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The Rewards of Risk-Taking: Two Civil War Admirals*

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James M. McPherson

Abstract

The willingness to take risks made Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut, victor at New Orleans in 1862 and Mobile Bay in 1864, the Union's leading naval commander in the Civil War. Farragut's boldness contrasted strongly with the lack of decisiveness shown in the failure in April 1863 to seize the port of Charleston, South Carolina, by Rear Admiral Samuel Francis Du Pont, whose capture of Port Royal Sound in South Carolina in November of 1861 had made him the North's first naval hero of the war. Du Pont's indecisiveness at Charleston led to his removal from command and a blighted career, while the risk-taking Farragut went on to become, along with generals U.S. Grant and William T. Sherman, one of the principal architects of Union victory.

In September 1864 Captain Charles Steedman of the United States Navy praised Rear Admiral David Glasgow Farragut for his decisive victory over Confederate forts and warships in the Battle of Mobile Bay the previous month. "That little man," wrote Steedman of the wiry Farragut who was actually just

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James M. McPherson earned a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins University in 1963 and from 1962 to 2004 taught at Princeton University, where he is currently the George Henry Davis '86 Professor of American History Emeritus. His some twenty books include *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era*, which won a Pulitzer Prize in 1989. In 2007 McPherson was awarded the Samuel Eliot Morison Prize in Military History by the Society for Military History. His latest book, *Embattled Rebel: Jefferson Davis as Commander in Chief* will be published in October 2014.

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under medium height, "has done more to put down the rebellion than any general except Grant and Sherman."[1]

Steedman's comment was not simply another example of naval boastfulness in the age-old rivalry between the army and navy. After many years of studying the American Civil War, I am convinced that Steedman was right. Farragut's victory at Mobile Bay and his even more spectacular achievement in the capture of New Orleans back in April 1862, plus the part played by his fleet in the Mississippi River campaigns of 1862 and 1863, did indeed entitle him to virtually equal status with Grant and Sherman in winning the war.

But Steedman was making a larger point, with which I also agree: the Union navy deserves more credit for Northern victory than it has traditionally received. General Grant made a similar point in his famous *Memoirs* when he praised the role of the navy's Mississippi River Squadron in Grant's most significant success, the capture of Vicksburg in July 1863. "Without the navy's assistance," wrote Grant, "the campaign could not have been made."[2]

Farragut emerged as the Union navy's foremost hero in the Civil War, and he was appointed as the nation's first rear admiral in July 1862. But for the first year of the war, the most prominent and successful naval officer was Samuel Francis Du Pont, whose fleet won the most important Union victory in 1861 and who was subsequently named the third-ranking rear admiral in American history. Like General George B. McClellan, DuPont was the great hope of the North in 1861; like Ulysses S. Grant, Farragut labored in relative obscurity during most of the war's first year until the two of them burst forth with major victories in early 1862, and went on thoroughly to eclipse McClellan and Du Pont in later stages of the war. And the similarities between McClellan and Du Pont on the one hand, and Grant and Farragut on the other, included personalities and qualities of leadership that explain how one pair faded into obscurity and the other pair emerged into greatness.

Descended from one of the foremost families in America, Du Pont in 1861 was a veteran of forty-five years in the United States Navy. Although he was from the slave state of Delaware and several of his friends supported or at least sympathized with the Confederacy, Du Pont left no doubt about where he stood. "What has made me most sick at heart is to see the resignations from the Navy" of officers from Southern states, he said in 1861, as he stood tall and imposing with ramrod-straight posture and luxuriant mutton-chop whiskers. "I stick by the flag and the national government," he declared, "whether my state do or not."[3]

About Farragut's allegiance, however, there were initially some doubts. He had served fifty of his fifty-nine years in the navy when the state he called home,

1. Charles Steedman to Sally Steedman, 30 September 1864, in Amos Lawrence Mason, ed., *Memoir and Correspondence of Charles Steedman, Rear Admiral, United States Navy* (Cambridge, Mass.: Riverside Press, 1912), 385.

2. *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: C. L. Webster & Co., 1885–86), 1:574.

3. Du Pont to Andrew Hull Foote, 25 January 1861, in James M. Hoppin, *Life of Andrew Hull Foote, Rear Admiral United States Navy* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1874), 148.

Virginia, seceded in 1861. Farragut had been born in Tennessee and had married a Virginian. After his first wife died, he had married another Virginia woman. He had a brother in New Orleans and a sister in Mississippi. "God forbid I should ever have to raise my hand against the South," he said to friends in Virginia as the sectional conflict heated up. But when Abraham Lincoln called out the militia after the Confederates attacked Fort Sumter, Farragut expressed approval of his action. His Virginia friends told him that anyone holding this opinion could not live in Norfolk, then his home. "Well, then," Farragut replied, "I can live somewhere else." He decided to move to New York. "This act of mine may cause years of separation from your family," he told his wife, "so you must decide quickly whether you will go north or remain here." She went with him. As they prepared to leave, the thin-lipped Farragut offered a few parting words to his Norfolk neighbors: "You fellows will catch the devil before you get through with this business." And as matters turned out, they caught a good many devils from Farragut himself.[4]

Congressional legislation gave Secretary of the Navy Gideon Welles authority to ignore the age-old rule of seniority in making promotions during the Civil War. Welles was quick to weed out dead wood in the senior ranks of captains in order to promote younger and more promising officers over their heads. He did precisely that with Du Pont and Farragut. He jumped Du Pont over eighteen of his seniors and named him commander of the South Atlantic Blockading Squadron in September 1861. Du Pont had already achieved prominence that summer as chairman of the Blockade Board, which produced comprehensive strategic plans for organizing the blockade and capturing ports and cities along the Confederate coast. Du Pont himself would command the first of these efforts, a major campaign to capture Port Royal Sound in South Carolina.

To command the West Gulf Blockading Squadron, whose main objective in 1862 would be the capture of New Orleans, Welles named Farragut—who was thirty-seventh in seniority on the captain's list. Farragut was respected by many of his fellow officers but virtually unknown to the public at the time. As Welles wrote in his famous diary, "neither the President nor any member of the Cabinet knew him, or knew of him. Members of Congress inquired who he was, and some of them remonstrated, and questioned whether I was making a mistake for he was a Southern man and had a Southern wife."[5] But Welles knew about Farragut's expressions of Unionism when he moved from Norfolk to New York and was willing to gamble on his loyalty as well as his ability. Rarely in the history of naval warfare has a gamble paid off so handsomely.

4. Loyall Farragut, *The Life of David Glasgow Farragut, First Admiral of the United States Navy, Embodying His Journal and Letters* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1879), 203; Christopher Martin, *Damn the Torpedos: The Story of America's First Admiral, David Glasgow Farragut* (New York: Abelard-Schuman, 1970), 153–54; James P. Duffy, *Lincoln's Admiral: The Civil War Campaigns of David Farragut* (New York: Wiley, 1997), 40–41. See also Farragut to Richard P. Ashe, 22 April 1861, David G. Farragut Papers, Huntington Library, San Marino, California.

5. Howard K. Beale, ed., *Diary of Gideon Welles*, 3 vols. (New York: Norton, 1960), 2:134–35, entry of 22 September 1864.

Meanwhile Du Pont was putting together the largest fleet in American history to that time: seventeen warships with 157 guns, twenty-five colliers and supply ships, and thirty-three troop transports carrying 13,000 soldiers and 600 marines to go ashore when the navy attacked the forts at the entrance to Port Royal Sound. This armada was more impressive in numbers than in the seagoing qualities of some of its vessels. In the rapid buildup of 1861, the navy had bought and chartered dozens of merchant ships and even several New York ferryboats and tugs never intended for open-water navigation. Some of these, in addition to regular navy warships, were part of Du Pont's fleet.

This fleet departed from Hampton Roads on 29 October 1861. As they emerged onto a smooth sea the first day, a lieutenant who commanded a gun crew on Du Pont's flagship, the 44-gun steam frigate USS *Wabash*, wrote that he looked out and saw "on either side of us, in line abreast, stretched for six miles the advanced guard of gunboats" followed by the transports. "Never did such a heterogeneous squadron venture upon the waters, nondescripts ad infinitum; vessels without shape before known to the maritime world. Had some homeward bound vessel helplessly got within our lines, surely would the bewildered skipper have imagined that 'Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane' had come against him."[6]

This romantic image gave way to chaos and panic on 1 November as the fleet ran into what another officer on the *Wabash* described as "one of the severest gales I have ever experienced" off the North Carolina coast.[7] A steamer carrying three hundred marines went down; the sailing frigate USS *Sabine* rescued all but seven of them. Some ships had to turn back, including small steamers for towing surfboats to land troops. Much of the army's ammunition was lost. On the morning of 2 November only eight other ships were in sight from the *Wabash.* By the time the flagship reached the bar off Port Royal on 4 November, however, most of the fleet was reunited. More vessels continued to arrive as the warships got over the bar on 5 November and prepared to attack the two Confederate earthwork forts mounting forty-three guns and situated three miles apart on either side of the wide channel.

This attack would have to be an all-navy show, for the loss of ammunition and surfboats made spectators of the army troops. Du Pont adopted a tactical plan made possible by steam power, which had revolutionized naval warfare during the past two decades. The ships would steam in an oval pattern between the two forts, pounding each in turn while presenting a moving target to the enemy. This movement upended the old adage from the days of sailing ships that one gun on shore in a fort was worth four on shipboard. At 9:26 a.m. on 7 November, fourteen warships led by the *Wabash* moved up mid-channel between Fort Beauregard to the north and the stronger Fort Walker to the south on Hilton Head Island, firing broadsides

6. John Sanford Barnes, "The Battle of Port Royal, S.C.," ed. by John D. Hayes, *New York Historical Society Quarterly* 45 (1961): 378–79, journal entry of 30 October 1861.

7. Roswell H. Lamson to Flora Lamson, 4 November 1861, in James M. and Patricia R. McPherson, eds., *Lamson of the* Gettysburg*: The Civil War Letters of Roswell H. Lamson, U.S. Navy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 39.

at both simultaneously. Du Pont placed five of his gunboats in a flanking position to protect the main fleet from the harassing fire of a small Confederate flotilla of converted tugs carrying one or two guns each. This so-called "mosquito fleet" soon fled up the Beaufort River out of range of the heavier Yankee guns. Du Pont turned back and brought the fleet close under the guns of Fort Walker, then turned again for a second pass up mid-channel. On the second pass he was joined by the USS *Pocahontas*, which had just arrived after battling the storm that had separated the fleet. This ship was commanded by South Carolina native Percival Drayton, who had remained loyal to the United States while his brother William had gone with the Confederacy and was a general now in command of Fort Walker, which came under fire from his brother's ship. Most of the damage to the fort, however, was accomplished by the big 9-inch guns of the *Wabash*, which Du Pont brought to within 500 yards of the fort on the second pass. A gun captain on the *Wabash* described the firing from the fort of "shell guns, Columbiads and rifled they cut us up in spars, rigging and hull pretty severely" but our guns "finally drove them out. They fled in all directions leaving some of the guns loaded, their arms, tents, etc." behind. The *Wabash* landed its marines and fifty sailors to take possession of Fort Walker. Across the entrance to the bay, Confederates also evacuated Fort Beauregard before the ships could make another turn to drive them out. Du Pont was elated by his victory. Several days later he wrote to a friend: "I never get *transporté*, as the French term it, but I will repeat, to the day of my death, that the second assault of this ship upon the forts, for rapidity, continuity, and precision of fire, has never been surpassed in naval warfare."[8]

Army troops landed and took possession of the forts, the town of Beaufort, and eventually most of the rich long-staple cotton plantations of the South Carolina and Georgia Sea Islands. White planters and their families fled to the mainland; almost ten thousand slaves stayed behind, making this campaign the largest emancipation of slaves in the war so far. Panic spread through the Carolina low country; Du Pont built up a large naval base at Port Royal and occupied other ports as far south as Fernandina and Jacksonville, Florida; army artillery forced the surrender of Fort Pulaski at the mouth of the Savannah River in April 1862, pretty much sealing off Savannah from blockade runners. Du Pont built up his blockade fleet in numbers and efficiency during 1862, and began planning for an attack on the cradle of secession, Charleston itself.

In the meantime, Farragut took command of the West Gulf Squadron and began building up his fleet for an effort to capture the biggest prize of all, the South's largest port and city, New Orleans. By April 1862 Farragut had gotten his fleet of twenty-two steam sloops and gunboats across the bar at Southwest Pass of the Mississippi River where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico. They were supported by twenty schooners that had been modified to carry a 13-inch mortar to bombard the

8. Roswell H. Lamson to Flora Lamson, 8 November 1861, ibid., 42–43; Du Pont to John A. Dahlgren, November?, 1861, in Madeleine V. Dahlgren, *Memoir of John A. Dahlgren, Rear Admiral, U.S. Navy* (Boston: J. R. Osgood & Co., 1882), 29.

Confederate defenses at two forts flanking the Mississippi seventy miles below New Orleans, Forts Jackson and St. Philip. Together the forts mounted 126 big seacoast guns to try to blow out of the water any fleet attempting to ascend the river. In addition, the Confederates had put together a squadron of eight gunboats converted from river steamboats, one small ironclad, and another large ironclad, the CSS *Louisiana*, which had its guns mounted but not yet its engines, so that it was anchored near the forts as a kind of floating battery. Farragut's fleet was supported by an army of 15,000 Union soldiers commanded by General Benjamin Butler—who was not much of an asset for the Union effort. The public expected the navy to do the heavy work, just as it had done at Port Royal. Iowa Senator James Grimes, a member of the Senate Committee on Naval Affairs, told Assistant Secretary of the Navy Gustavus Fox that "the country looks to the Navy. Don't wait for the Army; take New Orleans & hold it until the Army comes up."[9] And that is exactly how it happened.

The mortar schooners commanded by Farragut's foster brother, David Dixon Porter, were towed into position on 18 April to begin bombarding the forts. Over the next six days and nights they lobbed thousands of 216-pound shells into the forts, doing a lot of damage but not knocking out many of the guns. Farragut grew impatient, and decided to run his fleet past the forts in the pre-dawn darkness on 24 April. This was not a popular decision among his ship captains, who had "little or no sanguine feeling of success," according to one of them. On 22 April Farragut called for a meeting of his captains to plan the attack. In military annals it was proverbial that councils of war never fight. But this one proved an exception. After Farragut outlined his plans for running past the forts in the darkness, he invited the responses of his captains. As one of the participants wrote: "The prevailing opinion seemed to be adverse to making the attempt to pass the forts at that time; that it was premature; that the forts had not yet been sufficiently reduced by the fire of the mortar vessels, and that the risk of the loss of too many vessels was too great to be run." But Farragut said that the mortars would soon exhaust their ammunition; it was now or never; and he concluded the meeting with the words: "I believe in celerity."[10]

"I believe in celerity" became Farragut's hallmark. At 2:00 a.m. on 24 April his seventeen ships carrying 154 guns that were to make the attempt weighed anchor and began moving upriver, with Farragut's flagship *Hartford* in the middle of three divisions of the fleet in which the smaller gunboats were in the first and third divisions. The mortar fleet and the five steamers that towed them opened a furious fusillade to keep down the fire of the forts, while the ships of the three divisions also opened fire

9. James Grimes to Gustavus Fox, 3 February 1862, in Robert M. Thompson and Richard Wainwright, eds., *Confidential Correspondence of Gustavus Vasa Fox, Assistant Secretary of the Navy, 1861–1865*, 2 vols. (New York: Printed for the Naval Historical Society by De Vinne Press, 1918–19), 1:414–15.

10. Samuel Phillips Lee to Elizabeth Blair Lee, 17 April 1862, Blair-Lee Papers, Princeton University Library; Jonathan M. Wainwright to David D. Porter, June 1, 1862, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Navies*, 30 volumes in two series (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1894-1927). Citations indicate series, volume, and page numbers. Hereinafter abbreviated *ORN*. This citation is *ORN*, I, 18:143–44.

as they approached the forts; these forts began firing on the ships as they approached, and as the first ones got through, the Confederate gunboats above the fort also engaged. In this mélée, scores of shells were in the air and exploding at the same time, in what was surely the most spectacular fireworks display in American history to that time. The Confederates had also prepared fire rafts—large rafts piled with kindling and logs soaked with oil, which they lit and floated down toward the Union ships. As the *Hartford* approached the forts, Farragut climbed up the port mizzen ratline to get above the roiling smoke from the guns and fire rafts for a better view of the action. Holding on to the shrouds, he "stood there as cool as if leaning against a mantel in his own home," according to a sailor on the *Hartford.* Farragut's signal officer pleaded with him to come down. "We can't afford to lose you, Flag Officer," he said. They'll get you up there, sure." Farragut finally came down, and as he reached the deck a shell exploded where he had been standing on the ratline.[11]

By this time the river was full of fire rafts. Veering to evade one of them, the *Hartford* ran aground under the guns of Fort St. Philip. A Confederate tug pushed the raft against her port quarter. Flames climbed up the side of the hull and shot halfway up the mast. "I thought it was all up with us," wrote Farragut later. But after a few seconds of confusion, the crew went to fire stations and began playing hoses on the burning ship. The hoses finally doused the fire, the engineers applied all power to back the *Hartford* off the mud, and she proceeded upriver.

Fourteen of the seventeen Union ships made it past the forts. Three were turned back by the forts as it began to grow light that morning, and one of the fourteen that got through was sunk by Confederate gunboats. But seven of those eight gunboats, plus the small ironclad CSS *Manassas*, were sunk by the Union fleet, and the other one was captured. At the cost of only 37 killed and 147 wounded, the Union fleet had won a remarkable victory.

But that victory was incomplete until New Orleans was in their possession. At mid-morning on 24 April, Farragut's surviving thirteen ships rendezvoused seven miles above the forts. They were all more or less damaged but still operational. Farragut decided to continue upriver and attack the city. The Confederate troops that had been stationed in New Orleans had been called upriver to Tennessee to meet the Union threat there after Grant had captured Fort Donelson, leaving behind only local militia, which fled at the approach of the fleet. The city was virtually defenseless except for two earthworks with fourteen guns flanking the river at Chalmette three miles downstream from New Orleans, where Andrew Jackson had stopped the British in 1815. But nothing was going to stop Farragut. Five of his ships including the flagship *Hartford* came on, firing first with their bow guns and then veering left or right to fire crushing broadsides into the works. In twenty minutes the Confederate guns were silenced. "Those who could run," Farragut reported to Secretary of the Navy Welles, "were running in every direction."[12]

11. Charles L. Dufour, *The Night the War Was Lost* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1960), 269–70.

12. Farragut to Welles, 6 May 1862, *ORN*, I, 18:770.

Cut off and isolated downriver, with Butler's troops finally approaching the forts, the garrison at Fort Jackson mutinied and both forts surrendered to the navy on 28 April. The Confederates blew up their two big but unfinished ironclads, CSS *Louisiana* and CSS *Mississippi*. The Union fleet proceeded to New Orleans, where they found all of the ships at the waterfront and thousands of bales of cotton on the wharfs on fire. Mobs rioted in the streets and threatened the Yankees with bloody vengeance. The future Southern author, seventeen year-old George Washington Cable, witnessed the fury of the mob. "The crowds on the levee howled and screamed with rage," he recalled. "The swarming decks answered never a word; but one old tar on the *Hartford*, standing with lanyard in hand beside a great pivot-gun, so plain to view that you could see him smile, silently patted its big black breech and blandly grinned." With naval guns trained on its streets, New Orleans sullenly surrendered, and Butler's troops finally arrived to preserve some kind of order. If the passage of the forts by the Union fleet was not quite "The Night the War was Lost," as the title of a modern book about this campaign would have it, the capture of New Orleans was unquestionably one of the most important Union victories of the war, with major consequences both at home and abroad.[13]

Farragut continued up the Mississippi River with part of his fleet to Vicksburg, where he met the gunboats of the Mississippi flotilla that had fought their way down the river in the spring of 1862, capturing Memphis in June. They bombarded Vicksburg, and Farragut twice ran his ships past the Confederate batteries there, once upriver and once down, but the combined fleets failed to force Vicksburg's surrender in 1862. The following March, as part of the eventually successful Union campaign to capture Vicksburg and Port Hudson, Farragut tried to pass the Confederate fortifications at Port Hudson going upriver with seven ships, but only his flagship *Hartford* and a smaller gunboat consort got through. Two of *Hartford*'s sister ships were turned back with shots through their boiler and steam drum, and one other ship was sunk. When Farragut sat down next day to write his report to Welles, he began with the words: "It became my duty to report disaster to my fleet."[14]

But Welles did not think it was a disaster at all, but a valiant action in which the *Hartford* and its gunboat consort gained a position to contest control of the 250 miles of river between Vicksburg and Port Hudson with the Confederates, and to blockade the mouth of the Red River where supplies poured down to garrisons at Vicksburg and Port Hudson. Assistant Secretary Fox no doubt gladdened Farragut's heart with the assurance that "the President thinks the importance of keeping a force of strength in this part of the river is so great that he fully approves of your proceeding." And Farragut himself, looking back four months later, told his wife that "my last dash past Port Hudson was the best thing I ever did, except taking New Orleans. It assisted materially in the fall of Vicksburg and Port Hudson."[15]

13. George Washington Cable, "New Orleans Before the Capture," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: Century, 1888), 2:20; Dufour, *The Night the War Was Lost*.

14. Farragut to Welles, 16 March 1863, *ORN*, I, 19:665.

15. Fox to Farragut, 2 April 1863, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 1:331; Farragut to Virginia Farragut, 15 July 1863, in Farragut, *Life of Farragut*, 381.

While all of this was going on in the Mississippi Valley, matters at Charleston were coming to a head. The capture of this symbolic heart of the Confederacy had been a goal of Union strategy since Du Pont's success at Port Royal. But a fundamental difference existed between the Navy Department and Admiral Du Pont on how to carry out that strategy. Through the spring and summer of 1862 Du Pont and Assistant Navy Secretary Gustavus Fox carried on a correspondence about this matter in which they seemed to be talking past each other. Fox wanted it to be entirely a navy operation, on the model of Du Pont's capture of Port Royal and Farragut's capture of New Orleans. "Our summer's work must be Charleston by the navy," Fox wrote to Du Pont. "If we give you the *Galena* and *Monitor*"—the first two seagoing Union ironclads—"don't you think we can make it *purely navy*? Any other plan we shall play second fiddle" to the army, which "never does us justice, even when we win it" as at New Orleans. "The *Monitor* can go all over Charleston harbor and return with impunity. I feel that my duties are twofold; first, to beat our southern friends, second, to beat the Army."[16]

Du Pont was exasperated by this kind of talk. He believed that Charleston could only be captured by army troops moving against the forts and other defenses step by step, supported by the navy. "Do not go it half cocked about Charleston," he told Fox. "Think coolly and dispassionately on the main object," which was to take Charleston, not to glorify the navy. "There is no running the gantlet" of forts at Charleston as there was at the forts below New Orleans, he reminded Fox. "The whole harbor is ringed with batteries; it is like a 'cul de sac' or bag." In a striking simile that he would repeat several times, Du Pont described the Charleston defenses as "like a porcupine's hide with quills turned outside in and sewed up at one end."[17]

In October 1862 Du Pont went north for a visit home and for consultations in Washington, where he and Fox discussed their differences face to face. "The number of forts and guns" in the Charleston defenses was "simply fabulous," Du Pont told Fox, to say nothing of obstructions strung across the channel between Forts Sumter and Moultrie consisting of pilings, of logs strung together with ropes and chains, and of torpedoes—naval mines. But he could not get through to Fox, Du Pont complained to a friend. His "Navy feelings are so strong and his prejudices or dislike of Army selfishness so great that he listened unwillingly" to the idea of combined movements.[18]

Du Pont was nettled by Fox's frequent references to New Orleans: if Farragut could do it with wooden ships, why can't you do it with ironclads? A second generation of Monitor-class ironclads was becoming available, and nearly all of them went to Du Pont during the winter of 1862-63, with the idea that he could steam

16. Fox to Du Pont, 3 April, 22 May, 3 June 1862, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 1:114–15, and John D. Hayes, ed., *Samuel Francis Du Pont: A Selection from His Civil War Letters*, 3 vols. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1969), 2:91n., 96–97.

17. Du Pont to Fox, 20 September 1862, in Fox, *Confidential Correspondence*, 1:114–15; Du Pont to Fox, 31 May 1862, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 1:91–92.

18. Du Pont to Commodore Theodorus Bailey, 30 October 1862, and Du Pont to Captain Henry A. Wise, 16 January 1863, in *ORN*, I, 13:423, 513; Du Pont to Henry Winter Davis, 25 October 1862, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 2:259n.

right past the heavy guns in Fort Sumter, Fort Moultrie, Fort Johnson, and several other batteries and compel the surrender of Charleston with naval guns trained on its streets, as Farragut had done at New Orleans. Fox waxed poetic in his vision of Du Pont's nine ironclads—which now included the 20-gun *New Ironsides* of traditional frigate design as well as the new Monitor-class ships—"carrying in your flag supreme and superb, defiant and disdainful, silent amid the 200 guns, until you arrive at the center of this wicked rebellion" to "demand the surrender of the forts, or swift destruction. The President and Mr. Welles are very much struck with this program…..The sublimity of such a silent attack is beyond words to describe, and I beg of you not to let the Army spoil it."[19]

When Du Pont read these words, he wondered what Fox was smoking when he wrote them. Nevertheless, he replied to Fox that "we'll do it if it can be done—I would like to make you happy." But running silently past the forts was a non-starter. "I think we shall have to pound and pound beyond any precedent in history" to subdue the forts so that army troops could advance step by step toward the city. The "idea that ironclads can go pirouetting around the harbor and that the forts can be 'run'–à la Mississippi" just would not work, he insisted.[20]

The closer the date for his attack approached, the more pessimistic Du Pont grew. "The probabilities are all against us," he told a friend. "Thirty-two guns to overcome or silence two or three hundred, which, however, would not disturb me much if it were not for the idea of the obstructions. To remove these under fire is simply absurd."[21] Du Pont's gloominess infected several of his ironclad captains, who also began to write him that "*we are not very sanguine* of the attack being successful" against enemy defenses "in every conceivable shape, such as torpedoes, obstructions of piles, and innumerable ropes in the channel to foul the propellers."[22] Two days before the scheduled beginning of his attack—which finally took place on 7 April 1863—Du Pont forlornly referred to "these operations for the capture of Charleston, or what is more probable the *failure* of its capture."[23]

In Washington, Welles and Lincoln were increasingly disturbed by the defeatist tone of Du Pont's dispatches. They reminded Lincoln unpleasantly of McClellan. Welles was also a shrewd if sometimes harsh judge of character. He wrote in his diary: "I deplore the signs of misgiving and doubt that have recently come over" Du Pont. "Will and determination are necessary to success," but instead of emulating the "firm and impetuous Farragut," Du Pont "is getting as prudent as McClellan—is very careful—all dash, energy and force are softened under great responsibility. He has a reputation to preserve instead of one to make."[24]

19. Fox to Du Pont, 20 February 1863, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 2:450.

20. Du Pont to Fox, 2 March 1863, Du Pont to Henry Winter Davis, 1 April 1863, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 2:464, 534.

21. Du Pont to James Biddle, 26 March 1863, ibid., 2:510.

22. Charles Steedman to Sally Steedman, 3 April 1863, in *Memoir and Correspondence of Steedman*, 366–67.

23. Du Pont to Sophie Du Pont, 4 April 1863, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 2:544.

24. *Diary of Gideon Welles*, I: 237, 247, entries of 16 February and 12 March 1864.

The attack on 7 April by Du Pont's nine ironclads turned out just as he had feared—a self-fulfilled prophecy. The *New Ironsides* could not be controlled in the swift currents and had to anchor to avoid going aground, and got off only one ineffective broadside during the whole attack. Unknown to Du Pont, it anchored right over a 2,000-pound torpedo, which the Confederates on shore repeatedly tried to explode electrically, without success. (They later discovered that a wagon had run over the wires on Morris Island and cut them.)

That was the only thing that went right for Du Pont this day. The Monitor-class ironclads' rate of fire against the forts was too slow to do them much damage, and the forts in return, using pre-positioned range markers, riddled the Union ships with accurate fire. The ships got off only 151 shots during the battle, while 76 guns in the forts fired 2209 shots, of which a remarkable 520 struck the ironclads, partly disabling several and damaging the USS *Keokuk* so badly that she sank the next morning.

Du Pont broke off the action after two hours. He intended to renew it the next day, but at a conference that evening his ship captains told him that their vessels were so severely damaged that it would be suicidal to try it again. So Du Pont "determined not to renew the attack," as he reported to Welles, "for, in my judgment, it would have converted a failure into a disaster."[25]

In response to criticism that the attack failed because his heart was not in it, Du Pont wrote to a member of the Senate Naval Affairs Committee that "no officer living could have gone into the experiment with more earnest zeal than I did." This was disingenuous, to say the least. Soon after the battle, Du Pont had written to his wife: "We have failed, as I felt sure we would. …To me…there was no disappointment, for I expected nothing."[26]

Over the next few weeks, Du Pont became obsessed with defending himself against newspaper criticism, especially an article in a Baltimore newspaper which concluded: "Oh, that we had a Farragut here to take command at once, and do what has been so weakly attempted by Admiral Du Pont." Just as McClellan routinely blamed others for his failures, Du Pont openly criticized the defects of the ironclads, which, as he said, "are miserable failures where forts are concerned."[27]

Secretary Welles grew increasingly irritated with Du Pont for spending so much time and energy trying to justify himself instead of planning a new campaign against the enemy. In Du Pont's obsession with the supposed insult to his honor and self-esteem, Welles wrote in his diary, "he is evidently thinking much more of Du Pont than of the service or the country." Welles concluded that Du Pont "is against doing anything, he is demoralizing others. If anything is to be done, we

25. Du Pont to Welles, 8 April 1863, *ORN*, I, 14:3–4. The reports and other documentation of the battle are in ibid., 3–112.

26. Du Pont to Senator James W. Grimes, 8 August 1863; Du Pont to Sophie Du Pont, 8 April, 2 May 1863, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 3:220, 3, 74.

27. Article in *Baltimore America*, reprinted in *ORN*, I, 14:57–59; Du Pont to David Hunter, 8 April 1863, *ORN*, I, 14:31. For the aftermath of the battle and the criticisms of Du Pont, see Kevin J. Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral: The Life of Samuel Francis Du Pont* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005), 195–207.

must have a new commander." In June 1863, Welles accepted Du Pont's resignation and replaced him with Admiral John Dahlgren—whose efforts over the next several months to capture Charleston with combined army-navy operations also failed. Du Pont went home a bitter and in some ways broken man; he never again held an important command, and died in 1865. He was, in the words of his most recent biographer, "Lincoln's Tragic Admiral."[28] His tragic flaw, like that of McClellan, was his unwillingness to take large risks, and then to refuse to take responsibility for the failures that stemmed from unwillingness.

The opposite was true of Farragut—he was willing to risk his fleet and his reputation in the effort to achieve victory, and he proved it again in August 1864 at the Battle of Mobile Bay. Ever since his capture of New Orleans two years earlier, Farragut had wanted to attack the forts guarding the entrance to Mobile Bay and shut down that port to blockade running. But other priorities had intervened, and it was not until the summer of 1864 that the Navy Department turned him loose on Mobile Bay.

Farragut made the most of his opportunity. He now had four ironclads plus his fleet of wooden warships to take on the three forts plus a small Confederate fleet led by the formidable ironclad CSS *Tennessee*, and some 180 torpedoes that the Confederates had stretched across the entrance to the bay between the two main forts, leaving only a small opening. On August 5 the fleet weighed anchor and headed toward this opening, with the ironclads on the right closest to powerful Fort Morgan with its eighty-six big seacoast guns. The leading ironclad USS *Tecumseh* struck a torpedo and went down in less than a minute, taking ninety men with her. The captain of the USS *Brooklyn*, after watching this, hesitated at the line of torpedoes and the whole fleet came to a halt under the punishing fire of Fort Morgan. Next in line behind the *Brooklyn* was Farragut's flagship, the *Hartford.* Without hesitating, Farragut ordered the *Hartford* to pass the *Brooklyn*, and in that moment one of the great legends in the history of the U.S. Navy was born. "Damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead!" Farragut supposedly shouted. Whether or not Farragut actually said these words, he certainly did order the *Hartford* to go ahead. Captain Percival Drayton, the fleet captain commanding the *Hartford*, described these events. When the *Tecumseh* went down, he wrote, "our line was getting crowded and very soon we should all have been huddled together, a splendid mark for the enemy's guns. The Admiral immediately gave the word to go ahead with the *Hartford* and pass the *Brooklyn*. We sheered to port and passed directly over the line of torpedoes planted by the enemy, and we could hear the snapping of the submerged devilish contrivances as our hull drove through the water—but it was neck or nothing, and that risk must be taken. All the other vessels followed in our wake and providentially all escaped."[29] The rapid and shifting currents in the channel off

28. *Diary of Gideon Welles*, I: 228, 309, entries of 30 April, 23 May 1863; Weddle, *Lincoln's Tragic Admiral.*

29. Drayton to Samuel Francis Du Pont, 18 September 1864, in Du Pont, *Civil War Letters*, 3:383.

Fort Morgan had evidently broken loose some of the torpedoes and caused others to leak, dampening their powder—but of course Farragut could not have known that, especially after seeing what happened to the *Tecumseh*.

As the *Hartford* forged ahead, dueling with the guns of Fort Morgan, Farragut climbed the rigging for a better view above the smoke, and was lashed to the shrouds by the boatswain. A rifleman on the Confederate ironclad *Tennessee* fired several shots at him. If he had managed to hit him, Farragut might have become a martyred hero like Horatio Nelson at Trafalgar instead of merely the living hero of Mobile Bay. Once into the bay, the Union fleet engaged in a bloody firefight with the Confederate ships, especially the *Tennessee*, before eventually sinking or capturing two of the smaller ships and damaging the *Tennessee* so badly that she surrendered. Over the next two and one-half weeks the Union ships, with the help of army troops, forced the surrender of all the forts and gained control of the bay.[30] It was the first unequivocal strategic Union victory in 1864, and set the stage for several more victories in the following months that assured Lincoln's reelection and the final triumph at Appomattox.

In July 1866 Farragut became the first full admiral in American history, one day after Ulysses S. Grant became the first full general. In their epitaphs, it could have been written that they were willing to take great risks and accept the responsibility if they failed, and reap the rewards of success they achieved by their willingness to take those risks.

30. For all of the reports, dispatches, and other documentation of the battle, see *ORN*, I, 21:397–600.