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Mastering the Art of Command: Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and Victory in the Pacific

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BOOK REVIEWS

LEADING THROUGH CHANGE

Mastering the Art of Command: Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and Victory in the Pacific, by Trent Hone. Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2022. 448 pages. \$39.95.

In *Mastering the Art of Command*, naval historian and organizational analyst Trent Hone examines what makes a large organization successful in war. Hone's earlier, award-winning study *Learning War* sought to reconcile the image of the interwar U.S. Navy as a successful learning organization with its brutal 1942 combat losses. *Mastering the Art of Command* similarly seeks to reconcile two seemingly divergent perspectives: the organizational consultant's focus on institutional structure and culture and the admiralty's focus on personal leadership. Hone ties together these two views to illuminate the power and limitations of leadership in large combat organizations. As his case study, Hone uses the largest fleet in USN history—the World War II Pacific Fleet—operating under one of its most legendary leaders, Fleet Admiral Chester W. Nimitz.

Despite its subtitle, this book is not primarily a biography. Readers looking for a more conventional study of Nimitz would be served better by Craig Symonds's excellent work, *Nimitz at War*, or the earlier standard biographies.

In contrast, Hone deconstructs Nimitz as a critical element within a complex adaptive system, able to employ its resources and shape its responses within the limitations of the larger organization. While this description may sound as if it minimizes Nimitz's talents, every naval officer immediately will understand both that choices in any situation are bounded and that a skillful and imaginative commander can expand the bounds of what is imaginable and achievable—to a point.

When Nimitz arrived to take command of the Pacific Fleet in December 1941, he carried with him three decades of naval experience. That experience, of course, included familiarity with naval doctrine, Naval War College war games, and the Fleet Problem exercises that had defined both formal war plans and the informal tactical heuristics that guided USN forces. He also brought an exceptional familiarity with the senior officer talent available to the growing Navy. While the small size of the interwar Navy ensured that all senior officers had years of familiarity with one another, Nimitz's tenure as chief of

the Bureau of Navigation—essentially Navy Personnel Command—gave him a comprehensive view of the officer corps. Some of Nimitz’s contemporaries saw little value in this insight, but Nimitz himself understood that, as a fleet- and theater-level commander, he worked through others, both subordinate commanders and his staff.

Hone characterizes Nimitz’s work in the first two years of the war as time spent building adaptive capacity within both the Pacific Fleet staff and the wider fleet. Nimitz faced the simultaneous challenges of building trust with his own staff, earning the confidence of his superiors, selecting and guiding subordinate commanders, and learning from ongoing operations. Hone argues that Nimitz’s acceptance of calculated risk in the months before and during the Midway operation was, in part, a measure that created space and time for institutional learning and adaptation.

It is in Nimitz’s command arrangements that Hone sees the genius of a leader learning from and influencing a complex system. From 1942 to the end of the war, strategic and tactical actions remained under the fleet (CINCPAC) structure, which was configured to allow maximum space for subordinate commanders to exercise initiative in support of Nimitz’s intent. Operational-level tasks such as logistics and administration required tightly coupled integration of actions and were entrusted to a separate joint (CINCPOA) structure with a different culture and expectations. Hone describes Nimitz’s command structure as “emergent”: a novel approach not derived from a previous design growing from the collective experience of the fleet and its commander.

Nimitz’s fleet-command arrangements built on his “high trust” style of operational leadership. The close understanding that Nimitz developed with Admiral Raymond A. Spruance as a subordinate, numbered-fleet commander allowed a blurring of command lines and rapid, almost instinctive, alignment of purpose. The structure worked less well with Fleet Admiral William F. “Bull” Halsey, who required explicit and directive guidance while serving in the same subordinate role in a way that Spruance did not.

This observation highlights the one weakness of the volume. Focusing on Nimitz’s extraordinary successes does not exploit fully what can be learned from Nimitz’s few failures. One of Hone’s more tantalizing comments is that Nimitz’s successful World War II command style served him—and the Navy—poorly during his postwar tenure as Chief of Naval Operations. In the knife-fighting environment of Washington, DC, Nimitz was too collegial. A more thorough look at how Nimitz fell short or misread organizational dynamics would have helped round out our understanding of Nimitz as a leader.

Mastering the Art of Command is a richly layered book that will reward readers on multiple levels. Current and aspiring commanders will prize the example of Nimitz exploiting his intimate knowledge of the Navy, in all its organizational complexity, to create space and opportunity for his subordinates to fight and win. More broadly, *Mastering the Art of Command* challenges all Navy leaders to think self-critically about the adaptive capacity and resilience that enabled Nimitz. The Navy that allowed a Nimitz to create these organizational virtues at a key time and place was not

the product of a single personality but was built by generations of leaders who demonstrated and modeled what was possible. Few can be a fleet commander in the mold of Nimitz, but Hone reminds us that every naval leader has a hand in enabling those who are.

DALE C. RIELAGE



Getting China Wrong, by Aaron L. Friedberg. Cambridge, U.K.: Polity, 2022. 196 pages. \$27.49.

With the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan essentially complete and the long-vaunted pivot to the Pacific finally coming to fruition, the China challenge has moved to center stage. As defense professionals and policy makers in Washington, DC, seek to derive new policies to address the challenge that China poses, students at the Naval War College, such as myself, seek to gain a deeper understanding of China and its often tumultuous relationship with the United States. This is no easy task. A rash of “China experts” have come to the fore offering a variety of policy recommendations, thus widening the gap between thoughtful and poorly constructed analysis. Good advice has never been harder to find.

However, Aaron L. Friedberg fills that gap with *Getting China Wrong*, a thought-provoking, timely, and critical analysis of the relationship between the United States and China. Dr. Friedberg is a professor of politics and international affairs at Princeton University and the author of several works on China. His latest work delivers a compelling argument that U.S. policy makers fundamentally have misunderstood the Chinese Communist

Party (CCP), resulting in flawed policies that have accomplished the exact opposite of what they sought; China increasingly is repressive at home yet aggressive abroad, and its values have failed to converge with those of the world’s liberal democracies.

In the first of *Getting China Wrong*’s six chapters, Friedberg examines the underlying ideology that resulted in the U.S.-led West embracing China in a strategy of engagement—predicated on the idea that China could be shaped by greater economic connectivity with the West. This strategy of engagement has enjoyed bipartisan support in the United States, with its goal of connecting China more closely to a larger international order. Despite the 1989 Tiananmen protest and massacre, the U.S. government has believed that, with greater engagement, Chinese values would converge with those in the West, resulting in a more democratic China less likely to disrupt the post-Cold War order.

The book’s next two chapters consider the CCP and its resistance to change. Well aware of the liberalizing goals of engagement, the CCP took steps to preserve its grip on power. Deng Xiaoping’s strategy of “reform and opening up” co-opted market forces as a tool in service to the party-state. The CCP was willing to open up in terms of economic practice—but only so far as would not threaten its hold on political power.

Another chapter aligns the CCP’s goals with its worldview. The reconfiguration of the international system following the collapse of the Soviet Union was seen as a threat to the party’s existence. In turn, the CCP acted to solidify its hold on power while advancing two goals: regain China’s position as the predominant power in East Asia, and