Ghost Fleet: A Novel of the Next World War, by P. W. Singer and August Cole

Connie Frizzell
a six-hundred-man JSOC intelligence brigade added in late 2008. JSOC demanded and received a disproportionate share of assets, including taking control of other military units not only when necessary but when convenient—to the dismay of commanders also charged with fighting the war. But JSOC did kill Zarqawi and Bin Laden and many, many other very bad people. Leaders in Washington declared, “JSOC is awesome.” Our enemies needed killing, and no military unit did it better than JSOC.

Naylor tells us that before 9/11 several key figures described JSOC as “a Ferrari in the garage.” General McChrystal, with the full support of leaders in Washington, took the Ferrari out of the garage and created a killing machine whose performance was unparalleled. Unfortunately, a discerning reader easily could conclude that the Ferrari actually was still on the same road as the rest of the U.S. military—and that road would lead to nowhere.

HY S. ROTHSTEIN


No author today will argue with Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s perspective that any work of fiction requires the reader to engage in a willing suspension of disbelief. The wording of the concept is important because it goes beyond the idea of a reader just pushing the “I believe” button. The concept requires the reader to be an active participant: he or she must willingly enter a world known to be false. It is the job of the author to maintain that world, to hold the reader suspended throughout the entire book, and to prevent him or her from falling out of the fictional world with an ungraceful “whump.”

For the author of a techno-thriller, holding the reader suspended in this alternate reality requires even more finesse than for other types of fiction. The world of a techno-thriller is relatively close to the world in which the reader lives. Both the technology and the environment of the story are set in a future near enough that all the governmental and organizational structures, global and domestic relationships, and technical capabilities showcased in the story must be close enough to what the reader knows today to be believable.

This is the challenge P. W. Singer and August Cole set for themselves in Ghost Fleet. It is a herculean task. The international backdrop today is far different from that of the techno-thriller heyday of the 1980s and early 1990s. The U.S. cultural setting of Red Storm Rising, published in 1986, was influenced by forty years of the Cold War. Dominated by baby boomers and gen Xers, the general population of the United States during that time had limited access to international news and perspectives, had grown up with the threat of nuclear war, and had been indoctrinated with the ideological vilification of Communism. Today the cultural backdrop for the U.S. population is as mixed and varied as the people themselves. International news and perspectives are available to anyone, quite literally at the touch of a finger; the threat of nuclear war has been replaced with a threat of terrorism; and ideological vilification
revolves around extremist religious groups rather than nation-states.

This techno-thriller, then, with its hegemonic China overtaking the United States, feels slightly unbalanced, as if it is not settled on a firm foundation. It was only during the last decade that a majority of Americans came to consider China a player on the international stage, and those Americans who view China as a threat (with the exception of the U.S. Navy, perhaps) represent both a smaller percentage and an even newer phenomenon. In fact, the American perspective of our relationship with China over the past ten years probably can be described best as bipolar, or maybe schizophrenic; but historically China has not been considered existentially threatening, and still is not commonly considered so today. Whump.

That means the story Pete Singer and August Cole create has to be strong enough to overcome each cultural inconsistency that unceremoniously dumps us out of our suspended disbelief. Unfortunately, the one-dimensional and stereotyped portrayal of the military family in the story is representative of the rest of the characters in the book. Whump. China’s “Directorate” is a calculating, unfeeling behemoth. The Russian character is a vodka-swilling spy. The insurgent is a femme fatale. Whump, whump, whump. It may be an editor’s dream to have characters do exactly what we presume they would do, but as a story line it does not carry enough of a thrill to make the reader want to stay engaged. Rather than incorporating strong, motivating factors (including irrational ones) that would make erratic actions plausible and add interest and depth to the story, the characters act exactly as their stereotypes suggest they should—and the results of their actions are predictable.

The strongest element of the book is the technologies the authors choose to include. While the overuse of nomenclature feels clunky for all but those who collect technical classifications like Boy Scout badges, the authors do not reach too far into the realm of science fiction to build their arsenal of weapons, chemicals, and drugs. There is enough linkage to existing technologies and medical trends to make the future employment of these more-advanced programs feel realistic. Even so, they all fit into a too-predictable, no-surprise-here mold. There are even a few moments when the story feels like a propaganda piece for the Navy’s existing Zumwalt-class destroyer or railgun programs. Whump, and whump again.

All of which raises the question, who is the audience P. W. Singer and August Cole are trying to reach? If it is the military, we do not need to read four hundred pages to tell us what we already know. China’s versions of the concepts of antiaccess/area-denial and air-sea battle have brought plenty of visibility to the future risk China represents, even for those who have not been watching the Pacific for years. If the book is intended for a civilian population that no longer shares the common cultural backdrop that existed during the Cold War, it feels like just another fearmongering piece written by another advocate for a bigger defense budget. If it is a plea for the administration to sit up and take notice of China as a threat, it does not do a good enough job of explaining why all the elements of U.S. national power supposedly are completely defunct.

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Perhaps all of this is what makes the book unique, though. While the plot follows the typical path of a techno-thriller, where an aggressive move by a “bad guy” forces a “good guy” to join in a fight of epic proportions, the discomfort the reader feels at the end is real, despite all the fully anticipated and stereotyped characters, plots, and technologies.

But that is not so much thrilling as it is troubling. The disturbing question that lurks in the background and permeates the plot like an insidious, deadly gas is, how effective is the United States when it comes to using the diplomatic and informational elements of national power in the international arena? This might have been the true heart of the story. Surrounded by layers of protective muscle in military might and economic strength, have the diplomatic and informational elements of U.S. national power aged and atrophied beyond the size of the body they inhabit? Without the diplomatic and informational elements, can the government still operate on just the military and economic elements? The idea is unexplored, but Ghost Fleet, with a plot that takes Lady Liberty’s sword and purse away right from the start, leaves readers suspended in a disbelief completely different from the one they thought they were entering.

CONNIE FRIZZELL


Writing a definitive history of any major conflict from a single nation’s perspective can be an exacting task—and, in the case of the First World War at sea, a thankless one too, when compared with the far better known and better reported situation on land. This notwithstanding, it is hard to imagine a more timely and well-balanced book. David Stevens, as the Royal Australian Navy’s historian, was perhaps in a perfect position to take on this project, but this should in no way diminish what he has achieved. His extensive and far-reaching research has produced a work that, while entertaining and readable, has sufficient gravitas to ensure it will become the definitive work on the subject. This title will appeal to all audiences; historians will revel in the wealth of archival material and private diaries, but this book is far more appealing than a mere record of historical fact. Anyone who has been to sea and experienced life on board ship, in particular a warship, will appreciate the insights from someone so obviously well versed in this area. Drawing heavily on his own seagoing background, Stevens presents an engaging narrative that gets to the very heart of the unique human experience that is life at sea.

In many ways, then, this book represents the best of both possible approaches to a history of this type: the broad and analytical, which sweeps over the major maritime events of the time, giving the work its much-needed context; and the intensely personal, employing many passages from diaries, letters, and reports that together illustrate the rich variety of naval life from the deck plates to the wardroom. To this end, each chapter ends with a short biography of an important or interesting figure from the preceding pages, which both enriches and helps to consolidate this comprehensive coverage. The book also triumphs in another aspect: by not