



Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II, by Paul Kennedy, with paintings by Ian Marshall. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2022. ISBN: 9780300219173. Illustrations. Appendices. Notes. Bibliography. Index Pp xv, 451.

Near the end of *Victory at Sea*, Kennedy, one of America’s great historians of international history, writes of the Japanese surrender at Tokyo Bay on the deck of the USS *Missouri*, complete with a 400-plane flyover, signifying Allied victory. As the sun passed over the American and British ships moored in the harbor, eventually “going down over Mount Fuji” there was “no more appropriate symbol of the end of the Japanese Empire” (398). However, Kennedy’s work seeks to do more than chart the war in the Pacific. The victory at sea represented by these craft, much like the black ships of Commodore Perry’s arrival in Edo Bay in 1853, represented a new world or, for Kennedy, a new international order.

In the 1930s, the world’s navies consisted of six powers: Great Britain, the United States, France, Italy, Germany, and Japan. Each were bound by the strictures of the Washington Naval Treaty, signed in 1922, which allowed the Royal and US Navy each 30 percent of the world’s battleships—the presumed true arbiter of naval supremacy well into the Second World War—while 20 percent went to the Japanese, and 10 percent to the French and Italian navies. It was a multipolar naval world in which a “half-dozen navies jostled, unevenly, for power” (19). By 1945, however, the United States Navy was not simply larger than the next largest, Great Britain, but was larger than all the rest combined (424). Kennedy

therefore wants to use his work to understand the “deeper reasons” for the “amazing turnaround of fortune in the midst of this gigantic conflict” (xvi).

Kennedy divides his work into two elements: narrative and analysis. In doing so he attempts to paint a comprehensive picture of the Great Power navies on the eve of war, throughout the conflict, and afterward. His narrative presents one of the best aspects of his work, namely its scope. Often people are familiar with the Battle of the Coral Sea or of the U-boat threat but are not able to step back and take a global view of the naval conflicts. This presents a problem, as all these conflicts were interrelated; beyond the global nature of World War Two, and the fact that all the world’s oceans are connected, it was also a very practical matter. For example, a ship committed to bombarding an atoll in the Pacific was one less designated to hunt submarines in the Atlantic. Defeat in one of the theaters would imperil the entirety of the Allied war effort. At the same time, while it is helpful to realize that all theaters were interrelated, they also were their own distinct conflict requiring different strategies as well as the make-up of naval forces. The Allied navies had to balance, therefore, not only the strategic use of their forces but also the development of the needed forces for each mission. As such his narrative does a great job broadening the view of the reader to consider these interrelationships and how the war was shaped by mastery of the varied seas.

Some of these conflicts are well known to us, such as the U-boat peril that Churchill famously stated was the only element of the war that left him truly frightened. Yet others, such as the work of the Murmansk convoys or the fight for control around Malta, are less so. In both cases, however, Kennedy paints a vivid picture of these conflicts and underscores the bravery of the men involved, as well as the difficulties faced when winning the war(s) at sea. The vividness of his narrative is augmented by the incorporation of paintings by the late Ian Marshall. These paintings provide color, quite literally, as the press agreed to present all in full color, which helps arrest the reader’s gaze throughout and engross them in the narrative even further. One could hardly ask for a more beautiful depiction of such a dangerous time.

The book’s breadth means, naturally, that coverage of each region might not be as detailed as one hopes. There have been numerous works on each individual theater or naval conflict, from Ronald Spector’s exhaustive *Eagle Against the Sun* (1985) about the Pacific Theater and Samuel Morrison’s seminal *Battle of the Atlantic* (1957) to Jonathan Parshall and Anthony Tully’s exceptional *Shattered Sword* (2007) exploring the Battle of Midway. Conversely, Kennedy’s book focuses on providing an overview of all naval conflicts during World War II, which means that a reader hoping that the book will provide all that would be needed to

understand the entirety of naval conflict during World War Two will be disappointed.

Yet this reviewer does not believe that was ever Kennedy's aim. Instead, the narratives provide an important global coverage of the naval struggles that can then be followed up by more targeted studies depending on one's specific interests. One might think of Gerhard Weinberg's *World at Arms* as an equivalent; this seminal work is a grand-strategic view of the Second World War that can then be augmented, with much more detail, by other works. In this regard, while the book might be too detailed for a general World War Two course, it could serve as an overview text for a course focusing on the naval aspects of the war. And it makes for essential reading for anyone generally interested in the Second World War.

But Kennedy's work is not merely a narrative. Behind the scenes Kennedy is building his case for the slowly growing global power of the United States. A perfect encapsulation of this is the USS *Essex*. When launched in June of 1943, it represented a new class of fast carriers designed to help overcome the disparity in forces that saw, at that moment, only one US carrier on active duty (the USS *Saratoga*) of the six US carriers that had begun the war. In fact, at the beginning of 1943, the Japanese had more carriers in the Pacific even after the disastrous Battle of Midway than the US. Yet the *Essex* class carriers, of which 16 would be produced, served as the backbone of US efforts in the Pacific. By the end of 1943, the "carrier gap" was already surmounted and, by January 1, 1944, the USS *Essex* joined 12 other carriers as part of Task Force 58, which would carry the US Navy from Leyte Gulf to Iwo Jima, and then to Tokyo Bay. More than just an important point of interest, Kennedy highlights the launching of the USS *Essex* as a symbol of what was to come. It symbolized not just the eclipsing of the big gun ships as the crucial barometers of naval power and the beginning of the creation of the largest aircraft carrier force in history in the US Navy; it constituted a fundamental shift in global power writ large.

Specifically, Kennedy's argument is that the victory at sea during World War Two was an outgrowth of US productive capacity. Such capacity might be familiar to the reader in passing. Many are aware of how the USS *Yorktown* was repaired after Coral Sea just in time for the Battle of Midway in contrast with the Japanese carrier *Shōkaku* remaining in drydock during those crucial days in June 1942.

Certainly, the numbers of craft produced by the United States boggle the mind. The US was able to construct 24 light fleet carriers (CVLs) during the war—originally ordering 32 (!) to be built—while the Japanese shipyards raced to convert existing hulls in an unwinnable race. The "workhorses of the fleet," destroyers, were just as overwhelming in number. By the end of the war the US would list 554 destroyers, with the greatest challenge seemingly being the ability to provide

names to all of them. The numbers contained a great irony: American naval strategists, achieved their dream of the largest battlefleet in the world right as “there would be no real rival to it” (298). Regardless, the production of that many ships was an outgrowth of the numerous factories on the home front. Consider that a single shipyard in Washington State was converted for military use and then produced, in under two years, fifty escort carriers. Or the Bath Iron Works in Maine that cut destroyer production timelines “from over 300 days to roughly 190 days per vessel” and was photographed constructing 14 *Geary*-class destroyers at the same time (300).

Kennedy is not content to rest his argument upon numbers and factories alone but also seeks to highlight the entire logistical system behind the construction efforts. The numerous vessels were supplied by even more numerous mobile repair forces and fast oilers that enabled the US Navy “to conquer the Pacific Ocean’s famous tyranny of distance” (301). These mobile platforms were buttressed by the formation of the US Navy Construction Battalions (the CBs or Seabees), which constructed over \$10 billion in infrastructure across the Pacific. Kennedy proves the clear connection “between front-end war fighting and rear-end war production” as craft produced along the Gulf Coast quickly served from the Arctic to the Indian Oceans (303). Yet even this was only possible through the prodigious, and untapped, raw material and basic productive capacities of the United States. This can be seen in oil, which saw the US extracting 200 million metric tons to Germany’s 9 million in 1943, or the ability of the US economy to go from producing 750,000 tons of aluminum in 1942, critical especially in airplane production, to 1.241 million tons in 1943 (316-317).

Even then the “Arsenal of Democracy” could only exist due to the capital outlays the United States’ economy was capable of. Not only was the United States unleashing its massive productive capacity—with military outlays jumping from 1.4 percent of GNP in 1939 to 43 percent by 1943—it was managing to do so while raising real wages and the economic fortunes of the country as a whole. While America spent more than any other power, it was able to do so “because it was so rich—in raw materials, in industrial muscle, in its high-technology base, in its capital resources, and in its numbers of easily trainable people” (321). Winston Churchill described the productive power of the United States as a “giant boiler.” Like a railway boiler, once lit, the US picked up ever greater speed as the nigh inexhaustible input of raw materials, capital, and workers were “shoveled” into the ever-expanding engine of war production. For Kennedy, World War Two was crucial to catapulting the United States to global dominance, not merely because it saw a weakening or toppling of other powers, but because it helped realize the latent power of the American economy.

This also leads to a potential critique, at least depending upon how much one thinks that such an argument is deterministic. Specifically, does focusing on production not imply an inevitability to the Allied victory that can simply be cataloged on a ledger? This reviewer does not find that to be the case as throughout Kennedy is at pains to underscore the importance of *how* such productive capacity was used. For example, he dismisses the idea that German U-boats were defeated simply through the explosion of the Liberty Ship and the size of Allied convoys more generally (as did contemporaries). He does, however, note that the post-1942 surge in American shipbuilding “came just at the right time” to help bring victory in the Atlantic (308). The Liberty Ships were, instead, part and parcel of a larger productive force that developed the weapons and platforms needed to defeat the U-boat. Inherent to such an argument is that the correct tools of fighting were designed by inventors, produced by government and private action, appropriately coordinated by their commanders, and adroitly operated by their brave crewmen. In none of this is Kennedy suggesting, in a deterministic manner, that production inherently wins; rather he is arguing that to deny the productive power of the United States, from the victory at sea to the supplies of Lend-Lease trucks to the Soviet armies, is to miss a crucial part of the war.

The old saw is that amateurs study tactics while experts study logistics. Thus, Kennedy underscores US logistical power because without that understanding, one can get lost in the minutia of a battle and miss the broader picture. In this Kennedy is not alone. He notes how Churchill was aware, or at least later claimed to be aware, on December 8, 1941, that “Hitler’s fate was sealed” while the Japanese “would be ground to powder” because they had unleashed American power (325). This reviewer thinks of Michael Hodgson’s concept of the Great Western Transmutation, when the West created a social power that, from 1800 onward, permitted it to dominate the globe. The West did so by establishing, if you will, the “rules of the game” of industrialization, governance, empire, and the like. Thus, Europeans could be foolish, dumb, less courageous, or deficient in any number of ways compared to other peoples yet were establishing the broad movements which would allow them to do much better, overall, than their opponents. To put it another way, they created a system where the window of opportunity expanded for Europeans, even the dumb ones, and rapidly narrowed for non-Europeans, even the most brilliant and brave. There is something akin to that in what Kennedy charts as he does not argue that production capacity could overcome capricious leadership, cowardice, or lack of strategic thought. Yet the productive power of the United States, once unleashed, rapidly closed the Axis window of opportunity to the point at which continued resistance was near folly.

Kennedy's expansive work provides a wonderful strategic overview of the naval conflicts during the Second World War. It is also an analysis, utilizing the navy as an exemplar, of the shift in global fortunes and global power. In doing so Kennedy balances his analytical argument against the narratives of heroism and acts of sacrifice in each of the world's oceans. This balance is necessary to prove his thesis without losing sight of the humanity of those he covers. As he notes at the close of his book, the brave merchantmen attacked by a German U-boat in the Atlantic or sailors on a destroyer off Okinawa in the Pacific would have gotten cold comfort from the knowledge "that the broad sweep of history was going their way. And yet it was" (435).

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