



## *Titan: The Art of British Power in the Age of Revolution and Napoleon*

by William R. Nester.

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Political scientist William Nester (St. John's Univ.) has written several books on the "art of power" during the United States' first century<sup>1</sup> and in France's Fifth Republic.<sup>2</sup> In the present volume, he turns to the British in their twenty-three-year conflict against France in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. But what exactly is the "art of power"? In the first sentence of chapter 1, Nester states that "power involves doing what one can to get what one wants" (3)—in this case, what the British did to defeat the First Republic and the Napoleonic empire. Well and good, but we are left to wonder why we should think in terms of an *art* of power as opposed to an *exercise* of it. The author's claim to be providing "an empirical rather than theoretical analysis" (xiin4) would be more compelling if he did not constantly speak of an art of power as though it possessed a totemic value.

It is hard to detect any artistry in Britain's conflict with the French. From the start of hostilities in 1793, it hewed to its traditional eighteenth-century strategy of subsidizing coalitions of Continental powers to oppose the French, while using its own superior navy to check its enemy at sea and absorb French colonies into its own growing empire. Nester describes these coalitions chronologically chapter-by-chapter, describing how the British used loans and subsidies to cobble them together, only for them to be shattered by the French on the battlefield, leaving the British to start the process over again. A similar pattern recurs in the British attempts to deploy expeditionary forces on the Continent, leading to a litany of embarrassing failures prior to Wellington's victories in the Iberian peninsula; many words come to mind, but "art" is not high on the list.

If there is an art of power, then its practitioners must be artists. While Nester's account includes the usual cast of characters—Horatio Nelson, Lord Castlereagh, the Duke of Wellington—William Pitt the Younger is his choice as the era's foremost artist of British power. Only Pitt receives an entire chapter, devoted to a potted biography of his prewar life and career, with close attention to his fiscal abilities and reform policies. While the author's treatment of the long-serving prime minister is hardly uncritical, his censure of Pitt for rejecting Bonaparte's peace overtures in January 1800 is misplaced:

Pitt justified his decision by arguing that peace was impossible because Bonaparte could never be trusted to live up to it. A judicious look at the evidence, however, contradicts this assertion.... Bonaparte was indeed eager for peace after taking power in November 1799. War would stymie his ambitious plans to modernize France's economic, educational, and legal systems and promote art,

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1. Viz., *The Revolutionary Years, 1775–1789: The Art of American Power during the Early Republic* (Washington: Potomac Books, 2011), *The Hamiltonian Vision, 1789–1800: The Art of American Power during the Early Republic* (id., 2012), *The Age of Jackson and the Art of American Power* (id., 2013), and *The Age of Lincoln and the Art of American Power, 1848–1876* (id., 2014).

2. *De Gaulle's Legacy: The Art of Power in France's Fifth Republic* (NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

science, and innovation. He tried to rally France's political and business elite behind his plans through a series of speeches and newspaper articles. In a classic case of cognitive dissonance, Pitt and his colleagues ignored all this and clung to the scary caricature that Bonaparte was nothing more than an insatiable warmonger. In doing so, they failed to uphold the most vital element in wielding the art of power—to know one's enemy. (153–54)

This damning judgment is grounded in a hindsight that Nester's subjects lacked. The context of the cabinet's assessment was not Bonaparte's stated intentions or actions, but the frequently unstable revolutionary governments that preceded him. Even if they believed Bonaparte was sincere, they expected, given the previous decade in French politics, that it would only be a matter of time before they faced a new regime that might not feel obligated to honor his initiatives.

Other misconceptions raise concerns about the author's command of British history.<sup>3</sup> The text is rife with both typographical and more serious errors, like the assertion that that “only Horace [sic, read Robert] Walpole” (335) served longer as prime minister than Pitt. These mistakes make *Titan* a flawed introduction to its subject, which has been well covered in fine studies by Roger Knight (absent from Nester's bibliography), Rory Muir, and Christopher Hall.<sup>4</sup>

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3. To claim that “for nine centuries after the Norman conquest of 1066, the British Isles did not face a serious threat of being invaded, let alone vanquished” (7) is to accept the now-debunked mythology that William of Orange's landing at Torbay in 1688 with over fourteen thousand troops was anything other than a Dutch invasion.

4. Respectively, *Britain against Napoleon: The Organization of Victory, 1793–1815* (NY: Penguin, 2013); *Britain and the Defeat of Napoleon, 1807–1815* (New Haven: Yale U Pr, 1996); and *British Strategy in the Napoleonic Wars, 1803–1815* (Manchester: Univ Pr, 1992).