

## Review Essay—"A New Lens on Historical Lessons": "Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II"

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## REVIEW ESSAY

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### A NEW LENS ON HISTORICAL LESSONS

*Geoffrey Till*

*Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II*, by Paul Kennedy. New Haven, CT: Yale Univ. Press, 2022. 544 pages. \$37.50.

The late Ian Marshall was an American marine artist of remarkable ability. Fifty-three of his ghostly, atmospheric watercolors appear in this book as illustrations, mainly of the fighting Royal Navy of World War II. In a subdued mix of browns and grays, they convey impressions of the quiet, businesslike determination of the ships, little and big, against ethereal backgrounds of sea, coast, and harbors. Author Paul Kennedy originally intended to provide only the story behind each painting, describing the ship, its function, and the significance of its contribution to the outcome of World War II. His concise captions do exactly that, often implicitly underlining just how accurate and insightful Marshall's pictures are, for all their impressionistic approach. Compare them with the standard black-and-white photos of the time and you will realize quickly how much more than mere appearance the pictures reveal. They are truly extraordinary.

Quite often there are USN ships there too, operating alongside those of

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the British. Perhaps that helps to explain how the original concept of the book ballooned into something else, in which the pictures became not the main focus of the book but an impressive backdrop to the larger theme of how and why the U.S. Navy became the dominating navy of the time. The book shows the Royal Navy as a great and effective global force, but one constrained

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by circumstances and forced to yield its supremacy to its closest ally. There is a poignancy to the story that the pictures somehow amplify.

Of course, the dual aim of doing justice to the pictures and setting their context and at the same time explaining the rise of the U.S. Navy is an ambitious one. It calls for chapters of year-by-year narrative interspersed with chapters of reflective analysis. Inevitably there are slips and solecisms. Other reviewers have pointed out that one does not refer to HMSs *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*; instead, one says HM Ships *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*. And aircraft carriers definitely are not “boats.” Some errors of fact got through as well. The gallant pilots and navigators of the Royal Navy’s Fleet Air Arm in the Norway campaign must be rolling over in their graves at the news that instead of them it was the Royal Air Force that sank the German light cruiser *Königsberg* in 1940. Since this was the first warship ever to be sunk by airpower, it must be especially galling for such a significant achievement to be handed over gratuitously to what RN personnel often regarded as the “Royal Advertising Force”! As the name suggests, the Skua was a naval carrier plane. There are some presentational problems too; the double-page spreads of Marshall’s admirable pictures do not always work—sometimes key bits of the pictures are buried deep in the center binding. But overall, these points are not important and easily can be corrected in subsequent editions. In fact, it is quite comforting for the rest of us to be reminded that such superstars in the academic firmament as Paul Kennedy are—after all—human.

By contrast, the important thing is how very well the book charts and explains its main theme: the basic reason for the staggering rise of the U.S. Navy over the course of World War II. We get into this topic through Kennedy’s discussion of the strategic options confronting President Franklin D. Roosevelt in the Pacific campaign. Here you had the great American warlords—General Douglas MacArthur on the one hand and Admirals Ernest J. King and Chester W. Nimitz on the other—advocating for competing strategies for the final advance on Japan. MacArthur wanted his promised return to the Philippines, and thus he pushed for an amphibious campaign of hopping along what is now the Indonesian archipelago and from there swinging north toward Japan. Conversely, the USN admirals were dismissive of such a roundabout route; they merely wanted to barrel their way across the central Pacific, storming ashore against the islands needed as air bases for a softening of Japan before a final invasion, probably from Okinawa. For any other country, this choice between the plans of two such weighty interests in the political scene would have been—politically as well as strategically—very difficult for any president to make. But it was not so for the United States. Instead, because of his country’s sheer industrial power, Roosevelt was able to agree to conducting both campaigns simultaneously. Nothing could illustrate America’s industrial dominance of the scene better.

Three of the book's many tables and graphs make the basic point. One of these, on page 229, shows just how extraordinary the rise in the U.S. Navy's overall tonnage actually was. America's navy soars from being third in the hierarchy in 1939, below those of Britain and Japan, to opening up a lead of no less than eight million tons over its British ally. The Royal Navy does quite well too, rising by a million tons, but is eclipsed totally by the American achievement. By contrast, from as early as 1942 the Japanese are in terminal decline—just as Yamamoto had feared.

A second especially significant graph is on page 319. It shows the American war effort as a percentage of gross national product shooting up from 1.2 percent in 1938 to 41.6 percent in 1943—just five years later. The message is reinforced by a third graph on page 98, which shows that Japanese and American defense spending was about the same in 1938, despite the fact that Japan's effort represented over 28 percent of its national income spent on defense. Since that national income was just \$4 billion—compared with America's \$68 billion—the apparent tactical insanity of Japan's grand strategy seems clear. In addition, this surely helps to explain how surprising Japan's attacks on the United States and the British Empire were for its victims. Unifying fury at Japan's raid on Pearl Harbor—plus good leadership—meant that America's industrial strength soon could be mobilized fully for war through a sustainable combination of direct and indirect taxation, along with the country's richness in raw materials, industrial efficiency, high-technology base, capital resources, and large and easily trainable population.

But Kennedy does not fall into the trap of economic determinism. A country's strength is not measured simply by such financial and commercial indicators as these; economic factors alone did not make victory necessarily inevitable. Instead, it is a question of how the balance for one country between its resources and its commitments compares with that of its adversary, and of how effectively a country conducts itself. These caveats come out loud and clear in Kennedy's discussion of what arguably was the most complex and important of all the battles and campaigns of the war: the so-called Battle of the Atlantic. That battle was not won simply because the Americans could build ships faster than the Germans could sink them; even though this impressive capacity certainly helped, it was far from being the only thing that mattered. The nonmaterial dimensions of war are important too, as Kennedy constantly shows and discusses.

A final point emerges implicitly in Kennedy's brief discussion of the value of reflecting on the implications of naval history and on the rise and fall of great powers at sea. For a variety of reasons, the experience of the Pacific War—and especially the central drive advocated by King and Nimitz—tends to have a special significance when USN scholars reflect on the lessons of the past. It certainly

was the most impressive, momentous, and successful of the maritime campaigns the U.S. Navy ever has fought. But there is an obvious danger in unconsciously taking that apparently preordained victory as a guide to the future. Tomorrow's adversaries may not suffer the fatal industrial and strategic shortcomings of the World War II Japanese force; moreover, despite them, Japan's operational and tactical resistance was ferocious and imposed terrible costs in blood and treasure on the victors. What Kennedy's book shows first is that however momentous such campaigns were, they were but part of a much wider strategy that collectively determined the outcome. Second, the book reminds us that understanding the lessons of history demands that we note the differences as well as the similarities between then and now.

In sum, there is much food for thought in this admirably rounded account of the rise of American naval power during World War II. It is written nicely, in an easy conversational style that flows along, taking the reader with it. The illustrations are splendid, and we float past the occasional blemish. The book's subtitle is *Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II*, and as both an analysis of victory at sea in World War II and an account of the rise and fall of great naval powers, the book deserves an honored place on the bookshelves of anyone interested in such great maritime matters—as we all should be.