



**James R. Holmes, *A Brief Guide to Maritime Strategy*.
Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2019.**

Robert Dienesch

Theory is usually the point at which you lose most students. The idea of history is fascinating and exciting because at its core, it is a story of people and that makes it interesting and relatable to most. Theory however usually produces the opposite effect. It is seen as dull, or confusing, and often esoteric and difficult to relate to the history being studied. This is often made worse by the fact that the theory is usually written in

such a way that it is difficult for students to understand. Often written in a much earlier period, it does not translate well to students versed in the tweet, text, and modern slang. One former student equated it to understanding Shakespeare in old English. The result is often a glazed look and faces that convey boredom from students.

So when an author comes along and produces a very readable and engaging rendition of naval theory, it is a text that warrants a very close look. James R. Holmes has produced just such a text. The J. C. Wylie Chair of Maritime Strategy at the Naval War College and a former US Navy engineering and gunnery officer, Holmes merges a deep academic interest with the experiences of a naval officer into the production of an incredibly understandable and relatable text. In his preface, Holmes laments the fact that maritime strategy was a subject that really was not taught either within the naval academy experience or within the fleet. He indicates that this is somewhat logical and understandable. After all, success as a naval officer requires an extensive understanding of a great many technologies like engineering, computers, missiles, radar/sensors, etc. Within the academy, students spend such a great deal of time working in these areas that maritime strategy is often neglected. Once with the fleet, there is even less time for thoughtful reading and reflection on such esoteric issues as maritime strategy. Young officers have too much to learn in their areas of specialization and how to function within their ship. The result is a disjunction between capability within the fleet and the overriding reasoning as to why the fleet exists and how it achieves its ends. To help circumvent what he calls the tyranny of time, this text was meant to be a primer for cadets and young officers to help bridge the gap by looking at the main theories and relating them to geostrategic issues. The goal was to condense the rudiments of maritime strategy into something that was very usable by not only young naval officers but graduate students and laymen like congressional staffers and history students. As such, it is a solid stepping stone to deeper study and will serve even the history student well.

Over two hundred pages, Holmes examines the key protagonists of naval theory - Alfred Thayer Mahan and Julian Corbett and their fellow theorists. The implication of course is that it is more or less a balanced interpretation. Broken up into three larger chapters: "How to Generate Seapower," "How to Keep the Virtuous Cycle Turning," and "What Navies Do," the text is subsequently broken down further into subheadings

that help to keep it lively and interesting. The reader is thus led clearly through the theory with excellent examples to reinforce the relevant issues. In the first chapter, "How to Generate Seapower," Holmes examines the nature of the sea as the great common and a medium of interaction and how it relates to successful naval powers. Holmes then traces the elements that are seen as being essential for a nation to be a successful seafaring nation and thus by extension a naval power.

In the second chapter, "How to Keep the Virtuous Cycle Turning," Holmes further expands the linkage between economics, trade/commerce, and the sea. By extension, it is also a discussion of the importance of ports, the challenges of selecting the best for strategic advantage with relevant examples to the US, and a discussion of the importance of ships both merchant and military. The final chapter, "What Navies Do," examines how navies further the operational and strategic goals of their nation. To do this, Holmes looks at not just the strategic constraints on countries and navies but also the various roles that they play on the world's oceans from diplomatic and policing roles to warfighting. Holmes also examines a variety of ideas like "cumulative" operations and area denial. Collectively, the three chapters examine the relationship between naval power and national power, the importance and relevance of navies to their nation, as well as the roles they play in strategic thought.

On the whole, this is a very impressive and excellently written understanding. The author clearly articulates the theories and in the process provides concrete and easily accessible examples to reinforce his arguments. As a text for students in the field, it presents an incredibly clear and easily understood explanation of the strategic importance of naval power and the forces that underpin it. It certainly would be an excellent addition to anyone teaching naval power or any related area. The only real criticism that stands out with the text is that it is in fact really focused predominantly on Alfred T. Mahan. The author in essence is providing the reader with a modern understanding of Mahan's argument for what is required to be a success on the world's oceans. Seasoned with Corbett and others, the text seems to be biased in favor of Mahan's book *The Influence of Seapower on History*. This might be somewhat expected as Mahan, an American naval officer, was the theorist used by most naval powers in the years leading up to World War I and certainly remained dominant in some circles right through World War II and into the Cold War. However, there are some issues with

Mahan, including reductionism and the tendency to ignore technological innovation in his writings. Thus Holmes really is modernizing Mahan for modern readers and he does an excellent job. More emphasis on Corbett would have helped to further balance the examination, as Corbett's interpretation differed in significant ways from Mahan. Of course, I am qualifying that statement as I am a Corbettian and favor his arguments in many ways.

On the whole, this is an excellent text and it is most highly recommended to any reader interested in naval history or theory. Whether a layman, historian, student, or young naval officer, the reader will find very important points in this book. It will greatly improve their understanding of naval theory and help put naval history in general within the greater context of national policy and international relations. This book is most highly recommended and it will produce a most enjoyable read.

Robert Dienesch is a 20th Century Americanist specializing in military/intelligence history. He has written on the development of space-based reconnaissance in the 1950s and American submarine operations in the Pacific. He is currently working on a history of the North Nova Scotia Highlanders in the Second World War.