

Naval War College Review

Volume 36
Number 5 *September-October*

Article 11

1983

Professional Reading

R. W. Komer

Harold Brown

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Recommended Citation

Komer, R. W. and Brown, Harold (1983) "Professional Reading," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 36 : No. 5 , Article 11.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol36/iss5/11>

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PROFESSIONAL READING

“In dealing with naval matters, Brown knocks down the romantic notion of a US-USSR conventional conflict confined to the sea, a form of ‘horizontal escalation’ again enjoying some vogue.”

Brown, Harold. *Thinking About National Security: Defense and Foreign Policy in a Dangerous World*. Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1983. 280pp. \$17.95

It is hard for me to review objectively a book by a former Secretary of Defense whom I served as a senior subordinate and of whose performance in office I am a great admirer. Yet anyone who reads Harold Brown’s typically impersonal but insightful analysis of key national security issues cannot help but be impressed as well as informed.

This is no exercise in glittering generalities or impassioned rhetoric. It is studiously nonpolitical. Instead the book is like the man—a balanced effort to educate a wide audience on our pressing national security agenda rather than a personal memoir (I couldn’t find a single anecdote). Its detailed explicitness on most issues, combined with meticulous caveats on every judgment, show how wide ranging is his mind. When in office Harold Brown was most often referred to as a “technocrat,” yet his book demonstrates a thorough grasp that national security is a much broader matter than defense alone. Indeed, the knowledgeability he displays about crucial security-related economic, political, and energy issues is impressive.

Harold Brown was certainly the most experienced Secretary of Defense since George Marshall, having served as Director of Defense Research and Engineering, Secretary of the Air Force, disarmament negotiator and college president as well as nuclear physicist. He also was generally regarded as the strong man of the Carter cabinet. Comparing his dispassionate focus on the issues with the more personal (and readable) recent memoirs by his chief colleagues, National Security Adviser Brzezinski and even Secretary of State Vance, helps one understand why.

While it is hard to fault his policy and program prescriptions, how to make them happen in practice is the ultimate test of any Secretary of Defense. Thus what one misses most in the book is the obverse of its strengths—a sense of the quixotic President he served so loyally, more about the actual compromises he felt compelled to make with both the White House and Congress, his policy (though never personal) differences with both Vance and Brzezinski, his problems with a JCS system which was institutionally incapable of giving him the collective military advice he sought, and last but not least his budget and program battles with a fractious Congress with which he never felt comfortable.

In dealing with naval matters, Brown knocks down the romantic notion of a US-USSR conventional conflict confined to the sea, a form of “horizontal escalation” again enjoying some vogue. He favors a force of 12-13 CVBGs as optimum given other needs and likely resource constraints, though he fails to develop much of a mission rationale for them. Indeed he devotes only one ambivalent sentence to what I, for example, thought his most significant contribution in this respect—the concept of sequential carrier operations rather than building a big enough carrier force to take the offensive in at least three oceans simultaneously.

His book reveals Brown as both a rational centrist and a measured optimist: a man who recognizes the realities which constrain and often distort any policy or program, the essential continuity of US security policy, and the need for intellectually rigorous analysis as well as decisive leadership in making policy into program. He ends with a “program for the future” which recognizes that the US superpower no longer enjoys “military or economic supremacy.” Hence we confront much more difficult national security problems than in the past. His solution is a call for rational policies and programs plus greater efficiency, but he warns that measured real increases in defense spending (his choice is 5 to 7 percent per annum) are equally essential to an adequate security balance.

Harold Brown has provided vital food for thought to all defense professionals and guardians of the public purse. They may fault him on some details but no one else has yet provided so convincing a rationale for an overall security posture consistent with urgent national needs in the turbulent decade ahead. More the pity that this book’s colorless almost text-bookish style will tend to deter the very readers who would benefit from it most.

R. W. Komer
Former Under Secretary of Defense for Policy