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Armageddon: The Reality behind the Distortions, Myths, Lies, and Illusions of World War II

William R. Cooper

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Professor Boyd and Captain Yoshida, a retired officer of the Japanese Maritime Self-Defense Force, tell their story about the Imperial Japanese Navy's submarine force—formidable in prospect, forlorn in retrospect—economically and effectively. In doing so they miss almost nothing of importance. Moreover, they provide a number of helpful appendices.

Boyd and Yoshida have written a book worth owning.

FRANK UHLIG, JR.
Naval War College

Ponting, Clive. *Armageddon: The Reality behind the Distortions, Myths, Lies, and Illusions of World War II*. New York: Random House, 1995. 376pp. \$27.50

Anyone who has delved into the vast collection of works on World War II can tell you his or her favorite books, perhaps volumes that uniquely describe the reality of combat, the intricacies of strategy, or the complexities of politics. Other works effortlessly transport the reader into the lives and deaths of men and women in every theater, every nation, every unit of the global conflict. Finally, there are books that reveal the role of the human intellect as well as the human heart in great technical or moral achievements, as well as in unspeakable savagery. This is not one of any of those kinds of books.

Armageddon is a revisionist tale, told by an individual who seems to have nothing but contempt for every leader and nation that engaged in that terrible war. Clive Ponting is described on the dust jacket as a professor of politics at the

University of Swansea, Wales, and a former assistant secretary at the Ministry of Defence under Margaret Thatcher. No other credentials or background is offered, and truthfully, no other data is needed, since the book lacks even the pretense of scholarship.

The author's basic method is to blend statistics with selected events to create an "impersonal" point of view. Ponting omits discussion of any military aspects of the war. In the preface he states that "there is little here on the detailed tactical handling of forces by military commanders, or maps and descriptions of particular battles. These have been exhaustively covered elsewhere and *tell us little about the reality of the war*" (emphasis added). Instead, the author takes a more remote and narrow perspective on the war, in which Hitler, Mussolini, and Stalin are described as shrewd barbarians while Roosevelt is seen as an opportunistic political hack and Churchill as a prevaricator. This is akin to today's shoddy "gotcha journalism," not reputable history.

In this new telling of World War II, Britain and France are seen as cynically declaring war on Germany to preserve the status quo of their ill gotten imperial empires, not to stand alongside a nation being raped by Hitler. Germany, Italy, Japan (and also the Soviet Union) were "revisionist powers" that sought to change the world as it had stood for over a century. Ponting is more vague about the United States, although he does describe the critical role played by its overwhelming economic power. He also eschews any perspective concerning the *realpolitik* that drove many Allied contingency decisions at the senior levels. The well known political divergences among the Allies are retold with relish, especially if Ponting can claim that

the leaders involved were selling out governments in exile, abrogating articles of the Atlantic Charter, or otherwise acting just like our demonized foes. For example, the sad tale of the Royal Navy's reluctant attack on the French fleet at Oran in July 1940 is retold without any examination of the broader political debates and the ultimate rationale that drove the British to this option. A number of complex political processes are treated in a like manner, with the intricacies of military decision-making elements essentially omitted.

The book is broken into sections about the origins of the war (a mere eighteen pages long), the actions of the neutrals (but little concerning the embedded and complex historical, geographic, economic, and political relationships among the nonbelligerents), mobilization, strategy (which includes, *inter alia*, logistics, tactics, and technology but little discussion of broad strategic goals), life under occupation, liberation, and the aftermath of the war.

For readers who are familiar with the historiography of World War II, there are sections of this book that can act as excellent catalysts for debate and discussion. Certainly the role of the Atlantic Charter in shaping Allied policy (which was either used as a political template or summarily ignored when inconvenient) is a topic ripe for detailed analysis. This is where a real historian would be an immense pleasure to read, but this author offers mere pontificating.

The weakest element of the book is not the author's perspective, however, but rather the total lack of support he offers for any of his "revelations." It behooves an author telling a provocative version of well known historical events

to cite a wealth of sources to underscore the seriousness of his or her intentions and scholarship. Ponting, however, fails to cite a single source for any of his hypotheses. There are *no footnotes*, and instead of a bibliography one is presented with a "Guide to Further Reading." Such poor scholarship effectively reduces this work to the level of a supermarket checkout tabloid, with the same amount of credibility.

WILLIAM R. COOPER
San Diego, California

Fowler, William M., Jr. *Silas Talbot: Captain of Old Ironsides*. Mystic, Conn.: Mystic Seaport Museum, 1995. 231pp. \$29.95

Silas Talbot is not well known today, although his event-filled life is an excellent example of what one could accomplish in the early days of the Republic. Twenty-three years old at the opening of the American Revolution, young Talbot, born of a hard-scrabble farm family, already had become a skilled stonemason-bricklayer, gained seafaring experience in the coastal trade, and had returned ashore to establish himself successfully in business, begin a family, and build his own house.

The outbreak of the Revolution made him a militia lieutenant, then a Continental Army captain, and by 1779 a lieutenant colonel, his promotions propelled by his bravery. He was badly burned and temporarily blinded while commanding a fire ship on the Hudson and, after recuperating, he was twice wounded while commanding the rear guard at Fort Mifflin. Engaged as an Army officer in quashing Tory privateering off Rhode Island, he took more than a dozen prizes himself.