



# War, Technology, and Experience Aboard the USS Monitor

*David A. Mindell*

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In a familiar story, the USS *Monitor* battled the CSS *Virginia* (the armored and refitted USS *Merrimack*) at Hampton Roads in March of 1862. In *War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*, David A. Mindell adds a new perspective to the story as he explores how mariners—fighting "blindly" below the waterline—lived and coped with the metal monster they called the "iron coffin." Mindell shows how the iron warship emerged as an idea and became practicable, how building it drew upon and forced changes in contemporary manufacturing technology, and how the vessel captured the nineteenth-century American popular and literary imaginations.

Combining technical, personal, administrative, and literary analysis, Mindell examines the experience of the men aboard the *Monitor* and their reactions to the thrills and dangers that accompanied the new machine. The invention surrounded men with iron and threatened their heroism, their self-image as warriors, even their lives. Mindell also examines responses to this strange new warship by Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, who prophetically saw in the Civil War a portent of the mechanized warfare of the future. The story of the *Monitor* shows how technology changes not only the tools but also the very experience of combat, generating effects that are still felt today in the era of "smart bombs" and pushbutton wars.

"We find new significance in the otherwise well-known history of the *Monitor*. It is no longer the story of the heroic inventor and his impenetrable weapon thrusting themselves upon a doubtful and conservative bureaucracy... It is no longer the story of a heroic battle and the machine's epic loss soon after. Rather it is a story of people experiencing new machinery, attempting to make sense of its thrills, constrictions, and politics, and sensing its power and impotence—both in glory and frustration."—from *War, Technology, and Experience aboard the USS Monitor*

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