



Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II by Paul M. Kennedy.

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. Pp. xxii, 521. ISBN 978-0-300-26531-6.

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New books by leading historians are normally a cause for celebration. But Yale historian Paul Kennedy's *Victory at Sea* grew from unfortunate circumstances. As detailed in his preface, he originally agreed to write a companion text for a volume of Ian Marshall's naval paintings. Sadly, Marshall passed away in 2016, at which point Kennedy chose to transform his project into a much larger, more grandiose synthesis than originally envisioned. The finished product pays fitting tribute to Marshall: over fifty of his paintings serve as helpful guideposts in a sprawling narrative.

As in his acclaimed *Rise and Fall of Great Powers*,¹ Kennedy uses the naval dimensions of World War II to clarify the larger shifts in international power in 1936–46, when a tiered but still multipolar naval order succumbed to growing US naval dominance.

The book comprises five parts: the first concerns growth of sea power through the interwar period; the second covers the war through 1942; the third focuses on 1943; the fourth assesses the Allied victory of 1944–45; and the fifth offers an analytical wrap-up. Three short appendices underline Kennedy's view of the timing of the Allies' victory and their productive advantage over the Axis nations.

Victory at Sea comes on the heels of two other well regarded syntheses of the naval dimensions of World War II—Craig Symonds' *World War II at Sea*² and Phillips P. O'Brien's *How the War Was Won*.³ Kennedy's argument echoes the latter's in stressing materiel over individual contributions to the war effort.

The book stands out among Kennedy's writings for its Braudel-like stress on factors like geography, population, and economics underlying the shift from an Anglo-European center of global power to the United States. Chapter 8, "The Shift in Global Power Balances, 1943–1944," emerges as the spine of the narrative, detailing just how much American industrial productivity grew during the war and tipped the scales of materiel towards the Allies. That the United States became the engine of the Allied war effort is obviously not news, but Kennedy's heavy reliance on statistics will leave even the most skeptical readers in awe.

The book's distinctive approach is hampered by curious choices and errors. Readers may dislike Kennedy's concentration on the Atlantic and Mediterranean theaters rather than the Pacific, despite the latter's larger scope; but this can be excused, given the greater danger Germany posed to the Allies than did Japan.

Errors and infelicities mar the text too frequently, as, for instance, when aircraft carriers and other large surface warships are called "boats." While Kennedy does cite recent scholarship on the

1. Subtitle, *Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500 to 2000* (NY: Random House, 1987).

2. Subtitle, *A Global History* (NY: Oxford U Pr, 2018).

3. Subtitle, *Air-Sea Power and Allied Victory in World War II* (NY: Cambridge U Pr, 2015).

naval dimensions of World War II such as the aforementioned O'Brien volume, he most often engages with the works of Corelli Barnett, all of them now thirty-plus years old.⁴

Still more contentious are Kennedy's in-text references to *Wikipedia* entries, which will displease scholars who have spent decades advising their students to avoid citing this sometimes unreliable resource. While *Wikipedia* has tried to improve the editorial quality of its entries, the constant evolution of those entries over time will frustrate those seeking to find sources in its notes. *Wikipedia* entries, like larger scholarly syntheses such as *Victory at Sea* and other volumes cited by Kennedy, are built upon monographs; as a result, there is a missed opportunity to showcase the unheralded books and articles used to construct them.

While some of Kennedy's choices may frustrate readers, *Victory at Sea* is a readable, handsomely illustrated, and affordable hardcover volume that will engage laypersons and edify scholars at a time when debate rages over the effects of rising Chinese power and the recent exponential growth of the People's Liberation Army Navy.

4. E.g., *Engage the Enemy More Closely: The Royal Navy in the Second World War* (NY: Norton, 1991).