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Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World

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BOOK REVIEWS

WARS, HISTORICAL AND AMBIGUOUS

Seapower States: Maritime Culture, Continental Empires and the Conflict That Made the Modern World, by Andrew Lambert. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2018. 424 pages. \$30.

The idea of *seapower* serves as the foundational argument for Andrew Lambert's *Seapower States*. Lambert does employ the more traditional phrase *sea power*—but chiefly as a foil to his ideas of seapower. Although some might claim that the difference between seapower and sea power is merely an academic abstraction, or an unnecessarily confusing construct, the author crafts a convincing argument.

Lambert asserts that sea power is a Mahanian formulation of hard power. Any state can have the attributes of sea power—it only requires a powerful navy. This list of sea powers includes Rome, the United States, and contemporary China. What separates a state pursuing sea power from one demonstrating seapower is the relationship of the sea to the state's existence. Sea powers do not need the sea to survive as great powers. The military and economic advantages of sea power are nice to have, but the state does not live and die by the sea. Such states often are continental land powers first, and their wealth, size, and influence leads to naval—sea power—ambitions.

Conversely, seapower reflects weakness. Without international commerce and the moneys it generates, the seapower state would cease to be a great power. Various geographic, economic, political, and cultural attributes allow seapowers to punch well above their weight. Lambert categorizes Athens, Carthage, Venice, the Dutch Republic, and Great Britain as seapowers. This list is more restrictive than some; the author deliberately excludes Portugal and Spain, labeling them overseas empires, since their colonial possessions were a “useful adjunct to their core concerns,” while Lambert labels others, including Rhodes and Genoa, “sea states,” because they are “too small to aspire to great power status” (p. 204).

To understand the nature of seapower states, Lambert asks readers to look beyond hard power and strategy to the very nature of society. Seapowers tend toward more-inclusive political systems, usually oligarchic republics; absolute rule is an anathema. Economically, they depend on maritime commerce not only for wealth but for the very resources needed to survive—often these states are not agriculturally self-sufficient.

Commerce brings cultural exchange. Art and architecture reflect the sea and its significance to society. Yet although Lambert tries hard to focus on the cultural aspects of seapower, he has trouble defining culture. Too often, his cultural arguments drift into economic and hard-power factors, for these allowed seapowers to exert disproportionate influence on the international system. Seapowers have sought great-power status, but Lambert claims they have been limited in the courses of action available to them. They must play to their naval and economic strengths while avoiding land campaigns that are beyond their ability to sustain. They have neither the population to field large armies nor economies capable of sustaining large armies and navies simultaneously. Instead, seapower states prove most effective at fighting protracted naval wars for limited objectives, building wealth, and avoiding overextension.

Although they possess great wealth and powerful navies, seapowers are fragile—continental entanglements can spell disaster. In the case of the Dutch, landward threats proved inescapable, and Venice was weakened by terrestrial distractions. Britain's continental commitment in World War I “shattered the British seapower state” (p. 302). Lambert claims that Britain was both the greatest and the last of these states. Because of the twentieth-century world wars, Britain passed the mantle of global maritime dominance not to a seapower but to a sea power—the United States.

It is important to grasp what this book is—and more particularly what it is not. We should not consider this definitive history, for there is much with which to quibble. Lambert's evidence and interpretations are deliberately selective.

Although some may consider this a weakness, understanding this mitigates the issue and allows the reader to focus on Lambert's compelling interpretations. The book's primary value becomes its argument about what the sea means to different states, by highlighting competing worldviews. Lambert claims that seapower states are inclusive and dynamic, while the great powers that have destroyed them often were “terrified” by what seapowers stood for.

Although Lambert writes from his own (British) perspective and reflects particularly on what he considers to have been the last and greatest of the seapower states, his argument has noteworthy contemporary application. He forces the reader to ponder the sea's significance to contemporary China and the United States. Lambert claims both are continental powers. The sea is not integral for either in the manner that it was for seapower states; rather, the ocean becomes a frontier to be defended and exploited. The argument has substantial implications when understanding national objectives, strategy, and long-term sustainability. Lambert's argument certainly should spur controversy, for the author builds, through a series of carefully constructed arguments and case studies, a thesis that questions the nature of the international maritime environment of the future.

KEVIN D. MCCRANIE



War in 140 Characters: How Social Media Is Reshaping Conflict in the Twenty-First Century, by David Patrikarakos. New York: Basic Books, 2017. 320 pages. \$17.99.

Social media has deployed far-reaching global communication abilities,