Naval Blockades in Peace and War: An Economic History since 1750

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Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Stonewall Jackson have already appeared—are designed to be “quick reads,” of as much interest to the general public as to the military history buff. The work under review treats an important leader who may be in particular need of some rehabilitation, and it is a great advertisement for the entire series. In a single day’s reading one can dispel many of the “Strangelovian” myths and appreciate the man, the leader, and the timeless leadership lessons his example provides. Tillman skillfully blends elements from LeMay’s personal and professional lives with the historical, providing a remarkably nuanced appreciation for this greatest of bomber generals. Any reader can profit from this comprehensive account; for instance, any reader familiar with the classic film _Twelve O’clock High_ will recognize that a good bit of LeMay went into Gregory Peck’s character, Brigadier General Frank Savage. But even the most serious student of military history is likely to learn something new about LeMay’s life and times. Tillman’s portrayal of LeMay, however, is not solely complimentary. While he obviously has great appreciation and admiration for his subject, he is also frank about LeMay’s shortcomings. He admits that LeMay was much more effective as a commander and operator in the field than in Washington, D.C., as vice chief and then chief of staff of the Air Force. Tillman also calls LeMay’s decision to run for vice president in George Wallace’s independent party bid of 1968 "disastrous for his reputation,” although he finds any conclusion that LeMay himself was a racist “demonstrably false.” In sum, LeMay offers a balanced description of the general and his leadership.

LeMay’s insights into leadership are still useful today. The “bedrock of his leadership was professional competence.” He was known as the premier pilot, navigator, and bombardier in all his early bomber commands. Throughout the book, LeMay’s emphasis on competence, accountability to high standards, teamwork, developing subordinates, and communication come through loud and clear. Tillman uses LeMay’s own words as his final word on leadership: “No matter how well you apply the art of leadership, no matter how strong your unit, or how high the morale of your men, if your leadership is not directed completely toward the mission, your leadership has failed . . . [in a single word, leadership is] Responsibility.”

It is one thing to describe the principles of leadership. It is quite another to understand how the great leaders in history have lived and applied those principles. Barrett Tillman’s excellent narrative salvages both LeMay and his timeless lessons for today’s leaders.

DAVID BUCKWALTER
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As its title states, this book is an economic history examining the impact of naval blockades in general, but it really focuses on four major wars since 1750: the Napoleonic Wars (including the War of 1812), the American Civil War, World War I, and World War II (including the U.S. blockade of Japan).
While providing voluminous data on the economic effectiveness of naval blockades, the authors’ conclusions are generally dismissive of their military usefulness, suggesting that an opponent’s “military strength” and “productive capacity play a more important role in the outcome of war.”

Yet this negative assessment of blockades seems to run counter to many of the book’s case studies, such as the War of 1812, which the authors call “a military disaster for the United States.” During the American Civil War, the Northern blockade against the South played “a significant role in the Union victory.” In World War I, Germany’s debilitating “food crisis” was mainly due to “the effectiveness of the Allied blockade.” Finally, in World War II the U.S. blockade against Japan was so tight that “it may have been the most effective naval blockade in history.”

Given these generally positive views, it comes as a genuine surprise when the authors conclude by suggesting that the success rate of naval blockades “does not seem very high,” and that nations will continue “to deploy blockades, but greater success than that which has occurred in the past should not be expected.”

One problem might be the tables, some 142 in all, which document in minute detail the impact of naval blockades on wartime economies. Unfortunately, virtually all these tables were adapted from previous works, and some have not been updated. Another possible problem might be the authors’ too-narrow focus on economic factors rather than on how economic and military pressure jointly achieved victory. The inability of the Confederacy to obtain iron plates from abroad to construct its own navy, due mainly to the effectiveness of the Union blockade, is one case in point. The tight U.S. blockade against the Japanese home islands in combination with the use of the atom bomb may have been crucial in forcing Japan to surrender.

Before naval blockades are dismissed as an ineffective strategy, many other successful naval blockades that did not include large economic components would have to be considered. The authors of this book barely mention the U.S. “quarantine” during the Cuban Missile Crisis or Britain’s use of maritime exclusion zones while retaking the Falkland Islands, both widely considered to be highly effective examples of naval blockades.

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This is the first in a planned two-volume history of the application of scientific theory to ship design. Larrie Ferreiro is well qualified to take this on, having both trained and worked as a naval architect and having earned a PhD in the history of science and technology.

The sailing ship was arguably the most complex mechanical system in common use prior to the Industrial Revolution. Thus a natural development of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was, for emerging “scientists,” to try to explain the behavior of the ship at sea. The initial goals were to understand how it was