

Naval War College Review

Volume 55
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 9

2002

Review Essay—Ideas and Persecution: The Easy Way to Explain Decision Making

Stephen N. Whiting

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Whiting, Stephen N. (2002) "Review Essay—Ideas and Persecution: The Easy Way to Explain Decision Making," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 55 : No. 2 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol55/iss2/9>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

**IDEAS AND PERSECUTION:
THE EASY WAY TO EXPLAIN DECISION MAKING**

Stephen N. Whiting

Tate, James P. *The Army and Its Air Corps: Army Policy toward Aviation, 1919–1941*. Maxwell Air Force Base, Ala.: Air Univ. Press, 1998. 217pp. \$14

Hammond, Grant T. *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2001. 234pp. \$29.95

When an idea is slow to be adopted by an organization, the supporters of that idea frequently look for nefarious reasons for the organization's reticence. One explanation often adduced is that the organization is persecuting the purveyor of the new idea. Both books reviewed here—James P. Tate's *The Army and Its Air Corps: Army Policy toward Aviation, 1919–1941* and Grant T. Hammond's *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security*—ultimately deal with this interaction of ideas and persecution. Tate asks whether the Army's seemingly slow (in the airmen's opinion) development of airpower before World War II was caused by institutional hostility toward airmen; Hammond investigates whether the Air Force's reluctance to accept John Boyd's ideas was caused by institutional rejection of a brilliant iconoclast. While both authors also deal with other issues, their explorations of how ideas are adopted by a military service represent an illuminating contrast between the two works.

Tate received his bachelor's degree from the Air Force Academy and went on to Indiana University, where his doctoral dissertation was "The Army and Its Air Corps." After serving as an aviator in the Vietnam War, Tate taught at the Air

Force Academy. With his Academy education and his twenty-year service in the Air Force, Tate might have been expected to accept uncritically the popular stereotype of how the Army mistreated its Air Corps.

Instead, Tate's thesis is that "the development of the Army Air Corps was a history of struggle and compromise between realists and visionaries." My only criticism of Tate's book is that he does not rigorously pursue this theme throughout. The real unifying theme of *The Army and Its Air Corps* is that fiscal constraints, concerns with intraservice balance, and struggles with

Lieutenant Colonel Whiting is an Air Force space operations officer currently assigned as a student at the School of Advanced Airpower Studies, Maxwell Air Force Base. He received his bachelor's degree in aeronautical engineering from the U.S. Air Force Academy, completed both the Air Command and Staff College and Squadron Officer School in residence, and earned master's degrees from Air University and George Washington University. His previous assignments in operations and staff positions had an emphasis in missile warning, space surveillance, and satellite command and control.

Naval War College Review, Spring 2002, Vol. LV, No. 2

the Navy about roles and missions were more responsible for the development of the Air Corps than was persecution of the airmen by the Army.

Tracing the interwar history of the Air Corps, Tate debunks many current beliefs regarding the interwar Army. He approaches during those decades Army aviation policy during these decades by examining, in historical sequence, the major policy milestones of the era. To explain why the interwar Air Corps developed as it did, he reviews Army budgets, policy statements, operating regulations, congressional bills, presidential statements, special boards and commissions, Navy policies, and accounts of relevant events (e.g., the sinking of the *Ostfriesland* and the court-martial of Brigadier General William “Billy” Mitchell). Tate displays remarkable thoroughness and a deft touch for turning otherwise dry sources into a lively and coherent history of the Air Corps.

In so doing, Tate reveals two important points that run counter to the modern Air Force’s traditional view that the early Air Corps was unreasonably treated by the Army. First, he cogently builds the case that Air Corps development was most significantly shaped not by persecution but by tight budgets and interdepartmental trade-offs with the Navy. Second, he challenges the more basic myth that the Army was a poor steward of aviation, arguing that the service was a competent and evenhanded guardian of aviation prior to World War II.

In explaining the Air Corps’ interwar progress, Tate displays a nuanced understanding of organizational decision making (along the lines of Graham T. Allison’s organizational processes model in his *Essence of Decision*) by focusing on how Army decisions were the result of competing organizational preferences.¹ Avoiding the easy explanation that persecution kept airpower from achieving its full potential, Tate examines Army budgets, showing that aviation was funded at an increasing percentage of overall spending throughout the interwar period. The problem for the Army in general, and the Air Corps in particular, was the austere budget environment of the 1920s and early 1930s, caused by Republican penny-pinching and the Great Depression. Throughout this period, however, aviation was the most expensive branch in the Army, and airmen were chronically unsatisfied. Tate reports, “In an era of severely limited budgets, the Air Corps, with its highly expensive machines to buy and maintain, never thought it was getting enough. The other branches . . . always thought it was getting too much.”

While limited budgets created tension for the airmen within the Army, austerity also exacerbated their ongoing conflict with the Navy. According to Tate, “the idea that a limited budget produces controversy applied especially to the relationship of the Army’s Air Corps with the Navy.” As early as 1920, Billy Mitchell was crusading against the Navy for the coastal defense mission, with the goal of getting funds for Navy ships transferred to Army aviation. Although the battle

over coastal defense would be waged for twenty years, the Air Corps ultimately found itself in a position (the MacArthur-Pratt Agreement notwithstanding) whereby the Army could not support the Air Corps against the Navy; it could not afford the forces necessary for the coastal defense mission, nor could it accept the resulting imbalance between aviation and its other branches. As Tate explains, “Army leaders sometimes seemed to take the Navy’s side in the coastal defense controversy. [A] sudden decision in favor of the Air Corps over the Navy as the ‘far-flung’ line of defense would greatly increase the influence of radical airmen and other aviation interests, and not just on the issue of coastal defense.”

Perhaps even more surprisingly, Tate believes that the Army was a reasonable steward of airpower. He shows that, while Mitchell’s disciples “began to acquire something of a persecution complex . . . because the federal government, and . . . Army bureaucracy, would not capitulate to [them],” the Army’s concern for developing a balanced force limited its ability to embrace the airmen’s vision. Tate points out instances when the Army supported specific needs of its airmen, and others when it opposed them in the name of balance.

To explain the Army’s insistence on not overfunding the Air Corps at the expense of other branches, Tate notes that “no development of the air arm at the expense of other arms had been the plea of Army leaders since the end of the First World War. In the twenties, when Army strength was being reduced in the name of economy, . . . and during the Great Depression, . . . the opinion of Army leaders was that the air arm should, with due consideration of its special needs, accept its share of reducing.” To outflank this attitude, the Air Corps urged its allies in Congress to pass the 1926 Air Corps Act, which set into law a five-year program of Air Corps growth. Ultimately, this legislation forced defunding of other branches to the point that President Herbert Hoover told the Army and the Navy, “There seems considerable tendency to further expand the air components of the two services and perhaps regard them as exempt from [budget reductions]. . . . [I]f our air strength is out of proportion to our other forces, this . . . is not an efficient way of organizing our defense.” While the airmen always wanted additional funding to fulfill their airpower visions, the Army as an institution had to struggle to integrate airpower with its other branches.

Dr. Grant Hammond wrote *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security* while serving as director of the Center for Strategy and Technology at the Air War College, an institution he has long served as a distinguished professor. Hammond thus brings a remarkably informed civilian perspective to the subject of Colonel John Boyd, U.S. Air Force.² To one’s surprise, however, rather than using this perspective to offer distinctive insights into how the Air Force processes new ideas, Hammond appears to fall into the trap of viewing the military

as a unitary actor (Allison's rational actor model). While this vantage point conveniently allows sweeping generalizations regarding the Air Force, it fails to take account of the complexities of organizational decision making as revealed in Tate's book. It also prompts Hammond to adopt the easiest of explanations for why Boyd's ideas were not quickly accepted—persecution by the Air Force.

The thesis of *The Mind of War* is that Boyd has had a tremendous—if somewhat belated—impact on national security, and that he developed a new theory of war eclipsing in relevance those of the classical theorists. Hammond's book "deals mainly with Boyd's ideas. . . . It is less a validated record of Boyd than it is an intellectual biography." Further, Hammond calls his book "an explanatory presentation, not a critical analysis." Hammond is a vociferous advocate of Boyd's ideas and does not attempt to hold Boyd's theory up to critical light. Regrettably, he goes beyond advocacy, seeming to invent instances of persecution that purportedly explain Boyd's conflict with the defense bureaucracy.

For sources, Hammond relies on interviews with Boyd himself and people within his circle, Boyd's briefings, books on Pentagon politics, and newspaper and magazine articles. His use of organizational information, such as Air Force and Department of Defense documents, is limited.

Hammond's journey through Boyd's life and ideas presents two central claims. First, he contends that, despite Boyd's tremendous impact on the Air Force and national defense, the Air Force persecuted Boyd and actively sought to discredit and derail him. Second, through an explanation of Boyd's theory as contained in his magnum opus, "A Discourse on Winning and Losing," *The Mind of War* extols Boyd's ideas as forming a revolutionary new theory of conflict.

Hammond identifies numerous ways in which Boyd materially contributed to national defense; he also recounts the ways in which the Air Force persecuted Boyd at each turn. It is hard to tell from the narrative, however, whether this belief in Boyd's persecution is attributable to Boyd or to Hammond. Since many of the alleged instances of persecution occurred after Boyd's death, the best explanation seems to be that Hammond has embellished the pattern of persecution to simplify the complexities of organizational decision making and to enrich Boyd's legend.

Nevertheless, one of the valuable services Hammond performs in *The Mind of War* is to document of Boyd's remarkable influence on the Air Force and U.S. military thinking. Beginning with Boyd's seminal work on air tactics, Hammond provides insights into Boyd's "energy-maneuverability" theory, his impact on the development of the F-15 and F-16, his leadership within the military reform movement, and his advocacy of maneuver warfare (his greatest contribution, according to Hammond). Hammond builds a convincing case that

Boyd was a towering figure who had a significant personal effect on American military theory and policy.

The litany of Boyd's persecution, according to Hammond, is long. Hammond begins with Boyd's "Aerial Attack Study" and attempts to show how he developed it "against the wishes" of the Air Force. Hammond then claims that Boyd's work on the energy-maneuverability theory made him "persona non grata." Regarding the design of the F-15 and F-16, Boyd's work was "anathema to . . . the Air Force"—an interesting use of a religious term, implying that Boyd was a heretic. Further, Hammond claims that Boyd and the military reformers were "a huge threat to the American military." Finally, Hammond even senses persecution in the way the Air Force honored Boyd at his funeral (with the Air Force Band and honor guard, a general officer, and a planned flyby) and in how it memorialized Boyd at the Weapons School and at the Air University.

In his explanations, Hammond seems to have adopted a pattern of thinking that he attributes to Boyd. According to Hammond, "Boyd's approach was to look for interesting connections and then pursue the questions that fit the answers." It appears Hammond determined the answer to be, "Boyd's theories were not readily adopted by the Air Force." He then settled upon a question that explained his answer: "What happens when a brilliant strategist and theorist is persecuted by the Air Force?" This logic is flawed and ignores the multifaceted decision-making processes of the defense establishment.

In the end, Hammond's explanation is a strawman, not supported by the internal evidence. For example, while Hammond laments that mavericks receive "few rewards, virtually no ribbons and medals, and few thank-yous," he ignores the evidence in his own book that Boyd in fact won many awards (including the Systems Command Scientific Achievement Award), achieved the rank of colonel, received the Legion of Merit for his work on energy-maneuverability, had fourteen medals and ribbons on his chest at retirement, and was personally retired by the Secretary of the Air Force.³ Surely this was not the career of one who had been oppressed.

Hammond then presents Boyd's theory. Working in the Air Force's oral tradition, Boyd never saw fit to compile his theory in book form. Having taken the opportunity to explore the theory with Boyd himself, Hammond has preserved his ideas. While that certainly is a commendable and valuable service, it is, however, especially disappointing that he has failed in this volume to analyze Boyd's work critically, because no other author is likely to be so knowledgeable about the man, his ideas, and the Air Force in which he served.

Boyd's theory, as presented in "A Discourse on Winning and Losing," is astonishingly esoteric. Working through it is a difficult task, but Hammond handles the explanation gracefully. According to Hammond, Boyd's purpose was "to

make manifest the nature of moral, mental, and physical conflict; to discern a pattern for successful operations; to help generalize tactics and strategy; to find a basis for grand strategy.” By tracing their roots back to Kurt Gödel, Werner Heisenberg, and the second law of thermodynamics, Hammond demonstrates how Boyd’s ideas connected with the realms of philosophy, mathematics, and physics. Hammond then examines sources of Boyd’s ideas in the theories of Sun Tzu, Henri Jomini, Carl von Clausewitz, and others. Ultimately, Hammond explains how Boyd’s notion of the observe-orient-decide-act, or “OODA,” loop progressed into the conceptual spiral of insight-imagination-initiative—the theory’s central motif. While Hammond’s explanation of Boyd’s theory is well done, a critical analysis would have illuminated its strengths and weaknesses and thereby better served Hammond’s ultimate purpose—to promote consideration of Boyd’s ideas.

For example, Boyd’s belief that the F-15 would be too expensive to be bought in sufficient numbers to achieve air superiority led him to advocate the F-16 as a daytime “visual” fighter without radar. Based on testing of the YF-16, Boyd concluded that “the ability to shift or transition from one maneuver to another more rapidly than an adversary enables one to win in air-to-air combat.” Expanding this concept, Boyd postulated that “the ability to operate at a faster tempo or rhythm than an adversary enables one to fold the adversary back inside himself so that he can neither appreciate nor keep up with what is going on, . . . thereby collaps[ing] his ability to carry on.” Although this causal chain sounds valid in the abstract, Hammond did not point out two fundamental errors: that the F-15 was indeed procured in sufficient numbers to guarantee air superiority, and that the ability to win in modern air combat is less a function of maneuverability than of technology, such as radar and beyond-visual-range missiles, and aircrew training. What effect these (and other) errors in assumptions would have on Boyd’s overall theory has yet to be determined.

While Tate and Hammond deal with different topics, both provide case studies in how organizations process, assess, and implement ideas. In Tate’s case, an objective study of the Air Corps invalidates many of our notions regarding the interwar period. Instead of finding an Army determined to persecute its airmen, Tate reveals an organization trying to cope with tight budgets and interservice rivalry in its effort to develop airpower properly while balancing its other needs. Hammond, on the other hand, diminishes authorial objectivity through uncritical advocacy of his subject. Hammond’s work must be approached with caution; it cannot stand alone.

No one can deny, of course, that institutions do sometimes react negatively to individuals advocating dramatic change; persecution is a historical fact. Yet it

frequently is an oversimplification to put black hats and white hats on historical figures when the eventual outcome has become apparent and the contemporary complexities have been forgotten. How Billy Mitchell or Hyman Rickover should be understood are cases in point.

The danger of the persecution hypothesis is that it obviates the need to examine closely the actions of the protagonists, especially the supposedly persecuted hero. Tate, for example, dares to ask whether Army Air Corps leaders could have achieved more by an “all-arms” approach to service problems, for example, than they did with the airmen’s “me first” attitudes and tactics. Indeed, he suggests that the early airmen’s agitation for independence overlooked entirely the prospectively high costs of organizational overhead and the unavoidable turbulence of establishing a new service—both of which might have crippled American aviation development in those lean budgetary times.

Likewise, despite the cautions of noted historians, we humans tend to invoke analogies from the past to understand the present.⁴ Such reasoning often is erroneous, because history never truly repeats itself; the reasoning is made more dangerous when a simplistic or mistaken view of the past forms the basis for conclusions about the present. One contemporary example may be found within the Air Force’s space community. Over the past fifteen years, many space leaders portrayed airpower’s place in the interwar era as analogous to space power’s position today. Similarly, these leaders have compared space power’s development within the Air Force to that of airpower within the Army. While the analogy does offer similarities, it also invokes the mind frame of persecution and a failure to examine critically the actions of the space community itself in terms of its external environment. Tate’s *The Army and Its Air Corps* shows conclusively how dangerous such analogizing can be, while Hammond’s presentation of John Boyd’s life misses an opportunity to study and understand the complexity of real-life organizations, a constant of modern history.

NOTES

1. Graham T. Allison, *Essence of Decision: Explaining the Cuban Missile Crisis* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1971).
2. In 1960, then Captain John Boyd wrote the “Aerial Attack Study,” which was to become Air Force doctrine, first in the United States, then for air forces around the world.
3. Franklin C. Spinney, “Genghis John (Boyd),” U.S. Naval Institute *Proceedings*, July 1997, p. 44.
4. Se Yuen Foong Khong, *Analogies at War* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1992), and Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1988).