
BOOK REVIEW

The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War

Stephen Robinson (New Zealand: Exisle Publishing Pty Ltd, 2021), 305

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John Boyd and his adherents can be remembered in many ways. According to some narrators, they were responsible for a new art of war, often referred to as maneuver warfare. Others portray them as weak characters who reshaped the work of other theorists like Basil Liddell Hart and John Frederick Fuller, using quotes, arguments, and chronological patterns to apply them to other matters and explain them in their own ways. However, irrespective of the narratives, many writings regarding Boyd have argued that the ideas and concepts developed by him and his disciples were valuable and practical. Stephen Robinson, in the book, “The Blind Strategist: John Boyd and the American Art of War,” has disagreed with this fundamental hypothesis. Stephen Robinson is an officer in the Australian Army Reserve and has served as an instructor at the Royal Military College.

The book’s central argument is that the maneuver warfare developed by Boyd and his allies led the US forces astray. The examples drawn from history were flawed, based on the absolute lies of Nazi generals and misunderstood perspectives from the past. Also, it included much overlooked and miscalculated data, contrary to maneuver warfare theory.

To a reader, this book might seem to be a smear campaign on Boyd and the “maneuverists.” It also seems as if it proposes an idea that the maneuverists liked Nazis, who were extremely bad; thus, the maneuverists should be purged. Moreover, Robinson has spent enough time portraying the relations and connections that might be set up as damaging. In his view, the maneuverists have employed sufficient time and thought to glorify the Nazi generals and other sympathizers

like Liddell Hart and Fuller. The author has explained in depth in several ways that such admiration distorted theorists' modern-day understanding of World War II, land-based combat, and the roots of the theories they advocate.

The critical exposure of Robinson's reason is not that the maneuverists associated with and regarded the Nazi generals but that the entire concept of maneuver warfare is a fraudulent strategy. He argues that the entire constructs that establish the Army and Marine Corps are foundationally unprovable, centered around motivated reasoning, and often deceptive. Robinson and many others before him established that maneuver warfare was developed as a theory in search of empirical data instead of vice versa.

The author focuses on the extent to which Boyd has acknowledged and idealized a German way of warfare that has never existed. At least not how Boyd has claimed himself. He has highlighted the shortcomings in Boyd's theory by comparing the fundamental aspects of maneuver warfare theory with German operations. Robinson further disagrees with Boyd's incredible attention to maneuver, surprise, tempo, and terror and the unresponsiveness these can infuse in an enemy force. He also insists that in this process, Boyd underestimates the significance of several battles and disdains attrition-based warfare. The author reminds the readers that German tactics were less maneuverist than destructionist. In the light of the data acquired from the number of battles fought by the Nazi army, he explains that the primary focus of the Germans was to win wars swiftly by crushing the enemy forces through encirclement strategies, even if, in the preliminary steps, they pursued Boyd's maneuver warfare tactics.

Robinson provides the reader with valuable notice of the significance of analyzing and reviewing the obtained data from all viewpoints. He proves this in his exceptional critique of Boyd's ways of analyzing the sources and his careful use of the material. For example, while excusing Boyd's failure to know about senior Nazi officers' self-centered intentions and misrepresentations of the facts, he carefully utilizes Boyd's statements and arguments to establish how he refused to adapt his theory after Herman Balck, Friedrich von Mellenthin, and other senior German commanders discouraged many of his assertions about how Nazis fought.

Nevertheless, the author's arguments on maneuver warfare theory are not sufficient to entirely discredit Boyd's idea about the significance of up-to-mark decision-making, the pace of action, and disturbance and dislocation of the adversary forces as a way to achieve victory. In his theory, Boyd explains the ideal type of war and how to fight that way. However, Robinson rightly states that Boyd has claimed that maneuver warfare is a strategy to succeed in all future military struggles.

Considering the prior critiques, everybody interested in Boyd's speculations should treat Robinson's contentions seriously. Boyd highlighted that he is not a qualified military historian, and as the author, this has caused several problems and contradictions in his theory. However, the parts of maneuver warfare theory that are carefully used in a particular context remain helpful. Even though Boyd has refused to adapt his views in light of new evidence, violating his principle of analysis and synthesis of modern contexts and perceptions to generate a better understanding, his approval for perpetual learning and enhancement of understandings is worth praising. Every individual suffers from the tragedy of blind spots, and so does Boyd, but he was not a blind theorist or strategist. He may not be an excellent military historian, but his ideas are significantly helpful in understanding an armed conflict.

The research has been conducted using several primary sources, and remarkable diagrams and pictures are used to offer a better understanding. Being well-referenced research, it includes a bibliography that offers an all-encompassing range of sources a military historian must read. The book is helpful for scholars, students, and historians who seek to critically understand why and how the US military forces wedge and win wars.

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