

The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King – The Five Star Admirals Who Won the War At Sea¹

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*Leadership . . . consists of picking good men and helping them do their best for you. The attributes of loyalty, discipline and devotion to duty on the part of subordinates must be matched by patience, tolerance and understanding on the part of superiors.*²

I. Introduction

What differentiates a good from a great man? How do great men come to be? In his book, *The Admirals*, author Walter Borneman tells the story of four great Americans: William Leahy, Ernest King, Chester Nimitz, and William Halsey. Mr. Borneman discusses why, in his estimation, the only four men in the history of the United States Navy to achieve the rank of fleet admiral (five-star admiral) were great men, and how those great men came to be during the same period in history. In doing so, he takes his readers on a historical journey from the Spanish-American War through World War II and explains in detail how these four men not only created the modern U.S. Navy, but also won World War II. For students of this period of American history and students of United States naval history, some suggest there is, perhaps, no better single work.³

Yet, its depth is also its weakness. Mr. Borneman's description of the rise of these four men and their contributions to the creation of the greatest naval force in history is detailed and nuanced. So much so, that the book is, at times, both confusing and difficult to follow. For readers who are not historians or students of the World War II era, the book may even be a bit of a bore.

II. Beginnings

Each of the fleet Admirals . . . had the "ability to make men admire them one way or another." But far more than instilling admiration alone, each in quite different ways possessed a commanding presence that engendered commitment

and resolve toward a common purpose. King demonstrated it by bluster and verve; Nimitz by putting his hand on your shoulder and saying, "Let's get this thing done;" Halsey—still the fullback—by rushing through the line in such a way that everyone on the team wanted to go through with him; and Leahy with never letting his own personal feelings, or those of others, interfere with the long-range objectives and best interests of his country.⁴

As the four most famous admirals in American naval history, Earnest King's, Chester Nimitz's, William Leahy's, and William Halsey's names fill the pages of countless books. Their biographies and tales of their exploits line the shelves (virtual or actual) of popular book retailers. Yet, Mr. Borneman, much like the incredible men he wrote about, did what no one before him had; he combined the individual stories of the four most influential naval officers in history, providing his readers with a micro view of their lives and a macro view of their impact on each other, the United States Navy, and the United States of America during the most momentous war the modern world has ever known.⁵ The sheer brilliance of this accomplishment, however, is also the book's greatest weakness. In merging the stories of the four men, Mr. Borneman's writing, at times, is so nuanced that it is difficult to follow. The book reads more like a documentary, or a lesson in history, than that of a book trying to convey a salient message to its readers.

Mr. Borneman begins *The Admirals* by devoting a chapter to each of the four main characters.⁶ He begins

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¹ WALTER R. BORNEMAN, *THE ADMIRALS: NIMITZ, HALSEY, LEAHY AND KING – THE FIVE STAR ADMIRALS WHO WON THE WAR AT SEA* (2012).

² BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1.

³ See generally Robert F. Dunn, *Book Review: The Admirals'*, WASH. TIMES, Aug. 14, 2012, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2012/aug/14/how-navy-giants-secured-victory>.

⁴ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1.

⁵ John Lehman, "The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King – The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea," by Walter R. Borneman, WASH POST, June 29, 2012, http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-admirals-nimitz-halsey-e-war-at-sea-by-walter-r-borneman/2012/06/29/gJQAR95MCW_story.html.

⁶ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1, at Part One: Sailors, 1897-1918, Chapter 1, Leahy: "The Judge"—Annapolis, Class of 1897; Chapter 2, King: "Rey"—Annapolis, Class of 1901; Chapter 3, Halsey: "Pudge"—

before each man was born, takes the readers through their childhoods, and introduces the readers to their families. He takes his readers to the Naval Academy with each of the four men and discusses, at considerable length, their time in school and their initial assignments.⁷ Mr. Borneman attempts to illustrate that each of these men differed greatly from one another and all converged on the U.S. Navy from very different paths.

Mr. Borneman begins with William Leahy. Fleet Admiral Leahy, born in Hampton, Iowa, on May 6, 1875, was the first of eight children, and was raised by his mother and father in Wisconsin.⁸ Leahy's father, an attorney, wanted his son, William, to pursue a law degree. William, intrigued by his father's military service, decided instead to seek an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point.⁹ As luck would have it, his Congressman did not have any appointments to the military academy that year, but was willing to give him a nomination the following year to the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis.¹⁰ Despite being the weaker of the two academies at the time, Leahy accepted the appointment and in May, 1893, began his career in the U.S. Navy.¹¹

Ernest Joseph King was born November 23, 1878, in rural Lorain, Ohio.¹² From the time he was a very young child, Ernest King was never afraid to speak his mind. "Absolute candor, no matter how rude or insulting, became his trademark."¹³ King was clearly no fool, nor was he looking to follow in his father's footsteps working in the machining industry in Ohio.¹⁴ Instead, King pursued an appointment to the U.S. Navy from Congressman Winfield Scott Kerr.¹⁵ After excelling at Kerr's examinations, he was awarded Kerr's appointment.¹⁶ On August 15, 1897, Ernest J. King—who would become known as a frequent smoker, drinker, and philanderer¹⁷— began his career in the U.S. Navy.¹⁸

William Frederick Halsey, Jr. was born on October 30, 1882, to a long line of sailors and "at least one pirate."¹⁹ Unlike his contemporaries, Bill Halsey was not much of a student.²⁰ Though he tried time after time to receive a Presidential appointment to the Naval Academy, by the fall of 1899, it was clear that was not going to happen.²¹ After a dismal first year at the University of Virginia, it was clear that medical school was not an option either.²² However, in the wake of the Spanish-American War naval build-up, the President received an additional five academy appointments. Bound and determined to see her son at Annapolis, Halsey's mother "camped in McKinley's office until he promised her one for [him]."²³ On July 7, 1900, William Halsey followed in his father's footsteps by beginning his naval career.²⁴

Finally, Chester William Nimitz was born on February 24, 1885, to his widowed mother in Fredericksburg, Texas.²⁵ Nimitz, much like his contemporaries, was seeking a way out of a small town and a life of boredom—for him it would have been working in his grandfather's hotel or butcher shops.²⁶ His first choice, much like that of Leahy's, was seeking an appointment to West Point.²⁷ Also like Leahy's, Nimitz's Congressman only had appointments remaining for the Naval Academy in 1901.²⁸ Nimitz excelled at his examinations for the appointment and on September 7, 1901, he too began his career in the U.S. Navy.²⁹

III. Common Ground

Yes, the fleet admirals were different, but each had an enduring sense of duty, mission, and love of country that had been honed years before on the banks of the Severn. Each of them first learned to be

Annapolis, Class of 1904; Chapter 4, Nimitz: "Nim-i-tiz"—Annapolis, Class of 1905.

⁷ *Id.* at 16-25, 30-36, 45-49, 57-63.

⁸ *Id.* at 14.

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.* at 16.

¹² *Id.* at 28.

¹³ *Id.* at 29.

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ *Id.*

¹⁶ *Id.* at 30.

¹⁷ Lehman, *supra* note 5.

¹⁸ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 30.

¹⁹ *Id.* at 43.

²⁰ *Id.* at 44.

²¹ *Id.*

²² *Id.* at 45.

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Id.* at 55.

²⁶ *Id.* at 56.

²⁷ *Id.*

²⁸ *Id.*

²⁹ *Id.* at 57.

a follower. Then each unquestionably became a leader. All played pivotal roles in bringing the United States Navy to the pinnacle of naval power.³⁰

In his attempt to explain the lives and contributions of the fleet admirals, the author makes it clear that though each of the four men attended the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis, all graduating within ten years of each other (Leahy being the outlier, graduating in 1893), they were all very different. While their successes in large part mirrored each other's, the paths they travelled to their fifth stars did not. In a word, the men were diverse. Yet, together they were able to "transform Theodore Roosevelt's Great White Fleet of their youth into his cousin Franklin's ultimate weapon of global supremacy."³¹

The last of three sections of the book—"Admirals, 1941-1945"—recount, almost in full, the day-to-day activities of the fleet admirals,³² while essentially summarizing the battles in which they engaged. In doing so, Mr. Borneman, by others' accounts, matures and cultivates the fleet admirals' personalities for what he believed them to be.³³

Four distinct, complex and colorful personalities emerge from Borneman's prose. King was at once a mercurial egoist, a calculating careerist, an innovative administrator, and a brilliant strategist. Although Nimitz's ability as a master strategist equaled King's, the patient and thoughtful leadership style of this dedicated family man stood in marked contrast to that of his senior. Dynamic and pugnacious, [Halsey] basked in the flow of public admiration, yet he privately suffered from nervous disorders that took him out of the fight at key moments. Dismissive of any 'standard protocol' that might impede action, Halsey also failed to heed

important advice from his counselors—a reckless tendency that Borneman blames for the tragic loss of life suffered [.] caused when the indomitable admiral let his fleet into typhoons during the fall/winter of 1944-45. While Halsey reveled in publicity, Leahy actively avoided it. Such studied reticence often earns Leahy a mere mention in the footnotes of his historical accounts.³⁴

Regardless of their distinct personalities and varied backgrounds, what the author attempts to crystallize is that the fleet admirals' common abilities to inspire and motivate made them great. The fact that Earnest King was a "vain, hot-tempered, argumentative, hard-drinking womanizer" did not matter in the World War II United States Navy.³⁵ It was his brilliance as a sailor that propelled him above his peers to Commander in Chief, United States Fleet, at the end of 1941, and in 1942, Commander in Chief, Naval Operations.³⁶

Halsey, Leahy, and Nimitz were no different. Each of them had their quirks—Halsey, also a heavy drinker, was quite brash and insensitive with some of his public remarks.³⁷ Leahy was the statesman of the group. After he had retired, he was recalled to active duty by his friend, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, to serve as the President's senior military advisor.³⁸ Of the four, Nimitz is the hero that stands out most.³⁹ Known to be "patient, incisive, courteous, and diplomatic," he is the fleet admiral most written about, and "Borneman, in clear and concise writing, merely adds to the legend that is Chester Nimitz."⁴⁰

Mr. Borneman's work, however, is far from perfect. There is no arguing that the fleet admirals individually and collectively were great men. They were patriots and heroes. They were the sailors from which modern lore is created. However, in 476 pages of intersecting stories of battles and relationships, discussions of wives and children, talk of courts-martial,⁴¹ and of grounding ships,⁴² it is easy to lose track of who's who and of each of the four men's

³⁰ *Id.* at 473-74.

³¹ *Id.* at 3.

³² Scott Mobley, *Book Review – The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King – The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (March 26, 2013), <http://www.navyhistory.org/2013/03/book-review-admirals-nimitz-halsey-leahy-king-five-star-admirals-won-war-at-sea/>.

³³ See Dunn, *supra* note 3; Lehman, *supra* note 5; Mobley, *supra* note 34; Andrew Roberts, *The Hands on the Tiller*, WALL ST. J., May 25, 2012, <http://www.online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052702303513404577356392157165950>.

³⁴ Mobley, *supra* note 32.

³⁵ Lehman, *supra* note 5.

³⁶ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 5, 214.

³⁷ See Dunn, *supra* note 3.

³⁸ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 269.

³⁹ Dunn, *supra* note 3.

⁴⁰ *Id.*

⁴¹ BORNEMAN, *supra* note 1, at 64.

⁴² *Id.* at 64, 295.

individual contributions. Mr. Borneman, as evidenced by the sheer volume of sources referenced throughout his book,⁴³ had a seemingly unmanageable amount of information to convey to his readers, such that some of that information often comes across jumbled and confused. Mr. Borneman certainly tells a story about leaders; he does not, however, tell a story about leadership.

IV. Conclusion

“You will, . . . all have to a greater or lesser degree something that is intangible . . . a combination of loyalty to ideals, tradition, courage, devotion, clean living, and clear thinking. It is more than ‘esprit do corps’ because it reaches far beyond the corps and comradeship.”⁴⁴

The final chapter of *The Admirals* sums up the contributions and attributes of the four fleet admirals—good and bad—and gives readers an understanding of their lives after the navy, ultimately culminating with their deaths. Whether enjoyable or a bore, Mr. Borneman’s work told the stories of four great men who were patriots, scholars, and statesmen. Why are their stories so important? Why are their stories relevant? The answers are not clear. *The Admirals* discusses the lives of leaders, but it is not a book about leadership. It is a lesson on United States history—more specifically the history of the U.S. Navy these four men built, but not much more. Notwithstanding, it is clear the fleet admirals were exceptional men.

Once, when two enlisted men were walking along a passageway shooting the breeze, one of them acknowledged, “I’d go to hell for that old son of a bitch.” The sailor felt a poke in his back and turned around to find Halsey playfully wagging a finger. “Not so old, young man.”⁴⁵

⁴³ *Id.* at 495-532.

⁴⁴ *Id.* at 474.

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 473.