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Some Principles of Maritime Strategy

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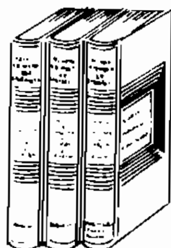
BOOK REVIEWS



A book reviewer occupies a position of special responsibility and trust. He is to summarize, set in context, describe strengths, and point out weaknesses. As a surrogate for us all, he assumes a heavy obligation which it is his duty to discharge with reason and consistency.

Admiral H.G. Rickover

"An Achievement of Unusual Interest and Stature"

Daniel A. Baugh

Corbett, Julian S. *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* by Eric J. Grove, ed. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1988. 351pp. $25.95

This book, written eighty years ago, is the pioneering analytical study of sea warfare. It commands intellectual respect not only because of the author's comprehensive knowledge of British naval history, but also because it does not shy away from complexities. Moreover, Corbett wrote it with the full knowledge that his message to his primary audience, senior British naval officers, was unpopular. He asked those officers to re-examine their most cherished dogmas and to do this by the light of a theoretical analysis based on historical evidence, a style of thinking for which most of them had no preparation, but a lot of contempt.

Two years before Corbett's publication, an unusual officer, Captain Herbert Richmond was already conducting scholarly research in naval history in his spare time. He confided to his journal: "The Admiralty plans are . . . the vaguest amateur stuff I have ever seen. . . . No governing idea

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at all except that the enemy's Fleet is to be brought to action—which is stated as being the principal object." Richmond did not exaggerate. A single-minded preoccupation with the idea of a decisive battle at sea had carried over from prevailing theories of land warfare. It had been reinforced by the familiar linkage of Lord Nelson and Trafalgar (as if Nelson had done nothing else of naval importance but fight that great battle). A supposition that winning the decisive battle was tantamount to command of the sea was given massive intellectual support by the historical writings of Alfred Thayer Mahan. Even commerce protection tended to be regarded as an unwise diversion of effort prior to the decisive battle, viewed as a rare or incidental post-battle problem. Similarly, any strategy of commerce warfare was considered futile unless the great issue between the capital ships was favorably settled. Julian S. Corbett struggled against these narrow and simplistic views.

Corbett's central and most important point was that command of the sea meant nothing more nor less than control of sea communications. Of itself the point was not original, but Corbett cogently set forth its implications. While granting that destroying the enemy battle-fleet was the best way to proceed, he showed that it was not really the prime object and that bringing an inferior enemy fleet to battle was neither simple nor always possible. He also warned against allowing the latent threat of an enemy battle-fleet to paralyze all other naval operations such as commerce protection and prevention. Using examples, most tellingly from the Nelson era, Corbett showed that the shepherding of troop transports and guarding of a military expedition's anchorage had always held the highest priority, and that when the orders were drawn up to ward off an invasion attempt the prime naval object was understood to be the enemy's troop transports, not his capital ships.

All this—heresy in Corbett's day—seems obvious now. But Corbett stressed two other key points that too often have been neglected. First, while command of the sea is secured by battle-fleets (whether by successful combat or correct positioning), there is an ongoing task of *exercising* command which is accomplished almost entirely by cruisers and smaller vessels; seldom do navies build and outfit enough of these in time. Second, he drew a distinction between commerce destruction and commerce prevention. He should have addressed more candidly the factors which could cause the former to become tantamount to the latter, but the distinction is still important because, as he said, the superior naval power should pursue commerce prevention, and the methods and measures of success for these two objectives are different. (The aim of commerce prevention is to exert economic pressure on an enemy by denying him access to or use of the sea; its success is measured primarily by disruption of traffic and only secondarily by numbers of vessels captured or sunk.)

The above matters are drawn from Parts II and III of the book, which are directly concerned with "principles of maritime strategy," and it must be granted that some are no longer relevant or no longer debatable. But Part I,

"Theory of War," is of enduring interest. Corbett dared to say to his audience that naval strategy and maritime strategy were not the same thing: "a maritime State to make successful war and to realize her special strength" must use the army and the navy in strategic coordination. Since maritime strategy involved more than naval considerations, it was necessary to formulate a theory of war that would fit the situation of "a maritime State." Obviously he had Britain chiefly in mind.

Corbett derived his theory from Clausewitz's *On War*, working mainly from Clausewitz's distinction between 'unlimited' and 'limited' wars. Whereas unlimited war entailed an intensive strategy of overthrow, involving direct confrontation and defeat of the enemy's armed forces, limited war, which was undertaken for limited objects, did not. Corbett saw an important peculiarity of warfare in the maritime sphere, namely that, by employing command of the sea to isolate its objects, a maritime power could impose conditions of limited war. Wars for supposedly limited objects on the European continent, on the other hand, tended to become unlimited, and on this ground he criticized Clausewitz's conception of "war limited by contingent." The model strategy towards Europe for a maritime power like Britain was provided by the Elder Pitt in the Seven Years' War. Pitt's British army in Germany, though it served Prussia's unlimited object (survival), was kept to a "definite and independent" strategic function and remained in "touch with the sea." In this fashion Corbett groped toward what Liddell Hart twenty years later called "the British Way in Warfare." In the last chapter of this section he went on to an inspired though sometimes incoherent critique of the common tendency to apply "the principle of 'overthrow'" to all strategic situations.

Unfortunately, Corbett failed to execute fully his theoretical mission. He concluded Part I by saying that the profits of the "limited form" could not be enjoyed "until we have entirely overthrown the enemy's naval force," yet he never actually stated what is implicit here and in subsequent chapters—that the *naval* aspect of war thus conceived must fall into the unlimited category. (The fact that Britain's national survival was also dependent upon naval power reinforces the point.) Perhaps because he failed to make this explicit, he wound up presenting a "Theory of War" which omitted the *maritime* objects of a maritime power's plan of war. Some of these were inserted helter-skelter in the strategic and operational parts of the book. But he remained wedded in Part I to Clausewitz's conception that a war's nature (limited or unlimited) was essentially defined by its *territorial* object. (It appears that only Corbett's *theoretical* scheme remained so wedded, because his categorical confusions—"limited interest, physically limited, limited form, limited war"—as well as some of his subsequent historical examples indicate an instinctive divorce.) In any case, his formal theory of war wound up one-sided. It incorporated maritime warfare into land warfare, but not vice versa. It encompassed ways in which seapower could be employed to influence land warfare (notably by "combined

operations") but neglected *conceptually* the manner in which a maritime state's selection of objects on land might be tailored to its unlimited maritime agenda.

Historians have noted that this treatise had scarcely any impact during the great war that began three years later. Although even a brilliantly composed book could probably not have made much headway against the prevailing dogmas and confident ignorance that gripped the Royal Navy's high command in those years, this book certainly had its faults. As noted, Part I, though pioneering and intellectually exciting, is logically flawed. The components in Parts II and III show signs of being cobbled together from other studies and the architecture looks hurried: crucial points of argument are scattered in unexpected locations (*e.g.*, the role of economic pressure on the enemy, pp. 99-102, 160, 185-6) or stated too equivocally (*e.g.*, the true functions of the battle-fleet, p. 115); these defects might have been remedied by summaries at the end, but those are lacking. Furthermore, although the power of the book's message required a clear confrontation with Mahanite orthodoxies, Corbett's text avoided overt mention of Mahan when discussing the crucial points. Corbett was a civilian historian with an established reputation and treasured naval connections, and was therefore personally in a difficult position, but his authorial decision injured the book.

He was a heretic who did not wish to sound heretical. This is probably what drew him to approach a controversial subject by laying down, as if fully valid, the very principles whose influence he hoped to reduce, and neglecting to supply a summary statement of how his discussion had revised their standing. The chapter on "Methods of Securing Command" is the most prominent case in point. Going through the whole book as well as the Royal Naval War College course's "Green Pamphlet," (a handout drawn up by Corbett and Captain Edmond Slade which serves as an outline for much of the book) it is easy to compile a long list of his damaging concessions to prejudices that he wished to overcome. The quotation in a previous paragraph (p. 87) is one example; similar examples may be found on pp. 167, 323, 343.

Some serious flaws in Corbett's use or knowledge of 18th-century naval history compounded the damage. Two important instances should be mentioned. First, Corbett could have made a far stronger *historical* case against the strategic principle that "seeking out the enemy's fleet" was the first order of naval business and usually feasible. Granted, in 18th-century naval wars British battle squadrons did meet, sooner or later, their opposites in combat, so in a strict sense the point was valid. But nowhere did Corbett observe that many years elapsed in some wars before such battles occurred. In some cases it was the strained naval finances of Britain's opponents rather than strategic maneuvering which had induced them to risk an early engagement, and such battles had often not been decisive either way. Britain had exploited her domination of sea communications during most of those wars without the convenience of having

annihilated the enemy's fleet. Corbett was aware of most of these facts and considerations, but his treatment of them offered no analytical focus.

In the second instance, he seems to have been ignorant of the facts. Unlike his discussion of invasion, which rested on sound analysis and good historical research, the discussion of defense of shipping rested on dubious assumptions and bad history. These assumptions led him to play down the problem, and bad history led him to "the principle of defended areas." The idea was that during the 18th century convoys were not really necessary in areas of heavy traffic like the English Channel, because these areas were effectively "defended" or "occupied"—by which he meant they were bookended by British battle squadrons and patrolled by cruisers. In reality, such a system was scarcely ever in place or reliable; seldom was it safe to allow anything important to sail even in the English Channel without convoy. Unquestionably, Corbett "made himself party to the most costly miscalculation in British naval thinking ever made." This observation by Professor Brian Ranft (quoted by Grove, p. xxxiv) refers to the year 1917. Ranft also noted that Corbett neglected the inherent "tactical advantages of the convoy system" (as so many British experts did), but his error also stemmed from ignorance of the everyday methods of commerce protection in the past.

Both of these historical lapses were especially unfortunate because if he had gotten them right he would have reinforced his two best strategic points: (1) that the securing of sea communications, and their denial to the enemy, was the primary objective, and (2) that command of the sea, though secured by capital ships, was an ongoing task that had to be exercised continually by smaller vessels. All the same, the book is a landmark, an achievement of unusual interest and stature.

Some very brief comments on this new edition are in order. Grove's introduction is interesting and helpful. The inclusion of the "Green Pamphlet" (in two versions) gives this edition a unique value. The new footnotes which identify people, places and events will be welcomed by nearly all readers (though the usage of the phrase "author's note" is steadily baffling). There is a new index, however, that is much inferior to the old, not only in respect to subject entries but even proper names. Working scholars should use the original index; the page numbers will be close.

Wylie, J. C. *Military Strategy: A General Theory of Power Control.* Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1990. Originally published, 1967. 169pp. $27.95

"You might not be interested in strategy, but strategy is interested in you," said Leon Trotsky. Even if you are not interested in strategy, you should be interested in J. C. Wylie's