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The Pentagon Paradox: The Development of the F-18 Hornet

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Stevenson, James P. *The Pentagon Paradox: The Development of the F-18 Hornet*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1993. 448pp. \$24.95

James Stevenson has made an expansive, if at times skewed, effort to describe, explain, and critique the decision-making process that allocates resources to procure high-technology weapon systems for the nation's defense. His work is a first-rate, albeit biased, commentary on the intricacies of the Pentagon-Congress-industrial complex that debates, negotiates, and directs the process—and benefits from it through enhancement of power and position, or by receipt of government contracts. Stevenson's focus is on the F-18 program and its source, the lightweight fighter program.

Paradox outlines the development of the requirements for, and the establishment of, the F-18 procurement program. The author attempts to show how the F-18 fits into the overall scheme of things with respect to the use of air power in the accomplishment of military missions, with the emphasis on how technology and concomitant perceptions and expectations influence procurement decision making. The book is both anecdotal and analytical in character, and it tends to be inductive in both its premises and conclusions (e.g., the F-18 was a multi-role platform, which means it was gold-plated, complex, expensive, and unreliable; therefore the decision to develop the F-18 was a bad one, and the airplane does not do the job it was procured to do).

The first several chapters are stage-setters that provide the

framework from which the author develops his premise, analysis, and supporting arguments. Stevenson is mainly concerned with the evolving role of air power and the uses and misuses of aviation platforms on the battlefield and in strategic bombing. The chapters immediately following provide a detailed assessment of the origins and context of the lightweight fighter program, and review the vagaries, conflicts, and outcomes that resulted in the procurement of the F-16 Falcon by the Air Force and the development of the F-18 Hornet by the Navy. The penultimate chapters discuss the Navy's subsequent procurement and operational fielding of the F-18—of which he is not only critical but damning. The final chapter is a harsh critique of the current Navy efforts related to the latest version of the Hornet, which he calls the F-19 Wasp.

It is obvious from the preface that Stevenson has been captured by the "lightweight fighter mafia," and he properly acknowledges his allegiance to their point of view. Given the number of conversational quotes by Chuck Myers, one could conclude that the author is ghost-writing doctrine for these "mafiosi." That is fine, for they have many cogent points to make; however, by not presenting the other side of the story, the book loses balance and, in my view, the author's arguments and conclusions lose credibility. Even where I agree with him, I believe much of his analysis is selective or revisionist. He creates the illusion of reality in support of preordained conclusions. A case in point is his discussion of the F-8 Crusader's prowess as a fighter. He overlooks the

efforts to provide a “down the throat” capability, via the semiactive radar homing version of the Sidewinder missile, in response to the operational desires of the fleet pilots (this reviewer included) for that edge in any engagement, day or night—creating the impression that real fighter pilots do not need or want that edge.

I also have problems with Stevenson’s attacks on the veracity or accuracy of certain statements by Admirals Burke, Holloway, and Turner, Captain Stiedle, and others. I consider these *ad hominem* in nature, where the author expresses his resentment of that tactic when used against “mafia” members. However, I agree with Stevenson that the issues should be settled on the evidence, not by casting aspersions at opponents’ assumed motives. I believe he would have made a better case for his views had he been consistent with this notion throughout this book.

My concerns aside, I think this book is a valuable contribution to improving the defense acquisition process, and I recommend it: not as a sole source, but as an addition to one’s library, as an unapologetic expression of a singular point of view.

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Barrett, David. *Uncertain Warriors: Lyndon Johnson and His Vietnam Advisers*.

Lawrence: Univ. Press of Kansas, 1993. 296pp. \$35

America’s participation in the Vietnam War is widely viewed as a monumental

mistake in the conduct of foreign policy. That this country became involved in a major war on the Asian landmass seems nearly incomprehensible when examined with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight. Yet Lyndon Johnson pursued a policy that appeared to him both coherent and consistent with this nation’s political objectives. David Barrett explores the interaction between the president and his circle of advisers, and he questions the traditional interpretation that Johnson’s penchant for secrecy shielded him from consultation with a wide range of formal and informal counselors.

In this study of the Johnson White House, Barrett traces the evolution from 1965 to 1968 of the president’s circle of Vietnam War advisers. His purpose is twofold: the first is to examine the interactions among those “uncertain warriors,” by way of explaining why America fought in terrain described as “the most unfavorable place in Asia to fight a war.” Secondly, Barrett seeks to prompt a new understanding of Johnson, whom he terms “one of the most complex presidents.” Using a plethora of primary sources, including memoranda, letters, diaries, and memoirs, the author portrays an extremely energetic chief executive who valued consultation but fashioned his decisions on an increasingly outdated worldview. The result was a series of decisions by Johnson that resulted in the choice of escalation as the most viable strategy for achieving political and military victory. Not surprisingly, the president paid particular attention to the hawks on his advisory team (Robert