

*Military History for the Modern Strategist. America's Major Wars Since 1861*

Michael O'Hanlon

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This interesting, thoughtful and well-written work follows the pattern of all-too-many books today in not actually matching its title. *Military History for the Modern Strategist*? Definitely not. Much of the world is not really covered, and most of it only if it relates to America. Instead, the subtitle is far more germane, although there are extensions on offer at some points. Does this matter? Well, yes, unfortunately. This is not so much a case of equity, although that would be a reasonable goal. After all, 'Military History for the Modern Strategist' should offer something for those of such major states as Brazil, India, South Africa and Turkey, which either do not feature in the book at all or apparently deserve much mention.

More significantly, even if the book is restricted to an American utilitarian perspective, as it frequently verges on doing, it is appropriate to have a forensic understanding of what military history and strategy means to other powers in order best to engage with them, as enemies, allies or whatever. Indeed, when modern strategy in the West is referred to as in disarray, which has been a frequent complaint over the last 15 years (and should have been since the Cold War ended), the focus should not be, as in O'Hanlon's book, on going back to some supposed fundamental state of American Grand Strategy, or strategy as a whole, but, rather, to understand the range, variety and multi-contextualism of strategies. This then helps bring to the fore the multivalent nature of the sphere and, as a linked question, the complexity in a context of many actors of trying to achieve an appropriate (or any) prioritisation in order to pursue goals and implement policies. The belief that a player can address this by going back to its first principles is attractive, but flawed, because it downplays the role of other participants. Moreover, there is the conceptual and methodological problem of assuming clearcut national interests, and therefore optimal policies, rather than accepting that these are inherently debatable and political.

O'Hanlon's book has much to offer those who are new to the subject and will benefit from an essentially clear read. The specialist may not be surprised by O'Hanlon's three lessons: 'Outcomes in war are not preordained'; 'War is usually harder and bloodier than expected'; and 'America's grand strategy is strong enough to absorb some setbacks.' Nor would it amaze the specialist to see that caution and restraint are endorsed for America alongside resoluteness, and that there is scepticism about any focus on supposedly transformative weapons technology.

The book is fairly up-to-date on detail, and its operational focus on strategy will please many readers. Others might prefer a military history for the modern strategist.

Jeremy Black's books include histories of air power, naval power, tank warfare, artillery, World Wars One and Two, the Cold War and strategy.