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Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World

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Chester Nimitz would be difficult to write. In spite of that, there is a quite valuable biography of Nimitz written nearly fifty years ago by Naval Academy professor E. B. “Ned” Potter (*Nimitz*, first published in 1976 and still in print). Yet, as Nimitz’s former staff officer noted, a combination of the character of Nimitz’s job and the enigmatic nature of the man himself kept much of his personal life in the shadows.

That is why this new book, *Nimitz at Ease*, from retired Navy captain Michael Lilly, is so useful. Lilly is a descendant of H. Alexander Walker (known as Sandy) and his wife, Una, who owned two houses on Oahu during the years Nimitz was Commander in Chief, Pacific Fleet, and who were great friends of Nimitz. Moreover, Una kept a daily diary in which she chronicled the social events of the Walker family and their friend. Captain Lilly came into possession of the diary, as well as scores of private letters and family photographs, and he has assembled them into an account of Nimitz’s private life during the admiral’s time as Pacific Fleet commander.

What emerges is a portrait of Nimitz as a man who was entirely comfortable in his own skin. He enjoyed not only playing horseshoes and practicing pistol shooting (well chronicled elsewhere) but also playing lawn tennis, roughhousing with the Walker grandchildren, swimming long distances in the ocean, and playing poker in shorts and an aloha shirt after dinner on the Walkers’ lanai. Una’s diary proves just how much time Nimitz spent at their beach home, called Muliwai, where he could escape from the frenzy of his Pacific Fleet headquarters in the “Cement Pot” on Makalapa Hill.

This is not a full biography by any means, and it does not supplant

Potter’s book as a life history, but it does illuminate an aspect of Admiral Chester Nimitz that heretofore has been hidden.

CRAIG L. SYMONDS



Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World, by H. R. McMaster. New York: HarperCollins, 2020. 560 pages. \$35.

Lieutenant General H. R. McMaster, USA (Ret.), whose *Dereliction of Duty* is a foundational case study of American civil-military relations during the Vietnam War, has produced another superb exposition of civil-military relations. This time, McMaster himself emerges as the case study, even if unintentionally, in *Battlegrounds: The Fight to Defend the Free World*. Ostensibly a memoir of McMaster’s time as national security advisor from 2017 to 2018, *Battlegrounds* offers so much more. McMaster’s achievement is all the more commendable (yet easily overlooked) as he presents a timely model of military professionalism and civic virtue in the context of a sobering analysis of the grave threats currently facing the so-called free world.

Combining easy prose and an approachable style with the experience and intellect of a decorated general with a PhD in history, McMaster has written a book as accessible to the lay reader as it is valuable to the national-security professional. McMaster even exposes the secret to his success; when asked why he “was spending more time packing books than clothes” for his work as national security advisor, McMaster responded that he “intended to draw on history to help frame contemporary challenges to national security” (p. 426).

Taking *Battlegrounds* as a case in point, McMaster weaves history together with political and international-relations theory, ethnography, psychology, and even a healthy dose of classical wisdom for good measure. The result is a comprehensive survey of U.S. foreign policy and national-security strategy.

McMaster foregrounds the discussion with his observation that “strategic narcissism” has plagued America’s approach to global affairs since the end of the Cold War. American policy makers paradoxically have demonstrated either too much optimism or too much pessimism about America’s role in the world; in either case, they have acted as if America is the axis on which the world rotates. In this, McMaster presents his own paradox; he contends that the United States has exhibited strategic narcissism in its behavior, but throughout the book he portrays the United States as uniquely responsible for the fate of the free world. Still, if strategic narcissism is the problem, then McMaster’s solution is “strategic empathy,” which requires studying and understanding other states, societies, and individuals, including their motivations, goals, and worldviews.

To underscore his thesis, McMaster structures *Battlegrounds* around the concept of strategic empathy by dividing the book into six parts, each of which examines a state or region (e.g., Russia, China, the Middle East). Each part contains two chapters, the first of which sets the strategic context for the challenges springing from each state or region owing to factors such as history, culture, and ideology, while the second presents McMaster’s summary of the dangers flowing therefrom, along with his discerning recommendations for tackling them. McMaster devotes

a seventh substantive part to what he identifies as “arenas” that the United States urgently must address, including cyber, space, climate, and education. The stakes are high indeed.

Owing to their own specific perceptions, interests, and intentions, states such as China, Russia, and Iran are pursuing aggressive policies that threaten the free world. For instance, Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party defend their actions as part of a “great rejuvenation” that will see China enjoy the power and prestige it once did, during its imperial period. Vladimir Putin’s Russia, in the aftermath of the Cold War and facing troubling domestic trends, has settled on a policy oriented more toward weakening rivals than to restoring its own standing. Iran will continue to destabilize the Middle East—whether there is a nuclear deal or not—owing to its entrenched revolutionary theocracy. The commonality among these states is that the ideologies of their ruling regimes are all implacably hostile to principles and institutions cherished in the free world, such as open society, representative government, and individual liberty.

America’s adversaries also are exploiting the transformations of the information age—which optimists had hoped would help spread freedom and democracy—to strengthen their repressive regimes at home and undermine constitutional governments abroad. For example, Russia has “turned the social network ecosystem invented in the United States against the American people, their democratic system, and their common identity” (p. 46). So, aside from the need for strategic empathy as it pertains to understanding others, McMaster intimates that the United States could benefit equally from self-reflection.

After all, McMaster's battlegrounds are not only overseas but also here, in the United States in a civil society currently too partisan and polarized to rally effectively against the forces massed against the free world.

The Roman author Tacitus wrote that one of the foremost functions of history is to ensure that no worthy deed or person goes unmentioned—or unstudied. He also believed that we honor those deeds and individuals best through emulation. Perhaps *Battlegrounds* is most instructive in the example McMaster sets as a soldier, scholar, and citizen in a republic. Even when he vigorously disagreed with the policies of administrations of both political parties, McMaster nevertheless discharged his duties to the best of his abilities. He has devoted his life to study and service for the good of his country. If more citizens and servicemembers follow his example, we yet may turn the tide.

JEFFREY P. ROGG



Sons of the Waves: The Common Seaman in the Heroic Age of Sail, by Stephen Taylor. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2020. 416 pages. \$30.

Are sea stories true? Landsmen never really know. Without direct experience of life at sea it is impossible to separate fact from fiction. Sailors have their own vocabulary and they forge strong bonds with each other. Sailors tell sea stories to bridge the gap between their world and the terrestrial world, but when they do so they are unbound by the constraints of commonly shared experiences that limit imaginations when two landsmen speak. At sea there are dragons, sailors say, and landsmen

have no way of disproving their claims; sailors exploit that uncertainty.

For all these reasons, naval historians always have treated sailors' memoirs with a great deal of caution. All memoirs require careful handling because the events being described often took place decades earlier, and the pressures of publishing provide incentives for exaggeration and sensationalism—and sailors hardly need encouragement on that front. Yet Stephen Taylor bases his new book almost entirely on sailors' memoirs, and argues that they provide a better window into the world of British sailors in the age of sail than historians have admitted previously. For Taylor, sea stories are mostly true, and he has done enough double-checking of the facts available to show that we should take seriously what they say about life at sea.

The central character in Taylor's book is Jack Tar. Most naval historians treat Jack Tar as a caricature, but Taylor argues that the popular perception of the common British seaman is not far off base. Taylor develops his character by narrating the experiences of dozens of sailors from 1740 through 1840. Jack circumnavigates the globe with Anson and endures deadly slaving voyages; he fights in major fleet battles and small-boat actions; and he returns home to earn his reputation for profligacy in port.

Throughout, Taylor maintains a healthy skepticism of his sources, but that does not stop him from repeating some of the more implausible stories, such as that of William Swallow. Taylor relishes such capers, but he also examined the available archival records to verify what could be verified in Swallow's story. *Sons of the Waves* is a compendium of sea stories, woven together in Taylor's