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Dov S. Zakheim

John Lehman

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LEHMAN'S MARITIME TRIUMPH

Dov S. Zakheim

Oceans Ventured: Winning the Cold War at Sea, by John Lehman. New York: W. W. Norton, 2018. 368 pages. \$27.95.

John Lehman probably was the most powerful Secretary of the Navy since Theodore Roosevelt effectively filled that position. Lehman entered office determined to reinvigorate the Navy, whose force level had declined precipitously in the aftermath of the Vietnam War, and whose assigned mission in a war with Europe seemed to consist primarily of establishing sea control to protect convoys to Europe. An A-6 navigator, Lehman brought to his position both real operational experience and more than a passing acquaintance with many of the Navy's most talented strategists and operators. Both stood him in good stead as he reshaped the Navy into a larger, more powerful force that during the height of the Cold War conducted radically innovative exercises that traumatized Soviet military leaders. *Oceans Ventured* is not the first book by this warrior-analyst-leader. But it is, in many ways, the most revealing, because it both draws on recently unclassified material and provides insights into Lehman's implementation of his bold, innovative, risky, and highly controversial Maritime Strategy.

Lehman came to lead the Navy at a time when—not for the first time—its force levels were declining owing to opposition from within the Office of the Secretary of Defense. As he recounts, while the Navy had thrived under Franklin Roosevelt, who had spent eight years in the Navy Department, it did far less well under Harry S. Truman and Louis A. Johnson, the latter named Secretary of Defense after Truman's victory in the 1948 presidential election.

When the Korean War broke out in June 1950, little over a year after Johnson took office, the Navy was still in a position to support American operations in Korea after the North overran all the air bases in the South. The Marine Corps's audacious landing at Inchon in September 1950 virtually coincided with Truman's firing of Johnson, who (in addition to having an unpleasant personality) was seen as responsible for America's initial lack of preparedness at the outset of the war.

Dov S. Zakheim is a senior fellow at CNA. He was an Under Secretary of Defense from 2001 to 2004 and a Deputy Under Secretary of Defense from 1985 to 1987.

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Lehman spends a considerable portion of his book providing an overview of the Navy's vicissitudes during the three decades before he took office. He points out that the Navy's fortunes improved markedly once Truman recognized his

strategic blunder and reversed himself on defense spending. In fact, Truman tripled the defense budget, which now included construction of a new aircraft carrier that Johnson had canceled. Lehman then outlines the increasing demands on the Navy as it not only supported land operations on the Korean Peninsula but also played a major role in maritime exercises conducted by the new North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He goes into considerable detail regarding those exercises, as well as the service's new strategic role when in 1961 the Kennedy administration adopted the Single Integrated Operational Plan (SIOP), which assigned specific targets to both Navy carrier air wings and the Air Force.

Lehman rightly observes that the SIOP severely constrained the Navy's operational flexibility, which constituted its fundamental competitive advantage over the Soviets. As he puts it, "The targeting constraints bit into the fleets' basic needs for movement, cover, and deception," which later became the essential ingredients of Lehman's Maritime Strategy. He applauds the Reagan administration's decision gradually to off-load nuclear weapons from the carriers, which afforded the fleet additional operational flexibility.

Lehman also discusses the role of civilian analysts in fleet operations. He notes that after World War II analysts began to go to sea to act as "unbiased [*sic*] fact-based analysts and judges of the effectiveness of weapons, electronics, equipment, tactics, and overall operations." The teams of evaluators eventually evolved into a major component of CNA, which continues to send its analysts to accompany major naval exercises.

Lehman's review of the Navy's strategic and operational role prior to his taking office sets the stage for his extended discussion of its exercises under his leadership. Before finally describing its operations during his term, however, he devotes considerable space to the policies of the Carter administration, which he vigorously opposed. Jimmy Carter's attitude to the Navy—despite his own background as a naval officer—was to some extent a throwback to the Louis Johnson years. Carter highlighted his 1976 presidential campaign with a promise to cancel production of the Navy's newest nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. It was only after the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that Carter reluctantly accepted the need for another carrier. Nevertheless, the Secretary of Defense's Office of Program Analysis and Evaluation (PA&E) not only opposed the construction of additional carriers but proposed reducing the carrier force to eight.

It was not merely the Carter administration's plan to reduce the fleet that angered Lehman, as well as many of his closest Navy colleagues, such as Captain James A. "Ace" Lyons Jr.; it was more that the Navy had been assigned a defensive role in any conflict with the Soviets, with its primary mission being to escort re-supplies to land forces fighting along what was then termed the "inner German

border." Lehman and his colleagues chafed at what they viewed as a reluctance to unleash the Navy's power directly against the Soviets, thereby both complicating and undermining any strategic plans Moscow might have developed for a thrust across the heart of Europe. Lehman points out that by 1980, with the Royal Navy's last conventional aircraft carrier retired and the U.S. Navy's carrier force committed to the Pacific, Indian Ocean, and Mediterranean theaters, "no more than one lone flattop was expected to be available to try to deter Admiral Gorshkov's swollen Northern Fleet" (pp. 72–73). For Lehman and close associates such as Lyons, this was an intolerable situation.

Lehman notes that despite the Carter administration's biases, the stage was being set for a significant change in the Navy's role—if only a friendly administration would come into office. The Navy's SEA PLAN 2000, together with the results of wargames conducted at Newport under the leadership of Francis J. "Bing" West, the War College's dean of research, provided the conceptual backbone of what soon became the Maritime Strategy.

In contrast to the policies of the Carter administration and thanks to Lehman's influence, Ronald Reagan already had committed himself to a major expansion of the Navy well before he was elected president. Once in office, he fully supported Lehman's drive to increase Navy force levels from about five hundred to six hundred ships and to increase the number of aircraft carriers from twelve to fifteen. He also sought to increase the submarine force by as many as twenty-five boats, with the goal of achieving a total of one hundred attack submarines.

Secretary Lehman fought long and hard to make a six-hundred-ship, fifteen-carrier Navy a key priority of the Reagan administration, often in the face of opposition from analysts in PA&E. I was a witness to the power of Lehman's influence at a 1983 National Security Council meeting that President Reagan chaired and that the Secretary of the Navy did not even attend. At one point in the meeting, President Reagan interrupted Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick—who rarely was interrupted by anyone—and asked the assembled group: "I understand that there is opposition to the 600 ship, 15 carrier Navy. Well, I support it. Does anyone disagree?" No one dared to speak up. Lehman got the president to settle the matter without even being present in the room.

Lehman pushed for an accelerated shipbuilding program that even included funding for two aircraft carriers in a single budget year. Moreover, working alongside Chief of Naval Operations Admiral Thomas B. Hayward, he pressed for the acquisition of fourth-generation F-18 aircraft as well as the most-advanced missile and electronic systems, which would constitute a vastly more capable deterrent against any aggressive moves by the Soviets, whether at sea or on land.

Lehman's ultimate objective was not modernization; rather, it was to develop and then implement an ambitious and radically different strategy that would be

buttressed by innovative operations and aggressive tactics for which the Soviets were completely unprepared. What became known as the Maritime Strategy called for operations just outside the Soviet Union's territorial waters, initially in the far North Atlantic and then in the Pacific.

Precisely because he was an analyst himself, Lehman, along with the Navy military leadership, exploited the Navy's network of intellectual resources to refine the Maritime Strategy and its underlying operations and tactics, so that each succeeding at-sea exercise conducted was more sophisticated than its predecessor. The Navy drew on the findings and evaluations of top operations analysts from CNA, who continued to accompany battle units as they exercised at sea. The Navy also incorporated the conclusions of key studies completed by students at the War College's Strategic Studies Group and at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey. Finally, it examined elements of the Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College's annual Global wargame.

Turning to innovative leaders such as the caustic but tactically brilliant Vice Admiral Ace Lyons, whom he chose to command the Second Fleet, and rising stars such as Rear Admirals Henry "Hank" Mustin and Jerry O. Tuttle, Captain Fox Fallon, and Commander Philip A. Dur, Lehman authorized exercises that masked the location of large multicarrier task forces until they were within shooting range of Leningrad and beyond. On virtually every occasion, Lyons's stealthy techniques caught the Soviets flat-footed.

The first such exercise, dubbed OCEAN VENTURE, from which Lehman's book draws its title, was a key part of a series of NATO exercises that began in July 1981. Lyons led his Navy and NATO colleagues in planning and developing OCEAN VENTURE '81 into a massive exercise involving fifteen nations, over a thousand aircraft, 250 ships, two aircraft carriers, and the British jump jet carrier *Invincible*. As Lehman notes, "It was the largest such exercise in anyone's memory" (p. 77).

The exercise practiced offensive and sea-control operations well north of the Greenland-Iceland-United Kingdom gap. It also posed major challenges for the operators; freezing temperatures and high winds and sea states in the North Atlantic proved to be extremely hazardous. Nevertheless, the exercise continued, with Lyons masking his entire striking fleet through electronic means, exploitation of the foul weather, and the use of decoys, until it was within striking distance of Murmansk.

The large-scale exercises in the Atlantic, which included allied forces, were paralleled by similar exercises in the Pacific, which employed the same techniques to threaten the Soviet Pacific bases. Moscow's military leaders soon realized that any attempt by their forces to cross the inner German border could well result in the destruction of key Soviet facilities, notably those that housed their

second-strike nuclear deterrent—namely, the strategic ballistic-missile submarine forces of the Northern and Pacific Fleets.

The Maritime Strategy often was dismissed, not only by the PA&E analysts but by influential officials such as Robert W. Komer, who devoted an entire volume to challenging both its utility and its rationale. At the time, there was no real way to rebut these critiques, as any attempt to do so would result in the leaking of highly classified information. It thus took three decades before the critical importance of Lehman's innovations finally could see the light of day. It is no exaggeration to assert, as Lehman does, that the Navy played a vital role in bringing the Cold War to a successful conclusion in America's favor.

Lehman's book does more than provide a valuable record of the Navy's prominent role in winning the Cold War for the West. In his relatively brief epilogue, Lehman makes a powerful argument for turning once again to maritime forces to provide America with a key advantage over near-peer potential adversaries. Russia's increasing assertiveness in Europe, whether through the conduct of hybrid warfare or through cyber aggression, has frightened not only longtime NATO allies such as Norway and Denmark, plus many of Moscow's former constituent republics—notably the Baltic States and Poland in the north and Romania and Bulgaria in the south—but nonaligned Sweden and Finland as well. At the same time, China's bald efforts to militarize the South China Sea threaten to upset long-standing power balances in Southeast Asia.

The Navy has declined to its lowest force levels since the days before World War II. Although the quality of its individual warships is unmatched, there are limits to what a fleet of fewer than 285 ships can do when faced with demands that range from the western Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Arabian, Mediterranean, Black, Baltic, and North Seas. Add to these challenges the emerging importance of the Arctic owing to climate changes that have melted what previously were frozen barriers to transit routes, and it is obvious that—once again, as in Lehman's day—there is an urgent need for a new naval force buildup. The current defense program calls for funding a 355-ship fleet, including a dozen aircraft carriers. Whether that goal can be realized is an open question, given the ongoing expense of both naval air modernization—the ultimate cost of the F-35 has yet to be determined—and the new fleet of strategic ballistic-missile submarines.

Lehman asserts that “the history of deterrence is a lesson that schoolboys know: credible threats are respected, while weakness invites unwelcome outcomes. America's naval decline since the end of the Cold War has invited the challenges we face today.” He ominously notes, with more than a bit of hyperbole, that “the allied naval disarmament treaties of the 1920s and '30s emboldened Germany, Japan, and their allies and became a contributing cause of World War II. America's postwar naval disarmament . . . facilitated the Korean War. The

post-Vietnam U.S. naval disarmament had the same result, encouraging Soviet aggression and expansion globally. Like a law of nature, this fact holds true irrespective of time and place: a decline in sea power invites disaster” (p. 276).

Lehman argues that, at least with respect to naval forces, America can achieve a rapid buildup that would mirror the one over which he presided during the 1980s. Moreover, “the lesson of this book,” he concludes, “is that we must restore the capability of our naval forces not because we might have to go to war with North Korea, Russia, Iran, or some other adversary, but because we must prevent having to go to war at all” (p. 284).

The Trump administration is committed to a major budgetary increase for defense, including for maritime forces—but only for the next two years. Moreover, the projected increases will result at best in a Navy of 355 ships, far short of the force levels required to maintain American naval power sufficient not merely to confront the three nations Lehman lists but also to maintain a credible presence elsewhere on the world’s oceans. If Lehman’s advice is to be taken seriously, defense budgets must be captive no longer to any sort of sequester, while the president and his administration must recognize the contribution of America’s long-standing allies, even as he also makes it clear that Russia, China, and any other country with aggressive intent at last will be met by more than mere rhetorical opposition. Anything less will result in outcomes that America may well regret bitterly for years to come.