
John Lehman's *Command*

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A Review Essay on *Command of the Seas*. By John F. Lehman. 464 pages. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988.

John Lehman, Secretary of the Navy during the bulk of the Reagan era, was the most controversial and probably the most effective service secretary in modern times. He had great success at securing resources for the Navy and protecting its interests in the Pentagon battles of the 1980s. Many Army and Air Force officers surely regretted that he was not their service secretary.

Command of the Seas is Lehman's account of his exploits at the helm of the Navy from 1981 to 1987. It is an entertaining read which covers a variety of topics, including the Maritime Strategy, the 1983 bombing of the Marine barracks in Lebanon, the Falklands War, the 1986 bombing of Libya, the 1983 invasion of Grenada, and the Navy's myriad procurement problems. Lehman's view of these matters has changed little since he left office, and thus the book's basic line of argument is a familiar one. It goes like this. The security problems facing the Navy, not to mention the country, are obvious and not very complicated; so are the solutions. The Secretary, of course, has figured out those solutions, although on almost every issue key individuals disagree with him. Those who challenge Lehman are clearly portrayed as the bad guys and he castigates them at every turn, while those who share his views and help promote his career are the good guys.

Not surprisingly, *Command of the Seas*, much like Nancy Reagan's recent memoir, aims to get even with former bureaucratic foes. And Lehman had no shortage of adversaries. Consider his description of his last days in office: "So instead of a stately departure, I felt like the retiring marshal of the Old West, backing out of the saloon with guns blazing because every punk wants to take a shot at him on the way out." By that point, the biggest "punk"

on the block was the Chief of Naval Operations himself, Admiral Carlisle Trost. Lehman skewers him along with his many other enemies.

The book's most interesting chapter details the firing of Admiral Hyman Rickover, who had long headed up the Navy's nuclear propulsion program. Lehman surely recognized that Rickover, a crotchety old mogul, was the one bureaucrat who could thwart his plan to take full control of the Navy. However, the Admiral's age, his loss of important congressional allies, and Lehman's formidable bureaucratic skills provided the basis for forcing Rickover out of office. Nevertheless, Rickover went not with a whimper but a bang in a famous White House meeting where President Reagan tried to smooth the Admiral's ruffled feathers. When Rickover asked why he was being fired, the President began to explain that he really was not firing Rickover. Before the President had completed one sentence, Rickover blurted out, "Aw, cut the crap." At another point, a furious Rickover queried the President: "Are you a man? Can't you make decisions yourself?" Finally, he told the President that Lehman was a "piss-ant [who] knows nothing about the Navy." One can imagine how dumbfounded the President and his aides were by this outburst. And one can hope that Reagan was following that rich tradition of taping Oval Office conversations. More to the point, one realizes that in an earlier time, when Rickover was plowing through the waters with a full head of steam, he would have clashed continuously with Lehman, and the Secretary probably would not have won many of those battles. Rickover was now gone, however, and there was no other serious challenger to Lehman's position within the Navy hierarchy.

Among the most important chapters are those dealing with the famous Maritime Strategy, supposedly the blueprint for procuring a 600-ship Navy. This force, which was to be built around 15 carrier battle groups, was destined to cost an astronomical amount of money, money that would have to come out of other Navy accounts and other service budgets. It thus had enormous implications for the specific contours of the nation's military strategy since funds spent on carrier battle groups would not be available to support other systems and strategic designs. There was abundant opposition to the 600-ship Navy and the Maritime Strategy from the start, and almost all

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Ronald Reagan Presidential Library

President Reagan greets Secretary Lehman and Admiral Rickover at their explosive meeting on 8 January 1982 to discuss Rickover's retirement.

of it was justified. Procuring expensive aircraft carriers to threaten a continental power like the Soviet Union made little sense: the strike aircraft from the carriers would possess little punch against the formidable land-based defenses of the Soviets. Buying carriers to threaten the Soviet Union was tantamount to buying pellet guns to shoot rampaging elephants. Not surprisingly, an army of strategic analysts, both inside and outside the Pentagon, opposed the 600-ship Navy. Yet they failed to sink it during Lehman's tenure.

How did he succeed? Clues to this intriguing question are provided in *Command of the Seas*, although the book is anything but an objective treatment of the matter. It is apparent that there was no good strategic rationale for the 600-ship Navy and thus military logic did not carry the day. The Maritime Strategy was riddled with flaws and Lehman himself spends surprisingly little time justifying the naval buildup in terms of the Soviet threat. In fact, what is remarkable about the book is how small a role the Soviets played in the Secretary's thinking. The real enemies in his story are not the Soviets,

but instead a host of different groups inside the American national security establishment who were unsympathetic to his goal of building more ships.

Almost everyone connected with the Carter Administration is an enemy, as are liberal intellectuals and journalists, who are labeled "detentists." It should be noted, however, that the Secretary, who stands on the far right of the American political spectrum, uses the "liberal" label liberally. "Armchair strategists" are another of his bêtes noires. These are mainly civilians at think tanks who have no prior service in the military and who disagree with Lehman. Europeanists or "central front fundamentalists" also come in for criticism, but the most dangerous enemies in Lehman's periscope are the bureaucrats in the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Joint Chiefs of Staff. He tells us, for example, that OSD's "entrenched anti-naval orthodoxy" was so strong that it convinced Secretary of Defense Caspar Weinberger to stop speaking in public about the need for naval superiority, a favorite theme of Lehman's.

Formidable as this threat environment was, however, Lehman never lost a pitched battle involving the 600-ship Navy during his tenure. The reason for this success is quite straightforward. Lehman was a remarkably skillful bureaucratic infighter who had no match inside the Reagan Administration. He was also well qualified to do battle for the Navy outside the confines of the executive branch but still inside the Beltway.

Lehman was a "combat veteran" whose past experiences in battle had prepared him well for his tenure at the helm of the Navy. He was not a combat veteran in the literal sense of the term, however. In fact, when numbers of his generation were off fighting in Southeast Asia, he managed to avoid active military service by first going to graduate school and then taking a job on Henry Kissinger's National Security Council staff in 1969. His combat was instead in Washington's bureaucratic wars and, as is clear from *Command of the Seas*, he learned many relevant lessons during his service in the Nixon and Ford Administrations. When he finally left government in 1977 at the tender age of 34 and with eight years of bureaucratic warfare under his belt, he was well prepared for the tests he would face in the Reagan Administration. He had, to use his own words, "experienced some epic Washington combats and had the confidence earned by those scars."

It is hardly controversial at this juncture to argue that the Reagan Administration's defense buildup was *not* guided by a carefully thought-out strategic rationale which paid careful attention to external threats. For anyone who has doubts on that score and for anyone who wants to know more about why we got so little bang for the buck from the Reagan spending spree, *Command of the Seas* is important reading. It makes clear that bureaucratic politics overwhelmed international politics, and moreover that there was no better bureaucratic warrior in the Reagan Pentagon than John Lehman. □