



Flying Camelot: The F-15, The F-16, and the Weaponization of Fighter Pilot Nostalgia by Michael W. Hankins.

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John Boyd (1927–97) is a polarizing figure. Military historian Michael Hankins¹ experienced this firsthand when he posted a brief article to an online journal discussing Boyd’s legacy.² Describing Boyd as the “US Air Force’s most controversial pilot and thinker,” Hankins cited some of Boyd’s various accolades—“legendary,” “a paragon of virtue,” “a premier fighter pilot.” But he also noted that others had considered Boyd “highly overrated ..., a failed officer and even a failed human being.” Hankins then dismantled other elements of the Boyd-orthodoxy, describing Boyd’s work developing the F-16 as part “subterfuge.” He also reported that the former fighter pilot had admitted to “copying” some charts used in his renowned Energy-Maneuverability analyses.³ Within days, Hankins was pilloried in the blog’s comments and across social media. Undeterred, in *Flying Camelot*, he has written a superlative, accessible, and balanced study of the influence Boyd and his acolytes had on the US Air Force (hereafter “Air Force”) and national defense establishment in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

Rather than writing another hagiography of John Boyd, Hankins casts his subject as the lead in an analysis of the “cultlike fanaticism” that shaped fighter aircraft design and Air Force policy following Vietnam (9). Routinely beaten by lower-cost North Vietnamese MiGs, the Air Force and its pilots yearned for the lopsided results they had enjoyed years earlier over Korea. A nostalgia for close-range dogfighting in sleek single-seat aircraft like the F-86 Sabre captivated Boyd and his cohort of fighter pilots. They dreamt of a new generation of fighter planes to replace the ugly, multi-role, two-seat F-4 Phantom. A new fighter plane, designed specifically to dominate in a dogfight, would represent the “Camelot of aeronautical engineering” (5). It would also rejuvenate the fighter pilot ethos and restore the pilots’ own mythical “Camelot” (10).

Hankins, now a curator at the Smithsonian National Air and Space Museum,⁴ goes further than previous historians describing the mythical fighter pilot.⁵ Drawing on a rich array of sources—biographies, oral histories, mission reports, and secondary literature including comics and pulp fiction—Hankins identifies five core elements of the symbolic white-scarfed fighter pilot: aggressiveness, independence, heroic imagery, technology, and community, each infused with strong “concepts of masculinity” (4). He acknowledges that not all fighter pilots exhibit every one

1. In 2018, a professor at the US Air Force Air Command and Staff College.

2. Viz., *From Balloons to Drones*, “A Discourse on John Boyd: A Brief Summary of the US Air Force’s Most Controversial Pilot and Thinker” (22 Aug. 2018)—available online.

3. On Energy–Maneuverability (E-M) theory, see also Grant T. Hammond, *The Mind of War: John Boyd and American Security* (Washington DC: Smithsonian Books, 2001) ch. 4.

4. Specializing in Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps post-World War II aviation.

5. Cf. Linda R. Robertson, *The Dream of Civilized Warfare: World War I Flying Aces and the American Imagination* (Minneapolis: U Minnesota Pr, 2003).

of these elements, and there is also a spectrum within each element. But Boyd bordered on the extreme in every area; in short, he was “the exemplar of the ideal fighter pilot” (56).

Having defined this “cultural context,” Hankins then details the “long and tumultuous” design process that yielded the F-15 Eagle (33, 52). Summoned to the Pentagon to assist with the aircraft’s early development, Boyd and his growing pool of disciples and like-minded fighter pilots fought to transform the early aircraft concepts from bloated, do-all F-111 clones to a stripped-down, air superiority fighter optimized for close-in dogfighting. Though they made considerable progress, they were disappointed in the final design: the F-15 was “too big, too sophisticated, and too expensive” to restore the “white scarf stuff of aerial combat” (95–96). Only starting afresh could Boyd and the others build a fighter jet that could “live up to their idealized image of knights of the air fighting aerial duels” (96).

Hankins next recounts how the new Lightweight Fighter (LWF) took shape as a physical manifestation of Boyd’s mythical fighter pilot. To tell this story, he musters a range of sources, including a windfall of correspondence gathered by Robert Coram for his biography of Boyd.⁶ Boyd and his “Fighter Mafia” wanted the new LWF aircraft to be the most maneuverable ever built. Their design validated Boyd’s E-M theories in the extreme, but, because it would lack the heavy electronics of other Air Force fighters, the new plane was suited only to a “day visual fighter air combat environment” (108). This was of little concern to the Fighter Mafia as they undertook the “Lord’s work,” tirelessly championing their perfect fighter while “waging an insurgency within the Pentagon” against anyone who opposed them (104). Even though the new LWF was an aeronautical engineering success, the Air Force promptly modified its design, spawning the larger, electronics-enabled, multi-mission F-16 Fighting Falcon. Disgusted by the bureaucratic outsiders’ alterations to their ideal fighter plane, Boyd and his Fighter Mafia concluded that the military-industrial complex was too corrupt and biased toward exquisite and costly technology to embrace their genius.

Hankins devotes another three chapters to detailing how Boyd’s team thereafter pivoted to address broader national defense issues, eventually spurring the Defense Reform Movement of the 1980s. He skillfully dissects Boyd’s later pseudo-philosophical works, including his theories of the Patterns of Conflict and the OODA (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act) Loop, finding evidence of the original fighter pilot ethos that drove the veteran aviator’s thinking. Hankins also examines the inconsistent and “zero-sum” analyses used by members of the Fighter Mafia, now known as “Reformers,” as they attacked the defense industry (144).

[The Reformers] argued that military technology had gotten too complex, the system too full of corrupt insiders. By looking nostalgically to the past—a time of simpler, cheaper weapons and a military run by warriors instead of bureaucrats—they could restore greatness to the military and maybe, by implication, to America itself. (148)

Given recent US defense failures in Vietnam, Afghanistan, and Iran, the Reformers’ message resonated. The popular press characterized the Reformers as “David” facing the defense industry’s “Goliath.” A Military Reform Caucus emerged in Congress, but it “was a big tent and purposefully tried to avoid policy proposals that could become too partisan or ideologically divisive” (161). After a flurry of early activity, the movement lost its luster and fizzled out in 1987 as many realized the Reformers’ analyses and proposed solutions were too reductionist to be useful (166). Hankins nonetheless believes they had been a useful “foil for the mainstream defense establishment,”

6. Viz. *Boyd: The Fighter Pilot Who Changed the Art of War* (Boston: Little, Brown, 2002).

prompting “introspection and improvement” to alter defense “procurement processes and doctrinal assumptions” for the better (172).

Hankins closes with a discussion of the role of the Fighter Mafia and Reformers during the 1991 Gulf War. Given the conflict’s timing and successful outcome, it is no surprise that proponents and opponents both claimed victory for their positions.

Most observers interpreted the war as a refutation of the Reformers’ ideas: advanced, expensive technologies were devastatingly effective. The Reformers themselves saw the war as a validation of their ideas, seizing on particular examples and interpretive lenses while giving John Boyd credit for the US victory. (174)

However, Hankins notes that, by the mid-1980s, the Reformers had become so isolated and dogmatic in their views of warfare and military technology that they could no longer effectively partner with the defense establishment. The Gulf War proved that air combat had not reverted to the Fighter Mafia’s preference for visual dogfighting. Moreover, the complex technologies the Reformers had long disparaged—including the Air Force’s F-15 and the Army’s M1 Abrams tank—performed admirably during the short conflict. “If the Reformers were right, they were right in a specific, purely hypothetical scenario” rather than the full environment that combatants encountered in the skies and deserts of Iraq (174).

Hankins describes *Flying Camelot* as the “biography of an idea” of how wars should be fought according to a popular myth embraced by a distinct subculture within the Air Force (10). In World War I, air combat was celebrated as individualistic, heroic, and chivalrous. However, the image of knightly aerial duels set against picturesque, blue-sky backgrounds belied the brutal reality for the antagonists. It was a myth from the outset, but one that the public and pilots themselves embraced “for over a century” through a “feedback loop of cultural expectations” (24, 26). With each generation, the attachment to the past strengthened even as the reality of air warfare diverged further from its original representation. Nonetheless, the fighter pilots’ enchantment with the nostalgic image of their forebears’ aggressiveness, independence, heroism, technology, and community played a key role in shaping military aviation and national defense policies for nearly a quarter-century after Vietnam. In the end, “the Fighter Mafia and the Reformers thought air-to-air combat was cool, and they wanted to build airplanes that excelled at that role” (199). Their outsized influence on the Air Force and national defense policy attests to the Sirens’ song of nostalgia.