

1992

II. "Technology, Culture, and the Modern Battleship"

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Recommended Citation

Bottoms, Albert M. (1992) "II. "Technology, Culture, and the Modern Battleship"," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 45 : No. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol45/iss4/8>

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Albert M. Bottoms

This reviewer received a very different message from *Sacred Vessels* than did Professor Sumida. The historical message of this book stimulates comparison and interpretation of aspects of the current military force composition and structure debates with similar debates that occurred prior to World War II. In each of the military services one can find core orthodoxies. These beliefs are not necessarily wrong or right, totally or in degree. It is helpful to have some understanding of the strong influences that experience and tradition have on preparations for the future.

Perhaps unwittingly, the stridency of Professor Sumida's arguments against details of O'Connell's theme—the dominant emotional content in the perceptions of the utility and the role of the battleship—supports O'Connell's point. *Sacred Vessels* illuminates a dangerous trap that lurks in the practice of military experts and political leaders, the tendency to reduce military discussions to arguments about size and numbers of individual platforms (or machines). The trap is one of harmful suboptimization. In this case the conventional wisdom sought to optimize the machine of war rather than the overall warmaking potential of the force.

O'Connell's use of the metaphors of religion effectively frames the intensity of feeling that surrounded the battleship even before the day of Billy Mitchell.

There is the child in each of us who stands in awe of a great machine of war—the more massive, the more awesome. It is quite plausible that awe, combined with professional and "cultural" biases, obscures reality. The professional officer class of that day came solely from the naval academy and was undiluted by officer streams from the Reserve Office Training Corps. It is not surprising that one would find an orthodox culture in the military hierarchy of the navy. The influence of that culture is a major theme in *Sacred Vessels*.

Thus, in the O'Connell work there is the contrapuntal theme, that also carries into the present, of the opportunity costs associated with dogma. Consider the deadening impact on the French capabilities in maneuver warfare of their fascination with the precise geometries of Vauban's fortresses—a fascination that reached its culmination in the Maginot Line. That is one example of the opportunity cost of dogma. O'Connell touches on this derivative of the romance with the capital ship. Are there not some modern analogies in the fierce resistance in the naval aviation community to the technological development of smaller,

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air-capable ships, Swath ships, Vertical/Short-Takeoff-and-Landing (V/STOL) aircraft, and even seaplanes?

Robert O'Connell makes a contribution to the study of how conservative organizations (cultures) tame or domesticate technological developments that are perceived to be threatening. In *Sacred Vessels* the dominating operational concepts of the day become the taming agents. From the army's early attempts to treat armor as "iron horses," to the more recent attempts to place the submarine in the role of supporting the current capital ships, we see examples of the same processes that O'Connell discusses in the effort to chain the emerging carrier navy to the direct defensive support of the battleship force. The submarine navy has also had to struggle against being given too many static defensive tasks in the defense of straits and passages, tasks that invite invidious comparison with the Captor mine.

Dr. Joel Lawson, former Director of Naval Laboratories, once observed that a sixteen-inch shell could move forty cubic yards of earth. The problem is to determine which forty cubic yards you want to move. In his last chapter, Dr. O'Connell touches on the disappointing results that were obtained in the Bekaa Valley in Lebanon when the *New Jersey* went after some Syrian antiaircraft guns. The problem was the difficulty of hitting a mobile or movable target. Dr. O'Connell does not enlarge upon the lesson by suggesting that a demonstrated lack of effectiveness in the tactical situation seems also to diminish the potential utility of the battleship as a component of the "naval presence force." In spite of the promise now shown by such supporting capabilities as the military version of the Global Positioning System, the battleship has once again left the active force structure of the United States Navy.

Dr. O'Connell's device of using hyperbole for emphasis may have laid him open to the charges of oversimplification. A number of Professor Sumida's criticisms seem to stem from the perceived failure to recognize the nuance of technical detail. That type of forensic approach may be valid if the specific detail is essential to the argument. In the case of *Sacred Vessels* the major messages are modulated only slightly in degree, not in kind, by the omissions that concern Professor Sumida. Dr. O'Connell is writing about the past to illuminate the future. In the final sentence of his book Dr. O'Connell says (in part) that his purpose is "to remind us that our fantasies are as real as anything else."

In a broader sense, Dr. O'Connell is addressing one of the most important aspects of the increasing tension between "requirements pull" and technological "opportunity push": the role of autocratic preconception. In his review, Professor Sumida correctly identifies the other factors that impinge upon the "balance" question. The nerve that Dr. O'Connell touches in this reviewer is the effective manner that a prevailing allegiance to a warfighting platform or concept can be used in an autocratic system to enforce "prior restraint" on research and **development and guarantee programmatic conformity.**

The student of national security affairs would do well to read this book. Take into account Professor Sumida's concerns of fact and ponder the implications that today's professional military conservatism and orthodoxy have on the U.S. force mix and posture of the future. As in the "battleship era," the American people and their political leadership place trust in professional military judgment—the Goldwater-Nichols Act mandates the military input to the budget process. The public must have confidence in both the professionalism and objectivity of military advice.

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A Call for Information

In 1991 the Chief of Naval Staff of the Royal Australian Navy endorsed a decision to write a history of the first entering class—known as the 1913 Entry—of the Royal Australian Naval College. Among this Entry's members were Vice Admiral Sir John Collins, Rear Admiral Harold Farncomb, and Rear Admiral Henry Showers, all of whom fought alongside the U.S. Navy in the 1942-1954 Pacific campaigns, from the Coral Sea to Leyte Gulf. John Collins later served as chief of the Australian Navy Staff, and Harold Farncomb headed the Australian Defence Staff in Washington until his retirement in 1951. Mr. A.W. Grazebrook (Commander, RANR, and naval correspondent to the *Asia Pacific Defence Reporter*) was selected to write this history and is currently collecting research material. Mr. Grazebrook plans to contact a number of relatives and persons who served with the 1913 Entry to obtain personal anecdotes and other material. Readers having information which may be of interest to the author in compiling this history are requested to contact the Historical Officer, HMAS *Creswell*, Jervis Bay, 2540, Australia.