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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

Professor John E. Jackson of the Naval War College is the Program Manager for the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program.

In January 2016 Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Admiral John Richardson, USN, laid out his vision for the Navy when he released “A Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.” (See *Naval War College Review* 69, no. 2 [Spring 2016].) Months later, he shared some of his thoughts about improving the intellectual skills of all sailors in the June 2016 issue of the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, in which he and coauthor Lieutenant Ashley O’Keefe, USN, published a succinct but important article (“Now Hear This—Read. Write. Fight”) about the importance that sailors participate in an ongoing discussion of topics important to our Navy.

They wrote (in part): “Warfare is a violent, intellectual contest between thinking and adapting adversaries. Usually, the team that can think better and adapt faster will win. Today, as we prepare for operations and war with an increasingly complex set of potential adversaries, we must do more to sharpen our thinking, learn the lessons from history, and expand our minds. The margins of victory will be razor-thin—we cannot be complacent. What we do in peace will be decisive in war.”

They go on to address directly those naysayers who believe they have no time to read, write, and prepare to fight, noting: “I realize that it takes dedication to devote time to reading, but it is fundamental to growth as a naval professional. As recently retired Marine General James Mattis, one of our best-read leaders, once wrote, ‘The problem with being too busy to read is that you learn by experience (or by your men’s experience)—i.e., the hard way.’ If, through a lack of research, we relearn the lessons of history each time we go to war, we will needlessly pay the price in sunken ships and greater loss of life. We must all study voraciously to prepare ourselves for the ultimate responsibility of leadership in war.”

They continue this theme by noting:

“Reading can teach us the fundamentals of our business. Thucydides, Clausewitz, Mahan, Corbett . . . these masters wrote works of the highest quality that have stood the test of time. . . .

“There is great value in testing conventional wisdom and exploring new ideas. A good idea will get better through this intellectual challenge. Newspapers, periodicals, and blogs can provide us different perspectives on issues of the day—and these contributors can also challenge our thinking. Focused forums such as the U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, the *Naval War College Review*, the *Marine Corps Gazette*, and more recently, online blogs, have hosted professional conversations. Thoughtful, well-researched articles can offer useful insights and, when needed, can help us change our minds. . . .

“Just about everywhere we look, our problems are becoming more complex and challenging. It is imperative that we, individually and as a Navy, are ready—morally, physically, and mentally. The nation will call on us to get under way and, if necessary, fight.

“By reading and writing now, we are improving ourselves and the Navy. We are preparing for when we are called into battle. Read and write professionally with that singular purpose: to confound our enemies and make our Navy more powerful. We must think hard and do better. It is time to break out the books and sharpen our pens.”

The program manager at the Naval War College is in the final stages of re-designing the CNO Professional Reading Program website into a CNO Professional Learning site, with increased content and functionality. In addition to recommending and facilitating access to selected e-books, the site will offer study guides to help readers get the most out of each book, videos and articles that amplify key points addressed in each book, and a process by which readers can exchange ideas about the books they have read.

The written word is a powerful tool that both illuminates the lessons of the past and shines a spotlight on issues of the future. All sailors, at all grades, ranks, and levels of seniority, are encouraged to read, write, and fight!

JOHN E. JACKSON