

1982

## America Arms for a New Century

Michael K. Doyle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Doyle, Michael K. (1982) "America Arms for a New Century," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 35 : No. 3 , Article 11.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol35/iss3/11>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

already appreciate naval history, and who have adopted certain battles as "their favorites," such a survey is useful. Although a reader may differ with the authors' emphasis and some of their conclusions, he may discover and learn to appreciate other battles, other campaigns and other applications of sea power.

If you have a copy of the first edition of *Sea Power* or of the 1955 volume, keep it for reference purposes. It is much more likely to contain the tactical details you might be looking for than does this second edition. Yet, as a survey of naval history (from the US perspective) for a reader unfamiliar with the subject, the second edition can be a valuable and readable introduction to a history rich in interest and significance.

---

Abrahamson, James L. *America Arms for a New Century: The Making of a Great Military Power*. New York: The Free Press, 1981. 253pp. \$17.95

James L. Abrahamson is a professor of history at the US Military Academy. In this account of the transformation of the American military establishment in the forty years prior to World War I, Professor Abrahamson has provided us with a fine work of synthesis and analysis. He has also produced a compelling reinterpretation of how the military reform movement in America achieved so many significant successes before 1917, yet collapsed completely after the First World War.

Much of the ground which Professor Abrahamson covers will be familiar to those acquainted with American military history. Briefly summarized, the US Army and Navy in the late 19th century suffered from a multitude of problems brought on by rapid technical and scientific change combined with neglect by successive administrations in Washington. Among these problems were bureaucratic anarchy and managerial incompetence, increasing technological obsolescence of weapon systems and equipment, and glacially slow promotion within both branches of the armed services. Such shortcomings were symptomatic of a concept of the armed forces' mission more suited to an 18th-century frontier

agrarian economy than to an expanding, economically powerful industrial nation on the verge of the 20th century.

Historians generally agree that the military reform movement began in the 1880s when farsighted individuals such as Maj. Gen. Emory Upton and Adm. Stephen B. Luce forced change upon an often reluctant, tradition-bound military establishment. Upton and Luce, together with their successors, men such as Gens. Leonard Wood and John J. Pershing, and Adms. Alfred Thayer Mahan, Bradley A. Fiske, and William S. Sims, are credited with fundamentally reshaping the American military establishment prior to World War I. Not only did they successfully urge modernization of the armed forces' weapon systems, from battleships to field artillery, but they also achieved major administrative and organizational triumphs. The latter included the creation of an Army general staff, the General Board of the Navy, the Joint Army-Navy Board, and the Office of the Chief of Naval Operations. The effect of these changes was to improve procurement practices, modernize tactics, and, for the first time, provide central direction and strategic planning for the nation's armed forces.

Where historians have differed is over the motives and objectives of the reformers. Recent scholars have concluded that the military reformers were

motivated by a combination of opportunism and a desire to create a military establishment to rival those of the major European powers. They rationalized their objectives by supporting an expansive, neo-imperialist foreign policy as necessary for the survival of the United States. It is this view of the reform movement that Professor Abrahamson disputes.

He argues that the key to understanding the military reform movement lies in the national impulse to reform, known as progressivism, that swept America in the two decades prior to World War I. Abrahamson builds a convincing case that political, social, and military progressives alike shared a common set of assumptions and objectives. They all sought in their different spheres of activity to reshape American institutions to meet the demands of the modern industrial state which America had become in the generation since the Civil War. Progressive reformers found the means for promoting these changes in the new methods of scientific management, central administration, rational planning, professional education, technical expertise, and a willingness to experiment.

Abrahamson has found that the specific objectives that guided the military reform movement were largely a reflection of the painful lessons learned in the Spanish-American War of 1898. With regard to this war Abrahamson makes a telling point ignored by previous historians of the military reform movement: the armed services emerged from the conflict as divided as the public over the issues of overseas expansion and colonialism. What drew military reformers together was the conviction that a modern state must have military forces structured so as to support national policy. Furthermore, the experiences of

the war confirmed the reformers' belief that modern forces, adequately prepared and wisely employed, could act as a deterrent to potential adversaries. Strange as it may seem now, these were startlingly new, even radical, propositions at the time.

The military reformers, guided by these premises and motivated by the principles of progressivism, stressed "efficiency, organization, planning, expertise, and social engineering" in their revamping of the military establishment. In so doing, Abrahamson concludes, the reformers succeeded in giving the American armed forces in the crucial decades before World War I "a modern character, adapting both the army and navy to the changed nature of warfare and America's new world position."

Why then did the military reform movement collapse after 1917? Abrahamson offers the explanation that the postwar reformers exceeded the limits of the possible in pressing such goals as universal military training and a "navy second to none" upon an unwilling Congress. An outstanding characteristic of the reformers' pre-1917 agenda, writes Abrahamson, was its "modest" goals. In the years before World War I, military reformers couched their program in terms of defense of the Western Hemisphere, terms that found ready acceptance among most Americans. Only when the military reformers stepped beyond these boundaries, as they did in 1919, and again in 1921 in an attempt to justify large peacetime defense expenditures, did they forfeit the confidence and support of the public and Congress. They had forgotten that the need to achieve consensus is fundamental to the success of any national reform effort.

There may have been more subtle causes for the collapse of progressive

military reform, just as there are for the progressive movement as a whole. Nevertheless Professor Abrahamson has drawn a lesson well worth pondering from the earlier successes of the military reformers: "Their modest, adaptive approach, which gave full attention to both the international and domestic dimensions of military policy, established a pattern suitable for emulation by subsequent generations of military leaders."

MICHAEL K. DOYLE  
ARINC Research Corporation

Polmar, Norman. *The American Submarine*. Annapolis, Md.: Nautical & Aviation Publishing, 1981. 172pp. \$17.95

On a cold February night in 1864, the first successful submarine attack in history was carried out by the surfaced Confederate submarine *Hunley* against the Union steam sloop *Housatonic*. Inside the 40-foot boiler-plate craft, a crew of 8 men manually turned a crank to propel the submarine towards its target. *Hunley's* "torpedo," mounted on a spar extending in front of the boat, rammed the *Housatonic* and the ensuing explosion sank both the attacker and the attacked. From that night forward, naval commanders knew that the enemy could attack not only from the four points of the compass, but below the surface of the sea as well.

*The American Submarine*, by Norman Polmar, provides an authoritative overview of the history, current use, and future potential of sub-surface craft. Polmar, one of America's most highly regarded defense writers, has written a profusely illustrated book which follows the growth of submarines from David Bushnell's one-man *Turtle* of 1776 to the mammoth *Ohio* of the 1980s with her crew of over 130.

One of the more interesting chapters in the book describes the contributions of

the "silent service" during World War II. As one measure of the success of US submarine warfare in the Pacific, the author notes that American submarines sank 55 percent of the total merchant tonnage and 29 percent of all warships lost by the Japanese during the war. This record was amassed by a force that comprised only 1.6 percent of the entire US Navy.

Despite the unquestionable success of submarines during the war, the fact remained that they were not true submarines, but were really specialized surface craft, submersibles, that could dip beneath the waves for what we now consider to be short periods of time. This remained true until 17 January 1955, when the age of the true submarine began with the USS *Nautilus'* report that she was "Underway on nuclear power." The *Nautilus* was the result of a program which began in the closing days of World War II. The head of the super-secret "Manhattan Project" formed a committee to investigate postwar uses for atomic energy, with nuclear ship propulsion emerging as the principal recommendation. Polmar traces the development of the "atom-powered" submarine from drawing board to building ways.

The development of the nuclear submarine was in itself a remarkable achievement, but of equal significance was the marriage of the nuclear-powered submarine and the long-range ballistic missile.

The author salutes Chief of Naval Operations Adm. Arleigh Burke and Special Projects Office head Vadm. William Raborn for leadership in developing the Polaris missile and the fleet ballistic missile submarine to carry it. In just over 5 years, the Polaris concept went from blue-prints to blue-water in what is still regarded as one of the most successful weapons procurement pro-