

BOOK REVIEWS

But there are more subtle lessons – ones that probably depend as much on the reader as on the author. A key one is the role of sea power in war, and the fundamental differences between armies and navies, in their roles, tactics, sociology and societal settings. Athens could afford to lose time and again on land, but never at sea. Similarly, while she was supreme at sea, she could win, or at the least, not lose, while ashore. This lesson was signalled at Syracuse where the poorly led Athenian army nevertheless penned the Syracusians in until the Athenian fleet was destroyed in the harbour. Their communications cut, the horrified land forces simply gave up and were destroyed. Conversely, when the Spartans, supported by Persian gold, finally learned to fight at sea, they had to win only once. Not until then did their decades of excellence in land warfare come to mean anything to the final outcome.

Similarly, the book brings to mind the management and role of a democratic system of government in wartime – something for Canadians to ponder.

Unrestricted democratic control was, in the Athenian experience, a disaster. Once the skilled guidance of Pericles was removed by disease, the unrestrained Athenian assembly, spurred on by demagogues, voted for foolish expeditions, mass executions of conquered cities, and expulsion and even execution of successful leaders – never failing to snatch defeat from the jaws of victory. Democracy, as revolutionary America understood, needs to be tempered with appropriate checks and balances. It must choose and agree upon its course through debate and consensus, but once a decision for war is taken, a democracy must then be guided by firm leadership.

Failing this, it can expect defeat and the humiliation of watching the symbols of its former glory destroyed to the cheers of its detractors.

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FIRST MAN: THE LIFE OF NEIL A. ARMSTRONG

by James R. Hansen

New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005

769 pages, \$41.00

Reviewed by Dean Black

I often wondered whatever became of the first man to walk on the moon. Neil Armstrong, like other astronauts, was a source of fascination when I was a teenager. America's space program was awe-inspiring for many young persons who saw in it a new and challenging frontier, a first step toward which involved flying fast jets. A career as a military pilot thus became a goal for many youngsters. But Neil Armstrong appeared to have virtually disappeared in the years following the epic Apollo 11 mission, and it was difficult to understand why such a public figure would prefer a private existence. I now understand, better than at any time since 20 July 1969, that

Neil Armstrong had not disappeared. We simply could not hear him or see him for the crowd of people surrounding him.

It is to James R. Hansen's credit that he brings to light what became of one of the most sought-after men of all time. Armstrong was never interested in fame; it appears that he deplored it. In retrospect, the magnitude of this famous astronaut's modesty matched in scope the enormity of the Apollo 11 accomplishment.

Armstrong wants us to believe that, because he is like the rest of us, we also are capable of achieving great things. But, this message is tempered by another concerning the interplay between man and machine. The underlying source of Armstrong's modesty may be his unique perspective on the man/machine synergy manifest in the Apollo program. After all, the idea of manned space flight ran counter to what NASA scientists initially had in mind. They were convinced that the human being was



BOOK REVIEWS

superfluous. When ‘test-pilot-astronaut-wannabes’ realized their spacecraft were purposely designed without the need for in-flight intervention, protests were waged and technical changes followed. Manning the spacecraft required a rethink, and compromises were designed to mitigate the risks that come with human interference. Armstrong perhaps understood this better than most. Deflecting bids to hail him as a hero, Armstrong consistently tried to convey that he was simply there, like his other crewmates, to monitor the machine that happened to take them to the moon and back. Nevertheless, despite efforts to portray Armstrong as a modest, ‘down-to-earth’ man, Chuck Yeager probably said it best when he reprimanded his pilots who had openly ridiculed Mercury astronauts for being nothing better than the monkeys that preceded them. Yeager pointed out one important difference between astronaut and monkey, namely that the monkeys had no idea they were sitting on top of a bomb that could blow up at any moment. Yeager thus believed that courage raised men like Armstrong to unprecedented heights.

Armstrong’s post-moonwalk life seems best described as a battle between obligation and modesty. He felt obliged to reach out to everyone who wanted a piece of him, because he knew that by simply living his life, he had touched many other lives in turn. However, modesty guided him, because he held in such high esteem the thousands of people who had designed and built the Apollo 11 Saturn rocket, believing that his own role as the first man paled in comparison to that attributable to the fantastic machine he felt he had only monitored.

Canada’s famous ‘goalie-turned-Liberal politician,’ Ken Dryden, recently said that public life is about noise, confusion and criticism. For almost 40 years, Armstrong has managed the noise, confusion and criticism with aplomb, acknowledging and explaining his accomplishments while still exuding a preference for modesty. No paragraph of Hansen’s *First Man* illustrates this quest better than that which closes the book. Neil and his second wife, Carol, were visiting friends at another couple’s home, and the latter couple’s five-year-old daughter, Emily, takes quite a liking to Armstrong, whom she knows as “the nice older man like Grandpa.” Emily leads the astronaut by the hand on a grand expedition through her house that ends in her room, where she shows off her small collection of children’s books. “[A]nd these are some of my books,” Emily boasts. “Winnie the Pooh..., Cinderella..., Sleeping Beauty, and, oh, here is a book about Neil Armstrong. He was the first man on the moon.” “Oh,” Emily continued, after a moment’s hesitation, “your name is Neil Armstrong, too, isn’t it?” *First Man* is a wonderful and informative story, especially for all those kids and kids-at-heart out there who have always wondered about what happened to the first man to have walked upon the moon.

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DND photo FA2006-0340 by Warrant Officer Serge Peters, Air Public Affairs

A French Air Force *Mirage 2000* takes off for the morning mission, Exercise Maple Flag, XXXIX, 4 Wing, Cold Lake, 1 June 2006.