely architect of this proposal appeared to have been Fox. The assistant secretary of the navy had twice earlier recommended that Dahlgren not be given a command afloat. While the ostensible reason for this was that he considered Dahlgren too valuable as head of the Navy's ordnance, this was probably not the only cause. Fox personally detested Dahlgren. In a letter to a friend, Fox decried Dahlgren's past success in lobbying Congress, noting, "he has molded all naval Legislation for ten years." Fox also realized the possible consequences if Dahlgren went to the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron: "if he takes Charleston he will dictate for the rest of his life to the Service." Despite his misgivings, Fox was obviously willing to risk this if it would lead to the capture of Charleston. Fox had grown concerned about DuPont, who had become less
and less sure of the wisdom of attacking the city and the final straw for Fox may have been when DuPont told him to "not go it half cocked about Charleston."26

Fox was convinced that Charleston could be easily captured by a monitor or two, and the monitors contracted for after the Virginia scare the previous spring were scheduled for completion that fall. All that was necessary, so it seemed to Fox, was to give one of the vessels to a bold commander who would steam his way past Fort Sumter and capture Charleston itself and he had two reasons to think that Dahlgren would do just that.

The first was obvious. The opportunity to be associated with, if not given the outright credit for, the capture of Charleston, was exactly the kind of distinguished service which would surely secure Dahlgren his coveted promotion to admiral.

Dahlgren had a less obvious, but just as important an incentive to act boldly if he was given the command of one of the new ironclads. The new monitors, like the original Union ironclad, were designed to carry two Dahlgren guns. Officially, Dahlgren had only received praise from Welles for meeting the dramatically increased ordnance demands since the start of the war. But even before the battle between the Monitor and Virginia had led to controversy and criticism of Dahlgren and his guns, people had begun to criticize the Navy's ordnance, especially the relative lack
of heavy rifled guns. Rifling overcame the inherent weaknesses of smoothbore guns, namely inaccuracy and short range. It also put increased strain on a gun, which made it more susceptible to bursting. While it would take advances in metallurgy and ordnance engineering not made until after the Civil War before dependable heavy rifled ordnance pieces would be available for widespread use, publicity about England's Armstrong, Whitworth, and Blakely cannon made it appear that dependable rifled cannon already existed by the beginning of the war. Partially because of the United States Navy's conservatism, and partially because he devoted most of his energy in the 1850s to getting his smoothbore shell-guns adopted, Dahlgren had been slow to begin work with rifled ordnance. But by the late 1850s, Dahlgren had begun experimenting with rifling and in the early months of the war the navy began using a series of his rifled guns. While looking outwardly like his large smoothbore shell-guns, the rifled Dahlgren guns did not demonstrate the same endurance as his smoothbores, and since the beginning of the war a number of them had burst during shipboard use. The most recent and perhaps most spectacular occurrence of this happened just a month before the Monitor and Virginia battle, during the Navy's assault on Roanoke Island. The report of the accident on the U.S.S. Hetzel read:

At 5:15, rifled [Dahlgren] 80-pdr. aft, loaded with 6 pounds of powder and solid Dahlgren shot,
80 pounds, burst, in the act of firing, into four principle pieces; the gun forward of the trunnions fell on deck, one third of the breech passed over mastheads and fell clear of ship on starboard bow, one struck on port quarter, and the fourth piece, weighing about 1000 pounds, driven through the deck and magazine, bringing upon the keelson; set fire to the ship.

Because of this, all of the Dahlgren 80-pounder rifles, and a number of the Dahlgren 30-pounder rifles were withdrawn from service. The failure of Dahlgren’s rifled ordnance, coupled with the criticism of his smoothbore guns after the Monitor failed to sink the Virginia gave Dahlgren great incentive to see that the new monitors were a success because their success would also serve as a vindication for his smoothbore shell-guns and his ideas about ordnance in general.27

Maybe because it had been his idea in the first place, Fox was accorded the unenviable task of informing DuPont what the Navy Department had decided to do with Dahlgren. He wrote unofficially to DuPont, who, after meeting with Welles and Fox in Washington, had gone to his home near Wilmington, Delaware. Fox told him, "Dahlgren frets under the war bugles, and I shall advise that he either take an ironclad with you or go as your ordnance officer: the latter would be more proper." DuPont quickly shot back, "let him take an ironclad and I shall be glad to have him as one of my captains." But as to Fox’s suggestion that Dahlgren serve as the fleet ordnance officer, DuPont stated, "It is
simply impossible—that cannot be and I want that understood.” As DuPont finished his remarks, he must have wondered what would happen with Dahlgren.28

If DuPont worried about the possibility of having Dahlgren assigned to him as ordnance officer, he need not have. Fox never told Dahlgren that he was behind the secretary’s proposal, and after receiving it Dahlgren decided that he was in the driver’s seat. After a few days consideration, Dahlgren replied to the secretary, and if possible, showed even more audacity than he did in his initial request. He agreed to accept command of an ironclad "because," he said, "I am willing to render any service that the country may demand." He did not wish to retain his Ordnance Bureau position, however. Dahlgren also showed that his statement that his request for the Charleston command had nothing to do with his desire for promotion was a boldface lie. He told Welles that, as proferred, the responsibility he would have in the Charleston attack was no more than equal to that of many officers junior to him, which "must necessarily be attended by a sense of painful humiliation, which the Department might well forbear to inflict on one whose professional standing has ever been without blemish, and who during the present struggle to maintain the Union has discharged the highest duties that a naval officer can render near the Government.". Therefore, he requested that he be allowed "to hoist the flag of a
rear-admiral... It will in a measure relieve me from the stigma that must attend my service as a captain afloat, while a junior by a whole grade commands as a rear-admiral."

This was a last desperate attempt to salvage a de facto command for himself. As Dahlgren envisioned the assault, it was probable that because of the nature of the targets in Charleston harbor DuPont would divide the ironclad fleet into two parts. His hope was that DuPont would be with one and Dahlgren would lead the other; thus in effect, Dahlgren would have command of his own force.²⁹

Welles learned of Dahlgren's reaction to the offer to command one of the ironclads even before his ordnance chief submitted his formal answer. Welles was nothing less than furious. In his diary, he angrily wrote, "My proposition has not been received in the manner I expected." Welles also recognized that Dahlgren was in a position to cause more problems for him than most officers because he "has his appetite stimulated by the partiality of the President, who does not hesitate to say to him and to me, that he will give him the highest grade if I will send him a letter to that effect, or a letter of appointment." Because of this, Welles noted, Dahlgren "cannot be reasoned with. He has yet rendered no service afloat during the war,—has not been under fire,—and is not on the direct road for professional advancement. But he is a favorite with the President and knows it." Welles then proceeded to criticize both the
President and Secretary of War Stanton, perhaps Welles's most detested enemy: "The army practice of favoritism and political partisanship cannot be permitted in the Navy....I am compelled, therefore, to stand between the President and Dahlgren's promotion, in order to maintain the service in proper condition." Welles concluded his long private tirade with reference to Dahlgren's counter-offer of accepting an ironclad provided he receive a promotion to rear-admiral and be allowed to resign the Ordnance Bureau: "This I can't countenance or permit."30

Welles waited almost a week before he penned his formal reply to Dahlgren's latest request, but even after six days to cool down his anger still showed. Welles stated, "Your communication of the 11th instant, placed in my hands yesterday by yourself, has caused me both surprise and regret." He then proceeded to reply to each of Dahlgren's propositions, starting with his request to replace Rear-Admiral Dupont and ending with his suggestion that he resign his position in the Ordnance Bureau. To each Welles's answer was the same, the requests were simply "inadmissible." He then reminded Dahlgren of the department's many favors to him. "The honors bestowed upon you have greatly exceeded those of any of your contemporaries or any officer of equal grade from the organization of the Government." This included giving him command of the Washington Navy Yard and then getting "the
law ... altered [so] that you might be continued in the position which had been confided to you in a great and trying emergency." He did this even though he realized he would be criticized; but he had endured the criticism willingly, Welles now told Dahlgren, because "I was satisfied of the rectitude of the course pursued and that what was done was for the best interests of the country."

In this same vein, Welles concluded by trying to call on Dahlgren's sense of duty to the war effort and suggested, that "in no position can you render the country so great service as in the Ordnance Department, and in these times it becomes everyone to sacrifice all personal considerations for the good of the country." 31

The bluntness of Welles's response made it clear that there was no possibility of Dahlgren securing a spot in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron which would allow him to exercise independent command. When he finally replied to the secretary of the navy's October 14 letter, instead of trying to strike some other arrangement to suit his own desires, he tried to mend the rift which this incident had opened between them. He expressed his "regret," and told Welles, "It is entirely unnecessary for me to say that my services are always subject to any disposition which may please the Department." A few days later, Welles responded. He was also conciliatory. He was "gratified," Welles told Dahlgren, that any "misunderstanding ... is removed." 32
During his month long effort to seize control of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Dahlgren made few references about it in his private journal. On October 26, the day after he sent his note of "regret" to the secretary of the navy, he made one brief comment. "The Sec.[retary] declined to let me go in a single vessel." In light of the facts of the case, Dahlgren's comment was totally untrue; but perhaps this was his way of convincing himself that it was not his fault that he was still behind his desk in Washington. His actions demonstrate how desperate he had become, and no matter how he tried to paint his situation, he must have recognized that he was further away from service afloat than he had ever been. Momentous events would have to transpire before he would at last raise an admiral's flag.33
Notes to Chapter IV

1Benjamin Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, pp. 232-35; there are two biographies of Welles: Richard S. West, Jr., Gideon Welles, Lincoln's Navy Department (Indianapolis, IN, 1943); and, John Niven, Gideon Welles: Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy (New York, 1973). The latter is generally considered the definitive work on Welles's life and career; for the praise of Welles, see, Robert Greenhalgh Albion, Makers of Naval Policy, 1798-1947 ed. Rowena Reed, (Annapolis, MD, 1980), p. 9.

2Fox Correspondence, I, p. 2; Caspar F. Goodrich, "Foreword," in Ibid., II, p. xv; Fox to Welles, February 24, 1865, ORN, 4, pp. 245-51.

3Lincoln to Fox, May 1, 1861, Collected Works, IV, pp. 350-51; Samuel Breese to Fox, April 25, 1861, Fox Correspondence, I, p. 36; Blair to Fox, April 26, 1861, Ibid., pp. 37-38; Fox to Virginia Woodbury Fox, May 4, 1861, Ibid., pp. 44-45; Lincoln to Welles, May 8, 1861, Collected Works, IV, p. 363; Welles to Fox, May 8, 1861, Fox Correspondence, I, p. 45; Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 351-54.

4Judge Levi Hubbell, April 1861, quoted in, Charles Royster, The Destructive War: William Tecumseh Sherman, Stonewall Jackson, and the Americans (New York, 1991), pp. 79-80; DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, July 16, 1861, ORN, 12, pp. 198-201; the blockade board consisted of four official members, Capt. Samuel Francis DuPont, U.S.N., Professor Alexander Dallas Bache, Superintendent of the Coast Survey, Cmdr. Charles H. Davis, U.S.N., and Maj. John G. Barnard, U.S.A. The board met periodically from late June through early August. Their reports helped to form early Northern naval strategy. See, DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, July 5, 1861, ORN, 12, pp. 195-98; DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, July 13, 1861, OR, I, 53, pp. 67-73; DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, July 16, 1861, ORN, 12, pp. 198-201; DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, July 26, 1861, Ibid., pp. 201-06; DuPont, Barnard, Bache, and Davis to Welles, August 9, 1861, ORN, 16, pp. 618-30; Bache to DuPont, September 4, 1861, ORN, 12, p. 207.


6Davis to DuPont, December 21, 1861, ORN, 12, pp. 422-23; Davis, quoted in, Jones, The Civil War at Sea, I, pp. 324-35.

7Lee to Benjamin, December 20, 1861, in, Clifford Dowdey, ed., The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee (New York, 1961), pp. 92-93; Lee also recognized the operation's military significance. He told Secretary of War Judah P. Benjamin, "It is certain that an attack on the city of Charleston is not contemplated, & we must endeavour to be prepared against assaults elsewhere on the Southern coast." Lee was correct on both counts.

8N. Y. Times, December 26, 1861; for similar expressions, see, Ibid., November 22, 1861; Ibid, November 27, 1861; Ibid., November 30, 1861; Ibid., December 30, 1861; as many people predicted, the impact of the obstructions proved ephemeral. A combination of their sinking in the soft bottom of the channels, as well as the strong currents, quickly made the obstructions ineffectual. In early 1862, a second "stone fleet" was sunk in another of the Charleston shipping channels, and it proved as ineffective as the first.

9Fox to DuPont, April 3, 1862, Fox Correspondence, I, pp. 114-15.


11DuPont to Fox, May 31, 1862, Fox Correspondence, I, pp. 121-24.

12Fox to DuPont, June 3, 1862, Ibid., pp. 126-28.

13Ibid.

14Fox to DuPont, July 31, 1862, Ibid., pp. 141-43.

15Fox to DuPont, September 6, 1862, Ibid., pp. 154-55; Welles to DuPont, September 10, 1862, ORN, 13, p. 322.

16Senator Grimes blocked approval of the vote of thanks for Dahlgren. He had been a driving force behind the

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admiral’s bill, but he complained that he had to accept “two or three absurd amendments” in order to get the bill passed. Based on his actions, it was likely that he saw Dahlgren’s amendment as one of those. Although Grimes had earlier supported legislation for Dahlgren’s benefit, all of those efforts had involved getting Dahlgren the Ordnance Bureau. Grimes was noted both for his great knowledge of Navy Department affairs and his desire to have the department run efficiently. This translated into making sure that the right people were put into the right jobs and he clearly viewed the Ordnance Bureau as the right place for Dahlgren. See, Grimes to DuPont, June 29, 1862, in, William Salter, The Life of James W. Grimes, Governor of Iowa, 1854-1858; A Senator of the United States, 1859-1869 (New York, 1876), pp. 201-02; Grimes to DuPont, February 9, 1862, Ibid., pp. 168-70; Grimes, “Statement on Establishment of Admiral’s Rank,” March 3, 1863, Ibid., p. 199; Grimes to DuPont, July 1, 1863, in, DuPont Letters, III, pp. 190-91; Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 376, 475, 518. Dahlgren apparently learned of Grimes’s intentions from Fox—Grimes and Fox were close associates and while the Senate was in session the two of them met at least three times a week—even before the admiral’s bill passed. As soon as he did, Dahlgren tried to withdraw his nomination for the Ordnance Bureau, but Welles refused to do so. See, Dahlgren, July 11, 14, 16, 17, 1862, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU; see also, Chapter III of this dissertation; Salter, Life of Grimes, p. 146.  

17Dahlgren to Welles, October 1, 1862, ORN, 13, pp. 353-54, Dahlgren’s comments about DuPont having “well used” his opportunities is a reference to his leading the successful Port Royal campaign. This secured DuPont a vote of thanks and when the admiral’s bill passed, a promotion to admiral. See, Grimes to DuPont, February 9, 1862, in, Salter, Life of Grimes, pp. 168-70; K. Jack Bauer, “Samuel Francis DuPont: Aristocratic Professional,” in, ed. Bradford, Captains of the Old Steam Navy, pp. 142-65; with passage of the admiral’s bill, Welles’s total legislative package was completed and he now finally filled the spots opened in December, 1861; Dahlgren was then promoted to captain; see, Dahlgren, July 21, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU; also see Chapter III of this dissertation. 

18Dahlgren to Lincoln, October 1, 1862, JADLC, underline in original. Dahlgren’s suggestion that the rank of Captain was “quite sufficient” was more than a bit ironic since the purpose of getting DuPont’s command was so clearly to enable him to become an admiral. 

19Ibid.
Welles ordered DuPont to come to Washington on September 10; but because of engine troubles on the vessel carrying the dispatch, he did not receive it until September 26, see, Welles to DuPont, September 10, 1862, ORN, 13, p. 322; Welles to Lt. William Budd, September 10, 1862, Ibid.; Budd to Welles, September 20, 1862, Ibid., p. 339; DuPont to O.M. Mitchell, September 26, 1862, DuPont Letters, II, p. 236; Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 160.

DuPont to Fox, October 8, 1862, DuPont Letters, II, pp. 243-44. DuPont's comment about "eating dirt and living on the pay of our rank" is a clear reference to Dahlgren's receiving the pay of an officer one rank higher than his actual rank, a bonus he secured and maintained for most of the 1850s and early 1860s.

Miers, ed., Lincoln Day by Day, III, pp. 143-44; in his diary entry of October 1, Welles wrote, "Called this morning at the White House, but learned the President had left the city. The porter said he made no mention whither he was going, nor when he would return." Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 157.

Welles, Ibid.; p. 158.

Welles, Ibid.; pp. 161-62; Secretary of Treasury Chase, in his diary, notes that on October 6, the Cabinet discussed the Charleston situation, but, makes no mention of Dahlgren, see, Chase, October 6, 1862, Diary Entry, in, "Diary and Correspondence of Salmon P. Chase," in, Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1902 (Washington, 1903, reprint edition, New York, Da Capo Press, 1971), pp. 101-04.

Welles to Dahlgren, October 8, 1862, ORN, 13, pp. 376-77.


Dahlgren to Fox, February 14, [1862], *Fox Correspondence*, I, pp. 423-24—this letter was probably written in response of the incident on the Hetzel; for the accident on the Hetzel, see, Davenport to Rowan, February 9, 1862, *ORN*, 6, pp. 558-60; for details of rifled ordnance in the Civil War, including the problems with Dahlgren's, see, Canfield, *Civil War Naval Ordnance*, pp. 5-8; Tucker, *Arming the Fleet*, pp. 225-39.

28Fox to DuPont, October 7, 1862, *DuPont Letters*, II, p. 242; DuPont to Fox, October 8, 1862, Ibid., pp. 243-44.

29Dahlgren to Welles, October 11, 1862, *ORN*, 13, pp. 377-78.


31Welles to Dahlgren, October 14, 1862, *ORN*, 13, pp. 389-92.

32Dahlgren to Welles, October 25, 1862, Ibid., p. 416; Welles to Dahlgren, November 1, 1862, Ibid., p. 426.

33Dahlgren, October 26, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.
Chapter V

The Making of a Squadron Commander

"So I am at last an Admiral of the Republic"

Having failed in his bid to displace DuPont, Dahlgren had little else to do but to devote his full attention to his ordnance work. Normally, this would have given him solace; now, however, all it served to do was to remind him of his failure. This was because he was working on the Navy’s new XV-inch guns, which he had designed for Ericsson’s new and improved monitors. Scheduled for completion that autumn, both the monitors and the guns were intended for the navy’s Charleston campaign.

From its outset, the XV-inch gun project gave Dahlgren nothing but headaches. His failed effort to dissuade Welles and Fox from proceeding with the project was followed by problems in design, manufacture, and proof firing. Production of the guns fell so far behind schedule that a change in the armament of the new ironclads had to be made; instead of carrying two XV-inch guns as originally intended, the improved monitors, beginning with the Passaic, the first of its class, were equipped with one XV-inch gun and one of
Dahlgren's smaller XI-inch shell-guns. That did not really matter to the monitor's designer. Ericsson told Dahlgren not to worry about the change because "I feel well convinced that [even] with only one of the large guns in each vessel we shall be able to destroy all rebel craft[,] inspire a wholesome dread in rebeldom[,] and prove to foreign powers that we can punish intermeddling." Despite Ericsson's assurances, Dahlgren still worried a great deal about the XV-inch guns. Not until he was actually able to fire one of the guns himself, which he did in mid-October, did he show any sign of relief, stating simply, the gun "works well."\(^1\)

As chance would have it, the first navy XV-inch gun ever manufactured and the *Monitor* arrived at the Washington Navy Yard within days of each other, the former for firing tests and the latter for repairs, primarily to the delicate machinery common to all of the monitors. This unlikely convergence of the navy's most famous warship and the navy's newest weapon led to a steady stream of guests visiting the yard. Dahlgren usually relished these events because of the opportunity that they provided him to advance his own interests; but one set of visitors that came down to the yard could not have given Dahlgren even the least bit of pleasure. Before returning to his command off Charleston, Rear-Admiral DuPont, along with Assistant Secretary Fox, visited to see both one of the guns and one of the vessels that Fox was assuring him would enable him to capture
Charleston easily. Unfortunately, neither Dahlgren nor
DuPont commented upon the awkwardness of meeting so shortly
after the former's ill-fated attempt to secure the command
of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, but it is hard to
believe that both men did not have at least a few
interesting thoughts about the situation. DuPont did
comment about the XV-inch weapon, however. "The gun," he
wrote to his wife, "makes the effect upon you, in size, to
all other guns you have seen, great as some of these are,
that the elephant in a menagerie does, in comparison with
the small quadrupeds. They are to be on the new
monitors[;];" and with uncharacteristic optimism he
concluded, "with a sufficient number of these vessels so
armed they would tear away, I believe, the walls of forts."2

DuPont's positive comments about the XV-inch gun was
one of the few good things associated with the project that
occurred that fall. Problems continued to plague almost
every aspect of the operation. Equipment at the Fort Pitt
Foundry broke down repeatedly. Thus the foundry's initial
assurances of the first four guns being completed by
September 1, with two guns to follow every week thereafter,
proved nothing more than a hollow promise. The fourth gun
was not actually completed until October 25, almost two full
months late. Even when the guns were finally finished, the
problems continued. There were only three transport cars
capable of carrying the massive 42,000 pound guns, and for
at least part of the autumn two of them were contracted to the army quartermaster general to carry locomotive engines to the armies out west. This led Dahlgren and the ordnance department to make extraordinary efforts to transport the guns. At one point Dahlgren literally had one of his assistants chasing after one of the guns to insure its safe transport from gun foundry to shipyard. He implored his subordinate to locate the whereabouts of the missing gun, and once he did, to catch it, and "remain with it until it reaches its destination." Furthermore, he told his assistant, he wanted daily updates about the gun's location; and if there were any delays he was to notify Dahlgren immediately. Of course, efforts such as these incurred tremendous costs, which in the case of the XV-inch gun sent to Boston for the monitor Nahant resulting in shipping costs of $3,082.66 compared to $157.43 for the XV-inch gun of the Patapsco, which was being built in Wilmington, Delaware. But it was clear to Dahlgren, when it came to anything involved with the Charleston campaign, cost was no object.³

Fortunately for Dahlgren, he did not find himself personally criticized for holding up the monitors, and therefore the Charleston attack, because the ironclad construction program experienced its own share of difficulties. Among the most serious problems were Ericsson's arrangements for mounting and firing the XV-inch gun. The Swedish inventor's first and foremost concern was
to make his ironclads impervious to enemy gunfire. This was especially true for the turret, the most likely part of the vessel to be struck. Ericsson would not enlarge the gun ports sufficiently to allow the muzzle of the XV-inch gun to extend outside the turret wall, believing that doing so would weaken it. The ship designer argued that it was possible to fire the gun while the whole of it was inside the turret without either tearing the turret apart or killing the gun crew. Welles was extremely skeptical of Ericsson’s plan so he ordered Dahlgren, along with Fox and Admiral Joseph Smith, to “witness [the] test experiment.” After watching one of the early tests, Dahlgren concluded in a most extraordinary understatement, it made a "terrible noise." While the sound must have indeed been horrific, firing the gun this way created an even more immediate problem; the smoke from the burned powder filled the turret, choking breath and obscuring vision. Still, Ericsson would not alter his opinion about enlarging the gun ports; instead he constructed a crude device to direct the smoke out of the turret. Alvah Folsom Hunter, who served on board the monitor Nahant, described Ericsson’s contraption. "A cast-iron flange, the inside diameter of which was an inch larger than the bore of the gun, was bolted onto the muzzle. As this flange was beveled to fit up against the inner curve of the turret wall, when the gun was run up to the edge of the porthole and fired, most of the smoke from the gun
passed out through the porthole." The so-called "smoke box" that Ericsson built did direct much of the smoke out of the turret, but it took weeks to make it even moderately reliable, further delaying the Passaic's departure from New York.4

Percival Drayton, Dahlgren's longtime acquaintance and colleague in the ordnance department for much of the 1850s, commanded the Passaic. He likened the new vessel to a complex clock, "and the least thing out of adjustment destroys the whole." Almost as if to prove the accuracy of his analogy, when all of the arrangements for the Passaic's XV-inch gun were completed, allowing it to leave New York and head for Hampton Roads to rendezvous with the Monitor and the other vessels being gathered for the proposed attack against Charleston, it became disabled by "a regular burst-up of the boiler". It was towed to the Washington Navy Yard for repairs, arriving on December 3. In a way, this was a blessing; when Drayton tried the XV-inch gun again, some of the components of Ericsson's smoke-box broke, "which rendered it [the XV-inch gun, and the vessel,] perfectly useless."5

As the crippled Passaic arrived at the Washington Navy Yard, Dahlgren no longer had much to do with either the XV-inch gun project or the new monitors. By this time, most of the problems involving the production and transportation of the large guns had been solved. As for the precise
arrangements for firing the guns inside the turrets, this was a problem for Ericsson to deal with and was none of Dahlgren's concern. Freed from a project that he really never wanted to be involved with in the first place, Dahlgren seemed to have little more to do than to watch both political and military events unfold around him.

While Dahlgren always watched both the progress of the war and events in Washington with great interest, in the fall of 1862 there seemed to be a superabundance of important happenings. In October and early-November, Dahlgren noted that the mid-term elections "have gone swimmingly with the Democrats," and "the political elements are looking angrily." He boldly predicted that the results would lead to a shakeup "in the Cabinet." He was quite correct to predict a change, but he looked to the wrong place, at least initially. The day after the Democrats carried New York, the North's most populous state, President Lincoln ordered Major-General McClellan's dismissal once and for all. Dahlgren was shocked. To remove the general "just now," Dahlgren recorded in his private journal, "seems unaccountable."6

While Dahlgren may not have understood McClellan's removal, the general's replacement certainly did. Major-General Ambrose E. Burnside took command of the Army of the Potomac and immediately moved south. Burnside knew exactly what was expected of him, a direct offensive against
Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia. The new commander of the Union's most prominent army did not disappoint, at least not in that way. But Burnside's frontal assault on the Confederate's entrenched positions near the town of Fredericksburg was nothing more than wanton slaughter of obedient soldiers.7

Full details of the Union disaster at Fredericksburg did not reach Washington until December 15, two days after the battle. Almost 13,000 dead, wounded, and missing Union soldiers seemed the lone result of Burnside's poorly executed campaign; and the Army of the Potomac quickly retreated back across the Rappahannock River. Even though Dahlgren had heard the news of numerous other disastrous Union defeats before, until this point in the war he had written about them in his journal relatively calmly, almost matter of factly. This time his response was different. Perhaps this reflected his own growing personal frustration. Whatever the cause, he now only used harsh words to describe the battle. "Begins to look like a confirmed repulse. No generalship, no mind—but merely a hurling of masses upon an army strongly entrenched. And a repetition the only resource....How terrible to think of so many thousands losing life or limb on such stupid plans!"8

After witnessing the effect that political pressures had on the battlefield, Dahlgren watched from closehand the impact that events on the battlefield had on political
affairs. Whereas Dahlgren did not hold either Lincoln or his administration in any way accountable for Burnside's foolhardy attack, many others in the North were not nearly so generous. Within days of the battle, a group of Radical Republican Senators met and developed a plan to try to gain control over the conduct of the war by gaining control over the President's Cabinet. They felt that Seward had too much influence over Lincoln and that it was the secretary of state's conservatism on the slavery issue which kept the President from prosecuting the war as vigorously as they believed necessary in order to secure victory. Furthermore, the senators wanted Burnside removed. They complained that the general, who was a friend of McClellan and a Democrat as well, was no better than the former general-in-chief himself. The senators unveiled their plan in a long meeting with the President on the night of December 18 in which they demanded both a change in the military leadership of all the Union armies and a reorganization of the President's Cabinet, beginning with Seward's removal.9

News of the senators' meeting with the President quickly became public knowledge and everyone in Washington wondered what would happen. This certainly included Dahlgren. On the morning of December 19, Dahlgren heard that Lincoln had been "asked ... to re-construct his Cabinet. Whereon Seward resigned." Dahlgren understood the connection between Fredericksburg and the rapidly
transpiring political crisis. "And so we have the first
political fruit of the ... failure of the campaign.
Probably a new Cabinet." But even more important, Dahlgren
asked himself, what did this mean for the administration's
"policy!! Is it war and confiscation & emancipation or
Peace?"\textsuperscript{10}

Dahlgren did not sit by passively to learn what was
transpiring. The next day he arranged for a get-together at
his house, the featured guests being prominent Republican
Senators John Sherman and Jacob Howard, the latter of whom
had attended the meeting with the President. Unfortunately,
as far as Dahlgren was concerned, his efforts shed little
light on affairs, and he lamented, "The secret as to action
generally of the Cabinet [is] well kept."\textsuperscript{11}

If his guests did not provide him any new insights, at
least Dahlgren did not have long to wait before finding out
exactly what was going on. On the morning of December 22,
the President sent word that he wanted to see him. Much had
happened in the preceding days. After meeting with the
Radical Republican senators, Lincoln demonstrated his
mastery of political infighting. He knew that Secretary of
the Treasury Chase, the most outspoken supporter in the
Cabinet of the Radical Republicans' viewpoint, was involved,
if not behind, the move to oust Seward. Lincoln called a
meeting of his Cabinet and maneuvered all of them, including
Chase, to announce their support for Seward verbally. With
this accomplished, he asked the senate committee back to the
White House and Lincoln had all of his Cabinet, excepting
Seward who was not present, reaffirm their public support
for the administration as it presently stood. The Radical
Republican Senators sat dumbfounded as Chase went along with
all of the other Cabinet members. Having badly
underestimated the President's abilities and having been
exposed, Chase offered to resign. The President gleefully
took Chase's letter of resignation from the secretary of the
treasury's "reluctant" hand and stated triumphantly, "This
... is all I want; this relieves me; my way is clear; the
trouble is ended."12

When Dahlgren arrived at the White House on the morning
of the 22nd and was shown into the President's office, John
W. Forney, the prominent Philadelphia newspaper editor who
was then serving as the secretary of the Senate was pleading
with Lincoln not to accept Chase's resignation. Then almost
as an afterthought, he also suggested that the President
should refuse to accept Seward's too. Although by this
point Lincoln had decided not to accept either resignation,
he apparently did not mind seeing Chase and his backers
worry a little bit more. He told Forney, "Why will people
be such damned fools." Then the President's face
"reddened," Dahlgren recalled, before he exclaimed, "If one
goes, the other must, they must hunt in couples." At this
Forney hurriedly departed, leaving Dahlgren and the
President by themselves. Dahlgren noted that as soon as Forney exited, Lincoln reverted to "his usual humor," suggesting that the President had enjoyed the exchange with Forney. The President immediately launched into the reason for summoning Dahlgren, which was to conduct an impromptu experiment with some gunpowder that someone had brought to the White House; but after a short time, perhaps sensing Dahlgren's inquisitiveness about what had just occurred, or not being able to get his own mind off the topic, the President turned the subject back to the Cabinet controversy. Lincoln recounted to his favorite navy officer the visit that he had from the committee of senators from the Caucus. The President told Dahlgren that while it was all well and good that the Senators "talk of remodelling the Cabinet," the problem with this, according to Lincoln, was that they "had thought more of their plans than of his [Lincoln's] benefit." When the President finished, Dahlgren took his leave. That evening he visited the secretary of the navy, and then afterwards, with the secretary of state, Seward, Dahlgren noted, was as might well be expected "in high spirits," and by evening's end Dahlgren had received "a full exposition" from the victorious side. Dahlgren, however, was troubled by something. As he recorded his thoughts he admitted that "It was certainly a great liberty with the Constitution for the majority of the Senate to meddle with the President's Cabinet. But," he wrote
worriedly, "what they felt to be the necessity for the measure has not been removed." 13

As important as it was, the President's political victory did nothing to reverse the North's lack of recent success on the battlefield and declining morale at home. Dahlgren's Journal entries for late 1862, and early 1863, show that like so many other people in the North he had become extremely pessimistic about the Union's military prospects. On Christmas day, he devoted his Journal entry to listing and recounting the defeats that the "Armies of the Union" had suffered since the beginning of the war. While he thought that "[w]hat is left...makes up a formidable army," he asked, "who shall head it[?]" Events in the new year gave Dahlgren only more reason for concern. "In the evening," he noted in his journal entry of January 3, "comes the news that the Monitor foundered off Cape Hatteras." A few days later word reached Washington that Grant had failed to take Vicksburg. Worse news followed. On January 11, Dahlgren's Journal entry read, "Fox sent word in the evening that the Confeds. had taken the [Harriet] Lane at Galveston & the Westfield was blown up. Town taken and our troops in it....So we lose Galveston and these vessels and are beaten at Vicksburgh [sic]." Dahlgren now came to question whether or not the North would win the war. "[The] Prospects," he noted grimly, "[are] rather dull." He then proceeded once again to recount the Union's growing
list of military setbacks. But defeats on the battlefield were only one area of his concern. He noted that the North’s "financial condition [was] bad--the Army unpaid--in debt all around for everything--Credit so low that $1 in gold is worth $1 1/2 in U.S. Notes and no loans anywhere." Dahlgren’s concerns did not end there. Popular support for the war, he continued, "wanes," and the "Army being of the people is more or less affected by the feeling of the people at large." In contrast, he concluded sadly, "the Confeds. are victorious, savage by reason of the Confiscation & Emancipation Acts[,] which will ruin them and make them homeless & penniless. So they fight under the best generals, for all that men can fight."14

As troubling as the progress of the war may have been for Dahlgren, a personal matter undoubtedly gave him even greater cause for concern. With the opening of the Congressional session in December 1862, Dahlgren’s thoughts had once again turned to the possibility of his being promoted to admiral. The route to this rank, established in the summer of 1862, was rather complex. It began with an officer receiving the President’s recommendation for a vote of thanks. The recommendation then went to Congress, where it required approval of both houses. As detailed in the preceding chapter, Dahlgren had received Lincoln’s recommendation and the favorable vote from the House. The result in the Senate was different. Grimes, believing that
the rank of admiral should only be awarded to officers who had distinguished themselves in battle, successfully blocked a full Senate vote on Dahlgren’s recommendation by keeping debate on the issue bottled up in committee until the end of the Congressional session.15

It appeared that Grimes was attempting to do the same thing during the current session. Elizabeth Blair Lee kept a close watch on the Senate Navy Committee’s actions because her husband, Samuel Phillips Lee, who commanded the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, was also hoping for a promotion to admiral. On January 25, 1863, she wrote to her husband, "Father [Francis Preston Blair, who was also the father of Postmaster General Montgomery Blair,] has returned after several days sojourn in the City with a conviction that no vote of thanks will get through the Senate except Separately & for special acts of merit—The [Navy] Committee," she continued, "will not report any of the names sent up from the House now before them." This was due to, she concluded, "This thing of Dahlgren’s ... it defeats the object of making the Admirals."16

Dahlgren also saw what was happening and he wanted to make sure that his chance for promotion was not blocked again. As he had done so many times in the past, he initiated a letter writing campaign supporting his case. One of his letters, a sixteen page plea to Senator David Wilmot, was classic Dahlgren. He told the senator that he
wished that he could tell him about all of the battles that he fought and won during the war, "but," he stated rather ironically, "it is not the province of an officer of the Navy to dictate to the Department how he shall be employed." Dahlgren argued that while he may not have fought directly in any battles, he had still contributed to numerous Union victories through his work in the ordnance department; and he cited letters that fellow officers had sent to him which complimented his guns and the role that they had played in their victories. Nor had he avoided sea duty during the war, he truthfully told Wilmot, rather, the "[Navy] Department would not allow ... [him] to leave" his ordnance post. Dahlgren concluded his long plea to Wilmot with an analysis of the wording of the admiral's bill. He pointed out that the legislation did not stipulate that one's distinguished service had to be rendered in battle; therefore, he closed, he should not be "excluded by cold and formal rules [from] that recognition which is ... [accorded] to others."17

Although there is no direct evidence to show that Dahlgren's efforts had any bearing on events, on January 31 the Naval Affairs Committee unexpectedly brought the President's recommendation of a vote of thanks before the full Senate. The committee had made some amendments to the House version and noted that votes of thanks had already been requested for upwards of fifty officers, which was
seven times as many as given in the entire history of the United States. This had the effect, the committee reported, of "rendering votes of thanks too cheap." The committee therefore recommended that it would be a "wise rule" that votes of thanks should only be given to officers "in command of an expedition, or when it was a separate service[,] like the conflict of the Monitor and Merrimac." The report sounded as if it was aimed directly at Dahlgren. He had certainly not commanded an expedition. As for rendering special service, the committee's wording seemed to imply that it was necessary to do so in a separate command at sea. But Dahlgren was in for a surprise. Only Captain James Lardner, who had been nominated for his supporting role in the Port Royal campaign, had been dropped from the list; Dahlgren's name remained. And on January 31, 1863, the Senate approved a "Vote of Thanks" for "Captain John A. Dahlgren, for distinguished service in the line of his profession, improvements in ordnance, and zealous and efficient labors in the ordnance branch of the service."18

Dahlgren's quest did not end with the Senate's affirmation, however. Because Lardner had been dropped from the resolution, the amended bill had to go back to the House. On February 4, the amended resolution passed in the House; three days later, the President signed it. This had two immediate effects. First, Dahlgren and the others were now eligible to serve on the navy's Active List for an
additional ten years. More important, it also made each of them eligible for promotion to the rank of admiral; but the key was that they were only eligible for the promotion, they were not guaranteed one. But if a promotion was not assured, Dahlgren certainly was going to try to secure one for himself. In his Journal Dahlgren recounted how this came about. On one of his frequent visits to the White House, "I mentioned [to the President] the vacancies on the Admiral's list—that I also was legally eligible and reminded him of his old promise to promote me." Dahlgren obviously did not feel that Lincoln received his proposition as enthusiastically as he could have because Dahlgren ended this entry, "Willing enough[,] poor gentleman," which suggested that Dahlgren did not believe that the President would act on his request. But Dahlgren was wrong. That same night, Lincoln met with Welles, and according to the navy secretary the President "expressed a wish that Captain Dahlgren should be made an admiral." Welles, who had often cited his belief that Dahlgren did not deserve this honor, reluctantly agreed; and on February 19, Welles nominated Dahlgren for promotion.

Dahlgren learned of his nomination from his friend Foote. Dahlgren was estatic. He went to see Welles to thank him for nominating him. Dahlgren could only have been shocked at Welles' response. "Told him," Welles recounted in his diary, "to thank the President, who had made it a
specialty; that I did not advise it." Welles's lecture did not end there. He then proceeded to give Dahlgren a severe tongue-lashing for his relationship with the President, telling Dahlgren that it had adversely affected his role as a military advisor.20

Dahlgren made no mention in his journal of Welles's harsh comments. Instead, he simply followed the progress of his nomination. Grimes, like Welles, had apparently given up the struggle to prevent Dahlgren from being promoted, and Dahlgren's nomination quickly passed through the Senate Naval Affairs Committee for a vote before the Senate. Two days later, February 27, the Senate confirmed Dahlgren's nomination. Dahlgren exclaimed: "So I am at last an Admiral of the Republic. There are five above me, Farragut, Goldsborough, DuPont, Foote, and Davis....Went into the President's to present the new admiral & shake hands."21

Dahlgren made no mention of how the President responded to his visit, but it would not have been at all surprising if the bulk of their conversation concerned Charleston. On January 6, Welles had sent orders to Admiral DuPont that he was to attack and capture Charleston as soon as the five ironclads the Navy Department was sending him arrived. The ironclads, Welles told DuPont, would "enable you to enter the harbor of Charleston and demand the surrender of all of its defenses or suffer the consequences of a refusal." Furthermore, the navy secretary informed his squadron

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commander, even though reinforcements for the Union army were also on the way to Charleston, DuPont was to make no mistake, "[t]he capture of this most important port.... rests solely upon the success of the naval force." Since Welles had issued these orders, almost every time that Dahlgren and Lincoln spoke to each other, the discussion invariably came around to that same topic. Dahlgren recognized that the President's personality had changed. He noted that Lincoln "never tells a joke now," and that he "always asks about Charleston. Very anxious is he about it--and his countenance shows it."22

Lincoln may have been anxious about Charleston, but Fox was obsessed with attacking the city. The same day that the orders for the campaign were written, Fox penned a private note to DuPont. Fox told DuPont that he would be the North's "avenging arm" as he delivered "the final blow" of the war. "The eyes of the whole country are upon you, and knowing your skill and resource, and reliance upon Him who gives victory, I commend you to his keeping, no misgivings as to the result."23

DuPont certainly shared Fox's millennialist outlook about the war in general and Charleston in particular, but he did not share his optimism about the supposed ease with which he could capture Charleston, even with five ironclads at his disposal. DuPont did all that he could to convince Fox to drop the idea of attacking Charleston, but Fox would
not be deterred. After he learned that DuPont wanted to make the attack a joint navy and army operation, Fox reminded the Admiral that the navy alone was to capture Charleston. "I beg of you not to let the Army spoil it," Fox implored. "The immortal wreath of laurel should cluster around your flag alone." Then, exhibiting a level of overconfidence which bordered on delusion, Fox suggested to DuPont that he steam into Charleston harbor with his guns "silent amid the [enemy’s] 200 guns until you arrive at the centre of this wicked rebellion and there demand the surrender of the Forts, or swift destruction."24

Fox’s determination to see Charleston attacked and destroyed flew in the face of sound military planning and he knew it. In a letter to Commander David Dixon Porter, who commanded the Mississippi River Squadron, Fox stated, "[t]he opening of that river [the Mississippi] as early as possible is the imperative act[,] to be considered above even the capture of Charleston." In a series of incredibly revealing communications with his western commanders, however, Fox repeatedly admitted that while he recognized the importance of the control of the western waters to the Union’s overall war effort, this would take a backseat to the Charleston operations. When Admiral Farragut told him that he could not "perform the duties which I came to execute" without ironclads, the most that Fox offered was to send him some after the capture of Charleston. Even more revealing was a
letter that Fox sent to DuPont. After informing him that he had arranged to have a total of nine ironclads sent to him, Fox stated: "If we had more you should have every one of them, that you might give us success. To do this, my dear Admiral, we have neglected the Gulf and fear every moment to hear of a disaster there...." When DuPont then complained that the Navy Department was holding back vessels from him, Fox spelled it out starkly:

The status is this, on the rebel side one Iron Clad in James River (Richmond No 2) & two others nearly ready: defence--Sangamon alone. Sounds of North Carolina one [Confederate] Iron Clad,--defence none. Lying at Fort Caswell[,] Cape Fear River, all ready one [Confederate] Ironclad;--defence none. Apalachicola river[,] one [Confederate ironclad] under Catesby Jones; defence none. Mobile, five [Confederate ironclads] under Buchanan; defence none. The Admirals in command of the Squadrons have placed these facts on record against us and called for Iron Clads to defend themselves but we have not given them any. Secretary Chase begged the Secretary to send some of the Iron Clads to New Orleans or we should lose the place and the army of Banks; we declined.25

Fox's bleak analysis of the Union's tactical situation versus the Confederate navy's ironclads was probably his way to spur DuPont to attack Charleston. DuPont stalled instead. He had sound military reasons for being cautious. As he pointed out, his ironclads and their crews were new and untried; therefore he wanted to give his ships and crews "the fullest test of active service." He thus ordered an

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attack against Fort McAllister on the Ogeechee River, south of Savannah.26

DuPont may or may not have had it as an ulterior motive when ordering the attack against the Confederate fort, but the results of the action provided him with more ammunition to argue against the Charleston campaign. After three monitors bombarded the fort for eight hours, no damage had been inflicted which "a good night’s work would not repair." Furthermore, DuPont felt that the McAllister attack had provided him with an ace up his sleeve. Alban C. Stimers, the navy’s chief engineer, had recently arrived at Port Royal to instruct DuPont and his officers on the removal of underwater obstructions and torpedoes. Stimers’s primary responsibility, however, was overseeing the monitor construction program. According to DuPont, he "belonged to the [monitor] enthusiasts and, like Fox, thought one could take Charleston." But after witnessing the unsuccessful attack on McAllister from inside the turret of the Passaic, Stimers was convinced that more ironclads were necessary before attacking Charleston. With the Chief Engineer’s conversion under fire, DuPont decided that instead of simply forwarding his reports of the McAllister attack to Washington, he would have Stimers hand deliver them, because as he cheerfully confided to his wife, "[h]e will enlighten them more at the Department than fifty letters from me would do."27
Stimers's surprise visit to Washington did indeed create a sensation. When he arrived at the Navy Department, a meeting was hastily arranged, with Welles, Fox, Lincoln, Chase, and Halleck in attendance. The President was extremely agitated. "It was," according to Lincoln, "the Peninsula all over again," as he disparagingly compared DuPont to McClellan. Welles was none too happy either. He expressed concern about the continued talk of a combined navy and army campaign at Charleston. As for postponing the attack until even more reinforcements could be sent, Welles stated this could not be done. "Old Welles," according to Stimers, "said the attack must be made whether successful or not, the people would not stand it and would 'turn us all out.'"

Dahlgren was out of Washington for a long stretch of time in March, therefore he missed much of the controversy that Stimers's unexpected visit created. But even when he returned to the Navy Department on March 29, the fallout was still evident. "Found [the] President in Chief Clerk's room," Dahlgren recorded in his Journal, "with Sec.[retary] and Fox. He [Lincoln] looks thin and very badly[,] very nervous. Complained of everything--they were doing nothing at Vicksburg or Charleston. DuPont was asking for one iron clad after another, as fast as they were built....I tried my hand at consolation," continued Dahlgren, "without much avail."
What the President did not tell Dahlgren was that he wanted to cancel the Charleston attack altogether, but Fox had talked him out of it. In what was apparently the last letter ever exchanged between Fox and DuPont, the assistant secretary boasted that he had "restrained" Lincoln "from sending off Hunter and all the Iron Clads directly to New Orleans;" although once again Fox acknowledged that "the opening of the Mississippi [is] ... considered the principal object to be obtained" by the Navy.30

Thoroughly disgusted, DuPont resigned himself to attack Charleston. In the last days before the attack he repeated his belief that even if he succeeded in capturing Charleston, it would have "nothing to do with the results of the war." "[T]he rebellion," he stated, "goes down when those 400,000 soldiers are put down and not before." As far as DuPont was concerned, an attack only went to "the gratification to the morbid appetite of the public" and the personal and political interests and ambitions of his civilian superiors in Washington.31

The attack on Charleston finally came on April 7. With months to prepare, the Confederate engineers established a series of strong batteries to defend the entrance to Charleston's inner harbor. Moreover, continuous ordnance practice allowed the gun crews to establish precise ranges, which they marked with floating buoys. The gunners thus exhibited remarkable precision and in the roughly two hours
that the Union ironclads were in range. Confederate gunners struck the nine Union warships a total of 520 times out of slightly more than 2,200 shots fired. The experimental ironclad Keokuk suffered the most punishment. Struck ninety times in only thirty minutes, nineteen shots pierced the vessel just at or below the water line; and in the words of the ship's commander, the "vessel was completely riddled." Despite the best efforts of the vessel's crew, the Keokuk sunk in the morning hours, April 8. While none of the monitors suffered the fatal injuries of the Keokuk, four of the seven lost the use of one or both guns during the engagement and in the opinion of DuPont thirty more minutes of action would have disabled the guns of the remaining three.32

According to DuPont, when he ordered his vessels to withdraw, he did so "intending to renew the attack" the following morning. But after listening to the verbal reports of his ironclad commanders, "I determined not to renew the attack, for in my judgement, it would have converted a failure into a disaster, and I will only add," he concluded, "that Charleston can not be taken by a purely naval attack, and the army could give me no cooperation."33

It would take a few days for both the news of the failed attack and of DuPont's decision not to renew operations against Charleston to reach Washington. As Welles awaited word of the fate of DuPont's forces, the Navy
Secretary's diary entries betrayed his lack of confidence. On April 6, he wrote, "Rumors are current and thick respecting Charleston, but they are all conjectural. A movement against the place is expected about these days, but there has not been time to hear of it. I have great anxiety and apprehension. Operations have gone on slowly and reluctantly." Less than sanguine of the prospects, Welles consoled himself. "[W]e have furnished DuPont the best material of men and ships that were ever placed under the command of any officer on this continent." Hopeful of victory, he admitted, "I am not without apprehensions."34

The lack of news became nearly unbearable. On April 9, Welles noted, "A yearning, craving desire for tidings from Charleston, but the day has passed without a word....A desperate stand will be made at Charleston, and their defenses are formidable. Delay has given them time and warning, and they have improved them." Welles also showed that he shared the general northern hatred of Charleston. "[T]here is no city so culpable, or against which there is such intense animosity." This of course explained why he and Fox had allocated "fifty-two steamers for the work and the most formidable ironclad force that ever went into battle." Despite this, Welles conceded:

For months my confidence has not increased, and now that the conflict is upon us, my disquietude is greater still. I have hope and trust in DuPont, in the glorious band of officers that are
with him, and in the iron bulwarks we have furnished as well as in a righteous cause. The President, who has often a sort of intuitive sagacity, has spoken discouragingly of operations at Charleston during the whole season. DuPont’s dispatches and movements have not inspired him with faith; they remind him, he says, of McClellan. Fox, who has more naval knowledge and experience and who is better informed of Charleston and its approaches, ... entertains not a doubt of success. His reliant confidence and undoubted assurance, have encouraged and sustained me when doubtful. I do not believe the monitors impregnable, as he does, ... but it can hardly be otherwise than that some, probably that most of them, will pass Sumter.35

The first word of DuPont’s failure reached Washington on April 10. Fox interpreted the account of the brief afternoon action gleaned from Confederate newspapers as a prelude to “the main attack.” He wrote to his brother-in-law Montgomery Blair, “I infer that the attack was for the purpose of obtaining full information, otherwise it would have been made in the morning. They are now preparing for more serious work.” Fox was concerned about one thing, the possibility of obstructions; but he optimistically told Blair that “they [DuPont and his forces] now know them and will reduce the fort. It is evident that they can attack it every day and at night retire to their anchorage inside of the bar. The damage upon Sumter can not be repaired. The only question is, Can the ironclads stand the work? I believe the monitors can.” As for the news about the Keokuk. It “was a small experimental vessel and was probably injured so that they beached her. I see no
reason whatever," he concluded even more optimistically than before the battle, "to be in the least discouraged. On the contrary, my faith in the vessels and the officers is strengthened by these rebel accounts."36

Welles's diary entry for April 10, suggests that he believed Fox's interpretation. "On the whole, the account, if not what we wish, is not very discouraging. The movement I judged to have been merely a reconnaissance, to feel and pioneer the way for the grand attack." Welles, however, did not share all of his assistant's views. "Fox persists," he continued, "that the ironclads are invulnerable. I shall not be surprised if some are damaged, perhaps disabled. In fact, I have supposed that some of them would probably be sunk, and shall be satisfied if we lose several and get Charleston. I hope," he concluded, "we shall not lose them and fail to get the city."37

The first official news about the failed attack reached Washington on the afternoon of April 12, when Commander Alexander Rhind, who commanded the now sunk Keokuk, unexpectedly showed up at Welles's front doorstep with DuPont's preliminary reports in hand. "[T]hey were not," Welles complained, "very full or satisfactory, --contained no details." He went on to disparage DuPont, "He has no idea of taking Charleston by the Navy."38

DuPont's detailed report finally reached Washington on April 20. After reading it, the navy secretary dejectedly
telegraphed Fox who was then in New York: "No indications of movements or intended movements." And although it would be ten more days before Welles stated directly that DuPont was "no longer useful in his present command," from the moment that he received DuPont's detailed report on April 20, Welles's private diary entries indicate that he had given up on his commanding officer at Charleston. The receipt of DuPont's detailed report led Welles to make an even more important acknowledgement, however. "I am," he wrote on April 20, "by no means confident that we are acting wisely in expending so much strength and effort on Charleston."

For after all, in Welles's own frank words, Charleston was "a place of no strategic importance."39

What probably upset Welles most was DuPont's post battle assertion that he never advocated attacking Charleston. When Welles read this in one of DuPont's letters he immediately recalled the admiral's October visit to Washington, especially his reaction to Dahlgren's request that he be allowed to lead the attack. Welles remembered how DuPont rejected any and all ideas of anyone but him leading the attack against Charleston, claiming for himself "the right to perform this great work."40

As chance would have it, the same day that Welles recalled how DuPont had earlier quashed all suggestion of Dahlgren's leading the Charleston attack, the ordnance expert returned to Washington from an inspection tour of the
navy's western posts. Having just received DuPont's detailed report, Welles not surprisingly turned the conversation to Charleston. Welles, recalled Dahlgren, was extremely critical of DuPont, and Dahlgren found himself defending the man he had attempted to supplant. Dahlgren tried to reason with Welles, pointing out that all of "the Capt's. of the Iron Clads who were chosen officers concurred with D[uPont]," but Welles did not want to hear it.

Undoubtedly surprised at the anger in Welles's assault on DuPont, Dahlgren had to be even more shocked at what came next. Leaving Welles's office, Dahlgren ran into Fox, who immediately renewed the discussion about Charleston. After stating a similar position about DuPont as did the secretary, the assistant secretary ended by concluding that he wished that Dahlgren was "down there." Dahlgren reacted simply and emotionally after speaking with Fox. "I am," he wrote in his private journal, "an applicant for sea service."

Unbeknowst to Dahlgren at the time, he was one of at least two applicants. Just as they did about the Charleston campaign in general, Welles and Fox disagreed on who was best to lead the Union forces there. Welles's first thought to replace DuPont was Andrew Hull Foote. Besides being the naval hero at Forts Henry and Donelson, Foote and Welles were boyhood friends. But as far as Fox was concerned, Foote was DuPont all over again. While Foote had ultimately

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proven successful on the Cumberland and Tennessee rivers, he was best known for being an unbending stickler for details, who was unwilling to act until he was completely satisfied that every possible preparation had been completed. Moreover, since being severely wounded during the attack against Fort Donelson, he had been serving as a bureau chief in Washington; and his painful wound which had not yet completely healed, and which restricted Foote to moving about on crutches, added to Fox’s concerns.42

The behind the scenes discussions about what to do about the Charleston command continued from late April and through most of May. The decision to replace DuPont only became easier with time as his reports became more hostile and filled with greater demands. In mid-May he requested that his reports detailing "every defect and weakness of the ironclads" be published. At DuPont’s request, his political ally Henry Winter Davis went "to see the President that he may call his dogs off." Then DuPont demanded that Alban Stimers be court-martialed because the chief engineer openly disagreed with him about the condition of the monitors after the April 7 attack. As far as Welles was concerned, DuPont’s actions were his way of providing "a victim. More than this," Welles continued, "he wants to lay his failure at Charleston on the ironclads."43

Welles did not want a public trial of either Stimers or the monitors, at least one that he could not control,
because as he readily admitted this would only provide ammunition for his and the administration's enemies. Welles had just learned that his arch enemy in the Senate, "John P. Hale, Chairman of the Naval Committee ... [was] occupying his time ... preparing for an attack on the Navy Department." Welles certainly did not want to provide him, or anyone else for that matter, with additional ammunition. Meanwhile, the question as what to do at Charleston also remained. In a meeting between Welles, Lincoln, Stanton, Halleck, and Fox, the army contingent stated that if an attack was made, it had to be led by the navy. Fox immediately supported the idea and said he welcomed the Navy's carrying the "brunt" of the work.44

Still, Welles was less than sure. Once again he questioned the wisdom of attacking Charleston, admitting, "[t]he place has no strategic importance." He also realized, however, "there is not another place our anxious countrymen would so rejoice to see taken as this original seat of the great wickedness that has befallen our country. The moral effect of its capture would be great." Moreover, it was hard to argue against a renewed attack for other reasons as well. The ships were already there and with each passing day there was less need for them along the Mississippi because both Farragut and Porter were managing their jobs without the ironclads. But Welles would not
order an attack "without some change of officers." The question was, Whom to put in charge?45

By late May, Welles privately admitted that he was at a complete "loss as to his [DuPont's] successor." He would have liked to have named Farragut as the replacement, but as Welles termed it, he was "employed elsewhere." He also worried about his good friend, Foote. Welles confided to his diary: "Had some talk with Admiral Foote respecting Charleston. He believes the place may be taken, but does not express himself with confidence." Just as troubling to Welles was Foote's "great respect for DuPont, who, I fear, will exercise a bad influence upon him should he be given command." Welles also considered Admiral Francis Gregory, but ruled him out because of age and illness.46

Finally, there was Dahlgren. On May 28, Dahlgren in his usually direct way spoke to Welles about the assignment. "He speaks of it earnestly and energetically," which were important considerations after Welles's trouble with DuPont. "Were it not so that his [Dahlgren's] assignment to that command would cause dissatisfaction" with so many other officers already upset that Dahlgren had been promoted to admiral, Welles lamented, "I would, as the President strongly favors him, let him show his ability as an officer in his legitimate professional duty. He would enter upon the work intelligently and with a determination to be successful. Whether," Welles concluded, "he has the skill,
power, and ability of a first-rate naval commander is yet to be tested. He has zeal, pride, and ambition, but there are other qualities in which he may be deficient." The "best arrangement," Welles realized, would be to have Foote and Dahlgren "act together." This offered the combination of the prestige of Foote, thereby eliminating Welles's concern of opposition to the new commander, and with Dahlgren, the promise of a vigorous campaign, easing both his and Fox's concern of a less than active attempt to take Charleston.47

Having finally made up his mind about whom to replace DuPont with, Welles acted quickly. He immediately sent for Foote and offered him the command of the South Atlantic blockading Squadron and was relieved to learn that Foote "really desired it." With Foote committed to leading the squadron, Welles next broached the subject of having Dahlgren join him. According to Welles, Foote responded enthusiastically to the suggestion, "thought it would be well for the country, the service, and himself, were Admiral Dahlgren associated with him."48

After nearly two years, it finally appeared that Dahlgren's long struggle to secure a command at sea was over; but was it? Foote followed his enthusiastic approval of Dahlgren serving alongside him with a warning. It was "doubtful," believed Foote, "if D.[ahlgren] would consent to serve as second." Foote was indeed right. Having learned that it was being considered to send both Foote and himself
to Charleston, Dahlgren made a long entry in his diary opposing the idea. "[T]his is objectional," wrote Dahlgren, "as it renders collision of opinion possible & hence dissension....Gen.[eral] Gilmore [sic] too is called on and on the whole, it does not look like unity of action. Foote wants to be of the party and there is a national wish to oblige him & to use me." 49

Welles learned how Dahlgren felt from Fox, whom he had sent to feel out Dahlgren on the possibility of serving as Foote's second. Welles probably had a hard time believing what Fox had to say. "[N]ot only was D.[ahlgren] unwilling to go as second, but ... he wished to decline entirely, unless he could have command of both naval and land forces." Welles had seen Dahlgren make outrageous demands before, but this clearly topped them all. The secretary of the navy noted:

This precludes farther thought of him. I regret it for his own sake. It is one of the errors of a lifetime. He has not seen the sea service he ought for his rank, and there is a feeling towards him, on account of his advancement, among naval men which he had now opportunity to remove. No one questions his abilities as a skillful and scientific ordnance officer, but some of his best friends in his profession doubt his capability as a naval officer on such duty as is here proposed. It is doubtful if he ever will have another so good an opportunity.

Foote suggested that as Dahlgren's longtime acquaintance, they had sailed together in the mid-1840s aboard the Cumberland on what was Dahlgren's last sea service on a
regular cruise, that he might be able to "induce" Dahlgren to change his mind, but Welles said he "doubt[ed] it. Dahlgren," Welles continued with his analysis,

is very proud and aspiring, and will injure himself and his professional standing in consequence. With undoubted talents of a certain kind he has intense selfishness, and I am sorry to see him on this occasion, as I have seen him on others, regardless of the feelings and rights of officers of greater experience, who have seen vastly more sea service and who possess high naval qualities and undoubted merit. In a matter of duty, such as this, he shows what is charged upon him,—that he is less devoted to the country than to himself, that he never acts on any principle of self-sacrifice."50

Dahlgren must have also realized that this was his last chance to secure a command at sea, and when he met with Welles and Fox a few days later on June 2, he suggested to Welles that there had been a misunderstanding. He now told Welles that he was "willing to go [to Charleston] if the Iron clads were assigned" to him.51

Probably the most relieved person in the room was Fox. Unlike so many others, he never lost faith in the monitors and he still believed that the only thing lacking at Charleston was a commander who believed in them and was willing to take them boldly right into Charleston harbor. While still finding Dahlgren personally distasteful, the combination of Dahlgren's driving personal ambition to wrap himself in glory, coupled with his continued desire to demonstrate the effectiveness of his guns, made Fox

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confident that Dahlgren would attack Charleston with vigor. Therefore, Fox wholeheartedly endorsed Dahlgren's offer. When Welles accepted the idea, Fox quickly urged Dahlgren to hurry to New York to confer with Foote, who was then making final preparations before heading to Charleston.52

Events then took on an almost frantic pace. The next day, June 3, Welles wrote to DuPont to inform him that he had ordered Foote to relieve him. That same day, Dahlgren traveled to New York and met with Foote, who agreed to Dahlgren's joining him. The next day Dahlgren reported to Welles, telling him about his discussions with Foote and General Quincy A. Gillmore, who had recently been assigned to command the land forces along the south Atlantic coast.53

It is unclear exactly what role Dahlgren was intended to play in the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron. In the long run, however, it did not matter, because shortly after Foote agreed to Dahlgren's joining him, he informed Welles that he was ill and that he would have to delay his departure. Foote's health quickly deteriorated. Dahlgren happened to be in New York making his own preparations before heading to Charleston when he learned of Foote's situation. He rushed to Foote's bedside, only to learn "his illness was considered fatal." Upon returning to Washington, Dahlgren's first stop was to see Secretary Welles. Dahlgren noted that after informing Welles of the "events of ... [his] journey," Welles made no mention of the
"consequences of Foote's illness." Since it was Sunday morning, Dahlgren went to church; but shortly after the service began a messenger arrived and told Dahlgren that the secretary wanted to see him immediately.54

Because Welles had already sent DuPont notice he was to be relieved, Foote's illness left Welles with little choice other than to name Dahlgren as the new squadron commander, and he wanted to make this clear to Dahlgren. "[Your] appointment," Welles told Dahlgren, "was a specialty imposed upon the Department by Admiral Foote's affliction when on his way to assume these duties; ... this interruption made prompt action necessary." Welles then reminded Dahlgren that he had been originally offered the position of "an assistant and second to Foote; that he was to go for a particular purpose." To make sure that there was absolutely no confusion about this, Welles told Dahlgren that "his absence from the [Ordnance] Bureau would therefore be temporary."55

That Welles was uncomfortable about naming Dahlgren as DuPont's sole replacement is evidenced by his diary entries during the last days that Dahlgren spent in Washington, when the two met to discuss final details. Welles was intent on avoiding the problems of communication that he had experienced with DuPont. "Told him," wrote Welles, "there must be frankness and absolute sincerity between us in the discharge of his official duties,—no reserve though we
might differ. I must know, truthfully," Welles continued, "what he was doing, what he proposed doing, and have his frank and honest opinions at all times. He concurs, and I trust there will be no misunderstanding." But despite the frank discussions and apparent concurrence of views, Welles continued to worry. Welles reminded Dahlgren that while anyone who replaced DuPont would experience the animosity of other officers because of DuPont's strong reputation amongst his peers, the feelings against him would be amplified because his promotion had come largely from the "partiality of the President." Therefore, Welles told Dahlgren, "[i]f any of his seniors [whom Dahlgren had jumped with his promotion] ... desired to be transferred, they must be permitted to do so, without prejudice." As troubling as were his concerns about Dahlgren's relationships with his fellow officers, Welles had an even greater concern. While acknowledging that Dahlgren had "intelligence and ability without question; his nautical qualities," Welles noted, "are disputed." Moreover, the secretary continued with his critical analysis, "his skill, capacity, courage, daring, sagacity, and comprehensiveness in a high command are to be tested." But as if Dahlgren's lack of command experience were not enough, Welles believed there was an even greater problem. "He is intensely ambitious, and, I fear, too selfish. He has the heroism which proceeds from pride and would lead him to danger and to death, but whether he has
the innate, unselfish courage of the genuine sailor and
soldier remains to be seen." 56

Perhaps he was too busy, but Dahlgren wrote little in
his journal about his last days in Washington, making
nothing more than passing remarks such as "getting matters
in order to leave." Arriving in New York again late on June
24, he spent most of the next week making his final
preparations before heading to Port Royal, South Carolina.
Not once did he indicate the slightest hint of concern about
his ability to handle the task ahead of him, remarking only
on whether he would ever again get to see all of his
children, who were then scattered all around, his oldest son
Charley at Vicksburg, his middle son Ully with the Army of
the Potomac, his youngest son Paully at sea as a Naval
Academy midshipman, and his fifteen year old daughter living
safe from the war in Newport, Rhode Island. As he left New
York on the morning of June 30, Dahlgren noted simply, "At
11 the steamer ... pushes off from the wharf[,] down the
superb bay and puts to sea." 57

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Notes to Chapter V

1Ericsson to Dahlgren, August 29, 1862, Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; Dahlgren, October 12, 1862, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU; the long process of getting the XV-inch guns from idea stage to placement on board ship can be followed by using a number of collections at the National Archives, Washington D.C., see, Record Group 74, Entry 1, Bureau of Ordnance, Letters to Secretary of the Navy and Chiefs of Bureaus, hereafter cited as NARG 74—Entry 1; Record Group 74, Entry 2, Ordnance Bureau, Letters to Naval Officers, hereafter cited as NARG 74—Entry 2; Record Group 74, Entry 4, Ordnance Bureau, Letters to Foundries and Inspectors, Fort Pitt, hereafter cited as NARG 74—Entry 4; Record Group 74, Entry 51, Ordnance Bureau, Letters Received Relating to XV Guns, hereafter cited as NARG 74—Entry 51; Record Group 45, Entry 356, Washington Navy Yard, Telegrams Received, hereafter cited as NARG 74—Entry 356. For the specific origins of the Navy’s XV-inch gun and Dahlgren’s objections to it, see, Chapter III of this dissertation; some of the design problems can be discerned from, Dahlgren, "Notes on Chronology of XV guns for Monitors," Undated, Box 30, JADLC; Harwood to Welles, April 8, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 1; Dahlgren to Fox, May 8, 1862, NARG 45—Entry 34. Production delays can be seen in, Berrieu to Dahlgren, August 15, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 51; A dispute between Dahlgren and the founders over the proper proofing of the guns is seen in, Charles Knap to Dahlgren, August 18, 1862, Ibid.; James Ripley, Chief of Army Ordnance, to Dahlgren, August 19, 1862, Ibid.; Ericsson to Dahlgren, August 20, 1862, Ibid.; Harwood to Dahlgren, August 21, 1862, Ibid.; Knap to Dahlgren, August 23, 1862, Ibid.; [Dahlgren] to Ericsson, August 23, 1862, Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D.C.; Dahlgren to Berrieu, September 2, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 4.


3Berrieu to Harwood, July 15, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 51; Knap, Rudd, & Co. to Dahlgren, October 18, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to Dahlgren, October 24, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to
Dahlgren, September 16, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to Dahlgren, September 19, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to Dahlgren, September 23, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to Dahlgren, September 26, 1862, Ibid.; Berrieu to Dahlgren, [November] 27, 1862, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Rowan, January 3, 1863, NARG 74—Entry 2; Nicholson to Dahlgren, December 3, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 51; Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to W. W. Queen, October 15, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 4; W. W. Queen to Dahlgren, October 18, 1862, NARG 74—Entry 51.

4 Fox to DuPont, December 13, 1862, Fox Correspondence, I, pp. 168-70; Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 179; Niven, Gideon Welles, p. 428; Ericsson to Fox, October 16, 1862, Ericsson Papers, Library of Congress; Ericsson to Fox, November 26, 1862, Ibid.; Ericsson proved as difficult to work with as did Dahlgren. This is readily discerned in the private correspondence of Percival Drayton, Captain of the Passaic; see, Percival Drayton to Heyward Drayton, October 29, 1862, in Drayton Family Papers, Correspondence of Percival Drayton, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, hereafter cited as Drayton Papers, HSP; Percival Drayton to Heyward Drayton, November 5, [1862], Ibid.; Drayton to DuPont, November 8, 1862, in, DuPont Letters, II, pp. 279-81; Drayton to DuPont, November 24, 1862, Ibid., pp. 292-93; Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren, November 2-3, 1862, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU; Alvah Folsom Hunter, A Year on a Monitor and the Destruction of Fort Sumter, ed. by Craig L. Symonds, (Columbia, S.C., 1987), pp.14-15.

5 Drayton to Heyward Drayton, October 29, 1862, Drayton Papers, HSP; Drayton to DuPont, December 20, 1862, DuPont Letters, II, pp. 305-07.

6 Dahlgren, October 16, 26, November 4, 9, 1862, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU; Lincoln to Haleck, November 5, 1862, in, Collected Works, V, pp. 485-86; Dahlgren was not the only one close to the President who was shocked at the timing of McClellan’s dismissal, so too was the secretary of the navy, see, Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 183.


8 Dahlgren, December 15-16, 1862, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU.

9 Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, pp. 350-55; Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals, pp. 197-229; Blue, Salmon P. Chase, pp. 191-94.
The entire episode of the Radical Republican effort to unseat Seward is detailed and analyzed in Williams, *Lincoln and the Radicals*, pp. 197-229; Lincoln's response to Chase, quoted in Welles, *Welles Diary*, I, pp. 201-02; Welles also provides an excellent view of the entire affair from inside Lincoln's Cabinet, see, *Welles Diary*, I, pp. 193-205; for Chase's involvement, see, Blue, *Salmon P. Chase*, pp. 191-94.

Lincoln's conversation with Forney is quoted in, Ibid.

For the full details of the admiral's issue, see chapters III and IV of this dissertation; for Grimes's feelings, see, Salter, *The Life of Grimes*, pp. 168-70, 199.


Dahlgren employed his closest friends to aid him in his case. He had Admirals Foote and Smith hand-deliver the above letters, stating in his closing, "they have known me long ashore and afloat and their testimony is unimpeachable.


Dahlgren to Wilmot, January, 1863, JADLC; see also, Dahlgren to Senator Edgar Cowan, Ibid.; Dahlgren employed his closest friends to aid him in his case. He had Admirals Foote and Smith hand-deliver the above letters, stating in his closing, "they have known me long ashore and afloat and their testimony is unimpeachable.


Dahlgren, February 25-28, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU; Dahlgren received his commission on March 11. It was dated February 7, 1863, the day on which Lincoln signed the vote of thanks. Receiving the commission, Dahlgren noted, "This jumps me over half the Captains, and all the Commodores, making me the 6th Admiral & officer on the List." See, Dahlgren, March 11, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, Ibid.

For Lincoln's concerns about Charleston, see, Dahlgren, January 29, February 6, 14, 15, 16, 17, March 1, 7, 29, 1863, Journal Entries, Ibid.; Welles to DuPont, January 6, 1863, ORN, 13, p. 503.

Fox to DuPont, January 6, 1863, Fox Correspondence, I, pp. 172-73.


Fox to Porter, October 14, 1862, Fox Correspondence, II, pp. 138-40; Fox to Porter, April 6, 1863, Ibid., pp. 164-65; Fox to Farragut, February 6, 1863, Ibid., I, pp. 324-35; Fox to Farragut, February 28, 1863, Ibid., pp. 326-27; Farragut to Fox, March 27, 1863, Ibid., pp. 329-30; Fox to Farragut, April 2, 1863, Ibid., pp. 332-34; Fox to DuPont, March 11, 1863, Ibid., pp. 191-94.

DuPont to Welles, March 6, 1863, ORN, 13, p. 716.

Welles to Stimers, February 13, 1863, Ibid., p. 662; DuPont to Welles, March 7, 1863, Ibid., p. 728; DuPont to Sophie DuPont, March 4-7, 1863, DuPont Letters, II, pp. 465-75.


Dahlgren, March 29, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU.

DuPont to Henry Winter Davis, April 1, 1863, DuPont Letters, II, pp. 532-35; Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 247; Fox to DuPont, March 18, 1863, Fox Correspondence, I, pp. 193-94; Fox to DuPont, March 26, 1863, Ibid., pp. 195-96;
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Fox to DuPont, April 2, 1863, Ibid., p. 197; *DuPont Letters*, II, n. p. 538.

31 DuPont quote in, DuPont to Charles Henry Davis, March 31, 1863, Ibid., pp. 530-32; see also, DuPont to James Stokes Biddle, March 25, 1863, Ibid., pp. 509-12; DuPont to Sophie DuPont, March 27, 1863, Ibid., pp. 515-22; DuPont to Sophie DuPont, March 30, 1863, Ibid., pp. 524-30; DuPont to Henry Winter Davis, April 1, 1863, Ibid., pp. 532-35; DuPont to Sophie DuPont, April 3, 1863, Ibid., pp. 538-41; DuPont to Sophie DuPont, April 4-5, 1863, Ibid., pp. 543-45.

32 DuPont's reports of the April 7 attack, accompanied by the reports of the individual ironclad commanders, are contained in, *ORN*, 14, pp. 3-28; the record of Confederate ordnance fire is contained in, Beauregard to Cooper, May 19, 1863, *QR*, I, 14, pp. 240-44.

33 DuPont to Welles, April 8, 1863, *ORN*, 14, pp. 3-4; DuPont to Welles, April 15, 1863, Ibid., pp. 5-8.


36 Butterfield to Fox, April 10, 1863, *ORN*, 14, p. 37; Fox to Butterfield, April 10, 1863, Ibid., p. 38; Fox to Blair, April 10, 1863, Ibid.


38 Welles, Ibid., p. 267.

39 Welles, Ibid., pp. 276, 288; Welles to Fox, April 20, 1863, *ORN*, 14, p. 45.

40 Welles, *Welles Diary*, I, p. 277; after the April 7th attack, DuPont confided to a friend that he "had not the moral courage" to tell the Department he did not want to attack, "So I compromised my conscience." See, DuPont to William McKean, April 29, 1863, *DuPont Letters*, III, pp. 65-68.

41 Dahlgren, April 20-21, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 9, JADSU.

42 Niven, *Gideon Welles*, pp. 9-12, 332; West, *Gideon Welles: Lincoln's Navy Department*, p. 200.

44Welles, *Welles Diary, I*, pp. 308-09.


46Welles, *Welles Diary, I*, pp. 312-16.

47Welles, Ibid.

48Welles, Ibid., p. 317.


50Welles, *Welles Diary, I*, p. 317; Foote did speak with Dahlgren that same day, but as Welles suggested, he was not able to get Dahlgren to change his mind, see, Dahlgren, May 29, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, *JADSU*.

51Dahlgren, June 2, 1863, Journal Entry, Ibid.

52Ibid.

53Dahlgren, June 3-4, 1863, Journal Entries, Ibid.


56Welles, Ibid., pp. 337, 341-42.

Chapter VI

Failure at Fort Sumter

"I regret to say that an attempt to assault Sumter last night was unsuccessful. Our column was repulsed with loss."

The appointment of a new commanding officer was not the only important change that occurred involving the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in the spring of 1863. DuPont's failed assault also dramatically altered the plans for capturing Charleston. Now, even Fox, who previously had done all that he could to ensure that the navy alone captured Charleston, realized that the best chance of taking the detested city was through the cooperation of navy and army forces. In fact, Fox even supported a plan which called for the army to lead the way, a plan which would have enormous consequences for Dahlgren's command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron.1

DuPont's April 7th attack against Charleston was based on the Navy Department's naive assumption that the monitors simply would be able to steam past Fort Sumter into Charleston harbor, forcing the city to surrender. But DuPont's attack demonstrated that Fort Sumter was the key to Charleston's outer defenses not only because of its guns,
but also because the fort anchored a line of obstructions which blocked the single ship channel between the fort and Sullivan's Island to its north. It was this line of obstructions which had prevented DuPont from simply steaming into Charleston's inner harbor as the Navy Department had hoped and expected.

Fort Sumter had been designed and built with an eye toward any attack on Charleston coming from the ocean. Situated just to the south of the ship channel, its offensive and defensive powers were concentrated on its north and east sides. Its weakest point, both offensively and defensively, was the long gorge wall facing to the southwest, toward James and Morris islands.

An attack via James Island was definitely out of the question. Union forces had already tried this route in June 1862, but against the heavily fortified Confederate lines which stretched across the width of the island, they suffered what General Hunter described as "a disastrous repulse." Some Union army officers, however, believed that Morris Island offered them an opportunity to exploit Fort Sumter's vulnerable gorge wall.2

Typical of the barrier islands which skirt much of the United States' Atlantic coast, Morris Island was just shy of four miles in length and ran more or less along a north-south line. Narrow and for the most part treeless, the island faced the ocean along its entire eastern side,
while to the west it bordered what were generally considered impassible marshlands. Uninhabited before the war, the island became important when Major Anderson occupied Fort Sumter in December 1860. South Carolina authorities then erected a strong artillery battery at Cummings Point at the island's northern tip, less than a mile from Fort Sumter's gorge wall. After the capture of Sumter, additional defenses intended primarily to protect the battery at Cummings Point were begun along Morris Island, the most important of which was Fort Wagner, which stretched across the narrowest section of the island, approximately three-quarters of a mile south of Cummings Point. However, because of an overall lack of resources and General Beauregard's belief that Morris Island was not absolutely essential to Charleston's defense, work on Fort Wagner and the other defensive works on the island proceeded slowly and were not yet completed by the spring of 1863. The hope in Washington was that the army would be able to land at the southern end of Morris Island from its base on Folly Island, directly to the south, and capture Fort Wagner before it was completed. This would make the Confederate battery at Cummings Point untenable, since all of its defenses faced north and east toward Charleston harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. With possession of Morris Island, it was believed that heavy long-range artillery batteries beyond the reach of Confederate guns could "demolish Fort Sumter." Once the
fort was destroyed, Union authorities thought that it would be easy to clear a path through the line of obstructions. Then, Union warships could steam into the harbor.3

There was good reason for officials in Washington to support the plan. On May 23, Quincy A. Gillmore wrote to General-in-Chief Halleck's chief-of-staff, George W. Cullum, and assured him that not only could "the forts in Charleston be reduced," but it could be accomplished without any additions to either the army or navy forces already there, save "a suitable number of the best heavy rifled guns." Gillmore's opinion carried a great deal of weight. A respected military engineer, in 1849 he graduated first in his class at the United States Military Academy. Assigned to the army's prestigious Corps of Engineers, he had since specialized in coastal fortifications, helping to supervise the construction of coastal defenses in both New York harbor and Hampton Roads, as well as serving as Instructor of Military Engineering at West Point. Even more important, Gillmore had commanded the army operations against Fort Pulaski, near Savannah, Georgia. Utilizing plans very similar to those now proposed for Charleston, Gillmore succeeded in capturing Fort Pulaski after the navy had been unsuccessful there. Gillmore's military qualifications coupled with his bold promises stood in stark contrast to the controversial political general, David Hunter, then in command of the Department of the South. Hunter seemed
primarily intent on securing permission to "organize colored regiments," rather than working toward the capture of Charleston. Thus on June 3, Gillmore was ordered to take command of the Department of the South.4

Even though it was clear that the army was to take the lead role in the new plan of operations, at least initially, the navy's full cooperation was also essential for success. Unfortunately, when Gillmore arrived at his headquarters at Hilton Head, South Carolina, in mid-June, he found that the situation surrounding the command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron meant that the navy's assistance was not forthcoming. Having already been informed he was to be relieved, Admiral DuPont did everything in his power to delay providing Gillmore any assistance, stating it would be unfair to do so because it would commit his successor to a course of action which he might not agree with. Gillmore found that other than complaining to his superiors in Washington, there was little that he could do but wait for DuPont's successor to arrive.5

After almost two years of what must have sometimes seemed like a vain struggle to escape his desk job in Washington, Dahlgren longed for action. He did not have to wait long. On the day of his arrival at Port Royal on July 4, he met with Gillmore. The General told Dahlgren that because the Confederate defenses on Morris Island were nearing completion that the campaign "must be tried now or
it would be too late." Dahlgren agreed to "grant the aid asked," recording in his Journal that he felt that he had "no alternative" but to do so.6

Dahlgren met with Gillmore again the following day to find out exactly what the navy was expected to do. As has already been described, the army's plan called for an amphibious landing along the south end of Morris Island. To Gillmore, the entire operation hinged on transporting his troops safely across the Stono River Inlet in small boats. The navy's primary job was to ensure that Confederate vessels from Charleston and Savannah could not get near the southern end of Morris Island. Of course the navy's role did not end once the army landed. As the army officers who originally proposed the Morris Island attack had pointed out, one of the great advantages of advancing along the barrier island was that the navy's ironclads and gunboats would be in an ideal position to provide supporting artillery fire, both against any Confederate artillery positions and troops.7

Ironically, for all of the complaints that he had registered about the navy holding the army up, Gillmore informed Dahlgren that the army would not be ready until Wednesday, July 8. Dahlgren did not complain about this delay. If anything, even this date was too soon. As he confided in his journal, both he and his staff were "new to the squadron & locality," and there were numerous details to
take care of before the navy could provide the requested aid. Alterations to strengthen the damaged monitors had to be stopped. The bar off of the Stono River inlet had to be buoyed to help the vessels navigate the tricky shallow waters safely. Additionally, each vessel called in to participate in the operation had to be replaced by another vessel to ensure the continued viability of the blockade along the rest of the coast for which Dahlgren’s squadron was responsible. These preparations took time, and three days hardly seemed enough.

Dahlgren’s concerns about having enough time were alleviated somewhat on July 7 when General Gillmore unexpectedly informed him that the army could not be ready until Thursday, a day later than previously thought. Even though the extra day gave Dahlgren the peace of mind that the navy would definitely be in position, Dahlgren still worried about the timing of operations. The campaign as detailed relied on some measure of surprise. Dahlgren had been doing all he could to make sure that the navy did not give any clues to the enemy of the upcoming attack. For example, Dahlgren had been carrying out all of his preparations for the impending attack from Port Royal. Additionally, since he intended to personally lead the navy operations, when Dahlgren left Port Royal on July 8, he left with as much secrecy as possible. This included leaving his admiral’s flag flying over his flagship while he quietly
headed south in a transport ship hoping that this would make it look like he was still at Port Royal.9

Unfortunately, Dahlgren's efforts to preserve secrecy were for nought. When making arrangements for the attack, Dahlgren had ordered that the participating vessels not normally stationed at Charleston should arrive after nightfall on July 8. But when Dahlgren arrived off Charleston that afternoon, some of the vessels were already there at anchor. So much for "obeying orders," he wrote disgustedly. Their presence only added to his anxiety, however. "Do wonder," he noted in his Journal, "if the many items of the plan will all work! and so wondering went to bed I tried to sleep[,] but in vain for the ship so groaned & shook as the sea tossed her about, that I could not." He was still awake at 5 a.m. when a message from Gillmore was delivered stating that he had postponed the attack again.10

The long-awaited attack finally began early on July 10, when at 5:10 a.m. the army's masked batteries on the northern end of Folly Island unleashed a forty-seven gun barrage. Dahlgren and the navy were ready. Unlike his predecessor, who openly distained the monitors, Dahlgren intended to lead the navy operations from inside one of his squadron's two-gun ironclads. Anticipating the attack, Dahlgren had raised his admiral's flag on the Catskill at 4 a.m. As soon as he heard the army's guns, he ordered the vessel to steam into action, the monitors Nahant, Montauk,
and Weehawken following close behind. The sluggish monitors took more than an hour to maneuver into position, and the navy's first contribution to the assault only came at 6:15. Due to the enfilading position that the vessels could take, however, their fire had an immediate and telling effect. Within minutes of the monitors' opening up, the men manning the Confederate batteries on the south end of Morris Island were forced to abandon their guns and could be seen running up the beach toward Fort Wagner.¹¹

With the Confederate guns now silenced by the monitors, the army's movement across the Stono River inlet began. A series of small sand hills near the end of Morris Island prevented Dahlgren and the navy from seeing the actual landing, but they knew the attack was underway from "the rattle of musketry." The tension created by not being able to see what was happening did not last long, because within minutes at least two regiments of Union troops were visible advancing up to the long flat section of the island.¹²

With the Union troops now in full view, the navy's role changed. "The ironclads," Dahlgren wrote in his official report of the action, "moved parallel to the low, flat ground that extends northward from the sand hills toward Fort Wagner, and as near to it as the depth of water permitted, rolling shells in every direction over its surface to clear away any bodies of troops that might be gathered there." So far, everything had happened quickly.
and according to plan. It was just 9 a.m. when the first Union troops reached the top of the sand hills; and at 9:30 they were within a half-mile of Fort Wagner. As for the monitors, by this time they had closed to within 1200 yards of the Confederate fort and proceeded to shell it.\textsuperscript{13}

Dahlgren did not know it at the time, but Gillmore had already called a halt to his operations. His troops, who had been up most of the previous few nights in preparation for the twice postponed attack, were exhausted by their effort. As Gillmore's men tried to recuperate in the intense heat of the July sun on the shadeless island, the four monitors maintained a heavy bombardment against Fort Wagner, finally withdrawing in the early evening after being in action for nearly fourteen hours.\textsuperscript{14}

It had been a long, but exciting day for Dahlgren; "my first battle," he recorded proudly in his journal. And he truly experienced it first hand. Undoubtedly because the Catskill led the way, carried his admiral's flag aloft, and did most of the signalling, the Confederate gunners concentrated their gunfire against it. This was borne out by the damage reports of the four monitors: Weehawken zero hits received; Montauk struck twice; Nahant hit six times; Catskill struck no less than sixty times. Moreover, many of the hits on the Catskill were serious. As Dahlgren noted in his official report of the day's action, "[w]hen these heavy shots struck, the concussion was very great, an officer ...
touching the turret at such a time, was knocked down senseless and much injured." Dahlgren himself narrowly escaped a possibly fatal injury when a direct hit "dislodged" one of the bolts holding the iron plates together, sending it ricocheting around the narrow confines of the pilot house where he was standing. Despite these and many other injuries which he described as "very severe," Dahlgren reported that he was "most favorably impressed with the endurance of these ironclads," a sentiment which tremendously pleased his superiors in the Navy Department.15

Dahlgren noted that he retired to his cabin "a weary man" the night of his first battle. He might have also noted that he was an uninformed man. That became obvious at about six a.m. the following morning when it was reported to Dahlgren that General Gillmore’s forces had attacked Fort Wagner at daybreak. Not knowing about Gillmore’s plan to attack, the monitors were not prepared for action when the fighting erupted at about 4 a.m. Listening to the sounds of battle, Dahlgren and his men could only speculate about what was taking place. Finally at about 9 o’clock Dahlgren received an official dispatch from Gillmore, stating that the army’s assault had failed and requesting the monitors be brought in to bombard the rear of the Confederate fort to help prevent its reinforcement. Dahlgren quickly assented to Gillmore’s request, and he again personally led the four monitors in "and peppered away at Wagner." He was, however,
more than a little annoyed with his army counterpart and in a rapidly penned note Dahlgren informed Gillmore that the monitors could have assisted sooner if only the request had been made.16

Dahlgren finally learned something of Gillmore’s intentions the following morning, July 12, when the general visited him. Gillmore began by recounting the details of the previous morning’s assault. The first column in the attack, Gillmore told Dahlgren, suffered more than fifty percent casualties. Simply ordering another frontal assault would more than likely result in a similar defeat, Gillmore noted, thus he decided to utilize the same tactics that had enabled his forces to land on Morris Island itself, a combined army and navy artillery barrage followed by an infantry assault.17

With Fort Wagner now the target, it was expected that the navy could play a much greater role than in the initial landing on Morris Island. That was because most of the army’s guns were relatively light, 30-pounders and less, while the navy ironclads on the other hand, had much heavier guns, 11-inch and larger. Moreover, because the vessels could take up an enfilading position along Wagner’s weak ocean front, the navy’s guns stood to do tremendous damage. Dahlgren only had one real concern. Dahlgren very much wanted to utilize as many of his squadron’s large caliber guns as possible. Another monitor, the Nantucket, had only
recently arrived, making five available. These five vessels, however, only carried a total of ten guns. The ship that he really wanted to utilize was the iron-sheathed frigate New Ironsides, the full broadside of which equalled that of the five monitors combined. The problem was that the ship drew so much water that it could only cross the bar off Charleston at exceptionally high tides, which occurred just a few times each month. Just such a tide was due on July 15, but at the morning high tide the sea was too rough for the ship to cross. Dahlgren ordered the vessel to be lightened as much as possible for the evening high tide. He also expressed his concerns to Gillmore, telling him that if the ship could not cross the attack should be postponed from the scheduled day of July 16. By the afternoon, however, the wind abated, and with ship now lightened somewhat, it successfully crossed, touching bottom only once.\textsuperscript{18}

With the New Ironsides across the bar, the navy was ready, but the army was not. Unable to complete all of its counter-batteries, late on July 15, Gillmore notified Dahlgren that the attack would have to be cancelled for a day. Then the weather proceeded to work against the Union operation. A series of heavy summer rainstorms typical of the southeast inundated the area, submerging the batteries already completed and slowing the progress on those still under construction. This forced a second postponement, the attack now being scheduled for July 18.\textsuperscript{19}
As had seemingly become the norm with the Morris Island campaign, the attack still did not begin when planned. A violent thunderstorm just before daybreak on July 18 flooded the Union batteries again. As the army proceeded with the rather ironic task of having to bail themselves out, Dahlgren’s forces waited. At 8:30, Gillmore signalled that he would be ready to move in no more than two hours. All of the navy’s wooden gunboats which carried rifled pivot-guns thus went into action, firing from beyond the range of the Confederate smooth-bore guns of Fort Wagner. Dahlgren also ordered the ironclads to prepare for action. Unfortunately, not long after this Gillmore sent word that the rainstorms had soaked the gunpowder supplies for his artillery and he was then in the process of bringing up dry powder that he had in reserve. Normally, Gillmore probably would have postponed the attack until at least the next day. There were, however, a number of reasons not to do so. Every postponement enabled the Confederates to strengthen their position. Gillmore’s growing sick list also indicated that his troops, already actively working for more than two weeks, were rapidly becoming exhausted, both physically and mentally. Therefore the attack, Gillmore informed Dahlgren, would commence at noon.20

Dahlgren led the naval operations from one of the monitors. He boarded the Montauk shortly before noon and led a flotilla of six ironclads into position; one benefit
of the army's delays was that repairs on the damaged monitor Patapsco were completed. Although the army's batteries had already opened fire before the ironclads were in position, the ships' enfilading position made their fire much more effective, and Dahlgren noted that "[t]he guns of the fort were soon over-crowed by the weight of metal and did not respond with spirit." Initially, an ebb-tide forced the ironclads to take a position about 1,200 yards from Wagner; but as the tide began to flow Dahlgren took the vessels in closer to shore, finally anchoring the monitors about three hundred yards from the Confederate position. With obvious pride, Dahlgren described the scene. "Such a cracking of shells and thunder of cannon and flying of sand and earth into the air....the Fort was quiet, would not answer with a gun, indeed under such a fire it was very unsafe for a man to come out of the bomb-proofs. The gunnery," Dahlgren continued, "was very fine[,] the shells of the Ironsides going right over the Montauk[,] so we had it all our own way."

Confederate reports describing the bombardment supported Dahlgren's views, at least in part. General Beauregard called it "unparalleled, until this epoch of the siege, in the weight of projectiles thrown."

Brigadier-General Tallafarro, commanding Confederate troops in Fort Wagner, wrote:
With this immense circle of fire by land and sea, he poured for eleven hours, without cessation or intermission, a storm of shot and shell upon Fort Wagner, which is perhaps unequaled in history. My estimation is that not less than 9,000 solid shot and shell of all sizes from XV-inch downward, were hurled during this period at the work; the estimate of others is very much greater.

The concentrated artillery fire had relatively little impact, however. With most of the defenders safely inside the fort's bomb-proof shelter, only eight men were killed and twenty wounded during the bombardment. The earthen fort itself also suffered only minor material damage. Even the massive 330 pound explosive shells from the monitor's fifteen-inch guns did little more than to displace some wet sand into the air, much of it simply settling back near its original location. Additionally, in anticipation of the bombardment, many of Wagner's light field-pieces had been buried under tons of sand, waiting to be exhumed when the artillery barrage ended and the expected infantry assault began. Of course, watching from the Union land batteries and naval vessels offshore, it would have been hard to believe that the concentrated bombardment had done so little actual damage, either to the fort or its defenders. Thus, Dahlgren was not at all surprised when near sunset he received a penciled note from Gillmore informing him that he had ordered an assault.22

Dahlgren described the events of the next few hours in his journal.
By the waning light we could see the masses coming along the beach, but the darkness shut them in ere they reached the Fort. Presently came the flashes of light and the sharp rattle from musket & cannon[,] there could be no help from us for it was dark and we might kill friend as well as foe. All we could do was to look on and await an issue not in our control. The contest went on for an hour and a half, lapsed and then died out. It was over, but who had won. About 10 almost worn out, with exertion for 19 hours. I returned to my den in the "Dinsmore" and there learned that our men had been repulsed with severe loss... The General has not force enough evidently.

Dahlgren was not alone in feeling that the Army did not have enough men. With his force reduced a full one-third since the beginning of the campaign, Gillmore informed General-in-Chief Halleck that he required the immediate addition of "8,000 or 10,000 effective old troops" to continue the campaign. Believing that the recent Union successes at Vicksburg and Port Hudson would enable Halleck to send him at least this many men, Gillmore closed: "I shall husband my strength until re-enforcements arrive."

When Halleck received Gillmore's request he became furious. "It is, to say the least, seriously embarrassing," the general-in-chief fumed. He reminded Gillmore of the assurances that he made before the campaign began, especially his statement that no additional troops would be necessary. "Had it been supposed that you would require more troops," Halleck continued in his rage, "the operations would not have been attempted with my consent or that of the Secretary of War."
Halleck's statements show that the army high command in Washington had little interest in either the Charleston campaign generally or the Morris Island campaign specifically. The same could not be said of the Navy Department. Fox had great expectations for the movement on Morris Island. After learning that Gillmore's forces had successfully landed on the south end of the barrier island, Fox boasted: "I ... got Gilmore [sic] sent down as a man who believed that Charleston could be taken and the result is that we have just learned that a brilliant lodgement was made on Morrisons [sic] Island." With this, Fox continued assuredly, "Dahlgren and Gilmore [sic] will certainly take Charleston....The rebellion is going overboard fast."26

Dahlgren's report detailing the defeat at Fort Wagner elicited an entirely different response from the Navy Department. Dahlgren stated that "[w]ith 20,000 men Fort Wagner would have been ours ... and then the rest must follow inevitably." Fox immediately went to see Halleck and asked him to rush reinforcements to Gillmore. But as Welles recorded in his private diary, Halleck brusquely responded that "if we [Fox and Welles] would take care of the Navy, he would take care of the Army." Welles and Fox refused to accept Halleck's rebuff as the final answer. Instead, as Welles later recounted, "I went ... to the President with Dahlgren's dispatches; told him the force under Gillmore was insufficient for the work assigned; that it ought not now
fail; that it ought not to have been begun unless it was understood his force was to have been increased; that such was his expectation, and I wished to know if it could not be done." Welles continued his plea for sending the reinforcements by arguing that "It would be unwise to wait until Gillmore was crushed and repelled, and then try and regain lost ground, which seemed to be the policy of General Halleck; instead of remaining inactive till Gillmore, exhausted, cried for help. His wants should be anticipated." 27

According to Welles, Lincoln "agreed with me fully." Of this fact, no one could be surprised. After all, here was the President's friend Dahlgren, who was in Charleston in part because of the President's influence, asking for assistance. How could Lincoln refuse? Shortly thereafter it was announced that 5,000 additional men were being sent to reinforce General Gillmore. And while, as Welles noted, "I thought it should be 10,000 if we intended thorough work, ... [I] am glad even of this assurance." 28

While the arrival of the first reinforcements on August 1 was indeed welcomed, their presence was no longer as crucial as Dahlgren and Gillmore had once assumed. That was because Gillmore had decided to change his plan of operations. Until the failure of the July 18 assault, he had believed that the capture of Fort Wagner would be a relatively simple task. This belief was reflected in his
decision to attack at sunset. Afterward, Gillmore realized that the timing of the attack had been a mistake. The leading column managed to seize the southeast bastion of Fort Wagner just as night fell. Gillmore noted that in the darkness the attackers were at a severe disadvantage. Unable to distinguish attacker from defender, the Union's artillery, which was the greatest advantage that the Union forces enjoyed at Charleston, was forced to cease firing. The attacking column had little choice but to fall back. Casualties reflected the completeness of the defeat; Gillmore lost more than 1,500 officers and men, the Confederates, 181.29

After two failed direct attacks, Gillmore decided not to order another. As he wrote in his final report of the campaign, because "[t]he demolition of Fort Sumter was the object in view" of securing Morris Island, "[t]o save valuable time, it was determined to attempt the demolition of Fort Sumter from ground already in our possession."

Gillmore's decision transformed the Union campaign into a siege. Major T. B. Brooks, who was in charge of the actual day-to-day engineering work on Morris Island, stated that after the failed second assault, the Department of the South's operations consisted of three components: first, "[e]stablishment of defensive lines across Morris Island, in order to secure our lodgement....[Second,] Construction of batteries employed in the demolition of Fort
Sumter....[Third,] Execution of approaches and batteries against Fort Wagner."  

At the outset of operations Dahlgren had concentrated much of his squadron at Charleston in order to provide as much support to the army as possible. This had severely weakened the blockade up and down the entire south Atlantic coast, but Dahlgren had deemed this necessary because of the importance placed on capturing Charleston. Furthermore, it had been assumed that the campaign would be short-lived and thus the blockade would be quickly restored to its former strength. Now, however, there seemed no immediate prospect for returning the vessels to their stations, and this presented a real problem. Ironically, General Gillmore was probably the most upset about the situation. On July 22 he wrote to Dahlgren and expressed his concern about the concentration of vessels at Charleston. It was not the effect on the blockade that concerned him, but rather the loss of protective naval support for his troops scattered along the coast, especially at Port Royal.

The army's actual operations called for the construction of a series of parallels. They served two purposes. First, each parallel brought the Union line closer to Fort Wagner; when they were close enough the fort would ultimately become untenable. Each parallel was also designed to hold new artillery batteries, some of which were
aimed at Fort Wagner, while others were for breaching Fort Sumter's gorge wall.31

A pattern quickly developed. Working under the cover of darkness, the Union army slowly but steadily pushed its trenches forward. In turn, the navy provided around the clock support, suppressing Confederate artillery and sniper fire from Fort Wagner and helping to prevent a counter-attack. The most difficult and dangerous part of the operation was establishing the artillery batteries in the completed parallels. The first of these operations came in the early morning hours of July 24. Normally, Dahlgren alternated the ironclads in the daily firing against the Confederate positions in order to allow some of the members of the squadron to rest, but transporting the artillery across the open beach required that the Confederate guns be totally silenced. That morning all of the Dahlgren's ironclads were close inshore firing away, while the wooden gunboats participated in the bombardment from long range. For nearly five hours, Dahlgren noted in his Journal, his squadron "[pl]ounded away [at Fort Wagner,"] scattering the sand, and silencing "the feeble reply it made."32

Completion of the second parallel brought the Union Army's entrenchments to within 870 yards of Fort Wagner and placed its long-range batteries "at a mean distance of 3,525 yards from Fort Sumter." This was just the beginning step in the Army's siege operations. The work of pushing the
lines forward continued, as did the pattern of nearly constant naval support.  

The siege tactics had enormous ramifications for Dahlgren and his squadron. The constant work quickly showed its effect, especially on the monitors. Dahlgren informed the Navy Department that while none of his monitors were so seriously damaged that they could not be repaired in a few weeks each at most, because of the constant need for their use he could not send them to Port Royal to have them repaired. He asked that the Navy Department exchange two undamaged monitors for two of his damaged vessels; in fact, Dahlgren suggested, why not send a third monitor as well? 

The officers and crews of the monitors showed the effects of the operations even more than the vessels did. The working conditions inside the poorly ventilated vessels were barely tolerable in the best of conditions, but in Charleston's summer heat, they became nearly unbearable. Temperatures inside the ironclad vessels soared, reaching as high as 140 degrees. Moreover, because the monitors were now kept inside the Charleston bar day and night, it was necessary to be prepared for a sudden attack at all times. This precluded the usual practice of allowing the crews to sleep on deck at night, which previously had at least provided some relief; and because the vessels were almost constantly engaged during the day, the awnings that each monitor was supplied with to provide shade, remained in
storage. By late July, the officers and seamen of the ironclads were rapidly breaking down under the strain. "[T]here is," Dahlgren informed the secretary of the navy, "a diminution of officers from sickness and of men from expiration of terms and sickness, so that on the whole, without being discouraged or feeling unequal to the task, I have my hands full." The need for officers was especially acute. Two of the monitors did not have commanders, and a third was without an executive officer. In an effort to try and provide relief for the men on the monitors, Dahlgren requested that the Navy Department provide his squadron with an old, but large sailing vessel, which he proposed to use more or less like a hotel for the crews. In further recognition of the extreme conditions, Dahlgren argued that the men should receive bonus pay. Additionally, and in an ironic twist considering Dahlgren's participation in the navy's first grog-less ship, Dahlgren requested that the monitors be exempted from the navy's recently passed regulation ending the daily alcohol ration for seamen.35

Dahlgren showed the impact of the constant exertion in the hot Charleston weather as well. Never a hardy or robust man—about six feet tall he weighed about 130 pounds—in early August Dahlgren became so weak it was difficult for him to leave his bed. His daily journal during this period contains a litany of complaints of his ill-health, which he was convinced was due entirely to Charleston's weather.
Undoubtedly contributing to his physical condition was the fact that Dahlgren apparently suffered from a chronic case of seasickness. While he never admitted this personally, according to George F. Emmons, who was Dahlgren's Fleet Captain, "The Admiral was somewhat affected by motion of a vessel in a seaway....A sailor never likes to acknowledge this, nevertheless, a great many suffer more or less all their lives." To try and combat his condition, every night Dahlgren anchored his flagship in a protected anchorage. He also found relief in another form. "Improved by frequent but small drafts of ale on ice," Dahlgren recorded in his journal, "and of a teaspoonful of Brandy on Ice with a sprig of Mint." Thus when the Navy Department rejected his request to provide the monitor crews with a whiskey ration, he not surprisingly reacted very angrily. "Mem.[orandum] from Bur.[eau] of Med.[icine] against Whiskey to the crews....Strange that persons who cannot know will judge of people who must know. Wish the people at Wash.[ington] would try a day's labor in a Monitor." Ironically, Dahlgren himself recognized the Bureau of Medicine's reason for denying the request, namely that the "issue of whiskey ... proves a temporary comfort;" because after extolling the virtues of ale and brandy on his own health, he noted, "Nothing but will has kept me up--my head screams and I could hardly walk five minutes."36
Of course, the army’s operations were not affected by Dahlgren’s physical condition. On August 9, the “third parallel” was opened, just 540 yards from Fort Wagner. Work on the dozen artillery batteries aimed at Wagner and Sumter rapidly neared completion as well. Gillmore informed Dahlgren that all should be ready for the bombardment to begin on August 14. In keeping with the past history of the entire campaign, the bombardment of Fort Sumter did not begin when planned because shortly before the scheduled attack the army’s ordnance officer discovered that the powder supply for heavy guns was of “inferior and irregular quality.” Fortunately, a loan of gunpowder from the navy and the opportune arrival of a shipment of powder from the north made the delay a short one.37

The army was eventually ready by August 17. Even in ill-health, Dahlgren planned on participating in the first direct attack of Fort Sumter since DuPont’s failure of April 7. At 5:30 a.m., he raised his flag on the monitor Weehawken, which then led a flotilla of seven Union ironclads into battle. Since the first order of business was to silence Fort Wagner in order to allow all of the army’s land batteries to engage Fort Sumter, Dahlgren anchored about 1,000 yards “abreast of Wagner” and opened fire, and the other ironclads quickly followed the flagship’s lead. At first, Dahlgren noted in his staff journal, the Confederate gunners in Fort Wagner responded
"very rapidly[,] ... using every conceivable form of projectile imaginable, from a Minie’ ball to a solid X-inch shot." But soon, he noted with obvious satisfaction, the combined firepower of the ironclad fleet became so intense that "Fort Wagner was covered by a cloud of dust and smoke," and the fort grew silent.38

With Fort Wagner silenced, Dahlgren turned his attention to Fort Sumter. In an incredibly ironic twist, Dahlgren abandoned his own ordnance technology when he transferred his flag to the monitor Passaic because it was armed with a rifled Parrott gun instead of the usual XI-inch Dahlgren gun that most of the monitors carried. He knew, as did most other commanders, that the longer range Parrott gun enabled the Passaic to engage Fort Sumter from a distance where the enemy’s fire would pose less risk. Dahlgren anchored the Passaic, along with the Patapsco which was also armed with a rifled Parrott gun, some 2,000 yards from Sumter and opened fire. For nearly two hours the two monitors maintained a steady long range barrage and Dahlgren noted that from the very first shot not a single one missed the target.39

The question of the safety of the monitors was shown to be more than just an idle abstraction that day. When Dahlgren ordered the Passaic and Patapsco to withdraw to allow the crews to get some rest, he learned that during the attack on Fort Wagner earlier that morning, one of his
monitor commanders, Captain George W. Rodgers who commanded the *Catskill*, was killed when a shot struck the top of the pilot house. The shot broke the roof’s iron plates, driving parts of them into the pilot house, where they struck and killed Rodgers, along with another of his officers.40

Dahlgren reported the death of Rodgers as the "one sad exception" in what had otherwise been a great beginning in the Union’s effort to destroy Fort Sumter. As both he and Gillmore noted in communications to each other, the day’s bombardment had "greatly damaged" the Confederate fort. But both officers also thought that the key to ultimate success was to maintain the attack until Sumter was completely destroyed; and in the evening of August 17, Dahlgren and Gillmore agreed to "the same programme for to-morrow that we had to-day."41

In the days following, the bombardment continued and Fort Sumter’s brick walls quickly began to disintegrate under the constant fire. Dahlgren closely monitored the destruction. Each day he boarded one of the ironclads and "steamed up to take a look at Sumter." On August 19, the third day of the bombardment, Dahlgren noted that Sumter’s gorge wall was "pretty well used up, but not breached." By the following day, however, Dahlgren stated that Sumter’s outer brick work on the gorge wall was "beaten in at the top and below it so as to make visible the arches within."

After five days of constant bombardment, Dahlgren reported:
"Sumter is now completely dilapidated at the Gorge & many shells have gone through the farther walls." General Beauregard reported pessimistically to Richmond: "West and northwest scarp walls of Sumter badly shattered by reverse fire of enemy's 200-pounder Parrott guns and iron-clad fleet....Batteries are disabled. Gorge wall damaged....Fall of Sumter now only a question of time."42

Both Dahlgren and Gillmore wanted to make sure that Beauregard's prediction came true, and the sooner the better. In the evening of August 21, Gillmore sent the following letter to Beauregard:

I have the honor to demand of you the immediate evacuation of Morris Island and Fort Sumter....The present condition of Fort Sumter and the rapid and progressive destruction which it is undergoing from my batteries, seem to render its complete demolition within a few hours a matter of certainty.... Should you refuse compliance with this demand, or should I receive no reply thereto within four hours ... I shall open fire on the city of Charleston....

When no answer was received, the one-gun battery which Gillmore's engineers had erected in the marshlands to the west of Morris Island, opened fire. Some illustration of the magnitude of the North's hatred toward Charleston was illustrated by the bombardment on Charleston itself. Not only did the "Swamp Angel," the name which the Union gunners gave to the gun, open fire at 1:30 in the morning, it also utilized incendiary projectiles known as "Greek Fire" rather...
than conventional projectiles. Fortunately for the citizens of Charleston, the "Swamp Angel" burst after firing only thirty-six times and the army did not attempt to place another gun in the marshlands.43

The same day that Gillmore demanded Sumter's surrender, Dahlgren also tried his hand at causing the fall of the Confederate fort. Dahlgren called his ironclad commanders together and explained his intention to attack Sumter that night, the advantage being that under the cover of darkness the vessels would make difficult targets for the enemy's gunners. But Dahlgren found that his subordinates had "[n]o particular zeal" for a night attack. Captain Stephen Rowan who commanded the difficult to maneuver New Ironsides voiced the loudest protest against the operation. This was understandable. His vessel had a much greater draft than the monitors and would be very susceptible to grounding in the shallow waters near Sumter. Despite the obvious lack of confidence, Dahlgren ordered the attack anyway. From the first, everything went wrong. When Dahlgren went to board the Weehawken, he found the monitor still at anchor. Even worse, not a single one of the other ironclads "was to be seen." After losing half an hour gathering his ironclad fleet together, Dahlgren ordered the operation to begin. As badly as the operation had started, things became even worse, and Dahlgren described it in his private journal.
Just as I was abreast of [Battery] Gregg, all well, comes the Scout and says the Passaic is aground. So here is a nice mess--took instant measures,--but so much time had been lost by the time she was off and I knew it, that there was too little of the night left. So I had to abandon the attempt. Very vexatious. Too little interest felt in the proceedings, that is the trouble.44

The "catastrophe," as he described the poorly executed night attack in his private journal, frustrated Dahlgren. The next day he wrote to Secretary Welles and complained that while "the shore batteries [had] ... ravaged Sumter," he lacked the means necessary to complete the job. Not only did he not have enough ironclads, according to Dahlgren, those that he did have were worn out. This was due to the lengthy joint operations on Morris Island. "[T]he calls from shore," he complained, "tax me heavily, for the trenches can not be advanced nor even the guns [in the shore batteries be] kept in play, unless the ironclads keep down Wagner, and yet in doing so the power of the ironclads is abated proportionately. Please," Dahlgren pleaded, "send me ironclads."45

Dahlgren expressed his concerns to Gillmore as well. After receiving what had become a routine request for the navy to silence Fort Wagner, Dahlgren responded sharply, "I will be glad to do [so]. It should be understood, however, that this course is likely to expend the force of the ironclads so as to render other active operations on my part impossible." Dahlgren pointed out that the army's constant
requests for the protective fire of the monitors were wearing his squadron out, both vessels and crews. Because of this, he warned the General, even "if Sumter and Wagner are reduced" the navy might not be able to take advantage of the situation.46

Dahlgren’s concerns were indeed legitimate. While the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron had seven monitors, one was more or less permanently stationed outside Savannah to prevent the Confederate ironclad in that port from venturing forth. Another was then at Port Royal repairing, and the Superintendent of Monitor Repairs estimated that at least twenty-four days were required to complete them. Of the remaining five monitors, three had use of only one guns, which Dahlgren noted, left just two "entirely complete." The irony of this, Dahlgren pointed out to Gillmore, was that while he was now expected to what DuPont had failed to do back in April, his squadron was so weakened by the almost two month long operation that it did not even compare with the force that Admiral DuPont had then. Despite the problems with the monitors, Dahlgren had little alternative but to provide Gillmore and his troops the protection that the general requested. Dahlgren thus ordered three of his ironclads to silence Fort Wagner. And while Dahlgren surely would have been comforted if he had been privy to the Confederate report stating that Wagner’s gunners once again had to seek refuge in the fort’s bombproof to escape the
"destructive" enfilading fire of the Union warships, he was even more concerned about the impact that the activity would have on his planned operations against Sumter set for that night.47

Despite having had half of his ironclads firing at Fort Wagner for most of the afternoon, Dahlgren decided to go ahead with a second consecutive night attack. And while this one went better, it was hardly a stellar success. Boarding the Weehawken at 11 p.m., Dahlgren did not fire the first shot until 3 a.m. The long delay had two causes. As always, the monitors were slow and difficult to maneuver into position. Navigation was further complicated this night by a heavy fog, which at times completely obscured Fort Sumter from view and forced the ironclad gunners to aim "by direction of stars." When Dahlgren finally ordered the five monitors to withdraw at 7 a.m., they had managed to fire a paltry seventy-one rounds, which Dahlgren described in a wonderful understatement, "was less than should have been."48

After two consecutive days and nights of around the clock operations, Dahlgren and his ironclad crews were completely exhausted. Dahlgren thus considered it more than "acceptable" when Sunday, August 23, proved "a quiet day." The main reason for the quietness was that the Union army's bombardment was winding down. After seven days of constant day and night bombardment, the army's thirteen long-range
guns aimed at Fort Sumter had fired off more than 5,000 rounds weighing more than half a million pounds. Adding to this total were about one thousand additional rounds expended by the navy's own four-gun battery on Morris Island, as well as the contributions from the navy's ironclads and gunboats. Gillmore's chief of artillery reported that due to the unparalleled bombardment, Sumter's gorge wall was "almost a complete mass of ruins." Moreover, from his long distance inspections of the fort, he believed that only one gun was still serviceable. "[T]he destruction of the fort," he continued, "is so far complete that it is today of no avail in the defense of the harbor of Charleston harbor. By a longer fire, it can be made more completely a ruin and a mass of broken masonry, but could scarcely be more powerless for the defense of the harbor." He concluded that it made no sense to continue the shelling.49

Sumter's destruction began a new phase for the Union operations. As had been discussed months earlier in Washington it was now up to the navy to take the lead, which Dahlgren seemed intent on doing. The same day that the Union bombardment of Sumter ended, Dahlgren wrote to Secretary of the Navy Welles, "I propose passing Sumter into the harbor." While Dahlgren's statement made it appear that getting past Fort Sumter was a relatively simple task, he realized that this was not the case. His biggest concern was the line of obstructions that the Confederates had
erected in the ship channel between Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie. The obstructions, Dahlgren added as a caveat in his report to Welles, might be "of such a nature as to prevent" his ironclads from reaching Charleston's inner harbor.50

The obstructions were an obvious source of anxiety for Dahlgren. He was thus not very upset when severe weather on August 24th and 25th forced him to cancel any attempt at running past Fort Sumter. The delay gave him time to develop a plan for dealing with the obstructions, which he detailed to his officers on August 26. The nighttime operation called for the monitors and New Ironsides to head toward Fort Sumter and open fire. This time, however, their bombardment would only serve as a diversion. While the ironclads were occupying the attention of the Confederate gunners, a small steam tug would tow a detachment of small boats up to the line of obstructions. Once there, the men in the boats, all of whom were "volunteers for a special service", were to use "tackles, straps, fishhooks, ... saws, augers, cold chisels, hammers" and a host of other devices to try to make an opening in the obstructions large enough to allow the monitors "to move up to Rebellion Road."51

Dahlgren recognized that he could not plan for every eventuality. "The general idea alone can be sketched," he noted in his orders; "the rest must be left to the coolness and judgement of commanding officers to meet with unexpected
events." What he did not write, but perhaps should have, was that some eventualities could not be overcome even with "coolness and judgement." That was demonstrated that evening when the plan was put into operation. Starting out at about 9 p.m., which was an hour later than Dahlgren had stipulated, the monitors and other vessels were opposed by extremely strong currents, greatly slowing their progress. Then "[t]he weather which had been threatening," Dahlgren reported in his account of the affair, "became very bad, blowing and raining violently." In the dark and rain everything became a mass of confusion. The officer in charge of cutting the obstructions reported that while he had gotten near the obstacles in the water, the current near Sumter was "like a sluice," preventing him from getting any closer. This settled matters. At about 2:30 a.m., Dahlgren ordered his ships back. He wrote despondently in his journal, "raining incessantly, and as dismal a night as one would wish to see."52

This first aborted attempt at getting by the obstructions was also the last one that Dahlgren's forces made. The following night Dahlgren cancelled the proposed operation when a mixup in the deployment of his squadron's vessels led to the one steam tug that was suited for towing the small boats up to the obstructions being sent outside the Charleston bar just prior to the scheduled operation. "If I attend not to every detail," Dahlgren recorded in
disgust in his Journal, "thus things go." The forecast for bad weather the next day caused another cancellation. Then on August 29, it was reported to Dahlgren "that Sumter has fired several shots." That settled matters as far as Dahlgren was concerned, and he bluntly told General Gillmore: "My movement is postponed."53

Dahlgren's decision led to an acrimonious exchange with Gillmore. As soon as the general learned of the reason for Dahlgren cancelling his operations, he telegraphed Dahlgren that the army's lookouts, who were "specially directed" to watch for ordnance fire from Sumter, were "positive" that "Sumter has not fired a shot to-day." Dahlgren immediately signalled back to Gillmore that while the army's lookouts might "be correct," he had received reports to the contrary. According to Dahlgren, the navy's "operations were based on the supposition that Sumter was silenced," and clearly in his mind this meant totally and completely silenced. Since Sumter may have fired a shot, this meant that the navy's operations were cancelled.54

Even if Dahlgren was correct that several shots had been fired from Fort Sumter, his decision to cancel the operations aimed at breaking the Confederate obstructions seems unwarranted. Dahlgren readily admitted in his reports to Washington that Sumter no longer posed a serious offensive threat. On the other hand, the report of ordnance fire from the fort may have provided Dahlgren a convenient
excuse not to deal with the obstructions personally. Throughout the Civil War, Union navy officers exhibited an absolute dread of underwater obstructions because of the recent introduction of explosive devices, then called torpedoes, now called mines. Time after time Union naval operations were stymied by torpedoes, real and imagined; and Farragut's "Damn the torpedoes! ... go ahead!" speech at Mobile Bay in August 1864, was certainly one of the few exceptional examples of aggressive action by the Union navy in the face of torpedoes. While certainly not lacking in personal bravery, as he exhibited constantly by leading the monitors into battle time after time, Dahlgren never exhibited any aggressiveness with the obstructions. In fact, a more scientific approach was his response to the torpedoes, which was not at all surprising considering his scientific background. For example, the first time that any of his vessels were confronted by torpedoes, Dahlgren requested that the navy construct submarines with explosive devices attached to their bows. "With such a contrivance," Dahlgren wrote, "a quantity of powder could be brought to bear upon obstructions which would dislocate any nice arrangements." Furthermore, the day prior to cancelling the operations against the obstructions, Dahlgren informed Secretary Welles that he had been approached by someone who proposed removing the obstructions, if the navy provided a
contract to do so. "I am willing," Dahlgren told Welles, "to recommend such an agreement."55

It was also possible that Dahlgren's physical condition may have been influencing him to make less than a whole hearted attempt to breach the obstructions. His health deteriorated dramatically in late August. On August 26, the day of the first attempt against the obstructions, Dahlgren wrote in his journal, "I was so feeble that I could hardly rise from the chair and walk across the room." Two days later he made an extremely dark appraisal of his condition. "[My] debility increases so that to-day it is an exertion to sit in a chair. I feel like lying down. My head is light. I do not see well. How strange, no pain, but so feeble that it seems like gliding away to death. How easy it seems. Why not[?]" he asked in conclusion, "to one whose race is run?" Whatever explained his decision, Dahlgren was not going to order another attack against the obstructions. Instead he asked Gillmore to resume the army's bombardment of Fort Sumter from Morris Island.56

Dahlgren did not explicitly state what had to happen before he would renew the navy's efforts to get past Fort Sumter into Charleston's inner harbor. Gillmore probably believed that once it was demonstrated that Fort Sumter did not have any guns mounted, the navy would resume their operations against the obstructions. Therefore, even though he disagreed with Dahlgren, Gillmore again ordered his
batteries to open up against Fort Sumter in order to
dismount any guns that still remained. The army's
bombardment began on the morning of August 30, but bad
weather prevented the navy from participating until the
evening of September 1. Thus uncertainty remained about
whether or not the fort had been completely silenced. After
the navy finally joined the attack, all that Gillmore wanted
to know was if the monitors had been fired upon from Sumter.
When he was told that they had not been, he undoubtedly
assumed that Dahlgren would once again begin to operate
against the obstructions.57

Dahlgren had no intention of doing this, however. He
now reported to Secretary of the Navy Welles that even
Though Fort Sumter was "almost entirely disabled,"
Charleston could not be captured until Fort Sumter itself
was occupied by Union forces. The navy could not move
against the fort because of the obstructions. The Army was
not able to occupy the fort because they had not yet
captured Fort Wagner. But all was not lost. According to
Dahlgren, the army was close to capturing Fort Wagner and
thus he decided to assist Gillmore in a final push to do
so.58

The need to occupy Fort Sumter was a major change in
the Union's military plans. Until this point, it had been
thought that it would only be necessary to silence the
Confederate fort. Dahlgren, however, had clearly come to
believe that his vessels could not get past the obstructions which blocked the ship channel between Fort Sumter and Fort Moultrie. But if Fort Sumter were occupied by Union forces—which Dahlgren believed would be the natural consequence of capturing Fort Wagner—it would not be possible for the Confederates to maintain the line of obstructions that they had established. Then, the Union ironclads would be able to steam directly into the inner harbor and capture Charleston itself.

Even when the focus of the Union campaign had shifted after the first bombardment of Fort Sumter ended on August 23, Gillmore and the army had not stopped trying to capture Fort Wagner. Utilizing the same method of advancing its trenches that it had been using since mid-July, by September 3, the army's lines were no more than seventy yards from the front of Wagner itself. Still, the capture of the fort was not a foregone conclusion. To protect Wagner, its defenders had buried hundreds of explosive land mines directly in front of the fort, which threatened to disrupt a frontal ground assault. But with all of the navy's ironclads working in conjunction with the army's heavy artillery, it was hoped that the troops in Wagner could be driven out.59

From September 3 onward, the Union artillery, army and navy, focused primarily on Fort Wagner. Hour after hour, day after day, shot and shell rained down on the Confederate fort. Unlike previous bombardments which had little impact
on either the fort or its defenders, now the Union guns worked with deadly accuracy. On September 5th alone, of the 900 soldiers that defended Wagner, 100 were listed as casualties because of the day's bombardment. The fate of Fort Wagner was now clear; and on the morning of September 6, General Beauregard ordered the evacuation of Wagner, to take place that night.60

The Confederate's evacuation surprised the Union forces. In fact, Gillmore had planned to assault Fort Wagner the very next morning, September 7. Obviously this was no longer necessary; instead, Gillmore reported euphorically to Dahlgren, "[t]he whole of Morris Island is ours."61

The Union's campaign had been predicated on the assumption that once Morris Island fell, Fort Sumter would also fall. Therefore, as soon as he received Gillmore's message, Dahlgren demanded that General Beauregard surrender Fort Sumter, telling him that the fort was "no longer defensible." If the fort was not surrendered, he warned, "I shall move at once on it." Beauregard had a decidedly different opinion about the importance of Morris Island to Fort Sumter's defense. Refusing to surrender Sumter, Beauregard tersely told Dahlgren that he "must take it and hold it if he can." Dahlgren immediately began to prepare to attack Sumter. Unfortunately, as events would quickly demonstrate, the attack which followed would be one of the
most ill-conceived, and poorly executed operations to occur during the entire Civil War.62

Dahlgren thought that it would be easy to take Sumter. When Commander T. H. Stevens protested his last minute assignment to lead the attack, Dahlgren admonished him, "'There is nothing but a corporal's guard in the fort, and all we have to do is to go and take possession [of it].'" Dahlgren's statement was not just false bravado intended to inspire a hesitant officer. He really believed what he said. This was reflected in his plan of attack, which consisted of little more than landing some four hundred marines and seamen in small boats right at the base of Fort Sumter. Armed only with muskets, bayonets, and side arms, the troops would then simply storm what Dahlgren believed was a defenseless fort, and Sumter would be in Union hands.63

Dahlgren planned the attack for the night of September 8, and he spent most of that day "arranging" the details. The biggest problem, at least so it seemed to Dahlgren at the time, was securing enough boats to transport his men to Sumter. That morning Dahlgren asked Gillmore to return some of the navy boats and crews that had been assisting various army operations, telling the General, "I am organizing an expedition for to-night."64

Dahlgren's request initiated a remarkable exchange between the two Union commanders. Not knowing about
Dahlgren's plans, Gillmore had also arranged to attack Sumter that night. The General thus wrote back to Dahlgren, "There should be but one commander in an operation of this kind, to insure success and [to] prevent mistakes. I have designated two small regiments. Will your party join with them," Gillmore asked, "[with] the whole to be under the command of the senior officer, or will the parties confer together and act in concert? The former method," Gillmore closed, "is much the best. What do you say?"

For many Northerners, Fort Sumter was the most visible symbol of the detested Confederacy. Undoubtedly, whoever captured it would be immediately blanketed with accolades. Dahlgren's lifelong quest for personal glory knew no bounds. Having spent all of his professional life trying to cover himself with fame, Dahlgren was not going to share the credit for capturing Fort Sumter. He told Gillmore that he had no intention of making the attack on Sumter a joint navy-army operation. Furthermore, to insure that it was the navy, and thus himself, that received the credit for the operation, Dahlgren told Gillmore that he was prepared to assign as high a ranking officer as he had to in order to insure that he out-ranked any army officer that Gillmore placed in charge.

Gillmore expressed incredulity at Dahlgren's response. He reminded Dahlgren that the most important point of the attack was capturing the fort, not who planted "our flag
over it." Dahlgren was firmly committed to having the navy alone capture Fort Sumter, however. He demanded to know when Gillmore planned to attack. Not receiving an answer quickly enough, Dahlgren telegrammed testily to Gillmore, "I am waiting."67

Dahlgren apparently became so worried Gillmore and the army would beat him to the punch that he decided to attack without ever learning Gillmore's intentions. His force found itself unprepared and untrained for the task at hand. Landing at the base of Sumter's walls, they lacked equipment to scale the walls. Even worse, they found themselves facing a well-armed and alerted enemy. As soon as the Union attack was detected, the troops inside Sumter launched signal flares and the Confederate batteries surrounding the fort began to fire at the defenseless boats. Meanwhile, the troops in Sumter who had been anticipating the attack threw hand grenades down at the disorganized Union sailors. The attack quickly deteriorated into bedlam, and the few officers who actually landed tried to call a hasty retreat. But for many, it was already too late. Of the 400 men that made up the original force, less than 300 returned.68

Believing that the attack could not fail, Dahlgren apparently planned to go into Sumter himself. He was close at hand to witness the attack. His boat was about one-quarter of a mile away when he heard "the fire of musketry from Sumter." Then, Dahlgren later recorded in his
Journal, "Moultrie opens--the affair of short duration and my impression ... not favorable. Moultrie," he continued, "fired like a devil. The shells breaking around me and screaming in chorus." Dahlgren did not wait around "to see how the matter ended;" instead he gave the order to return to his flagship. But Dahlgren's boat got caught in the strong currents of the harbor. Lacking a rudder, it proved difficult to maneuver the small craft and at one point the boat came very near being swept over the breakers at the bar and into the open ocean. But finally, after hours of hard pulling at the oars, Dahlgren's boat reached one of the blockading vessels anchored just inside the Charleston bar.69

The boat attack was a disaster and Dahlgren knew there was no good way to explain it. The next day he reported simply to Welles, "I regret to say that an attempt to assault Sumter last night was unsuccessful. Our column was repulsed with loss."70
Notes to Chapter VI

1Dahlgren, May 3, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 9, JADSU. Fox would later boast about his role in the change of plans and the selection of the army officer to lead the operations, see, Fox to Porter, July 16, 1863, Fox Correspondence, II, pp. 165-85.

2Hunter to Stanton, June 23, 1862, OR, I, 14, pp. 42-43; as seemingly with everything that Hunter was involved in, the "disastrous repulse" at Secessionville was the source of controversy. Hunter placed General H. W. Benham under arrest for disobeying orders, which led to a long and acrimonious investigation. To follow this, see, Ibid., pp. 41-110; 979-1015.

3W. A. Swanberg, First Blood: The Story of Fort Sumter (New York, 1957), p. 179; E. Milby Burton, Siege of Charleston (Columbia, SC, 1970), pp. 152-53; Quincy A. Gillmore, "Report of Operations at Charleston," 103 page report in, National Archives, Washington D. C., Record Group 94, Adjutant General's Office. This report is the manuscript version of Gillmore's report which can also be found with minor modifications in, Q. A. Gillmore, Engineer and Artillery Operations Against the Defenses of Charleston Harbor in 1863 (New York, 1865); and in, OR, I, 28, pt. 1, pp. 2-40. All further references to this report will be from the version printed in OR.

4Gillmore to G. W. Cullum, May 23, 1863, OR, I, 14, p. 459; Hunter to Lincoln, April 25, 1863, Ibid., p. 447; G. W. Cullum, Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy, 3 vols. (Boston, 1891), II, pp. 367-70; for official reports of Gillmore's operations against Fort Pulaski, see, OR, I, 14, pp. 320-33; Quincy A. Gillmore, Official Report to the United States Engineer department of the siege and reduction of Fort Pulaski, Georgia, February, March, and April, 1862 (New York, 1862); Special Orders, No. 249, June 3, 1863, Headquarters of the Army, OR, I, 14, p. 454.

6 Dahlgren, July 4, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, July 6, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 311.

7 Dahlgren, July 5, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.

8 Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren, July 5, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, July 6, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 311; Dahlgren to Welles, July 6, 1863, Ibid., p. 312; Dahlgren to Gillmore, July 6, 1863, Ibid., p. 312; for the flurry of orders that Dahlgren sent once he and Gillmore agreed to operations, see, Ibid., pp. 313-15.

9 Dahlgren, July 7-8, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU.

10 Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren, July 8-9, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to George Rodgers, July 6, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 313; Dahlgren’s concern about secrecy was indeed merited. General Beauregard wrote on July 8 that he was still not sure if the Union forces intended an attack. The arrival of the Union vessels, however, confirmed it for Beauregard. See, Beauregard to Adjutant-General Cooper, July 8, 1863, OR, I, 28, pt. 2, p. 182; Beauregard to Governor M. L. Bonham, July 9, 1863, Ibid., p. 183.

11 Dahlgren, July 10, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.

12 Dahlgren quote in, Ibid.; Dahlgren to Welles, July 12, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 319-21; Gillmore to Halleck, July 12, 1863, OR, I, 28, pt. 1, p. 12.

13 Dahlgren, July 10, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to Welles, July 12, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 319-21.


15 Dahlgren, July 10, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, July 10, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 319-21; for the damages sustained by the four monitors, see, Ibid., pp. 322-25; when Welles received Dahlgren’s report praising the endurance of the monitors, he wrote with a sense of relief, "his [Dahlgren’s] dispatch reads much more satisfactorily than the last ones of Du Pont." Welles, Welles Diary, I, p. 372.


20 Ibid.


23 Ibid.


26 Fox to Porter, July 16, 1863, Fox Correspondence, II, pp. 185-86.

27 Welles, Welles Diary, I, pp. 382-83.


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32Brooks to Gillmore, September 27, 1863, Ibid., p. 266; Gillmore, "Engineer and Artillery Operations Against Charleston," Ibid., pp. 16-26; Dahlgren, July 24, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.


35Dahlgren to Welles, July 20, 1863, Ibid., p. 376; Dahlgren quote in, Dahlgren to Welles, July 24, 1863, Ibid., pp. 389-90; Welles to Dahlgren, August 3, 1863, Ibid., pp. 414-15; Welles to Dahlgren, August 5, 1863, Ibid., p. 418; W. Whelan, Chief of Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, August 4, 1863, Ibid., pp. 418-19; Dahlgren to Welles, August 9, 1863, Ibid., pp. 431-32; Dahlgren to the Crews of the Monitors, August 16, 1863, Ibid., p. 444.

36Dahlgren, August 9-15, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Emmons wrote to Madeleine Dahlgren who was then writing her husband’s memoirs and was trying to refute the allegations that he was ill most of the time while in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, see, Emmons to M. V. Dahlgren, August 4, 1870, JADLC; Welles to Dahlgren, August 5, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 418; W. Whelan, Chief of Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, August 4, 1863, Ibid., pp. 418-19.


38Dahlgren, "Extract from staff journal," August 17, 1863, contained in, ORN, 14, pp. 454-55; Dahlgren, August 17, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Confederate reports confirmed the importance of the Navy’s efforts in silencing Fort Wagner. At one point the Union ironclads approached so close that the Confederate gunners could not depress their
guns enough to fire at the vessels, see, "Report of Colonel Keitt, C.S. Army, commanding Battery Wagner," August 17, 1863, in, ORN, 14, pp. 484-86.

39 Dahlgren, "Extract from staff journal," August 17, 1863, contained in, Ibid., pp. 454-55; Dahlgren, August 17, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.

40 Dahlgren, "Extract from staff journal," August 17, 1863, contained in, ORN, 14, pp. 454-55; Carpenter to Dahlgren, August 17, 1863, Ibid., p. 458; the Catskill was anchored a little less than 1,000 yards from the enemy batteries when Rodgers was killed, see, Dahlgren to Welles, August 18, 1863, Ibid., pp. 452-54.

41 Ibid.; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 17, 1863, 1:40 p.m., OR, 1, 28, pt. 2, p. 44; Gillmore to Dahlgren, August 17, 2:50 p.m., Ibid.; Gillmore to Dahlgren, August 17, 1863, 10:50 p.m., Ibid., p. 45.

42 Dahlgren, August 19-21, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Beauregard to Adjutant and Inspector General Cooper, August 19, 1863, OR, 1, 28, pt. 2, p. 294.

43 Gillmore to Beauregard, August 21, 1863, Ibid., p. 57; Beauregard considered Gillmore’s decision to bombard Charleston "atrocious and unworthy of any soldier," and strongly protested the act, see, Beauregard to Gillmore, August 22, 1863, Ibid., pp. 58-59.

44 Dahlgren, August 21, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 22, 1863, OR, 1, 14, pp. 466-67; Dahlgren to Welles, August 22, 1863, Ibid., p. 470.

45 Dahlgren to Welles, August 22, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 470.

46 Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 22, 1863, Ibid., pp. 466-67.

47 Ibid.; Dahlgren to Welles, August 22, 1863, Ibid., p. 470; Reynolds to Dahlgren, August 22, 1863, Ibid., p. 470; Danby and Faron to Reynolds, August 22, 1863, Ibid., p. 471; Hagwood to Nance, August 22 1863, Ibid., pp. 489-90.

48 Dahlgren, August 22, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, August 23, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 501-02; Downes to Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, Ibid., p. 502; Badger to Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, Ibid., p. 503; Giraud to Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, Ibid.; Colhoun to Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, Ibid., pp. 503-04; Dahlgren to Gillmore,
August 24, 1863, Ibid., pp. 506-07; abstract logs for the vessels involved in the attack are in, Ibid., pp. 507-09.

**Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Turner to Gillmore, August 23, 1863, OR, I, 28, pt. 1, pp. 599-600; "Tabular Statement of firing at Fort Sumter," in, Gillmore, "Engineer and Artillery Operations Against Charleston," Ibid., p. 29; Parker to Dahlgren, August 23, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 471-72; the abstract logs of the individual vessels that participated in the bombardment provide an account of the ammunition expended, see, Ibid., pp. 476-83.**

**Dahlgren to Welles, August 23, 1863, Ibid., pp. 501-02.**

**Dahlgren, August 24-26, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren, August 26, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 517-18; Dahlgren, August 25, 1863, Ibid., pp. 514-15.**

**Dahlgren, August 26, 1863, Ibid., pp. 517-18; Dahlgren, August 26, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 27, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 520.**

**Dahlgren, August 27-29, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren, August 27, 1863, "Memorandum for night of 27th August," ORN, 14, pp. 521-22; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 28, 1863, Ibid., p. 523; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 29, 1863, Ibid., p. 524.**

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**For an account of the Confederacy's use of submarines and mine warfare, as well as Union responses, see, Milton F. Perry, Infernal Machine: The Story of Confederate Submarines and Mine Warfare, (Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1965); Farragut quoted in, Fowler, Under Two Flags, p. 241; Dahlgren to Welles, August 11, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 435-36; Dahlgren to Welles, August 24, 1863, Ibid., p. 446; Dahlgren to Welles, August 28, 1863, Ibid., p. 523.**

**Dahlgren, August 26-28, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Gillmore, August 29, 1863, Telegram, 11 p.m., ORN, 14, p. 525.**

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1863, OR, I, 28, pt. 1, pp. 600-02; Gillmore to Halleck, September 1, 1863, Ibid., p. 602; Gillmore to Dahlgren, September 2, 1863, Telegram, 10:00 a.m., ORN, 14, pp. 530-31; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 2, 1863, Telegram, 11:45 a.m., Ibid., p. 531; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 2, 1863, Telegram, 11:50 a.m., Ibid.

58 Dahlgren, September 2, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Welles, September 2, 1863, ORN, 14, pp. 531-32.

59 The details of this stage of operations at Fort Wagner can be followed in, Gillmore, "Engineer and Artillery Operations Against Charleston," OR, I, 28, pt. 1, pp. 24-28; also see, Brooks, "Reports and Journal," Ibid., pp. 264-303; for the Confederate view, see, Beauregard, "Report, Department of the South," Ibid., pp. 55-116; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 3, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 534; Gillmore to Dahlgren, September 3, 1863, Ibid., pp. 534-35; Dahlgren, September 3, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.


61 Dahlgren, September 6-7, 1863, Journal Entries, Vol. 11, JADSU; Gillmore to Dahlgren, September 7, 1863, Telegram, 5:30 a.m., ORN, 14, p. 548.

62 Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 7, 1863, Telegram, 6:20 a.m., Ibid.; Dahlgren's actual demand for surrender is not contained in either ORN or OR. Dahlgren explained his request in, Dahlgren to Welles, September 7, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 549; for Beauregard's reply, see, Johnson to Dahlgren, September 7, 1863, Ibid., p. 548; see also, Beauregard to Cooper, September 7, 1863, Ibid., p. 572.

63 Dahlgren quoted in, T. H. Stevens to Welles, September 28, 1865, Ibid., p. 633; Dahlgren's exact plans have not been found, but it is possible to reconstruct them from the reports of the officers involved in the attack, see, Ibid., pp. 611-36.

64 Dahlgren, September 8, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 8, 1863, Telegram, 11:45 a.m., ORN, 14, p. 607.

65 Gillmore to Dahlgren, September 8, 1863, Telegram, 6:55 p.m., OR, I, 28, pt. 2, p. 88; also in ORN, 14, p. 608.
66 Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 8, 1863, Telegram, 7:10 p.m., OR, I, 28, pt. 2, p. 88; of interest, the full text of this letter, including Dahlgren telling Gillmore that he would assign as high a ranking officer as necessary to assure naval control, is not contained in ORN. see, ORN, 14, p. 608.

67 Gillmore to Dahlgren, September 8, 1863, Ibid., pp. 608-09; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 8, 1863, Telegram, 9:30 p.m., Ibid., p. 609; Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 8, 1863, 10:00 p.m., Ibid., Dahlgren to Gillmore, September 8, 1863, 10:45 p.m., Ibid.

68 The many accounts of the Union fiasco, including casualty figures, are in, Ibid., pp. 611-636; see also, Dahlgren, September 8, 1863, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU.

69 Ibid.; The details of Dahlgren being almost swept out to sea are described in, William H. West to DuPont, September 13, 1863, DuPont Letters, III, n., pp. 237-38.

70 Dahlgren to Welles, September 9, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 610.
Chapter VII

A Bitter End

"It would not be easy to say how I received an order so unjust in its nature....And yet there is no appeal from the pleasure of this poor old imbecile [Welles]."

The capture of Fort Sumter was to be the capstone of Dahlgren's career. While exceedingly proud of both his promotion to rear-admiral and his appointment to command the important South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, neither accomplishment completed his lifelong quest for personal glory and greatness. The only way to achieve his goal was to win a great victory in battle. But rather than providing the climactic conclusion to his long and arduous struggle to be seen as a naval hero, the failed boat attack proved to be the beginning of a rather anti-climactic conclusion to both Dahlgren's Civil War and navy careers.

Immediately following the failure to take Fort Sumter by storm it appeared that Dahlgren would continue an aggressive campaign to capture Charleston. But it quickly became clear that he had no intention of renewing the navy's campaign against either Fort Sumter or Charleston, at least with the forces that he then had under his command. On
September 24, Dahlgren wrote to Fox and asked him if the Navy Department intended for him "to make the final attack with the seven monitors" he presently had in his squadron. A few days later Dahlgren wrote to Welles. "I could offer no assurance," he told the secretary of the navy, "that an attack with seven monitors could yield, with certainty, such a result as the Department might deem desirable. On the other hand," Dahlgren continued, "if a reserve of five monitors could be had, ... there would be every reason to look for success."¹

Dahlgren's boat attack fiasco and subsequent request for reinforcements nearly equal in size to the force that he already had was exactly the type of thing which normally resulted in a commanding officer being removed from his post. When Secretary Welles learned about the failed assault, he noted rather disgustedly in his diary, "it had been a hasty and not very thoroughly matured movement." He further said of Dahlgren, while "intelligent," he was "out of place" and could "better acquit ... [himself] as [an] ordnance officer ... than in active command." But while Welles's private appraisal of both the attack and Dahlgren were quite harsh, his public reaction was very different. He told Dahlgren that the Navy Department had "confidence" in his "judgement, firmness, and discretion," not to mention his "skill and bravery." Welles's official praise of Dahlgren stood in stark contrast to his private assessment.
It was also clear from his official correspondence with Dahlgren that Welles had no intention of removing him from his command. But, why not? The answer was really quite simple. Just as when he was originally appointed to command the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron, Dahlgren was still the officer best suited for serving the Navy Department's interests. Those interests had changed dramatically, however.2

In large part, the Navy Department had sent Dahlgren to Charleston because he promised to use the monitors aggressively. The importance of this promise, besides having the obvious potentiality of destroying and capturing the most hated city in the South, was that it would aid Welles and Fox in their ongoing controversy with Admiral DuPont, who blamed the monitors for his failure to capture Charleston. Elizabeth Blair Lee, who was in close contact with both Welles and Fox, saw firsthand the Navy Department's effort to have Dahlgren succeed as a way of dealing with DuPont. In August 1863, she wrote to her husband Samuel Phillips Lee, who commanded the Union navy's North Atlantic Blockading Squadron:

There is evidently a desire on the part of the [Navy] Dep[ar]t[ment]--to give Dahlgren (who is no favorite--but has the ear & control[,] so says Fox[,] of Congress) no room for any complaint on any score--and then DuPont is on the other side bent upon defeat of our operations at Charleston by way of self justification--so the Depart.[ment] is in a tight place & evidently is oblivious of
all its duties save those at Charleston as
thru'ugh] these two Admirals it is on a sort of
trial before the public--Brother [Postmaster
General Montgomery Blair] made this remark to me
some weeks since--& evidently thought that Fox's
sickness was caused by his intense excitement &
labor over this matter & he evidently feels slaked
upon the issue which DuPont has made with him
personally. He never talks to me five minutes in
the last two months without getting on this DuPont
fight with the Dep[ar]t[ment]--in which it is
evident that both he & Welles have become very
bitter.3

Dahlgren, of course, had not managed to capture
Charleston. But even in defeat, Dahlgren continued to serve
Welles's and Fox's interests; in fact, keeping Dahlgren in
command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron was more
important than ever. That was because DuPont's attack on
the Navy Department began to take shape by the late summer.

Leading the assault on the Navy Department was Henry
Winter Davis. The powerful Radical Republican congressman
from Maryland was not at all interested in the technical
merits of the Union navy's ironclads, but he thought he
could use the issue to attack President Lincoln and the
moderate members of the Cabinet, which included Welles, who
favored a conservative approach to reconstruction. Davis,
like Chase and Stanton, supported a drastic plan requiring
the abolition of slavery before a state could be considered
for readmission into the Union, and an acknowledgement that
the ultimate authority on reconstruction was the Congress,
not the President.4
Fortunately for Welles and Fox, they apparently had very precise information about DuPont’s and Davis’s intentions; in fact, it appears that they may have even known what documents the latter planned to use against them. Welles and Fox defended themselves accordingly, and central to their defense was Admiral Dahlgren.5

Their strategy worked brilliantly. When DuPont and Davis finally unleashed their attack on the monitors in the fall, Welles and Fox were ready with dozens of reports. Among the most important were those written and compiled by Dahlgren. As the commanding officer of essentially the same fleet of ironclads that DuPont had commanded earlier, Dahlgren’s favorable opinions about the monitors and the New Ironsides carried enormous importance. Furthermore, in a debate which the Navy Department successfully framed in technical terms, Dahlgren’s reputation as a technical genius only made his testimony more damning to DuPont’s arguments, and thus much more important to the Navy Department’s defense.6

The ongoing struggle between the Navy Department and DuPont over the qualities of the monitors, which was really a struggle between the moderate Lincoln administration and its Congressional enemies, dragged on for months. It culminated, more or less, in late spring 1864, when the Navy Department published its Report of the Secretary of the Navy in Relation to Armored Vessels. Of course, the
importance of Dahlgren to their case meant Welles and Fox had to live with his decision not to renew the attack on Charleston without the addition of at least five more monitors. Unfortunately, as Welles noted in his response to Dahlgren’s request in the fall 1863, construction of the new monitors was far behind schedule. At best, the Navy Department could send four more monitors to Charleston by early December. The navy’s campaign to take Charleston would have to wait.7

Although no one knew it at the time, what was supposedly a temporary postponement of the navy’s campaign against Charleston eventually became permanent. Various problems continued to plague the navy’s ironclad construction program, pushing the completion of the vessels Dahlgren said he needed well into 1864. But when the new monitors were finally completed, they were not sent to Charleston. By then, Grant had been appointed the army’s general-in-chief and he was able to convince the Lincoln administration to have all of the Union’s forces, with the exception of Porter and Banks in the Red River campaign in Louisiana, work together in a series of coordinated campaigns. The capture of Charleston did not figure into Grant’s overall strategic plans. When the monitors were finally completed, they were sent to the Gulf Squadron. There, Farragut used them to enter Mobile Bay. In sharp contrast to Dahlgren at Charleston, Farragut steamed
straight into Mobile Bay, ignoring the obstructions and explosive torpedoes. Following the closing of Mobile to Confederate blockade runners, the Navy Department turned its attention to Wilmington, North Carolina, the last Confederate port still readily accessible to the outside world.8

As the Navy Department was forced to concentrate its ironclads on more strategically important targets in 1864, Dahlgren and his squadron faced an impasse at Charleston. He was unwilling to attempt to force his way past the obstructions as Farragut had done at Mobile Bay. Thus his squadron of ironclads did little more than continue to seal Charleston off from blockade runners, a task that they did effectively after Dahlgren established an anchorage inside the Charleston bar for the monitors, and bombard Fort Sumter periodically.

When Charleston finally fell into Union hands early in 1865, it had little to do with the navy’s efforts. After reaching Savannah, Georgia, which completed his "March to the Sea," General William Tecumseh Sherman turned his army northward. With no major fortifications on its landward side, Charleston was completely defenseless to an attack from this direction. On February 17, the Confederate army evacuated the city.

Dahlgren was among the first Union navy officers to enter Charleston. The city, he wrote, was "[d]esolate,
desolate," but, this was "well merited." For after all, Charleston "was the hotbed of the Rebellion and for half a century has striven by word and deed to produce Rebellion." Then after initiating the Civil War, "the whirlwind came,—Blood and treasure flowed as if they were water—for four years our efforts were jeered at & taunted," but, now, "at last comes fate--and the wretched lying, boasting crew sneak away from their dear City and will not risk its bricks nor their own hides. Go in ignominy & disgrace." 9

Dahlgren's statement showed that he recognized that in at least one very important way, the Charleston campaign had failed. Ever since Fort Sumter had been fired upon in April 1861, the goal of the North had been to destroy Charleston and to make its inhabitants suffer retribution, because as Dahlgren suggested, as far as the North was concerned it was South Carolina, especially the citizens of Charleston, that had caused the war. 10

Of course, if the navy's campaign had failed, so too had Dahlgren. To secure the command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron he had made bold assurances of success. At one point he even went so far as to tell a navy colleague in Washington that the day he attacked Charleston would either be his "best[,] or the last" of his life. But Dahlgren's promise of either capturing Charleston in a spectacular naval attack or dying in the attempt never materialized. 11
Undoubtedly the highlight of Dahlgren's last months in command of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron was April 14, which he described as "The Day." To commemorate the capture of Charleston a grand celebration was held in the now battered Fort Sumter. Among others, General Robert Anderson was in attendance, and he raised what was reputed to be the very flag that he had lowered when he surrendered the fort exactly four years earlier. The Reverend Henry Ward Beecher addressed the crowd of assembled sailors, soldiers, and dignitaries. Beecher's address, Dahlgren noted, was "moderate." This contrasted sharply with the sermon that Beecher gave when he learned that Sumter had been fired upon in April 1861. Then, he called on the North to make the South suffer physical retribution. But now, sounding more like Lincoln's calls for a moderate plan of reconstruction, the time for conflict was past because, Beecher assured his audience, the people who had caused the war in the first place had "an endless retribution" awaiting them.12

After Charleston's fall, Dahlgren's primary responsibility was overseeing the dismantling of his squadron. The Navy Department instructed Dahlgren to reduce his force to six tugboats and fifteen other steamers. He was ordered to send all of the monitors north. "Economize," was the word of the day, and Dahlgren was told to make sure
that the vessels that remained only utilized steam power "in an emergency." 13

In mid-June, Dahlgren finally received "the important letter," which ordered him "to proceed north." His last few days in Charleston were a hectic combination of carrying out the Navy Department's orders to cut the squadron to bare bone, visiting with his officers to offer his goodbyes, and packing for the voyage home. Leaving Charleston on June 17, Dahlgren noted the views on his outward voyage, "We passed Sumter, then Wagner and all the familiar scenes of the last two years--And a little after 5 [pm] turned out to cross the Bar....so ends a command of two years." 14

Dahlgren began his post-war career with a well-deserved vacation. He took everyone by surprise when on August 2, 1865, he married Madeleine Vinton Goddard. Some of Dahlgren's naval colleagues, accustomed to ascribing base motives to everything that he did, could not help but wonder whether the money and influence that his wife enjoyed as the daughter of a wealthy former United States congressman were not the main reasons for the marriage. It certainly could not be explained by Goddard's looks, noted one navy officer who wrote: "You may recollect the lady as one of the ugliest of her sex[, ] though adorned with many golden charms!" 15

Dahlgren's vacation ended in early November. For a brief time there had been some discussion in the Navy Department of sending him to Europe to conduct a tour of the
ordnance facilities there, but perhaps because of his recent marriage the trip never materialized. Instead, he was assigned to serve on the highly publicized court-martial trial of Commodore Thomas T. Craven. In command of the **Niagara** in 1865, Craven’s vessel was part of what was known as the Flying Squadron, which the Navy Department created to try to capture the Confederacy’s small fleet of commerce raiders. Chasing after their elusive prey largely on the often months-old information provided by American diplomats stationed in ports throughout the world was somewhat like trying to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. But in late March 1865, Craven found the Confederate ram **Stonewall** docked in Ferrol, Spain. There was one major problem as far as Craven was concerned. The **Niagara** and the **Sacramento** sailing with him were both wooden vessels, while the **Stonewall** was an ocean-going ironclad. In Craven’s opinion, the **Stonewall** was “more than a match for three such vessels as the **Niagara**.” When the **Stonewall** left the protection of the neutral waters of the Spanish port, Craven did not attack the Confederate ironclad; and being faster than the two Union vessels the **Stonewall** steamed to points unknown.  

Craven was charged with “Failing to do his utmost to overtake and capture or destroy a vessel which it was his duty to encounter.” The court split three ways, with some members arguing for a conviction, others arguing for an acquittal, and a third party arguing for what Dahlgren
described as a partial acquittal. Dahlgren, along with Farragut, who was the president of the tribunal, spearheaded this latter position. Eventually, after days of discussion, the entire court agreed to this viewpoint. Craven was found "guilty of the charge in a less degree." As for sentencing, the court recommended that Craven "be suspended from duty on leave-pay for two years."¹⁷

Welles was furious with the court’s decision. He argued that in this case the court could not legally convict Craven of a lesser charge and he sent the case back "for a revision of the finding." But the members of the court obviously sympathized with Craven because they simply revised their decision by finding Craven guilty as charged, with the sentence to remain as before, a two year suspension on leave-pay. Learning of the court’s latest actions Welles exploded. "A court martial of high officers in the case of Craven," Welles wrote in his diary, "has made itself ridiculous by an incongruous finding and award which I cannot approve. It is not pleasant to encounter so large a number of high officers of high standing, but I must do my duty if they do not." Ironically, Welles’s only choices were to accept the court’s latest ruling or to set aside the verdict altogether. Arguing that to allow the precedent of court’s decision stand was the greater evil, Welles decided to set aside the conviction "and Commodore Thomas T. Craven is hereby relieved from arrest." Dahlgren was as upset with
Welles as the secretary was with the court. In typical fashion Dahlgren penned a lengthy rebuttal to Welles's decision. But Dahlgren decided not to send it, a wise move, because it probably would have focused Welles's anger on him instead of Farragut, whom the Secretary blamed for the court's decision.  

It was extremely unusual for Dahlgren to remain publicly silent to anything that he perceived as a personal affront, but he had good reason not to raise anyone's ire against him at the moment. During the early days of Craven's trial, Dahlgren received a very unexpected visit from his brother Charles. Now almost penniless, the former Mississippi cotton planter and Confederate general had come to Washington to enlist his older brother's help to secure a presidential pardon. "[R]ather hard," Dahlgren wrote in his Journal, "after all I have done & suffered for four years in putting down the Rebellion; one affliction after another." Despite these feelings, Dahlgren demonstrated loyalty to his brother and immediately sought the support of his many political contacts. When he spoke to the secretary of state, Dahlgren was relieved when Seward "said promptly he would have the Pardon paper for my brother—Very Kind."  

Dahlgren's status as one of the navy's highest ranking officers resulted in his being named to a succession of highly visible positions. In February 1866, Dahlgren was appointed to the Commission on Harbor Defenses. Following
this post he was named president of the Naval Academy's Board of Visitors. As these jobs kept Dahlgren only moderately busy, he found plenty of time to re-establish himself in Washington's highest social circles. The list of people who attended the various dinners and parties that Dahlgren went to, or those who came to his home, reads like a veritable who's who of Washington's elite. Then, when the weather began to grow warm, Dahlgren moved his family to Newport, Rhode Island "for the season."

The comfortable existence that Dahlgren had enjoyed since his return to Washington came to a sudden end in the autumn of 1866. On September 28 the Navy Department issued orders for him to take command of the South Pacific Squadron. "It would not be easy to say how I received an order so unjust in its nature, so rude in its manner," Dahlgren noted upon receipt of the directive. "And yet there is no appeal from the pleasure of this poor old imbecile [Welles]; who so soon is capable of forgetting service rendered to the public cause."21

Dahlgren proved a poor choice for this command. The United States was then working to increase its influence in the region. In doing so, the United States offered to mediate a dispute between the Allied Republics, which included Peru, Chile, Bolivia and Ecuador, and Spain. Unfortunately, Dahlgren's actions while in command may have
been the reason behind the Allied Republics rejection of the United States offer.22

Just prior to Dahlgren's appointment, what appeared to be a serious incident occurred between an officer of the South Pacific Squadron and an officer of the Peruvian navy. Captain Fabius Stanly, in command of the USS Tuscarorá, reported that when he visited with Admiral John Randolph Tucker, the highest ranking officer in the Peruvian navy, that Tucker failed to show him proper professional courtesy. Stanly's report, unfortunately, failed to explain a number of important details. First of all, at the time that the incident took place, Tucker, who was an American, was dealing with the mutiny of forty-eight Peruvian officers who refused to serve under him. But even more important, Stanly failed to note that when the incident occurred, Tucker had not yet been commissioned and was still officially a civilian, was in civilian clothes, and was not even on a Peruvian vessel, but rather was a passenger on an English mail steamer.23

When Dahlgren was appointed to the South Pacific Squadron few of the important details of the incident were known in Washington. What was known, was that Tucker was a former Confederate navy officer who had been, of all things, in command of the Confederate navy forces at Charleston. Just before leaving for his new command, Dahlgren went to the Navy Department to inquire how he should deal with
Tucker. According to Dahlgren, Welles called Tucker "an unpardoned rebel who was liable to be hanged if he appeared at Fort Monroe." Furthermore, Dahlgren recalled in his journal, Welles did not "wish me or any officer to be disgraced by compulsion to offer him civilities."\textsuperscript{24}

By the time that Dahlgren reached his new command, the facts of the incident were clear. Because the incident had taken place before Tucker had any official standing, the diplomats on hand quite logically decided to treat the entire episode as a personal one between Stanly and Tucker and considered the case closed. Dahlgren refused to accept this decision. He argued that Tucker's status at the time of the incident had no bearing on the issue. Since the Peruvian government had not yet offered an official apology, which the United States had requested before the full specifics were known, Dahlgren ordered the suspension of courtesies "to the officers in the Peruvian service who still remain excluded as citizens of the U.S. from the amnesty of the President." After doing so, Dahlgren noted in his journal with more than a hint of satisfaction, "so the ball is opened."\textsuperscript{25}

Dahlgren's actions escalated the incident far beyond the scope of the original one. The United States minister to Chile told Dahlgren "that unless this difficulty can be speedily and amicably arranged our influence on this coast will be lost." Furthermore, he told Dahlgren, "I believe
the Allies were inclined to accept our offer [to mediate], but under the present circumstances of course cannot do so."

Dahlgren showed that he realized the seriousness of the proceedings. In a dispatch to Washington he noted that "the Peruvian Government is very sore on the subject, and takes it seriously enough." But he did not want to back down. "I really cannot perceive," he told his superiors in Washington, "that the United States is called on to back out entirely." 26

In Washington an entirely different decision was made. It was time to end this entire affair because it was interfering with much more important matters. Seward wrote that while the "sentiments of Admiral Dahlgren in regard to the character of ... Admiral [Tucker] ... are approved and commended," he ordered that henceforth all courtesies, which primarily involved ceremonial gun salutes, would be exchanged with the Peruvian navy. Ironically, by the time that Seward's directive arrived, the situation had largely resolved itself. In mid-March 1867, Tucker resigned his commission over an entirely different issue. Receiving Seward's order shortly afterward, Dahlgren reacted angrily:

Seward's letter is highly complimentary to my sentiments but says Tucker must be looked on as a Peruvian Officer--A shameful & outrageous backdown--needless too, for Tucker backed out first. There must have been a stir among the dry bones in the N.[avy] Dept[artment]... all I
wanted [was] that they should hold the ground in Wash.[ington], but the imbeciles would not.\textsuperscript{27}

For the time being, the Allied Republics refused the American offer to act as mediator; and while no concrete evidence exists to indicate that Dahlgren's actions played any role in this decision, the controversy caused by Dahlgren's order to withhold salutes to Tucker could not have benefited America's diplomatic efforts. Dahlgren remained in charge of the South Pacific Squadron until July 1868; and following the resolution of the Tucker incident the last year or so of his command was relatively uneventful in comparison.\textsuperscript{28}

Upon his return to the United States in July 1868, Dahlgren was again named chief of the Bureau of Ordnance. He accepted the assignment, but he was not at all happy. He complained that "retrenchment being the order of the day" meant that his job entailed little more than filling routine requests for ordnance supplies. Almost immediately, he requested a transfer back to his old post at the Washington Navy Yard. Welles refused, telling Dahlgren that he was in the correct place.\textsuperscript{29}

Not everyone agreed with Welles. Many people opposed Dahlgren's appointment, arguing that he would hinder any advancement in the navy's ordnance. Dahlgren felt that many if not all of the attacks on him stemmed from the efforts of greedy inventors whose inventions he had rejected. He
believed that his critics were simply trying to steal from the government's coffers. There was some evidence to support this notion. Since late in the Civil War, various Congressional committees had conducted investigations on the status of the army's and navy's ordnance. Many of these investigations had indeed originated with an inventor seeking economic redress for the damages reputedly inflicted on him because of the decision of either the army's or navy's Ordnance Bureau. But while the claims of individual inventors may have initiated the many of the Congressional investigations, they also dealt with a more fundamental, and a more important question; what was the future of America's military ordnance?30

Throughout the Civil War, Dahlgren had argued that his smoothbore, muzzle-loading cannon were the best large guns in the world. Events during the war, he argued, had done nothing to change his opinion. Dahlgren repeatedly stated that he did not believe that heavy rifled guns would ever replace smoothbores. The issue finally came to a head in early 1869. In testimony before another Congressional committee, Dahlgren stated, "My own experience, from repeated action, induces me to give preference to heavy smooth-bore guns. I always thought that they hurt our ironclads more in battle than the rifles did, and I am inclined to believe that the same opinion prevails largely in the navy."31
Dahlgren had good reason to be proud of his distinctive guns. As Henry Wise, then chief of the navy's Ordnance Bureau, reported to Congress in November 1865, "Not a single gun of the Dahlgren system burst prematurely," which was rather remarkable considering that by the end of the Civil War more than 1,800 Dahlgren smoothbores of various sizes had been cast. The same could not be said of the Parrott rifled 100-pounder, which was the main rifled gun used by the navy during the Civil War. Of some three hundred of these guns, nineteen burst in service. Still, the era of the low velocity smoothbore had passed away at the same exact time that wooden ships became obsolete. Dahlgren refused to acknowledge this. While ordnance specialists throughout the world were working to perfect rifled, breech-loading guns, he continued to hold onto the past.32

Dahlgren sent off what turned out to be his final ordnance report to a Congressional committee on February 11, 1869. It took only four days for the committee to respond. After reading their recommendations, he noted tersely in his Journal, "both my guns & Rodman's are condemned."33

Dahlgren was devastated. He asked to resign from the Ordnance Bureau and to be assigned command of the Washington Navy Yard. His request was refused. But Dahlgren did not relent until the Navy Department finally honored both his
resignation from the Ordnance Bureau and his request to take command of the Washington Navy Yard.34

Dahlgren returned to his old and familiar post in August 1869. There, on November 13, he celebrated his sixtieth birthday. "I complete sixty years to-day," he noted on the occasion. "Grateful to say, in good health and only the worse in point of time." But Dahlgren's diagnosis of his physical condition was overly optimistic. Having long suffered from various ailments, the following summer he began to experience chest pains. And on the morning of July 12, 1870, Dahlgren died rather suddenly.35

Dahlgren died an angry and bitter man. His superiors in the Navy Department had become nothing but "imbeciles," who invariably made decisions that ran counter to all good sense, at least as far as Dahlgren was concerned. His children from his first marriage had also become a major disappointment. At one point he called them his "greatest affliction." One of his children was an exception, his son Ulric. But even a greater source of grief for Dahlgren, his favorite child had died in a controversial cavalry raid on Richmond in March 1864. While Union authorities claimed that the raid was designed to free Union prisoners held in Richmond, Confederate authorities claimed that the orders found on Ulric Dahlgren's body also called for an attempt to assassinate President Jefferson Davis and his Cabinet, and to burn Richmond. Dahlgren claimed that the orders were a
forgery. He would devote a great deal of time trying to
exonerate his son's reputation. He eventually completed a
biography of his young son, but tragically for Dahlgren, a
publisher could not be found who would agree to publish the
work until 1872, two years after Dahlgren's death. Of
course, there was also the controversy surrounding
Dahlgren's ordnance career, which ended with his resignation
from the Ordnance Bureau in 1869, and for all intents and
purposes his complete withdrawal from the profession which
had been the main source of his fame and reputation.36

As distressing as all of the things may have been,
Dahlgren's greatest source of anger and bitterness was his
command of the naval forces off Charleston. From the
failure of the boat assault on Fort Sumter on September 8,
1863, onward, Dahlgren became the target of severe
criticism. It turned out that much of this criticism
originated with his army counterpart, General Quincy
Gillmore. The general strongly questioned Dahlgren's
decision not to make an all out effort to reach Charleston's
inner harbor immediately following the close of the first
bombardment of Fort Sumter, on August 23, 1863. According
to Gillmore, "These were the decisive days." At first,
Gillmore used both friendly newsmen and political contacts
to wage an all out effort to get Dahlgren removed from
command. But, as noted earlier, because of Dahlgren's role
in the Navy Department's fight with both DuPont and its
Congressional enemies, Dahlgren remained in command until the end of the war. Failing to get Dahlgren removed, Gillmore did the next best thing, he wrote a book exonerating his actions at Charleston while placing the entire blame for the Union's failure to take Charleston squarely on Dahlgren's shoulders.37

From the time that Dahlgren read Gillmore's book in February 1865, he vowed to refute Gillmore. And in the last five years of his life Dahlgren repeatedly explained why Charleston had not fallen until February 1865. As far as he was concerned, there were numerous reasons to explain this. First, he asserted, the army's campaign to take Fort Wagner and Morris Island took longer than planned; thus the monitors were worn out before he could make an attempt against Charleston itself. Next, the officers he had appointed to lead the boat assault on Fort Sumter had been guilty of "mismanagement." Furthermore, the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron never received the additional monitors that Dahlgren had requested and that the Navy Department had promised, therefore, Dahlgren argued to his dying day, he never had enough vessels to take Charleston. Finally, and perhaps most important in his defense, Fort Sumter had never been completely destroyed; and as long as Sumter remained in Confederate hands, the obstructions could not be removed.38

Many of Dahlgren's arguments had merit. If his historical reputation is used as the yardstick, his efforts
at personal vindication were successful. But no matter how well he may have defended himself against the criticism, Dahlgren had failed in at least one important way. More than anything in the world, Dahlgren desired fame and glory as a naval hero. Unfortunately for Dahlgren, no explanation or rationalization could ever secure him what he coveted above all else.
Notes to Chapter VII

1Dahlgren to Welles, September 10, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 641; Dahlgren to Fox, September 24, 1863, Ibid., pp. 671-72; Dahlgren to Welles, September 29, 1863, Ibid., pp. 680-81.

2Welles, Welles Diary, I, pp. 434, 475; Welles to Dahlgren, October 9, 1863, ORN, 15, pp. 26-27.


4For the full complexity of Davis’s efforts, see, Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 467-95; see also, Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals, pp. 288-305.

5The most likely source of this information was Senator Grimes. DuPont, mistakenly believing that Grimes was his ally and not the Navy Department’s, informed the Senator of his plans and sent him a complete set of the documents he planned to use. See, DuPont to Grimes, June 16, 1863, DuPont Letters, III, n. p. 190; DuPont to Grimes, August 8, 1863, Ibid., pp. 219-25; Grimes to DuPont, August 15, 1863, Ibid., pp. 226-29.

6Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 467-95; the Navy Department’s defense is in, Report of the Secretary of the Navy in Relation to Armored Vessels (Washington, 1864), hereafter cited as Armored Vessels. Welles’s first request for reports from Dahlgren concerning the ironclads came shortly after Grimes received DuPont’s package of documents, see Welles to Dahlgren, August 26, 1863, ORN, 14, p. 519; after not receiving reports on the subject from Dahlgren in about two weeks, Welles made an additional request. This second request showed great urgency. See, Welles to Dahlgren, September 11, 1863, Ibid., pp. 642-43; for the first of Dahlgren’s ironclad reports, see, Dahlgren to Welles, September 23, 1863, Ibid., pp. 659-668; the most important of Dahlgren’s ironclad reports is, Dahlgren to Welles, January 28, 1864, Letterbook F, JADLC—also in ORN
14, pp. 590-601. Dahlgren wrote this 54 page report immediately following the receipt of letters from Welles and Fox, of January 9 and 12, 1864, respectively. While these letters are not in Dahlgren's papers, nor Welles's, Fox's, nor ORN, in his private Journal Dahlgren acknowledged receiving them, noting that both letters were "prodigiously flattering—and asking for good character to the Monitors." See, Dahlgren, January 21, 1864, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; for his responses, see, Dahlgren to Welles, January 22, 1864, ORN, 15, pp. 250-51; Dahlgren to Fox, January 22, 1864, Ibid., pp. 251-52. These two reports by Dahlgren, plus numerous other reports that Dahlgren wrote containing favorable comments about the ironclads are all contained in Armored Vessels.

7Davis's attack on the Lincoln administration did not end here. He simply moved on and ultimately saw the passage of the Wade-Davis Bill, which Lincoln pocket-vetoed. See, Niven, Gideon Welles, pp. 478-87; Williams, Lincoln and the Radicals, pp. 318-26; Thomas, Abraham Lincoln, pp. 438-40.

8For problems with construction of the monitors, see, Welles to Dahlgren, November 21, 1863, ORN, 15, p. 134; Welles to Dahlgren, December 3, 1863, Ibid., p. 146; for Grant's impact on military policy, see, McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, pp. 721-24; for the Navy at Mobile Bay and Wilmington, see, Fowler, Under Two Flags, pp. 236-45, 266-72.

9Dahlgren, February 18, 1865, Journal Entry, Vol. 13, JADSU.

10For the most vivid contemporary articulation of the view that South Carolina lay at the root of the secession movement and thus deserved punishment of the highest order, see, John Smith Dye, History of the Plots and Crimes of the Great Conspiracy to Overthrow Liberty in America (New York, 1866, reprint edition, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York, 1969).


13Fox to Dahlgren, May 31, 1865, ORN, 16, p. 340; Dahlgren, June 6, 17, 1865, Journal Entries, Volume 13, 1865, JADSU.

14Welles to Dahlgren, June 9, 1865, ORN, 16, p. 343; Dahlgren, June 14, 17, 1865, Journal Entries, Vol. 13, JADSU.


17Welles, Welles Diary, II, pp. 261, 267, 392-93, 396; Dahlgren, November 6-December 6, 1865, Journal Entries, Vol 13, JADSU; Navy Department, General Order No. 68, December 6, 1865, copy in JADLC.

18Welles, Welles Diary, II, pp. 392-93, 396; Navy Department, General Order No. 68, December 6, 1865, copy in JADLC; Dahlgren, Response to Welles, Undated, Box 30, JADLC.

19Dahlgren, November 9-10, December 9, 1865, Journal Entries, Vol. 13, JADSU.

20For examples of his social life, see, Dahlgren, November 9, December 25, 1865, January 27, February 1, 12, March 19, April 13, 20, 1866, Journal Entries, Vol 13, JADSU; for Dahlgren’s comments on the Harbor Commission, see, February 20, 26, March 15, 29, 1866, Ibid.; The report of the Board of Visitors to the Naval Academy for the Year 1866 is contained in, “Message from the President of the United States,” S. Ex. Doc. 53, 39th Cong., 1st Sess.; also see, Dahlgren, June 3, 1866, Journal Entry, Vol 13, JADSU.

21Welles to Dahlgren, September 28, 1866, JADLC; Dahlgren, Undated journal entry immediately prior to October 14, 1866 entry, Vol. 14, JADSU.


23The entire incident can be followed from Tucker’s perspective in, David P. Werlich, Admiral of the Amazon: John Randolph Tucker, His Confederate Colleagues, and Peru.
(Charlottesville, VA, 1990), pp. 111-33; Stanly to Pearson, October 16, 1866, JADLC; Pacheco to Hovey, November 23, 1866, in, Record Group 59, Diplomatic Dispatches from U. S. Ministers Lima, Peru, National Archives, Washington D.C., hereafter cited as DDLP; Pearson to Stanly, December 10, 1866, JADLC.

24Dahlgren to Welles, October 12, 1866, JADLC; Welles to Dahlgren, November 21, 1866, JADLC; Dahlgren, November 15-22, 1866, Journal Entries, Vol. 14, JADSU.

25Dahlgren to Thompson, January 8, 1867, JADLC; Dahlgren, February 3, 1867, Journal Entry, Vol. 14, JADSU.

26Kilpatrick to Dahlgren, February 15, 1867, JADLC; Dahlgren to Welles, February 26, 1867, JADLC.

27For what was happening in Washington, see, Welles, Welles Diary, III, pp. 66-7, 68-69; for Seward's comments, see, Seward to Hovey, March 18, 1867, DDLP; for Dahlgren's response, see, Dahlgren, April 20, 1867, Journal Entry, Vol. 14, JADSU.

28The Allied Republics would eventually accept the United States offer of mediation, but not until 1871, see, James W. Cortada, "Diplomatic Rivalry between Spain and the United States over Chile and Peru, 1864-1871," Inter-American Economic Affairs 27 (Spring 1974): 47-57.

29Dahlgren, August 1-3, 1868, Journal Entries, Vol. 15, JADSU; Dahlgren asked for the transfer in September 1868, see, Dahlgren, September 12, 1868, Journal Entry, Ibid.

30For Dahlgren's feelings about the opposition toward him, see, Dahlgren, September 12, 1868, Journal Entry, Ibid.; the proceedings of two of the most important Congressional investigations on ordnance are: "Report to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: Heavy Ordnance," S Report 121, 38th Cong., 2d Sess.; "Report of the Joint Committee on Ordnance Experiments on Heavy Ordnance," S Report 266, 40th Cong., 3d Sess.


32Wise, quoted in, Tucker, Arming the Fleet, p. 255; for the statistics on Dahlgren guns, see, Ibid., pp. 221-23; for a general description of the Navy's rifled guns, including the Parrott gun, see, Ibid., pp. 224-255.
Dahlgren, February 11-15, 1869, Journal Entries, Vol. 15, JADSU; for both Dahlgren's report and Congress's answer, see, "Report of the Joint Committee on Ordnance Experiments on Heavy Ordnance."

Dahlgren's efforts can be followed from his journal entries, see, Dahlgren, March 10, 30, April 26, July 12, August 2, 1869, Journal Entries, Vol. 15, JADSU.


For Dahlgren's sentiments toward his children, see, Dahlgren, January 15, 1864, Journal Entry, Vol. 11, JADSU; see also, Dahlgren, July 24, 1868, Journal Entry, Vol. 15, JADSU; for Ulric Dahlgren's participation in the raid against Richmond and the controversy that followed, see, Virgil Carrington Jones, Eight Hours Before Richmond (New York, 1957); for John Dahlgren's defense of his son, see, John A. Dahlgren, Memoir of Ulric Dahlgren, ed. Madeleine Vinton Dahlgren (Philadelphia, 1872).


Dahlgren's defense took numerous forms. For official reports, see, Dahlgren to Welles, June 1, 1865, ORN, 16, pp. 380-403; Dahlgren to Welles, October 16, 1865, Ibid., pp. 429-55. Dahlgren's defense can also be seen in a number of publications after the war, see, John W. Draper, History of the American Civil War 3 vols. (New York, 1867-70); see also, Lewis R. Hammersly, The Records of Living Officers of the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps (Philadelphia, 1870). Dahlgren's correspondence with Draper and Hammersly—the last of this correspondence dates to within weeks of Dahlgren's death—as well as his defense which consisted of hundreds of pages written narrative, is contained in, Box 18, JADLC; for additional correspondence with Draper, see, John William Draper Papers, Library of Congress, Washington D. C.; finally, see, M. V. Dahlgren, Memoirs of John A. Dahlgren, which John Dahlgren had begun before his death, and was completed and published by Madeleine Dahlgren.
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