

# ENGELSBERG IDEAS

**A marriage of the geopolitical, the military and the material —  
*Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global  
Order in World War II* by Paul Kennedy**

## Review

- [Lincoln Paine](#)

*While the intricacies of twentieth-century military history offer a well-trod path, the experience of reading Kennedy's latest work is as humbling as it would be to watch a master chef prepare one's favourite recipe.*



German sailors standing on the conning tower of a U-boat. Credit: Everett Collection Inc / Alamy Stock Photo.

When considering a new book on a topic as well-trod as the naval aspects of the [Second World War](#), the first question that comes to mind is whether the world really needs another one. In the case of [Paul Kennedy's \*Victory at Sea\*](#), the answer is yes. The book doesn't break new ground. Rather, Kennedy interweaves a robust narrative of the principal events set against the main arcs of the conflict — the battle of the Atlantic, the contest for the Mediterranean, and the Pacific theatre — with an analysis of why things unfolded the way they did. Some battles are described at length, but Kennedy prefers a more bird's-eye

view of events within the context of great power relations to blow-by-blow accounts of manoeuvres or convoy logistics.

Kennedy marries the military, the material, and the geopolitical to reveal ‘the linkages between on the one hand the profound changes that drive and shape the course of history and on the other hand the day-to-day or even year-to-year events that occur, some of them dramatic, grand, and fast-moving’. Central to his exposition is how the United States unleashed its latent industrial potential, a theme familiar to readers of Kennedy’s [The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers](#). If the central idea lacks novelty, it isn’t due to the reader being jaded. The experience of reading *Victory at Sea* is as humbling as it would be to watch a master chef prepare one’s favourite recipe.

The pleasure of the text — perhaps the most sensible one-volume introduction to the naval history of the Second World War — is complemented by more than fifty remarkable watercolours by [Ian Marshall](#), a former [Fellow of the American Society of Marine Artists](#). The centrality of these illustrations stems from is the book’s origins as an expansion of a text Kennedy planned to write for a collection of paintings called *The Fighting Warships of the Second World War*, a project forestalled by Marshall’s death in 2016. Yale University Press deserves credit for producing *Victory at Sea* in full colour on paper that showcases Marshall’s art and lends clarity to the many maps, charts, and tables.

Marshall’s portfolio in *Victory at Sea* focuses exclusively on [ships](#) — a few merchant vessels and their corvette and destroyer escorts, submarines and U-boats, but mostly capital ships: cruisers, battleships, and aircraft carriers. People appear rarely, and when they do, they are indistinct. In this respect, as an approach to understanding the war, both the illustrations and the narrative seem to hail from a very distinct past. Indeed, Kennedy borrows the title from a 1952 US Navy television documentary about the Second World War, which also highlights the importance of American productivity to the Allied victory. At one point in the documentary, the narrator intones, ‘The United States of America organises her land, her resources, her industry, her men . . . In the greatest mobilisation of strength ever known to the world, America prepares to rescue the world. And to the rescue, America marches.’ This is Kennedy’s thesis in a nutshell, although he is at pains to explain the United States’ effort to get to the starting line.

Kennedy identifies the key to Europeans’ global dominance during the long nineteenth century (1789–1919) as the ‘Military Revolution at Sea,’ which featured ‘organized, state-financed and state-built fleets of warships struggling for command of international trade and markets and . . . pushing to acquire the adjoining coastlands and, eventually, their hinterlands.’ The ability to project and defend political, economic, and military control from the sea made European overseas empires possible, and both industrial and economic capacity and a navy were requirements for a nation aspiring to ‘great power’ status.

Yet Kennedy never fully explains what constitutes a great power or how a country achieves such status. While it seems to be the product of a combination of money, machinery, and military might, the last may not be necessary. Sketching the industrial, demographic, and economic growth of the United States in comparison with that of Europe as far back as the turn of the century, Kennedy concedes that ‘Without the war, [the United States] might not have become so obviously the greatest of the Great Powers by 1945 after all.’ So, prowess on the field of battle doesn’t seem a prerequisite.

The war not only defeated ‘the Fascist states’ aggressions,’ it also weakened ‘irretrievably the European colonial empires (even the British) . . . to leave the United States and, a bit more shakily, the USSR as the only large powers standing upright after 1945.’ Yet there is no discussion of the [Soviet Union’s industry during the war](#). In Kennedy’s telling, the USSR seems to have survived thanks to a combination of American generosity and the sacrifices of the Royal Navy. How it managed to end the war as a great power in a bipolar world goes unexplained.

Equally puzzling is Kennedy's assertion that, as the United States out-produced European countries, 'what seemed even more unusual . . . was the continued insistence of this nation's policy-makers on having such a minuscule army . . . and on trying to stay absent from most world affairs. Number one powers in the past didn't do that sort of thing.' To whom this seemed unusual is not clear. Nor is it clear the United States was, or should have been, actively competing to be the 'number one power.'

The isolationist tendencies Kennedy observes have deep roots in the United States, and for many reasons. Though not often articulated as such, one problem of being a great power is that it comes with great responsibilities that most countries are ill-equipped to honour. So, the peace of the [Pax Romana](#), the [Pax Britannica](#), and the Pax Americana were and are enforced by almost endless warfare, if not directly with other great powers then via their proxies. For the United States, this has played out from Latin America and the Caribbean to Africa and Asia, and now Ukraine.

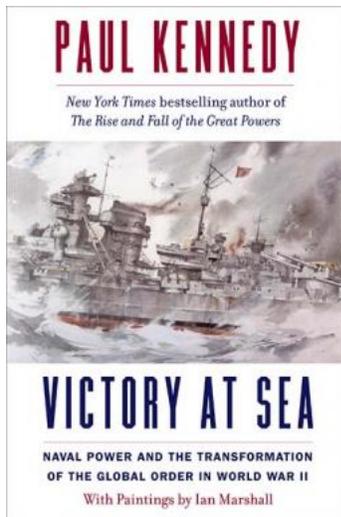
The path of America's rise ignores the many variables that had to fall into place just so to achieve the result that Kennedy paints as almost inevitable: 'the culmination, more or less, of Tocqueville's 1835 prophecy that this nation was one day destined to sway the destinies of half the globe.' In the harsh light of 2022, with the rise of nationalism, wealth gaps, and political polarisation, among other things, ignoring particular circumstances is a glaring oversight.

What if Germany had started the war with more submarines? What if the US had not come to Britain's aid? What if Germany had not invaded the USSR, or declared war on the United States? What if Japan and the Soviet Union had abandoned their Neutrality Pact of 1941 and the US–Vladivostok route for Lend-Lease shipments had been as dangerous as the Murmansk run? How would any of these contingencies affected the 'huge technology base [that] existed as a precondition' of Allied success in 1944, and thus victory over [Germany](#) and [Japan](#) the next year?

In view of America's current domestic turmoil, one consideration is the New Deal policies enacted by the Roosevelt administration in the 1930s. Among other things, this contributed to a massive increase in hydroelectric power generation. The Grand Coulee Dam in Washington State began operation only two months before Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour and provided electric power for Pacific Coast shipyards, aircraft manufacturers, and, starting in 1943, processing plutonium for the [Manhattan Project](#).

Another Public Works Administration project, the Tennessee Valley Authority, made it possible to convert bauxite into aluminium, an enormously energy-intensive process that Kennedy describes in an appendix. Without these New Deal policies, which conservatives reviled as 'socialist,' or if 'America First' Nazi sympathisers gained the White House during the 1930s, America's role in the Second World War and the trajectory to great power status Kennedy describes would have been markedly different.

Well into the twenty-first century, we have drifted out of an age of navies into something altogether different. Our global economy is highly dependent upon maritime trade, but units of naval power are at an historic low point both in absolute terms and relative to the volume of shipping, defined either by tonnage or number of ships. This calls not for a tweaking of historians [Alfred Thayer Mahan](#) or Julian Corbett — both of whom Kennedy invokes here — but a wholesale revision of naval policy and construction. Kennedy hammers home again and again the lesson that the shipbuilding priorities of the interwar period proved almost irrelevant to the realities of the war that came. The one clear lesson *Victory at Sea* holds for today is that the strategies, tactics, and weaponry of any future great power naval war will have little, if anything, in common with those of the last one.



Paul Kennedy, *Victory at Sea: Naval Power and the Transformation of the Global Order in World War II*. Illustrated by Ian Marshall. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2022. 544 Pages, 7.00 x 10.00 in, 53 colour illus. + maps and charts. ISBN 13: 978-0-30021-9-173. Hardback \$37.50

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