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THINKING AHEAD INTELLIGENTLY

Francis G. Hoffman

Mahnken, Thomas C. *Uncovering Ways of War: U.S. Intelligence and Foreign Military Innovation, 1918–1941*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 2002. 176pp. \$27.95

The significance of this slim book to today's nascent military transformation is entirely out of proportion to its size. Thomas Mahnken, professor of strategy at the Naval War College, has produced a compact and highly relevant work of scholarship that warrants attention from serious students of military innovation. Mahnken deftly corrects the orthodox view, expressed best by Stephen Rosen, about the limited role of intelligence in spurring military adaptation.¹ On the basis of extensive archival materials drawn from reports and correspondence of American military attachés and intelligence agencies, the author traces how well U.S. military planners were informed about developments in Germany, Great Britain, and Japan between the world wars. The implications that can be drawn from this work are profound.

Sir Michael Howard once quipped that whatever vision of future warfare the armed forces were focused on, whatever concepts or capabilities the military was pursuing, he was sure it was going to turn out wrong.² Given the ambiguity of the future, however, he suggested the real trick is not to be too badly wrong and to react quickly. As Mahnken unfolds the facts, it becomes evident that despite its limited size and resources, American intelligence up to 1941 kept policy makers informed about technological developments and emerging concepts being pursued overseas. With some exceptions, they did not get it too badly wrong.

Uncovering Ways of War examines nine examples of interwar innovation. Of these nine historical examples, American intelligence provided advance warning in six. U.S. observers identified ongoing armor programs in Britain and Germany, as well as landing craft designs to support Japanese amphibious tactics. Mahnken credits with partial success American efforts to discern Japanese sur-

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face warfare capabilities, although the full impact of the Type 93 Long Lance torpedo was missed. He also notes the imperfect recognition of German tactical aviation advances by Army Air Corps officers, who were blinkered by the orthodoxy of strategic bombing dogmatically asserted by airpower advocates on both

sides of the Atlantic. Also overlooked by the U.S. intelligence arm were German technological efforts in rocketry that led to the V-1 and V-2, and British radar advances. Another genuine surprise was the massed air strikes perfected by Japanese naval aviation.

However, noticeably absent in this book are the German interwar submarine developments, an area that the historian Holger Herwig once addressed in an essay, "Innovation Ignored."³ That the U.S. Navy and its intelligence arm would ignore such an ungentlemanly tool is understandable. Naval planning efforts focused on War Plan ORANGE and derived their energy from the belief that a war against Japan would be decided in a Mahanian clash of battle lines somewhere in the Pacific. The major debate was between battleships and carrier aviation. The idea that the submarine could develop into a strategic weapon was overlooked, since, in the words of Samuel Eliot Morison, "too many envisaged this war as a succession of Jutlands, to be decided by big guns on battleships."⁴ Inexplicably, the lessons of World War I were ignored, and the United States was unprepared both materially and technically to cope with the U-boat.⁵

Having missed Germany's hidden submarine program and offshore technical developments from 1925 to the late 1930s, the Allies repurchased antisubmarine warfare lessons in the North Atlantic at a dear cost.⁶ Germany unleashed its sea wolves on Britain's precarious oceanic umbilical cord to the New World and found easy pickings. The U-boats enjoyed a brief "happy time," sinking hapless British merchant ships with very few losses of their own.⁷

Fortunately, Germany had started the war with only thirty-seven U-boats and could only maintain a few at sea at any one time. Admiral Karl Dönitz focused his wolfpacks on sinking seven hundred thousand tons each month, a goal that would cripple Britain's economic and military situation and cause food and raw material shortages. The effectiveness of the German effort was short-lived, however, as the Royal Navy dusted off its World War I lessons. In short order, convoys, escorts, and airborne surveillance dented the U-boat scourge. Radar, direction finding, and sonar developments further complicated the lives of Germany's U-boat crews.

When America entered the war, the Navy's war planners and intelligence appeared to have been in a vacuum for nearly two years. Dönitz brought the war to America's very doorstep and took advantage of its lack of experience. In Operation PAUKENSCHLAG (roll of the drums), Dönitz urged his crews to strike "a blow against the United States as sudden and as blaring as a beat on a kettledrum." Although he even now had only ninety-one boats, the results were remarkable. The U-boats called it a "second happy time," as they sat outside brightly lit U.S. ports along the East Coast waiting for fat and unprotected U.S. tankers.

The war's first four months have been described as the U.S. Navy's worst defeat, "an unparalleled massacre."⁸ All told, about 2.5 million tons were sunk in the Atlantic in the first half of 1942, at the cost of only eight U-boats. General George Marshall wrote to Admiral Ernest J. King urging him to stem the hemorrhage: "Losses by submarines off our Atlantic seaboard and in the Caribbean now threaten our entire war effort." King's own antisubmarine-warfare expert told him bluntly in June 1942, "The Battle of the Atlantic is being lost."

Ultimately, convoys, escorts, better intelligence, radar and sonar, and air patrols turned the tide. By May 1943, known as "Black May" to the German crews, the Allies were winning the battle in the Atlantic. While some historians make light of the impact of the U-boat, most concur with Morison's assessment, "There is no denying that the submarine was the greatest threat to Allied victory over the Axis."⁹ There is also no denying that U.S. intelligence and naval planners failed to appreciate the threat or prepare for it.

It is not clear why Mahnken overlooked this case. As an example of surprise and the clandestine development of asymmetric capabilities, the German U-boat is highly relevant today. We live in an age where dual-use technologies are burgeoning, where new combinations of asymmetric tactics and advanced technologies are possible, and where unconventional approaches are the rule, not the exception. In an age where we assume overwhelming military superiority, the motivation and potential for surprise are striking. "The tendency to concentrate on the familiar at the expense of the novel," Mahnken keenly notes, "carries with it the danger of mirror-imaging." There is little doubt that mirror-imaging influenced naval planners in the interwar era. Thus, an understanding of the origins of this intelligence and planning failure is in order and should be incorporated into the key lessons of *Uncovering Ways of War*.¹⁰

The submarine example does not diminish the utility of Mahnken's research or conclusions; quite the contrary. The principal finding from this spare and occasionally dry effort is not that intelligence is always clairvoyant. Instead, the book suggests that there are certain times when U.S. intelligence is well suited to identifying adversary innovations, indicators of when policy makers may want to be more cautious. Mahnken's careful research highlights that U.S. intelligence entities have been inclined to monitor the development of established weapons over new systems (battleships, aviation, armor over rocketry); more successful at detecting combat-proven technology and doctrine than new ideas (armor, aviation, and Japanese landing craft vice radar); and better at identifying military technologies and concepts in which the services were interested (armor and aviation over submarines).

These conclusions do not augur well for America's interests. They suggest that the future holds numerous other surprises for U.S. national security policy

makers. If our intelligence agencies are inclined to monitor established weapons, we could overlook many advances in robotics, information warfare, and biological systems. If our intelligence efforts focus solely on battle-proven technologies, we could be rudely surprised when a long peace is quickly shattered and we find that some adversary has beaten us to the punch in space. If American intelligence analysts remain solely interested in the concepts or dogmas *du jour* of their own military, the United States could be overtaken by an enemy unencumbered by parochialism or complacency. If 11 September 2001 revealed anything, it is the consequences of illusion and myopia. The author aptly observes in his conclusion, “to be successful, the United States will have to resist the ever present temptation of *hubris*.”

This is a wonderfully researched and compressed analytic history that belongs on the shelf of every serious student of the U.S. military. Mahnken has extended his growing reputation for timely and strategically relevant research. Any senior policy maker contemplating the transformation of the U.S. military in the midst of a rapidly changing world should read this book closely. It is important not to be too wrong at the start.

NOTES

1. Stephen Peter Rosen, *Winning the Next War: Innovation and the Modern Military* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1991).
2. Michael Howard, Royal United Services Institute for Defense Studies, Chesney Lecture, October 1973.
3. Holger Herwig, “Innovation Ignored: The Submarine Problem—Germany, Britain, and the United States, 1919–1939,” in *Military Innovation in the Interwar Period*, ed. Williamson Murray and Allan R. Millett (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1996), pp. 227–64.
4. Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Two-Ocean War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1963), p. 578.
5. *Ibid.*
6. David McGregor, “The Use, Misuse, and Non-Use of History: The Royal Navy and the Operational Lessons of the First World War,” *Journal of Military History*, October 1992, pp. 603–15.
7. The new standard is Clay Blair, *Hitler’s U-boat War: The Hunters* (New York: Random House, 1996); Nathan Miller, *War at Sea: A Naval History of World War II* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1994), pp. 137–200, 291–327.
8. Eliot Cohen and John Gooch, *Military Misfortunes: The Anatomy of Failure in War* (New York: Free Press, 1990), p. 59; see also George Baer, *One Hundred Years of Sea Power: The U.S. Navy, 1890–1990* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford Univ. Press, 1994), p. 199.
9. Morison, p. 563.
10. F. G. Hoffman, *Strategic Review*, Spring 2000, pp. 27–34.