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Presidents & Their Generals: An American History of Command in War

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functions common to all navies, the impact of cooperation among navies of all sizes, and the common pressure placed on navies to align resources with operations and mission execution. Germond’s essay compares classification criteria and argues that twenty-first-century navies should be classified by their “order of effect” vice their “order of battle.”

This book as a whole does not propose its own definition generally accepted by the authors. It is instead a thoughtful examination of the conditions in the twenty-first-century security environment that challenge preexisting classifications while broadly observing that the size of a navy is an insufficient basis of classification.

Building a small navy is a national choice. Essays in this work examine the conditions of the strategic environment that cause states to build them, finding that because of the effects of globalization, technology, and economics, navies are valuable to states for a variety of reasons.

Several essays discuss the necessity for small navies to provide perceived or actual returns on national investment in naval force structure. Absent a nationally valued return, small navies face an existential threat, which may explain the observation that many small navies have made the practical decision to build constabulary and coastal-defense forces. Such navies focus on maritime missions that promote national-security and economic interests through operations in territorial seas and exclusive economic zones.

Small Navies is a thoughtful collection of concepts and ideas now present in naval force planning. This book assesses the range of strategic and domestic influences facing states and navies engaged in maritime force-structure decision making. Today, naval ship-building costs are on the rise, potential adversaries have access to technology that complicates the threat to maritime forces, and states struggle to dedicate more than a few percentage points of gross domestic product to defense. These trends portend that a growing number of states will possess the capacity to build only small navies.

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The author delivers a chronological review of how the relationship between the president and senior Army leaders has evolved over the life of the Republic. The book is part history, tracing the evolution of U.S. civil-military relations from an uncertain beginning to a level of increasing professionalism, to the current state, which the author finds excessively partisan. It also belongs on any shelf devoted to government policy, since it presents a convincing argument that Samuel Huntington’s concept of operational control is as artificial a construct as the frictionless plane described in most physics textbooks. Moten is not the first author to suggest this. For example, Mackubin Owens, of the Naval War College, has long held that the U.S. political-military relationship is more akin to a contract that has been periodically renegotiated. However, Moten takes this a step farther by
arguing that the civil-military contract is under constant negotiation and that the reality of governance makes it inevitable that senior generals and political leaders will be (and should be) involved in each other’s spheres of endeavor. This partnership is often an uneasy one and is always marked by tension, but when it works the country profits immeasurably.

Moten argues convincingly that this key relationship works best when both partners are competent practitioners of their respective arts, when each respects the other’s roles and abilities, and when each is willing to engage in frank, even adversarial discourse to gain the best possible understanding and strategy. He argues there are times when military leaders should offer advice that requires political understanding and times when a president should intervene in military affairs. The relationship is not an equal partnership; the civil partner must take precedence over the military. The pairings of U. S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln and of George C. Marshall and Franklin D. Roosevelt are regarded as the best the nation has seen.

Although civil-military relations also evolve during times of peace, Moten confines his examination to wartime leaders, arguing that it is during conflict that these relationships can do the most good or harm to the nation and put the maximum strain on the participants. He also all but exclusively confines his work to the relationships between presidents and generals. Presidents & Their Generals does not suffer as a result.

Moten is on his most solid ground when he discusses historical relations up to the end of the Cold War. His observations are logical, his analysis solid, and his tone temperate. Much of this work may be unfamiliar and therefore even more welcome to readers whose knowledge of civil-military relations only connects the dots represented by the presidencies and wars of George Washington, Abe Lincoln, FDR, and Lyndon B. Johnson. Presidents & Their Generals also does justice to some of the warmer moments of the Cold War, such as the Bay of Pigs and the long involvement in Vietnam. As with Moten’s discussion of earlier conflicts, there is no lack of willingness to find fault and identify weaknesses. For example, his dispassionate accounting and analysis of Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara strikes just the right note.

Unfortunately that note sounds increasingly sour as Moten turns his attention to post–Cold War civil-military relations. His criticisms come across as increasingly personal, and his assertions appear not to be well supported. The choice of adjectives and other descriptions becomes increasingly pejorative. This tendency reaches a crescendo when Moten describes Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, which he clearly views as among the nation’s worst failures of the civil-military partnership. He is scathing in his descriptions of General Tommy Franks, Vice President Richard Cheney, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, and others. This is not to say that he does not present a case, but he should, as much as possible, maintain objectivity and limit inflammatory writing.

The book concludes, rather hurriedly, with a series of recommendations to strengthen the strategic partnership. If anything, this chapter is much too short. However, taken in its entirety, Presidents & Their Generals is a worthy
addition to the genre and deserves serious consideration not only by scholars but also by general readers.

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Jan Martin Lemnitzer has made a very important contribution to international history in this study of the 1856 Declaration of Paris and its immediate aftermath. Having begun his research as a graduate student at the University of Heidelberg, Lemnitzer completed it as a PhD thesis in the Department of International History at the London School of Economics in 2010. With a highly structured approach and a persuasively presented argument, Lemnitzer has made excellent use of primary-source materials from Austria, Britain, France, Germany, and the United States. He has brought to light much new and detailed material, which he complements with broad-gauged and valuable insight.

Most importantly, Lemnitzer places his story in the context of the complex balance required to create and maintain international law in matters of warfare. On the one hand, this is a balance between law and power; on the other, between great powers and smaller states. Lemnitzer demonstrates that the 1856 Declaration of Paris was the event that clearly established the manner in which modern international law is created. Likening it to a global opinion poll among national governments, he shows how the congress of nations at Paris after the Crimean War created instantaneous international law through what has since become common under the modern rubric of “multilateral law-making treaties.”

Historians are often puzzled about why the United States never signed the declaration, and they have asserted a variety of explanations. Through his careful research, Lemnitzer unveils the fascinating story of how Britain and the world’s leading powers focused the declaration’s ban on privateering directly on American policy. For most countries at that time, privateering was a largely forgotten weapon. But Britain and the United States had the largest merchant shipping fleets in the world, and there was a danger of war between the two. Since America had a small and weak navy, its merchant ships, which could easily be converted to privateers, were collectively its main strategic weapon. Since they could effectively attack Britain’s network of global trade, statesmen in London had a major strategic interest in eliminating that threat, which could crush British control over global trade.

Lemnitzer follows the development from the experience of the Crimean War and shows how that first major conflict involving steam-powered warships raised a range of questions about the future course of warfare at sea. The idea that privateering should be banned first arose in 1853. While for some it was an advance, the banning by the civilized world of an ancient barbaric practice, for others it was a clear-eyed way to prevent smaller nations from causing major damage. Lemnitzer shows that the declaration was a deliberate attempt to isolate the United States diplomatically and force it to accept the abolition of privateering to suit British strategic ends.