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# Origins of the Maritime Strategy: American Naval Strategy in the First Postwar Decade. Contributions to Naval History, No. 1

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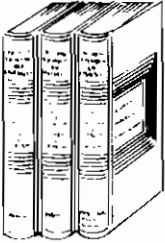
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# PROFESSIONAL READING



“The main strategic aim of the ‘maritime alliance’ must be to keep Russia in the landlocked position that has always handicapped her. This means commanding the sea-lanes of the world, notably the chokepoints through which not only Russian but most major shipping must pass.”

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John B. Hattendorf

Palmer, Michael A. *Origins of the Maritime Strategy: American Naval Strategy in the First Postwar Decade*. Contributions to Naval History . . . No. 1. Washington: Naval Historical Center, 1988. 129pp. \$7.50

**M**ichael Palmer’s short study is an important and welcome addition to the literature, not only for the subject it examines, but as the first work in what one hopes will be an important, continuing series of studies in naval history.

The title suggests the immediacy of current events in the 1987-88 period when Palmer wrote the study; as time passes on and those issues fade, the subtitle will provide the more valuable guide to his subject. It is an important and relevant point that there are similarities in thought between strategic thinking in the 1980s and in the 1946-54 period. It is important to understand that the ideas expressed in the 1980s reflected many earlier ideas about the importance of Nato Europe in American naval planning, the role of peacetime forward operations for protection of American national interests, and the need for a balanced fleet prepared for a full range of contingencies.

However, one could well argue that these ideas were not merely the extended origins of the Maritime Strategy announced by Secretary Lehman and Admiral Watkins, but ideas that reflected the thought of classical naval theorists and the earlier practice of Great Britain as a global naval power.

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Be that as it may, one can congratulate the Naval Historical Center for producing a work that is equally attractive to the academic scholar and to current policymakers and planners.

Palmer's study is an important authoritative, official history based on recently declassified documents. It is one of only a handful of serious scholarly contributions to understanding American naval issues in the postwar period.

Tracing the development of U.S. naval thinking in the late 1940s as it adapted to American involvement in Nato, Palmer demonstrates Admiral Forrest Sherman's key role from 1946-47 as DCNO for operations and as CNO from 1949-51. Sherman's strategic concept stressed the central role of the carrier task force as the key element for its missions in antisubmarine warfare, amphibious operations and air strikes ashore. It provided balance and direction to the various naval forces, missions and priorities. While not trying to seek wide public support, Sherman did try to formulate a strategic concept that was independent of the war plans. He saw, too, the need to improve strategic thought within the navy, and supported the role of the Naval War College for this purpose.

In particular, Sherman was instrumental in placing the Nato command structure in the Mediterranean on a firm footing and he emphasized the importance of that sea in naval strategic thinking. Upon Sherman's death in 1951, the navy had a coherent strategic concept and began to think seriously about operations on both flanks of Nato's central front. By 1953, using Sherman's theory as a basis, naval strategists moved on to consider seriously possible wartime operations in the Norwegian and Barents Sea areas.

By 1957, following changes of leadership and emphasis, Sherman's strategic plan had become so diffuse that it was no longer recognizable. Under Eisenhower, the navy was unable to continue to develop a concept separate from those created by the Joint Staff. The navy's separate concept was the victim of the 1953 DoD Reorganization Act which weakened the influence of the individual services. At the same time, new technological advances in Sosis, the development of the SSBN, and a changing strategic situation in Asia, as well as Eisenhower's emphasis on nuclear weapons as an economical alternative to conventional forces altered the basis for Sherman's concept.

Palmer's comparison of Sherman's strategy of 1946-54 with that developed in the 1970s is a very useful one. One cannot help but see the striking similarities and note both the strength of Sherman's concepts and the reasons for their disappearance. Palmer clearly makes his point in emphasizing Sherman's thoughts on forward peacetime operations: a balanced fleet prepared for global nuclear war during routine presence deployments, serving as both a visible deterrent to potential enemies and a clear commitment to allies. Pounding home his parallel to the 1980s, Palmer even goes on to stress Sherman's interest in the Norwegian Sea and to publish as an appendix Sherman's briefing of his ideas to President Truman.

The similarities are indeed striking, making it particularly worthwhile reading for modern naval strategists. Palmer ends his history on a note of sadness for "a strategy lost." Yet this is misleading. A strategy by definition is not something permanent. It should change as situations change and it should be lost when it no longer can achieve the desired goals with the means available. More interestingly, one might want to ask whether the Goldwater-Nichols Act of 1986 will not be more important than the 1953 Act in its effect on separate service thinking about strategy. Its fundamental thrust seems to be to stop independent service thinking such as Sherman's and that done in the 1980s. If that is the case, it would be useful to examine positive historical examples of the navy's cooperative effort in joint planning, showing how each service's roles and missions can be effectively used jointly in a national strategy. It would be sad for the navy, if the situation has changed, merely to pine away in sorrow for a bye-gone method. There is more to be learned from a close examination of this example.

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### Captain Wayne Hughes, Jr., U.S. Navy (Retired)

Keegan, John. *The Price of Admiralty: The Evolution of Naval Warfare*. New York: Viking Penguin, 1989. 292pp. \$21.95

**T**he *Price of Admiralty*, John Keegan's latest endeavor, is a maritime companion to his best-selling, *The Face of Battle*. Paralleling his earlier book, *The Price of Admiralty* fulfills the promise of the subtitle, *The Evolution of Naval Warfare*, with a series of four, chapter-long vignettes that promise the essence of naval combat: the evolution of tactics and technology; the strategic setting; the personalities of the commanders; and the naval societies of the fighting men they lead. This talented author has vividly depicted the battle scenes and has included a few charts and illustrations.

Keegan chose for his subjects, Trafalgar, Jutland, Midway, and the Battle of the Atlantic. The periods of action are the age of fighting sail, the age of the big gun, and two manifestations of sea war at this century's midpassage, the carrier battles and a submarine campaign. His narrative on World War II leads to some prognostication in the concluding chapter.

How well does Keegan fulfill his self-appointed purpose? He does not paint war at sea with the bold strokes we saw in *The Face of Battle*. This is because

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Captain Hughes is professor of operations research at the Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California. He is also author of *Fleet Tactics, Theory and Practice*.