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History of Warships: From Ancient Times to the Twenty-First  
Century (review)

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**History of Warships: From Ancient Times to the Twenty-First Century.**

By James L. George. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 1998. Pp. xvi+353; tables, appendixes, notes/references, bibliography, index. \$32.95.

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In a single volume, James L. George has attempted to surmount three problems: first, to cover the entire history of warships; second, to combine a description of ships and their historical characteristics with accounts of their operational use; third, to write for lay as well as expert readers. A former officer in the United States Navy and national security adviser in Washington, George has added to this ambitious undertaking the task of trying to point out “firsts” and “lasts” of different kinds of ships.

In order to handle the mass of potential material, George has divided his history into various ages (the Age of Galleys, Age of Sail, Age of Steam, Ironclad and Steel, and then the Modern Age). The entire history of warships up to 1890 is covered in only seventy-five pages, however, and the modern period takes up by far the bulk of the book. Organized around the analytical notion of “ship types,” the book contains separate histories of battleships, cruisers, destroyers, aircraft carriers, support ships, and so on. Only at the end of the book does the author reveal that he also intends to draw some “lessons of history” from the preceding material.

Unfortunately, there are a number of errors of fact and interpretation. For example, with respect to the Persian Wars, the sea battle of Salamis is said to have ended the Persian threat to Greece forever, which is hardly the case (at the very least, there was still the battle of Plataea to go). With respect to World War II, the USS *Yorktown* is said to have been sunk by Japanese planes during the Battle of Midway, when it was in fact first put under tow as salvageable and later sunk by submarines. With respect to the introduction of ironclads, the *Warrior* of 1860 is said to have been longer than *Minotaur*, when the opposite is true. Captain Cowper Coles is said to have raised the matter of turrets during the Crimean War, which he did not. John Ericsson is said to have been first to design an actual turret, and this assertion is used to support an old argument about British technological conservatism in the nineteenth century, whereas James Phinney Baxter showed this to be fallacious with respect to ironclads as far back as 1933, and the last twenty years of scholarship has shown it to be fallacious with respect to the nineteenth century as a whole.

These comments are not intended to be unduly critical, but rather to lead to two final observations. One is that, as with so many other fields, the history of warship-building has become the subject of a specialized literature that is too large and complicated for a single nonexpert (or expert, for that matter) relying entirely on secondary sources to digest and synthesize. Second, although *History of Warships* is intended to replace this specialized literature, at least for some readers, the niggling errors mean that the more

serious reader will have to refer to the specialized literature anyway in order to be sure that what is said is really correct.

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