

BOOK REVIEW:

Habits of highly effective maritime strategists

by James R. Holmes

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This book is aimed at developing both current and aspiring strategists. Its title, though, is slightly misleading as the habits the author promotes apply to any strategist, regardless of the domains (land, maritime, aerospace *etc.*) of interest. Few points pertain exclusively to the sea, and these focus on understanding the mercurial nature of the medium in order to develop a mental “sea culture”.

The author holds the Wylie Chair of Strategy at the United States Naval War College, and earlier had a naval and then an academic career. The book demonstrates that he is very widely read, and has thought deeply on the nature of strategy and its application, both historically and in the present era.

Holmes believes that to excel at strategy, one should learn what excellent strategists do and practise that ritual each day. Over time, it becomes second nature to take the long view of national political and strategic ends; marshal diplomatic, economic, and military resources; and devise ways to put those resources to work for strategic gain.

Many of the habits that he wishes to encourage are ones that apply to commerce and the conduct of life in general. He advocates that, rather than proceeding through life in an unconscious manner, encountering and reacting to whatever comes over the horizon, the strategist should adopt a conscious, aware, critical and rigorously professional and questing perspective – an approach that seeks to shape events towards a desired outcome for the benefit of the strategist’s nation. None of this is new, and is the purpose of multiple, extant, human disciplines, religions and philosophies.

Holmes triumphs the benefits of what we call a renaissance education, a ‘*catholic*’ approach, and undertaking a career striving for excellence, in order to train a person for strategic analysis. As per Marx and Weber, he believes in the value of the dialectic interaction via the thesis and the anti-thesis.

Often his language is precocious: “*I plunder philosophy, history, biography, and strategic theory for wisdom that is relevant for practitioners*”. In part, this comes from his enthusiasm for the approach advocated by Feynman: “*It is designed to help readers study their profession in the kind of undisciplined, irreverent, and original – yet determined manner*”.

Holmes draws heavily on both the ancient precepts of Aristotle and the modern Covey to emphasise the need for a consistently conscious, disciplined and ‘aware’ approach: “*There is no substitute for thinking for yourself and exercising individual judgement*”. Like the Jesuits, a

person has to start young in order to engrain solid habits in their 20s. A series of habits of enquiry, which embrace new things and change, whilst avoiding ruts. For Holmes, developing foresight is at a premium in modern strategic competition.

Much of his subsequent commentary is a re-affirmation of the application of the Principles of War *i.e.* select and maintain the aim, concentration of effort *etc.* His chapters conduct a tour through the last two centuries of world diplomatic and military history, where Holmes displays his knowledge, peppered by insights and homilies. These include: the utility of the indirect approach and asymmetric techniques; the need to be self-aware to avoid the traps of hubris and ambition; and the need to devote great effort to understanding one’s audience of key stakeholders, to effectively communicate with them, and to validate the process.

For instance, he draws on Carl von Clausewitz, who exhorted strategists to amass superior forces at the decisive place and time, while abjuring secondary commitments that scatter resources about the map and risk leaving each force too weak to accomplish its goal. Similarly, Alfred Thayer Mahan devised a formula for sizing fleets to overpower foes in important waters or coastal zones. In contrast, Sun Tzu, B. H. Liddell Hart and J. C. Wylie, advocated the ‘indirect approach’ to strategy.

One useful technique he draws from Kissinger is the ‘bad cop, good cop’ approach of initially intimidating an opponent by waving the big stick, and then reassuring them by offering inducements. He also reaffirms Luttwark’s thesis that the use of the terms of ‘war’ and ‘peace’ can be counterproductive. Rather, the strategist should have the perspective that the norm is perpetual conflict, with just the level varying over time.

Chapter 4 focuses on the role of the strategist leader in war and the necessity of mastering a person’s passions to avoid being ruled by hubris, anger or despair. As such, the strategist needs to develop the ability to employ cognitive dissonance to events, in order to avoid overreaction and to gain dispassionate perspective able to generate deep insights. To illustrate this, he compares the careers of Alcibiades and Washington in an insightful manner. He also ropes in Winston Churchill: “*In War: resolution; in Defeat: defiance; in Victory: magnanimity; and in Peace: good will*”.

In all, it is an entertaining read, and a good refresher of the techniques that a serious strategist needs to consistently and rigorously employ.

Ian Wolfe