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Hal M. Friedman, *Digesting History: The U.S. Naval War College, the Lessons of World War Two, and Future Naval Warfare*. Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2010. Pp. xxvii, 375. ISBN 978-1-884733-68-0.

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This new monograph by Hal Friedman (Henry Ford Community College) adds to his considerable body of work<sup>1</sup> on the U.S. Navy immediately following World War II. He is well-suited to address this topic, having served in the Navy and done extensive research at the Naval War College (NWC) in Newport, Rhode Island. He focuses on the Pacific Ocean from the perspectives of American imperialism, strategic policy, administration, and bureaucratic infighting. This latest effort, part of the ongoing NWC historical monograph series, might have been entitled “War College Lessons Learned in the Recent War in the American Lake”; he plans two further volumes on the same subject area.

Friedman believes decisions made in 1947–49 have had long-term consequences for U.S. national security and that the context and processes of those decisions, as well as the personalities behind them, are instructive for those interested in policy, strategy, and organizational dynamics during periods of change. Accordingly, he examines the attitudes of officers at the NWC regarding the evolving postwar security threats posed by the Soviet Union and the potential use of atomic weaponry in future conflicts. Another concern is the Navy’s role and fleet structure in such an environment—from the relevance of operational missions such as amphibious warfare to warship design (349). He draws primarily on theses, speeches, and lectures that address such “big” issues.

Friedman begins with an explicit disclaimer: “The reader will find this book to be a very straightforward, chronological narrative. I have not attempted to deeply analyze or ‘deconstruct’ what the historical actors have said, but instead I have taken great pains to record what they said at the time as closely as possible while creating a readable narrative” (xxv). These words adumbrate both the strengths and the weaknesses of the study. Strengths include its comprehensive and faithful summation of the relevant theses, lectures, and speeches from the critical period of Admiral Raymond Spruance’s NWC presidency (Feb 1946–Jul 1948). Friedman accurately explains the opinions and ideas of the Navy’s officer corps and even conveys some of the ambience of its premier educational institution. In so doing, he carefully describes trees and shrubs while somewhat neglecting the forest. The book could have achieved more had it not been so strictly delimited in both analytical scope and time period covered.

Another weakness is the neglect of context. For example, in Chapter One, Friedman summarizes a thesis by Lt. Cdr. Lodwick Alford without discussing his personal background, wartime service, or subsequent career. Yet Alford’s early experience aboard destroyers in the Asiatic Fleet clearly shaped his conclusions about preparedness and strategy (5).<sup>2</sup> There are three such thesis reviews in this chapter. Were these the only three or are they representative examples? Friedman gives little indication of his rationale for structuring this or other chapters as he does. The result is a sometimes indistinct narrative thread.

Friedman correctly emphasizes the speeches and lectures of Admiral Spruance, but missing are the interoffice memoranda or the like that might have provided a “peak behind the curtain” of decision-making in the NWC under Spruance’s tutelage. In such an institution, there are always agendas and “pet projects”

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1. *Creating the American Lake: United States Imperialism and Strategic Security in the Pacific Basin, 1945–1947* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Pr, 2001), *Governing the American Lake: The US Defense and Administration of the Pacific, 1945–1947* (East Lansing: Michigan State U Pr, 2007), and *Arguing over the American Lake: Bureaucracy and Rivalry in the U.S. Pacific, 1945–1947* (College Station: Texas A&M U Pr, 2009).

2. See Alford’s recent memoir, *Playing for Time: War on an Asiatic Fleet Destroyer* (Bennington, VT: Merriam Pr, 2006).

being advanced, discussed, and acted on at the senior levels of the administration. Why was “so and so” asked to lecture? Were particular thesis projects encouraged or did students have complete discretion in selecting them? There is little of this kind of contextualization.

To his credit, Friedman does address issues of context and analysis in his extensive notes. For example, Adm. Robert Carney, in a commencement speech at the College, made a series of self-serving justifications for Adm. William Halsey’s decisions at the Battle of Leyte Gulf (40–41). Friedman neglects to remind the reader that Carney had been Halsey’s chief of staff (something he mentions in the first paragraph introducing his summary of the speech). He says in a note that “it is unclear from the document if Carney really believed his own version of the battle ...” (56, n. 22), but stops short of asserting that his defensive attitude reflected his responsibility for the atmosphere of group think that contributed to Halsey’s blunder. Thus, he misses the larger opportunity to show how rationalizations and bully pulpits can undermine the disinterested pursuit of honest lessons afforded by history.<sup>3</sup>

This book gradually uncovers a battle over history and naval reputations taking place right under Spruance’s nose. For example, it is especially informative on the tarnishing of Adm. Frank “Jack” Fletcher’s reputation. Fletcher had been in command at the Battles of the Coral Sea, Midway, and (in its first phase) Guadalcanal. Some postwar officers at Newport made a concerted effort to undermine Fletcher, especially in the school’s “official” battle studies. Friedman, in his account of curricular revisions, notes that Cmd. Richard Bates, who supervised the NWC’s Coral Sea battle study, made it his personal mission to question and denigrate just about any action Fletcher took (182–83). He was aided in this by one Capt. Fred Dickey, an instructor in the Department of Aviation. Bates sent Dickey to interview Fletcher, then Chairman of the General Board, with the intent of gathering information with which to criticize him. Dickey produced a less than flattering summary of the interview.

Bates specifically wanted to see certain CINCPAC [Commander in Chief, Pacific] dispatches to clarify how and when then-Rear Admiral Fletcher put out an operations order during the battle to merge his force with that of then-Rear Admiral John Fitch, Commander of Task Force 11. Bates wanted to know if the order originally came from Fletcher or from Admiral Nimitz. More exactly, Bates wanted to know if it was “satisfactory” for Nimitz to have Task Forces 11 and 17 “running around” separately in the Coral Sea if they were supposed to actually be combined into one force under Fletcher (199).

Friedman hints about this emerging larger narrative in an endnote citing the pioneering work of John Lundstrom<sup>4</sup> in largely rehabilitating Fletcher’s reputation (197, n. 27).

Later, Friedman notes that Bates criticized Fletcher for not commanding from a shore base like his Japanese counterpart (Admiral Inouye), but then claimed Halsey at Leyte Gulf (Oct 1944) was justified in commanding from a ship because he was only directing a “raiding force.” Friedman does not identify this as a clear case of special pleading in the smear campaign against Fletcher. One hopes that, in his promised future volumes on war gaming at the NWC, he will revisit the issue of the battle studies, which so often formed the basis for the games (xxv–xxvi).

The concentration on American naval policy from 1945 to 1947 certainly has merit, since this was a critical period of transition for the United States and other countries from world war to a more stable global “system,” from imperialism and colonialism to the creation of a more durable world order in the aftermath of the breakdown of the grand alliance that had defeated the Axis powers. Such major issues demand the sort of in-depth analysis and even synthesis found in previous NWC publications.<sup>5</sup> Friedman’s conclusions

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3. Evan Thomas, *Sea of Thunder: Four Commanders and the Last Great Naval Campaign, 1941–1945* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2006) 229–31, discusses Carney’s role on the night prior to the Battle of Samar, when Halsey’s mistake became apparent to a much larger audience.

4. *Black Shoe Carrier Admiral: Frank Jack Fletcher at Coral Sea, Midway, and Guadalcanal* (Annapolis, MD: Naval Inst Pr, 2006); see esp. xv–xvii for the debate over Fletcher’s legacy and 508–15 for Bates’s role after the war.

5. See, e.g., Ronald H. Spector, *Professors at War: The Naval War College and the Development of the Naval Profession* (Newport, RI: Naval War Coll Pr, 1977) and Michael Vlahos, *The Blue Sword: The Naval War College and the American Mission, 1919–1941* (Newport RI: Naval War Coll Pr, 1980).

occupy no more than a mere page of text, let alone a chapter. His audience would have been better served had he shortened his lengthy thesis synopses to make room for more analytical material. Given his mastery of this period of naval history, he is certainly aware of broader trends and themes.

*Digesting History* usefully reveals the raw insights of NWC officers of the selected period in a slightly processed form suitable for other specialists—but not for a wider readership.<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, I can recommend it only to naval historians already conversant with the Pacific conflict and its study in the immediate postwar period.

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6. Happily, the book's comprehensive index is well designed to assist readers at all levels of expertise.