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Aaron B. O'Connell, *Underdogs: The Making of the Modern Marine Corps*. Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 2012. Pp. xiii, 381. ISBN 978-0-674-05827-9.

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Aaron O'Connell (US Naval Academy) intends *Underdogs*<sup>1</sup> to be “a cultural history of the United States Marine Corps—a study of the stories, assumptions, and habits of mind of this smallest of the four armed services”<sup>2</sup> (2)—from the glory days of World War II to the beginnings of the Vietnam War. O'Connell, a lieutenant colonel in the Marine Corps Reserves, claims that the Corps created a public image as America's elite fighting force by working harder than the personnel of the other service branches: “Marines thought and acted differently than the other American armed services,” with consequent “long-lasting effects on American society, national defense and the United States' role in the world” (3-4).

The book comprises six chapters designed to demonstrate the unique culture of the Marine Corps within the American military establishment. Chapter 1, “A Harsh and Spiritual Unity,” treating the Corps' experience in World War II, sets the tone for the whole work. O'Connell uses various campaign narratives to show that “the island combat of the war with Japan ... empowered the Marine's culture” (60).<sup>3</sup> Unlike the larger services, the organized storytelling by Corps public affairs played to home and family life by sharing the combat losses with the community and invoking values of tradition and sacrifice.

Chapter 2, “The Privates' War and the Home Front in the 1940s,” explains how the Marines' combat experiences and suffering aroused the admiration and emotional attachment of the general public, particularly when enhanced by USMC public relations tactics and popular Hollywood films.

Chapter 3, “The Politicians and the Guerrillas,” traces the special relationship between the Marines and the US Congress, which was, the author observes, unlike that enjoyed by any other service. The Corps found ways to assist the campaigns of Marine veterans running for political office, and a dedicated group of officers in Washington waged a mostly clandestine campaign against the executive branch and aimed at countering elements of the postwar Defense Reorganization that seemed to threaten the Corps' status as a separate service.

Chapter 4, “Forgetting Korea,” describes how the Marine Corps shaped its narrative during the Korean War by reviving World War II public relations methods—honoring heroism in its ranks while playing down the suffering and wounds, both physical and psychological, that the war inflicted. The Corps' one-upmanship in comparing its efforts to those of the other services, O'Connell claims, benefited both individual Marines and the service's prestige among civilians.

In chapter 5, “First to Fight in the 1950s,” O'Connell demonstrates how the Corps reinforced its reputation for toughness and dedication in an epoch of increasing American militarism, even as it encountered societal problems of increasing criminal violence, alcoholism, and domestic abuse, not to mention the poor treatment of veterans and recruits in training. This is the book's least satisfactory chapter: it is laced with anachronistic usages (for example, a penchant for vogue word “warrior” [192]) and unpersuasive claims that USMC publicity machine somehow ensured the persistence of a positive and unvarnished image into the future.

The sixth and final chapter, “Rise of the Amphibious Force-in-Readiness,” returns to the task of defining Marine Corps culture by examining its success in budgetary and doctrinal wars with the other services. The hyperbolic endorsements here of the Corps as the nation's force-in-readiness could have been written by its Public Affairs Division. At the same time, the author is silent on the Corps' enduring problem—especially

1. Originally a 2009 Yale PhD dissertation.

2. The yet smaller US Coast Guard is dismissed in a footnote (2n2).

3. Cf. his “A Harsh and Spiritual Unity: A New Look at Culture and Battle in the Marine Corps' Pacific War,” *Int'l Journal of Naval History* 7.3 (2008) – [www.miwsr.com/rd/1506.htm](http://www.miwsr.com/rd/1506.htm).

severe since 1990—of securing the US Navy’s cooperation in providing it with indispensable shipping, transport, and landing craft.

In his conclusion, “Marine Corps Culture since 1965,” O’Connell postulates that

[their] emphasis on community helps explain why Marines have remained so high in the public’s esteem since World War II. For, as the feelings of young Frances Newman,<sup>4</sup> actor Jack Webb, and a host of politicians, journalists and ordinary citizens demonstrate, the culture of the Corps was not only attractive to its members. It ... gave the American people something that they valued.... [T]he standard explanations of what makes Marines impressive—their toughness, courage, and battlefield success—are only half the story. The Marines’ culture also had intimate, nostalgic and familial elements that they advertised and occasionally offered to the public. They gave their members (and some civilians too) ... a mediating community between family and nation—a network of affiliation that adapted the deep feelings of biological kin to a larger group of individuals. (277–78)

The goal of this book—to define the culture of a storied armed service—is a most ambitious one. Unfortunately, its author too often asks his reader to accept critical concepts or arguments entirely on faith. For instance, his claim that the values, accomplishments, goals, and infrastructure he identifies are unique to the Marine Corps should be proven by comparing them to those of the rival armed services. Instead, O’Connell simply denies that the other branches came near the standard of the Corps in this or that endeavor; he also tends to elevate a single example to a general pattern. We are supposed to agree that certain Marine Corps narratives evince specified cultural values or conditions. The author cites the literature on particular cultural attributes, but does not argue persuasively that they are now (or ever were) characteristic of the Corps as a whole. The reader is left to imagine that the actions of the men of every Marine Corps unit or base reflected these attributes. Nor does the author explain how the militarization of American society during the Cold War specifically favored the Marine Corps over the Army, Navy, and Air Force. All of the armed forces gained popularity and increasing visibility in American life during the 1950s, thanks to television programs, open houses, and demonstrations that featured each of the services in a most favorable light. The relative lack today of such publicity, combined with the abandonment of conscription, has meant a general decline of visibility for all the services. In short, there remains much room for skepticism about O’Connell’s thesis.

Perennially obsessed with losing status or being polluted by outside influences, they [Marines] displayed many of the traits of what anthropologists call a fundamentalist or enclave culture. And while it goes too far to call them a monastic order, the Marines of this era [World War II to the present] drew regularly on the language of religion, practices of extreme discipline and intricately scripted rituals to mark themselves as different, separate, and superior to every other organization around them. (6)

Perhaps so, but the author does not convincingly prove that this putative “culture” typified the myriad types of Marines and Marine Corps organizations or that it differed from that of the other services.

O’Connell assembles the testimony of Marines and former Marines to support his argument, but limits himself to the most outspoken zealots, many of them acknowledged icons of the Corps. This leaves unproven the cultural conformity of the vast number of Marines who have not written books or been interviewed for oral histories. The same sort of narrow selectivity mars his use of historical documentation. Thus, he maintains that the Marine Corps pioneered amphibious tactics before World War II (13–14), disregarding the landings practiced or executed by the Japanese and Russian armies in the 1930s. Moreover, Navy-Marine Corps doctrine for landings had to be rewritten or improvised during the war—most of its flaws were eliminated only in 1944. On another subject, the author’s many citations of brutality in World War II recruit training (34 ff.) are confined mostly to memoirs written decades after the fact. It is more likely that boot camp violence began to be inflicted in the 1950s by a cadre that had missed combat in Korea.

The book’s descriptions of fighting in the Pacific consistently overlook the experiences of the US Army (42 ff.), which made more landings than the Marines. Army soldiers certainly faced the same psychological

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4. The eighteen-year-old Newman wrote in June 1945 to the general commanding 4th Marine Division about the death of her brother at Iwo Jima, whereupon Gen. Clifton Cates sent a Marine Corps escort with gifts to attend her birthday; this was well reported in the press.

challenges of combat in that theater as the Marines, but O'Connell ignores the replacement of the exhausted 1st Marine Division at Peleliu by an Army infantry division and the relief of Marine units by Army units at Guadalcanal and Bougainville (43). There is no indication that the Marine landing on Guadalcanal was unopposed (47) or that the Army's green 27th Infantry Division was allowed to use only a single regiment at Makin Island, while most of the 2d Marine Division struggled to secure Tarawa/Betio. The infamous charges against the 27th Infantry Division for its performance in its first combat at Saipan lack fairness and objectivity; it had been assigned more challenging terrain between two experienced Marine Corps divisions. The notion that Marine Corps divisions other than the 1st were badly treated by the Army after their combat operations (48) omits the fact that those units were refitted in the Hawaiian Islands and later at Guam, while the Army's 27th Infantry Division went to the malaria-infested New Hebrides. Curiously, the author gives no equivalent description of the largest and last amphibious operation in the Pacific, Okinawa, where two Marine Corps and four Army divisions destroyed the Japanese garrison. In short, O'Connell proves neither that the Marine Corps suffered more than the Army in the Pacific nor that Marines' D-days there were any worse than the Army's in Europe.

The book is rife with errors of fact. The Commandant of the Marine Corps did not sit with the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS) at the end of the Vietnam War (1 and *passim*). Gen. Louis B. Wilson, Commandant from 1975 to 1979, became a full-time member of the JCS only in 1978. Prior to that, the Commandant was allowed to join the JCS only on matters pertaining to the Marine Corps. That the German Army called US Marines "Devil Dogs" during World War I (10–11) is a myth. The Marine Corps was not averse to nuclear weapons for its units, as the author claims (240, 245), and by the mid-1950s it demonstrated a zeal for nuclear ordnance and nuclear-capable missiles. O'Connell asserts that the Marines had embraced limited war in the 1950s (247), but the Corps approved war plans against the Soviet Union starting in the late 1940s, accelerated its procurement priorities for a heavy tank and added the Lacrosse tactical missile to its nuclear delivery capability in 1959. In 1975, tank battalions returned to all Marine divisions along with self-propelled artillery and NATO war plans were the basis for Marine Corps exercises and procurement programs through the following decade.<sup>5</sup> Marine Air-Ground Task Forces (MAGTF) did not operate with regularity in three oceans in the 1960s and continuous deployments of the lesser Marine Amphibious and Expeditionary Units in the Mediterranean date from 1971 (244–48 and *passim*). Despite the plans and proposals of USMC generals, the Marine units in the Korean War did not function as MAGTF, and Corps aviation was mostly under the control of the Navy and Air Force (243–44).

Rather than insisting on the exceptional nature of Marine Corps culture, O'Connell would have done better to set it in the context of legends and lore propagated by every armed service. The USMC, like all branches of the American military, seeks to use the media to trump its competitors in gaining a bigger share of the military budget. If Marines have cultivated an image expressed in the idea that "It's hard to be humble, when you are the best," the Corps, from the commandant down, has been a team player that fights the enemies of the state, whoever they may be. Marines today train for general purpose warfare as well as for insurgencies and small wars. They plan for nuclear warfare as well as amphibious raids, and they plead for the best technology, including heavy artillery, tanks, and superior fighter planes. All the services do the same.

Aaron O'Connell has performed a long overdue service in scrutinizing the stereotypes of the USMC and assessing their validity. It is disappointing that he so often perpetuates the more extreme myths of life in the Corps and implies that a single template applies to each individual Marine. He does not recognize various sources of friction, such as cliques within the ranks, including among the generals, or internal strife among the various specialties and units, especially in the air-ground teams. These and many other issues go unaddressed here, leaving readers with an incomplete and simplistic picture of a complicated organization. Nonetheless, *Underdogs* should be the starting place for anyone interested in the evolution of the Marine Corps in image and reality in the mid-twentieth century.

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5. See, esp., Steven T. Ross, *American War Plans 1945–1950* (1988; rpt. Portland, OR: Frank Cass, 1996) 49, 67–70, 88–90, and Marine Corps Objective Plan 1961 (22 Jan 58), NARA RG127/60A2514/Box 1.