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## Iron Coffins

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military and civilian administrative structure. This was a problem which the Americans refrained from tackling." Further, he expresses the view that the main reasons for the failure of the U.S. policy in Vietnam during the period 1965-1968 were an obscurity of aim, a failure of strategy, and a lack of control. From these, all other errors stemmed. Sir Robert's solution is simple and direct, requiring clear-cut objectives, constructive aims, and patience—both political and military in nature.

Sir Robert's most biting commentary is that the United States has failed to understand the nature of the conflict in which it is engaged. He describes it as "a People's Revolutionary War" rather than an insurgency or a civil war. The basic misconception, he says, is that the war can be won militarily. He describes U.S. aims in Vietnam as vague; this in turn makes it difficult to provide direction to its efforts.

Sir Robert suggests that the only way out is a long-haul, low-cost war to which the impatient, aggressive Americans will have difficulty accommodating. Yet the costs must be brought into acceptable limits. It is not enough to win the war; it must be won in an acceptable way.

It is my view that now, more than at any time in the past decade, it is vital for the United States to keep its pledge and stand by South Vietnam. There is no exit and the new President does not really have much choice as far as policy is concerned. He does, however, have the opportunity to change the strategy. The American aim should be revised to read: "To establish, at a cost acceptable to the United States, South Vietnam as a free, united and independent country which is politically stable and economically expanding." This does not require a defeat of the North but only that its design to take over the South

should be frustrated. To achieve this aim does, however, leave a long-haul, low-cost strategy as the only option.

This indictment of the American strategy in Vietnam must not be taken lightly; it is extremely perceptive and offers insights into what must be understood and controlled in the American character. This could easily be the most valuable "Lesson Learned" from the United States experience in Vietnam. Sir Robert has written a significant work which is must reading for anyone associated with Defense/State activities.

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Werner, Herbert A., *Iron Coffins*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969. 329 p.

*Iron Coffins* is a personal account of the war years by one of the very few German U-boat commanders to serve in the submarine force throughout World War II and survive the experience. Herbert A. Werner was a member of the class of 1939 at the Naval Academy in Annapolis. Following a brief period in command of a small minesweeper, he underwent submarine training and reported to his first submarine, U-557, in mid-1941. From that time until the end of the European war in May 1945, he served continuously in submarines, commanding both U-415 and U-953.

It may still be too early, even after more than 25 years, to view the Battle of the Atlantic with detachment and impartiality. It may even be that we should not view it with detachment, for the questions of morality and the rightness and wrongness of causes were inextricably involved, and there is little virtue in moral neutrality. Yet we are at least far enough from the event to recognize that good men fought well, even on behalf of bad causes. In writing the story of the Battle of the Atlantic as it appeared to the men who served in

the U-boats, Werner has fulfilled a deeply felt obligation to tell their story.

Of all the battles of World War II, the Battle of the Atlantic was probably the most crucial. If Germany had won that battle, Britain could not have survived, and we would live in a very different world today. But Germany lost the battle, despite the dedicated and, toward the end, desperate efforts of the U-boats. In the process the U-boats underwent an attrition that must be among the highest ever suffered by a fighting force anywhere. Werner states that 842 U-boats saw battle duty, and 781 were lost, which means that 93 percent of the operational U-boat force was lost. Yet, to the end, their crews continued to take the boats to sea.

The dramatic and literary interest of *Iron Coffins* lies in the stark and vivid tale of life in the U-boats, as the wolves become the harried, hunted, and finally desperate prey. Few works of non-fiction can equal the imagery of Werner's description of passage across the Bay of Biscay under relentless attack from both surface and air forces. Besides the dramatic merits of the book, however, there are lessons worth the careful attention of the professional

officer. Implicit in the book is the notion that if Germany had placed a higher and earlier priority on the under-sea fleet she could have won the Atlantic war. More explicit is Werner's indictment of operational policies: "the great tragedy of the U-boat force was not merely that so many good men perished; it was also that so many of our lives were squandered on inadequate equipment and by the unconscionable policies of U-boat Headquarters."

In his excellent preface to the book, Ned Beach states that the story "can be fully appreciated only by another submariner of the war, but anyone can get the message." That may well be, and this destroyer officer would just as soon get no closer to the receiving end of a depth charge attack than the restrained intensity of Werner's descriptions. Even when your sympathies remain with the surface forces doggedly trying to get their precious commodities through to beleaguered Britain, by the time you have finished *Iron Coffins* it is impossible not to have at least a grudging admiration for the performance of the enemy below.

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