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Robert D. Kaplan, *Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts: The American Military in the Air, at Sea, and on the Ground*. New York: Random House, 2007. Pp. xii, 428. ISBN 978-1-4000-6133-4.

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Robert Kaplan provides a panoramic account of his travels with American servicemen and women all over the globe between summer 2004 and summer 2006. His earlier *Imperial Grunts*¹ detailed his experiences with Army Special Forces and Marines in counterinsurgency and irregular warfare. *Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts* shifts attention to the bulk of American forces deployed overseas and illuminates the daily tasks of Navy, Air Force, and conventional Army and Marine Corps. As such, this extensive travelogue, laced with both insightful and questionable analysis of strategy and historical context, offers a window into the missions, lives, and attitudes of men and women who project American power in the far reaches of the world. This unabashedly imperialist book rejects moral underpinnings of foreign relations and juxtaposes the warrior spirit of American soldiers against the non-warrior democracy they serve.

The resulting narrative moves back and forth across the vast expanses of the Pacific and Indian Oceans and considers issues ranging from four U.S. Marines providing military training at a remote army base in Niger to 32,000 American troops still guarding the demilitarized zone in Korea. On balance, Kaplan celebrates the U.S. military—particularly lauding noncommissioned officers as the backbone of the armed services—and embraces its fight for stability in a world system led and defined by the United States. If he is pessimistic about anything, it is the nation, not its military or its global presence. Based on his observations, he argues in a long afterword that the men and women of the U.S. armed forces are far removed from a mainstream society that no longer entertains the notion of service but greatly respects those who do. Throughout, Kaplan shows the deeply held beliefs and fierce commitment of American soldiers, their patriotism, moral hardiness, “and stubbornness inspired by faith” (374). He admires their professionalism and sharply contrasts their warrior ethos with what he considers decadence of those who have lost confidence in their nation and its mission and concludes that “our own lack of faith in ourselves ... leads to an overdependence of technology by our military establishment” (377).

There are flaws in Kaplan’s argumentation, which at once praises America’s imperial forces and doubts that a nation grown complacent in an anti-war environment can sustain a decisive global presence. For one, Kaplan does not analyze American public opinion; he merely assumes that conservative critics of liberal society are right to detect a degree of decadence and apathy reminiscent of the latter days of the Roman Empire.² His brief discussion of the interrelations of technology, power, and security (or lack thereof) is based on a shared observation of Ralph Peters, a controversial commentator on strategic and military matters, and Rudyard Kipling: the suicide bomber is more effective than any weapon in the arsenal of even the most highly developed and powerful state. Instead of pursuing this line of argument, however, Kaplan turns to a standard critique of the media as soulless, anti-American, and guilty of providing the information technology that gives suicide bombers an immediate global audience. Such a dichotomy between American values and the global media is overdrawn and not supported by evidence. On the other hand, Kaplan’s consideration of nationalism as a driving force in the foreign and defense policies of China, India, Iran, and Pakistan—drawing on the work of political scientist Paul Bracken—is more substantial and leads him to conclude that the military may be the last vestige of nationalism in the United States.³

1. *Imperial Grunts: On the Ground with the American Military* (NY: Random House, 2005).

2. For American public opinion in wartime, see, e.g., Adam J. Berinsky, *In Time of War: Understanding American Public Opinion from World War II to Iraq* (Chicago: U Chicago Pr, 2009).

3. Paul Bracken, *Fire in the East: The Rise of Asian Military Power and the Second Nuclear Age* (NY: HarperCollins, 1999).

Since Kaplan, well known as a longtime *Atlantic Monthly* war correspondent (and current national correspondent) and the author of a dozen books, is one of the foremost observers of current threats to international security and American responses to global instability, it would be short-sighted to dismiss his analysis. His recent books, in treating the Global War on Terrorism, point at a deeper problem, first identified in his long 1994 article on anarchy in the international system.⁴ Kaplan makes a compelling case for the significance of small-unit operations in places that garner no media attention. His visit to Mali, for instance, recounted in chapter 9, reveals the efficacy of personal networks built by Special Forces. He suggests that stealthy, lower-intensity military operations often succeed better than major deployments that Americans actually become aware of. But such small-scale endeavors, aimed at building lasting structures, lack the immediate effects demanded by impatient politicians. Kaplan also worries about resource allocation in, for example, his discussion of the enormous cost of just one B-2 bomber (\$1.1 billion), speculating that the same expenditure would allow Special Forces teams to saturate future trouble spots in all of Africa. While conventional and even nuclear forces remain necessary to contain challenges from nation states, the ultimate success of America's mission in keeping the world secure and open for commerce rests on the sovereignty of national governments in areas that might become failed states but for timely military and economic assistance.

In eleven chapters, Kaplan crisscrosses the developing world from West Africa to Colombia and from Georgia to South Korea, giving readers an impression of America's global presence, the scope of its deployment and military-logistics networks, and the crises that may emerge anywhere at any time. It would have been helpful, however, if the author had provided a clearer sense whether the challenges to state sovereignty within distinct geographic regions were related. For example, following the discussion of military advisers in Niger, Kaplan turns to the Pacific Rim before returning, in chapter 5, to Algeria and, in chapter 9, to Mali. Lost in the process is any indication whether U.S. efforts in the countries of the Sahara-Sahel region are in response to a coordinated threat or to rebellions bred by local conditions.

In his wide-ranging chapter on the Pacific, a journey from Alaska to headquarters and logistics bases of Pacific Command in Hawaii, Guam, Okinawa, Thailand, and the Philippines, Kaplan introduces two fundamental issues. First, on U.S. global strategy, he agrees with German journalist and scholar Josef Joffe that the United States is the hub of a global system of pragmatic alliances and partnerships—a worldwide version of German chancellor Otto von Bismarck's late nineteenth-century alliance system based on realist assumptions of shared needs and common enmities. Kaplan believes that the clumsiness of the George W. Bush administration destroyed this ideal vision for a global system.⁵ In the Pacific, however, it “still survived and prospered for the United States, helped along by the pragmatism of Hawaii-based military officers five time zones removed from the ideological hothouse of Washington, D.C.” (47). This aptly illustrates Kaplan's position on the constraints of civil-military relations. Second, Kaplan explores the deep roots of public and private interaction with the military-industrial complex: for example, a missile defense base in Alaska operated by employees of Boeing and small private outfits of former American servicemen in Thailand and in the Philippines who service U.S. planes—thus giving domestic administrations a degree of separation from the U.S. military—and help American soldiers and sailors navigate the challenges of bustling Asian cities.

Though the Pacific is the geographic core of the book's vision of world order and future threats, Kaplan's travel schedule has taken him to North and West Africa, Georgia, Iraq, and Colombia, and led him to a conclusion worth pondering:

Indeed, it seemed that the ultimate strategic effect of the Iraq war might be to speed up the arrival of the Asian Century not just in economic terms, but in military terms, too. While the American government was

4. “The Coming Anarchy: How Scarcity, Crime, Overpopulation, and Disease Are Rapidly Destroying the Fabric of Our Planet,” *Atlantic Monthly* (Feb 1994) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1004.htm>, rpt. in *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Cold War World* (NY: Vintage, 2000) 3–58.

5. Oddly, Kaplan's conclusion closely mirrors Joffe's observation that the United States was destroying the system because Washington was taking out much more than it was investing. See Joffe, “Hubs, Spokes and Public Goods,” *The National Interest* 69 (Fall 2002) <www.miwsr.com/rd/1005.htm>.

distracted by Iraq, and Europe's defense establishments continued to be budget-starved, Asian militaries—China's, Japan's, India's, and so forth—were quietly enlarging and modernizing, even as their economic leaders became more and more integrated among themselves and with the rest of the world. If the development of Asian militaries was anything to go by, the Middle East was *now*, the Pacific *the future* (11, author's emphasis).

This raises two significant issues Kaplan could have explored more fully: the rise of East and South Asian powers and their potentially global reach.

Still, the centrality of the Pacific—and by extension the eastern Indian Ocean—emerges in chapters 3 and 4, which see Kaplan travel on a guided-missile destroyer (USS *Benfold*) and a nuclear submarine (USS *Houston*). His experience on the *Benfold* in winter 2005 is particularly important for highlighting the alternation between military and quite frequent relief missions. Kaplan boarded the destroyer just as it was moving from a humanitarian assistance effort in Indonesia following the devastating tsunami of December 2004 to its observation station in the Strait of Malacca, a critical chokepoint for global commerce. Indeed, he entitles the book's prologue "The Better They Fought, the Better Relief Workers They Became" (3).

Kaplan writes from the perspective of men and women from a disappearing America of small, rural towns with a farming mindset, as in this description of the relationship of American trainers and Algerian forces:

The most well-educated, well-traveled and linguistically adroit noncoms were precisely the ones most critical of the diplomatic and relief aid establishments. After all, they knew much of what the diplomats and NGOs knew, occasionally more. But because of their hardscrabble backgrounds and military experience, they just interpreted reality differently. Rather than a disadvantage, the hands-on circumstances of their own upbringings helped break down barriers with host-country nationals....This was an economically tenuous existence not far removed from the men of the Algerian Special Forces company. Over lamb couscous one day with Master Sgt. Butcher, Maj. Brahim noted a truth familiar to classicists: "The best soldiers have been farmers" (195).

Kaplan's time with an eleven-man Army Special Forces team in southern Algeria again showed him the benefits of a small footprint: such cooperation with Algeria's effort to defeat al-Qaeda affiliates in the Sahara has helped bring a onetime hotbed of Third World radicalism into the pool of states that reliably maintain regional stability.

From Algeria, Kaplan traveled to Nepal, where he observed the declining fortunes of government forces against Maoist rebels. He concludes that American demands for democracy as a precondition for assistance—though not invariably applied—in this case impeded successful cooperation between the military wing of the U.S. embassy and the Royal Nepalese Army. He observes that "only at sea, from what I had seen so far, were we still relatively unfettered by global and domestic politics" (225). And even at sea, as he cautions in an earlier chapter, surface ships are restrained by political considerations; only submarines are truly free to act out of sight of public opinion.

In chapter 7, on Iraq, which he visited in fall 2005, Kaplan observes the difficult counterinsurgency against tribal insurrections often structured around close-knit families. Drawing on the work of Samuel Huntington, he reiterates his plea for strengthening of institutions rather than insisting on immediate democratization.⁶ He contends that the experience of American soldiers in building local and national institutions in Iraq makes junior and noncommissioned officers the most likely future elected leaders of the United States. Such leaders might equally reject intervention for the sake of transplanting democracy and defeatism or isolationism, instead becoming "internationalists of a very pragmatic sort" (264).

Robert Kaplan offers a perceptive narrative bringing to life the conditions American soldiers and marines toil under in deserts and jungles and depicting the claustrophobic environment that sailors and submariners endure to keep the Pacific an American lake. He is particularly good at giving readers a sense of who serves in the modern military. Hence, military sociologists and those seeking to understand the scale of America's global presence and the day-to-day challenges of maintaining international security and stability will find *Hog Pilots, Blue Water Grunts* a useful source. Those desiring careful assessments of the costs,

6. Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, CT: Yale U Pr, 1968).

benefits, and limitations of an informal American empire or answers to the questions raised in Kaplan's afterword about technology, power, and security will find this book thought-provoking but no substitute for more trenchantly analytical works.⁷

7. See, e.g., Andrew J. Bacevich, *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism* (NY: Metropolitan Books, 2008), Thomas G. Mahnken, *Technology and the American Way of War* (NY: Columbia U Pr, 2008), Walter Russell Mead, *Power, Terror, Peace, and War: America's Grand Strategy in a World at Risk* (NY: Knopf, 2004).