

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of "Mastering the Art of Command: Admiral Chester W. Nimitz and Victory in the Pacific"

Trent Hone, Annapolis, MD: Naval Institute Press (2022)

Review By: John J. Abbatiello

Trent Hone brings an interesting set of perspectives to this recent military biography of Admiral Chester W. Nimitz, Commander in Chief of the Pacific Fleet and Commander in Chief of the Pacific Ocean Areas during World War II. Hone is an expert on the history of the US Navy in the early Twentieth Century, with several excellent books and articles covering doctrine and leadership during this era. He is also an organizational learning consultant, advising organizations about improving their processes and techniques. In *Mastering the Art of Command*, Hone applies management theory and ideas about organizational leadership to investigate Nimitz's performance as a fleet and theater commander.

Hone focuses his analysis on Nimitz's World War II experience, with very little discussion about his pre-war or post-war career. This limited scope allows a laser-like focus on how the Admiral made decisions, how he organized his headquarters, and most importantly how he built relationships with his key subordinates and staff members. From his arrival as Pacific Fleet commander on Christmas Day 1941, to the signing of the Japanese surrender aboard the *USS Missouri* on 02 September 1945, Nimitz clearly excelled as a strategic leader. Hone highlights several reasons for this success throughout the book.

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Firstly, Nimitz fostered a team environment with his subordinate commanders and staff members. He did this through regular meetings, which the Navy at the time called “the conference method,” to promote collaborative problem solving and sense making (p. 342). Nimitz had a knack for encouraging open debate and ensuring psychological safety, through humility, inquisitiveness, and open-mindedness. Secondly, Hone highlights Nimitz’s decentralized approach to command, pushing authority and decision-making responsibility to the lowest levels possible in order to maintain the initiative against the Japanese and seize opportunities as soon as they became evident. Thirdly, Nimitz built his headquarters staffs by putting the right people in the right roles, knowledge he developed from relationships he had nurtured. For example, he placed two very aggressive senior officers in his plans and operations sections in order to meet his intent for staying ahead of the Japanese decision cycle, while giving logistical responsibilities to subordinates who were highly competent but methodical leaders.

The final organizational leadership techniques dealt with what Hone calls “continual reorientation,” “relentless pursuit of options,” and “strategic artistry.” Here, Nimitz reorganized and reoriented forces to meet immediate circumstances whenever needed, explored all courses of action suggested by his subordinates before making a final decision, and sustained a rapid pace and sequencing of major operations, respectively. The latter technique was a key feature of the island-hopping campaigns of 1942 through 1945, whereby each offensive sequentially meshed with others to schedule logistical buildups, force reconstitution, training, air and naval attacks to soften defenses, and finally the assault itself. Using these techniques, Nimitz was able to maintain an aggressive posture that stole the initiative from the Japanese in mid-1942 and continued to the final successful campaigns against Iwo Jima and Okinawa in 1945.

The author makes use of archival sources—such as meeting minutes, correspondence between commanders, and after-action reports—to dig into the details of Nimitz’s leadership style as well as important decisions he made collaboratively with the Joint Chiefs in Washington, DC and with his key subordinates. The book’s chronological narrative takes the reader from the dangerous days after the Pearl Harbor attack, through the “calculated risk” and key victory at Midway, and then on to the major campaigns of the Solomons, Gilberts, Marianas, Philippines, and final assaults in 1945. It is a story of American aggressiveness, innovation, and organizational competence under Nimitz’s collaborative leadership style.

Hone’s background as a management consultant contributes to the value of this book in two important ways. Firstly, he includes modern management terminology to describe what Nimitz accomplished as an organizational leader. Many will find “complex adaptive system,” “dispositionality,” and “flow” somewhat familiar. Secondly, Hone backs up his analysis with recent leadership scholarship. For example, he references Amy Edmondson’s work on psychological safety, David Epstein’s research on generalists, Mary Uhl-Bien’s work on complexity leadership theory, and other important theoretical concepts to relate Nimitz’s approach to leadership in light of these ideas.

An interesting blend of biography, naval history, and management theory, *Mastering the Art of Command* provides a unique approach to studying organizational leadership. Several other excellent biographies of Nimitz—such as E.B. Potter’s classic *Nimitz* (1976) and Craig Symond’s recent *Nimitz at War* (2022)—also examine the genius of this important leader. Nevertheless, Hone’s approach will be especially appealing to readers interested in the study of organizations and how they are effectively led.