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A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare

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A New Conception of War: John Boyd, the U.S. Marines, and Maneuver Warfare, by Ian T. Brown. Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Univ. Press, 2018. 311 pages. Available for download at usmcu.edu/. Free.

There is more folklore associated with John Boyd than perhaps any other military thinker of the last fifty years. Maverick fighter pilot, iconoclast, conceiver of the now-ubiquitous “OODA loop,” Boyd never fit neatly in anyone’s mold. Knife fighting his way through the Pentagon bureaucracy, Boyd reshaped a generation of U.S. fighter aircraft, influenced key acquisition programs, and changed the way American military officers thought about combat—amassing along the way a distinguished list of senior enemies. His influence, while profound, usually was indirect and always difficult to characterize.

It is ironic that Boyd had his most sweeping impact outside both aviation and the Air Force that he served for thirty years. Maneuver warfare—the defining characteristic of Marine Corps combat doctrine for three decades—was in no small part a product of Boyd’s thought. While Boyd has been the subject of several books, in *A New Conception of War* Marine major Ian Brown provides the first complete account of Boyd and the Marine Corps. In the process, he crafts a case study in military institutional change that deserves wide attention.

Brown asserts that the road from Boyd’s ideas to maneuver warfare doctrine required four essential and distinct elements: need, idea, internal advocacy, and leadership. First, the Marine Corps of the 1970s and ’80s recognized that it needed a new institutional approach. The end of the Vietnam War left the Corps

struggling to find its way in a world newly refocused on great-power competition with the Soviet Union. Advances in military technology had rendered familiar Marine Corps operational approaches questionable. Not interested in being relegated to constabulary operations outside the main fight, the Corps was looking for a way to leverage what it believed were its distinctive strengths in support of high-end combat.

The second essential element was Boyd and his ideas. Brown, like all writers who have sought to capture the essence of Boyd’s thinking, struggles to capture the shifting intellectual journey that marked Boyd’s life. Boyd’s seminal work was a briefing entitled “Patterns of Conflict.” Delivered over the course of hours, each presentation expressed Boyd’s thinking at that moment. By never putting his ideas fully into print, Boyd could (and routinely did) deflect criticism by remaining the sole arbiter of his meaning. Nonetheless, Brown manages to capture the sweep of Boyd’s ideas. Readers familiar with the common simplistic summary of Boyd’s observation, orientation, decision, and action (OODA) loop model will be intrigued by the full scope of this idea and how Boyd extended its implications to the breadth of human conflict.

However profound, Boyd’s ideas would not have had influence without advocacy within the Marine Corps. Brown excels in describing the small group of influencers who became the key internal advocates for Boyd. Each occupied a sweet spot in the Corps hierarchy: senior enough to be credible, but not so senior that he could not critique the service; experienced enough to see the need for change; knowledgeable and confident in his own thinking; and positioned at an overlap between the Corps and sources of outside

ideas. One key influencer, Colonel Michael Wyly, came to occupy key positions in the Marine Corps educational establishment, where Boyd's ideas crystallized into maneuver warfare doctrine.

The Corps's internal advocates eventually found senior leadership willing to push the service in a new direction, most importantly General Al Gray. In 1989, Commandant Gray issued Fleet Marine Force Manual 1. Entitled simply *Warfighting*, FMFM-1 made maneuver warfare the key defining characteristic of the Corps's operational approach; it has remained so for thirty years. It is significant to note, however, that the senior leaders who adopted maneuver warfare did not become converts as senior officers; rather, they had become interested in these ideas years before, ascended the ranks, then moved to implement their vision—an observation consistent with other studies of institutional reform.

The story of how a rogue Air Force fighter pilot shaped the core ideas of the Marine Corps is a case study in how militaries learn and change. Many similar case studies oversimplify this messy and imperfect process, creating a clean narrative of progressive heroes and resistant villains. Brown avoids this trap—a success all the more impressive given the strong opinions that still surround Boyd. In so doing, Brown has produced a book that will take its place alongside Rosen's *Winning the Next War* and Bergerson's *The Army Gets an Air Force* as a foundational study of military institutional change.

A New Conception of War skillfully brings an extraordinary, historic episode to a new generation of Marine Corps leaders and, in a larger context, to any leader who is contemplating leading change.

DALE C. RIELAGE



The Mayaguez Crisis, Mission Command, and Civil-Military Relations, by Christopher J. Lamb. Washington, DC: Joint History Office, Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2018. 330 pages. Available for download at jcs.mil/. Free.

Khmer Rouge forces boarded and took control of the U.S.-registered merchant vessel *Mayaguez* on 12 May 1975, then released the crew three days later. Coming just two weeks after the fall of Saigon, the move was considered a brazen challenge to the U.S. commitment in the region. Ultimately the American response resulted in the release of the crew and their ship, at the cost of forty-one American servicemen killed and dozens wounded. Christopher J. Lamb, a distinguished research fellow at National Defense University, has written a thorough and evenhanded history of the crisis, demonstrating a command of existing literature and original sources.

In the immediate wake of the invasion and collapse of South Vietnam, the overwhelming motivation among decision makers was to demonstrate American resolve. President Ford and Henry Kissinger—the latter wearing both the national security advisor (NSA) and Secretary of State hats—were fully in charge, but Secretary of Defense James Schlesinger, Deputy NSA Brent Scowcroft, White House chief of staff Donald Rumsfeld, and other key actors all agreed with Ford and Kissinger that forceful action was necessary to reassure allies, to show Beijing that Washington would remain engaged in the region, and above all to deter Pyongyang. North Korean aggression was a real concern, as was a repeat of the 1968 *Pueblo* incident or the lesser-known EC-121