

Indecision at Monterey?

On July 7, 1846, landing parties of sailors and marines from ships of the United States Navy's Pacific Squadron occupied the Mexican town of Monterey, the capital of the department of California. Commodore John Drake Sloat, the squadron commander, issued a proclamation to the inhabitants declaring that, from that day forward, California was annexed to the United States.¹ Hostilities had finally broken out between the United States and Mexico, but the commodore had not yet received official notification that war had actually been declared. Sloat had arrived in Monterey aboard his flagship, the frigate *Savannah*, almost one week earlier. The Pacific Squadron had sailed from Mazatlán after Sloat learned that combat had taken place along the Rio Grande between Mexican and United States forces. By the end of July, Captain Robert F. Stockton had relieved Sloat as the commodore of the Pacific Squadron, and Sloat had left for New York.

A large monument to Commodore Sloat stands on the grounds of the Presidio of Monterey, and some streets and schools are named in his honor. But few among the general public who travel on those streets seem to have any idea who he was. Several published histories of California appeared in the nineteenth century that took critical views of many American figures involved in California during the war with Mexico, including John Drake Sloat, Robert Field Stockton, and John Charles Frémont. Among the most prominent voices, historian Theodore Hittell opined that Sloat acted wisely in Monterey, whereas Hubert Howe Bancroft (not related to George Bancroft) and Josiah Royce argued that the commodore had a timid and vacillating nature that led him to act hesitantly and risk failure of his assigned mission in California.²

Among students of the Mexican War, Commodore Sloat's actions in command continue to provide grist for the mills of historical controversy. Interpretations appearing after 1900 take either of two approaches. Some criticize Sloat sharply for not acting sooner than he did in Mazatlán and also after arriving in Monterey. Authors from this school of thought use words like "Nervous Nellie," "dithering," or "hypochondriac" to describe Sloat. The historian K. Jack Bauer best exemplifies this most critical viewpoint. In his 1969 book about the naval aspects of the Mexican War, Bauer blisters Sloat with scathing denunciations and portrays him as timidly quavering in a situation that demanded decisive action. Five years later, Bauer authored a work on the entire war in which he toned the rhetoric down somewhat, and in a 1980 book chapter about George Bancroft as secretary of the navy, Bauer stated that while Sloat was "overly cautious," his proclamation of annexation was a good approach to the situation as it existed at that point in time. Bauer also criticized Secretary Bancroft's actions and, in all three of these works, heaped criticism on Commodore Robert F. Stockton as well.

Commodore Sloat has received kinder treatment from other modern historians of the Mexican War. Such writers tend to sympathize with his fear of repeating the colossal blunder of Commodore Thomas ap Catesby Jones, who in 1842 occupied Monterey in his mistaken belief that the United States and Mexico had gone to war. Some note Sloat's age and sickness. Bernard DeVoto added that Sloat was a "navy fuss-budget." Robert Selph Henry and John S. D. Eisenhower have seen Sloat as ensnared in a predicament caused by unclear, contradictory orders from Secretary Bancroft.³

Some officers of the age of sail navy, such as Stephen Decatur, are the subject of several biographical studies. Most others, of course, have none at all. The corpus of "commodore biographies" comprises a large and important part of the history of the United States Navy in the age of sail. The years from the navy's founding in 1798 until the end of the War of 1812 have attracted a fair number of studies, some of the interest relating to the bicentennial of that war. Studies of the period between 1815 and 1861 do exist but in much smaller numbers than for the preceding years. The biographical literature comprises a very important part of the naval historiography of those later antebellum years.⁴

There is one earlier biography of Rear Admiral John Drake Sloat, who was promoted to that rank on the retired list after the Civil War. Edwin Allen Sherman's *The Life of the Late Rear Admiral John Drake Sloat* appeared in 1902.⁵ Major Sherman served as the secretary of the Sloat Monument Association of California, an organization founded to raise the monument on the Presidio of Monterey. Sherman's adoring book reflects its author's mission and is also rife with fulminating ad hominem attacks against anyone who had criticized Sloat or whose words might have been construed that way. Triumphant and celebratory, the work is unreliable but by no means completely worthless. It does contain some outright falsehoods, and some of them will be pointed out in this essay. Sherman seldom identified his sources, but it appears that much of his information came from an anonymously authored magazine article that appeared in 1849 and also from descendants of Sloat. One great-grandson was present at the dedication of the monument. I have chosen to treat Sherman's book as a sort of family memoir of a departed ancestor that requires corroboration before accepting anything it says. Sherman created a historical record that needs revision, and this book will make that contribution.

Wondering how a high-ranking naval officer such as Sloat could possibly be "timid" sparked the research that led to this biography. After all, he had been decorated by Congress for his key role in capturing a British frigate during the War of 1812 and later led United States Navy forces in the capture of an elusive and fearsome Caribbean pirate. To understand Commodore John Drake Sloat's actions, one must understand something about the man himself and the experiences that shaped him. That goal requires studying the life course that brought him to Monterey that fateful July. The surviving historical record does not support "getting into his head" in any psychological sense. However, we can peer over Sloat's shoulder and look out at things as he saw them. That is not enough. We must also consider situations and settings that affected his thoughts and actions, even though they were sometimes beyond his radius of personal influence.⁶ He first entered the United States Navy soon after it was founded and was placed on a retired list in 1855. His career spanned almost the entire period between the navy's beginnings and the Civil War. Then just as now, much of navy life was mundane and

unexciting. But at different times and in varying degrees, Sloat's life also touched a wide range of important historical issues and processes beyond what might be expected in the biography of a high-ranking officer in the United States Navy. He played an important role in the territorial expansion of the United States. In his role as commandant of the navy yard at Portsmouth, and later at Norfolk, Sloat was the chief operating officer of industrial enterprises in a period of rapid changes in technology. But there is still more. The practices of Hudson Valley landowners, the suppression of Caribbean piracy, attempts to overthrow the government of Peru, the American maritime labor market, and the expansion and urbanization of New York City, all had their impact on the life of this long-serving naval officer and prominent New Yorker.