Book Reviews


Reviewed by Dave Mugridge

Seldom does an academic textbook articulate as clearly and logically the complexities of modern warfare as this authoritative tome. Understanding Modern Warfare is a must for all students of defence or strategic studies, whether professional, military, academic or layman. Well written and sophisticated, it delivers a comprehensive digest of the amalgamated works from this impressive array of authors. Their success lays in the accessible manner in which they portray both the theory and the manner of modern war-fighting. Good, clear, concise language with well-made argument is the cornerstone of this valuable contribution to current research.

The authors’ close links with both British and American military academies is evident from the outset. Speaking personally as a ‘dark blue’ graduate of the UK Defence Academy, I wish this book had been on my pre-course reading list as it brings together knowledgeable subject matter experts and a detailed bibliography to illustrate the components of joint warfare. I believe the quality of this book recommends itself to past, present and future graduates of any military staff college irrespective of their background.

The six chapters are individually well laid out and presented with informative tables and illustrations. Each of the authors conducts a thorough review of his subject area and their conclusions are applied to the future conduct of war-fighting in their environment. Wisely the publishers have avoided the temptation to follow the modern military mantra of ‘effects-based operations,’ instead allowing the reader to appreciate the value that each military arm brings to the party.

The ‘revolution in military affairs’ (RMA) is intelligently handled by all, with a pleasing absence of the normal zeal which accompanies its very mention in stove-piped military circles. The nexus between the successful adaptations of irregular warfare as a response to RMA is pertinent and will undoubtedly gain the approval of the warrior cadre and technophobes alike. After all, the revolution in military affairs is not the unqualified success that its advocates would suggest and at best Iraq and Afghanistan have shown there is a need to commit troops into combat; particularly in counter-insurgency campaigns. There will always be a need for boots on the ground, despite the success of the geek squad.

My one critical observation of this book is the absence of a chapter on how modern warfare is inextricably linked with the delivery of national security and how it is but one part of the triangle (defence, diplomacy and development). The authors do mention this link but given its importance, more could have been done to educate the reader, particularly given recent coalition failures in both Iraq and Afghanistan. We are all converts to the ideas of three-block warfare, the strategic corporal and the essential flexibility demanded of today’s deployed military personnel. The complexity of modern warfare demands more from its commanders and their political masters than ever before if a truly comprehensive approach to security is to be delivered.

To summarize, this well-researched and well-documented book will add to the reader’s understanding of defence, strategy, political, military interplay and the realities of modern combat. It achieves this through an intelligent appreciation of history, contemporary trends and future scenarios. The authors’ works could easily stand alone but complement each other so the value of the book is greater than the combined value of the individual chapters.

To conclude, this book is a worthy if not essential addition to your bookshelf. I doubt any purchaser would not find it fascinating and informative. To christen it a condensed and portable staff course review would be parochial but still accurate. Unlike so many books published on warfare, I believe that it has the potential for further editions and the current contributors should be commended for their work to date. This book is ideal for those who value the joint-force approach to war-fighting but not slavish devotion to it. For me its real value is that it allows readers to draw their own conclusions from the well-researched articles.


Reviewed by Ann Griffiths

Why review a book about politics after 9/11 in the Canadian Naval Review? Well, if military forces are instruments of a state’s foreign policy, then it would seem important that they know something of the foundations of that policy. Global Politics after 9/11 is an examination of the
underlying elements of Western – particularly American – foreign policy. It is a series of interviews conducted by Alan Johnson, the editor of Demokratiyada and a professor of political science. The interviewees are nine prominent leftist, and one prominent neo-conservative, writers, academics and activists from different institutions, intellectual traditions, states and nationalities, including British, American, Egyptian and Iranian.

The response to the events of 9/11 caused tremendous division among representatives in the liberal-left camp. Leftists were bitterly divided about the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, and about the ‘war on terrorism’ in general. The reaction was confused and leftists argued amongst themselves about what path to take. Many found themselves in a position of knee-jerk anti-Americanism/anti-George W. Bush, others were very supportive of the idea of intervening to promote human rights and democracy (but not of American unilateralism), and others uncomfortably and implicitly supported unsavoury regimes simply because the Bush administration opposed them. The division and confusion is referred to at one point as “the vacuum at the moral centre of the left today” and at another point the “unilateral intellectual disarmament on the part of many on the liberal-left.”

Johnson asked each person the same series of questions in order to probe the perspectives of the left/progressives (and one neo-conservative) in the post-9/11 world. They were asked questions such as the following: How serious a threat is Islamism? How can Islamism be defeated? Is Islam compatible with democracy? Why are many leftists unable to see Islamism as a threat or to oppose it vigorously? Is there a naiveté built into liberal civilization? What is the meaning of the concepts ‘just war’ and ‘humanitarian intervention’? What are the agencies that should trigger such interventions? How should they be conducted? What drives US foreign policy? What lessons are to be learned from the intervention in Iraq?

The answers to these questions are very interesting. The reader ends up with 10 different perspectives on these matters, none of which are definitive but all of which are fascinating. There are interesting discussions in the book about, among other things, the sources and threat of terrorism, the responsibilities of American power, the crisis in post-9/11 methods of waging war, civilizational challenges within the Muslim world, the conduct of war in Iraq, Islamic totalitarianism, the relationship between rights and security, and the role and elements of neo-conservatism.

The book does not include a concluding chapter to sum up or analyse what has been said in the interviews. This is appropriate, I think, because to synthesize the various perspectives would be to deny the most important point that this book illustrates – that in a democracy, these fundamental issues must always be debated. Political figures have to make foreign policy decisions, but the debate about first principles should never cease. The elements of a state’s foreign policy must be debated and updated as global threats and opportunities evolve. Global Politics after 9/11 is an interesting and illuminating examination of the tenets of Western foreign policy in the wake of a significant change in the geostrategic environment.


Reviewed by Jay White

Who rivals Nelson in the panoply of British naval gods? Possibly Viscount Samuel Hood (1724-1816), who Nelson himself called “the greatest sea-officer I ever knew.” Admiral Hood’s active service spanned three 18th century wars: the Seven Year War; the American Revolutionary War; and the Napoleonic War. He was the first of many Hoods who rose to prominence in the Royal Navy; so many that it is tricky to tell them apart. Samuel is the one whose namesake, HMS Hood, was the pride of Britain’s pre-Second World War fleet.

Colin Pengelly’s Sir Samuel Hood and the Battle of the Chesapeake focuses on naval action during the closing weeks of the American Revolution. Hood figured prominently in the second Battle of the Capes in September 1781 when a French fleet off the Virginia coast prevented the Royal Navy from relieving British forces at Yorktown. This failure is widely regarded as a turning point in the war. Although the battle itself was a draw, recriminations flew between Hood and his superior officer, Thomas Graves. Surprisingly, this book sides with Graves in the “Hood-Graves controversy,” although it offers insufficient evidence to close the debate.

This was an age when empires were far-flung and the task of protecting them formidable. The stakes were so high that an admiral could – and in one case, famously did – face a firing squad for failing to press home the attack. While British tactics favoured engaging the enemy at all costs, for the French, an engagement avoided was a strategic victory. Until Nelson, the scales of battle never tipped decisively toward one side or the other.

Like most of his contemporaries, Hood’s career included battles both won and lost. To be a successful admiral in
the 18th century required political acumen as much as seamanship skills. Those who achieved flag rank almost always fought a rear guard action at home to protect their interests and reputations against jealous rivals and scheming foes. Wielding pen and cannon with equal vigour, Hood’s correspondence reveals a “carping and querulous character” (p. 6), “who could serve happily only in first place” (p. 55). Although “kind and generous to his family and friends, and understanding to his juniors” (p. 93), Hood “stressed duty and was severe on those who failed in it” (p. 5). The portrait of Hood that emerges, while less laudatory than one expects of a naval hero, probably captures more of the private man than he would have wished us to see.

With four decades of research under his belt, Pengelly knows his subject. But the book will disappoint scholars expecting a broader analysis based on a wide range of sources. The bibliography promises more than the citations deliver; too many endnotes (more than 70 of 285) contain bio-data with no sources specified. Secondary works by leading authorities are lightly referenced. The obligatory ‘other side of the hill’ chapter on French naval developments is virtually devoid of citations.

Over-reliance on too few sources is the bane of every historian. In one early chapter, Commodore Hood arrives in Halifax as the newly appointed commissioner of the dockyard and finds that stores of oak for ship repairs are shockingly low. Pengelly blithely accepts Hood’s judgement that corrupt local contractors were to blame. The author then reinforces the point with his own “damning commentary” toward the laxity of dockyard administrators “in a continent where large tracts were covered in forests” (p. 24). What Pengelly (and presumably Hood) failed to realize was that native Nova Scotia oak was entirely unsuitable for shipbuilding purposes. As Julian Gwyn has pointed out elsewhere, the Navy Board considered North American hardwoods to be of inferior quality. It was likely that the logistics of gathering timber under wilderness conditions contributed to supply problems on the Halifax station rather than corruption or poor administration. Gwyn’s book, not to mention R.G. Albion’s classic Forests and Sea Power (1926), would no doubt have been useful to Pengelly.

Maps and diagrams are invaluable even to those intimately familiar with the tactics of 18th century naval warfare. How an academic publisher could allow a monograph of this kind to be so deficient in illustrations beggars belief. The only map, of the Chesapeake region, is dated 1916 and shows railway lines! Numerous typos scattered throughout suggest other corners were cut in the editorial workflow.

As “both an analysis of the engagement and a biography of Admiral … Hood,” this book serves the former purpose better than the latter. One could wish for a fuller treatment of Hood’s other notable engagements, such as the blockade at Toulon, by Pengelly’s own admission “the most difficult” of Hood’s long career (p. 220). One could wish as well for a more in-depth analysis of French naval commanders, particularly Hood’s great nemesis, the Comte de Grasse, during operations in the West Indies. But this is perhaps asking too much of a book aimed at an American readership. That said, Sir Samuel Hood and the Battle of the Chesapeake should warm the cockles of armchair admirals who know the ins and outs of fighting sail.

Notes

The 2010 Conference and AGM of the Naval Officers Association of Canada (NOAC) will be held in Halifax 1-4 July 2010. The theme of the 2010 conference, hosted by the Nova Scotia NOA, is “Celebrate Our Past, Our Future.” The schedule will include meetings/briefings and celebrating naval centennial events, the July 1 celebrations, the Nova Scotia International Tattoo and other activities. Additional conference information is available at www.noac-national.ca or www.nsnoa.ca

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