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Command of the Seas: Building the 600 Ship Navy

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PROFESSIONAL READING



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

One Man, One Book, Two Views

Lehman, John F., Jr. *Command of the Seas: Building the 600 Ship Navy*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988. 464pp. \$21.95

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Rear Admiral C. E. Armstrong, U.S. Navy (Ret.)

From the tales of the rich and famous to thoughtful discourses on national and maritime strategy, the defense acquisition system, and recent military operations, the richly anecdotal *Command of the Seas* by John F. Lehman, Jr. is an interesting and valuable, if somewhat uneven, account of his six years as Secretary of the Navy during the Reagan administration. His book clearly illustrates how one man with will and determination can make a difference, even in as hidebound an organization as the navy, and as Byzantine an environment as the Pentagon.

On 28 January 1981, the Congress approved President Reagan's appointment of John F. Lehman, Jr. as the Secretary of the Navy. It was a position the 39-year-old Lehman had avidly and aggressively sought, and one to which he brought several unique qualifications, including his experience on the National Security Council and his continuing reserve duty stints as bombardier navigator with active duty carrier squadrons. The central goal of Secretary Lehman's agenda was no less than to rebuild and reenergize the post-Vietnam navy. It was a navy that had shrunk from 950 ships in 1969 to 479 ships in 1979 and a navy with too few officers and men

(many of whom were not up to their job), poor morale, low retention, and severe drug problems—all exacerbated by a perceived lack of esteem from the American public, low pay, and long deployments away from homeport.

When Lehman resigned in 1987, he bequeathed a different navy to his successor. His oft-stated goal of rebuilding the navy to 600 ships was within reach. The very best of our young men and women were once again serving their country with pride and distinction, essentially free of drug influences, and now a force with which to be reckoned. He also left behind loyal friends and bitter enemies. It is a strange paradox that this man, who did so much to lead the navy back to a position of strength and pride, should continue to be the source of so much resentment by many, both in and out of the navy.

The upper levels of the navy were not quite ready for John Lehman. He knew what he wanted, and to achieve his goals he was willing to test the legal limits of civilian control over the military. In carrying out his ever-expanding agenda, he wandered repeatedly and with full awareness into the minefields of traditional uniformed prerogative. An accomplished infighter, he was awed by neither title nor crusty gold striping. In his tilts with the top levels in the office of the Secretary of Defense, as well as in the navy, one senses that he took as much satisfaction from the battle, for which he was always prepared, as he did from the victory, which he usually won.

Lehman moved back and forth with remarkable ease between his status as reserve officer on active duty and that as Secretary of the Navy. During his active duty periods and frequent whirlwind trips as Secretary to ships and installations around the world, he related remarkably well with the operators—the people doing the work. His charm and wit, his willingness to listen, and his demonstrated qualifications to perform as a combat-ready crew member of a carrier jet, all made him a welcome visitor, enabling him to hear, unvarnished, the concerns of the fleet. These trips provided him with invaluable ammunition for the battles he fought within the Pentagon.

Lehman's background, education and experience brought him into conflict with the "systems analysts," whom he felt gave far too much credence to technical quantitative assessments and far too little to conceptual context. This conflict extended more broadly to the nuclear submarine community, which had been led by Admiral Hyman G. Rickover for more than 30 years. Chosen from only the best and brightest talent within the navy, with promotional quotas higher than those of all other warfare areas, it is not surprising that the ensuing years have witnessed a high percentage of Rickover-trained officers rising rapidly to the topmost positions in the navy. Lehman believed—and he was not alone—that Rickover's single-minded concentration on the technical disciplines, coupled with his increasing influence on school and training curricula, were creating an

officer corps unprepared to think tactically and strategically. Early in his tour as Secretary, Lehman succeeded in bringing about Admiral Rickover's retirement, but he was less successful in limiting the pervasive strength of the nuclear submarine community.

Lehman's assessment that the national security apparatus lacked the effectiveness to properly plan and execute military operations is well supported. He used the military operations of the late 1970s and early 1980s to point out specific shortcomings in planning, training, command and control, and tactics. He did more than identify problems. Naval aviation did not like hearing from Lehman that it was "broke" after the unsuccessful 1983 Lebanon air strikes, but Lehman was right, and he took immediate action to correct the situation. With the support of the CNO, in a remarkably short period of time he constructed a strike-warfare training center at Fallon, Nevada. He selected the best operational talent in the navy to develop the tactics and do the training, provided realistic and responsive training ranges and equipment, and then made the training mandatory for every carrier air wing preparing for deployment. Credit Lehman's initiative with today's stronger, more professional at-sea striking force. One wishes that the command and control structure—from the commander in chief to the on-scene commander—were similarly improved.

Lehman takes credit for bringing much needed reforms to the defense acquisition system, and, indeed, his policy changes and bully boy tactics focused attention and got results. His successes in terms of lower unit costs and improved delivery schedules are impressive, and a significant number of the reforms he imposed on the navy acquisition process and on navy contractors have been adopted throughout the defense acquisition system. Heady as these successes were, there were indications, even before Lehman's departure, that many defense companies were finding it increasingly difficult to struggle with the growing number of restrictive, often confusing, and frequently contradictory regulations that have increased risks, constrained allowed profits, and created a counterproductive adversarial environment. Condemning the entire industry for the greed and mismanagement of the few has been a bitter pill to swallow. It has not been made easier by the revelation that the Defense Department also had a few willing contributors to the problem.

By his own admission, Lehman pays "scant attention" to his "mistakes and bad calls." He also makes no apology for promoting and placing in key billets those officers who supported his actions and policies, or for ignoring or crushing those who did not. He is vindictive toward those few who were successful in thwarting him. His unnecessary parting shot in this book, directed at the current CNO, Admiral Carl A. H. Trost, is a case in point.

John Lehman is now working in the financial world, presumably recharging both his batteries and his coffers in preparation for a return to

government service. He has much to offer, not the least of which is the self-confidence that he can persuade the other 89,999 ants on the log who think they are steering to answer John Lehman's orders to the helm.

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Albert M. Bottoms

Rarely does one have the opportunity to share the thoughts, events, and motivations that surround a major national leader. Lehman's *apologia* provides a form of instant history that is all the more fascinating for his articulate presentation of the forces that he perceived to be impinging on the navy. To be sure, there is a distinctly defensive tone in his remarks that at times approaches paranoia. Whether he actually believes the things he says or whether he applies his perceptions in a tactical fashion are matters left to the reader to decide.

This reviewer is a practicing systems analyst. Mr. Lehman leaves no doubt as to his opinion of that genre. He does not sugarcoat his criticism and disdain for those who would have the temerity to analyze his policies or his concepts of strategy. What galls me is that he is more right than wrong in his assessments. He correctly alludes to the atrophy in conceptual thinking that he found upon taking the navy's helm.

Unfortunately for the navy and the country, Mr. Lehman, the political scientist, was and apparently remains blissfully unaware of the powerful and sometimes inconvenient concept of opportunity costs. The landscape is littered with the carcasses of naval economists who attempted to discuss these matters prior to the headlong rush to 600 ships. Not only was the orderly development of analytical methods consigned to the trash heap, but emergent technological development was also cut. Mr. Lehman's management initiative that eliminated the Naval Material Command and reorganized the navy's research and development processes had the effect of straining to the breaking point the developer-user relationship that had been the hallmark of the navy's successful exploitation of the fruits of research and development.

There are some fascinating parts in Mr. Lehman's book. His account of his struggle to have Admiral Rickover retire gracefully and his description of the powerful influences that opposed his efforts are revealing and instructive for the future. His wars and battles with peers and superiors who opposed the Lehman version of naval strategy are equally instructive, as are the revelations of character and purpose in this largely autobiographical account. But the reader must continuously ask whether the stated views of his opponents are real or strawmen. My contacts with the same people and

institutions that Mr. Lehman describes as so “Army-oriented” show about the same distribution as one would find elsewhere in informed societies, including the Army.

This book belongs on the navy bookshelf. It has much fuel for discussion and—perish the thought—analysis. Inevitably there will be the temptation to second-guess many of the force level and platform decisions. When that process starts, it is only fair that we take into account the environment and the implicit and explicit assumptions that Mr. Lehman made in his quest to rebuild the navy.

Smith, Hedrick. *The Power Game: How Washington Works*. New York: Random House, 1987. 793pp. \$24.95

Hedrick Smith is an imaginative and insightful journalist. His earlier volume, *The Russians*, based upon his experience as a *New York Times* Moscow correspondent, is the best of its kind. It manages to capture both the personal and the bureaucratic, the official and the very unofficial facets of life in the Soviet Union.

Mr. Smith’s latest book sadly lacks the crispness and freedom from cant which marked his first volume. It is difficult to determine whether Mr. Smith was overcome by his subject or whether his editor and publisher let him down. This reviewer is inclined to choose the latter as more likely.

True enough, *The Power Game* is full of interesting insights on the changing nature of politics “inside the Beltway.” There are fascinating quick analyses of the impact of money, television, public opinion polling, incumbency in the House of Representatives and the destruction

of its seniority system, the maladies and false victories within the old Reagan White House, the agonies and exasperations of a cabinet poorly led, and the corrosive impact of right-wing orthodoxy on programs throughout the last two presidential terms. Unfortunately, the heavy emphasis upon bungling, pettiness, and the cult of the Reagan personality compels one to wonder why the United States has not proceeded along the path of the Roman Empire long before now.

Surely the opportunity to observe the process of government “inside the Beltway” and the process of electioneering “outside” does not bring joy and relief to the idealistic observer. Mr. Smith observes that the Founding Fathers built our system to be inefficient, and it is indeed, in many respects, exactly that. Despite occasional bows in the direction of honest men’s differences, however, Mr. Smith identifies so few successes in public life as to leave a very bad taste for nearly everything and everyone involved in