Intelligence in War: Knowledge of the Enemy from Napoleon to Al-Qaeda

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For those seeking more than a basic education, this work provides a serious guide to today’s “hottest” adversaries and their weapons of mass destruction. Through well-researched history, biography, and analysis of the cultural and strategic setting, this book acquaints readers with today’s enemies and invites them to ponder critically the propensity of these enemies to use their weapons.

A curious omission of this research is its lack of any systematic methodological discussion. The book’s primary assumption is that deterring adversaries requires an understanding of their strategic culture. Yet nowhere do the editors formally define strategic culture or its link to the adversary. The reader comes to appreciate, however, that each study uniquely attempts to make the connection.

Between the lines, this study calls for a new paradigm, yet the book itself mostly relies on an outdated theoretical approach that ultimately handicaps what it set out to do—assess adversaries. That kind of work requires a deeper analytic template for profile analysis than presently conceived, one that cannot be wedged into political science paradigms.

Ultimately, knowing the enemy requires a better appreciation of the advanced capabilities that studies of such behavioral areas as emotion, cognition, and performance can offer. Alongside traditional political science and psychology, this brings a deeper understanding to the urgent and complex problem of knowing our adversaries in relation to deterrence, information warfare, and psychological operations.

An adversary’s behavioral structure reflects his identity and a consistency of pattern and style that no amount of image management can disguise. Direct microanalysis at the level of structure of a leader’s videotaped expression offers insights into psychological states and cognitive patterns, cues into how these contextually unfold over time, and topic-yielding insights into stress, credibility, level of certitude, and conflict that can still remain undetected after years of traditional analysis.

Challenging the way policy makers and analysts think about this vacuum in understanding weapons of mass destruction and foreign adversaries is the problem that this book illuminates, and it is perhaps ultimately its most significant contribution.

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Among many military historians, the release of a book by John Keegan is cause for celebration, and the sentiment is not altogether out of place. Keegan’s prolific output of insightful studies, reaching back to his seminal *Face of Battle* (1992), has won for himself devotees from both the academic and public sectors. In his latest book, *Intelligence in War*, Keegan returns to the distinctive format he used in *The Face of Battle*, dividing his study into several vignettes from a broad range of military history—what he labels here as “a collection of case studies”—organized, in this case, to highlight the effect that good intelligence has on military operations, and the general role intelligence plays...
in underpinning the effectiveness of armed forces in the field.

Beginning with Admiral Horatio Nelson’s chase of the French Mediterranean fleet in 1798, Keegan goes on to discuss the role of intelligence in Stonewall Jackson’s Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1862, the British navy’s search for Rear Admiral Maximilian von Spee and his ships in World War I, and the battle of Midway, the German assault on Crete, and the Battle of the Atlantic in World War II. In each of these, we see how the gathering and the use of intelligence—two very different acts—affected the action. As usual, Keegan’s narrative skill sets the stage succinctly for his discussion. We feel how heavily the unknown weighs on the commanders, Nelson especially, and how at times they were bogged down sorting through an overabundance of intelligence, especially after the advent of wireless communication, to divine the plans of the enemy. Commanders had to deal with many possible answers to difficult questions, usually with only one being the right answer. Intelligence, we realize, works to weed out possibilities and narrow the options.

A book-length study of how crucial intelligence is will almost inevitably run the risk of elevating this one element above all other elements in a successful military operation. “If only this commander had known about the enemy’s troops,” we might find ourselves saying, or, “If only his spies would have alerted the admiral to his opponent’s plans the outcome here would surely have been different.” To his credit, however, Keegan avoids this determinism that would cause us to think that with good intelligence, battlefield victories can be made all but certain. On the contrary, he acknowledges that “however good the intelligence available before an encounter may appear to be . . . the outcome will still be decided by the fight.” Brutal fighting, we are reminded, along with a good bit of luck, are the key determinants of battlefield success. What Keegan instead shows is that good intelligence can reduce the scope of the unknown, and most importantly remove guesswork from the equation as much as possible. “Thought,” Keegan explains, “offers a means of reducing the price” of the cold, bloody attrition that lurks in the background of all battlefield victories.

Unlike some other Keegan volumes, this work builds its effectiveness only cumulatively through its stories. If one picks up this book and reads but one or two of the vignettes, a clear and timeless axiom of intelligence is likely to elude him. It is through the cumulative effect of all these stories, one after the other, that we begin to grasp Keegan’s broader point and see just how varied in form and content, but fundamentally useful, sound intelligence of every sort can be. One clear contribution that this book makes is to remind us that intelligence has much to do with mundane issues of how dense that forest on the map really is, how muddy that road becomes in April, or how to interpret what we inadvertently overhear on the radio.

Professional military readers will understand intuitively the importance of intelligence in the new kind of war the United States finds itself fighting today, and that brings us to the book’s subtitle. Given the recent debates over the quality of American intelligence, many readers will eagerly anticipate that Keegan’s analysis of the war against
al-Qa’ida and that the war on terror will be as fully developed as his examination of Jackson’s Valley campaign or the battle of Midway. Those readers will be disappointed. The discussion of al-Qa’ida is only a small part of his penultimate chapter, “Military Intelligence since 1945,” which discusses the Falklands War in greater length than what the United States faces today. Nevertheless, Keegan speculates that old-fashioned human intelligence will be the best means of carrying the war to the new enemies of the United States, and through his historical exposition of intelligence, we are well reminded just how crucial this apparently mundane work really is.

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An author who uses the words “the face of battle” in the title of any book pertaining to military matters is throwing down a pretty hefty literary gauntlet. For “face of battle” guarantees that the work in question will be compared to Keegan’s 1976 landmark volume of the same name. Keegan asked the basic question, “What is it like to be in a battle?” He sought the answer in a comparative study of the battles of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme.

John Reeve and David Stevens were well aware their book would be compared to The Face of Battle. In fact, they encourage the comparison and offer their book as a sort of maritime bookend to Keegan’s earlier work. There is a patent need for such a work and while some, including Keegan himself, have tried to fill it, none have yet succeeded. Despite a most encouraging beginning, however, Reeve and Stevens also miss the mark, although this book is still worth reading.

Rather than a coherent examination of the human experience of naval combat, this work is a collection of essays by seventeen separate authors, the majority of whom happen to be Australian. This is not surprising when the reader learns that most of the essays were originally presented at the 2001 King-Hall Naval History Conference in Canberra. The book starts off strongly with a masterful essay by John Reeve, who discusses naval history in general, identifying certain challenges in “piercing the veil” of individuals’ experiences in naval battle and suggesting an organizational approach, analogous to that used by Keegan, that could be used to grow a general understanding of naval combat. Unfortunately, the use of preexisting essays may have precluded such an approach, and the promise of the first chapter is not met in the book’s subsequent pages.

The essays are arranged more or less in chronological order and cover such diverse topics as a look at the battle of the Yellow Sea, the treatment of German sailors taken prisoner in World War I, and the personal experiences of an officer in command of an Australian guided missile destroyer in Operation DESERT STORM.

Despite its failure to live up to the promise of its title, this work is worth reading for several reasons. First, much of it, especially the portion written by Russell Parkin, deals with the