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Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present

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BOOK REVIEWS

MANY WAYS TO SKIN A CAT—SOME BETTER THAN OTHERS

Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present, ed. Paul Kennedy and Evan Wilson. New York: Routledge, 2020. 278 pages. \$128.

As the United States sails further into the twenty-first century, strategic discussions have swung toward a realization that any view theorizing the “end of history” is both ahistorical and a poor representation of the world around us. In the new book *Navies in Multipolar Worlds: From the Age of Sail to the Present*, a group of esteemed historians borrows the idea of multipolarity from the realms of political science and international relations to examine the historical role that naval forces have played in the interaction between great and rising powers. The results are both enlightening and strategically valuable as the United States approaches what the last National Defense Strategy called the return of great-power competition.

The effort is led by legendary historian Paul M. Kennedy, in partnership with Evan Wilson, a rising scholar in the field of maritime history. In his preface, Kennedy steams unswervingly into the question of relevance, directly addressing questions posed by former Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John M. Richardson and illuminating the historical reality that the affairs of great powers

and rising powers and their interactions with each other on the world oceans are not merely a contemporary challenge, instead forming a major part of maritime history across centuries. Wilson, in his introduction, picks up on Kennedy’s explanation of multipolarity as a concept in international-relations scholarship but deftly pivots once he has borrowed the framing, writing that “this book is not concerned with resolving the debate about the nature of the international system” (p. i). Instead, as they do best, the historians here offer their chapters—ranging in temporal coverage from the mid-eighteenth to the early twenty-first century—to illustrate and illuminate the competing dynamics of the concept rather than systematizing the present or predicting the future.

Across twelve chapters, and an afterword that really serves as a thirteenth, *Navies in Multipolar Worlds* ranges widely. Alan James examines the French navy of Louis XIV and French sea power in its interactions with the British and Dutch. Brian Chao carries the French example into the nineteenth century and offers an unexpected and valuable

look at what it means to be the world's second-most-powerful navy. Roger Knight and Evan Wilson examine the Royal Navy toward the end of the Napoleonic period, with Wilson's deep dive into British postwar redeployment and retrenchment offering a particularly relevant bit of history to a U.S. Navy that itself has experienced a shrinking of capacity since the end of the Cold War. The era after the First World War, well known for its great-power maneuvering, is covered by four authors, each from a distinct perspective. With elements of the British experience examined by John Maurer and G. H. Bennett, the Japanese discussed by S. C. M. Paine, and the Italians covered by Fabio De Ninno, the reader gains enormous insight into the truism popularized by James N. Mattis: the adversary always gets a vote.

It is not until the ninth chapter that the United States and the U.S. Navy make their appearance, as Kennedy charts the interaction between the Americans and the great powers as war clouds form and then the Second World War crashes across Europe and the Pacific. The rise of American maritime hegemony by 1945 was neither a foregone conclusion nor necessarily a surprise, as Kennedy deftly illustrates.

The post-Cold War era is discussed skillfully by Tim Choi in his examination of contemporary Danish naval developments in pursuit of Arctic power and by Geoffrey Till in his wide-ranging look at the multipolarity of the early twenty-first century. Finally, the chapter by Chinese scholar Hu Bo is a fascinating examination of how the People's Republic of China views maritime power and the history of great-power competition. While the whole book deserves a wide readership, this final chapter

provides direct contact with today's multipolarity and global competition and is enormously valuable to any strategist.

Kennedy's long list of insightful histories and Wilson's numerous books, including several edited volumes, speak to the pair's ability to bring deeply researched history together with contemporary relevance and to package it in a well-organized and readable collection. Edited volumes—particularly those, like this one, that include both well-known scholars and rising stars—are notoriously hard to edit in a way that holds together both thematically and stylistically. Yet the editors of *Navies in Multipolar Worlds* have navigated these shoals adroitly to produce an enormously valuable collection.

This reviewer has one major complaint, although it is not something that the editors necessarily could control: the price of the book. At \$128 a copy, it is almost guaranteed that the officers and strategists who should be reading these chapters will not. For a book that shares so many insights and offers today's readers so much valuable context and knowledge, it is a shame that it likely will find its way onto the shelves of a handful of research libraries and go no further.

Political scientists and international-relations scholars often tell historians that the work the latter do in the archives is the foundation of the former's efforts at social science. *Navies in Multipolar Worlds* flips that script, not only offering chapters from historians who have conducted the deep research into their topics necessary to relate clearly the complications of the past, but also offering key arguments and fascinating insights about what multipolarity is and how nations interact on the world's oceans. This

interaction has happened for centuries, and understanding that history will offer today's strategists, officers, and decision makers the background they need to think deeply about the great-power interactions of the twenty-first century.

BENJAMIN ARMSTRONG



Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads, by David Rundell. London: Bloomsbury, 2020. 336 pages. \$27.

The active pursuit of knowledge through experience, academic study, and deep critical thought may define a lifelong learner; however, the ability to convey that same information to readers effectively is no less than a gift. In David Rundell's *Vision or Mirage: Saudi Arabia at the Crossroads*, we find its result: a treasure that is no less than a sentinel-level work on the historic evolution of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

It is easy, even natural, for this reviewer and other readers to be critical even to the point of cynicism when it comes to books on geopolitics and history. Before reading this work, a colleague (who is also a war college graduate) and I listened to a virtual presentation by an opening commentator and then one by the author himself. Both of us exclaimed, "This guy is an apologist of the current leadership, without question!" Had the book not been ordered already, I fear I may have skipped it, given the opinion I developed that afternoon. What a mistake that would have been, and how terribly wrong I was in my assessment! Rundell is no practitioner of apologetics; he is a gifted storyteller and writer, and his insights into the dynamics of the Middle East and Saudi

Arabia's role in it are comprehensive. He misses none of the subtle nuances that elude some of the best writers. For any real student of the subject, this book is a treasure to be returned to again and again. If one ever has observed a master of any craft or profession—surgery, for instance—one understands and knows the joy of learning from someone who is comfortable in his element and has progressed through practice, experience, failure, and reattempts in the pursuit of excellence. This certainly is the case with Rundell's lucid explanation of Saudi Arabia's journey.

Rundell has spent his life preparing for or serving within the diplomatic sphere, beginning with his education in economics at Colgate University and MPhil from Oxford in Middle Eastern studies. Of his more than thirty years of diplomatic experience, half was spent in Saudi Arabia itself and the remainder in countries in the region or having influence in the same. If academic preparation and experience are not enough to convince, consider critical thinking as the third leg in certifying Rundell as a subject-matter expert on the kingdom. Finally, he is a gifted writer, interweaving facts, opinion, and external influences into a thesis that sticks. His ability to convey the complex in a near-layman's approach helps the reader form enlightened conclusions rather than being merely informed through expert opinion.

Readers will enjoy the format by which the writer progresses. The book is divided into five near-equal parts, each with three to five chapters that are easily digestible and leave the consumer hungry and expectant. The parts give general views on subjects such as nation creation, succession management,