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From the Archives: Valuing Innovation Where You Find It

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From the Archives

Valuing Innovation Where You Find It

This story, drawing on the British Navy's conversion from sail to steam, may resonate across both centuries and service lines.

In spite of its traditions of gallantry and seamanship, the nineteenth-century Royal Navy was unready for war. Responsibility for this lay at the top. Weapons and tactics in naval warfare were changing rapidly, but many senior officers preferred not to notice. They were assigned to ships, they served in them, eventually they commanded them, without ever giving a serious thought to their tactical employment in battle. Anything new was suspicious and potentially dangerous. . . . One problem was Nelsonian tradition. . . . British captains still dreamed of closing to point-blank range. No matter that Nelson throughout his career had been a practitioner of boldness and innovation. . . .

[Admiral Sir] Percy Scott was a practical sailor, not a visionary. What he wanted was a navy trained to use the more powerful guns with which technology was providing it. He wanted British gunners trained to hit the target, and to hit it often, at ever greater ranges, in all kinds of weather and sea conditions. To him it was ludicrous and dangerous that in 1896 the crew of the modern steel battleship *Resolution* was still being mustered on deck for cutlass drill, training to parry and thrust, for the moment their ship would grind alongside an enemy and they would swarm over the side in boarding parties.

Alone, Percy Scott would have made no difference. He would have been shunted aside as a fanatic who disturbed the tranquility of the peacetime navy. But Scott was not alone, and he was promoted to stations where his obsession could benefit the Fleet. . . . The man who promoted Scott was a naval visionary, a man obsessed not just with gunnery, but also with naval strategy, tactics, ship design, and organization of personnel. Throughout his fifty years of service, from cadet to Admiral of the Fleet [Sir John "Jacky" Fisher] pressed for change. . . .

Besides making himself available, Fisher encouraged original thought. . . . Flinging open the door to new ideas and hobnobbing with lieutenants instead of senior captains sent startling messages through the Fleet. Fisher's behavior was unprecedented; some found it disgraceful. Heretofore, admirals had consulted no one—or at the very most had looked to a flag captain for a confirming nod of the head. Fisher's behavior, ignoring seniority and showing little interest in the views—or feelings—of senior officers who preferred traditional ways was alarming to these older men. "It was brought home to them," said [retired Admiral and British naval historian Sir Reginald] Bacon, "that the brains which were to be useful to the Commander-in-Chief were not of necessity to be found in the heads of the most senior of officers."

Source: Contributed by Colonel Thomas E. Ayres, US Army. Drawn from Robert K. Massie, *Dreadnought* (New York: Random House, 1991), pp. 391, 400, 437.