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War Games: The Secret World of the Creators, Players, and Policy Makers Rehearsing World War Ill Today

Peter Perla

Thomas B. Allen

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Ropp's balanced presentation of the French picture is enhanced greatly by a continual comparative analysis of development and adaptation in the neighboring navies of Italy, Britain, and Russia. As technology was mastered, first one and then another moved into a temporary perceived "lead" which rendered other ships and weapons obsolete. Progress was halting and jerky in all the navies, with little conception of where technology was leading ships and the organizations that built and operated them. Frequently, the traditional approach triumphed simply because it was familiar to the decisionmaker.

Throughout the narrative, the tragic flow of the Third Republic is exposed time and again. Politics for the sake of politics; charges, counter-charges and acrid *ad hominem* dispute poisoned the domestic political atmosphere and spilled over into the professional navy via the civilian secretariat. In reaction, the navy turned inward, became separated from the public, and lost the understanding and support of the general population which was (and is) the *sine qua non* of modernization and maintenance of a naval force structure.

It is this aspect of the tale which is most unsettling to a thoughtful reader, as it is a reaction most of us have felt when confronted with antagonism from political and academic critics of our best work. Ropp concludes with this paragraph, which provides a philosophical summation:

Perhaps the greatest weakness of the French Navy in 1904 was the continued

lack of understanding between its leaders on the one hand and the public and its representatives in Parliament on the other. The navy's failure to resolve the traditional problem of its relations with public opinion was a major cause of the survival of its antiquated administration, of the public apathy that permitted the ruinous regime of Pelletan (a civilian secretary), and of the continued failure of the public and military men to see the importance of sea power in a continental war. In a democratic society like France, it is as impossible for the public to escape its responsibility toward the navy as it is for the navy to exclude it by reconstituting the old closed corporation of experts of aristocratic days. While the French experience proved the public's incompetence in technical matters such as ship design and naval tactics, it also proved that the abstention of the public, which owes far more to the navy than mere financial support, will show up eventually in flaws in the Navy's industrial and general strategic system, even if the navy is run by some of the ablest experts in the world.

This book deserves careful thought by each of us.

J. B. BONDS
Captain, U.S. Navy

Allen, Thomas B. *War Games: The Secret World of the Creators, Players, and Policy Makers Rehearsing World War III Today*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1987. 402pp. \$19.95

Thomas B. Allen explores the scope and uses of war gaming in the study and making of U.S. defense strategy and policy. Political and military simulations, analyses, and games have become important tools for the defense community, and Mr. Allen's attitude about them is well summed up in his own words. "From

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many of these games come ideas that find their way into American foreign policy and military contingency plans. But little is known about gaming beyond game rooms because of the secrecy that is imposed upon the identity and the moves of the players."

Mr. Allen's raw material consists of extensive research into the literature of war gaming and model building, including a collection of formerly classified, Vietnam-era game documents obtained through the Freedom of Information Act. He supplements his written sources with information gleaned from conversations and interviews with a wide variety of people, ranging from commercial hobby war game designers to past and present members of the military, government, and industry. He weaves his story in a long series of vignettes, sometimes only loosely connected, which describe the origins and evolution of some of the basic ideas of gaming, or which detail the course of particular games. Although this approach might work well for relatively narrowly defined topics, it proves a bit unwieldy in a 400-page book dealing with a complex and technical subject. The constant jumping back and forth between history and current practice, research philosophy and politics, makes it difficult for the reader to follow a coherent line of argument.

Mr. Allen has an unfortunate tendency to over-dramatize some of his anecdotes, which may make them more interesting to read but also makes it more difficult to assess fairly

what they actually mean. Beyond the melodrama, however, the book is on target in its discussion of several subjects. Mr. Allen is right to question the validity of "lessons learned" from games, especially from the type of political-military games on which he focuses most of his attention. Such games, by their very nature, depend almost entirely on a set of assumptions about the political nature of some future world and are useful only for investigating the possible implications of such assumptions, not for verifying their validity. He is right, too, in his contention that war games "give policymakers a cheap and quiet way to go to war for the mundane purposes of planning budgets, for tinkering with the size of Army divisions and Navy fleets, and for putting non-existent weapons and outlandish tactics onto mythical battlefields."

Mr. Allen is less correct in his apparent fear that some war games may have profound and potentially dangerous effects on actual policy decisions. His statement that "Pentagon games . . . often take yesterday's events, merge them with today's planning, and file the results away for tomorrow's action" is difficult to reconcile with his apparent belief in the accuracy of a claim made by Paul K. Davis of Rand Corporation that "he had seldom heard a senior U.S. official base policy on games." This mixture of concern that games have too much influence, and of uncertainty about the nature of that influence, pervades the book.

Although accurate in some of his observations, Mr. Allen ultimately fails to come to grips with his subject. The tone of a few of his judgments sometimes implies unwarranted or ill-informed criticisms. He implies that aircraft carriers are never sunk in Navy games. In fact, aircraft carriers sometimes do get sunk. Despite his valiant and in many ways successful efforts to penetrate the arcane secrets of the field, Mr. Allen never truly grasps the nature of the beast or of the language it speaks. The touchstone is there, but he fails to perceive its importance. He dutifully relates a sequence of definitions for gaming, war gaming, simulation, and model. These definitions, taken from a Defense Advance Research Projects Agency study, try to isolate subtle but essential differences and so highlight the peculiar strengths and limitations of each distinct tool. Yet, Mr. Allen seems to believe that such fine distinctions are of mere "academic" interest, or serve only as devices for making the idea of gaming more acceptable by disguising it with a fancier name.

As a result, Mr. Allen ignores the same traps into which many an unwitting gamer, analyst, and model builder has fallen before him. He sees everything as a war game, falling along a "spectrum" that ranges from field maneuvers at one extreme to abstract mathematical analyses at the other. This image, while a popular one, is misleading. As it is usually described, the spectrum implies a one-dimensional increase in "realism" when moving from studies to exercises. In fact, the tools change their

focus, not their accuracy, as they move from analysis (focusing on physical parameters and processes) through war gaming (focusing on human decisions) to exercises (focusing on the execution of decisions). Mr. Allen also reads too much importance into the results of the games. He says very little about the real value of the learning process that goes on during the play of a game and worries a great deal about the potential dangers of using the outcome of a game as a predictive tool. Perhaps this is understandable in light of his obvious fascination with the rare but dramatic picture of the game that comes close to replicating future events (as in his example of the hijacking of TWA flight 847 from Athens).

Ultimately, the book is unsatisfying; it comes to an end rather than reaching a conclusion. It is as if the author became so caught up in relating all the interesting "whats" he had discovered, that he forgot to ask about the "whys." Mr. Allen's effort to penetrate the "secret world" of war gaming gives his readers fascinating glimpses of the people who have helped to shape that world, but shows only an incomplete understanding of the nature and meaning of their work. As a result, those who have some experience in defense analysis are likely to find the book at once interesting and exasperating. Those with little or no experience in the field are likely to find the book interesting but misleading.

PETER PERLA
Washington, D.C.