

2009

A Class with Drucker: The Lost Lessons of the World's Greatest Management Teacher

Hank Kniskern

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Kniskern, Hank (2009) "A Class with Drucker: The Lost Lessons of the World's Greatest Management Teacher," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 62 : No. 3 , Article 16.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol62/iss3/16>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

optimism, as some protagonist (normally the United States) always allows its conduct to be driven by the atavistic notions of sovereignty and physical security. In fact, the United States (particularly the last Bush administration) comes out as the book's principal villain, although the Clinton administration also takes its hits. Owing to its superpower status, the United States is directly involved in every incident in which humanitarian intervention is a possible course of action, and its responses never meet the author's high standards.

While Coicaud's facts and historical analysis are correct and fundamentally sound, a reader might get the impression that it is only a matter of time before the entire world is persuaded to see the *responsibility to protect*—the international community sending in forces to protect the citizens of an offending country—much as an enlightened European does now. I am certain that Coicaud is buoyed by the advent of the Obama administration in hopes that the United States will eventually join in this enlightenment. Unfortunately, his optimism is probably misplaced, for two reasons. First, none of today's emergent powers (China, Russia, India, or Brazil) have been proponents of what the author calls "conditional" sovereignty. If anything, they hold dearly their sovereignty and support this right for other nation-states. The second point forces us to focus on the title of the book.

That is, national interest is the real culprit. As long as nations constitute the world's central cast, there is little likelihood that it will achieve Coicaud's idealistic standards. Even his recommendations to strengthen the United

Nation's peace-enforcement and humanitarian roles are largely bureaucratic and peripheral, suggesting that the author is also aware of the fundamental resistance. As long as the UN remains nationally based, the likelihood that its members will be driven by "supranational" interests will be slim. Indeed, simply getting *beyond* the national interest is not enough. The international community must adopt *supranational* interests or it will forever be hampered by the primacy of "security issues" and "self-centered nationalism," which, unfortunately for Coicaud, is likely to be a long time coming.

Although a welcome addition to those advocating for the rights of individuals over those of nation-states, the book unfortunately fails to deal meaningfully with the real obstacles to the ideal. Further, since much of this book is a diatribe against the Bush administration, its salience is increasingly historical.

TOM FEDYSZYN
Naval War College



Cohen, William A. *A Class with Drucker: The Lost Lessons of the World's Greatest Management Teacher*. New York: AMACOM, 2008. 248pp. \$24.95

Krames, Jeffrey A. *Inside Drucker's Brain*. New York: Penguin, 2008. 257pp. \$24.95

Peter Drucker, considered the father of modern management, died in 2005 at the age of ninety-five. For six decades he consulted with industry and government leaders and taught at New York University and the Claremont Graduate School of Management, publishing thirty-nine books, including one on

Japanese art. Drucker's principles of leadership, responsibility, management, and strategy transcended organizational mission, whether for-profit, nonprofit, or military.

It is not surprising that several books about Drucker have been published since his death. One interesting one, *A Class with Drucker*, is by Bill Cohen. Cohen graduated from West Point and was a PhD student of Drucker's. He served as a major general in the Air Force reserves, worked in the defense industry, and remained in touch with Drucker for thirty years. The goal of Cohen's book is to share lessons from Drucker's classroom.

Peter Drucker was an exceptional thinker and writer. His perspectives on organizations were refreshingly unorthodox and expressed with piercing logic. Drucker drew deeply from global history and economics. Although he was an academic, his audience was the practitioner. Ethics and social responsibility themes permeated his writing and teaching. Many concepts that are now part of everyday organizational vocabulary originated with Peter Drucker, such as management by objectives, knowledge workers, decentralized management, and strategic leadership in business.

Two things make Cohen's book interesting. One is Drucker's influence as his mentor and teacher, and the other is his own military perspective. Cohen interweaves Drucker's concepts of leadership, strategy, ethics, and professional development with his own military education and experiences, often adding candid personal reflection and revealing anecdotes.

One revelation emerged during a class session when a student asked Drucker how he got started as a "management consultant." Drucker talked about being mobilized for World War II, armed only with a PhD and experience in economics. Drucker's job classification in the Army was "consultant," but neither he nor his colonel had any idea what that entailed. Drucker started asking the colonel about the group's goals and resources, and a few days later he went back with a report of priorities and alternatives. As it turned out, the group was quite successful in its mission.

Cohen affirms that Drucker's principles of strategy and leadership are tightly coupled to personal responsibility, and he elaborates on the distinctive challenges between tactical and strategic decisions for the military leader. The strategic leader must persistently ask the right questions; as Drucker would state, "You can't get *there* unless you know where *there* is." To be a strategic leader, one must avoid developing strategy by formula and instead devote time to self-development by expanding one's knowledge and perspective. Drucker's advice for professional development was to "read, write, listen and teach . . . and strive for expertise in an area outside your profession."

Drucker lectured his students about what to do, not *how* to do it. Cohen sometimes takes a Drucker principle and expounds on it using his own "boilerplate" advice. Some of the elaborations are unremarkable, but others are a genuine fusing of Drucker's influence with the author's experience.

Another book on the subject published about the same time is *Inside Drucker's Brain*, by Jeffrey Krames, a seasoned writer who has written extensively on

General Electric's Jack Welch. In 2002 he published a work on Donald Rumsfeld and his leadership style.

Krames's new book draws on a six-hour interview that took place in Drucker's home about two years before he died, as well as upon Drucker's writings. As Krames sat down for the first (and apparently only) interview, Drucker mentioned that Jack Welch had sat in that same upholstered chair twenty years earlier, just before Welch became the legendary CEO of General Electric.

The goal of Krames's book is to capture the relevance of Drucker's most important management philosophies and strategies. Reading this book, one gets the sense that the author wants to ensure that Drucker's contribution to management knowledge does not diminish with time.

His concern has merit. Drucker's career path was varied and unconventional, so he was never really viewed as a true academic, especially by other academics. Krames points out that although Drucker had a seminal influence on such leaders as Welch, Tom Peters, Jim Collins, Michael Dell, Andy Grove, and Bill Gates, Drucker is rarely referenced in management textbooks. Perhaps one reason is that Drucker was not a self-promoter. You will not find a Drucker Consulting Group, spin-off publications, or Drucker training workshops. Drucker declared, "My aim has never been academic, that is, to be recognized; it has always been to make a difference."

Like Cohen, Krames centers on leadership, strategy, and social responsibility, covering much of the same ground. However, Krames has more of a business and historical perspective than

Cohen, who writes from a military vantage point. Each book makes its own unique contribution. For instance, Krames's extensive insights into General Electric amplify the little-known influence Drucker had on the company and its iconic leaders. On the question of whether leaders are born or made, Drucker said that some leaders are naturals (like Welch) but that there are not enough of them—so leaders have to be made! That is one of the reasons why General Electric has done so well; the company has been developing leaders at its renowned Crotonville Training Center since the 1950s. Drucker was a founder of Crotonville, along with Ralph Cordiner, General Electric's CEO at the time. For readers interested in where great leaders get their ideas, the book's chapter entitled "Drucker on Welch" is quite interesting.

However, it seems presumptuous to say that after only one interview and a few letters, the author got "inside Drucker's brain." The reader is left wondering why there was no second or third interview.

HANK KNISKERN
Naval War College



Wukovits, John. *One Square Mile of Hell: The Battle for Tarawa*. New York: New American Library, 2006. 320pp. \$15

One Square Mile of Hell relates the story of the November 1943 battle for the Tarawa Atoll from the personal level of the Marines who endured this remarkably bloody fight. John Wukovits makes use of firsthand interviews with veterans of the operation, while also citing personal letters and diaries. The result