**Against the Tide: Rickover’s Leadership Principles and the Rise of the Nuclear Navy**, by Rear-Admiral Dave Oliver, USN (Ret’d), Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2014, 179 pages, $27.95 (hardcover), ISBN 978-1-61251-797-1

Reviewed Colonel P.J. Williams

Truth be told, there’s likely a bit of Admiral Hyman Rickover (also known, perhaps ironically as the ‘Kindly Old Gentleman’ to crews of US nuclear-powered warships) in all of us. From time to time, we’ve probably all been in a situation where we were trying to advance an idea, which we knew was right, in the face of fierce opposition, whether real or imagined. And we met with success, or not, to varying degrees. Certainly no one can deny that the late Admiral Rickover, the so-called ‘Father of the (US) Nuclear Navy,’ believed he was right and indeed a good case can be made that in fact he was. The most potent warships in the US arsenal – its aircraft carriers and submarines – are nuclear-powered, and have been so for decades, largely thanks to his foresight and persistence. The subs in particular, in the author’s view, proved to be the key military capability which effectively won the Cold War.

Dave Oliver’s aim in writing this book is, in his words, “to offer a perspective on the admiral’s leadership” (p. 3). He goes on to state that he is describing Rickover’s management style, which many would say is not exactly the same thing. The book is organized so as to use vignettes from various stages of Admiral Rickover’s career, including those in which the author was involved. At the end of each chapter, having used such anecdotes to bring out a specific lesson, the author then questions readers as to whether their own organization or leadership style embodies the principle just illustrated.

This book is not, and does not claim to be, a scholarly work. The author writes with an easy, sometimes folksy style which is well suited to this kind of work. Clearly having served as (because he was chosen by Rickover) a submarine commander under the Admiral, he retains much admiration for his subject. Most chapters are introduced with a quote from Admiral Rickover, and the author’s many encounters with Rickover over the course of his career are used to illustrate the leadership principles espoused in the title. In many ways there is nothing new here as these principles number among them foresight, accepting correction, flexibility of mind and loyalty to top-performing subordinates. The author distills these down to three key lessons:

- hard work and focus can succeed for anyone;
- humans can manage process control as well as continuous change at the same time; and
- an extraordinary leader can see well ‘beyond the horizon’ (p. 118).

Rickover remains the longest-serving naval officer in US history with 63 years active duty, and for almost half of this maintained control over the selection of nuclear submarine commanders and engineering officers. Stories of his interviews with prospective members of ‘his program’ are legendary. If he’d been in the Canadian Armed Forces, he would have been entitled to five clasps to his Canadian Forces Decoration! His legacy lives on in the two submarines which have been named after him as well as Rickover Hall at the US Naval Academy, where it is said that science students rub the nose of the bust of Admiral Rickover, outside the hall, for good luck before an exam. Despite his influence, which is felt to this day, the story of Admiral Rickover is somewhat of a cautionary tale and he was eventually forced to retire under the administration of President Ronald Reagan, after a somewhat stormy meeting with the President, the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of the Navy.

After reading this I wondered if Canada could ever produce such an officer. Certainly the way in which Canadian senior military leaders engage with the highest levels of government is different. Canada is a parliamentary democracy while the United States is a republic, and in the United States the legislative branch (Congress) is sometimes more important to cultivate than the Executive (the White House). That said, the story of Rickover and how he made the US Navy into what it is today offers valuable lessons, not only on the need for technical competence in capability development but also in civil-military-relations. While Canada may not have ambitions to make its warships nuclear-powered, how the Kindly Old Gentleman was able to win the support of those who enabled him to make the nuclear navy a reality, might usefully inform our own discussions on future capabilities such as the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter and cyber-warfare, or indeed defence renewal. As such, this book is recommended for senior defence leaders, especially if they think they’re right. 🚫

Reviewed by Joe deSapio

Although Bryan Elson’s book is ostensibly about the naval bases and fortifications of both Victoria and Halifax, its major appeal stems from the way in which the local histories of these places are seamlessly inserted into the wider imperial relationship between Canada and Great Britain. Elson’s belief that the questions and debates of empire had real impact on the Canadian coasts is well-founded; there is a remarkable parallel between the Halifax and Esquimalt naval dockyards searching for a role after the British handover with that of the Canadian experience, similarly finding a new footing that was neither entirely independent from British ties, nor too firmly attached for political reasons.

Bastions of Empire demonstrates that when it comes to Canadian politics and policies, continuity reigns supreme. The haphazard and inconsistent manner in which both the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) and militia are incorporated, financed and fielded between 1871 and 1914 speaks volumes on the ubiquity of the ‘hurry up and wait’ nature of Canadian defence politics, as the English-French compromise and the presence of the ‘Militia Myth’ cloud a unified approach until war is near – a trend repeated throughout the conflicts of the twentieth century. Furthermore, this internal discord was often mirrored by tensions between British expectations and Canadian realities, as well as the looming presence of the United States to the south. Bastions of Empire shows a maturing and evolving Canada attempting to chart its own course among these political shoals.

Elson also knows when to ignore the larger relationship in favour of smaller, piecemeal events which draw Halifax or Esquimalt (or Victoria or Sydney) into wider events. The story of Victoria emptying its jail to provide labour for a hasty refit of HMCS Rainbow, for instance, shows brilliantly just how underfunded and perilously close to collapsing the early RCN actually was.

This story is, however, laid out in an inconsistent fashion. The first half of the book’s eight chapters are devoted to a quick examination of the 160-year historical relationship underpinning the developments of Halifax and Victoria (and, by extension, the RCN). The remaining four chapters focus on the months from August to December 1914. It seems an abrupt conclusion to these places’ stories – surely the successful prosecution of WWI would have been a more fitting evolutionary capstone, and a signal that Canada had matured into a capable and independent state.

Present in the background of Elson’s work is an interesting argument on the nature of imperial defence and the RCN. Focused on domestic policies such as the National Policy or transcontinental railway, most Canadians turned a blind eye to defence matters. It became necessary for both the militia and fledgling navy to build themselves a public presence – to ‘show the flag,’ in modern terms – especially in interior or rural areas. Defence spending on improving Halifax or Esquimalt was not always a priority unless the military could be shown to be an indispensable part of Canadian life. Indeed, during the Reciprocity debates of 1910-11, the old fears of American annexation of Canada resurfaced, the same period which saw the establishment of the Canadian Naval Service. While not a clearly causal relationship – the German threat provided better motivation for naval endeavours – the necessity of having a functioning and capable military was nevertheless demonstrated as a precursor to total sovereignty.

Ultimately, Elson has crafted a readable and engaging narrative of an understated, yet formative period in Canadian history. In the years between 1907 and 1914 (and indeed, 1918) Canadians evaluated their place within the larger British Empire, examined their self-identity, and then resolutely embarked on a path of continued independence.


Reviewed by Colonel (Ret’d) Brian K. Wentzell

This voluminous work by the late Gordon W. Smith has been published by his literary executors, Tom W. Smith and Nell Smith, with the able editorial assistance of P. Whitney Lackenbauer. Gordon Smith devoted most of his life to the study of the issues of Canadian Arctic sovereignty, from both national and international perspectives. This book is the first volume of his previously unpublished works. It is a comprehensive study spanning seven decades. The material has been thoughtfully organized by Professor Lackenbauer and, despite some inevitable repetition, flows well.

The study chronicles the political history of the Canadian
Arctic from the earliest transfer of authority from Great Britain in 1870 to the 1942 voyage of the RCMP ship St. Roche through the Northwest Passage and onward to Halifax, Nova Scotia, where she arrived on 11 October 1942 under the command of Henry Larsen. At the time, the government of Canada was concerned about challenges to its authority in the Arctic, particularly by Denmark, Norway and the United States.

The true extent of the Arctic lands was unknown in 1870. Only careful exploration and mapping could better define its full extent. Canada was a very young country with many pressing issues upon which to focus in its expansion westward through the continent. Thus, the resources available to exercise sovereignty in the mostly uncharted north were meagre at best. However, the federal government did pay attention to the need to explore and document the full extent of the northern archipelago, the Inuit people, the vegetation, animals, mammals, birds and fish in the region. This was accomplished over the seven decades in a reasonably methodical fashion, as financial and other resources permitted.

A key part of the exercise of sovereignty was the application of Canadian laws to those who inhabited or traversed the territory. The RCMP, Department of Marine and Fisheries, and the Department of the Interior, later reconstituted the Dominion Lands Administration, were the main agencies involved in exercising sovereign rights. This was important as American and European whalers, hunters and explorers were known to frequent Canadian Arctic waters and islands and paid little attention to compliance with Canadian laws.

International law was another facet of the challenge to sovereignty. Visits by private explorers did not necessarily give rights of claim or ownership to the country of their citizenship. Proclamations by government-sponsored explorers provided some authenticity to sovereignty claims, however, these were not usually accompanied by continuous occupation or use.

Some legal clarity came about through the decision of the Permanent Court of International Justice that resolved a dispute between Norway and Denmark over the ownership of eastern Greenland in 1933. The court ruled that a claim of sovereignty, to be valid, must be “based not upon some particular act or title such as a treaty of cession but merely upon continued display of authority, [that] involves two elements, each of which must be shown to exist: the intention and will to act as sovereign, and some actual exercise or display of such authority” (p. 317).

The Danes had occupied the east coast of Greenland from 1894 and no country physically challenged its claim until 1921. Finally, in 1931, the Norwegian government proclaimed sovereignty over a part of eastern Greenland. The court held that the Norwegian act “did not make out a superior claim” to that of Denmark (p. 317). Denmark had exercised sufficient authority over Greenland from 1814 to 1915 to confer a valid title to the sovereignty (p. 318).

Thus, the acts of authority exercised by Canada, dating from the original transfer of the northern territories from Great Britain in 1870, conferred a valid title to the Dominion. Although title to some islands in the archipelago might have been open to challenge, Norway, Denmark or the United States could not demonstrate a superior claim to any islands or portions thereof. In short, Canada had used its Arctic lands and therefore could not lose them.

The analysis of Gordon Smith in this first volume does not extend to the issue of international straits as none then existed. Perhaps a subsequent volume will provide a depth of analysis that will help solve that increasingly important issue.

I strongly recommend this present volume to all Canadians and others interested in issues of Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic.


Reviewed by David A. Beitelman

The recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are historically significant for a variety of reasons. For military historians, one important feature of the US engagements will certainly be the dominant role played by US Special Operations Forces (SOF). In Relentless Strike, defence journalist Sean Naylor has offered a comprehensive history of the military command at the forefront of US SOF, the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The true tip of the spear, JSOC oversees the most elite units, including the Army’s 75th Ranger Regiment and Delta Force, the Navy’s famed SEAL Team 6, and a host of other intelligence and aviation special mission units. From the JSOC’s beginnings in the aftermath of the failed mission to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980, through to the fight against the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq today, Naylor shines a light on the shadowy world of clandestine, covert and special operations carried out in all corners of the world.

Relying on a bevy of mostly anonymous sources, Naylor does a wonderful job of weaving history and investigative
journalism into a cohesive, and compelling, narrative. And at over 500 pages, the pace Naylor sets is itself ‘relentless.’ For those looking to satisfy their inner spy, there is plenty of intrigue and suspense. Indeed, the book is like peeling the layers of an onion – for every revelation, there are hints of other, more interesting stories that Naylor leaves alone. For instance, there is the revelation and occasional mention of the use of female operatives working for Delta Force and SEAL Team 6. There are stories of single operators sent on missions in non-permissive environments like Iran, their identities and missions kept secret from all but a few senior officers within JSOC. The point Naylor drives home is that in the world of black operations, even the shadows have shadows.

But more than just a chronological history or collection of stories of daring and bravado, it is a story of adaptation under pressure. When the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq began in 2001 and 2003, respectively, JSOC, then under the command of Major General Dell Dailey, was bulky, requiring a large support staff to deploy on every mission. The premier special mission units within the command, like Delta Force, were rarely used, much to the chagrin of their operators. It was, as Naylor phrases it, like having a Ferrari kept in the garage. As the nature of American wars changed and the country’s enemies increasingly became networks of insurgents and terrorists rather than uniformed soldiers, JSOC took on a transformative role. The command changed and with it the way the United States fights its wars.

Relentless Strike is also a story of leadership and martial innovation. General Stanley McChrystal, who led JSOC for a record-setting five years (as opposed to the traditional three), is credited with transforming JSOC into a nimble, aggressive and devastatingly lethal force – more so than it had already been. To target networks of enemies, McChrystal adapted JSOC into a network of its own, with greater intelligence sharing and joint operations than had previously existed. The operational tempo under McChrystal increased to a level that almost defies belief, with units striking multiple targets per night, where before they only conducted a handful a month. Find-Fix-Finish became the new mantra – identify the targets, find their location and kill or capture them.

Underlying the importance of leadership is a story of military culture. Commanders of JSOC are usually veterans of its composite units. McChrystal, for example, was an Army Ranger. General Dailey served in the Army’s 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment – the Night Stalkers – home to the US military’s best pilots, particularly known for their helicopter skills. The history of the commanders plays into their leadership style, which composite units they are perceived to favour, and how risk-averse they are. McChrystal’s successor, Admiral William McRaven, a former Navy SEAL, planned and oversaw the operation that killed Osama bin Laden – an operation carried out by the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, also known as SEAL Team 6. The unit was selected to carry out the bin Laden mission because of mundane operational divisions which meant the SEALs cover Afghanistan while the Army’s Delta Force covers Iraq. However, many within JSOC felt that if McChrystal had been in charge at the time, the mission may have been given to Delta Force.

Relentless Strike is a book that tells many different stories in the process of telling the singular history of one command. It is a detailed chronological retelling of the last 30 years of American shadow wars. It is a story of the bravery and dedication of the men and women who comprise the JSOC units and their experiences in combat around the world.

It is also a study in military innovation, adaptation, leadership and inter-service tribalism. There is even the occasional mention of Canadian operatives for those looking for stories closer to home. It is rich in detail, carefully researched and sourced. Indeed, there is a surprising tension between Naylor’s use of names and his reference to anonymous sources. (Several of those named in the book, like former Delta Force operator Brad Taylor, took exception to being ‘outed’ by Naylor, even though Taylor himself is an established fiction writer who has made no secret of his military career.) Anyone interested in military history, special operations, the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, or the peripheral combat zones that fill today’s headlines, should read this book. Relentless Strike is an instant classic. 📚