Silent Killers: Submarines and Underwater Warfare

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These attitudes were encouraged by both the misuse of analogies and the personality and style of Bush. The final discussion, on U.S. energy policy, seeks to determine why the United States, despite the oil embargo of the early 1970s and a continually acknowledged need for a long-term, consistently applied energy policy, has been unable to put such a policy into effect.

However, national security decisions by their very nature are extraordinarily complex. To his credit Yetiv recognizes and addresses these complicating factors. In each case he presents, there is a deliberate attempt at least to identify, if not discuss, alternate explanations and influential factors not relating to cognitive biases. For example, in the case of U.S. energy policy, Yetiv makes a persuasive argument that a general unwillingness to pay more, the power of the automobile industry’s lobby, and a short congressional election cycle go a long way in explaining why the United States tends to resemble Aesop’s grasshopper more than it does his ant.

That said, the book still leaves questions unanswered. For example, how can the cognitive biases held by Al Qaeda’s leaders become those of all their followers? In what ways are group biases different from groupthink? How can an analyst determine the relative importance of cognitive biases in explaining or, better, predicting a decision? Finally, given all the other forces acting in the decision domain and on the decision maker, how can one determine how important biases may be in the overall mix? Yetiv does attempt to offer some methods to combat the effect of cognitive biases. Surprisingly, he argues that merely knowing such biases exist is not enough to guard against their effect. Better approaches include the use of a devil’s advocate, the institution of formal decision-making processes, and expansion of the circle of advisers consulted prior to a decision.

At the end of the day, National Security through a Cockeyed Lens is worth a read. By not overselling his argument, Yetiv makes a stronger case for considering the presence and possible impact of cognitive biases. In doing so he also makes the case, perhaps inadvertently, that rather than being used in isolation, models of decision making should be used in conjunction with one another—and that is a very useful concept.

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Given the book’s title and the cover photo of the Los Angeles-class fast attack submarine USS City of Corpus Christi, readers might reasonably assume that James P. Delgado’s Silent Killers: Submarines and Underwater Warfare is focused on modern submarines and undersea warfare. However, this is not the case. Instead, it is a small coffee-table book on the overall history of submarines, with pronounced emphases on early (pre–World War I) development and on the archaeology of submarine wrecks. A few minutes on the Internet readily explains this. In addition to having a keen interest in submarines, Delgado is a historian, former executive director of the Vancouver Maritime Museum, and PhD in archaeology who has published nearly thirty books. He is also a cohost of National Geographic’s
Sea Hunters television series. This work reflects all his credentials. It is well written, it documents its sources, it is visually compelling, and it entertains. Despite these strengths, however, many Review readers will find that important aspects of underwater warfare are given short shrift. For example, submarine aspects of World Wars I and II are dealt with in nineteen and seventeen pages, respectively, with illustrations making up approximately seventeen of those pages. Consequently, the discussion and descriptions lack depth and detail, which is a shame. Similarly, ballistic-missile submarines receive only five pages of what must honestly be said is superficial coverage, which mirrors the passing discussion of modern nuclear-attack submarines. This shortfall is compounded by the author’s twice relating the questionable, if not bizarre, hypothesis that the nuclear attack submarine USS Scorpion was sunk on 15 May 1968 by the Soviets “in the belief that an American submarine had collided and sank the Golf II boat K-129 in the Pacific on March 8, 1968.” The citation provided for that salacious theory is not one that one would expect of careful research. There are other, much more credible and likely explanations, which this book fails to examine.

On the other hand, one of the book’s strengths is a thoughtful discussion of the development, employment, and archaeological recovery and preservation of the Confederate submarine H. L. Hunley, lost during the Civil War. Similarly, David Bushnell’s American Revolutionary War submarine Turtle receives worthwhile treatment, including an update on the debate concerning whether Turtle had enough positive buoyancy to allow boring a hole in the target ship’s copper-clad wooden hull while submerged. Another strength is the book’s photos, which will fascinate modern submariners.

Many will find this book worth reading, and much of it well rewards the time invested. Like a National Geographic television production, this work is entertaining, lavishly and excellently illustrated, and it reflects the producer’s or author’s passion, which in this case appears to be undersea archaeology. This book is broad rather than deep, however, and as such will probably interest the generalist more than the specialist.

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