

PRESIDENT'S FORUM



The Rules of the Game *and Professional Military Ethics*

IN THIS PRESIDENT'S FORUM, I'd like to share some thoughts about a recent addition to my bookshelf: *The Rules of the Game: Jutland and British Naval Command*, by Andrew Gordon (Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press, 2013). At first glance, it looks like a rather obscure history book on the battle of Jutland. After reading it, however, I now see it as an astute study of command culture with important insights on professional military ethics. This is a book with which every member of the maritime profession of arms should spend time.

Before diving into the book and its lessons, let me explain how it got on my bookshelf.

One of the best parts of this assignment is the opportunity to meet with all the great leaders who visit the Naval War College over the course of a year. Last fall, General James Mattis, USMC (Ret.), was here in Newport for a lecture of opportunity, and I had a chance to speak with him prior to the lecture. We discussed the leader development challenge the Navy is addressing today: how best to prepare our leaders for naval warfare at sea, with near-peer competitors, in an age of precision strike, and in an increasingly complex operational environment.

When I asked whether he had any recommendations on books to read that might be relevant, he stated without hesitation: "Gardner, you have to read *The Rules of the Game*—it tells the story of what happened to Britain's Royal Navy between Nelson at Trafalgar and Jellicoe at Jutland."

With only a foggy knowledge of Jellicoe and the faintest understanding of the battle of Jutland, I responded with a hearty "Wilco, sir," and we headed off to his lecture.

That night, I went home and ordered the book on Amazon. Three days later, the package arrived; I was ready to rip through the book and looked forward to its leadership lessons. Well, I opened the package and my jaw dropped—I saw this tome of a book, more than two inches thick and over seven hundred pages. My dreams of a quick read and quick lessons on leader development were dashed. But, motivated by the directness of General Mattis’s recommendation, I waded into the book. By the time I was finished, I knew I had read a seminal document with important implications for how I thought about the maritime profession of arms and the enduring ethical challenges our members face.

In the introduction, Gordon, a noted naval historian, explains that the book originated out of a simple disagreement with a retired naval officer about the appropriateness of the tactics the British employed at Jutland. In this discussion, Gordon suggested that, on meeting the German High Seas Fleet, the British 5th Battle Squadron either should have turned in succession immediately or turned all together, rather than turning in the delayed, in-succession manner in which it did. Gordon’s suggestion provoked such a strong response from his colleague that he decided to dive into his own primary-source research. Over the course of that research, Gordon’s focus shifted from the history of the battle and “could have / should have” questions to a detailed look at the command culture of the Royal Navy—more specifically, the *changes* in the command culture of the Royal Navy from Nelson at Trafalgar to Jellicoe at Jutland—and the key forces that drove those changes.

Shifting from Nelson’s Command Culture

The battle of Trafalgar was fought off the Spanish coast on 21 October 1805. In this most decisive naval engagement of the Napoleonic Wars, Nelson’s twenty-seven ships went up against the thirty-three ships of the combined Spanish and French fleets. Twenty-two Spanish and French ships were lost, while the British didn’t lose a single ship.

The manner in which Nelson commanded during this battle sealed his legacy as an extraordinary combat leader. He focused his energy on setting conditions for success in battle well before the battle itself. He held frequent, face-to-face meetings with his commanders to ensure they had a common understanding of the situation, the enemy, and his intent. He encouraged initiative and empowered his subordinate commanders at every level. Together, these actions allowed Nelson to execute decentralized operations effectively and succeed in combat. A master of what we now know as mission command, Nelson was a professional whose “greatest gift of leadership was to raise his juniors above the need of supervision” (Gordon, *The Rules of the Game*, p. 160).

About halfway through the book, Gordon has a chapter titled “The Long Calm Lee of Trafalgar.” It’s here that Gordon moves away from the battle of Jutland itself and spends the next two-hundred-plus pages recounting the changes in British command culture, and the drivers of those changes, in the century between Trafalgar and Jutland.

In the aftermath of Trafalgar, the Royal Navy reigned supreme across the oceans of the world during a period of significant social and technological change. This period witnessed the rise of Victorian culture as Britain enjoyed prosperity and the ever-increasing spread of its empire. Gordon writes (p. 179), “The Victorians sought to structure and codify as many fields of behavior as possible in order to regulate their world, disarm the unpredictable, and perpetuate the status quo.” As William Manchester writes in *The Last Lion*, central to the Victorian’s worldview was a “firm belief in obedience—absolute obedience to God, the Queen, and one’s superiors. . . . It was a time of pervasive authoritarianism . . . [and] [u]nquestioning submission to orders.”* The way to succeed in life, as in sport, was to play by the rules of the game—to comply with the established order. With some understanding, Gordon notes (p. 182) that “the tendency of the late Victorians to ritualize and regulate, and thereby ‘tokenize,’ warfare was perhaps a natural one for the world’s foremost territorial freeholder.”

This was also a period of significant technological change. As the Industrial Revolution progressed, ships’ propulsion transitioned from sail to steam and their weapons transitioned from cannon to guns. Gordon asserts (p. 183) that these changes resulted in a new era of seamanship for the Royal Navy, a “seamanship of iron and steam,” in which “mathematics were subverting the art of centuries and a vista of possibilities opened up for tightly choreographed geometrical evolutions—far beyond what had been possible with sailing fleets.”

Gordon argues (p. 182) that the combination of the social and technological changes during this period had a significant impact on the Royal Navy’s command culture. As they looked back to the legacy of Nelson and forward to the almost unlimited potential of controlled fleet actions, “the Victorians chose to extract the myth of the central genius directing the lovely obedient fleet with brilliance and precision.” Jutland would prove the shortcomings of this approach to command and control.

One interesting indicator of this authoritarian approach to command is the Royal Navy’s *Signal Book*, which Gordon calls (p. 183) “the supreme agent of centralization.” Dating from 1799, the *Signal Book* had been established before Nelson’s time, but what changed over this period was its size and role. In its early

* William Manchester, *The Last Lion*, vol. 1, *Visions of Glory 1874–1932* (New York: Random House, 1983), p. 70.

days, the *Signal Book*'s limitations were appreciated and its primary use was to supplement commander's intent. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, it had grown to over five hundred pages in two volumes, and had become enshrined as the key enabler not only of fleet maneuvering but also of effective naval operations.

At the end of *The Rules of the Game*, Gordon acknowledges (p. 564) that the Grand Fleet achieved its strategic objective at Jutland: maintaining sea control and holding the threat of the German High Seas Fleet at bay. At the same time, however, he questions whether Jellicoe and the Royal Navy "gave Jutland their best shot." Noting that "war is infinitely unpredictable in detail, nobody can expect to control it, and the power of a military force must include its capacity to respond rapidly and effectively to unscripted eventualities," he states (p. 565) that Jellicoe's "main fault was that 'control' was a contract he tried to make with fate; he feared losing it . . . and imposed a doctrinal regime which seemingly presumed to govern the very nature of war." One has to wonder, Gordon implicitly questions, how World War I might have transpired if the Grand Fleet had operated with a decentralized command structure, clear commander's intent, subordinate empowerment, and individual initiative.

As you can imagine, at seven hundred pages in length, there is much more to this book, including the following (p. 597):

- The story of Vice Admiral Sir George Tyron that recounts his attempts to reinstall a Nelsonian and decentralized approach to operations, the *Victoria-Camperdown* collision in 1893 that ended such efforts, and the resulting courts-martial that rewarded the members of the bridge team who, while knowing that the ordered maneuver was going to result in a collision, held fast to the culture of obedience and simply executed the order
- Gordon's own lessons learned from the research, and his offering of twenty-eight "syndromes" that impact maritime forces today
- Gordon's discussion about "regulators and ratcatchers," in which he points out that there is in peacetime a natural rise in the predominance of "regulators," and therefore there is a need to develop, deliberately and purposefully, "ratcatchers": officers comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity and ready to exercise initiative when appropriate

It's important to highlight that *The Rules of the Game* is not without its critics. Some scholars of naval history see Gordon's treatment of Jellicoe as too negative and too pro-Beatty, and opine that *The Rules of the Game* fails to give the Royal Navy full credit for its successful incorporation of emerging technology (efficient and reliable mechanical propulsion, central direction of gunnery, signals intelligence, and wireless communications).

Key Takeaways

Despite such critiques, this has become a very important book to me. I read it while clarifying what the profession of arms means to me; what my professional identity was—and what it should be; and how I should think about ethics in this framework. Within this context, *The Rules of the Game* spoke loudly. It challenged me to think more broadly about professional military ethics, far beyond the rules-based, compliance focus of ethics to which I had become accustomed over the course of my career.

The story of the Royal Navy in the nineteenth century pointed out to me that a profession's identity, the culture that underpins it, is never static, but rather in a constant state of evolution. Left unattended, that culture will morph, and there is a natural tendency for bureaucratic attributes to dominate professional attributes. As a result, members of the profession have an *ethical responsibility* never, never to take the profession's identity for granted. We must assess the profession's identity constantly and deliberately, then nurture and sustain the attributes that best serve the client—for us, the American people.

Additionally, I saw a cautionary tale for the U.S. Navy, with parallels between what Gordon described as the “long, calm lee of Trafalgar” and the U.S. Navy's history since World War II. Reading and reflecting on *The Rules of the Game* made me realize that, as stewards of our profession, we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that our Navy doesn't fall prey to the potential for complacency and professional erosion in what could be described as our own “long, calm lee of Leyte Gulf.”

Finally, I saw a clear linkage between the key lessons of the book and our Navy's “Design for Maintaining Maritime Superiority.” The Design highlights the critical importance of decentralized operations to achieve success in a complex environment, and calls for our Navy to focus on being prepared for decentralized operations. Trust and confidence are the critical enablers of decentralized operations. Bureaucratic organizations are characteristically low-trust and low-confidence organizations. *Only an organization with a strong professional identity engenders the trust and confidence necessary to fight and win in a complex environment.*

So, reading *The Rules of the Game* reinforced in me the idea that there is a war-fighting imperative that we view our Navy as a profession. Such a view isn't an academic exercise or a purely theoretical construct; it has practical and operational implications. As stewards of this profession, I see clearly that we have an ethical responsibility to ensure that our professional identity, including the attributes of our professional identity most essential for war fighting—integrity, accountability, initiative, and toughness—is never taken for granted, but rather constantly and deliberately developed, nurtured, and sustained.

During the centenary anniversary of the battle of Jutland this year, I encourage all members of the U.S. Navy to read (or reread) *The Rules of the Game*, reflect on the experiences of the Royal Navy, and commit to strengthening our sense of professional identity.

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