

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: CAST OFF: MARITIME LABOR IN
AMERICA FROM 1935 TO 1955

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History

Many studies have observed the precipitous decline in American shipping following the Second World War. Most focus on changes in maritime policy and the upsurge of flags of convenience. Yet this interpretation relegates mariners to a footnote. This thesis argues that America abandoned its seamen years before it abandoned its merchant marine, and that the labor story is an integral and largely overlooked dimension of the industry's broader decline. It explores how the status and makeup of American seamen underwent monumental shifts from 1935 to 1955. Increased nationalization, improved conditions, and a patriotic cause boosted the standing of the industry, but federal and union intervention also changed the composition of the workforce and even eroded seamen's status. These greater controls on mariners negatively affected the industry and this work contends that labor played a role in the transformation, and even decline, of the overall American Merchant Marine.

CAST OFF: MARITIME LABOR IN AMERICA FROM 1935 TO 1955

by

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Table of Contents

| | |
|--|-----|
| Acknowledgements..... | ii |
| Table of Contents..... | iii |
| List of Tables..... | iv |
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Chapter One: <i>Derelict</i> : Seamen in the Great Depression..... | 6 |
| Myths and Realities of Seafarers..... | 9 |
| A Changing Mix..... | 14 |
| Wards of the State?..... | 20 |
| A More Perfect Union?..... | 33 |
| Amending the Merchant Marine..... | 40 |
| Chapter Two: A New Generation: Wartime Changes in Composition..... | 49 |
| Ebbing Neutrality and Federal Intervention..... | 49 |
| Grooming a New Generation of Seamen..... | 54 |
| Consolidating Control under the War Shipping Administration..... | 65 |
| Wartime Recruitment..... | 76 |
| Wartime Changes in Composition..... | 88 |
| Chapter Three: Cast-off: Abandoned Postwar Seamen..... | 109 |
| Anonymous Heroes or Draft Dodgers?..... | 110 |
| The Promise of a Future? Exclusion from the G.I. Bill..... | 117 |
| Exodus..... | 133 |
| Conclusion..... | 142 |
| Bibliography..... | 145 |
| Secondary Sources..... | 145 |
| Primary Sources..... | 149 |

List of Tables

| | |
|--|-----|
| Table 1.0 Merchant Marine Demographics..... | 89 |
| Table 2.0: Merchant Marine Demographics based on Experience..... | 100 |
| Table 3.0 Reported Post War Plans of Merchant Seamen | 101 |
| Table 4.0: Percentages of African Americans in the American Merchant Marine..... | 138 |

Introduction

When twenty-five year old Benjamin Narinsky received his first Seamen's Certificate of Identification in 1939, he had been sailing as a merchant mariner for nearly ten years. Listing his height and hometown, as well as a description of his complexion as "ruddy," the certificate provides a small window into the seaman's livelihood. Yet the official U.S. Coast Guard-generated record overlooked much of the seaman's past. It ignored that Narinsky went to sea at fifteen following the death of his father. And it did not mention his exploits as a recreational boxer, training aboard ship and fighting in foreign ports. The certificate also omitted Narinsky's 1937 stopover in Spain, where he joined the leftist Republicans in the Spanish Civil War and was bayoneted in the gut. Yet it does speak to the changing relationship between mariners and the U.S. government by 1939, and even foreshadows the impending war that would later result in Narinsky having two ships blown out from under him and cause the loss of sight in one eye.¹

Though sensational, Narinsky's experience in the U.S. merchant marine during the 1930s and 1940s evokes that of many seamen. He sailed during successive tumults, from the labor upheavals of the 1930s, through a series of New Deal-era transformations, and finally into a world war. Just as importantly, Narinsky's withdrawal from the merchant marine also mirrors many of his peers. His sisters, shocked by the dangers he had faced and mourning the recent death of another seafaring brother who perished in a ship explosion in San Francisco Bay, urged Benjamin to return home. Finding more safety and opportunity on land, Narinsky eventually obtained a unionized job in the

¹ "Seamen's Certificate of Identification," March 7, 1939, Box 1, Benjamin Narinsky Private Collection; "Narin's Journey: From World War II Boxer and Seamen to Loyal Volunteer," *Seafarers Log* 57, no. 5 (May 1995): 1.

mailroom of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, where he worked for more than twenty years before retiring.

Many studies have observed the precipitous decline in American shipping following the Second World War. Most have focused on changes in maritime policy and the increasing use of flags of convenience. Historians argue that the practice of shipowners registering their ships under a nation that is different from their country of origin, or using “flags of convenience,” is the primary reason for the industry’s twentieth century decline. Yet this interpretation relegates the mariners who kept the ships running to a footnote, often blaming overzealous wage and working condition demands for taxing a foundering industry. This thesis argues that America gave up on its seamen years before it gave up on its merchant marine, and that the labor story is an integral and largely overlooked dimension of the industry’s broader decline.

The status and makeup of American seamen underwent monumental shifts during the 1930s and 1940s in response to economic, political, and military demands. Increased nationalization, improved working conditions, and a patriotic cause helped boost the standing of the blue water service, but intervention by the federal government, labor unions, and shipping companies also created great changes in the composition of the workforce. Even before the Second World War ended, federal actions, union intervention, a denial of wartime benefits, and continued criticism of radicalism began to erode seamen’s status, and ultimately the strength of the merchant marine itself. This work explores how greater controls on mariners from 1935 to 1955 negatively affected the industry and contends that labor played a key role in the transformation, and even decline, of the overall American Merchant Marine.

It also seeks to fill a historical gap created by the complicated nature of mariner's quasi-governmental status in this twenty year period. Generally speaking, labor, maritime, and military historians have all focused on specific aspects of contemporary maritime workers, yet have largely avoided overlap. Labor historians of the 1930s analyze "maritime labor" *working* in a wholly civilian American merchant marine industry. Military historians of the 1940s analyze "maritime personnel" *serving* in the U.S. Merchant Marine. Even maritime historians observe this conceptual break between the prewar and wartime years, treating the wartime mobilization of labor as though it was as nascent as the Liberty Ships launching from America's shipyards. This work attempts to draw greater continuity between these two narratives, connecting the militant radicals of the 1930s with the wartime heroes who kept ships sailing. After all, as much as government officials and union leaders hoped to refashion the composition and status of mariners during this time period, the merchant mariners of the wartime and postwar period were never wholly disassociated from the turmoil of the 1930s. As the subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the promises, prejudices, and participants of the earlier decade played a pivotal role in the future of maritime labor.

Finally, unlike a majority of works concerning merchant labor during World War II that concentrate on officers, or "licensed" personnel, this work focuses specifically on the unlicensed seamen who occupied subordinate positions aboard ship. This thesis also follows, but does not attempt to replicate, numerous studies on the monumental ship construction program of the Second World War. While important, these internal accounts often jump from the construction of the ships to the actual voyages, relegating the matter of manning and operating to a footnote. Although many scholars are quick to

point out the unprecedented increase in the number of *ships* of the merchant marine, far fewer have explored the expansion of its *mariners*.

Although this work explores overarching themes such as workers' rights and conditions, federal intervention, discriminatory hiring, race and ethnicity, and status and citizenship, it is generally organized chronologically. Chapter One begins by providing historical perspective and context into the seafaring profession and describes contemporary conditions in the maritime industry. It argues that, in response to unstable and adverse economic and working conditions during the 1930s, two powerful influences emerged in the form of stronger maritime unions and ground-breaking federal legislation. Both promised to reform and reshape the character and composition of mariners sailing in the American Merchant Marine. The newly-formed industrial union proposed to do this through collective action, control over hiring, and equitable employment practices. Policymakers proposed government-subsidized salaries, improved working conditions, and a regulated workforce that better adhered to American ideals.

Chapter Two reveals how federal intervention, union resistance, and the war emergency fundamentally altered the composition of maritime labor. Mariners, attracted by patriotic appeals and implicit guarantees of an improved status and future, became more accustomed to federal control. Despite the unprecedented recruitment of personnel and the consolidation of power wielded by newly created wartime agencies, this chapter argues that the federal government never fully managed to craft its ideal force of merchant manpower. Although a new generation of mariners joined the industry, it remained a complex force, subject to disparate perceptions.

Chapter Three shows that federal lawmakers ultimately reneged on America's implicit Depression-era and wartime promises to revitalize the merchant marine. The effect of this reversal in policy, epitomized by mariners' exclusion from the G.I. Bill of Rights, ultimately damaged not just the prospects of individual mariners, but the entire maritime industry.

Chapter One: *Derelict*: Seamen in the Great Depression

On July 30, 1934, a procession of 1,000 seamen gathered for one final act of defiance against shipowners. For eighty-two days, maritime workers in San Francisco had been on strike, bringing the city to a standstill. And as unrest spread, the flow of goods had ground to a halt in other ports up and down the West Coast. Initiated by longshoremen and embraced by seamen days later, the strike swelled as other transport workers joined the waterfront workers' cause, mounting one of the largest general strikes in history. It also turned violent. Police crackdowns, U.S. National Guard presence, and hordes of vigilante riot police threatened the striking workers. The ensuing months of clashes left two strikers dead and many more wounded.

By the time the seamen gathered on the morning of July 30, the general strike had collapsed and the confederacy of maritime workers had begun to crumble. The longshoremen voted the day before to return to work, and the beleaguered seamen would soon be forced to do the same. It seemed unlikely that maritime workers could achieve their demands for higher wages, better conditions, maritime union hiring halls, and collective bargaining.

Defeated but defiant, the seamen performed one more act of disobedience, protesting not just the turmoil of the past 82 days but also their poor treatment over the past decade at the hands of shipowners and even government officials. With legendary maritime union leader Andrew Furuseth looking on, the seamen lit a bonfire, mounted a cross, and earnestly began dipping their company union membership books in oil and

throwing them into the flames. “We are burning the seamen’s chains,” Furuseth declared.²

The embattled seamen returned to work the following day, their achievements uncertain. According to historian Bruce Nelson, the strike-torn waterfront saw “widespread confusion and a growing sense of betrayal.”³ Old divides between maritime workers returned, as discontent over union leadership deepened. Shipowners were shaken by the unrest, but the strike had forced them to make few concessions. Seamen also regarded the government uneasily as they tried to resolve contradictory memories of failed arbitration with the brutality of law enforcement.

Yet for individual seamen, the final act of burning their so-called “fink hall books,” represented a threshold moment. For more than a decade, these company-mandated documents had chained seamen to increasingly grim conditions, forcing them to accept hiring practices that imposed shipowner interests. Any seamen working in the industry had to obtain one of these books, which listed past voyages and conduct. The fink books also worked as a blacklist against any form of agitation including radicalism, union membership, and even simple workplace complaints. Once a seaman earned a black mark for even the smallest infraction, employment was nearly impossible.⁴ By burning these books, seamen hoped to usher in a new era of militancy, unrest, and autonomy. “God help anybody that flashes one of those slave market records around these parts again,” one seaman proclaimed. In this sense, the collapse of the 1934 strikes

² “Workers Return to Dock Jobs,” *Berkley Daily Gazette*, July 31, 1934; Alex, W. Roland, Jeffrey Bolster, Alexander Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship: America’s Maritime History Reenvisioned, 1600-2000* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 289.

³ Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 153-155.

⁴ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 73.

and the burning of the fink books on July 30 was not an impasse but a crossroads for mariners. Although the strikes ended anticlimactically, the coming years would bring both great vulnerability and great change within the maritime industry.⁵ The status of the mariners themselves amid this setting is the study of this chapter.

The seamen striking in 1934 had been an increasingly overlooked segment of society. The waterfront—once the lifeblood of coastal towns—gradually had become more isolated, industrial, and ignored. Accordingly, the perceived value of seamen too had deteriorated in recent decades. Long recognized for their transnationalism, individualism, and isolation, seamen had become ever more detached from American society. Yet the violent 1934 strikes and the flagging maritime industry were difficult for the public to ignore. Consequently, the government renewed its interest in the wayward industry during the 1930s. Simultaneously, other forces began to pressure lawmakers to take a renewed interest in seamen. Federal government corruption, declining commerce, and threats abroad invigorated legislators' calls to revamp the industry. This chapter explores the pressures put on seamen during the 1930s by the public, lawmakers and federal agencies, and the unions. These pressures include the wide gulf between public perceptions of seamen and the realities of seafaring, reasons behind the changing composition of the workforce, the impact of union rivalries and union resurgence, and finally, the codification of laws demanding the regeneration of maritime labor.

⁵ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 285; Stephen Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea: A History of the Sailors' Union of the Pacific, 1885-1995* (Sailors' Union of the Pacific, AFL-CIO: 1986), 110.

Myths and Realities of Seafarers

Classically seen as coarse drifters with limited allegiance to any one town, port, or ship, the personnel who operated commercial vessels during the 1930s were a diverse and dynamic group. Common archetypes ranged from irreligious drunks to uncivilized outsiders to radical anarchists. Experience also varied, including veteran “old salts” and boys as young as twelve seeking an escape or searching for adventure.

To understand the treatment of seamen in the 1930s, one must understand America’s strong seafaring legacy and the historical conditions of the workforce. One of the oldest occupations in the world, seafaring always had been a part of American life. Colonial ports revolved around waterborne commerce and seamen were a visible and vibrant participant in the economy and lifestyle. Following the American Revolution, Thomas Jefferson estimated that the industry occupied more than 100,000 Americans and seamen spanned all classes, ages, nationalities, and races.⁶ Historians often attribute its wide appeal to the guarantee of passage to unknown and promising horizons. Young men, including former slaves and free blacks, flocked to the sea, seeking exploits and opportunity. According to historian Paul A. Gilje, seamen “experienced a different freedom that came from the vast expanses of the ocean and the fact that he had the whole world to explore.”⁷

⁶ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 87; Leon Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World’s First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 2011), 11; Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6.

⁷ Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 2004), 68.

This spirit of adventure also appealed to those on land. During the first half of the nineteenth century, readers clamored for accounts of life at sea, inspiring a slew of novels, memoirs, and travelogues. Works by Herman Melville, James Fenimore Cooper, and Robert Lewis Stevenson captured the attention and imaginations of the American public. Personal memoirs relating adventure and adversity, popularized by Richard Henry Dana, also thrived. Described as “a hybrid form of literature” by historian Myra C. Glenn, these often hyperbolic accounts were “partly coming-of-age narratives, didactic reform works, war stories, picaresque rogue tales, captivity narratives, exposes of cruelty and injustice, and conversion narratives.”⁸ Seamen’s exotic yet relatable exploits were a real part of everyday nineteenth century life and popular culture.

Yet seamen in early America represented more than just adventure. After the Revolution, American seamen lost the protection of the British Empire. Barbary pirates captured vessels and enslaved seamen along the African coast, while British naval and merchant ships impressed seamen into service. Sensing these actions as a threat to American sovereignty, the public rallied behind seamen, and by the War of 1812, workers on the waterfront became a national symbol for liberty. In his study of antebellum seamen and their relationship to the state, Michal Taylor Raffety wrote that during this “golden age of sail,” seamen were “convenient metaphors for the spirit of a new, dynamic, mobile, commercial nation, and a ready stand-in for the quintessential American character.”⁹ Yet this perception faltered following the Civil War. Emphasis on American shipping declined in the Reconstruction period as the great American west

⁸ Myra C. Glenn, *Jack Tar’s Story: The Autobiographies and Memoirs of Sailors in Antebellum America* (Cambridge University Press, New York: 2010), 2-3.

⁹ Mathew Taylor Raffety, *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), 147, 216.

exerted a proportionally greater pull on national ambitions. With that change, seafarers faded from their prominent position in the nation's consciousness and imagination.¹⁰ Once the focus of church groups, benevolence societies, and reformers, seamen were gradually replaced by other pressing reform movements, leaving seamen even more adrift in the twentieth century.

While the public championed seamen as a symbol of liberty in early America, their working conditions were simultaneously– and paradoxically– akin to bondage. Despite repeated attempts at reform, the historically foul conditions and abusive relations between shipowner and seafarer survived into the industrial age.

During the nineteenth century, the status and rights of seafarers stood only barely above those of slaves, with men facing imprisonment if they broke their sailing contracts.¹¹ This form of involuntary servitude remained legal until the passage of the landmark Seamen's Act in 1915, which also abolished flogging and other forms of corporal punishment long banned on shore. Known as the "La Follette Act" in recognition of its sponsor, progressive Wisconsin senator Robert M. La Follette, the legislation also mandated a nine-hour workday, improved diets, facilities, and safety measures, and strengthened bargaining power for maritime unions. At the insistence of those unions, it also included English language requirements, disguised as a safety measure.¹² As a result, basic workplace rights had been achieved within the living memory of many of the older seamen participating in the 1930s strikes.

¹⁰ Andrew Gibson and Arthur Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean: A History of United States Maritime Policy* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 2000), 64.

¹¹ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 12; Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 183.

¹² Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 94.

The monumental La Follette Act had followed rather extreme changes at sea. Wind and sail had largely been replaced by steam engines during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Journey times had shortened, marine architecture had evolved, and jobs aboard ship had become more stratified. Modern seamen propelled their ships by heaping mounds of coal into filthy engine boilers, while work on deck began to mirror that of unskilled workers on land. These conditions not only sullied the physical workspace of seamen, including stifling, cramped quarters, and scorching, sooty engine rooms, but also began to erode the perception of seamen themselves. Slowly the romanticized deckhand of the mid-nineteenth century transformed into the marginalized, despoiled, industrialized merchant seamen of the twentieth century. Seamen, once a parable for the character of the nation, had been relegated to common laborers. Described by historian Leon Fink as “the downward passage of sailors from exotics to drudges,” the deskilling of maritime labor, like other industries, had a profound impact on perceptions of seamen.¹³

By the 1934 strikes, popular portrayals of seamen matched maritime’s often marginalized workforce. Summarizing this change in an 1930 article titled “The Unredeemables,” Joseph Lilly and Benjamin Hanft left little leeway in their assessment that “the American seaman today is not the modern counterpart of the man who went down to the sea in whaling boats and clipper ships. There is nothing of that old romance about him. Herman Melville would, perhaps, loathe him.” Yet their description of the seamen remained complex, equally disparaging and awestruck. While other workers had been “put through efficiency schools” and came out “docile,” the seamen stood as an

¹³ Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 145-147; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 14-15.

exception, “unimpressed by the blessings of prosperity, ignorant of the moral beneficence of prohibition” while “belligerent, boastful, and often-times besotted.”¹⁴ These diverging perceptions demonstrated the public’s tendency to both demonize and romanticize those who worked at sea.

Early film portrayals added to this complex caricature. In 1930, Paramount Pictures produced *Derelict*, starring George Bancroft as rugged first mate Bill Rafferty. With the tag line “A Man-Wrecked Woman! A Ship-Wrecked Man!” the screenplay took place on the modern high seas, chasing Rafferty as he fought for the love of a Havana showgirl, was dismissed from his post after negligently letting his ship collide with another, drunkenly steamed through a tropical storm, and repeatedly brawled with a fellow seamen.¹⁵

Rafferty ultimately wins the love of the showgirl, but the reputation of the merchant seaman suffered from this type of portrayal. Although a protagonist, Rafferty’s character is captivating for his coarse masculinity and exoticism, which were magnified by the veteran’s actor magnetism and prestige. As a seaman, however, Bancroft’s Rafferty is pugnacious, rough-edged, a careless employee, and a drunkard. This morally complicated portrayal matched the paradoxical public opinion of the merchant mariner as both sympathetic and threatening, recognizable and alien. Moviegoers may have seen a glimmer of themselves in the protagonist, but largely speaking, Rafferty fell outside

¹⁴ Joseph Lilly and Benjamin Hanft, “The Unredeemables,” *Outlook and Independent* (April 30, 1930): 688.

¹⁵ Mordaunt Hall, “Derelict (1930)” *New York Times*, November 22, 1930; *The American Film Institute Catalog of Motion Pictures Produced in the United States, 1921-1930* (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1971).

normal society. There was a dangerousness about the seaman that seemed best left at the docks, or even better, out at sea.

A Changing Mix

The lower skill requirements that transformed expert mariners into “unredeemable” citizens during the early twentieth century also had very real effects on the composition of the labor force. Shipping companies began replacing experienced seamen with cheaper workers including unemployed drifters, inexperienced boys, and foreign seamen. Lower requirements also meant fewer jobs for a wider pool of applicants, which only increased instability. By 1929, estimated annual turnover reached nearly 300 percent as more seamen vied for fewer positions.¹⁶

As a result, the seamen who participated in the strikes of 1934 had experienced broad fluctuations in their cohort in previous decades. Often these changes reflected the larger on and offshore labor markets rather than deliberate changes within the industry. Nonetheless, specific policy changes in recent years also had a profound impact on those serving in the merchant marine. As we shall see, protectionist legislation and a flagging industry left some seafarers in even worse positions than their fellow workers.

By the First World War, nearly 90 percent of seamen operating American flag ships came from foreign countries, particularly Great Britain and the seafaring Scandinavian nations. African Americans, who once made up as much as 18 percent of the maritime labor force during the eighteenth century, had largely been pushed out of the industry because of competition from immigrants and unfair hiring practices. At the same time, the number of Asian and Central American seamen was on the rise, and their

¹⁶ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 33.

acceptance of lower pay and worse conditions made them correspondingly attractive to shipowners and threatening to existing seamen.¹⁷ Significantly, America's protectionist 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act did not apply to seamen. Although lawmakers designed increasingly stringent and xenophobic laws to prevent the hiring of non-white and foreign seamen, including the English language requirements in 1915, these measures had limited impact on demographics. Even the unforgiving Immigration Act of 1924, which set a permanent quota system regulating the number of incoming foreign nationals, had a clause excluding "bonafide foreign seamen," allowing them to enter U.S. ports temporarily (and often longer).¹⁸ It was not until four years later, after years of declining shipping, that restrictions began to change. In the Merchant Marine Act of 1928, Congress included its first restrictive measures against foreign seamen. The law required that at least half of all crews on vessels receiving government subsidies be U.S. citizens. This came at a time when 44 percent of seamen sailing on U.S. flagged ships were citizens of another nation and 11 percent were naturalized U.S. citizens. After the passage of this legislation, foreign seamen sailing on U.S. ships began to decline, with alien seamen comprising 25 percent of the workforce by 1933.¹⁹

While this legislation affected the composition of seamen, so too did the larger economic conditions of the industry and nation. The American Merchant Marine had

¹⁷ Jeffrey Bolster, *Black Jacks: African American Seamen in the Age of Sail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 6, 223; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 42-43.

¹⁸ Benjamin W. Labaree, William M. Fowler, Jr., et al., *America and the Sea: A Maritime History* (Mystic, Connecticut: Mystic Seaport, 1998), 581; Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 106; Xiaojian Zhao, Edward J.W. Park, *Asian Americans: An Encyclopedia of Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political History* Volume 1 (Santa Barbara, CA: Greenwood, 2013), 864-865; John Mallory, ed. *United States Compiled Statutes, Annotated, 1916* Vol. 5 (St. Paul, MN: West Publishing Co, 1916), 5128.

¹⁹ "Composition of Labor Force in the Merchant Marine," *Monthly Labor Review* (1938): 349.

already been suffering nearly a decade-long slump by the time the Great Depression struck the rest of the country. Like agriculture and coal, the shipping industry stumbled during the 1920s, beginning with an oversaturation of merchant vessels after the massive emergency shipbuilding program during World War I and followed by a 1921 recession and decline in shipping demands. Not a single American shipyard constructed an ocean-going vessel from 1922 to 1928.²⁰ High wartime wages for mariners vanished during the decade, plummeting 15 to 35 percent as shipowners reinstated the twelve-hour day and as weakened seamen's unions lost their power to bargain collectively. In response, the proportion of American-born or naturalized seamen declined in the 1920s as they found employment on shore. Low pay also provided African Americans, who made up about 6 percent of unlicensed personnel, more opportunities. Prior to the increased unemployment of the 1930s, Black seamen could work in the higher paying engine and deck departments, although the lower paying stewards department employed nearly three-fourths of all Black mariners.²¹

These trends, however, quickly reversed following the stock market crash in 1929. During the Great Depression, rising unemployment on land began to force desperate workers out to sea. Dwindling commodity sales and general economic stagnation further debilitated the flagging industry.²² In this competitive labor market, the average wage of an able-bodied seaman dropped from \$64 per month in 1929 to \$52 by

²⁰ Maury Klein, *A Call to Arms: Mobilizing America for World War II* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2013), 73.

²¹ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, 286; Labaree, et. al., *America and the Sea*, 543; Herbert Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System: Race, Work, and the Law* (Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. Washington DC, 1977), 218, 228-233.

²² Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 286; Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 73; Labaree et al., *America and the Sea*, 511.

1934, and reportedly sank as low as \$25. As unemployment onshore continued to swell, men unaccustomed to the sea signed on for “shipaways.” In exchange for one month’s room and board, these novices received a paltry salary of \$1 per month. Facing competition from nearly-unpaid workers, the labor conditions for existing mariners further deteriorated.²³

For the American seamen who participated in or witnessed the West Coast strikes of 1934, these labor conditions were all too real. Exploitive salaries, discriminative hiring practices, long hours of employment, and cramped quarters made for deplorable conditions. Contracted for the length of just one voyage, seamen also lacked the stability of permanent employment and faced the whims of hiring halls rather than working steadily in a corporation. As we have seen, seamen had faced disproportionately desperate conditions for over a decade by 1934, and these conditions not only fomented fluctuations in the labor pool but also larger and increasingly militant unrest.²⁴

But who were the seafarers who worked in the merchant marine? Despite many colorful tales about seamen, data about mariners was sparse. According to a 1937 government report, “practically no statistics relating to the employment of seamen” existed. To compensate, the federal government commissioned a survey of 1,000 seamen in New York Harbor. The findings provided limited insight: most seamen hailed from

²³ US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Handbook of Labor Statistics* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1936), 1017; U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, November 10, 1937), 46; Labaree et al., *America and the Sea*, 543-45.

²⁴ Chairman Emory S. Land to Senator Josiah Bailey, January 18, 1939, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Records of the U.S. Maritime Commission (hereafter Maritime Commission Records), National Archives and Records Administration, College Park, MD (hereafter NARA-CP).

coastal states, were single, had no bank accounts, and did not vote. Time spent at sea ranged from one month to forty years, and the average seamen sailed on the same ship for only months at a time before moving to another ship or occupation.²⁵

The report demonstrated that there were few hard facts about mariners. In part, this could be attributed to the transiency of the industry, with its high turnover rates and workforce absent from land-based statisticians for long stretches of time. The decentralized nature of the industry also added to this difficulty. No one association existed for shipowners and operators; the largest maritime union was highly segmented by craft; and numerous government agencies held regulatory control over fractured portions of the industry. For example, the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the Department of Commerce, overseas consul and customs officials, the U.S. Public Health Service, and the U.S. Coast Guard all monitored different aspects of merchant personnel.

The Department of Commerce offered one of the best contemporary glimpses into the composition of the merchant marine. Its Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection conducted quarterly surveys of the industry throughout the 1930s. According to a summary prepared by the Bureau's Division of Wages, Hours, and Working Conditions in 1935 and 1936, which surveyed 17,187 active seamen, the average age of workers was 33.8 years old. Sixty-two percent of those sailing were older than thirty while 2.4 percent were over seventy. Nearly 2 percent of the merchant marine also included women who served as stewardesses, cooks, and maids aboard passenger liners. African Americans made up over 6 percent of the crews, while foreign seamen accounted

²⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, F: Census of Seamen, Box 373, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.; U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 44.

for 19.2 percent. Most of those foreign workers hailed from Britain, Spain, the Philippines, Germany, Norway, China, Portugal, South America, Central America, the Netherlands, or Sweden. The highest percentage of foreign seamen worked in the stewards' department, particularly on passenger vessels. Chinese stewards comprised the majority of foreign workers on passenger vessels, while Filipinos held the same position on cargo and tanker ships. Chinese seamen were also more prominent in oceanic trade on the Pacific Coast. Occupations for unlicensed seamen (whether on deck, in the engine room, or in the stewards' departments) were highly stratified by age, with chief stewards and deck watchmen more likely to be older, while the lower ranks that included bellboys, messboys, and porters averaged just twenty-three years old.²⁶

Other surveys conducted by the Bureau of Navigation and Steamboat Inspection provided an additional window into the lives of these seamen. Prompted by increased unease about the quality of maritime labor, the Bureau assembled more than 500 cases charging crew unrest or insubordination in 1936 alone. Charges ranged from refusal to stand watch, abstaining from fire drills, and refusal to sail until captains addressed complaints.²⁷ These rebellious instances represented a growing level of unrest and even militancy in the maritime industry, while also reflecting American labor turmoil at large. By the end of 1934, passengers, shipowners, maritime union members, government regulators, and even seamen themselves were ready for major changes. Who dictated and

²⁶ "Composition of Labor Force in the Merchant Marine," *Monthly Labor Review* 349 (1938): 349-353; "Resolution (Women Going Back to Sea), Box 419, P/Entry 1 Central Correspondence Files, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records NARA-CP; "Table S201—Age Distribution of Personnel Employed on American Steam and Motor Merchant Vessels," Box 373, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

²⁷ "Crew Troubles," *Time* 27 Issue 16, (April 20, 1936), 70; "Discipline at Sea," *Washington Post*, April 9, 1936.

controlled these changes, and what effect they would have on the composition of seamen, would become a tense subject of debate in the coming years.

Wards of the State?

Mariners were not alone in their suffering. The Big Strike of 1934 came at a time when desperation and unrest gripped much of the country. To many, the Great Depression signaled fundamental flaws in industrial capitalism that could only be rectified through powerful means. The Roosevelt Administration responded to this challenge and undertook massive changes in bureaucracy and infrastructure, earnestly working to foster stability and growth. Accordingly, the year 1934 marked a turning point in federal involvement in the maritime industry.²⁸

In part, government interest in the waterfront was a reaction to the unrest demonstrated on the docks of San Francisco.²⁹ Reoccurring shipping disasters and mounting concerns over waste and mismanagement further raised public ire. However, increased federal oversight reflected larger New Deal trends toward economic stabilization, structural reform, income security, national defense, and greater regulation of public utilities. While reforming the maritime industry may not have warranted action in the first Hundred Days of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's presidency, lawmakers earnestly began reconceiving the very basis of the merchant marine. To a degree, this involvement complimented past federal attempts to revamp the industry. However, it quickly became clear that the newly proposed reforms would affect nearly every aspect

²⁸ Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 5-7.

²⁹ *House Hearings to Develop an American Merchant Marine: Hearings Before the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries, HR 7521, 74th Cong., 1st sess., March-May 1935*, 189.

of how the industry would construct, subsidize, and operate its ships. It would also fundamentally change conceptions of the ideal American mariner.

The policymakers trying to influence the character of the merchant marine during the 1930s joined generations of like-minded forbearers. Though a private industry, America's waterborne commerce has always been intricately bound with the country's economic and national security and has helped propel the nation's trade, transportation, technological development, and imperial expansion. As a result, the private industry also functioned as a public utility of sorts, whose services could be relied on, and also regulated, by the nation. Policymakers have fostered, subsidized, and even mandated maritime policy.³⁰

Lawmakers also took interest in the individual merchant mariner.³¹ Because federal law cast the industry as both quasi-public and quasi-private, seamen historically enjoyed an equally complex relationship with the state. Beginning in 1934, a slew of Congressional leaders and federal agencies set out to coax, mold, and tidy-up maritime personnel into an ideal workforce. But lawmakers hardly were operating with a blank slate; the long experience of seamen in American history had established many

³⁰ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 3.

³¹ Historians too, have long explored these endeavors including studies on disciplinary reform, sailors' rights, and seamen healthcare. See Paul A. Gilje, *Liberty on the Waterfront: American Maritime Culture in the Age of Revolution*; *The Republic Afloat: Law, Honor, and Citizenship in Maritime America*; *Sweatshops at Sea: Merchant Seamen in the World's First Globalized Industry, from 1812 to the Present* and Matthew Raffety, "Discipline but Not Punish: Legality and Labor Control at Sea, 1790 to 1861," in *Jack Tar, Pirates, and Memory*.

precedents. Congress's determination to fix the "public transportation utility" built upon a tradition of paternalism.³²

Indeed, the federal government had a centuries-long history of protecting mariners. In addition to legislation covering shipbuilding, shipping routes, tariffs, imports and exports, safety at sea, and maritime infrastructure, federal laws enveloped the lowly seamen. Statutes passed as early as 1790 had prevented seafarers from breaking their shipping contracts, and early regulations condoned harsh punishments by ship captains.³³ Seaman suffered under harsher laws than laborers on land and received worse compensation. To discourage desertion, strikes, or imprisonment, early American policies also prevented seamen from receiving credit, traveling without discharge papers, or leaving docked ships after dark, thus keeping seamen on hand and under their captain's servitude.³⁴ If punitive, lawmakers were also paternalistic. Congress passed "An Act for the Protection and Relief of Seamen" in 1796 followed by "An Act for the Relief of Sick and Disabled Seamen" in 1798. The former issued certificates of citizenship to U.S. seamen in an attempt to prevent the continuation of British impressment. These certificates became the first issuance of any documentation defining and certifying American nationality. The later act, which aimed to provide relief for

³² During the 1935 Congressional hearings debating changes in the industry, lawmakers repeatedly referred to the Merchant Marine as a "public transportation utility," signaling perceptions of the industry's quasi-public status. *House Hearings to Develop an American Merchant Marine: Hearings Before the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, HR 7521, 74th Cong., 1st sess., March-May 1935, 922.

³³ Matthew Raffety, "Discipline but Not Punish: Legality and Labor Control at Sea, 1790-1861," in *Pirates, Jack Tar, and Memory: New Directions in American Maritime History*, ed. By Paul A. Gilje and William (Pencak Mystic Seaport: Mystic Connecticut, 2007), 185-6.

³⁴ Jesse Lemisch, "Jack Tar in Streets: Merchant Seamen in the Politics of Revolutionary America," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 24, no. 3 (Jul., 1968): 378-80; Labaree et. al., *America and the Sea*, 106-7.

ailing seamen, created a system of marine hospitals in large Atlantic port towns. Those sanatoriums became the precursors to today's U.S. Public Health Service, making seamen the very first population identified by the nation as needing particular care and protection. This tradition of paternalism shaped how the nation perceived of and treated its mariners, and the U.S. government's relationship with seamen continued in that vein well into the twentieth century. Indeed, seamen held the legal status of wards of the state— akin to orphans— until the passage of the 1915 Seamen's Act. Less than two decades later, this “part coercive, part protective” relationship still existed between American mariners and their nation.³⁵

Along with its long history of protecting mariners, the U.S. government also had continuously kept watch over the industry at large. Officials levied protective tariffs, dredged harbors, aided ship construction, created navigational aids, and subsidized shipping lines.³⁶ However, as the nation's commercial interests abroad expanded significantly around the turn of the century, federal attention to the merchant marine likewise increased. This interest also coincided with a precipitous decline in the strength of the American Merchant Marine: the percentage of exports transported in American-owned vessels dropped from 72 percent in 1850 to less than 10 percent by 1900.³⁷

When the Great Powers went to war in 1914, the United States, though neutral, experienced the full vulnerability of this imbalance. The warring countries carried more

³⁵ Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 14, 43-54; Raffety, *The Republic Afloat*, 177, 196; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 12. According to historian Leon Fink, even this paternalism was not new to mariners. Ancient codes bound seamen to ships while the medieval Rolls of Oleron and Statutes of Visby regulated conditions at sea.

³⁶ Gerald R. Jantscher, *Bread upon the Waters: Federal Aids to the Maritime Industries* (Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution, 1975), 1.

³⁷ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 198.

than 70 percent of the world's foreign commerce, and when their merchant ships were requisitioned into auxiliary navies, shipments across the Atlantic slowed and America's trade suffered. Once the United States entered World War I, in large part due to Germany waging unrestricted submarine warfare on America's merchant fleet, wartime administrators again felt the strains of a weak merchant marine as they struggled to transport enough men and materiel overseas.³⁸

For U.S. lawmakers, the First World War provided an argument for maintaining a strong merchant marine in peacetime and wartime. Yet creation of an effective maritime policy proved difficult. Congress passed acts in 1920 and 1928 that subsidized shipbuilding and intended to restore the American Merchant Marine. Despite this increased federal intervention, however, the industry had pitifully declined – for reasons we will consider – by the time the stock market crashed in 1929.³⁹

When President Franklin Delano Roosevelt took office in 1933, interest in revitalizing the maritime industry reemerged. Several high-profile shipping disasters, such as the 1934 sinking of the SS *Morro Castle* off the coast of New Jersey, inspired calls for regulatory reform. Policymakers also sought to correct what was now considered to be a disastrous Merchant Marine Act of 1928, which provided Department of Commerce subsidies for ship construction in exchange for U.S. Mail services aboard commercial vessels. Investigated by a special Congressional committee led by Senator Hugo Black, the rampant corruption and graft that plagued the program scandalized the nation. Poorly defined policies, greedy shipping magnates, and corrupt government officials enabled a subsidy program that lined the pockets of industrialists but did little to

³⁸ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 273.

³⁹ Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 126.

improve America's merchant marine.⁴⁰ According to historians Andrew Gibson and Arthur Donovan, the committee's findings, carefully laid out to lawmakers, produced one of the "most scathing reports ever produced by a congressional committee investigating a specific industry and a governmental agency."⁴¹

In the face of such a damning indictment, many lawmakers pushed for the end of government shipping subsidies altogether. Yet Roosevelt opposed this strategy. As a former Assistant Secretary of the Navy, the president staunchly supported a strong Navy and merchant marine. He sought to reverse America's commercial vulnerability and trade dependency on other nations by increasing shipping subsidies and making them more transparent. He reasoned that should war break out among other seafaring nations, or should the United State itself enter a conflict, the country would need the merchant marine as an independent mechanism for foreign trade and as well as a strong naval auxiliary.⁴² As the decade wore on and threats overseas materialized, this last factor became increasingly important to the maritime industry. Long seen by lawmakers as an important means of wartime transportation, overseas shipping received an overhaul. So too did conceptions of the ideal American mariner.

Congress responded to the Black Report and the President's urgings by passing the U.S. Merchant Marine Act of 1936. The most comprehensive piece of legislation ever levelled at the maritime industry, the act stripped away existing programs and

⁴⁰ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 295-297.

⁴¹ Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 127.

⁴² Rene De la Pedraja, *A Historical Dictionary of the U.S. Merchant Marine and Shipping Industry: Since the Introduction of Steam* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 417-419; *Committee on Commerce, Merchant Marine Act of 1936*, 74th Cong., 2d sess., 1936, S Rep. 1721, 1-6; Labaree et. al., *America and the Sea*, 536; Samuel A. Lawrence *United States Merchant Shipping Policies and Politics* (Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution, 1966), 44.

enacted sweeping reforms. It immediately replaced the old Shipping Board with the U.S. Maritime Commission, which became responsible for the creation and maintenance of a well-balanced merchant fleet and for the development of updated and safe vessel designs. Although the legislation maintained that ownership and operation of the merchant marine would remain in the hands of business, its directive included subsidizing the operation of ocean-liners, appropriating loans for ship construction, and finally, the creation of wage and working conditions standards for American seamen.⁴³

While early motivations for the statute focused on the economic revitalization of the merchant marine, by the late 1930s, Congressional leaders had grown more concerned with national defense. Vague fears overseas had transformed into more palpable threats. With the ever-increasing size of the German, Japanese, and Soviet armies and navies, the newly formed U.S. Maritime Commission concentrated most on ship construction to augment the paltry American fleet in the event that Europe went to war. Commissioners were determined to modernize American shipping by building fifty ships in ten years, thus replacing the obsolete fleet built during World War I.⁴⁴

In addition to concentrating its efforts on ship construction and operating subsidies, the federal government also turned to improving the quality of maritime workers. As the *New York Times* claimed before the bill was passed: “It is idle to talk of building up the American Merchant Marine if simultaneously the quality of its personnel

⁴³ Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 137-141.

⁴⁴ Elmo Paul Hohman, *Seamen Ashore: A Study of the United Seaman's Service and of Merchant Seamen in Port: Volume II* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1952), 25; Labaree et. al., *America and the Sea*, 541; Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 177.

is not improved.”⁴⁵ Some of these changes were directed at ships’ officers. Those commanding the deck and engineer departments, according to the Act, would now be required to join the Naval Reserve. In part, this would augment the Naval Reserve Corps. It would also further distinguish merchant marine officers from unlicensed seamen. The Act further stated that officers alone should wear uniforms, distinguishing insignia, and gold braids. And Officer’s sleeping and eating quarters had to be separate from those of other crewmembers.

In addition to sharply distinguishing the status of officers from unlicensed seamen, the Act created further distance between American and foreign seamen. Building on the 1928 strictures, it required native-born and naturalized citizens comprise a staggering 90 percent of crews sailing on government subsidized vessels. Alien seamen could only sail on government-subsidized vessels if they held a valid declaration of intention to become an American citizen. Since 37 percent of seamen sailing on American ships in 1936 were foreign-born, this statute would compel seamen to either declare their intention to become American citizens, sail on non-subsidized vessels, or sail for another flag. Asian seamen, who could not obtain American citizenship at the time, would be forced to do one of the later options.⁴⁶

For a majority of unlicensed seamen, the most influential part of the 1936 Merchant Marine Act concerned wage and living conditions. Title II of the act “authorized and directed” the Maritime Commission “to investigate the employment and

⁴⁵ Felix Belair, Jr., “Merchant Marine Reform Urged: Modernized Fleet of Ships and Better Crews are Sought Through Establishment of Centralized Federal Authority,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1936.

⁴⁶ Merchant Marine Act of 1936, Public Law 74th Cong., 2d sess., 1936. (June 29, 1936), accessed <http://www.usmm.org/mmact1936.html#mma19>.

wage conditions in ocean-going shipping.” After the investigation, the Commission would define minimum manning and wage scales on any merchant ship receiving an operating subsidy.⁴⁷

The Maritime Commission completed its mandate to investigate wages and conditions the following year. Published and presented to Congress in November, 1937, the *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine* devoted much of its attention to shipping policies and requirements. Yet the maritime labor force also received both attention and condemnation.

By the time of its publication, minimum-wage scales on all government-subsidized ships had already been adopted, but the industry’s complex labor conditions had been left untouched. Labeling seamen as having “a unique status under the law,” the *Economic Survey* identified personnel as one of “the most difficult problems” confronting the Commission. To obtain information on maritime labor, the Commission held hearings in various port cities and invited seamen, union representatives, and shipowners to air their grievances. Investigators also boarded more than forty different vessels, and found many of the seamen’s complaints justified. Ships quarters were “crowded, insanitary, and poorly ventilated,” food was “unpalatable,” and heating systems needed improvements. Demonstrating the Commission’s proclivity toward ship design and construction, the survey did not include any specific grievances from seamen. But it did go on to make recommendations about adequate facilities. New Maritime Commission vessel designs would have recreation rooms, better messrooms, additional berthing space, improved heating and ventilations, moisture proof materials, and insulating bulkheads.

⁴⁷ Lawrence, *United States Merchant Shipping Policies and Politics*, 65-66; Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 137, 153.

The survey also acknowledged the need for additional manning scales and working conditions as well as vacation time for both officers and unlicensed seamen.⁴⁸

The survey then quickly turned course, censuring the industry for being “characterized by an unenlightened attitude on the part of both employer and employee.”⁴⁹ Poor conditions imposed by the shipowner, misconduct among seamen, and strained labor relations between the two were identified as main grounds for alarm. For each problem, the U.S. Maritime Commission prescribed increased government oversight as a solution.

The *Economic Survey* reproached the “shortsightedness” of employers, whose appalling wage and living conditions and repression of labor for more than a decade was bound to cause strife. To address this maltreatment, the survey recommended the creation of a maritime labor board for the adjudication of labor disputes and for setting minimum condition requirements. Citing similar boards used by the railroad industry, the “mediation tribunal” would help prevent interruptions in waterborne commerce while also promptly settling all grievances.⁵⁰

Seamen themselves, however, were also identified as a major issue. Echoing the sentiments of the *New York Times* a year before, the Commission reported that “unless something is done to reduce interunion friction, to increase the efficiency of our crews, and to restore order and discipline upon our ships, all Government efforts to develop a strong American fleet will be futile.” Maritime personnel, maritime experts claimed, suffered from transient employment, a lack of discipline, and poor training. In response,

⁴⁸ U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 46.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, 44.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 44-49.

the Commission gave itself unprecedented permission to shape the overall character of merchant manpower.

As a first step, the Commission identified an immediate remedy for disorder at sea: continuous employment. Rather than the “archaic system” of seamen signing on for one voyage at a time, the survey recommended hiring on a continuous basis. According to the commissioners, this system would reduce the “kaleidoscopic turnover characteristic of the industry” and help maintain orderly industrial relations. It also fit squarely within the New Deal agenda of securing full employment for all workers.

Though logical, adopting continuous employment would significantly change the nature of the occupation. The innocuous paragraph in the survey, which acknowledged that the per-voyage contract system had been around since the days of sail, points to the authors’ naiveté. In addition to Maritime Commission staff, “outside experts” – including naval personnel and professors in commerce, transportation, mechanical and marine engineering, and business economics – helped draft the report. None of these experts grasped the radical nature of this suggestion, nor anticipated the backlash that would come from seamen. That they could conclude, with limited explanation, that “there seems to be no reason for [the] continuance” of per-voyage contracts indicates both their sincerity and their ignorance of maritime labor.⁵¹

Although not stated explicitly, the *Economic Survey* shows that the Commission was willing to modify, augment, and even scrap existing personnel as readily as outmoded ships. From their perspective, mariner’s conduct on board was “disgraceful.” The survey observed that

⁵¹ U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 2, 47-9.

order and discipline have in many cases disappeared. Passengers complain of insolent treatment. Vessels have been delayed by the frequent use of the 'sit down' and 'quickie' [strike]. Such conditions must be remedied and remedied forthwith. With conditions remaining as they are today it is only a question of time before disgusted shippers and worried travelers turn to the vessels of our competitors.⁵²

The survey provides no evidence of a specific study or incident that informed its findings, but it is clear that the perception of general disorder and lack of discipline aboard ship was commonplace. According to a 1936 *New York Times* article, "there is probably no nation so plagued as we are with unmanageable seamen."⁵³ At the same time, the U.S. Coast Guard reported hundreds of recent cases of crew insubordination while passenger complaints aboard ocean liners had reportedly risen sharply.⁵⁴ Undoubtedly, for the veteran naval personnel drafting the survey, workplace performance aboard a merchant ship must have contrasted sharply with their seafaring experience. The less-structured, unruly atmosphere and the riotous, individualistic seamen were alien and even dangerous to those accustomed to military rule.

In response, the Commission recommended a new training program intended to restore order and discipline to American vessels. Supervised by the Coast Guard, the program would create training stations for merchant seamen. The program, undoubtedly conceived in part by *Economic Survey* contributor Captain Felix Riesenber, would train 500 American citizens between the ages of 18 and 23, recruited from "all sections of the country." Over a course of one year, the "recruits" would be "enlisted" for three months

⁵² U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 46.

⁵³ Belair, Jr., "Merchant Marine Reform Urged."

⁵⁴ "Crew Troubles," *Time* 27 Issue 16 (April 20, 1936), 70.

of shore training, six months at sea on a merchant vessel, and three months on a Coast Guard cutter.⁵⁵

Additionally, the Commission proposed the creation of a national merchant marine academy specifically for officers, similar to the four existing state academies in New York, Pennsylvania, Massachusetts, and California. Fashioned in the mold of Annapolis or West Point, the recommendation operated under the belief that “the training of officers is properly a Federal and not a State function.”

The survey also casually recommended considering a more comprehensive program for existing personnel. After completing training courses, seamen could join a “maritime service.” Although not compulsory, payment during the training period and the additional payment for one month a year could act as inducements.⁵⁶

It is not difficult to detect the nationalizing and militarizing forces behind this program. In pursuit of obedience and order, the Commission promoted “a new concept of service” aboard merchant ships.⁵⁷ In this pivotal survey it is possible to witness a transition from a maritime steward’s definition of “service” (performance of duties similar to a waiter or servant) to one more akin to the armed forces (performance of duties on behalf of the nation). In fact, the labor recommendations provided by the Commission allow little agency or oversight by merchant mariners themselves, nor the unions representing them. According to the survey, “the sea is no place for divided authority. When a man puts foot on the deck of a ship he becomes part of a disciplined organism subject to the navigation laws of the United States.” Here, the U.S. Maritime

⁵⁵ U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 51.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 50-52.

⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 47.

Commission staked its claim, reminding seamen that they “must recognize that the nature of their calling, which gives them a unique status under the law, also imposes upon them obligations not common to shore occupations.”⁵⁸ In this case, these obligations included the revamping of their occupation, from a transnational, individualistic, professionally isolated subculture to a single, disciplined, nationalized “organism.”

The section on maritime labor in the *Economic Survey* ended hopefully, observing that “there is every reason to expect that a high type of personnel drawn from all sections of the country can be attracted to our merchant marine.” This optimism, however, naively overlooked the opposition the program almost certainly would face from maritime labor unions and seamen themselves. Although the Commission acknowledged that such opposition had been suggested to them, it blithely ignored such warnings, arguing that labor would not “oppose any reasonable plan for raising the standards of its craft.”⁵⁹ In a tumultuous decade in which private industries, public programs, and people struggled to survive, this attitude proved too optimistic.

A More Perfect Union?

For the seamen in the 1930s, memories of government oversight were more likely negative than positive, and most were convinced that they needed strong unions to protect themselves. The previous decade had seen some of the worst conditions for seamen in years. The U.S. Shipping Board, however, had not only turned a blind eye but also repeatedly ruled against the beleaguered workmen. More than that, seamen often experienced acute harassment by law enforcement officers in some ports—encounters that

⁵⁸ U.S. Maritime Commission, *Economic Survey of the American Merchant Marine*, 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

made deeper impressions than distant actions by the more labor-friendly Roosevelt Administration. Despite laudable promises within the 1936 Act, seamen remained wary.

Simultaneously, internal fracturing within seamen's own strongest organization, the International Seamen's Union, generated confusion and distrust. At a time when rank and file seamen were becoming increasingly organized and radicalized, union leaders counseled conservatism. The result was a rupture that would influence unlicensed seamen's labor-relations for decades to come. It would also affect how each faction envisioned its ideal seafarer.⁶⁰

American seamen had organized as early as the 1880s, and the International Seamen's Union of America (ISU) officially formed in 1892. Similar to a federation, the ISU was largely decentralized, comprising of numerous regional and autonomous unions divided by maritime occupation or craft. Representing unlicensed (or non-officer) seamen, ISU unions included the powerful Sailors Union of the Pacific (SUP), the Marine Cooks and Stewards Association of the Pacific (MSC), the Marine Cooks and Stewards Association of the Atlantic and Gulf, and the Marine Firemen's, Oilers' and Watertenders' Union (MFOW), among others.⁶¹

As an affiliate of the American Federation of Labor (AFL), the ISU had a deep connection to craft unionism which helped reinforce the stratified nature aboard ship. Members of the deck department – including able-bodied seamen, ordinary seamen, carpenters, boatswains, apprentices, and deckboys – saw themselves as superior to those

⁶⁰ Joseph P. Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 141-155; Howard Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets? The Making of Radical and Conservative Unions on the Waterfront* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 9.

⁶¹ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 8-9.

working in the engine and stewards departments. Ethnic and racial divides also bred stratification. White seamen, particularly Scandinavians, largely made up the deck department, while Irish Americans dominated the engine room. Stewards, indisputably the lowest in ranking, were often black or non-white foreigners. Other worker divisions also existed between vessel types (whether passenger, cargo, or tanker) as well as ocean-going versus coastal trade.⁶²

The internal frictions fortified maritime craft unionism, which thrived in the early decades of the twentieth century, in part due to the passage of the La Follette Act in 1915 and the success of the 1919 seamen's strike. The ISU, led by the fiery Andrew Furuseth, negotiated unprecedentedly high wages and improved working conditions during the 1910s. Yet the decline in shipping and the overpopulation of labor markets in the 1920s left the unions and their seamen vulnerable. Sensing this weakness, recently organized shipowner associations struck hard at the ISU, joining a wide-ranging nationwide trend against unionism. When an ISU-led strike collapsed in 1921, shipowners reinstated open shop hiring, eventually adopted the despised company union hiring halls and “fink books,” and allowed wage and workplace conditions to plummet.⁶³ In less than ten years, the vigor of the ISU had evaporated and ISU membership plunged from 115,000 in 1920 to 16,000 in 1923.⁶⁴

This decline wrought not only evaporating jobs at sea, but also rising disconnect between seamen and their union leaders. The industry and the ISU remained weak through the 1920s, but the West Coast Waterfront Strike of 1934 reignited both seamen’s

⁶² Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 31-32.

⁶³ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 286-87; Nelson, 45, 67-68.

⁶⁴ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 67.

discontent over conditions and their leadership. Frustrated by inaction, rank and file seamen aligned with other waterfront workers and seafaring crafts to push a more radical agenda. Furuseth and the ISU, meanwhile, fruitlessly worked with shipowners to compromise and end the strikes. With an estimated all-time low of 5,000 members in 1934, the ISU, however, hardly represented most seamen.⁶⁵

Despite the ISU's dubious representation during the Big Strike of 1934, its membership again blossomed after the unrest, reaching an estimated 50,000 by 1935.⁶⁶ This stability, however, did not last long amid increased waterfront unrest. Successive strikes organized by rank and file union members in 1935 and 1936 gave way to more militant measures including the adoption of sit-down strikes, as mariners imitated the model set by autoworkers against General Motors. In response to this insubordination by its own members, the ISU expelled its most powerful union, the Seamen's Union of the Pacific, charging that it had been infiltrated by communists.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 67. Dedicated to craft unionism, ISU leaders feared radical calls for "One Big Union" among maritime workers. However, this trend, which had been gaining steam in the early years of the Great Depression among all of organized labor, had deep roots in maritime unions. While the ISU had been battling shipowners for control of hiring, other more radical elements had been vying to represent seamen. One such union, the Marine Workers Industrial Union (MWIU) formed in 1930. With strong ties to the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) and organized by members of the Communist Party, the MWIU supported industrial unionism and hoped to unite the waterfront against oppressive shipping companies and obsolete presumably AFL unionism. In concert with other radical elements of the waterfront, including Harry Bridges of the International Longshoreman's Association, the MWIU promoted union controlled hiring during the 1934 Strike. Its rejection of craft unionism also helped inspire other coalitions including Bridges' Maritime Federation of the Pacific Coast, the Industrial Union of Marine and Shipbuilding Workers of America, and ultimately the National Maritime Union. See Nelson and Labaree, 545.

⁶⁶ Labaree et. al, *America and the Sea*, 543-45; *House Hearings to Develop an American Merchant Marine: Hearings Before the Committee on Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, HR 7521, 74th Cong., 1st sess., March-May 1935, 549.

⁶⁷ Goldberg, *The Maritime Labor Story*, 143; Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 119-120.

At the same time, the ISU's continuing conservatism and lack of support on both coasts inspired a large group of left-wing seamen to break away from the ISU in 1937 and form the National Maritime Union (NMU). Led by the outspoken Joseph Curran, the union supported a more aggressive and progressive agenda than the ISU, including sit-down strikes and other forms of direct action. As an affiliate of the recently formed Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the NMU also embraced industrial unionism. By the end of 1937, a majority of shipping lines had recognized the new union, and its membership swelled to 47,325 seamen.⁶⁸

With the ISU in tatters, the American Federation of Labor revoked the charter of the decades old union and reassembled a new union in the following year. The Seafarer's International Union (SIU) readmitted the Seamen's Union of the Pacific (SUP) back into the orbit of the AFL. Although both the NMU and the SIU represented all American ports, the NMU had a larger presence on the Atlantic and Gulf coasts while the SIU dominated on the Pacific.⁶⁹

Fierce antagonism between the two unions arose immediately, at a time when union power was cresting. Between 1934 and 1938, maritime workers launched a staggering 589 strikes in response to their dismal working conditions. This unrelenting series of work stoppages finally succeeded in gaining seamen nominal improvements in wages and hours. It also won unions control of hiring. Union-controlled hiring halls gave members preference and adopted rotational hiring practices. As a result, employment became more a democratic representation of unionized seamen. It also

⁶⁸ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 231.

⁶⁹ Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 218-219.

consolidated union power, making membership nearly essential. Individual seamen were obliged to enjoy the protection, patronage, and power of the unions.⁷⁰

This newly-won control of hiring only increased the rivalry between the NMU and SIU. On ships where one union dominated, seamen of the other union were often taunted, abused, or even denied employment.⁷¹ This system of dual unionism resulted in increasingly stratified ships and policies. The NMU, for its part, faced frequent charges of communism. Although they were not an official organ of the Communist Party, many of its top officials were Party members or had affiliations and there were strong radical elements within the rank and file.⁷² More than a vehicle of communism, however, the NMU broadly championed left-wing policies of social welfare, political and direct action, and nondiscrimination. In an industry becoming increasingly hostile towards minorities, the NMU had a strict policy supporting all seamen “without regard to race, creed, or color.”⁷³

The SIU, on the other hand, continued backing the discriminatory practices long encouraged by its predecessor. Unlike NMU ships, where Black seamen could serve in all departments, SIU ships limited non-white workers to the Stewards Department and the Seamen’s Union of the Pacific (SUP) denied African Americans union membership altogether. The SIU also lobbied shipping companies and policymakers alike for anti-

⁷⁰ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 163-167, 268; Kimeldorf, *Reds or Rackets?*, 30; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 4.

⁷¹ B. Arevalo, “Hitting Below the Belt,” *Voice of the Federation* (December 30, 1937): 2.

⁷² Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 87-89, 229.

⁷³ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 9; Lester Rubin, William S. Swift, and Herbert R. Northrup, *Negro Employment in the Maritime Industries: A Study of Racial Policies in the Shipbuilding, Longshore, and Offshore Maritime Industries* Volume VII- Studies of Negro Employment (The Industrial Research Unit, The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, 1974), 42.

immigrant labor laws to help safeguard their employment.⁷⁴ Critics of the NMU's welcoming policies towards immigrants and African Americans, SIU leaders and fear-mongering lawmakers alike were quick to point out that the NMU's hiring practices aligned with the recent Sixth Comintern Congress of the Communist Party's emphasis on increasing "Negro" membership.⁷⁵

The ideological schism that existed between the two emerging unions broadened as each sought to define itself and in opposition to the other. Charges of communism and radicalism by the SIU likely drove more left-leaning seamen into the NMU, while the NMU's charges of traditionalism and syndicalism likely drove the more reactionary to the SIU. And within each union, these principles pushed leaders toward either extreme. While the vast majority of seamen were far more moderate than the rhetoric, it is also true that the polarities began to shape and characterize the merchant marine workforce. Unions ensured that whole ships sailed with solely NMU or SIU members on board. Looking to minimize strife, shipowners supported this arrangement.⁷⁶ Yet it also meant that when one union dominated a certain shipping line or port, its hiring practices prevailed. Segregated ships crisscrossed with integrated ships. Sit down strikes (a

⁷⁴ Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 218-220; Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 162; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 48-49.

⁷⁵ *Amending the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, Part 10 Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce and Education and Labor*, S. 3078, 75th Cong. 3rd sess., February 1938, 1004.

⁷⁶ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 291; "Amending the Merchant Marine," 983; "Inside the C.I.O.— Joe Curran Challenges Old-Line Unions and Wins Gains from Employers on Atlantic Coast," *New York World-Telegram*, January 18, 1938; Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Seas*, 116.

hallmark of the burgeoning NMU) sprang up in some regions but not others. And charges of waterfront radicalism either rankled or emboldened.⁷⁷

The animosity between the NMU and the SIU was not unique to the maritime trades in the depression decade. In his study on maritime labor during the 1930s, Bruce Nelson explains that “fratricidal warfare” developed between CIO- and AFL-affiliated unions, with similar strife occurring in the auto, rubber, and steel industries. “Henceforth,” he states “jurisdictional conflict between unions would be almost as prolonged and violent as the struggle between workers and employers.”⁷⁸ It was in this setting— as two new and diverging types of labor organizations each worked to define themselves and do away with the other— which the government then was also working to define the merchant marine. For the next decade, all factions (unions, government agencies, and shipowners) had to navigate often changing or contradictory internal and external politics. Each worked to become a prevailing force in shaping the industry and the workforce propelling it. Shipping company hiring halls, dominant less than a decade before, had been replaced by a consortium of nascent organizations, jostling for control.

Amending the Merchant Marine

During the late 1930s, the unions were not alone in their “fratricidal warfare.” Government agencies, emboldened by the renewed emphasis on the merchant marine, jockeyed for control over the maritime workforce. Conservative elements in Congress, the Department of Commerce, and the Department of Justice challenged the liberalism of

⁷⁷ The animosity between the NMU and the SIU was not unique for the decade. Bruce Nelson argues that “fratricidal warfare” developed between CIO and AFL led unions and similar strife occurred in the auto, rubber, and steel industries. “Henceforth” he argues, “jurisdictional conflict between unions would be almost as prolonged and violent as the struggle between workers and employers.”

⁷⁸ Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 223-225.

the Department of Labor. This backlash occurred in the context of not only opposition to militant maritime workers, but also in opposition to broader New Deal policies. It also was a response to increasing international concerns as Nazi Germany remilitarized. If Europe went to war, the United States needed its own merchant marine to keep commerce flowing. As the decade progressed, anti-labor sentiment united with concerns over national defense. In turn, scrutiny of American seamen intensified. Despite continued espousal of isolationism, lawmakers and the public both agreed that if the merchant marine had to augment military transport in times of war, the workforce needed to be restrained and revamped. As a result, conservative backlash intermixed with policies of preparedness to form a new future for the merchant marine.

The initial passage of the 1936 Merchant Marine Act gave the U.S. Maritime Commission limited immediate oversight over personnel and labor. According to a later Maritime Commission report, the Commission had no jurisdiction over labor disputes, yet “employers and employees alike have usually assumed, and at times insisted, that the Commission attempt to adjudicate controversies.” Many of these controversies arose between ship operators and their crews, as strikes continued and even increased in number following the passage of the 1936 act.⁷⁹

But other disputes concerned newly minted laws regulating seamen. In addition to the Merchant Marine Act of 1936, Congress passed House Resolution 8597, known as the Copeland Safety at Sea Law. Named after Commerce Committee Chairman Senator Royal S. Copeland, who also had been instrumental in passing the Merchant Marine Act, the law drew immediate the ire of seamen. Specifically, the Act required that all seamen

⁷⁹ Letter from Emory Land to Senator Josiah Bailey. Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

register for a certificate of identification and a “Continuous Discharge Book.” Known as a Copeland Book, the later document would record all prior voyages and conduct. Issued by the Department of Commerce’s Bureau of Marine Inspection and Navigation, the continuous discharge books differed from previous Bureau oversight which consisted of one-time, regionalized issuance of discharge certificates following a voyage.⁸⁰

For seamen, the Copeland Books harkened back to the hated company “fink books” discarded only a few years before during the 1934 strikes. Thousands of protests poured into the Bureau, the U.S. Maritime Commission, and the Department of Labor. Seamen proclaimed that the “anti-labor” books would “constitute the means whereby an employer can discriminate against and blacklist any American seaman who will not subject himself to any and all demands.” The Copeland Safety at Sea Act, one union complaint alleged, mandated “continuous discharge books (fink books) and certificates of service or efficiency (dog collars), which American seamen consider detrimental to their best interests and constitutional rights.” As strikes became increasingly common, seamen saw the books as a means for controlling radical seamen and expelling them from employment.⁸¹

More than 50,000 seamen pledged not to register for the Copeland books, forcing the Commerce Department to postpone the provision. Opposition ultimately forced the government to concede by 1938 when the Bureau gave seamen the option to possess

⁸⁰ Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 118; Memo from Golden W. Bell, acting General Counsel to Telfair Knight, U.S. Maritime Commission Secretary, F: 109-1-35 Investigation Labor Conditions in Maritime Service, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

⁸¹ Letters to the U.S. Maritime Commission, F: 109-1-35 Investigation Labor Conditions in Maritime Service, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

either a continuous discharge book *or* a certificate of identification. Seamen who had already obediently obtained the Copeland Books were blackballed by the NMU, which preferred hiring only seamen with certificates of identification. Consequently, a seaman's chosen form of government document caused another divide between unions and often determined who sailed and who did not.⁸²

At this point, however, the Department of Commerce, Congress, and the Department of Justice had found other means to control unruly seamen. In November 1937, the Department of Justice arrested fourteen crewmen of the SS *Algic*. Charged with mutiny and held in federal prison, the arrests represented a change in how the government treated sit-down strikes.

The particulars of the *Algic* case are, indeed, compelling. While approaching the port of Montevideo, Uruguay, the NMU-affiliated crew voted to support striking longshoreman in the South American port. After a sit-down strike commenced, four seamen deserted ship. When their dingy capsized, officers refused rescue and one of the deserters drowned. Another man was killed in a shore-side brawl. The violence appalled government officials. So too did the implications of seamen striking overseas in support of non-American workers. In response, federal prosecutors authorized the *Algic's* captain to arrest the striking seamen.⁸³

⁸² Schwartz, *Brotherhood of the Sea*, 119; Letter from Daniel S. Ring, Director of the Division of Maritime Personnel, October 18, 1938, F: 109-1-35 Investigation Labor Conditions in Maritime Service, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP; "\$2 Assessment Non-Concurred In by Baton Rouge Meeting," NMU *The PILOT* (October 7, 1938); Letters from Alex Yruash and John Nash to the U.S. Maritime Commission, F: 109-1-35 Investigation Labor Conditions in Maritime Service, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

⁸³ "Algic Sailors Held to Jury; Mates Cited," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1937.

This treatment differed from the numerous sit-down strikes that had occurred in months past. In a similar case, Secretary of Labor Francis Perkins famously challenged the Commerce and Justice departments' accusations of mutiny, instead insisting that crew sit-downs were ordinary labor actions. The strikers, including future NMU leader Joseph Curran, were all fined two days wages, fired, and blacklisted, but Perkins prevented prosecution. By later 1937, however, "the Perkins philosophy has been discarded" proclaimed the *Washington Post*. Amid a larger conservative backlash, this signaled the Roosevelt Administration's reluctance to protect seamen and the waning of the Department of Labor's influence on the industry.⁸⁴

Indeed, the *Algic* case marked a change in government action and public patience. Hundreds of editorials and articles condemned the "mutineers" and celebrated their arrest. "Evidently," one journalist mused, "there is still a government beyond the hands of [CIO leader] John L. Lewis." Other editorials supported more severe action. "Some of the ancient laws against mutiny might well be revived as they were in the case of the *Algic*," argued a small Vermont paper. Its author continues, "Right or wrong, there can be but one responsible master of a ship at sea and that is the captain. When his authority begins to be undermined by subversion of or disloyalty in his crew, it is high time for the police power of Government to intervene."⁸⁵

These comments harkened back to the romanticized– and subjugated– seaman of the age of sail. In the same way that a captain had sole command of his ship, so too, the authors argued, must government have sole command of its mariners. Following the

⁸⁴ "Union Insists President Oust Maritime Head," *Washington Post*, October 27, 1937.

⁸⁵ "Mutineers," *Sun (Independent)*, December 20, 1937; [No Title], *Herald*, Rutland, Vermont, December 20, 1937.

second inauguration of President Roosevelt in 1937 and the failure of the court packing plan, growing conservative critics believed that previous treatment of strikers demonstrated anti-business New Deal tendencies that encouraged labor unrest. Moreover, the language of many detractors, including the adjectives “mutinous,” “subversion,” and “disloyal” shown above, spoke to growing domestic fears. Conservatives believed seamen directed their treachery not just at employers and industry, but also at capitalism and country.

Following the *Algic* case, which coincided neatly with the U.S. Maritime Commission’s publication of its *Economic Survey* in November 1937, Congress launched a series of hearings to amend the Merchant Marine Act of 1936. The witnesses – which overwhelmingly represented the interests of the shipowners and government officials – bitterly charged mariners with racketeering, radicalism, and misconduct. Accusations overlapped and intersected with direct charges of communism, subversion, and disloyalty. Witnesses spoke of “communistic” behaviors, proclaiming that seamen had adopted the “techniques” of Lenin from the summer of 1917. Despite calls for caution by Frances Perkins and various National Labor Relations Board representatives, lawmakers continually asked leading questions about the radicalism of seamen. The hearing’s chairman, Senator Copeland proclaimed “I am personally convinced from the testimony” that union leaders “are communistic and un-American.”⁸⁶

⁸⁶ “Seamen and their Critics,” *The New Republic* (February 2, 1938): 353; *Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce and the Committee on Education and Labor, S. 3078, 75th Cong. 3rd sess., Part 8, January 20 and 25, 1938, 689; Hearings Before the Committee on Commerce and the Committee on Education and Labor, S. 3078, 75th Cong. 3rd sess., Part 10, February 2,3,4, and 7, 1938.*

The public shared this alarm. In an article titled “Anarchy at Sea,” the *Chicago Daily Tribune* declared that “lawless violence in American shipping has reached a climax. It is destroying the American Merchant Marine and the livelihood of tens of thousands of American workers on land and sea.” In 1937, *Washington Post* journalist Edward T. Folliard investigated accusations of communist infiltration at sea with a sensationalist series about the Communist Marine Training School in Beacon, New York. Described by the author as “Red Annapolis,” the facility at Camp Nitgedaiget reportedly served as a “Soviet academy for the training of sailors to spread red doctrine to the American Merchant Marine.” Draped with Soviet flags and banners championing “A Communist Unit on Every Ship,” the Training School— and Folliard’s article— elicited alarm.⁸⁷ These warnings were not restricted to open public discourse either. In a letter to the Maritime Commission, seamen John Nash complained “it seems to me that the prime requisite for membership in the union is based on the ability of an applicant to froth at the mouth and quote Karl Marx at the same time.”⁸⁸ In 1939, the *Chicago Daily Tribune* reported that the merchant marine “has been so heavily infiltrated by communists that men trained in commercial vessels can no longer be regarded as reliable for naval service.”⁸⁹

This, then, became the crux of conservative lawmaker’s argument. With conflict in Europe looming, the striking men of the merchant marine were not just unruly, they

⁸⁷ Edward T. Folliard, “Communist Party has Established Own ‘Annapolis’ Near West Point,” *Washington Post*, November 6, 1937; “Letters to the Editor: Communist Cells,” *Washington Post*, November 19, 1937; “Training Merchant Seamen,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 1937.

⁸⁸ Letter from John Nash to U.S. Maritime Commission, Box 382, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

⁸⁹ “Where America Lags,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 20, 1939; “Training Merchant Seamen,” *Washington Post*, December 29, 1937.

were allegedly fundamentally untrustworthy and un-American. A Tennessee newspaper summarized the conclusions of the Congressional committee when it stated that maritime labor “must be dealt with firmly and in a definite fashion. Perhaps the best treatment would be through the stamping out of its seed at its source, through annihilation of unwholesome alliances and restrictions of seamen’s organization.”⁹⁰ Rather than rehabilitation, lawmakers provided mechanisms for the “annihilation” of radical seamen through a quasi-nationalized and naturalized force.

Taking heed of testimony and building on the recommendations of the 1937 *Economic Survey*, Congress passed the Merchant Marine Act of 1938, or the “Bland Amendment,” in June of that year. The amendment formed the U.S. Maritime Service and created a new organ for merchant mariner training. In September 1938, the U.S. Treasury Department announced that the U.S. Coast Guard— a military service— would be taking over responsibility for mariner training from the U.S. Maritime Commission. This met with approval from the conservative factions who supported a more martial structure, but also raised questions about the future of the traditionally civilian workforce.⁹¹

While language in the Bland Amendment spoke of “improving” the force, in reality it appeared that the government had concluded that the best option would be to replace radical seamen entirely by launching a new phase of government influence on the composition of the merchant marine. This coincided with a new era of scrutiny. In addition to the Bland Amendment, the hearings in 1938 inspired the alarmed Senate to

⁹⁰ “Terror on the Seas,” *Nashville Banner*, January 22, 1938.

⁹¹ “Kennedy Reports,” *Time*, November 22, 1937, 26; Lawrence, *United States Merchant Shipping Policies and Politics*, 71; Jeffrey L. Cruikshank and Chloe G. Kline, *In Peace and War: A History of the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy at Kings Point*, (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2008), 60.

also create a “Special Committee to Investigate Conditions in the American Merchant Marine.” For the next half decade, the committee monitored maritime labor unions and their “communistic” tendencies. The Special Committee received additional company just months later, when the Chairman Martin Dies formed the notorious House Un-American Activities Committee to investigate disloyal and subversive activities. As lawmakers sought to eradicate undesirable seamen in exchange for model Americans, maritime laborers became one of their earliest targets.⁹²

By the 1930s, America’s merchant seamen had become increasingly unionized and radicalized for some very good reasons. Maritime labor’s militancy and the public’s changing perception of the workforce would become particularly significant in the coming years as mariners vied for not just economic security but physical safety in times of war. As the next chapter will show, the national emergency enabled the government to impose new controls not only on mariner’s behavior but also composition.

⁹² *Hearings Before a Special Committee on Un-American Activities to Investigate the Extent, Character, and Objects of Un-American Propaganda Activities in the United States*, HR 283, 75th Cong., 3rd sess. October and November, 1938; Joseph P. Goldberg, *The Maritime Story: A Study in Labor-Management Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press: 1958), 190.

Chapter Two: A New Generation: Wartime Changes in Composition

The late 1930s marked renewed struggle over the identity of seaman. The formation of the National Maritime Union in 1937 followed by the Seafarers International Union and U.S. Maritime Service in 1938 gave rise to powerful new interests. A far cry from previous centuries (and even decades), shipowners, shipmasters, benevolent societies, and popular novelists no longer held a premium on defining life at sea. Instead, nationwide unions and the federal government vied for influence. At stake was who would define and lead the ideal seamen. In short, would seafarers be a brotherhood shaped by unionism or by nationalism? And where did the desires and expectations of seamen themselves fall within this contest? The ensuing struggle – profoundly altered by the Second World War – influenced not only the composition of seafaring personnel but also the outlook for the American maritime industry itself.

This chapter explores how, during the war emergency, the government reconfigured and exponentially increased maritime personnel. The reconfiguration built upon policies and ideals born out of 1930s legislation, creating a continuum of intentions from the New Deal-era, despite America's transformative entrance into World War II. Using patriotic appeals and promises of postwar prosperity while partnering with the maritime unions, federal agencies recruited a new generation of merchant seamen.

Ebbing Neutrality and Federal Intervention

While the late 1930s were marked by the nation's sluggish transition from isolation to intervention, U.S. maritime policy had a central position in the slow trend toward war. When Roosevelt took office in 1933, he immediately focused on domestic solutions for the economic crisis. This happened during one of the most strikingly

isolationist periods of American history, internal strife preoccupied the nation. The public retained this focus throughout the decade as Roosevelt characteristically vacillated between openly supporting isolationism and quietly appeasing foreign interests.⁹³

Developments within the merchant marine reflected this domestic reform. During the first half of the decade, industry leaders and lawmakers concentrated chiefly on American shipbuilding, commerce, employment, and working conditions. Nonetheless the industry could not escape its inherent internationalism. As the decade progressed, foreign unrest raised concerns within the Roosevelt Administration about the vulnerability of ocean-going commerce. America needed the means to transport its goods independently should war break out. As a result, the Roosevelt Administration strengthened the fleet more to preserve the nation's neutrality than provide for future American hostilities.⁹⁴

However, U.S. neutrality slowly eroded as Ethiopia, parts of China, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and ultimately much of Western Europe fell to totalitarianism. Roosevelt responded by manipulating the merchant marine to skirt the Neutrality Acts, and supply America's allies without angering the public. The U.S. Maritime Commission's growing fleet and the newly formed U.S. Maritime Service usefully protected national security by exploiting the partially public- and partially private-funded industry's dual functions of commerce and national defense.

Accordingly, maritime policies in the late 1930s embodied the convergence of New Dealism and national security policies. This convergence originated as a means of

⁹³ George C. Herring, *From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 484, 511.

⁹⁴ Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 134-38; Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 300-301; Labaree et al, *America and the Sea*, 536-541.

protecting American neutrality and national interests, but slowly transitioned to a more outward-looking and bellicose role. The evolving experience of maritime personnel during this period reveals a similar shift. While historians have given much attention to the federal construction of the victory fleet which began during the late 1930s, far fewer have acknowledged that maritime labor was undergoing similar reconstitutions in this same period.

The 1936 Merchant Marine Act may have set the stage for federal oversight of unlicensed personnel, but the passage of the Bland Amendment set the framework. And the impact of this framework had a tepid start. As we shall see, the creation of the U.S. Maritime Service and the priorities underlined by federal commissioners did not instantly affect most mariners significantly. Yet, in time, the federal policies and persuasions eventually had a major impact on mariners during World War II. Two of the most significant impulses to develop out of the 1930s were the drives to naturalize and nationalize. Already primed by the time America entered the war, these efforts fundamentally changed how America perceives the industry to this day.

The policy to *naturalize* merchant seamen developed from the citizenship requirements in the 1936 Merchant Marine Act. It stipulated that 90 percent of unlicensed personnel working on federally subsidized vessels be American citizens while the remainder had to declare an interest in gaining citizenship. Economically protectionist and racially motivated, this clause built on older xenophobic traditions to thwart foreign seamen from threatening American jobs. According to historian Leon Fink, the quotas demonstrated “a racist, anti-immigrant, and specifically anti-Asian animus” common to the maritime industry— and American labor more generally— during

the 1930s. Contrary to the classic composition of maritime labor comprising foreigners and men of no nation, those sailing in the U.S. fleet now had to be patently American.⁹⁵

The naturalization clauses forced foreign seamen to naturalize or quit ship. For workers accustomed to sailing with limited supervision while circumventing national barriers by way of the seas, the restrictions threatened their livelihood and worldview. Amid “rising nationalist barriers,” Fink explains, seamen were “continually deported and effectively locked out of ‘civilized’ society.” Dubbed “Americanization” by the fledgling Maritime Commission, the programs for civilizing mariners aimed at forming a domesticated – and consequently whiter – workforce.⁹⁶

Amid increasing world turmoil, the citizenship stipulations also meant to temper foreign influence on merchant seamen. Fears of leftist radicalism, communism, and fascism inspired among government officials dreams of a more insular and regulated labor pool. Citizenship laws also gave the Commerce and Justice Departments a means to control and even expel “unruly” foreign seamen. While this tactic intensified following World War II, both agencies increasingly investigated and deported ideological

⁹⁵ Leon Fink, “Global Sea or National Backwater?: The International Labor Organization and the Quixotic Quest for Maritime Standards, 1919-1945” in *Workers Across the Americas: The Transnational Turn in Labor History*, ed. Leon Fink (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 420-423; American League for Peace and Democracy, “Resolution to Urge Amendment to Section 302 of the 1936 Merchant Marine Act,” June 6, 1939, F: “Americanization,” Box 334, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

⁹⁶ Fink, “Global Sea or National Backwater?,” 411; See folders on “Americanization” in Maritime Commission records, Boxes 334-335, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

dissident, or at least disruptive, seamen during the late 1930s, including prominent union members.⁹⁷

The second impulse, *nationalization* of U.S. mariners, grew out of similarly protectionist and unilateralist tendencies. In hindsight, it is easy to attribute the Maritime Commission's revitalization efforts prior to World War II as a clairvoyant moment in a period of muddled foreign policy. In fact, as the previous chapter demonstrates, the government's motivations were actually more complex. Although Roosevelt cited national security as a prime justification for the 1936 and 1938 acts, both were also profoundly protectionist. In addition to sheltering the American maritime industry from outside competition, a nationalized merchant marine could insulate the United States from threats of war and radicalism. Loyal personnel serving in a large, highly function fleet allowed the nation's trade to function unilaterally, even if Europe succumbed to conflict. In a period when 95 percent of the American public opposed participation in future wars, the revitalization of seamen appeared to have been a bid to maintain rather than circumvent neutrality.⁹⁸

As a result, the new policies to naturalize and nationalize were complimentary efforts to transform an international industry into a state-sanctioned service. And the

⁹⁷ Dan Kanstroom, *Deportation Nation: Outsiders in American History* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2007), 161; Gerald Horne, *Red Seas: Ferdinand Smith and Radical Black Sailors in the United States and Jamaica* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 200-201; Athan G. Theoharis, *The FBI and American Democracy: A Brief Critical History* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 58. While historians have shown that many seamen of the 1920s and 1930s adopted leftist ideologies, Bruce Nelson also argues that there was a strong strain of Americanism and patriotism among seamen. They did not, in fact, "see a sharp distinction between allegiance to their class and loyalty to their country." Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 179-182.

⁹⁸ Fink, *Sweatshops at Sea*, 159-161; Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 298; Herring, *From Colony to Superpower*, 504.

composition of the merchant marine was central to the cause. With reform, the Maritime Commission intended to change the very face of merchant manpower. This stemmed, in part, from a practical (though anti-labor) goal of neutralizing the labor unrest then rocking the industry and, in the process, keep ships sailing. Well-trained, hard-working, professional seamen could rehabilitate the industry, according to maritime officials. Yet the policies designed to naturalize and nationalize reveal darker motivations and beliefs aimed at altering the ideology, culture, and even racial makeup of mariners in ways that were not in the best interest of the workers at sea.

Faced with increasingly radical, unionized seamen, the U.S. Maritime Service attempted to shut out unwanted foreign forces. Lawmakers and newly appointed Marine Service representatives aspired to create a merchant marine in their own image. The 1938 legislation and the gathering storm abroad gave them a chance to do so.

Grooming a New Generation of Seamen

The U.S. Maritime Service enrolled its first unlicensed trainees in September 1938. Operating under the auspices of the Maritime Commission and Coast Guard, a facility on Hoffman Island, New York, accepted unemployed men over twenty-one with at least two years of seagoing experience. Soon after, the government opened other facilities in Alameda, California, and later an officer's training school in New London, Connecticut. The first crop of enrollees included specially selected youths who would undergo three months of training and receive a stipend of \$36 per month.⁹⁹

The initial effort to reeducate maritime labor began modestly. The training took months to complete, and only a handful of mariners graduated each year. Yet the

⁹⁹ "Coast Guard Gets Work of Training Merchant Sailors," *Washington Post*, September 3, 1938.

implications of the program were wider reaching. To the government, this was an attempt to take greater control of an industry that often eluded oversight. To the union, it foretold the threat of impending government takeover. And to the mariner, it offered the promise of a paycheck during times of high unemployment. Within a few years, all these concerns would materially transform as the training facilities became the nucleus of the wartime mobilization of mariners.

U.S. Maritime Service training focused on the fundamentals of seamanship, ranging from knot tying, rope making, and the handling of booms, masts, and cargo winches. Trainees learned basic shipping nomenclature as well as safety procedures. The second month of training taught specialized skills needed for workers in the deck, engines, or stewards departments.

Seamen studied different skills depending on their department. In the second month of training, engineering trainees learned the theory and operation of boilers and main engines. Depending on their ultimate job or “rating,” they also trained as firemen, watertenders, oilers, machinists, and electricians. Deck trainees, on the other hand, practiced boat drills, launching, rigging, standing watch, steering, and equipment use. As the lowest paid occupation aboard ship, stewards learned the arts of food preparation, nutrition, and other domestic activities.

The men of each department reunited for a thirty-day cruise during the final month of training, for which they earned Coast Guard certification upon graduation. Although the government could not guarantee graduates employment at the end of their

training, the schooling gave men the right to wear special insignia and return for future training courses.¹⁰⁰

For seaman, whose training would be paid for by the Maritime Service, this credentialing theoretically offered the opportunity to acquire new skills and pursue upward mobility.

Federal Art Project posters conveyed this practicality. The stark, simple advertising strayed somewhat from other 1930s-era federal campaigns, but the

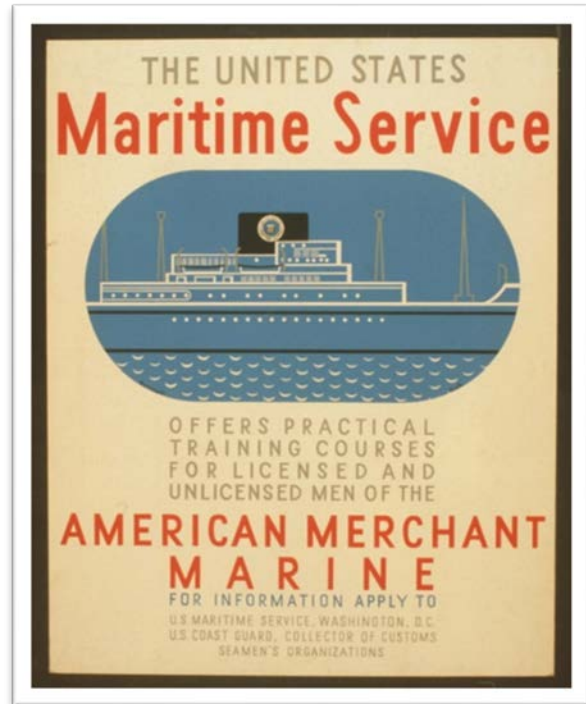


Figure 1: LC-USZC2-5633 Federal Art Project poster for the U.S. Maritime Service, Library of Congress

message was clear: the New Deal had voyaged out to sea. Referencing the “U.S. Maritime Service, Washington D.C.,” the “U.S. Coast Guard,” and lastly unnamed “Seamen’s Organizations,” the pragmatic advertising, as shown in Figure 1, introduced a new era of government involvement to the shipping industry. The relegation of “Seamen’s Organizations” to the bottom of the advertisement also subtly implied the ascendancy of this public service over private entities.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ “Seamen’s Seminar,” *Time* 32 Issue 12 (September 19, 1938), 40; “Background Material for Maritime Service Training Courses for Apprentice Seamen” Box 12, I-6/Entry 128, RG 211 Records of the War Manpower Commission (hereafter WMC Records), NARA-CP.

¹⁰¹ Leslie Bryan Burroughs, “The United States Maritime Service offers practical training courses for licensed and unlicensed men of the American Merchant Marine,” (advertisement), Federal Arts Project, 1936-1939, accessed Library of Congress Prints and Photos Online Catalog.

Although the structure of the Maritime Service mirrored other training agencies of the era by providing unemployed youth with housing, income, and professional skills, it also introduced an even stronger element of militarism that emphasized the merchant marine's distinctive importance to national defense. The Maritime Service, according to the *Washington Post*, took on new "important defense aspects." After all, according to the *Post*, subsidizing the construction of a wartime auxiliary held little value unless manned by "a steady infusion of well-trained professional sailors encouraged to belong to some form of naval reserve."¹⁰²

As tensions in Europe escalated, so too did additional resemblances between the Maritime Service and the armed services. Licensed officers received navy blue uniforms – highly suggestive of naval officer uniforms to the untrained eye – with gold braid and an American-eagle-and-wreath-adorned cap. Rigid rules guided officers on how to correctly wear insignias, buttons, and shoulder boards to separate themselves from other ranks.¹⁰³ Maritime Service instructors expected cadets to look and act like members of the military. In addition to the formal "Rules and Instructions of the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps" booklet and "Station Orders" issued to all midshipmen, cadets also received informal "Notes for the Newly Appointed Cadet-Midshipman." Sections on general conduct, saluting, cleanliness, and marching described behavior befitting a future American Merchant Marine officer. "You must conduct yourself," the booklet reads, "in a strict military manner" and follow customs and courtesies of the Maritime Service. In

¹⁰² "Training Merchant Seamen," December 29, 1937.

¹⁰³ Cruikshank and Kline, *In Peace and War*, 60; Merchant Marine Act of 1936, (June 29, 1936).

their infancy, the customs of this new American force had to be “based on the traditions of the Merchant Marine and Navy.”¹⁰⁴

The booklet also provided evidence of what the instructors expected to face in their new seafaring recruits. While many pages describe proper saluting and marching, general conduct instructions also devolve into bans on littering, food in the barracks, “skylarking or disorderliness,” feet on the furniture, hats in the lounge, as well as mandatory silence after taps, less boisterousness at meals, and a provision to prevent the hanging of cloths on boilers.¹⁰⁵ Merchant seamen, often accused of unruliness and a lack of discipline, suddenly entered an environment that demanded unconditional acceptance of the authority of their instructors, naval customs, and an increasingly stratified rating system and complicated division of labor. Clearly, the service’s instructors expected seafaring men to struggle with these new “traditions.”

Unsurprisingly, labor unions did not support these new Maritime Service training schools. In a rare moment of solidarity, the Sailors’ Union of the Pacific (SUP) and the NMU both opposed the program, believing it would raise unemployment levels by attracting more seamen to the already oversaturated industry. They also questioned the motivations and implications of the government’s action, viewing the schools as a federal attempt to take control of hiring. Lawmaker’s threats to overhaul maritime personnel had not gone unnoticed by union members. In response, both unions launched pickets in late 1938.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ “Notes for the Newly Appointed Cadet-Midshipman” U.S. Maritime Service, Cabinet 8, Drawer A, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy Library and Museum.

¹⁰⁵ “Notes for the Newly Appointed Cadet-Midshipman,” 7.

¹⁰⁶ “Union Asked to Aid Seamen’s Schools,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1938.

According to the Maritime Commission, students attending Maritime Service schools highly praised the training. Yet enrollment remained lower than expected. The Coast Guard rightly attributed this to union opposition. Union leader Joseph Curran charged the Maritime Commission program with violating the Labor Relations Act through its “anti-union” plan to hire crews using its own bureaus rather than through union hiring halls.¹⁰⁷

Hoping to negotiate, the Coast Guard pointed out that “an overwhelming majority” of the men attending the training schools held NMU membership and simply wanted to improve their livelihoods. Admissions requirements also drew students directly from the sea by demanding two years of active service aboard merchant vessels. Trainees themselves, highly aware that they would need union backing upon graduation, entreated the NMU to support the schools.¹⁰⁸

Although union representatives who investigated the schools found the facilities and programs satisfactory, picketing continued through mid-1939. As a result, enrollment was again low when war broke out in Europe that fall. To fill positions, the Maritime Commission boldly enrolled 250 youths from the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and developed a one-year apprentice program to accommodate the inexperienced men. The decision had a twofold mission, according to the *Los Angeles Times*’ shipping news reporter: on the one hand, it would “eventually vitiate” union opposition “by providing a reservoir of unlicensed personnel with selected physical and mental qualifications for the Maritime Commission’s new fleet.” Secondly, “by taking the CCC

¹⁰⁷ “Union Asked to Aid Seamen’s Schools: Students on Hoffman Island Praise the Training Course Provided by Government,” *New York Times*, December 7, 1938; “Sea Union Fights Federal Training,” *New York Times*, April 7, 1939.

¹⁰⁸ “Union Asked to Aid Seamen’s School.”

enrollees from areas throughout the United States, it would distribute the need of an adequate American Merchant Marine across the entire nation.”¹⁰⁹

The Maritime Commission’s decision to man its own fleet with non-union personnel demonstrated the willingness of the government to circumvent union opposition and control. While serving as an aggressive warning to the unions, the Commission’s use of CCC men also marked a key transition from the desire for New Deal economic reform to the imperative of national defense. With or without union support, the government demanded an increasingly professionalized, increasingly nationwide, and increasingly nationalized merchant marine.¹¹⁰

When Germany invaded Poland on September 1, 1939, the American Merchant Marine employed somewhere between 50,000 and 70,000 merchant seamen.¹¹¹ Unlike the rest of the country, which slowly began awakening from isolationism, merchant seamen were swept into the European conflict in short order on October 9, 1939. Destined for England, the merchant ship *City of Flint* crossed paths with a German battleship whose captain demanded that the commercial vessel halt for inspection. German sailors deemed its cargo contraband and redirected the ship to Norway.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Waldo Drake, “Shipping News Los Angeles Harbor Activities: Sailors’ Union Given Answer: Maritime Board to Enlist C.C.C. Men for Training Courses,” *Los Angeles Times*, September 29, 1939; “Maritime Service Reports Wide Gain,” *New York Times*, October 15, 1939.

¹¹⁰ Drake, “Shipping News Los Angeles Harbor Activities.”

¹¹¹ “The Merchant Marine at War,” F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc. Box 589, NC-148/ Entry 90, RG 208 Records of the Office of War Information (hereafter OWI Records), NARA-CP.

¹¹² Ironically, the *Flint’s* captain, Joseph Gainard, also served as captain aboard the *SS Algic* during the famous strike in Montevideo. John Bunker, *Heroes in Dungarees: The Story of the American Merchant Marine in World War II* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute

In response to war, Congress passed a final Neutrality Act in November 1939 that barred American merchant vessels from delivering goods to war zones. The provision reduced North Atlantic trade and left thousands of mariners unemployed. The Maritime Service responded by offering increased enrollment at its training schools, but Union members balked, viewing the offer as an attempt to weaken union control. They also accused the Maritime Commission of lobbying for the shipping companies, with whom the unions were currently negotiating contracts. Angry NMU and SIU picketers carried signs reading “Maritime Commission says go to concentration camps or starve.”¹¹³

Maritime Service training director and retired Admiral Henry A. Wiley vigorously denied any hidden objective to recruit mariners to the armed forces or influence collective bargaining. Instead, he claimed, the enrollment of recently unemployed men as merchant mariners was intended to provide individual aid while improving the overall quality of personnel.¹¹⁴ Yet just weeks later, in December 1939, the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Maritime Service announced a program to train mariners for war duty. Any merchant officers holding Navy Reserve commissions, as required by the 1936 Merchant Marine Act, would receive Naval training in gunnery, in protecting ships from submarines and mines, and in anti-aircraft tactics, convoy duty,

Press, 1995), 1; William McFee, “Seagoing Soviets,” *Saturday Evening Post* September 21, 1940.

¹¹³ “Union Accused of Seeking to Wreak Seaman-Aid Plan,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1939.

¹¹⁴ “Union Accused of Seeking to Wreak Seaman-Aid Plan,” “Milestones: 1921-1936, The Neutrality Acts, 1930s,” Office of the Historian, Bureau of Public Affairs, United States Department of State, Web.

naval signaling, and naval regulations and customs. To the union, the militarized program further substantiated premonitions of government takeover of the industry.¹¹⁵

While this new “Merchant Marine Reserve Training Center” saw high enrollment among officers, a majority of unlicensed personnel continued to avoid government training schools. In early 1940, low registration again forced the Maritime Service to enroll nearly 500 CCC workers.¹¹⁶ Not until August 1940, nearly a full year after Europe erupted into war, did the NMU formally pledge cooperation with the Maritime Service. The growth of the Maritime Commission’s fleet, continued employment of non-union men aboard government ships, the prospect of better bargaining agreements, and an increasing likelihood of the U.S. entering World War II all influenced the union’s policy change.¹¹⁷

The NMU’s capitulation also may have been an effort to distance itself from Moscow following increased public and Congressional scrutiny over the union’s communistic ties. According to a *Saturday Evening Post* article, “Seagoing Soviets,” the personnel in the NMU was “so completely dominated by Communist Party members” that “the union policy follows the party line in every particular, even to endorsing the Hitler-Stalin pact.” Further, the magazine charged that maritime union members were “dangerous to Americanism.... They have a faith and a loyalty to a principle which permits them to debase and debauch the rank and file of the seamen in order to seize

¹¹⁵ John G. Norris, “U.S. Merchant Marine Officers to be Trained for War Duty,” *Washington Post*, December 7, 1939; Waldo Drake, “Ship Training Course Offered: Proficiency of Deck Officers in Visual Signaling Sought,” *Los Angeles Times*, January 31, 1940; John G. Norris, “U.S. Trains Merchant Marine Officers for War and Peace,” *Washington Post*, December 10, 1939.

¹¹⁶ “Maritime Service Gets 400 Boys from CCC,” *Baltimore Sun*, May 25, 1940.

¹¹⁷ “C.I.O. Ship Unions Pledge Cooperation,” *Washington Post*, August 14, 1940.

power.”¹¹⁸ Praying on isolationist fears, the article also warned that “the Communist water-front party has been called the real Trojan horse of America.” Facing increased charges of anti-Americanism and loyalty to the Soviet Union, the CIO maritime unions avowed that “its officers, constituent unions and membership are fully prepared to discharge our responsibilities in the approaching national emergency to the best interests of the United States of America.”¹¹⁹

Despite this assertion of loyalty, the government continued to challenge the NMU’s influence in the final months of American neutrality. The Maritime Commission established new radio, apprentice, cadet, and officer training schools. By 1941, the Maritime Commission held nearly one-fifth of all active American vessels and had graduated nearly 3,300 unlicensed and licensed seamen. At the same time, early signs of a labor shortage arose as seamen began leaving the industry for more lucrative defense positions on land.¹²⁰

Looming legislation proved an even more virulent threat to merchant manpower. After months of debate, Roosevelt signed the Selective Service Act into law on September 16, 1940, forcing men between the ages of twenty-one and thirty-five to register for the nation’s first peacetime draft. While nearly three-fourths of the public favored the legislation, the NMU disapproved. No regulations existed for the deferment

¹¹⁸ “House Told Communists Plot to Control Canal, Supply Ships,” *Washington Post*, April 4, 1940; “Sea Union Leader Called Communist,” *New York Times*, July 26, 1940; “Excerpts from Report of the Dies Committee to Congress,” *New York Times*, January 4, 1940.

McFee, “Seagoing Soviets.”

¹¹⁹ “C.I.O. Ship Unions Pledge Cooperation,” 5.

¹²⁰ Labaree et. al., *America and the Sea*, 541; “Seaman Shortage Developing Fast,” *New York Times*, February 23, 1941.

of merchant seamen, and the draft quickly became a drain on merchant manpower.¹²¹ Seaman of nearly any rating could be drafted, and although the unions pushed for the deferments, it took more than half a year for the Selective Service Board to ease qualifications in favor of the merchant marine.¹²²

The maritime unions were one of many trade organizations pushing back against the increased militarization. However, as noted by historian Nelson Lichtenstein, this stance “seemed, in the fall of 1940, politically naïve and militarily impractical.” Emergency defense mobilization, including the Selective Service Act, was fundamentally changing the social and political landscape. With 42 million men adding their names to the draft list, a huge percentage of civilians fell under the potential jurisdiction of the armed forces. The social engineering found in the draft boards – from screenings to testing to training – far surpassed the government oversight imposed on the merchant marine in recent years. Peacetime conscription marked a new era of citizenship requirements in the United States, and a majority of the public supported this agreement forged between the government and its newly inducted soldiers, sailors, and marines.¹²³ It also forced cooperation between industry, labor, and the nation.

Faced with the loss of manpower, the threat of military takeover, and an ambiguous future for private shipping, maritime leaders diplomatically emphasized the

¹²¹ “Selective Plan Urged by Byron,” *The Sun*, August 14, 1940, 5; James T. Sparrow, *Warfare State: World War II Americans and the Age of Big Government* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 209; William L. O’Neill, *A Democracy at War: America’s Fight at Home and Abroad in World War II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 81-86.

¹²² “Bottom Roundup: Ships for Defense and Ships for Britain,” *Time* 37, issue no. 24 (June 16, 1941); 22.

¹²³ Nelson Lichtenstein, “The Making of the Postwar Working Class: Cultural Pluralism and Social Structure in World War II,” *The Historian* LI, no. 1 (November 1988); 44-45; Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 209.

importance of the merchant marine to national defense while demanding autonomy. The tenuousness of this balancing act between cooperation and independence only increased after America entered World War II. In the ensuing war years, numerous government agencies, private companies, and unions struggled to define the nature of the merchant marine, to influence the character and composition of the service, and to determine the country's obligation to its mariners. Under the stewardship of the newly devised War Shipping Administration, the federal government dominated this debate.

Consolidating Control under the War Shipping Administration

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, American Merchant Marine had already experienced its first human loss. The first casualty occurred in November 1940, when one mariner died after the *City of Rayville* struck a mine off the Australian coast.¹²⁴ Half a year later, a German submarine sunk the SS *Robin Moor* in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Although the entire crew survived, Roosevelt condemned the belligerent act and championed a radical reversal of the Neutrality Acts. Congress passed legislation in November 1941 to arm American merchant ships with guns manned by Naval Armed Guards.¹²⁵

In the immediate weeks and months following Pearl Harbor, American merchant vessels came under repeated attack by the Axis. The locales of these devastating assaults ranged from just off the East Coast of the United States, to the Bering Sea, to the Philippines. By February 1942, the Maritime Commission reported more than 1,000

¹²⁴ Bunker, *Heroes in Dungarees*, 4.

¹²⁵ Arthur R. Moore, *A Careless Word... a Needless Sinking* (Kings Point, American Merchant Marine Museum/ Letter Systems, Inc.: 1983), 242-243; "President Sends Note to Congress: Robin Moor was Sunk by U-Boat Executive Says," *Evening Independent*, St. Petersburg, June 20, 1941; Bruce Felknor, *The Merchant Marine at War* (Annapolis, MD, Naval Institute Press, 1998), 215.

killed or missing merchant seamen and more than 100 vessels damaged, captured, or sunk since December 7.¹²⁶

The Maritime Commission, overwhelmed by the losses, could no longer oversee both ship construction and operations. While the U.S. Navy, Coast Guard, and Allied nations scrambled to protect the shipping lanes, Roosevelt created a new agency to support the civilian maritime service. Established by Executive Order 9054 on February 7, 1942, the War Shipping Administration (WSA) would “control the operation, purchase, charter, requisition, and use of all ocean vessels under the flag or control of the United States” except for those of the armed services and vessels engaged in coastwise, intercoastal, or inland trade.¹²⁷ Additionally, the WSA would supervise recruitment and crew arrangements, ensure war risk and marine insurance, resolve delays in shipping, and control transfer of materiel at port facilities. Like the World War I-era Emergency Fleet Corporation, the WSA also requisitioned most merchant vessels registered under the American flag. Because the shipping companies continued to operate the actual ships (most often with closed-shop agreements and union-affiliated men), the industry entered a public-private configuration similar to that of government owned/contractor-operated (GOCO) facilities on shore.¹²⁸

¹²⁶ Labaree et. al, *America and the Sea*, 546; For additional statistics on ship and crew losses please see Captain Arthur R. Moore’s *A Careless Word... a Needless Sinking* and the casualty lists compiled by the website “American Merchant Marine at War,” <http://www.usmm.org/casualty.html>.

¹²⁷ “Executive Order No. 9054 Establishing a War Shipping Administration in the Executive Office of the President and Defining its Functions and Duties,” F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49: Marshall E. Dimock Papers, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Hyde Park, New York (hereafter Dimock Papers).

¹²⁸ WSA, “The United States Merchant Marine at War,” 38; Paul A.C. Koistinen, *Arsenal of World War II: The Political Economy of American Warfare, 1940-1945* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 253-257; Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 300. All

The creation of the WSA brought a new era of regulation to maritime labor. Building on prewar aspirations, the creation of an agency solely to control ship operations incontrovertibly influenced every seaman sailing in the American fleet. The merchant marine, like other wartime industries, subsequently experienced the full weight of consolidated government power, fueled by nationalism and wartime demands. Facing Allied intervention, military takeover, and defensive labor unions, the War Shipping Administration evaded threats to its authority and implemented a new era of federal controls on seamen.

Under the direction of Admiral Emory Land, whom Roosevelt enlisted to serve as administrator of the WSA in addition to Chairman of the Maritime Commission, the WSA created three internal organizations. The Maritime Service Training Organization, the Maritime Labor Relations Organization, and the Recruitment and Manning Organization (RMO) would handle all personnel matters. Oversight of the Maritime Service training schools transferred from the Coast Guard to the Training Organization in July 1942. The WSA office also oversaw the Merchant Marine Cadet Corps and the now federally-supervised state maritime academies. Additionally, the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy in Kings Point, on northwest Long Island, New York, commenced courses in 1942.¹²⁹

American vessels finally fell under the WSA's control following a general order on April 18, 1942. Prior to that date, transport of military, lend-lease, and other cargoes had been voluntary.

¹²⁹ WSA, "The United States Merchant Marine at War," 60-63; "The Merchant Marine at War," F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc. Box 589, NC-148/ Entry 90, OWI Records, NARA_CP; "Administrative Order No. 17," F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49: Dimock Papers.

Meanwhile, the Maritime Labor Relations Organization served as an added liaison between maritime unions, shipping companies, and the federal Maritime War Emergency and National War Labor Boards. Charged primarily with negotiating wages, war-risk insurance, and other benefits, it worked to impose uniformity in compensation across the industry.¹³⁰

The RMO tackled most other wartime personnel issues. In particular, it ensured the steady growth and use of qualified merchant marine manpower. Through its regional and port offices, the RMO attracted, assigned, and referred men to maritime training schools or hiring halls. With the help of the War Manpower Commission, the United States Employment Service, and the Office of War Information, the RMO effectively became the public face of the WSA.¹³¹

Prior to the formation of the RMO in May, 1942, the WSA possessed limited means to address immediate manpower problems. Despite expanding the existing Training Organization, which had adopted accelerated wartime officer and apprenticeship programs, the WSA could only graduate a finite number of seamen. Yet war demanded an unprecedented seafaring of men and goods, shipped in the Maritime Commission's rapidly growing fleet. By mid-1942, the WSA's projections estimated that the number of mariners would need to double in a year.¹³² Thus, the WSA sought to build a much larger

¹³⁰ WSA, "The United States Merchant Marine at War," 65; Goldberg, *The Maritime Story*, 208-209. To accommodate the public/private partnership in which civilians sailed on behalf of private operators on government ships, the WSA mandated uniform bargaining rights across all ships. The NLRB continued to represent employees during disputes, but the WSA formulated labor policies through the Maritime Labor Regulations Organization.

¹³¹ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 29.

¹³² "Manpower Requirements of the Merchant Marine" (July 15, 1942) Container 56, Dimock Papers.

force by addressing three immediate manning problems: desertion of Allied seamen, allocation and turnover of existing seamen, and recruitment of additional seamen. On the surface, the main impetus of these actions was to supply enough personnel for the daunting wartime demand. But within each effort lay a latent struggle to dominate the regulation of merchant labor and achieve prewar ambitions of personnel reform.

Following America's entry into the war, the U.S. government began coordinating with the United Kingdom and other nations over maritime manpower. During a February meeting, the United States rejected the notion of having an international pool of Allied seamen who would man ships irrespective of nationality and race. Instead, the U.S. government would maintain its firm grip on the nationalized fleet. This, however, presented problems concerning the dearth of Allied seamen.¹³³

Even before Pearl Harbor, Allied seafarers had used frequent lend-lease voyages to the United States as an opportunity to escape the turmoil of war. British, Norwegian, Greek, French, Polish, Honduran, Nicaraguan, Dutch, Canadian, and Chinese seamen had been disembarking in American harbors and disappearing. Not only did this violate U.S. immigration laws, but it hindered the Allies' ability to keep ships sailing.¹³⁴ Both nations agreed that no "U.S. flag ships or Panamanian or other foreign-flag ships owned and controlled by this country" would engage Allied seamen without consular permission.¹³⁵

In this way, the United States maintained control over the personnel manning its own ships. It also gave further reason to deport any Allied seamen who failed to depart.

¹³³ "Allied Seamen in the United States," February 28, 1942, F: WSA General (May 1941-Dec. 1943), Container 9, Dimock Papers.

¹³⁴ See F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

¹³⁵ "Allied Seamen in the United States," February 28, 1942, F: WSA General (May 1941-Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

Led by the Marshall E. Dimock of the Immigration and Naturalization Services within the Department of Justice, the State Department and War Shipping Administration formed the Special Interdepartmental Committee on Maritime Labor. Together, they devised a system that tracked down and deported the nearly 6,000 alien seamen who had failed to re-ship.¹³⁶

While these deportations revealed continuity in the federal government's policy to nationalize the American Merchant Marine, it also showed early signs of the subtle forms of coercion evoked during wartime to keep mariners sailing. Certainly some of the Allied seamen stayed in America to pursue job prospects in the booming war industries (records also show that a handful of Greek seamen took advantage of the wartime economy by setting up a red light district in Norfolk, Virginia). Yet reports from the field also told of war-weary Allied mariners refusing to return to sea. According to one memo to the Special Committee in May, "since the beginning of the war, 444 Norwegians have been returned to New York after having been on torpedoed ships. Of these, only 95 have been willing to re-ship."¹³⁷

By this time, crew shortages were causing delayed departures of both Allied and American ships. In part, this was from the lack of centralized infrastructure in maritime hiring. A glut of seamen in one port could not help sail an undermanned ship in another. Nevertheless these allocation issues were only part of the problem. Like their Allied counterparts, American seamen had suffered terribly in just a few months. According to a WSA report "only part of the surviving manpower from torpedoed vessels reenters

¹³⁶ See F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

¹³⁷ Thayer to Dimock, May 5, 1942, F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

effective supply ashore, within a reasonable interval, owing to prolonged or permanent disability, temporary stranding abroad, transportation difficulties and so forth.”¹³⁸

Additional men succumbed to what seamen called “Torpedo Horrors,” or the equivalent of post-traumatic stress. In a plea to Admiral Land, Able-bodied seamen Irby Lee Guess implored for better care of torpedoed men. A forty-four-year-old Navy veteran of World War I, Guess sailed on two ships sunk by German submarines where he “saw 22 of my shipmates blown all to pieces by a torpedo after they were in lifeboats.” He remained ashore for 5 weeks before being “forced to ship out again for economic reasons. I can truthfully say, and am not ashamed to admit that I was afraid... this neriousness [sic] was not entirely abated when we were torpedoed and the vessel sank in about five minutes.” With no additional compensation beyond normal wages, he and many of his fellow seamen had to return to sea without adequate readjustment time. “If nothing is done to remedy this conditions and the war continues, within six months the waterfronts of the Nation will be flooded with men suffering from what was called in the last war ‘Shell Shock,’ although this time the men of the ships have coined a new word ‘Torpedo Horrors’ for it.” He admitted, “I feel this Horror.”¹³⁹

As casualties peaked, seamen were turning to the government for increased protection. In part, this expectation arose from federal actions in World War I, when naval destroyers escorted convoys of merchant ships. But Guess asked for more than just physical protection. Seamen, as he saw it, deserved the full backing of the WSA and the nation.

¹³⁸ Dimock, “Manpower Requirements of the Merchant Marine,” 3.

¹³⁹ Guess to Land, August 7, 1942. F: 109-1-61 Aid for Seamen, Box 412, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP.

Facing excessive manning and morale problems, the WSA agreed. In May, it tapped Marshall Dimock, former head of the Special Interdepartmental Committee on Maritime Labor, as its leader. Dimock – a social scientist, civil servant, academic, and laymen for the Unitarian church – appeared to be an ideal choice to the WSA. His previous work for various universities and the federal government concerned immigration, public utilities, liquor control, labor requirements, and even what it meant to be American. Deeply concerned with social welfare, Dimock had a moderate outlook on labor and immigration, combined with a traditional attitude towards benevolence.¹⁴⁰ His lack of a maritime, military, or labor background also helped the WSA dodge accusations of favoritism with his appointment.

Dimock's employment began just as rumors of Navy takeover of the merchant marine reached FDR's ears. In a memorandum sent to Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox on May 20, 1942, Roosevelt insisted that the WSA be granted complete control over "recruiting, coordinating of training, manning and labor relations," of the merchant marine. "There was a great deal of unwarranted publicity about the Navy manning the whole of the Merchant Marine," Roosevelt stated. "This was at no time considered by me."¹⁴¹ Mariners would continue to be certified by the Coast Guard and serve on Army Transport Service vessels, but the civilian character of the merchant marine would remain intact to preserve the commercial industry.

¹⁴⁰ See The Papers of Marshall E. Dimock, Accession Nos. 71-34, 72-13, FDR Library; Eric Pace, "Marshall E. Dimock, 88, Author and Public Administration Expert," *New York Times*. November 19, 1991.

¹⁴¹ "Memorandum for the Secretary of the Navy and the Chairman of the Maritime Commission," F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49: Dimock Papers.

With this presidential mandate, Dimock began targeting crew shortages. In part, this demanded better facilitation within the entire industry. To keep men and materiel moving, the unions, the shipping companies, and the WSA had to reach a consensus. Like others in the industrial sector, the maritime unions received closed shop agreements, increased wages, insurance, power over hiring, and the likelihood of institutional growth as manpower swelled through favorable collective bargaining. The shipping companies signing these agreements received the guarantee of stabilized conditions from the unions and extraordinarily lucrative contracts from the government to operate the merchant fleet. The government compelled the unions to agree to a “no-strike” pledge and chartered most of the maritime industry’s infrastructure to ensure forward momentum in the war effort. According to historian Nelson Lichtenstein, the agreement also gave the NMU, who only months before had faced accusations of communism, a much needed “Rooseveltian seal of patriotic orthodoxy.”¹⁴² Conflicts, of course, arose during the war, but the government, business, and labor also became habituated to their new wartime forms of cooperation and authority.

This new wartime partnership appealed to many seamen as well. Nationalism promised to fulfill workers desire to fully integrate into American society and support a united cause.¹⁴³ Using material inducements, patriotic appeals, and targeted propaganda, the newly formed WSA encouraged this belief by carefully crafting an image of the merchant marine that would appeal to workers for its practical benefits, vital mission, and

¹⁴² Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 180-82; Lichtenstein, “The Making of the Postwar Working Class,” 46.

¹⁴³ Gary Gerstle, “The Working Class Goes to War,” in *The War in American Culture: Society and Consciousness During World War II*, ed. Lewis A. Erenberg and Susan E. Hirsch (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 114-116; Lichtenstein, ““The Making of the Postwar Working Class,” 55.

virile nature. As a result, an implicit agreement built on Americanism, as understood by most seamen and as propagated by the government, compelled many men to sea in 1942.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁴ Felknor, *The Merchant Marine at War*, 178; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries of House of Representatives*, HR 1361, Rights and Benefits to American Merchant Seamen, 78th Cong., 1st sess., March 18, 1943, 120.



Figure 2: 357-G-2435, U.S. Maritime Commission, NARA-CP

Wartime Recruitment

During the course of the war, the sea-going force of the American Merchant Marine expanded from about 55,000 to nearly 250,000 active seamen.¹⁴⁵ In spite of this, the formation of the RMO and subsequent fivefold expansion of seagoing personnel was not unique in World War II. From a total population of 130 million people, nearly 17 million joined the industrial ranks during the war. One third of the population became new income-tax payers while nearly two-thirds purchased war bonds. As noted by historian James T. Sparrow, “the Second World War, building on but also superseding the New Deal, was a critical turning point for the growth of the federal government within American society.” This expansion in size, scope, and authority occurred not only in the maritime industry, but across most aspects of American life. It also fundamentally changed the nature of the relationship between citizen and country. According to Sparrow, this era marked the cultural foundations for the “nonviolent coercions and collective political action” that today help define American citizenship and nationalism. As the “government expanded and demanded more of its citizens, they had to be habituated to new forms of authority and new social arrangements resulting from its growing power.”¹⁴⁶

While the government had long subsidized and exerted forms of oversight over the mariner, the seaman and his country entered a new figurative relationship during the war. Building on recent policies, the merchant marine became increasingly nationalized in practice and character. Citizenship requirements, regimented training, and increased credentialing had triggered this change, but the war gave nationalistic fervor true

¹⁴⁵ WSA, “The United States Merchant Marine at War.”

¹⁴⁶ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 6-9.

momentum. Using coercive hard powers such as draft deferments for active seamen and wage increases, the government formed and fostered a highly organized civilian force. At the same time, federal agencies strategically used soft powers, including rhetoric, propaganda, and public-private initiatives to recruit their ideal volunteers. Both ultimately had a deep-seated impact on the make-up of wartime merchant manpower.

As newly appointed director of the Recruitment and Manning Organization, Marshall Dimock immediately understood the give-and-take with seamen required to build the maritime workforce. In a speech before the National Association of Seamen's Welfare Agencies in June 1942, Dimock proclaimed that mariners had been doing their part, but that a new degree of "statesmanship" was required to improve the "health, spirits, and general well-being of our seamen." While seamen were fulfilling their duties heroically, Dimock asked "Are we doing ours? The problem is not merely one of economics, the protection of basic rights and interest, and the creation of patriotic zeal in support of a cause. It is social and psychological."¹⁴⁷ In short, it was not only the responsibility of seamen to man the merchant marine, it was also the responsibility of the government to protect, support, and oversee mariners. Much of the federal government's ensuing recruitment campaigns hinged upon this implicit pact.

To prevent turnover, the RMO developed incentives to improve morale. This included better wages and opportunities and improved facilities. To start, the WSA helped negotiate increases in wages and benefits. Seaman received 85 cents per hour overtime pay, stand-by pay as they awaited ships, \$5 for every day they sailed in seas approaching combat areas, a \$100 monthly minimum war-risk bonus for sailing in

¹⁴⁷ "Maritime Personnel and Morale Problems During the War," (June 29, 1942), Container 56, Dimock Papers.

combat areas, and a flat rate of \$125 if the Axis destroyed attacked their vessel. The WSA further guaranteed \$5,000 war risk insurance, paid incrementally to disabled seamen and in a lump sum to the families of deceased mariners.¹⁴⁸

To improve morale, the WSA also developed a number of shore-side incentives including seamen's canteens, loans, individual insurance plans, improved medical care, a program to study mental health, free advice to seamen on family problems, repatriation services, libraries, and recreational facilities. Rest centers were built near various popular domestic and foreign ports where wounded and fatigued seamen could convalesce. Finally, Dimock encouraged the WSA's Training Organization to prioritize a policy of promotion from within.¹⁴⁹

In a joint effort among shipping management, the government, and the NMU, the RMO also facilitated the organization of the United Seamen's Service (USS) in August 1942. A private group akin to the United Service Organizations (or USO), the USS functioned in various ports worldwide to provide support to seamen. It also centralized private donations from a number of disparate maritime interests. Led by Dimock, the board featured the strange bedfellows of American shipping executives paired with NMU chief Joseph Curran.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Felknor, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War*, 182; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries of House of Representatives*, H.R. 2346, 79th Cong., 1st sess., October 18-19, 1945, 26, 34, 135-137.

¹⁴⁹ "The Merchant Marine at War,"; "Merchant Marine Radio Fact Sheet No. 251," June 29, 1944, F: Merchant Marine Recruitment Campaign, Box 15, I-6/ Entry 126, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP; "Calling All Tars," *War Progress* (October 23, 1942), War Production Board, Box 172, President's Secretary's File, FDR Library.

¹⁵⁰ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 30-31; See F: United Seamen's Service General (Apr. 1943, Apr. 1944- Feb. 1947), Container 47, Dimock Papers.

Externally, the WSA pressed the War Manpower Commission (WMC), the Selective Service Board, the U.S. Employment Service, and the Office of War Information to make maritime recruitment a priority. In a presentation before the WMC, Dimock requested that merchant seamen receive the highest priority rating, demanding that no active, inactive, stand-by, registered, nor training school graduate be referred for transfer to another industry by the USES unless already authorized by the RMO. He also asked that the USS refer anyone employed in the merchant marine since 1937 directly to the RMO. Under this arrangement, any personnel attached to civilian industries whose skills could contribute to the merchant marine, such as engineers, radio operators, cooks, and bakers would also be transferred.¹⁵¹ The WSA and WMC later signed a cooperative agreement to cement these recommendations that would drive the most qualified men towards the civilian service.¹⁵² The agreement included negotiations with the Selective Service Board, which slowed and ultimately stopped the drafting or recruitment of all draft-age qualified seamen into the armed forces.¹⁵³

The RMO also tested the voluntary nature of the merchant marine. Using provisos and propaganda, the RMO poached highly qualified seamen, such as licensed officers or seamen with senior ratings, from “state and local governments, large utility

¹⁵¹ “Manpower Requirements of the Merchant Marine,” Dimock Papers.

¹⁵² “Cooperative Arrangement Between the Recruitment and Manning Organization and the United States Employment Service for the Recruitment of Seamen for the Merchant Marine,” July 22, 1942, Box 31, I-6/ Entry 89, Office of the Assistant Executive Director for Program Development, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁵³ Telegram from Frank Fenton of AFL to War Manpower Commission, F: Merchant Marine- Employment Stabilization, Box 16, I-6/Entry 23, Records of the Management-Labor Policy Committee, RG 211 WMC Records NARA-CP; “Action Pursuant to the Recommendation of the Management-Labor Policy Committee with Respect to the Merchant Marine,” December 23, 1942, F: Merchant Marine, Recruitment of, Box 16, I-6/Entry 89 Office for Program Development Records, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

companies, insurance companies, and large corporations.” To prevent backlash, they negotiated with employers who “almost without exception” assured “re-employment rights to men with marine licenses who are needed to go to sea.” By 1944, Congress passed legislation that guaranteed postwar reemployment for all highly-qualified merchant seamen leaving shore side jobs.¹⁵⁴

According to then-restricted documents, the WSA and WMC nearly took even more coercive measures to maintain active personnel using employment stabilization, which would essentially restrict current seamen from leaving the industry. A December 1942 proposal recommended a statute ensuring that no employer “shall hire or solicit for the purpose of hiring, any active maritime worker.” The WMC’s Management-Labor Policy Committee eventually halted the order after Roosevelt transferred jurisdiction of the Selective Service Board to the WMC later that month, thus nullifying the urgency of the discussion. The Committee agreed that the percentage of men leaving industry did not yet warrant such drastic measures.¹⁵⁵

Instead, as Dimock said, they continued their “voluntary approach.” Unable or unwilling to fully nationalize the merchant marine or adopt measures as strict as employment stabilization, federal authorities instead drew upon the federal government’s massive wartime information and propaganda agency, the Office of War Information (OWI).¹⁵⁶ In addition to policy adjustments that steered mariners out to sea, the WSA engaged the OWI to develop high-profile recruitment campaigns. Using rhetoric,

¹⁵⁴ “Experiences of the Merchant Marine with Manpower,” Container 56, Dimock Papers, 3-4; “WMC Field Instruction No. 679,” January 25, 1945, Box 24, I-6/ Entry 184 Records of the Bureau of Placement, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁵⁵ See entire Folder: Merchant Marine- Employment Stabilization, Box 16, I-6/ Entry 23, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁵⁶ Dimock, “Manning the Merchant Marine,” 5.

symbolism, and the allure of Americanism, masculine virtue, and patriotic sacrifice, the OWI crafted sophisticated campaigns designed to appeal to different audiences. The OWI effectively portrayed the merchant seamen as a complicated paradox: part youth, part veteran; part victim, part crusader, and most importantly, part civilian, part soldier.¹⁵⁷

As a result, subsequent advertising for the merchant marine targeted skilled “old-timers” who had left the service, potential Maritime Service apprentices, new recruits, and current seaman contemplating leaving the sea. Each segmented audience required different and evolving strategies, but all aimed to recruit the largest number of skilled men possible.

Immediate demand meant attracting veterans who needed limited training. Facing acute shortages in skilled seamen, including officers, engineers, able-bodied seamen, firemen, and qualified members of the engineering department, the WSA placed a priority on men with licenses or higher ratings. The OWI demonstrated its strategy in an undated booklet titled “The Merchant Marine Sends out an SOS to American Advertisers! Your Help is urgently Required in Securing 43,000 Experienced Seamen Needed Fast.” Calling on advertisers to embed Maritime Commission recruitment messages into their own advertisements, the booklet suggested appealing to the essential and unique nature seafaring, an assurance of postwar work, patriotism, and fast advancement prospects. Additionally, the booklet enlisted advertisers to help convey the urgent need for more men, create a better reputation for the merchant mariner, and to “optimistically dramatize the future of the industry.” Sample advertisements entreat:

¹⁵⁷ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 4-8; “Men for the Merchant Marine,” F: Bulletins: Merchant Marine Recruiting 1, Box 1531, NC-148/ E. 288 Correspondence Re: Film Production, OWI Record, NARA-CP.

For the sake of those boys over there... for your country's sake... for your own sake... *go back to sea now* where you can do what you can do best, and when it's needed most. Apply to any War Shipping Administration office, your Maritime Union, the U.S. Employment Service, or any Matson Operating Dept. Office.¹⁵⁸

In ensuing recruitment campaigns, numerous posters, radio announcements, and films, the OWI urged former seamen back to sea. An internal OWI document prepared for the campaign explained that they wanted “to appeal to all those who have marine licenses and who are not using them, to give up their unessential jobs for the duration and to go to work for Uncle Sam doing the job that they, and nobody else, can do.” Rough and ready, posters of “old-salts” showed weathered men willing to return to their former way of life, no matter the age. One poster showed an enthusiastic but hunched old man dragging heavy ship lines while another featured a set-jawed worker, vowing “You bet I’m going back to sea!” (see Figures 3 to 7).¹⁵⁹ According to Sparrow, these kinds of images “recast shopworn iconography of the worker’s clenched fist, bulging muscles, and bellicose glare to represent national unity.” They also suggested that all workers were just a soldier in a different uniform.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ “SOS to Ex-Officers,” F: Merchant Marine Campaign Guide Ads, Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁵⁹ 287-MC-1.25, Records of the Government Printing Office, Still Pictures Branch, NARA-CP; LC-USZC4-6779, War Shipping Administration Poster, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress.

¹⁶⁰ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 170.

EXAMPLES OF FEDERAL PROPAGANDA DIRECTED AT EXPERIENCED SEAMEN



Figure 2: 287-MC-1.25: Se-1, NARA-CP



Figure 4: LC-USZC4-6779, WSA Poster, NARA-CP



Figure 5: Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP



Figure 6: Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP

EXAMPLES OF FEDERAL PROPAGANDA DIRECTED AT YOUNG RECRUITS



Figure 7: 44-PA-1351, NARA-CP



Figure 8: 44-PA-442, NARA-CP



Figure 9: 44-PA-1149, NARA-CP



Figure 10: LC-USW3-005807-D, Hoffman Island Maritime Service trainees, Library of Congress

The RMO estimated that nearly 375,000 Americans had former sea experience. Government recruiting teams scoured port cities for ex-mariners, who, in the words of maritime historian Felix Riesenber, “were flattered, embarrassed and cajoled into shipping out again.” Some mariners, like sixty-nine-year-old Harry Daniel Ginch, needed no such goading. He told the WMC that he “spent the last war ashore installing engines in ships being built for war service... I don’t want to sit this one out.”¹⁶¹

Recruitment campaigns aimed at younger recruits took a different approach. Many appealed to a mariner’s masculinity and blurred the lines between the armed services and the merchant marine. Posters of young men with exaggerated muscles, strong jaws, and robust posture instructed men to “Deliver what it takes to Blast the Axis,” and “Join the Fighting Men of the U.S. Merchant Marine.” The not-so-subtle similarities with naval recruitment campaigns insinuated comparability between the two “services.” Press releases and recruitment campaigns depicting rigid formations of seamen substantiated these parallels (see Figures 7 to 10).¹⁶²

Federal propaganda often avoided distinctions between the merchant marines and the military. A WMC fact sheet issued to radio stations nationwide claimed that “service in the Merchant Marine, considering its importance to the war effort and the hazards involved, is so closely allied to service in the Armed Forces” that men “actively engaged at sea may well be considered as engaged in active defense of the country. Such service

¹⁶¹Dimock, “Manning the Merchant Marine,” 3; Felix Riesenber, Jr. *Sea War: the Story of the U.S. Merchant Marine in World War II* (Westport, Conn., Greenwood Press, 1974), 93; Box 4, I-6/ Entry 138, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁶²Graphic 44-PA-1351 and 44-PA-114, Records of the Office of Government Reports, Still Pictures Room, NARA-CP; LC-USW3-005807-D, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress; Armistice Day Parade USMM Basic School Pass Christian MS NOV 11 1942; Schuyler Otis Bland Memorial Library, U.S. Merchant Marine Academy, Kings Point, NY.

may properly be considered as tantamount to military service.” Spots on the War Shipping Administration’s “It’s Maritime” radio program featured dramatic run-ins with enemy submarines, resulting in fiery decks, swift sinkings, and daring rescues.¹⁶³ Dimock acknowledged as much during a speech, declaring

It is surprising how widely our fellow countrymen think that the Merchant Marine is part of the armed forces. It is not, of course, for it is a civilian undertaking like ship building, airplane construction, and the operation of the railways. On the other hand, the War Manpower Commission in its directive deferring all active seamen from military service correctly characterized the function performed by seamen in saying that they are to be regarded as essential as members of the armed forces. They do not wear uniforms; they have been called our fighters in dungarees. They are rough and ready, unassuming, fearless Americans. The seaman who, to the so-called respectable people, seems to be the toughest is often the most fearless when the going gets the roughest. Men who have been in the thick of combat will not be surprised at this.¹⁶⁴

In this way, the WSA and its affiliates ascribed the ideals of patriotism, nationalism, and sacrifice to service in the merchant marine. They recast seamen, barely tolerated only a handful of years before, as war heroes. Their cause was sound and their sacrifice was noble. With young hopefuls and old experts encouraged to join the ranks, they suddenly represented the best of America’s past, present, and future.

Active, novice, and returning seamen were encouraged to believe that working in the merchant marine was a patriotic act. Undeniably, some men surely sought the high wartime wages and chance to avoid the draft. But for many others, serving in the American Merchant Marine fulfilled the tacit social contract on which war conditions

¹⁶³ “Merchant Marine Radio Fact Sheet No. 251,”; “It’s Maritime,” Reel 178.15, RG 178 U.S. Maritime Commission Records, Motion Picture Research Room, NARA-CP.

¹⁶⁴ Dimock, “Manning the Merchant Marine.” 4.

depended.¹⁶⁵ Although most seamen did not sign actual contracts with government recruiters, many, if not most, saw their work as a realization of their democratic duty. And the ties went deeper. Mariners registered for war service in RMO offices, obtained new assignments from government employees, underwent training at federal facilities, and received some form of protection from the military establishment. To seamen sailing in the all-volunteer force, signing a contract on a merchant ship was akin to pledging their allegiance, and sometimes their lives, to the United States.

The wartime government did much to embolden this interpretation. The War Manpower Commission emphasized the critical nature of the service through its labor directives. The Office of War Information advertised the service as the civilian occupation second to none. The Recruitment and Manning Organization managed the enrollment of suitable applicants. The Maritime Service trained and legitimized the seaman as warrior. The Coast Guard certified recruits and penalized delinquent mariners with court martial. The Army and Navy validated the merchant marine by prioritizing their protection. And the American Battle Monument Commission buried or memorialized over 1,500 mariners in its overseas national cemeteries.¹⁶⁶

In an era that promised “an equality of sacrifice,” within industry, it is not surprising that seamen and their supporters drew a distinction between themselves and

¹⁶⁵ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 12-13; James D. Page and Ladislaus J. Zbranek, “A Study of 500 Consecutive Trainees in the United States Maritime Service Training Station, Avalon, California,” in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, ed. George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 155.

¹⁶⁶ American Battle Monuments Commission, ABMC Burials and Memorialization Database. Spreadsheet provided by the American Battle Monuments Commission in 2011.

other wartime workers.¹⁶⁷ Their quasi-military status, both in terms of physical sacrifice and general perceptions, naturally led mariners to believe that their service demanded recompense closer to that of a servicemen. For all the pomp of propagandists, however, wartime treatment and measures also fundamentally changed the service in more ominous ways. Despite wartime demands, neither the government, the unions, or the workers could totally shed prewar principles or prejudices.

Wartime Changes in Composition

On a whole, the fivefold wartime expansion of the merchant seagoing force vastly changed the industry. The massive influx of government trained men, coupled with a return of veteran seamen, altered the composition of the classically heterogeneous industry. In some ways, the enrollment of non-seafarers and substantial government supervision had a homogenizing effect on the service. In others, it added to the merchant marine's generational, economic, and cultural diversity. This section charts how the composition of the merchant marine evolved during the war.

Understanding who served in the merchant marine at any given time is a difficult task. Several government agencies attempted to monitor maritime personnel during the late 1930s and 1940s, but each struggled to define current membership and formulate a comprehensive picture of the force. Did it include any person who held a U.S. Coast Guard certificate? Or just those actively sailing? Did one count the river, coastwise and Great Lakes trades? Or just offshore shipping? Statisticians often discounted low tonnage ships, yet the demarcating weight varied. Did seamen employed in port offices, unions, or operating companies count? Or those serving in the Army Transport Service? What of

¹⁶⁷ Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 98-103.

the men convalescing, unemployed, or on stand-by? American seamen sailing on Allied ships and foreign seamen sailing under Honduran or Panamanian flags caused added confusion and inconsistencies.

As a result, the War Shipping Administration, the Department of Labor, the U.S. Coast Guard, and various other agencies all compiled differing statistics on mariners. Despite vast disparities, these numbers reveal certain trends regarding wartime mobilization. Perhaps most pronounced were the attempts of the federal government and unions to shape the character of the merchant marine. In some ways, these different parties held sway over maritime composition. In others, the desperation for personnel during war held the greatest power.

TABLE 1.0 MERCHANT MARINE DEMOGRAPHICS¹⁶⁸

| MERCHANT MARINE | | | AVERAGE AMERICAN |
|----------------------|------------|----------|-------------------------|
| | 1935 | 1943 | 1940 |
| African American | 6.2% | 6.0% | 9.8% |
| Women | 1.8% | 0% | 49.8% |
| Naturalized American | 19% | 6.6% | 5.4% |
| Foreign | 19.4% | 6.2% | 2.5% |
| Average Age | 33.8 years | 27 years | 29 years ¹⁶⁹ |

¹⁶⁸ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Merchant Marine Statistics* (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1935), 80; “Annual Report of U.S. Merchant Marine Personnel Employment during the Twelve Month Period from 1 September, 1943 to 31 August, 1944” F: Labor Force Records, Box 424, P/ Entry 1, Maritime Commission Records; Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1944-1945* no. 66 (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1945), Parts 1 and 3.

¹⁶⁹ This is the median age, not the average age. According to *The Historical Statistics of the United States, 1789-1945*, the median age is often one to two years lower than the average age.

Foreign Seamen

Adhering to prewar policies, the number of foreign seamen in the American Merchant Marine remained relatively low throughout the war. By 1943, the proportion of alien seamen had dropped thirteen percentage points from 1935 to 6.2 percent. Similar to nationwide trends, naturalized seamen decreased more drastically, falling from about 19 percent of personnel in 1935 to 6.6 percent in 1943.¹⁷⁰

The war produced a sharp contrast in the treatment of international seamen. On one hand, the shared responsibilities of war forced increased cooperation between American shipping agencies and their Allied counterparts. At the same time, some existing nationalistic divides in the maritime industry also intensified.

In early 1942, the FBI seized a number of Axis seamen who had recently debarked in the United States. The Alien Enemy Control Unit detained more than 2,000 German, Japanese, and Italian seamen at detention camps under suspicion of enemy activity. Some were held throughout the war. Perhaps indicating the foreignness of the merchant marine to the general public, a handful of these seamen were actually referred by camp officials directly to the RMO for employment upon release. Envisioning themselves similar to the armed services, the WSA staunchly rejected the suggestion that a fascist one day could be a mariner the next.¹⁷¹

On the exterior, World War II appeared to represent the peak of nationalism within the U.S. Merchant Marine. Yet war opened doors to increased collaboration with

¹⁷⁰ U.S. Department of Commerce, *Merchant Marine Statistics* (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1938), 111; National Maritime Union, "Lest We Forget," 1947, Department of Labor, Wirtz Labor Library; Gerstle, "The Working Class Goes to War," 115.

¹⁷¹ Letter from Vincent to Stone, May 19, 1944, F: WSA, General (May- Oct. 1944), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

foreign flags and opportunities for foreign seamen. From 1942 to 1945, the War Shipping Administration expanded its jurisdiction over not only the American Merchant Marine but also Central American seamen. In March 1942, the WSA extended its war risk insurance to Latin American countries and established a shipping pool for Panamanian and Honduran flagged vessels. According to historian Rodney Carlisle, the WSA also developed certificates for Panamanian crewmen which functioned as passports. Demonstrating the WSA's compunction for control, however, the federal government also found that withholding these cards "provided a means of excluding troublesome or politically dangerous crewmen from WSA employment."¹⁷² These punitive actions would foreshadow the censure and marginalization of American seamen that was to come.

Federal infrastructure, maritime culture, and wartime rhetoric all signified a newly nationalized American Merchant Marine. Yet these structures ultimately could not combat the inherent internationalizing nature of life at sea. American seamen continued to intermix with their Allied counterparts, disembark in and enjoy foreign ports, and sail alongside seamen born from across the world. Furthermore, wartime demand opened doors to increased collaboration with the Panamanian and Nicaraguan flags as the lines between the American maritime industry and the Central American maritime industry continued to blur. As much as lawmakers wished to create a merchant marine in their own image, internationalizing forces pushed back.

¹⁷² Carlisle, *Sovereignty for Sale*, 99-100; "Revised Agreement: Shipping Pool for Panamanian and Honduran Flag Vessels," May 24, 1944, F: WSA, General (May- Oct. 1944), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

Women

Female mariners comprised less than 2 percent of mariners when war broke out. Most served as stewardesses, nurses, or waitresses aboard passenger liners which were immediately requisitioned by the Army for troop transport following Pearl Harbor. A handful of women fell victim to the Axis onslaught on shipping at the beginning of the war, with some even captured or killed. In response, Admiral Land of the WSA ordered all women off seagoing vessels.

Many of these former mariners opposed the decree. According to an appeal sent to the WSA, they “indignantly rejected- and still are bitterly protesting- this being ‘protected’ against their wills, while they are arbitrarily deprived of their accustomed livelihood.” A group of twenty female mariners confronted Land in person about the policy. According to accounts, he reportedly “told these ladies of ‘mixed nationalities including a couple of coloured women’ that the question of their morals must be considered.” The women’s leader replied, “Damn you, Admiral. You take care of your morals and we’ll take care of ours.”

Despite appeals to Eleanor Roosevelt and a fierce campaign by the NMU, female mariners failed to sway the government’s conviction and did not return to sea until 1946.¹⁷³ Women had comprised just a small fraction of mariners prewar, but their absence aligned with the WSA’s vision of a quasi-military service.

¹⁷³ U.S. Department of Labor, *Maritime Labor in the United States* (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1942), 438; See F: Employment of Women, Box 419, P/Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records, NARA-CP; “Women Mariners in World War II,” <http://www.usmm.org/women.html>. Revised 04/26/12.

African Americans

Increased federal oversight, wartime urgency, and the progressive policies of the NMU considerably improved employment opportunities for Black seamen. Yet union control over hiring also helped maintain, and even bureaucratize, discrimination during World War II.

Black seamen, who comprised about six percent of the prewar service, made up nearly ten percent of the NMU during wartime. Unlike the armed services, the NMU practiced desegregation aboard its ships, allowing African Americans to serve in all departments. It also readily complied with the Roosevelt Administration's 1941 executive order banning discriminatory hiring practices and took complaints from the newly-formed Fair Employment Practice Committee seriously. Despite these advances, however, the Seamen's International Union (SIU) segregated non-whites to the stewards department while the Seaman's Union of the Pacific (SUP) continued its policy of denying Black seamen membership altogether.¹⁷⁴

Men interested in serving on a merchant ship had several options. If union men, they could go straight to their union hiring hall and receive an assignment. If they did not hold a union membership, they could either approach a shipping company with open shop hiring policies, or register with either the RMO or USES. These federal agencies would then refer the men to either a union hiring hall or shipping company for assignment. As a result, the RMO largely just helped facilitate employment by maintaining a list of

¹⁷⁴ Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 298; William Swift, "The Negro in the Offshore Industry," in *Negro Employment in the Maritime Industries: A Study of Racial Policies in the Shipbuilding, Longshore, and Offshore Maritime Industries* Volume VII, ed. Lester Rubin, William S. Swift, and Herbert R. Northrup (University of Pennsylvania: Philadelphia, PA, 1974), 25-26.

available seamen. When unions had crew shortages, they contacted the RMO, who sent over the seaman at the top of their list.

This practice, however, gave unions the option to accept or reject suggestions. Time and again, black seamen would be denied employment aboard SUP ships or required to serve in a lower occupation. This meant that not only did SIU and SUP discriminatory practices expand during the war as the number of ships they sailed increased, but also that the government became complicit in these practices. Ordered by Admiral Land to obey the demands of the union hiring halls, the RMO ultimately served as a champion of both desegregation and segregation. Its desegregated training centers graduated thousands of black seamen and its recruiting campaigns celebrated the first black NMU ship captain. It could not, however, ensure Black seamen a position on all government-owned vessels. At some RMO offices, this complicity extended as far as rejecting black applicants from registration lists due to a “colored quota.”¹⁷⁵ The Pacific Coast, which saw the largest increase in shipping activity and employment of any region during the war, also became the epicenter of the SUP’s discriminatory hiring practices.

Accused by the SUP of being social reformist and for “cramming Negroes down their throats,” the RMO ultimately capitulated to union demands. According to historian Herbert Hill, the “government’s priorities were such that it compromised its own civil rights policies rather than force the union to change.” In turn, discrimination “evolved from an informal custom into a rigid pattern” during World War II. This framework

¹⁷⁵ Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 179, 218-233; Glenn A. Knoblock, *African American World War II Casualties and Decorations in the Navy, Coast Guard and Merchant Marine: A Comprehensive Record* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2009), 468; Report of Applicant-Holding Office on Inter-Office Recruitment, F: Maritime Service, U.S. HQ 11,000 1945, Box 6, I-6 Entry 191, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

persisted postwar as West Coast shipping gained momentum and advancement opportunities for Black seamen evaporated.¹⁷⁶

Criminality and Paroles

According to a WSA study, 3.9 percent of mariners were cited for misconduct by the U.S. Coast Guard during the course of the war. A majority of these infractions were minor and involved attendance and job performance. About 3.5 percent of the total infractions concerned assault and battery while another 10.5 percent resulted from drunkenness. Less than 2 percent of the violations were for “desertion” (a strikingly incongruous term for a civilian worker).

Another WSA survey of 500 seamen indicated that old-timers were more likely to have criminal pasts than newly trained or recruited seamen. In fact, “old-timers were the worst offenders. In part this is due to their age, since they had more years in which to get in trouble, but it is in part due to the individual types they tend to represent.” The study did not elaborate, but presumably was alluding to prewar perceptions of drunken, disruptive waterfront dredges.¹⁷⁷

Desperate for servicemen in 1942, the WSA further added to the complexity of the force by enrolling paroled prisoners from various state prisons. According to the WSA, many of these men were “hardened criminals,” some having committed multiple offenses. In light of their past criminal behavior, the parolees received surprisingly positive marks from WSA examiners, and some even received citations of distinction for

¹⁷⁶ Hill, *Black Labor and the American Legal System*, 327-333.

¹⁷⁷ Nathan S. Kline and Lawrence Rogers, “Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen,” in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, ed. George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 190.

their service. While paroles ultimately served in most war industries, their presence in the merchant marine added complexity to maritime personnel's incongruous reputation for being both criminals and heroes.¹⁷⁸

Age, Draft Eligibility, and Experience

According to studies conducted by the War Shipping Administration, the policies surrounding recruitment often created extremes.¹⁷⁹ In a survey of 500 randomly selected unlicensed personnel, examiners found a remarkable variation in age, experience, origin, time spent at sea, family responsibilities, education, and work experience. The program defined "Old-Timers," or experienced seamen, as men who sailed prior to 1940. "New untrained seamen" were those who entered service after 1940 but who avoided U.S. Maritime apprentice training either by virtue of an existing shoreside skill (such as radio operators, cooks, electricians, etc.) or by entering an entry rating requiring no formal training. In this study, U.S. Maritime Services apprentices included all men who attended a federally run training school but who did not receive officer training. As shown in Figure 2.0, these three categories of wartime seamen varied greatly in terms of past experiences.

¹⁷⁸ "Men on Parole Fill Many Jobs in War Machine," *Christian Science Monitor*, October 27 1942; Jacobson, "Employment Records of Selected Groups of Merchant Seamen," 277-9; John Bond, "Army Rules Likely to Keep More Inmates Out of War," *Christian Science Monitor*, September 17, 1943.

¹⁷⁹ During the war, the WSA created a cross-divisional program called the Psychobiological Program. Its goal was to assess the "mental and emotional problems" of seagoing men upon recruitment, training, and before each voyage. Those deemed mentally, physically, or emotionally unfit were denied service. In 1946, the Psychobiological Program published, in collaboration with Stanford University, *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*. This report included analyses of each U.S. Maritime Service training station, screening programs, and mental hygiene activities. It also included a section on the overall characteristics of seamen. Although these surveys were limited studies with very small sample sizes, they are perhaps the best detailed summary of the composition of wartime seamen.

Overall, the average seaman was twenty-seven years old. However, varying Selective Service Board demands during the war heavily influenced enrollees. Even before 1942, the WSA lowered age requirements from nineteen to eighteen years old. From mid-1943 until the end of the war, the WSA generally refused admittance to healthy men falling between eighteen and twenty-six years old. When the Selective Service Board formally prohibited the recruitment of draft age mariners in 1944, the WSA further lowered the age limit to 16.5 years old with the condition of parental consent. Although the policy only lasted for about half a year, a drove of young men enrolled to join the war effort. According to studies, this included a significant number of boys who “were immature, low in ability, and from economically handicapped, culturally substandard, unhappy homes.”¹⁸⁰

Conversely, the “old-timers” represented the other extreme. On average, these men were 37.69 years old, though some “old salts” were well into their seventies. They had served an average of 9.6 years and 53.7 percent never married. Over 34 percent of old-timers were also foreign born. This differed greatly from the trained seamen of the Maritime Service and the newly recruited untrained seamen, both of whom faced stricter citizenship requirements.

While studies found that new licensed seamen were particularly high caliber and sixteen-year old recruits were particularly low caliber, the program reported mixed reactions to veterans of the armed forces. Most men in this category had recently been

¹⁸⁰ Judd Marmour and Alvin F. Zander, “Psychological Problems in the Training of 16 and 17-year-old Youths in the United States Maritime Service,” in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, ed. George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 170; Kline and Rogers, “Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen,” 175.

honorably discharged by the Army or Navy for medical reasons. Navy recruits proved superior while Army and Marine Corps veterans demonstrated substandard performance.¹⁸¹

¹⁸¹ Paul H. Jacobson, "Employment Records of Selected Groups of Merchant Seamen," in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, ed. George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 279.



TABLE 2.0: MERCHANT MARINE DEMOGRAPHICS BASED ON EXPERIENCE¹⁸²

| | EXPERIENCED SEAMEN | UNTRAINED SEAMEN | USMS TRAINEES | AVERAGE AMERICAN MALE |
|--------------------------------------|--------------------|------------------|---------------|-----------------------|
| Percentage of Service (%) | 19 | 26 | 49.4 | n/a |
| Average Age (yrs) | 37.69 | 25.99 | 22.64 | 29 |
| Average Years at Sea (yrs) | 9.625 | 1.465 | .994 | n/a |
| Average Education (yrs) | 10.99 | 11.80 | 10.05 | 8.3 |
| Non-English Speaking (%) | 2.4 | 1.4 | 0.0 | ---- |
| Foreign Born (%) | 34.7 | 12 | 2 | 9.1 |
| Single (%) | 53.7 | 63.3 | 68.8 | 33.2 ¹⁸³ |
| Divorced (%) | 4.2 | 1.5 | 2.0 | 1.2 ¹⁸⁴ |
| Previous Military Service (%) | 21 | 19 | 7 | ---- |
| Previously Unemployed (%) | 29* | 17* | 5* | ---- |
| Beyond Draft Age (%) | 40 | 6 | | ---- |
| Entered Service Before Draft Age (%) | n/a | 20 | 40 | n/a |
| Medically Ineligible for Draft (%) | 8 | 21 | 6 | 30.2 ¹⁸⁵ |
| Draft Eligible (%) | 31 | 34 | 47 | ---- |
| Torpedoed 1-5 times (%) | 23.2 | 6* | 3* | n/a |
| Faced Air-raids (%) | 57* | 40* | 43* | n/a |

*approximate

In sum, experienced seamen were significantly older than their newly trained and untrained counterparts. They were also more likely to be foreign-born, previously unemployed, unable to read English, and had minor brushes with the law. In 1940, their

¹⁸² Compiled from Kline and Rogers, "Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen," 173-195; Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstracts of the United States, 1944-1945* no. 66 (U.S. Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1945), Parts 1 and 3. Assumes total American population of 138,397,345 based on 1944 number, Population Estimates Program, Population Division, U.S. Census Bureau, 2000. 66,061,592

¹⁸³ Marital Status of the Males 15 Years Old and Over, *Statistic Abstracts of the United States, 1944-45*, Part 1, 44.

¹⁸⁴ Marital Status of the Males 15 Years Old and Over, *Statistic Abstracts of the United States, 1944-45*, Part 1, 44.

¹⁸⁵ Marcus S. Goldstein, "Physical Status of Men Examined through Selective Service in World War II," *Public Health Reports* 66, No. 19 (May 11, 1951), 593.

ranks comprised 100 percent of the merchant marine but now represented closer to one fifth. And by 1945, they were also were overwhelming more likely to continue service in the merchant marine after the war (see Figure 3.0).

TABLE 3.0 REPORTED POST WAR PLANS OF MERCHANT SEAMEN¹⁸⁶

| | EXPERIENCED SEAMEN | NEW UNTRAINED SEAMEN | USMS APPRENTICES |
|---|--------------------|----------------------|------------------|
| Return to Previous Occupation or Other Work | 12% | 42% | 41% |
| Return to School | 0% | 7% | 6% |
| Undecided | 20% | 30% | 34% |
| Continue as Merchant Seamen | 67% | 17% | 15% |

Discrimination against Experienced Seamen

The WSA heavily favored recruiting and training novices rather than existing unlicensed seamen during the early years of war. An estimated three out of four mariners were new recruits by 1945, despite a prewar overabundance of experienced seamen. Government recruitment campaigns that appealed to experienced mariners largely focused on skilled mariners with highly needed ratings such as officers, able-bodied seamen, or radio operators. Ordinary seamen and other lower-skilled occupations (who, consequently, were more likely to form the rank and file), received fewer appeals and opportunities to join.¹⁸⁷

Although the RMO promised upgrading and internal promotion as an incentive to existing mariners, they instead intentionally mobilized a new generation of seamen. From 1938 to 1945, the training program graduated 31,986 officers, 7,727 radio

¹⁸⁶ Kline and Rogers, “Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen,” 191.

¹⁸⁷ “Merchant Marine Recruitment: Inexperienced Men,” n.d. F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc., Box 589, NC-148/ Entry 90, RG 208 OWI Records, NARA-CP.

operators, and 150,734 unlicensed seamen of all ratings. In comparison, fewer than 40,000 active seamen graduated from the WSA upgrade and refresher schools.¹⁸⁸ All told, WSA figures revealed that the number of mariners actively serving in the U.S. merchant marine peaked at 248,000 during late 1945. This estimate, however, only represents the number of mariners serving at that exact time, not the total number of mariners who served throughout World War II. Deaths, disabilities, inductions into the armed forces, and general turnover meant that closer to 400,000 total men served between July 1941 and July 1945. Of these, three-fourths were recruited and trained by the WSA. The remaining 100,000 entered service directly through the unions and operators. How many of the 400,000 included prewar seamen is not exactly known, however the WSA estimated that it recruited 100,000 ex-mariners, a figure which excluded the men already actively serving when the war commenced.¹⁸⁹

According to recruitment materials, the WSA sought a new crop of seamen to man its ships. Distancing itself from old perceptions of life at sea, the WSA promised “no leaky tubs, no corned beef and hardtack, no picturesque cursing old captains.” Instead, the wartime mariner had “fresh vegetables, fresh meat, bread and pies prepared by skilled cooks. Intelligent career men as officers; clean-cut American boys as shipmates; a new efficient merchant marine.”¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ WSA, *The United States Merchant Marine at War*, 64.

¹⁸⁹ U.S. Maritime Commission, *Size and Composition of the Maritime Labor Force in the War and Post-War Periods*, October 1946, F: Labor Force Records, Box 424, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Records, NARA-CP; “Manpower Requirements of the United States Merchant Marine,” July 1, 1944, F: Merchant Marine- Campaign Guide Ads, Box 589, NC-148/ Entry 90, RG 208 OWI Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁹⁰ “Merchant Marine Recruitment: Inexperienced Men,” n.d. F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc., Box 589, NC-148/ Entry 90, RG 208 OWI Records, NARA-CP.

The WSA did not inadvertently promise a new merchant marine. Attentive to prewar unrest, as well as charges of un-Americanism and communism, the RMO's own charter articulated its basic mission to filter radical veterans out of its ranks. Coordinating with the Department of Justice, the U.S. Navy, and "other Governmental agencies," the RMO would "prevent the recruitment of disruptive or disloyal elements for the personnel of the Merchant Marine."¹⁹¹ In their stead, "clean-cut American boys" would be recruited, allocated, and trained. Differing starkly from the unlicensed seamen of the 1930s, these men, according to the Maritime Service, were "from all walks of life, from all sections of the country... from cities, farms, villages, and the highways and byways many of whom have never seen a body of salt water."¹⁹² Statistics backed up that claim. Of the 55,000 men who ultimately underwent Maritime Service training in 1943, around one tenth came from land-locked states. Every state in the union, plus the nation's capital contributed at least one seaman.¹⁹³ This differed from times past when coastal and Great Lakes populations dominated the industry.

The NMU understood the gravity of this change. In February 1943, Joseph Curran demanded that the Maritime Service reduce its training program, which planned to graduate 50,000 men that year.¹⁹⁴ According to historian Maury Klein, the graduates "pouring out" of these training schools "were not flocking to the union."¹⁹⁵ The scale of

¹⁹¹ "Administrative Order No. 17," May 5, 1942, Container 49, Dimock Papers.

¹⁹² "Background Material for Maritime Service Training Courses for Apprentice Seamen," June 29, 1943, Box 12: War-Wilson, F: War Shipping Administration, Box 12: I-6/ Entry 128, RG 211 WMC Records, NARA-CP.

¹⁹³ Graphic 357-G-3014A and caption. Maritime Commission Records, Still Pictures Branch, NARA-CP.

¹⁹⁴ "New Deal," *Time* 41, No. 5 (February 1943), 77.

¹⁹⁵ Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 546.

the WSA's program threatened not only the character of the prewar merchant marine. It also threatened union control while depriving them of potential dues-paying members.

When the United States joined the war, the WSA estimated that over 375,000 citizens had sea experience, while fewer than 70,000 positions were available. Discounting draftees, retirees, and the deceased, around 225,000 seamen remained. Yet the WSA did not court these men wholesale. According to Dimock, at issue was not overall supply and demand of manpower, but supply and demand by rating. Skilled seamen were recruited at a much higher rate than experienced men at entry ratings. By the end of 1943, only 27.4% of recruited ex-mariners held entry ratings, while 73.6% were non-entry ratings, including deck or engine officers, able-bodied seamen, qualified engineers, cooks, or bakers.¹⁹⁶

Facing increasingly dire manpower problems, Congress' Subcommittee on War Mobilization to the Committee on Military Affairs analyzed maritime recruitment in late 1943. Their report, issued by Senator Harley Kilgore of West Virginia, lambasted the WSA, stating

The most important limitation has been the failure to utilize fully the still large reserve of experienced seamen now ashore. This failure is traceable principally to the apprentice training program of the War Shipping Administration which has attempted to substitute new and youthful personnel for older, experienced workers. This practice is both discriminatory and wasteful. The training program must be reoriented if it is to meet effectively the manpower needs of the shipping industry. It is imperative to use fully the older, experience men who require no training beyond brief refresher courses; the younger men are needed in the armed services.

¹⁹⁶ Dimock, "Manning the Merchant Marine," 6; Dimock, "Manpower Requirements of the United States Merchant Marine"; "Update on Recruitment," F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers; Kline and Rogers, "Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen," 174.

Validating the union's concerns, the Kilgore Committee directed the WSA to "open its doors to labor participation" and adopt a bottom up policy. Specific recommendations included curtailing the training program, reducing the physical qualifications of trainees, intensifying the recruitment of experienced seamen in lower ratings, and expanding upgrading from lower to higher ratings and developing more adequate refresher courses.¹⁹⁷

In response to this rather damning appraisal, Dimock sent a memorandum to the WSA's deputy director, Captain Edward McCauley, requesting a drastic reduction in the program and a "corresponding increase in the recruitment of experience seamen to fill jobs as Ordinary Seamen, Wipers, and Messmen." He further admitted that, for the past eighteen months, the RMO had not been accepting as many applications of experienced seamen at entry ratings. "As you know," he continued, "none of our advertising and none of our field recruiting activity" had been directed towards these men. In fact, their recruitment had been discouraged. These seamen, responding to repeated federal recruitment campaigns, were "advised we have no place for them."¹⁹⁸

Although Dimock does not explicitly articulate why the WSA discriminated against these men, one answer lies in the strict age and physical condition of the U.S. Maritime Service. According to a Maritime Service Training Fact Sheet titled "Who is Wanted?" applicants had to be between ages 17.5 and 35. The steward's department also accepted recruits between the ages thirty-five and fifty. While the physical requirements were relaxed soon after the Kilgore Committee, prior to 1944, the merchant marine

¹⁹⁷ *Report of the Subcommittee on War Mobilization to the Committee on Military Affairs*, S. Res. 107, 78th Cong., 1 Sess., October 7, 1943, 14-16.

¹⁹⁸ Dimock to McCauly, Report of the Kilgore Committee, October 16, 1943, F: WSA General (May 1941- Dec. 1943), Container 49, Dimock Papers.

rejected “the color blind, those with one eye, minor deformities of the extremities, and slight hearing defects” as well as those requiring glasses.¹⁹⁹ Seamen, who had been sailing for years, if not decades, were more likely to fall within those categories. Despite their experience, disabled seamen failed to meet the physical expectations of an organization run by former Coast Guard and Navy veterans.

More surreptitiously, the Kilgore Committee’s findings – and Dimock’s response – illuminated a more sinister prejudice. Prewar seamen of lower ratings were far more likely to be naturalized or alien citizens, African Americans, unemployed, or more militant members of the rank and file. In 1941 alone, more than 77 percent of all African Americans employed in the merchant marine were stewards. Similarly, unlicensed members of the prewar maritime industry, according to David Glazer, come closer than a majority of other workforces to “mass membership” in the Communist Party. In short, these were the men who in previous decades had been looked down upon, or downright despised, by federal officials. Based on the Kilgore report, it is likely that members of the WSA’s RMO and Training Organization failed to disassociate prewar prejudices, despite growing manpower demands.²⁰⁰

Following the Kilgore Committee report, the U.S. Maritime Service began loosening its requirements and the RMO increasingly targeted experienced seamen of all skill-levels and ratings. Sadly, the embracement of these marginalized workers emerged

¹⁹⁹ Dimock to McCaully, October 16, 1943; “Who is Wanted?” Box 12, WMC Records, NARA-CP.

²⁰⁰ U.S. Department of Labor, *Maritime Labor in the United States* (Government Printing Office: Washington, D.C., 1942), 438; Swift, “The Negro in the Offshore Industry,” 25; “Composition of Labor Force in the Merchant Marine,” *Monthly Labor Review* 349 (1938): 349-353; Nathan Glazer, *The Social Basis of American Communism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1974), 114.

concurrently with another trend: growing opposition to full seamen's benefits and citizenship rights.

Ultimately, despite government attempts to standardize the merchant marine, it remained a highly diverse service. Even with an influx of new recruits and a Maritime Service that cherished uniformity, perhaps seamen's most unifying characteristic was their willingness to "Finish the Job" amid hazardous conditions. The WSA's physiological study showed that just about 90 percent of seamen had served overseas and 89 percent sailed in combat zones. Nearly half had seen enemy fire while one in ten had been hospitalized. Initial government estimates reported 5,638 seamen died from enemy action and 581 more had been prisoners of war. More recent estimates have suggested a figure closer to 9,000 and 700. At the same time, the Coast Guard disciplined almost one in twenty merchant mariners, and reports of disobedience and conflict with Naval Armed Guards abounded. As the study concluded, the merchant marine "has been so variously damned and praised, extolled as a hero and condemned as a draft dodger, that the need for an unprejudiced and objective study is obvious." In spite of this stance, the WSA's study did little to quell misperceptions and disregard.²⁰¹

The quasi-military nature of the American Merchant Marine not only confused the public, many of whom incorrectly believed that the industry was a subset of the armed forces, but also peeled back the luster of national fervor to reveal a paradox. During World War II, Americans embraced the combat soldier as a personified symbol of

²⁰¹ George G. Killinger, *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 17; Felkner, *The U.S. Merchant Marine at War, 1775-1945*, 175.

the ideal citizen.²⁰² Yet the visual and rhetorical allegories of merchant seaman as part civilian, part soldier rang true when considering their responsibilities and sacrifice. How should the nation treat a service whose sacrifice equaled that of the soldier, but whose status equaled that of a civilian worker? Merchant seamen had a freedom of choice, air of self-interest, and unpredictability that complicated the narrative. Whereas soldiers stood as a unifying symbol of national sacrifice, the complexity of the merchant seamen's contributions made it harder for the nation to conceptualize seamen as a full embodiment of national citizenship or patriotic symbol behind the war effort. How these men fit into overall ideas about obligations of average citizens, self-interest of the wage earner, and the idealization of America's citizen soldiers complicated not only the social contract of the merchant marine, but also the social contract of the nation. In America's attempts to reconcile the status of the merchant seamen, congressional leaders, military officials, veterans groups, union representatives, and mariners themselves struggled to clarify and classify the contributions and entitlements of the wartime merchant marine.

²⁰² Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 12-14.

Chapter Three: Cast-off: Abandoned Postwar Seamen

Since World War II, mariners and their advocates have shared a widespread belief that those seafarers who contributed to the war effort did not receive adequate recognition, gratitude, or recompense. Within this narrative – first articulated during the war – there is tendency to portray the neglect as an unfortunate oversight, an aberration due to the overwhelming demands of war. Yet as this chapter will illustrate, the mistreatment of seamen sprang from both indignities caused by government neglect as well as blatant attacks by conservative opponents. A postwar escalation of hardships signaled a sea change in the federal government’s previous commitment to merchant manpower. Sensing this dismissal, those seamen with better shoreside employment prospects left the industry. Those who remained largely comprised a collective of marginalized Americans, denied the benefits and respect of full citizenship.

The marginalization of postwar seamen ultimately signaled the federal government’s wholesale rejection of New Deal-era attempts to protect, redeem, and nationalize maritime manpower. While many maritime historians either outright ignore the impact of personnel on the decline of American shipping, or attribute it to unreasonably high labor costs, this chapter concludes that, in fact, it was the government’s abrupt reversal in its attitude toward the treatment of seamen that chiefly undermined the status and condition of American merchant mariners. This chapter argues that the treatment of seamen, in addition to poor maritime policy and use of foreign flags, helped accelerate the decline of the U.S. merchant marine.

Anonymous Heroes or Draft Dodgers?

By the end of 1943, nearly 135,000 were men sailing in the American Merchant Marine, and demand for seamen had stabilized. So too had mariner casualties as the Allies gained greater control of the seas in the middle months of the year. But quotas still needed to be filled. And following the Kilgore Committee report, ships were increasingly manned by prewar seamen or untrained men lacking the training and sanction of the federal Maritime Service.

At the same time, the Roosevelt Administration became increasingly concerned about rising military manpower issues. The invasion of Europe would require a spike in troops, and in 1943, only 8 percent of Americans were in uniform compared to 10 percent in Great Britain. Men capable of military service needed to be pulled out of defense positions and shipped overseas.²⁰³ On the home front, the United States remained the only major military power not to require national service of its entire citizenry. Although members of Roosevelt's cabinet supported national service legislation since early in the conflict, the president remained hesitant. After two years of war, Roosevelt feared that the fatigued nation would reject compulsory wartime service.²⁰⁴

Following the Teheran Conference in November 1943, which deliberated on the logistics of the Normandy landings, Roosevelt could no longer ignore manpower demands. During his State of the Union address, delivered by fireside chat on January 11, 1944, Roosevelt announced his support for a national service law. The law would "make available for war production or for any other essential services every able-bodied

²⁰³ "The Merchant Marine at War," OWI Records, NARA-CP.; O'Neill, *A Democracy at War*, 369, 392.

²⁰⁴ Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 627.

adult” in America. Despite recommending an unprecedented step toward total war, Roosevelt, as historian Maury Klein observed, expressed the law in truly democratic terms, stating that “National service is the most democratic way to wage a war. Like selective service for the armed forces, it rests on the obligation of each citizen to serve his Nation to his utmost where he is best qualified.”²⁰⁵

In his address, Roosevelt then quoted a recent joint statement from the heads of the War Department, Navy Department, *and* the Maritime Commission, stating:

When the very life of the Nation is in peril, the responsibility for service is common to all men and women. In such a time there can be no discrimination between the men and women who are assigned by the Government to its defense at the battlefield and the men and women assigned to producing the vital materials essential to successful military operations. A prompt enactment of a National Service Law would be merely an expression of the universality of this responsibility.

Here, the merchant marine stood in company with the military services as an equal, pushing for increased national responsibilities.

Not surprisingly, the law languished in Congress and was overshadowed even within the State of the Union address itself. For, in addition to supporting national service, Roosevelt also introduced his “Second Bill of Rights” during his January 1944 address. Known as the “Economic Bill of Rights,” Roosevelt’s tenets lauded security and prosperity for all Americans. They included the right to earn a decent wage, provide adequate food, clothing, and recreation for one’s family, live in a decent home, and receive a good education.²⁰⁶

²⁰⁵ Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 629.

²⁰⁶ Klein, *A Call to Arms*, 627-629; Franklin D. Roosevelt, “State of the Union Message to Congress,” January 11, 1944 Accessed through the FDR Library, http://www.fdrlibrary.marist.edu/archives/address_text.html.

Historians often overlook that Roosevelt coupled his vision of a welfare state with the suggestion of national service. According to James T. Sparrow, however, the two were inexplicably tied. Practically speaking, the “liberal ideals of freedom and rights championed by Roosevelt and his war administrators were predicated on the greater obligation to meet the requirements of national belonging.” In other words, to obtain full and genuine national citizenship, all citizens needed to share in the burden of war.²⁰⁷

So, under Admiral Land’s representation in early 1944, the merchant marine appeared to join the military services in recognizing wartime obligations and rights. Yet the status and citizenship of merchant seamen was far more complex. And within months, national leaders questioned the very worthiness of seamen in receiving economic security and prosperity through federal aid.

The treatment of the merchant marine by the nation’s highest political officials often differed from their day-to-day standing. From the outset of the war, merchant mariners had faced unusual indignities, hardships, and accusations, often resulting from a general uncertainty or confusion over their quasi-military status. These hardships, and the government’s attempts to address them, generated the dual belief among seamen that they were considered second-rate, and that it was the government’s responsibility to rectify that fact.

When the U.S. entered the war, the federal government had limited services to attend to merchant seamen. Despite the Maritime Commission’s training schools, the newly anointed War Shipping Administration lacked the structure to accommodate naval

²⁰⁷ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 3-4.

warfare. Almost immediately, shocking issues began to arise that left the WSA dumbfounded and merchant seamen distraught.

To begin with, shipping casualties introduced grisly realities. As German *U-Boats* sunk merchant ships just off the Eastern seaboard, nameless bodies clad in dungarees began to wash ashore. Officials had no inkling of their identity or what to do with the remains. Some deceased mariners were sent to Navy morgues, others to U.S. Marine Hospitals. After the Navy denied any responsibility, flummoxed hospitals returned the deceased to the shipping companies, who bore this burden with likewise unease. Uncertain, the shipping companies occasionally turned to the NMU for identification and internment. In a letter to President Roosevelt, one union representative begged for some kind of identification system, describing the ghastly scene “Skilled artisans were vainly attempting to make presentable their poor burned and battered faces. Their bodies, burnt and broken were shining emblems of what the American seamen are doing to win this war.” Yet the NMU representative could not identify the men. “But who were they?” he asked. “The agent requested that I identify them as I had shipped them originally. I could not do so. No would could do so. Even the tattoos were burned from their arms. The Army, Navy, Coast Guard, and Marine Corps are spared this fate.”²⁰⁸

The WSA ultimately orchestrated the production of metal identification tags, paid for funeral and burial costs, and borrowed the language of the Navy to inform next-of-kin of their loved one’s wounding, disappearance, or death. Yet more indignities followed. Sometimes these resulted from general confusion over the status of the merchant marine.

²⁰⁸See F: Disposition of the Remains of Seamen, Box 404, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records.

Letters from state legislators and community leaders flooded the WSA questioning whether deceased merchant seamen should be inscribed on war memorials. Others asked if the U.S. Merchant Marine was a part of the armed services. Family members of seamen, and sometimes seamen themselves, earnestly appealed for greater recognition, whether through the adorning of service pins, adoption of uniforms, or the creation of medals. The WSA ultimately developed all of these accolades and awarded 141 Distinguished Service Medals.²⁰⁹ Yet most seamen rejected flashy decorations, instead yearning for simple respect. One seaman's mother, appealing to the WSA on behalf of her son, wrote "these men don't like fuss and frills but they are very human and, being so, like to know that their efforts are appreciated."²¹⁰

Blatant disregard offended unlicensed seamen most. Overseas, mariners were denied entrance into USO facilities while the Red Cross and other aid organizations billed displaced torpedoed seamen for basic items. At home, seamen repeatedly found themselves barred from Service Men's Centers and even received poor treatment at their own USS facilities. Some seamen alleged that the USS was more welcoming to licensed officers or young and uniformed Maritime Service graduates, while veteran mariners were greeted with "go way- you're drunk" and were "denied their rights and privileges because they were old-timers."²¹¹

²⁰⁹ See F: Honor Roll of Merchant Seamen Lost by Enemy Action, Box 404, P/ Entry 1, Box 178 Maritime Commission Records; See F: Bonus for War Time Service, Wartime Status for Seamen, Medals for Service. Box 353, P/ Entry 1, Box 178 Maritime Commission Records; WSA, *The United States Merchant Marine at War*, 71.

²¹⁰ "Anonymous Heroes," *Time* 40, Issue 14 (November 5, 1942): 6; See F: Disposition of the Remains of Seamen, Box 404, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records.

²¹¹ Hohman, *Seamen Ashore*, 37; WSA Report, November 17, 1942. F: War Shipping Administration: General, Box 18, UD/ Entry 7, RG 248 Records of the War Shipping

The most egregious offenses came from attacks by conservative news outlets. Aimed at maritime unions, and specifically communist elements inside these unions, these attacks ultimately tarnished seamen's reputations for years to come. Despite being refuted by top military and political leaders and debunked by a Congressional hearing, the rumors capitalized on prewar perceptions of seamen and bred distrust and ill will.²¹²

The onslaught of negative press began in late December 1942. On December 21, a *Time* article described Maritime Service trainees as "slackers, draft dodgers, and profiteers." Four days later, the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, whose anti-labor agenda had dogged maritime unions for years, ran a story about the subversive insolence of the NMU. The Christmas Day article quoted a "naval officer" who branded seamen "draft dodgers, misfits, yellow, insubordinate scum." Under the "guidance of Communist elements," the "stewards, cooks, and messmen are the worst of the crew" the officer alleged. "Their union is communist directed and most of them are followers of the party line. They instigate trouble with other crew men, but are careful to avoid overt acts." Charges of exorbitant pay, insufficient working hours, and impertinence followed.²¹³

To the NMU, these allegations smacked of "fascist propaganda." Directed at union members (specifically the lowliest and often most racially diverse crewmembers of the steward's department), the article received immediate condemnation by NMU President Joseph Curran and members of the NMU. Seamen picketed the newspaper's

Administration, NARA-CP; "Says Service Centers Bar Seamen as Result of Phoney Press Smear," *The PILOT*, February 26, 1943;

²¹² "House Unit Dismisses Guadalcanal Story," *New York Times*, February 24, 1943; Andrew J. Waber, "Popular Perceptions of the American Merchant Marine During World War II," Diss. (Florida State University, 2008. Tallahassee, FL), 25-31.

²¹³ "Slackers and Suckers," *Time* 40 Issue 25 (December 21, 1942): 86; "Naval Officer Bares Red Rule of Sailor Union," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, December 25, 1942, 8; "Seamen Get Smeared by Chicago Tribune," *The PILOT*, January 1, 1943.

headquarters with protest signs reading “I was Torpedoed Twice. Our Casualty List is the Answer to the Tribunes Lies!” Meanwhile, top federal officials scrambled to disavow the critiques. Admiral Land, the Attorney General, the Navy Department, and the Office of War Information blasted the charges while Eleanor Roosevelt categorized the *Tribune* article as “outrageous.”²¹⁴

Public leaders and Congressional hearings absolved mariners of wrong-doing, but the Justice Department continued its prewar investigations of Communist seamen. Although President Roosevelt personally denied to Joseph Curran in 1940 that the FBI had been investigating the NMU, the Bureau had, in fact, been continuing their surveillance. Following the publication of the above articles, government operatives increased their harassment of Curran by suddenly reclassifying him in 1943 as eligible for military service and refusing to allow him to travel to the Soviet Union and United Kingdom. Although the draft board ultimately reversed his 1-A status, the senior leaders of the NMU remained under surveillance and the ideologies of seamen remained under scrutiny.²¹⁵

²¹⁴ “Picket Phoney Rag,” *The PILOT*, January 8, 1943; “Mrs. Roosevelt Raps Tribune Slander Story,” *The PILOT*, January 15, 1943; “The Enemy at Home,” National Maritime Union, November 1943.

²¹⁵ Letter from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Joseph Curran, November 19, 1940. See also Folder OF 4177 National Maritime Union of American 1937-1945, Box OF 4166, Roosevelt, Franklin D., President, Official File, FDR Library; Robert Justin Goldstein, *Little ‘Red Scares’: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921-1946* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014), 33-34. The NMU also ardently protested the detention of German-born communist and NMU seamen Ernest Fox throughout the war. Fox was deemed a “dangerous enemy alien” by the government, but the NMU alleged his arrest was due to his militant unionism. See Leo Huberman, “There is a Man Interned in a Prison Camp as a “Dangerous Enemy Alien,” National Maritime Union, 1944.

In the following months, the *Akron Beacon Journal* made additional sensational allegations against seamen, accusing NMU ships of refusing to unload supplies at Guadalcanal. Press rooms nationwide picked up the story. In response to these serious allegations, the House of Representatives held a hearing on the “misbehavior of merchant seamen.” Despite Congress finding the story groundless and a subsequent defense of the merchant marine by President Roosevelt, the public perception of mariners suffered a blow.²¹⁶ The NMU, meanwhile, recognized these slanderous articles as the opening volley of a larger battle. “The immediate pick-up of this story by anti-labor forces in Congress merely indicates what we can expect in the coming year,” the NMU’s newspaper proclaimed. “We know there is an attack against labor in process which will become more violent as the year goes on and which will see the same false stores and unreliable information to slander us.” According to one seaman, conservative politicians and federal officials were “concerned more with the destruction of our trade unions than they are with the successful prosecution of this war.” In truth, an internal clash over America’s treatment of seamen was just beginning.²¹⁷

The Promise of a Future? Exclusion from the G.I. Bill

On May 22, 1944, the nation celebrated its eleventh official National Maritime Day. Despite being devised by the Roosevelt Administration amid the contentious labor unrest of the early 1930s, the federally-sanctioned tribute in 1944 appeared undeniably

²¹⁶ Smear attacking NMU Discredited by U.S. Officials,” *The PILOT*, January 22, 1943; For a more detailed analysis of perceptions of mariners, see Andrew J. Waber’s “Popular Perceptions of the American Merchant Marine During World War II,” Diss., (Florida State University, 2008. Tallahassee, FL), 25-31.

²¹⁷ “Davis Crew Says Phoney Guadalcanal Story is Part of Anti-Labor Campaign,” *The PILOT*, February 19, 1943; Correspondence to President Roosevelt, May 14, 1942, F: Disposition of the Remains of Seamen, Box 404, P/ Entry 1, RG 178 Maritime Commission Records.

patriotic. Posters honored the “more than 5,500 Merchant Seaman Lost in Action against the Enemy,” while President Roosevelt praised the “patriotism, courage, sacrifice, and labor” of maritime workers ashore and afloat. Federal officials and shipping industry executives voiced their gratitude. Even so, these tributes included a thinly veiled agenda for greater recognition. “Fellow Americans—*Give them your answer!*” one announcement proclaimed. Roosevelt added that “the nation will always owe a debt to those young Americans who have sailed the seven seas in the face of hidden dangers and gone down with their ships when carrying supplies to our fighting men.”²¹⁸

Despite these public accolades, Congress notably excluded American mariners from the Soldiers Readjustment Act just one month later. Known as the “G.I. Bill,” the landmark legislation guaranteed armed service veterans unprecedented security through the authorization of postwar benefits such as federal housing loans, hospitalization, and education, yet failed to mention the merchant marine. On signing the bill into law, Roosevelt acknowledged the omission, stating “I trust that the congress will also soon provide similar opportunities for postwar loans, healthcare, education, unemployment insurance to the members of the merchant marine who have risked their lives times and again during this war for the welfare of their country.”²¹⁹

The denial of federal benefits to the merchant marine launched a simmering dispute in the coming years between lawmakers and maritime circles about the rights of seamen and the balance between duty and entitlement. From 1944 to 1947, Congress debated various forms of Seamen’s Benefits bills but ultimately failed to pass any form of

²¹⁸ See *The PILOT*, May 26, 1944; F: 1010 National Maritime Day (1934-1945), Roosevelt, Franklin D., President, Official File, FDR Library.

²¹⁹ “FDR Asks GI Benefits for Merchant Marine,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 23, 1944.

legislation. What began as an omission due to mariner's civilian status ultimately became a rebuke of mariner's standing as worthy American citizens. These events condemned seamen by not only excluding them from the most important welfare legislation of the wartime era, but also by relegating merchant manpower as the domain of marginalized Americans. Their exclusion hindered not only the future of individual unlicensed seamen, but also the future of maritime labor at large.

In part, the exclusion of seamen from the G.I. Bill can be attributed to the simple and self-evident reasoning that seamen were not, in fact, veterans under U.S. law. Drawing a clear dividing line between the deserving and the underserving helped limit government expenditures and maintain the hero status of the combat soldier. In this sense, the G.I. Bill represented, according to Sparrow, the "tremendous moral claim the GIs could make on the nation" by casting "veterans into first class citizens entitled to a comprehensive welfare state." Veteran's benefits offered soldiers and sailors the chance to secure middle class-status and full acceptance as American citizens.²²⁰

A second explanation for the denial of veteran benefits to merchant seamen was the increasing conservatism of Congress and the American public. Beginning with the 78th Congress in 1943, a conservative coalition defeated a series of pro-labor, pro-New Deal legislation, including the progressive Wagner-Murray-Dingell bill which would have extended the American welfare state. The Roosevelt Administration, primarily concerned with national defense, largely conceded to conservative legislators by shifting

²²⁰ Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 256; Gary Gertsle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 187, 251.

its focus away from domestic reform.²²¹ Consequently, merchant mariners were not alone in their disappointment and disillusionment after the government failed to make good on lofty wartime rhetoric. Many Americans believed that they themselves deserved greater recognition for their tremendous war efforts and sacrifices. The patriotism and imagery that had compelled America's "soldiers of production" to the factory lines not only engendered personal connections to the front lines, but also made workers feel entitled to postwar promises. With victory, Americans also expected opportunity. Despite this belief, subsequent legislation discounted large segments of society including African Americans, other non-white citizens and immigrants, women, and, finally, mariners.²²²

In the year and a half that followed the enactment of the G.I. Bill, passage of some kind of seamen's bill appeared eminent. Admiral Land entreated Congress for post-war benefits in October 1944 as the WSA drafted a legislative program for the law. In February 1945, the House of Representatives introduced a "Merchant Seamen's War Service Act" in Congress, which would secure unemployment benefits and educational opportunities for mariners. According to a Gallop Poll, 60 percent of Americans supported the legislation in the final year of war.²²³ Seamen themselves, showing their optimism in the bill, began making postwar plans. "After I go back to Scotch Plains and finish high school," seventeen-year old Cornelius J. Duffy announced, "I'd like to go to college and get a degree so I could teach mathematics. I won't be able to do that unless

²²¹ David Brody, "The New Deal and World War II," in *The New Deal*, ed. John Braemen (Ohio State University Press, 1975) 272-274; Gerstle, *American Crucible*, 201.

²²² Sparrow, *Warfare State*, 241, 256. While African American veterans were included in the Servicemen's Readjustment Act, most were systematically denied these rights through prejudicial execution of the law.

²²³ "GI Bill of Rights for Seamen Drawn," *New York Times*, August 27, 1944; George Gallup, "Merchant Marine Inclusion in GI Bill Backed by Public," *Washington Post*, July 7, 1945; "Merchant Marine Under GI Bill?" *Atlantic Constitution*, July 9, 1945.

Congress gives us the Seamen's Bill of Rights." African American Merle Milton agreed, indicating that he planned to stay at sea, but wanted to the opportunity to attend officers' school under a Seamen's Bill provision.²²⁴

The legislation, however, stalled. At the same time, the merchant marine began facing increasingly dire manpower shortages. In part, these shortages can be attributed to the Maritime Commission's massive production of ships and the ever-mounting seafit of supplies to Allied warzones. Yet the Recruitment and Manning Organization also detected fatigue and even disillusionment among mariners. According to an Office of War Information circular on "Why men leave the Merchant Service," merchant seamen feared the collapse of the industry postwar and a return of low wages and an oversaturated labor market. In addition to these economic reasons, the OWI also cited "social pressures," including fatigue, family reasons, and the belief that "the public regards him as a war profiteer." Negative press "referring to seamen as communist bums and draft dodgers" added to these pressures. "Some members of the merchant marine feel dissatisfied because of apparent failures to counteract adverse propaganda regarding wages and patriotism," the RMO explained in an internal memorandum. "Letters have been received in some port offices from parents of merchant seamen requesting assistance in vindicating these seamen in the eyes of their local communities."²²⁵

According to seamen and their families, their exclusion from the G.I. Bill also incited greater turnover. One mother, Alice Kahn of Hyattsville, Maryland, remarked

²²⁴ "Opinion: What are your impressions of the Seamen's Bill of Rights?" *MAST Magazine*, U.S. Maritime Service, November 1944. Accessed <http://www.usmm.org/seamanrights.html#anchor634381>.

²²⁵ "Why Men Leave the Merchant Service," "Manpower Requirements of the United States Merchant Marine," and Memorandum, June 16, 1944, F: Merchant Marine Campaign Guide Ads, Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP.

“Congress is to be blamed if there is a bad feeling among seamen and if the merchant marine deteriorates quickly. For there does not exist a bill of rights for the seamen nor for the youngsters who entered the training schools of the War Shipping Administration.” The WSA agreed. “We understand,” wrote the War Manpower Commission in a memorandum to Admiral Land addressing unusually high turnover, “that there has been recognition in certain quarters of the necessity for providing after-the-war benefits seamen.” With no postwar entitlements, life at sea “offers only a limited wage return with no future.”²²⁶ Others recognized seamen’s health issues as a motivation. Although an estimated 80 percent of seamen had survived enemy torpedoes and many suffered injuries and disabilities, few postwar programs existed. If seamen left rehabilitative treatment for more than two months, they could receive no future care. Despite recent advancements, they still had no pensions, limited medical care, and no unemployment insurance.²²⁷

The “Education Department” of the NMU agreed. In a 1944 publication “Heroes Today, Tramps Tomorrow?” the union argued that current war heroes would soon be “walking the streets in rags while their wives and children starve.” After all, “you can’t eat medals or words of praise,” the pamphlet quipped. Seamen’s lack of benefits,

²²⁶ “Manpower Requirements of the United States Merchant Marine,” and Memorandum, June 16, 1944, F: Merchant Marine Campaign Guide Ads, Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP; “Merchant Marine Rights,” *Daily Boston Globe*, January 15, 1945; Letter to Admiral Land, June 11, 1945, F: War Shipping Administration, General, Box 24, I-6/Entry 184, WMC Records, NARA-CP.

²²⁷ “Charles Hurd, The Veteran: Adequate and Fair Provision Urged for Veterans of Merchant Marine,” *New York Times*, March 25, 1945.



Figure 13: “Heroes Today, Tramps Tomorrow?”
National Maritime Union

including their exclusion from the 1935 Social Security Act, made wartime seamen particularly wary of postwar conditions.²²⁸

To combat this outlook, the OWI and WSA stressed the vitality of the job and aimed to “dramatize the future of the Merchant Marine.” In the publication, “Should I Stay at Sea,” the RMO entreated “YOU, and you alone, by staying on the job, can earn the praise and Merchant Marine offers post-war opportunities fully as great as in any American industry today.” Featuring an “old-timer” on

the cover, the advert further discouraged attrition by emphasizing the difficulty of obtaining shoreside jobs. “WHY TAKE THE CHANCE?” it probed. Perhaps most calculatingly, the flyer concluded by informing seamen that by “coming ashore before the wars are over,” they would risk losing the benefits of the proposed GI Bill for Merchant Seamen. “Peace is more than a promise, more than written agreements” it concluded.²²⁹

²²⁸ “Heroes Today, Tramps Tomorrow?” National Maritime Union, November 1944.

²²⁹ War Shipping Administration, “Should I Stay at Sea,” F: Bulletins: Merchant Marine Recruiting 1, Box 1531, NC-148/ E. 288 Correspondence Re: Film Production, OWI Record, NARA-CP.

The WSA pamphlet was not singular in its attempts to persuade seamen of the industry's postwar prospects, or in its use of pending legislation as an additional enticement. In the final year of war, as the power of patriotic rhetoric waned, the Office of War Information increasingly appealed to the practicality of seafaring.²³⁰

Despite support from the WSA, the unions, and President Roosevelt, Congress continually failed to pass a bill. Legislators justified their actions by citing the civilian status of seamen. However, more dubious reasons can be teased out from the ensuing public and congressional debates. These include a perceived threat to military privilege, denial due to existing private benefits, aversion to union activity, accusations of un-American activities and communism, and overt classism on the part of policymakers, military officials, and veteran's groups.

As early as 1943, Navy representatives opposed any additional benefit for seamen, arguing they would "invade the line of demarcation which is zealously preserved between civilians and military personnel." The American Legion, which helped draft the G.I. Bill, underscored that merchant seamen were not subject to military discipline or other hardships. As a result, they embodied "incompetency, ineptitude, and lack of discipline." In a more politely worded letter, a Legion representative explained that they would like to maintain the special category of the armed forces "without infringement by those serving in civilian capacities, however meritorious."²³¹

Opponents also lobbed charges of profiteering at seamen. Pointing to seamen's war risk insurance and bonuses, wages (which were higher than the armed services but

²³⁰ "Merchant Marine Lists Inducements For Men to Join," *Chicago Defender*, July 1, 1944; See F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc., Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP.

²³¹ *Rights and Benefits to American Merchant Seamen*, March 18, 1943, 3-4, 120; "Seamen Oppose Legion on Benefits," *New York Times* June 26, 1946, 44.

were subject to income tax and did not come with other benefits such as transportation costs, uniform stipends, medical care, etc.), congressmen, military officials, and veterans' groups argued that seamen were already well taken care of by public and private funds. Although the WSA repeatedly debunked the superiority (or even equality) of wartime benefits to those of the armed services, these misrepresentations repeatedly arose as a rationale for denying seamen.²³²

Despite the clear divide between employment in the merchant marine and service in the Armed Forces, opponents to the Seamen's Bill could not ignore the complexities of mariner's status. After all, enemy combatants targeted mariners and seized them as prisoners of war, unlike other civilian personnel. In response to these complicating factors, mariner's opponents augmented original arguments over civilian status, and increasingly began attacking the character of mariners. By adopting an anti-union and anti-communist animus, opponents called into question mariner's status as worthy citizens.

Criticism of seamen intensified in the last months of war. Led by conservative congressmen and press representatives, the opposition was, in large part, due to increased labor unrest following victory in Europe. The unions, which had managed to negotiate large wartime hazard bonuses, balked when the War Shipping Administration discussed revoking bonuses for Atlantic voyages after German surrender. After all, the bonuses often made up nearly half a mariner's wartime wage, and the reduction of these earnings belied WSA promises of a stable conversion to peacetime conditions. Mariners, the unions argued, were still performing essential war work while facing port cities riddled

²³² *Rights and Benefits to American Merchant Seamen*, March 18, 1943; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine*, October 18-19, 1945.

with mines. America needed the merchant marine to repatriate American troops and deliver promised postwar provisions to war-torn nations. After years of acquiescing to a wartime no-strike pledge, and anticipating further bonus cuts following the defeat of Japan, the unions concluded it was time for seamen to renegotiate.

Aiming to achieve wages akin to those on shore, the National Maritime Union launched a series of strikes following Japanese surrender.²³³ Although the number of wildcat strikes in the United States had skyrocketed since 1944, the NMU's work stoppage enraged Congress and much of the public. After all, immobile ships delayed the homecoming of America's G.I.s.²³⁴

It was during this period that opposition to mariner benefits began taking on increasingly aggressive tones. Some maritime supporters, including Congressman Ellis Patterson, pledged that they wholly sympathized with the "aspirations of the American seamen to an industrial status at least comparable to shore-side workers and to the basic forms of protections which have become identified with our American standard of living." Yet others accused seamen of disloyalty, greed, and communist indoctrination. In a letter presented to Congress amid the strikes, a mother wrote: "I sense the Americanism which is our greatest boast is seriously threatened by a little group of powerful, selfish union leaders who are using American labor as a screen for something more sinister."²³⁵

²³³ Elmo P. Hohman, *History of the American Merchant Seamen* (Hamden, CN: Shoe String Press, 1956), 95; "Mariner's Union Fights Bonus Cut," *Port Arthur News*, July 2, 1945; Goldberg, *The Maritime Story*, 216-218.

²³⁴ Gerstle, "The Working Class Goes to War," 107.

²³⁵ "Continued Atlantic Hazards Are seen dictating retention of seamen's bonuses," Bonus for War Time Service, Box 353, P/ Entry 1, Box 178 Maritime Commission

Suddenly, at the highest level of politics, the dialogue surrounding merchant seamen began to merge concepts of anti-unionism, anti-communism, and un-Americanism. “Despotic labor leaders” were “using their war-swollen membership and dues as a weapon to force unwelcome issues. We know that if these strikes were put to an honest and open poll,” the congressional record continues, “they’d be voted down. It’s just due to the rule of a few radical union bosses with strong communistic influence and a weak-kneed, vote-frightened Congress who doesn’t dare do anything about it.” During his testimony, forty-four year old Chief Engineer George S. Robson acknowledged this change in dialogue. When discussing the need for veteran’s benefits, and the condition of his seafaring son who had sustained wartime injuries, Robson protested against “people who are trying to bang at these merchant seamen because they think it is a communistic endeavor to get something for nothing.” Rather than just drawing a distinction between the armed services and the civilian force, this rhetoric cast the merchant marine as dangerous, disloyal, and beholden to foreign ideologies.²³⁶

Those who came to the defense of the merchant marine avoided defending the unions. Instead, they highlighted the young mariners who had answered their nation’s wartime call. These youths reportedly opposed the “unpatriotic strikes” of the NMU but could not protest or the unions would deny them employment. If they left the sea, they would suddenly be subject to the draft, after years of existing wartime service. “We signed with civilian status and trained under the WSA. But now the WSA doesn’t seem

Records; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, H.R. 2346, 1st Sess., October 18-19, 1945, 106.

²³⁶ *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, 105-106; Westbrook Pegler, “Is a Bit Perplexed,” *Atlanta Constitution*, June 11, 1945; “Race Prejudice on Shipboard,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, October 14, 1945.

to be interested in us anymore,” explained one merchant seaman. “We’re subject to two agencies, the Selective Service, which threatens to throw us into the armed forces if we leave the ship, and the unions, which dictate how, when, and if we shall work. Actually we are between the devil and the deep blue sea.”²³⁷

A *New York Times* article published the same day as the Congressional hearings described seamen as “captives.” “Where do we go from here?” seamen asked.

Selective Service is the only organization or agency with jurisdiction over us. It was the War Shipping Administration that welcomed us in, but they wash their hands of us. It is only a matter of a half year or so until many of the ships will be out of service, and none of us wanting to get out before the job is done. But what are we to do then? Will our service well done be recognized, and will we be permitted to go home to our own normal lives? The answer is no. We are 18 to 24 years old, most of us. All we can look forward to in the future is induction, after four years in the war. Thousands of us. Are we guilty of some awful crime, and did we commit an inexcusable error in volunteer for sea duty? Are we a bunch of cowards who ran and escaped from the war? There must be an answer.

Older, militant seamen and the WSA, they contended, were the cause for their plight.

Seamen were “being used as pawns for a few ardent radical unionists and for their futures interests,” the *Times* article concluded.²³⁸

Somewhat ironically, then, the wartime-era youths specifically recruited by the WSA could not avoid being saddled with the unfortunate and unpopular perceptions of seamen that had existed prewar. With a fivefold expansion in personnel since 1941, few of these young mariners had set foot on a ship before the war and most had no memory of the labor strife that wracked the docks in the 1930s. Yet it appears that some lawmakers and journalists retained this memory, ignoring the general lack of continuity between

²³⁷ “Merchant Marine,” *Washington Post*, December 5, 1945, 6; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine*, October 18-19, 1945, 26, 105, 115.

²³⁸ “Wartime Seamen Protest They are ‘Union Captives,’” *New York Times*, October 17, 1945.

these young recruits and the “unruly” mariners of the previous decade. Rather than inspiring sympathy, these appeals only emboldened opponents of the Seamen’s Bill. In the coming months, additional attacks on the character of unlicensed seamen appeared in print. Later lodging that seamen were “sympathizers of foreign ideologies,” both the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars raised doubts about the loyalties of the service. They linked charges of communism and profiteering directly with union indoctrination, and some conservative congressman emboldened their indictments. Ohio Representative Alvin Weichel, whose eleventh hour protest sank the seamen’s benefit bill in 1946, stated that any legislation would be “a \$116,000,000 gift to the national maritime union.” “It is utterly unjust to give these men the same rights as those who fought to save the country,” the Congressman argued. Granting government funds to the “disloyal and rapacious” ranks of the merchant marine would be “an insult to GI’s” the *Chicago Daily Tribune* charged.²³⁹

As maritime strikes continued through 1946, the rebuffing continued. “There can be no American Merchant Marine,” ran a *Los Angeles Times* article, “as long as service on American ships is as insolent and poor and subject to capricious delays...or as long as Communist leaders wield as great an influence as they do in some of the maritime unions.”²⁴⁰ A far cry from the reformist legislation of 1936, this reasoning suggests that no merchant marine was better than a radical merchant marine.

²³⁹ “Merchant Marine Benefits Opposed,” *The Baltimore Sun*, June 18, 1946; “Merchant Marine Lacks Discipline, Council is Told,” *Washington Post* (December 9, 1947), 8; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine*, October 18-19, 1945, 101-105; Willard Edwards, “Protest Snags Vet Benefits for CIO Seamen,” *Chicago Daily Tribune* (July 11, 1946), 3; “An Insult to GI’s,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, July 15, 1946.

²⁴⁰ Hanson W. Baldwin, “Who Will Run the Ships?” *Los Angeles Times*, October 12, 1946.

Accusations of selfishness, union indoctrination, radicalism, profiteering, unruliness, limited training, and disloyalty, as well as incessant examination of the seaman's wages versus benefits all suggested latent– and sometime overt– class warfare and discrimination. Compared with the armed forces, whose ranks largely comprised draft age men from every city and town in the nation, the merchant marine had higher percentages of previously unemployed, foreign-born laborers, and slightly-skilled workers. Even with the influx of wartime recruits, as well as an education level above the national average, the public perception of seamen remained that of the rank and file troublemaker from the 1930s. Old-timers were repeatedly blamed. Collective action was equated with mutiny. It is likely that these perceptions subconsciously slipped into the debates on seamen's legislation and influenced lawmaker's decisions. As one member of Congress claimed, another objection to seamen's sense of entitlement "is that this proposition goes further than the present veterans' laws, and turns up a field of trouble in taking in some new class of people, not hitherto provided for." Unlike the all-American G.I., merchant seamen were an unworthy class. The father of a deceased seaman, speaking to Congress acknowledged this bias. "I am of the opinion," claimed Frank L. Thomasson, "that the apparent discrimination is due to the fact that a large portion of the crew of any vessel operating under the War Shipping Administration is composed of men without any great amount of previous education, and without ambition for further education."²⁴¹ Despite their sacrifices, years of Congressional debates and press

²⁴¹ Waber, "Popular Perceptions of the American Merchant Marine During World War II," 37-40, Kline and Rogers, "Characteristics of 500 Active Wartime Merchant Seamen," 173; *Rights and Benefits to American Merchant Seamen*, March 18, 1943; *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine*, October 18-19, 1945, 151.

accusations deemed the merchant marine unworthy of not just veteran's benefits, but most forms of federal support.

Initially, the NMU vehemently rejected these charges. After winning the war, seamen simply wanted to "win the peace," Curran explained. They no longer wanted to be "second-class citizens but first class citizens." In the union publication "Battle Stations for Peace," the NMU lamented the lack of respect shown by Congress. "For our labors and sacrifices, what is the seamen's reward?" it asked. "The shipowner treats with contempt our demands for decent wages and conditions. We are denied the benefits of a Seamen's Bill of Rights. Our needs for unemployment insurance, adequate shoreside housing and proper hospitalization are ignored." Despite the union's war service record, seamen had found themselves "subject of slanderous red-baiting attacks from the boss press. Other and more vicious attempts to smash our Union and reduce our standards of living are in the wind." Union reactions became increasingly menacing as the Seamen's Bill stalled. In a 1947 collection of NMU "Songs for Seamen," the ballad "We've Got our Eyes on You" threatened Congress for their rulings:

*If you want to go back to Congress
Let me tell you a thing or two
Everybody shipping from the Union
Got his eyes on you*

*You think you acted smartly
With your slave labor plot.
Everyone who voted for Taft-Hartley
Is on the Spot*

*We want a seamen's
Bill of Rights
Don't make us ask again
Or we'll give you the right to be
A private citizen*

Despite the union's bravado, Congress voted down the Seamen's Bill again in 1947. Concurrently, it adopted the notoriously anti-union and anti-communist Taft-Hartley Act, which ended the NMU's closed shop agreements and threatened the fundamental legality of union hiring halls. Fearing the return of shipowner control over hiring, the NMU joined other labor unions in their vehement criticism of the legislation.²⁴² Meanwhile, conservative newsmen, veteran's groups, and opposing unions continued to lob allegations of communism at the NMU. Pressure to address these allegations mounted amidst growing Cold War angst and passage of Taft-Hartley.²⁴³ After four years of wartime institutional growth and collaboration with federal officials and maritime executives alike, Joseph Curran had also become increasingly established and less tolerant of rank and file militancy. Similar to other labor unions, the NMU had undergone a transformation during the war. Institutional growth and dependence on the government had transferred power from the rank and file to union leaders.²⁴⁴ Facing allegations of communism and disloyalty, Curran shifted right to accommodate the union's growing critics. Laying blame on a handful of top radical officials, including his

²⁴² "Curran Says Seamen to Be 1st Class Citizens After War," *The PILOT; Battle Stations for Peace: Resolution adopted March, 1946* (New York: National Maritime Union, 1946); "Songs for Seamen," (New York: National Maritime Union, 1947), 2; "New York Times tells Congress- Legalize the Seamen's Hiring Halls!" (New York: National Maritime Union, 1950); William Standard, "Taft-Hartley 'Union Shop' Means Open Shop for Seamen!" (New York: National Maritime Union, 1948); Goldberg, *The Maritime Story*, 233-239, 244; Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, 89-91.

²⁴³ Goldberg, *The Maritime Labor Story*, 234; "Saving the Merchant Marine," *Hartford Courant*, December 17, 1947; "U.S. Shipping Called Wide Open to Reds; FBI Probe Proposed," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, January 18, 1948; "Why American Ships Lose Trade," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, February 21, 1948.

²⁴⁴ Gerstle, "The Working Class Goes to War," 107; Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, 235.

right hand man, Caribbean-born immigrant Ferdinand Smith, Curran expelled all outspoken communists from the NMU between 1948 and 1950.²⁴⁵

The purge, which helped the NMU later avoid expulsion from the CIO, helped quell much criticism.²⁴⁶ At the same time, however, it caused immense unrest and reshuffled union control away from the union leaders who had most militantly fought for equality and worker's rights. Curran's actions may have saved the union from further anti-communist hostility, but it also gravely weakened the union's progressive impulses to defend the most vulnerable members of the maritime community, particularly African Americans.²⁴⁷ By 1955, when the CIO merged with the AFL, the once dominate NMU had nearly the same membership as its rival, the SIU. In the same year that the CIO merged with the AFL, it had become clear that the ideologies of the once radically different unions had also become more alike.²⁴⁸

Exodus

The conservative backlash in Congress did not affect the maritime industry alone. As domestic politics continued to shift to the right in response to a wave of strikes and animosity towards the Soviet Union mounted, merchant personnel were only a subset of unionized workers hurt by a changing postwar climate. A far cry from the radical 1930s, many maritime workers and the NMU itself ultimately capitulated to these conservative

²⁴⁵ Horne, *Red Seas*, 158

²⁴⁶ Goldberg, *The Maritime Labor Story*, 258-259; Philip Tact, "Civil Rights and the National Maritime Union, American Civil Liberties Union, 1950; National Maritime Union, *This is the NMU* (New York: W.P. Gotllieb Co., 1956).

²⁴⁷ Lichtenstein, *State of the Union*, 91; Horne, *Red Seas*, 175, 184.

²⁴⁸ NMU, *This is the NMU*; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employment Outlook in the Merchant Marine* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1952), 25; Swift, "The Negro in the Offshore Maritime Industry," 45-46.

attacks.²⁴⁹ Denied benefits by Congress, accused of un-American behavior by portions of the public, and faced with a decline in waterborne trade, many wartime mariners jumped ship. At the same time, the Taft-Hartley Act and internal purges left the NMU weakened. Within a decade, the circumstances of the maritime industry had vastly changed. The maritime unions lauded the privatized wage and welfare benefits it had achieved, but ignored the looming vulnerability of their organizations and the American mariner.

Many of the seamen who sailed during the Second World War felt betrayed by Congress. According to the testimony of Wayne P. Paschal, a spokesman for radio operators, seamen had been treated unfairly:

These Americans answering their country's call were under the impression, set forth in these advertisements and radio announcements asking them to serve in the merchant marine, that they were performing a patriotic duty fully as much as serving in the Army or the Navy. This was the tone of the recruiting drive, of every dinner speech, every celebration, every publication. This is fully shown by the tone of these advertisements in general and in particular.

Instead, seamen had been denied benefits. Mariners had responded to the lofty rhetoric of recruit campaigns, shared in the burdens of war, and fulfilled their obligation to their nation. Yet now they found that this compact was not the implied quid pro quo understanding they held upon joining the merchant marine. Congress had accused seamen of disloyalty and abuse of their position, yet seamen sensed their own betrayal. This duplicity hastened seamen's departure.²⁵⁰

According to a War Shipping Administration report from January 1946, the attrition rate of mariners skyrocketed following Japanese surrender. Many of the seamen

²⁴⁹ Brody, "The New Deal and World War II," 274; Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, 233-235.

²⁵⁰ "Fact Sheet: Merchant Seamen Needed," F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc. Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP.

initially leaving the industry were those beyond draft age who would not be conscripted by the Selective Service Board. Yet the percentage of draft age seamen who left the industry increased more than any other age group. Moreover, the report found that officers had left the industry in greater numbers than unlicensed men. The attrition of unlicensed seamen, who routinely experienced higher turnover than their officers, increased 13.5 percent, while the attrition of licensed deck and engine officers spiked by 28 percent.²⁵¹ In addition to the relaxation of conscription by the Selective Service Board, the WSA identified the cause of this turnover as “the feeling that shore jobs offer better pay and will insure greater postwar security” and “a regrettable lack of recognition on the part of the public for what the Merchant Marine has accomplished.”²⁵²

As an increasing number of seamen turned shoreside for employment, a degree of despondency can also be detected in the correspondence of the WSA. For, with the end of the war emergency, it was becoming increasingly clear to the federal officials that the postwar period would not be a continuation of New Deal commitment to a revitalized maritime industry. WSA employees watched as their postwar plans fell by the wayside, ignored by Congress and shipping industry leaders. In a memorandum from late 1945, a WSA representative petulantly wrote of their proposed program, saying “This plan is based on the belief that we will have a sizeable Merchant Marine, paying living wages and giving a reasonable security of employment and that the industry needs many of the high grade, ambitious young men now on our ships.” If, he continued, “our Merchant Marine is to become fourth grade, with cheap and low grade personnel, this plan has no

²⁵¹ “Attrition- September versus August 1945,” F: Labor Force Records on Merchant Seamen, Box 424, P/Entry 1, Maritime Commission Records.

²⁵² “Fact Sheet: Merchant Seamen Needed,” F: Radio—Fact Sheets, etc. Box 589, OWI Records, NARA-CP.

meaning and should be tossed in the waste basket along with our hopes for a strong maritime industry.”

In the coming years, reconversion policies further weakened the position of the WSA and mariner’s employment prospects. Although a wartime industry, it is important to remember that the WSA had strong prewar antecedents. In fact, with its promises of postwar employment and focus on training and cultivating a revitalized force, the WSA never fully separated itself from the maritime personnel policy aims of the 1930s. Split from the U.S. Maritime Commission during wartime to strengthen shipping operations, the agency, however, was seen as increasingly irrelevant after victory. By 1946, the WSA had to reduce the number of Maritime Service recruits and shutter half its existing training facilities. The Recruitment and Manning Organization was dissolved, along with the WSA’s Medical Division, and the withdrawal of federal funding for the United Seamen’s Service fatally weakened the organization. Private ships reconverted to their owners in peacetime and Congress passed the Merchant Ship Sales Act of 1946 which sold surplus Maritime Commission vessels to other nations. While the disposal helped facilitate economic recovery in war-torn nations and encouraged multilateral trade, the sale of these ships abroad also signaled the immediate elimination of shipboard positions for American seamen. By 1950, Congress dissolved the War Shipping Administration itself.²⁵³

That a wartime apparatus should disappear, along with a wartime glut of jobs, is not unexpected. Following the First World War, the shipping industry saw similar trends.

²⁵³ Hohman, *History of the American Merchant Seamen*, 96; Lloyd Beers, “Ships of State: Maritime Policy as Foreign Policy Under the Merchant Ship Sales Act of 1946,” Diss. (University of Maryland. 2009. College Park, MD), 1-10.

However, the post-World War II treatment of seamen vastly differed from the reformist vision of the 1930s. Through its WSA counterpart, the U.S. Maritime Commission had been given the chance during the Second World War to truly shape the composition and character of the merchant marine. More than 262,470 men passed through federal training facilities and the RMO assigned over 341,600 seamen. In this process, men were screened, rated, and certified as members of a U.S. Merchant Marine.²⁵⁴ Yet the degeneration of the WSA signaled not only the end of wartime mobilization but also the obsolescence of New-Deal era commitment to mariners. Some personnel matters reconverted to the U.S. Maritime Commission, but after years of implicit promises from the government, individual seamen were left confused about their postwar status and desperate for federal assistance. Hundreds wrote the Maritime Commission, asking after benefits they believed they had earned, but in fact, had never been codified. All the Commission could do was tell seamen to contact the shipping companies they worked for concerning any overdue hazard pay and inform them that “Congress has not taken favorable action.”²⁵⁵ A far cry from the reform rhetoric of the 1930s and the recruitment posters of the wartime era, the denial of seamen’s benefits signaled the end of federal efforts to transform merchant seamen into first-class citizens.

Sensing this policy change, many seamen of the wartime era chose shoreside employment instead. By October 1946, over 130,000 men had left the industry since V-J Day. Another 90,000 men entered the service during that time but most were novices sailing on their maiden voyages. In February 1946 alone, 37,993 seamen had signed their

²⁵⁴ WSA, *The United States Merchant Marine at War*, 56, 64.

²⁵⁵ Correspondence from the Maritime Commission to Calixto Ouerto, November 2, 1948, Bonus for War Time Service, Box 353, P/ Entry 1, Box 178 Maritime Commission Records.

very first shipping contracts. According to the WSA, the number of Puerto Rican seamen signing on at this time spiked, with nearly half of those signing on in New York City after VJ-Day hailing from the U.S. territory.²⁵⁶ Similarly, in the next decade, the percentage of African Americans in the industry increased— less because of new Black seamen signing on, but instead because of the higher percentages of white seamen leaving the industry. According to a later study by the Wharton School, as waterborne transportation declined, African American employment increased steadily. “This trend,” the authors reported, “runs counter to the usual finding that Negroes are the last hired and first fired, since cutbacks in employment have not decreased the number of jobs held by Negroes and have actually served to strengthen his position in the industry.”²⁵⁸

| TABLE 4.0: PERCENTAGES OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE AMERICAN MERCHANT MARINE ²⁵⁷ | | |
|--|------|------|
| 1940 | 1950 | 1960 |
| 5.2 | 6.0 | 6.6 |

The problem then, was that minorities were strengthening their numbers in a weakening industry. Unlike other unionized workers, who experienced the consolidation of power in the white working class and the homogenization of ethnic-European workers during this era, the shipping industry increasingly became the domain of a more marginalized workforce.²⁵⁹ African Americans and immigrants from Asian and Central American nations gradually comprised more and more of the unskilled merchant

²⁵⁶ Report, March 23, 1946, F: Labor Force Records on Merchant Seamen, Box 424, P/Entry 1, Maritime Commission Records; Lawrence Rogers, “Characteristics of 200 Unlicensed American Merchant Seamen Recruited Since V-J Day,” in *The Psychobiological Program of the War Shipping Administration*, ed. George G. Killinger (Stanford University, CA: Stanford University Press, 1947), 212.

²⁵⁷ Swift, “The Negro in the Offshore Maritime Industry, 89.

²⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 90.

²⁵⁹ Lichtenstein, *State of the Union: A Century of American Labor: A Century of American Labor* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 56.

manpower. According to the NMU, by 1947, minorities comprised nearly a third of their membership, including “Jews, British West Indians, Chinese, Puerto Ricans, Egyptians, Filipinos, Latin Americans, and scores of others.”²⁶⁰ Denied benefits, accused of unpatriotic behavior, and sensing both as a bad omen for the future, the skilled and semi-skilled white seamen of the war years left for better prospects on land. For these men abandoning the shipping industry, positions ashore promised a future more aligned with broader American standards of living than the precarious position of the merchant marine. The stability of shoreside employment enabled greater prospects for marriage, home ownership, and continuing education. Despite vast improvements since the depths of the Great Depression, life at sea remained estranged from the economic security and prosperity espoused in the Second Bill of Rights.

Furthermore, the denial of full benefits to seamen signaled Congress’ vote of no confidence in not only mariners, but also existing federal maritime labor policy. New Deal-era visions of a nationalized, naturalized merchant marine— protected from outside interests and subsidized by federal funding— were deemed excessive and undeserved. As a result, the maritime policy of the mid-1940s nullified the pledges of support that had been so plentiful during the 1930s. In doing so, it altered the future prospects of individual American seamen as well as the future American industry at large. After all, one could recollect the sentiment from 1936 that “it is idle to talk of building up the American Merchant Marine if simultaneously the quality of its personnel is not

²⁶⁰ National Maritime Union, “Equality for all: the Stand of the NMU on Discrimination.” (New York: National Maritime Union, 1947).

improved.”²⁶¹ Despite the WSA’s efforts, Congress’ charges of disloyalty, profiteering, insubordination, and communism belied the aspiration of Americanism intoned by those committed to revitalization. And to the policymakers, shipping executives, and industry specialists, the increasingly unskilled, inexperienced, African American, and immigrant composition of mariners failed to match their expectations of an ideal force.

Those who remained at sea did greatly benefit from the postwar wage scale increases demanded by the unions and endorsed by the War Shipping Administration. In fact, real wages had more than tripled since 1935. Although still below those of shoreside workers, American mariners were easily the best paid seafarers in the world. And shipping operators took notice. Facing increased labor costs, combined with a decrease in the white, All-American wartime workers, shipping executives turned to other cheaper options. While flags of convenience had been employed since the interwar years to skirt strict American policies, Congress’ rejection of New Deal-era maritime labor policy likely emboldened desertion from the American flag. Attributing their business decisions on exorbitant labor costs alone, shipping companies used the damaged postwar status of seamen to their advantage, knowing that the nation’s leaders were far more concerned about trade and tonnage than the protection of the merchant marine’s marginalized workforce.²⁶²

The postwar plight of mariner begs a counterfactual: Had mariners received better treatment at the hands of Congress and had more of the WSA’s ideal trainees stayed in

²⁶¹ Roland, Bolster, and Keysler, *The Way of the Ship*, 299; Felix Belair, Jr., “Merchant Marine Reform Urged: Modernized Fleet of Ships and Better Crews are Sought Through Establishment of Centralized Federal Authority,” *New York Times*, April 12, 1936.

²⁶² Gibson and Donovan, *The Abandoned Ocean*, 170; Marc Levinson, *The Box: How the Shipping Container Made the World Smaller and the World Economy Bigger* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 2006), 21; Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, 363.

the industry, would shipping companies have been able to so quickly desert the American flag? And would Congress have been more proactive in preventing this desertion?

Commonly referred to as the abandoned ocean, the postwar decline in American shipping, to some measure, began with the abandoned seaman.

Conclusion

“His name is Joe, or Bill or Jack. He has been killed in action; he has been tortured by Japs or thrown into their prisons. He has been wounded and permanently crippled, and his outfit has the highest proportional dead and missing rate of the war. But he has no honorable discharge button; he is ineligible for the American Legion; and he comes home from the battle fronts without parades or banquets. He cannot be honored with the flag in burial at sea; his name seldom gets on the hometown bronze plaques, and for him there is no GI bill of rights.”

- Dean Jennings, *Coronet Magazine*, September 1945 ²⁶³

In 1956, 57,192 seamen sailed in the ocean-going American merchant fleet. By the turn of the twenty-first century, the number had dropped to about 6,600. Similarly, U.S. flagged ships carried just 2.6 percent of the nation’s oceanic cargo in 2000 versus 20.7 percent in 1956.²⁶⁴ The precipitous decline in both American ships and seamen following the Second World War is often regarded as the twilight of American shipping, the industry cast off by policymakers, abandoned by shipping executives, and abused by maritime unions. Maritime’s inability or unwillingness to combat foreign competition, which offered lower operating costs and regulations, is seen as the major catalyst for this decline.

This work, however, has attempted to show that the story of labor was much more important to the decline of American shipping than the standard interpretations have suggested. It is important to remember that in 1916, 90 percent of personnel sailing on American ships were born in foreign countries, and seamen were more tied to their profession than to their citizenship. Consequently, lamentation over the rise of foreign competition only considers the short view—the period beginning in the 1930s when the

²⁶³ *Hearings Before the Committee on the Merchant Marine and Fisheries*, H.R. 2346, 1st Sess., October 18-19, 1945, 4.

²⁶⁴ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 362.

American merchant labor was both strong and protected from outside competition. When viewed in the long arc of the twentieth century, however, the 1930s was both an aberration and a turning point. Prior to then, seamen were largely non-citizens and even eschewed strong affiliations with any nation. By placing greater controls on seamen beginning in the 1930s, maritime unions and the federal government attempted to reconstitute and Americanize maritime personnel while imposing cultural and ideological prejudices. Promising prosperity, economic security, greater respect, and greater status, union and federal officials pledged mariners a hopeful future with protected American jobs. Yet their protectionism, focused on nationalizing and Americanizing what had long been an international industry, ultimately fell short. Despite new controls imposed on seamen that tightened citizenship requirements, regulated licensing, improved conditions, discouraged radicalism, institutionalized unionism, and permitted preferential hiring for white union members, the maritime industry could not be insulated from global pressures. World War, II, celebrated for its massive mobilization efforts and exceptional for its controlled economy, turned out to be a major opportunity for both institutions to achieve better control over mariners. However, the war ultimately served as a key force in undermining the reformist vision of the 1930s.

Today, legislation requires that 100 percent of those sailing on American ships hold American citizenship. While many maritime experts lament the evaporation of the American flag, maritime historians have recently pointed out that, to a large degree, private American interests continue to maintain control over a large portion of shipping capital and operations. Although largely invisible, American capital maintains its control

over much of oceanic shipping.²⁶⁵ Conversely, American seamen truly have shrunk to a minute fraction of the off-shore industry. The American seamen who remain are well paid, but they are a small elite. Unlicensed American crewmen on oceanic vessels have largely vanished. America's modern seagoing mariners are chiefly licensed, well-trained maritime academy graduates. In that sense, federal government and union attempts of the 1930s and 1940s to revamp, reconfigure, and professionalize the average unlicensed seamen yielded unexpected consequences. To be sure, American unlicensed seamen no longer are the international, unruly seamen that lawmakers and the public so feared a half century ago. That is because they have largely vanished from the oceans.

²⁶⁵ Roland, Bolster, and Keyssar, *The Way of the Ship*, 413-418.

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