Faith and Freedom
Admiral William S. Benson

By William J. Shepherd

What is now unremarkable and commonplace, a Catholic in a senior position in the U.S. Navy, was truly extraordinary in the World War I era. Even more remarkable was the fact that William S. Benson, a prominent Catholic layman and first Chief of Naval Operations, achieved his position without the usual objections from an often intolerant America. In retrospect Benson’s career seems to have followed a smooth trajectory from ensign to senior admiral, from adult convert to leading Catholic layman, but as in everyone’s life many choices must be faced. Benson’s choices were informed by a sure political instinct and strong religious belief. He must be counted among the nation’s useful and important citizens.

FORMATION

Benson was born near Macon, Georgia, on September 25, 1855. With a dearth of schools in the post-Civil War south, the boy’s education was limited to parental tutoring and book reading unlike his father, Richard Aaron Benson, who attended Randolph Macon College, or his mother, Catherine Brewer Benson, who in 1840 was the first woman to graduate from Georgia Female College (now Wesleyan College). In 1872, with the blessing of his father who had fought for the Confederacy, Benson sought entrance to the U.S. Naval Academy. He was formally appointed in September, one of the first southerners to enter the academy after the Civil War.

In Benson’s day cadets were required to serve four years at the academy and two at sea before receiving their commission. Consequently, he began his first sea service in 1877, mostly in South American waters. He was injured in Panama during a scuffle to apprehend a deserter before finally being commissioned as an ensign in 1881 while serving at the Brooklyn Navy Yard under the great naval historian Alfred Thayer Mahan.

It was during his last year at the academy that he met Mary Augusta Wyse, whom he married three years later. The Wyse family was Catholic, and the young couple was married in the Wyse family residence in Deer Park, Maryland, near Washington by Father Edmund Waldron. Over the strong objection of his mother in particular, Benson soon became a convert to his wife’s religion and was baptized at St. Ann’s Church in New York City in 1880. He was confirmed later that summer at St. Joseph’s Church by Cardinal John McCloskey.

Benson began the slow climb up the bureaucratic ladder, alternating between extended land assignments and relatively brief sea duty. Despite his advancing rank, he never served in combat, but became a familiar figure in the Navy’s various scientific and engineering projects. He would in 1899, for example, participate as an officer of the cruiser New York when inventor Guglielmo Marconi’s transmitted the first official radio message from a naval vessel. It was during these years of slow advancement that Benson became identified as a Catholic layman. In 1907 he served
as President Theodore Roosevelt’s representative, greeting visiting Catholic dignitaries to the Tercentenary Exposition celebrating the establishment of the first English colony at Jamestown, Virginia. There he got to know dignitaries like the Apostolic Delegate, Archbishop Diomede Falconio, and the Archbishop of Baltimore, Cardinal James Gibbons.

IN COMMAND

In 1909 Benson, in command of the cruiser Albany stationed off the Pacific coast, participated in a show of force in Central America. An instance of so-called gunboat diplomacy, the Albany’s presence deterred Nicaragua’s threatened invasion of its neighbor, El Salvador. Later promoted to the rank of captain, he took command of the battleship Utah where his training efforts resulted in an engineering trophy awarded by Assistant Secretary of the Navy, the young Franklin Roosevelt.

While later in command of the Philadelphia Navy Yard, Benson demonstrated his tactfulness, impressing Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels. He avoided criticism in response to a request to hold a Catholic Memorial Day service by arranging for it to be held under the auspices of the Army and Navy Union at no cost to the government and with voluntary attendance. Benson cultivated Daniels, a former newspaper editor and publisher from North Carolina associated with the William Jennings Bryan wing of the Democratic Party. He supported the Secretary’s plan to develop educational opportunities for enlisted personnel as well as his efforts to interdict arms supplies to Mexico then in the grip of a revolution.

As World War I approached, both President Woodrow Wilson and Secretary Daniels hoped to avoid involvement by achieving a negotiated peace instead of building up American defenses. Congress, however, took a different tack. It created the position of the Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), its incumbent to be responsible for naval readiness. By this time Daniels was convinced that Benson was a trustworthy officer who would not challenge civilian leadership. He recommended to Wilson that Benson be appointed to the new post. In 1915 Benson, with the rank of rear admiral (later full admiral), became the navy’s first military chief.

Benson remained CNO until his retirement from the service in 1919. During those years he remained a staunch believer in the principle of civilian control of the military. Against some of his
any political arrangements that might confer undue advantage upon Britain’s Royal Navy.

Following retirement, Benson reluctantly agreed to the White House’s request that he become chairman of the U.S. Shipping Board. Created by Congress in 1916, the board was a promotional and regulatory body supporting the American merchant marine. Ever the rationalist, Benson advocated a merchant marine of ships built by, owned by, and operated by Americans sailing under the American flag as an instrument accumulating national wealth. He insisted that the way to insure America’s competitive position in world trade was via subsidies. Despite criticism from those who feared a trade war, Congress agreed to subsidies.

Benson continued to serve as a member of the board under Wilson’s Republican successors before finally retiring in 1928. His last official act as chairman was to help settle a maritime strike in 1919. He argued that operating expenses must be cut by reducing wages. After tough negotiations between owners and labor, a settlement was reached that both sides accepted.

FAITH IN ACTION

The highest ranking Catholic in the American military during World War I, Benson remained the Church’s most prominent layman in the postwar era. As a devout convert, he was critical of nominal practitioners. “We must force the ‘nominal’ Catholic to have something besides inert faith; we must make him zealous and active in belief in God’s Church.” He lived these words, being very active in church related organizations as a widely sought speaker and leader. He had joined the Knights of Columbus, the Catholic fraternal organization in 1914. His leadership qualities and national prominence led him to progress to the organization’s fourth degree just one year later. The Knights would honor Benson when its historical commission sponsored publication of its book, The Merchant Marine. It seemed

Admiral Benson and his wife, walking in 1917.

senior officer colleagues, he supported Secretary Daniels emphasis on restricting the use of naval forces to protecting troopships carrying soldiers to France to support an independent American army. While Rear Admiral Sims and other high officials argued that the United States should deploy all available warships to Europe to prevent Germany starving Britain into submission, Benson looked at present problems through the lens of probable postwar conditions. Tactics proposed by Sims and others, he argued, would leave the U.S. fleet unbalanced should the war end suddenly in a compromise.

Concern over the comparative naval strengths among the allies in the postwar era was always foremost in Benson’s mind. At the Paris peace conference that ended the war he opposed
entirely appropriate, given Benson’s association with the city, that the knights in Annapolis would name their council after him.

Recognizing his contributions to the Church’s growing acceptance, many Catholic groups sought to honor him. For example Notre Dame University conferred on him its prestigious Laetare Medal in 1917, and Pope Benedict XV bestowed upon him the military grade of the Order of St. Gregory in 1920. A popular speaker on all manner of military and Catholic subjects, Benson was much sought after by leading universities and societies.

Although now retired and living in a house he built for his family on northwest Washington’s Tracy Street, Benson continually accepted church-related offices. For example, he was the first president of the National Council of Catholic Men. The council, which operated through a committee system in dioceses throughout the country, included efforts to influence legislation, motion pictures, and the press against perceived anti-Catholic prejudice. When he resigned from the presidency in 1925 the organization had grown to over 1,000 affiliates in nearly 90 dioceses.

Benson was also a fundraiser and chairman of the board of trustees for the Cardinal Gibbons Institute in Ridge, Maryland. The institute had been founded as a Catholic high school with an integrated curriculum modeled on Booker T. Washington’s famous Tuskegee Institute. It was a significant effort to educate African Americans for working for better social conditions.

Sensitive as he was for the frequent charges of religious bias, he sought to prove himself an exemplar of religious freedom. For example in 1926 he headed the Washington Committee for the American Christian Fund for Jewish Relief that sought financial support for suffering Jews in Eastern Europe. He was also cautious about political endorsements, especially the 1928 presidential campaign with Democrat Alfred Smith against Republican Herbert Hoover which stoked the flames of national religious prejudice as Smith was a Catholic. Benson declined that

Admiral Benson and Josephus Daniels handing out medals on the Fourth of July.

year to join the Calvert Association’s campaign against religious intolerance and opposed a general meeting of federated Catholic societies to support Smith, believing such actions would only stimulate more religious intolerance.

THE BIGOTS’ TARGET

Prejudice against Catholics turned particularly virulent in the post-World War I era. As both the nation’s most prominent Catholic layman and influential government official, retired Admiral Benson made a tempting target for the bigots. A smear campaign against him was reported on at length in the December 2, 1922, issue of the New York Times. Therein was detailed a widespread and secret effort to force him to step down from the U. S. Shipping Board simply because he was a Catholic.

The attack on Benson apparently began back at least as early as October 1922 when as the result of information given the admiral by an unidentified employee that it was members of the Anchor Club, an organization of Masons employed in
the federal government, who had attempted to intimidate Benson to retire. Benson had told the Times that when he learned this he had contacted the Shipping Board’s Personnel and Investigation Departments, asking them to look into the matter. If true, he told the Times, he believed that “such conduct was thoroughly un-American and could not be tolerated in a Government organization.”

Shortly thereafter another charge circulated against Benson, this time accusing him of giving an order to disband the Anchor Club. Benson’s reply to the Times was that “I had given no such order. I have no authority to give any such order.”

Actually Benson had long advocated that this type of groundless bigotry was best ignored and left to die on the vine. In this case he admitted having taken no action against his accusers. He cited two of its specific charges. The first: his being a Knight of St. Gregory “legally disqualifies him for any position of trust under our Government.” As any literate person was aware, being a Knight of St. Gregory merely made one a member of a fraternal society of prominent Catholics selected by the Vatican for such an honor. The second charge: “The Jesuits had presented him [Benson] with a gold sword.” From this the authors concluded, “it is apparent that the admiral is the secret high commander of the papal militant forces in the United States, and that he is directing the Romanization of our army and navy in anticipation of the final thrust which had been planned for the psychological hour.” Actually, Benson revealed, the sword had been a gift from the United Daughters of the Confederacy in his native state of Georgia.

An aroused Father John Burke, General Secretary of the National Catholic Welfare Conference, was so incensed by the Times story that he had considered threatening the paper with a libel suit until Benson informed the sympathetic priest that he had actually seen the article prior to its publication and had approved it. Here was an example of Benson apparently, and correctly, believing that airing the fallacious charges would demonstrate their utterly ridiculous nature. In that vein he was satisfied especially with the Times correction regarding the matter of the sword.

ASSessment

Benson died suddenly at his home at the age of seventy-six on May 20, 1932, of a cerebral hemorrhage. His requiem Mass was celebrated at St. Matthew’s Church with the archbishop of Baltimore presiding and leading figures of church and state in attendance. Admiral Benson was buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

Benson’s career in the U.S. Navy spanned the transition from sail and wood to steam and steel as it grew to a fleet of the first rank. He witnessed revolutionary changes in technology and management yet he never deviated from his firm belief in civilian control of the military. Above all, he was a determined nationalist and devout Catholic whose patriotism and faith were core elements of his character and the guiding forces of his life.

Bibliographical note: The author first became interested in Admiral Benson while working as an archivist at Catholic University processing the records of the National Council of Catholic Men (http://archives.lib.cua.edu/findaid/nccm.cfm) and the National Catholic War Council (http://archives.lib.cua.edu/findaid/NCWar/Council.cfm).

He also recommends Benson’s papers in the Library of Congress (http://memory.loc.gov/service/mss/eadxmlmss/eadpdfmss/2010/ms010289.pdf)


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