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Reflections on Reading

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REFLECTIONS ON READING

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The purpose of the Chief of Naval Operations Professional Reading Program (CNO-PRP) is to encourage sailors of all ranks and specialties to use professional reading as a tool for personal and professional growth. This is the fifty-second article in the Reflections on Reading series for the *Naval War College Review*, and in virtually every one of those articles we have highlighted specific books or addressed larger issues related to professional development in the maritime services. In this installment, we will suggest that you do something you may find difficult or unappealing: *reading something you don't want to read!* We are including books, magazines, newspapers, and Internet websites within the scope of this discussion. Let me explain what we are suggesting.

The United Nations estimates that 2.2 million books are published globally each year, and 1,279 daily newspapers and 7,357 magazines are published regularly in the United States. As for electronic forms of information distribution, there are 1.7 billion websites available worldwide. Information is available at rates and through means that were unimaginable only fifty years ago. By some measures, this abundance of information creates a higher level of knowledge among readers, which can be a good thing.

A more critical view, however, suggests that the overwhelming volume of data creates an information overload that forces readers to pick and choose which portions of the “data buffet” they will consume. Research on reading habits has shown that readers tend to seek out sources of information that reinforce their preconceived notions, an effect known as *confirmation bias*: accepting only evidence that confirms what someone already believes. Tom Nichols’s widely read—and hotly debated—book *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* dedicates a full chapter to his notion that “unlimited information is making us dumber.”

How should we improve the “informational diet” we consume each day? Nichols notes: “For nearly thirty years, I’ve opened almost every class I teach

at the college and graduate level by telling my students that no matter what else they do, they should consume a balanced daily diet of news. I tell them to follow the major newspapers; to watch at least two networks; [and] to subscribe (online or otherwise) to at least one journal with which they consistently disagree.” The CNO-PRP does not recommend any specific newspapers, magazines, or broadcast outlets, but its managers maintain that readers should choose information sources that span a wide spectrum of opinions.

The current version of the CNO-PRP features seventy-four books, many of which deal with issues related to warfare, leadership, and strategy, and I suspect that many sailors naturally will seek books from within these genres. However, in the opening paragraphs we challenged you to seek out *other* books: those that address topics with which you are less comfortable. The list includes books about sexual, racial, and ethnological subjects that, for many sailors, fall outside their “mainstream.” All readers should feel empowered to read such books to understand the issues better and ensure they are equipped to share the privilege of maritime service with crewmates and teammates who subscribe to practices and beliefs that may be at odds with those of the majority.

Navy policy states as follows: “No matter your background, lifestyle, gender, sexuality, or religious beliefs, there is a place for you in the Navy. Here, all are welcome and have a part to play. We believe that when a diverse group of individuals come together to do a job, they can do it better because of their differences.” And the Secretary of Defense defines the overarching intent of the Department of Defense as follows: “The Department will lead with our values, building diversity, equity, and inclusion into all aspects of our work and in everything we do.” In the final analysis, the Navy’s focus is on deterring wars if possible and winning wars when necessary. A diverse and inclusive naval force will execute the Navy’s mission, which is “to recruit, train, equip, and organize to deliver combat-ready forces to win conflicts and wars while maintaining security and deterrence through sustained forward presence. We are an integrated Naval force that will provide maritime dominance for the Nation.”

The motto of the CNO-PRP is Read Well to Lead Well. As part of reading well, all of us should read (in hard copy, digital, and other forms) materials that *challenge* our assumptions instead of simply and blindly confirming them. You could summarize this notion as “read to learn, not to confirm”!

JOHN E. JACKSON

