

2022

Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay

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Recommended Citation

Holmes, James R. and Symonds, Craig L. (2022) "Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 75: No. 4, Article 13.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss4/13>

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Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay, by Craig L. Symonds. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2022. 496 pages. \$29.95.

From master storyteller Craig Symonds (professor emeritus, U.S. Naval Academy) comes *Nimitz at War: Command Leadership from Pearl Harbor to Tokyo Bay*. Professor Symonds refrains from attempting to offer a complete chronicle of the life of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, commander in chief of the U.S. Pacific Fleet (CINCPAC) from 1941 to 1945; E. B. Potter performed that task ably decades ago (*Nimitz*, Naval Institute Press, 1977). Instead, Symonds uses the life of Nimitz to deliver a master class in theater-strategic leadership at sea.

Since teaching is his goal, Symonds confines himself chiefly to what Admiral Nimitz thought, felt, and did during his tenure as CINCPAC. On occasion the author augments his narrative with brief reminiscences from Nimitz's prewar life and career to illuminate the admiral's approach to strategic leadership. For instance, the author attributes Nimitz's stoicism in the face of battlefield reverses in large part to his maternal grandfather, who raised him after the premature death of his father. He observes approvingly that "one piece of advice his grandfather gave him was never to worry about things that were beyond his control." That homespun Texas stoic philosophy, says Symonds, "became a central element of Nimitz's personality and was a core element of his equanimity" (p. 39). This is important. After all, as the greats of strategy proclaim, wartime command is as much about temperament as about intellectual artistry. *Stoicism*—in this context, a commander's ability to

take setbacks in stride rather than be consumed by them—helped Nimitz keep his bearings throughout the Pacific War.

Plutarch, the grand master of teaching through biography, would deem this a fitting approach to examining the life of Nimitz. Symonds excels at producing chronologically or geographically "narrowcast" studies such as this one, because they allow him ample space for the personal touches he clearly relishes applying. By contrast, a sprawling work such as his *World War II at Sea: A Global History* (Oxford Univ. Press, 2018), whose self-appointed task was to relate the story of history's greatest naval war within a single volume, leaves scant room for enlightening or amusing details about the principals; intimacy must be dispensed with to keep the page count from careering out of control.

And yet the intimate approach enriches history, making insights more accessible and vivid. Throughout the book, Symonds makes extensive use of Nimitz's correspondence with his wife, Catherine, to good effect. He also does spin the occasional humorous aside. For example, he notes that Nimitz was snakebit with regard to air travel around Pacific islands such as Midway and Guadalcanal; his planes had a proclivity for breaking down and stranding him. On one occasion the admiral and visiting Secretary of the Navy Frank Knox set out from Pearl Harbor for Midway, only to have engine trouble force their seaplane to return to Hawaii—whereupon it began to sink! Deadpan Symonds, "Knox, who had an ample posterior, had difficulty making it and had to be shoved through" the narrow escape hatch. "The individual assigned that duty was not identified" (p. 202).

The theme coursing through *Nimitz at War* is what CINCPAC called “the principle of calculated risk,” articulated in his instructions to task-force commanders Frank Jack Fletcher and Raymond A. Spruance on the eve of the June 1942 Battle of Midway (pp. 110–11). By this he meant that U.S. naval commanders—who were woefully short on aircraft carriers in particular—should refrain from striking at the superior Imperial Japanese Navy carrier striking force, or Kidō Butai, unless they believed they stood to inflict worse punishment on Kidō Butai than the Japanese stood to inflict on them. Then he left Fletcher and Spruance to put the principle into action—and it worked. Abjuring micromanagement set the pattern for his handling of theater command for the rest of the war.

Calm reckoning of costs and rewards, risks, and dangers helped Nimitz navigate the dark eighteen months following December 7. It also helped him discern when to attempt the transition from a strategically defensive posture vis-à-vis Japan—a posture adopted out of necessity when the Pacific Fleet lay in ruins—to the strategic offensive.

Nimitz’s temperament also fitted him for a productive if fraught relationship with Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Ernest J. King. Admiral King incessantly pushed CINCPAC to go on offense, long before Nimitz believed that U.S. forces had the capability or capacity to do so. Symonds’s account of their interactions evokes Theodore Roosevelt’s maxim (in his 1908 message to Congress) that “wise radicalism and wise conservatism go hand in hand, one bent on progress, the other bent on seeing that no change is made unless in the right direction.” King was the wise radical, Nimitz the

wise conservative whose prudence tempered the CNO’s thirst for offense.

By 1943, the arrival of new-construction warships in the Pacific helped the two reconcile their perspectives on strategy—and to launch the fleet on an offensive it never would relinquish. Through productive discord they charted a judicious way forward. This account of their shared history is must reading.

JAMES R. HOLMES



Information Technology and Military Power, by Jon R. Lindsay. Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 2020. 306 pages. \$42.95.

Most textbooks designed for mid-to-senior-level undergraduate courses in information systems (IS) and information technology (IT) are designed foundationally around the use of IT in organizations—specifically nonmilitary organizations. In contrast, *Information Technology and Military Power* highlights the use of IT in the military while also introducing and discussing theories of information practice, processes, and technologies within an explicitly military context.

Jon Lindsay is a Navy veteran and a graduate of Stanford University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Information Technology and Military Power* is his first book-length publication. It begins with acknowledgments, and next it offers a list of abbreviations that will prove essential. Then it engages readers in the book’s core content—which is laden with eighty-five of those abbreviations and acronyms over the course of the book. Perusing the list of abbreviations in advance would be most helpful to a