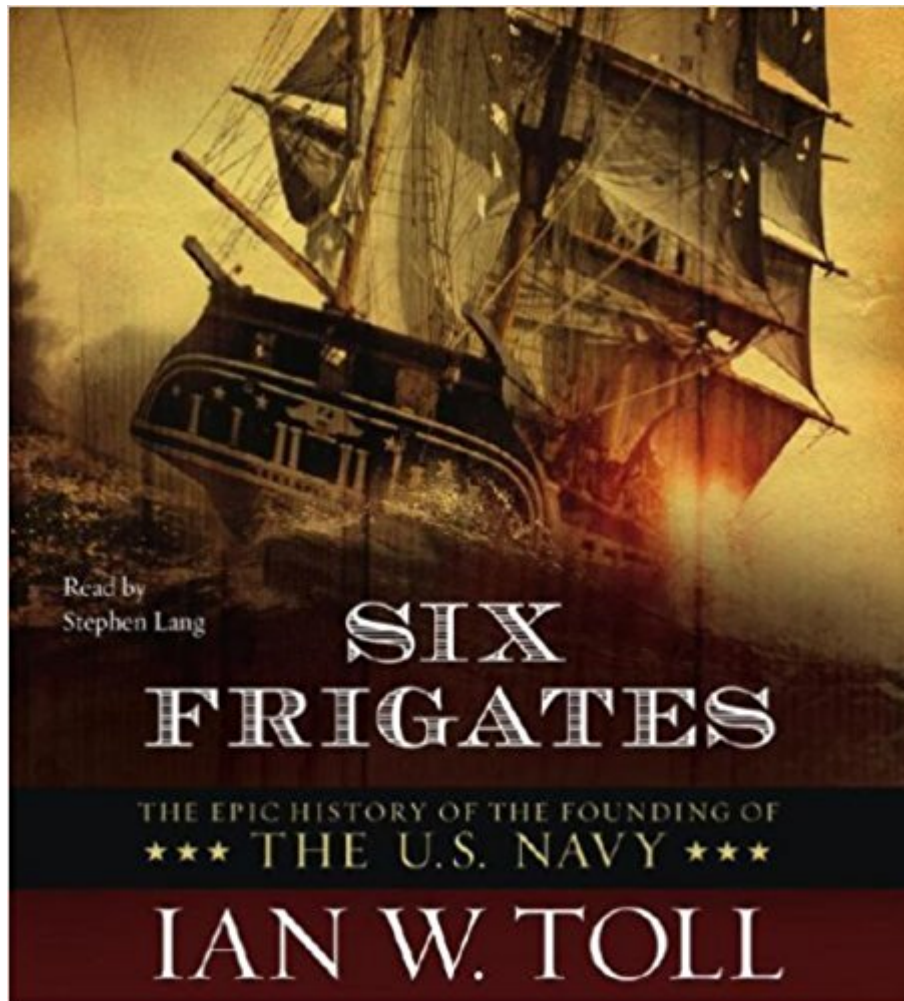


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Six Frigates: The Epic History Of The Founding Of The U.S. Navy



Synopsis

Before the ink was dry on the Constitution of the United States, the establishment of a permanent military had become the most divisive issue facing the young republic. Would a standing army be the thin end of dictatorship? Would a navy protect American commerce from the vicious depredations of the Barbary pirates, or would it drain the treasury and provoke hostilities with the great powers? How large a navy would suffice? The founders -- particularly Jefferson, Hamilton, Madison, and Adams -- debated these questions fiercely and switched sides more than once. In 1794, President Washington signed legislation authorizing the construction of six heavy frigates. The unique combination of power, speed and tactical versatility -- smaller than a battleship and larger than a sloop -- that all navies sent on their most daring missions. It was the first great appropriation of federal money and the first demonstration of the power of the new central government, calling for the creation of entirely new domestic industries, and the extraction of natural resources from the backwoods of Maine to the uninhabited coastal islands of Georgia. From the complicated politics of the initial decision, through the cliffhanger campaign against Tripoli, to the war that shook the world in 1812, Ian W. Toll tells this grand tale with the political insight of Founding Brothers and a narrative flair worthy of Patrick O'Brian. In the words of Henry Adams, the 1812 encounter between USS Constitution and HMS Guerriere "raised the United States in one half hour to the rank of a first class power in the world."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ever since reading Patrick O'Brian's depiction of the battle between the USS Constitution and the

HMS Java in "The Fortune of War," I've wanted to learn more about the United States's own naval history from that period. Surprisingly, though, I was unable to find many published works on the subject. Finally, Toll's "Six Frigates" has arrived, and it's exactly the sort of book I was looking for. "Six Frigates" is a comprehensive look at the founding of the American Navy, from the years shortly after the Revolutionary War. While the young nation had won its independence, the rest of the world still thought of it as a target ripe for exploitation, and the United States soon found its vulnerable merchant fleet being preyed upon, not only by the Great Powers of Europe, but even the small, piratical nations of the Barbary Coast. The obvious solution would seem to be the creation of an armed navy, but a surprising revelation of Toll's book is just how much opposition to the idea existed amongst the country's early leadership. Fans of David McCullough's "John Adams" and "1776" will be pleased by the appearance of figures like Washington, Adams, and Jefferson, but here Toll focuses more on their political actions and philosophies than their personalities or character. The arguments over whether creating a navy only served the interests of war profiteers, or whether having one placed too much power in the central government, or might cause the government's bankruptcy, provides a fascinating perspective on the differences between the early Federalists and Jeffersonian Republicans. Grudgingly, and in fits and starts, the federal government allowed for the creation of the book's eponymous six frigates.

Six Frigates is a great read for anyone interested in naval history during the age of sail. Ian Toll does a very good job of detailing the political background and historical circumstances that led to the creation of the US Navy shortly after America's struggle to achieve sovereignty. I found the political landscape particularly interesting, as the infighting between nascent political parties ranged from agriculture to commerce, and how this affected the naval policy (and whether there even should BE a navy at all!). It was very interesting to see how bureaucratic problems and commercial interests affected national policy. At times it is easy to lament about our nation's current standing with regards to these topics, however, Six Frigates gives an interesting perspective on how the past is not nearly as pristine and rosy as we'd like to imagine. The chapters detailing specific naval military engagements are well written and I was never confused about the ships' relationship to each other throughout the battles. They are also as exciting as they are interesting. As I read this book shortly after returning from Iraq and spending the summer of 2006 driving around Baghdad concerned with the prospect of a molten copper disk being blasted through me and thinking "this is such a dirty war", I was again checked in my views on the past while reading about sailors who dealt with mind-boggling quantities of iron balls being blasted through their wooden ships. Another very

interesting chapter dealt with a blockaded American port sending out mined boats in an attempt to destroy the vastly superior British naval force in what immediately brought my mind back to the game of cat/mouse with IEDs in Iraq.

In *Six Frigates*, Ian Toll captures both the grand design and small nuances of America's evolution toward a naval power. I enthusiastically recommend this book as a superb distillation of a period of history frequently given modest attention. Well researched, exquisitely written, Toll engages attention from the first and comfortably navigates the reader through the philosophical, political, economic, technological and military convolutions that were the seed of the U.S. Navy. Toll chronicles key naval actions of the Quasi War, Barbary Coast, and War of 1812. But "conflict" is not reserved to "Old Ironsides" or her sisters. Toll sets the military stage with a thorough and insightful examination of the political and economic ebb and flow of the time, and how "civilian" matters shaped action at sea. Toll examines the political debate (Federalist v. Republican) on the notion of whether or not to establish a permanent navy and, if so, how it should be best funded and managed. Toll is also careful to juxtaposition the personalities, strategies and actions of the foreign powers of the time, Great Britain and France. The book includes enlightening biographies of key political players and their opinions. For example, Toll puzzles over Jefferson's contradictions, writing, "...it is hardly surprising to find that Jefferson's words and deeds on the subject of seapower are dissonant. While serving as minister to France in the 1780s, [Jefferson] had argued in favor of building frigates to patrol the Mediterranean... Fifteen years later, campaigning for president at the head of the fiercely anti-navalist Republican Party, he declared himself in favor of 'such a naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors'..." (Page 162).

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