

American Amphibious Warfare: The Roots of Tradition to 1865

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Review

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Ohl, Gary. *American Amphibious Warfare: The Roots of Tradition to 1865*. Naval Institute Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9781421423494

Gary Ohl's book on Early American amphibious warfare is a welcome addition to the historiography on this highly specialized aspect of naval warfare. He introduces new concepts and perspectives that I think will assist other scholars in their endeavors. At the same time, he also employs this history in a way that might be very valuable to strategic planners and policymakers. As such, the book is not just history but informed historical policy analysis. The latter, however, may alienate purists as much as it attracts practitioners.

Ohl's starts with an Author's Note in which he illustrates that amphibious warfare goes back to the Ancient Period. He spends most of this section, however, on demonstrating how central amphibious warfare became to the British Empire and, consequently, the Thirteen Colonies. Still, one weakness in the organization of this book was that he then devoted the Introduction to explaining 20th century terminology on the subject, such as "amphibious warfare," "amphibious operations," "amphibious assault," and "amphibious landing." The book would have been improved if this terminology had been explained up front for the reader in the Author's Note while the contextual background was left to the Introduction.

In addition, there was no dedicated section tackling the notion about whether or not there was "amphibious warfare" before the 1900s. In other words, to what extent is the author employing 1900s terminology to explain pre-1865 events? Ohl is not the only historian to ever do so and it can certainly be credibly done, but there needed to be some section explaining the terminology and outlining for the reader the advantages and disadvantages from a historical analytical perspective about employing a modern-day context to explain the past.

One of the more fascinating concepts that this reviewer thinks Ohl introduced was the amphibious defensive in contrast to the amphibious offensive. While both are fairly obvious if

one thinks about amphibious warfare, the term “amphibious defensive” is rarely, if ever, employed in the historiography but clearly has to be studied to contrast with the amphibious offensive, whether the latter is an assault, an “incursion” (another term of Ohl’s), or a landing. In fact, given that Ohl does not think that the US became a power capable of the amphibious offensive until the Mexican-American War, much of the book is devoted to analyses of successful and unsuccessful American amphibious defensive battles and campaigns during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812 as well as the British amphibious offensives in those conflicts.

Ohl’s takes the reader through five examples of what he terms Early American amphibious warfare, starting with the New York Campaign during the Revolution and proceeding to Yorktown through the rest of the war, then looking at the US’s first amphibious operations in the Mediterranean, especially the assault on Derna. After this, he proceeds to the War of 1812, the Mexican-American War, and the American Civil War, looking especially at highlights in each war such as British operations in the Chesapeake Region in 1814, American operations along the California Coast and at Veracruz between 1846 and 1848, and both failed and successful US assaults on the Confederate strongpoint Fort Fisher in early 1865. One does wonder why there was nothing about the Second Seminole War, which can certainly be classified as some sort of amphibious warfare as Ohl is defining it. Nevertheless, in each case study covered, Ohl analyzes both the amphibious offensive and defensive, but he focuses especially on critical elements of successful amphibious offensive operations, such as unity of command or—lacking the former—unity of effort, particularly the strengths and personalities of the naval and landing force commanders and their ability or inability to cooperate if there was no clear unity of command. Added to this analysis, in each chapter Ohl’s explores aspects of the operation such as ship-to-shore movement, the establishment and securing of the beachhead, the buildup of combat power, the use of naval gunfire support, and the ability to exploit a successful landing.

Herein, however, is the problem again with terminology, concepts, and context. Ohl makes clear to the readers that there was no doctrine as amphibious capability was created by the United States military in the 1840s and after. In fact, even after there were successful amphibious attacks, such as Veracruz in 1847 and eventually Fort Fisher in 1865, nothing much was written down and so doctrine was not developed in a modern or 1900s sense of the term.

So, were these really “joint” or “combined” operations if those terms had not yet been developed? Obviously, to analyze these events, terminology of some sort has to be employed in some way. I am just wondering, however, if terminology like this—and other phrases such as “amphibious power projection” or “naval power projection force”—are too strongly post-1900 terms to be used here since they can so easily give a sense of continuity to the reader that might not have existed?

As to continuity, there needed to be some additional context on historical memory in American military institutions. Ohl argues, for instance, that Veracruz was the real beginning not only of the US as an amphibious power but also the beginning development of the United States Marine Corps as an amphibious assault force. His term used for Early American naval actions that were short of amphibious campaigns—“amphibious incursions”—is probably more accurate than amphibious assault when it comes to Veracruz, but assuming that Veracruz really was the beginning for the modern Marine Corps, there needs to be some explanation as to how and why the Marines kept that institutional memory alive when it was clear that the other services did not. Ohl does have a couple of footnotes devoted to Marine Corps planners in the 1920s and 1930s looking back in time, but that material really needs to be part of the analysis in the main body of the work.

Similarly, how the Army and Navy were able to carry out successful attacks in the Spanish-American War needed more attention. Again, there were a couple of sources cited in the endnotes but no real explanation—even in the endnotes—about how the Army and Navy carried out these operations when there was still no written doctrine and no institutional memory, at least according to Ohl. The analysis might have gone further if Spanish weaknesses had been more thoroughly looked at, as the author did with the Mexican military of the 1840s. Granted that Ohl’s intention was to stop at 1865, but with strong assertions made about the US military in the Spanish-American War, there needed to be a more thorough analysis of the latter conflict.

Ohl is correct to wind up with the Marines in the Pacific War, but even at the end of the book there needed to be some holes patched. Arguing that the lack of technology precluded frontal amphibious assaults before the 1900s, he then asserts that advanced technology caused them, but he does not fully explain this phenomenon. Often, geography caused frontal amphibious assaults, such as many of the attacks by the US military in the Central Pacific in 1943-1945 where the atolls were so small that landing spots were practically dictated by the

defense. In addition, on several occasions, Tarawa and Iwo Jima especially, the Marines were ordered to make costly frontal assaults not because of geography but because the higher command worried about the US Fleet being exposed to air attack for too long while operating in support of the amphibious operations.

Ohl concludes by suggesting that this Early American amphibious tradition looked almost like the Post-Cold War naval doctrine *From the Sea*. There are, of course, similarities and he is right to point them out, especially for strategic planners and particularly for the civilian policymakers who are almost always so intellectually ill-equipped to be making strategic policy. Still, the time periods are vastly different and that historical chasm needed to be bridged somehow in the body of the book.

In conclusion, this book is a valuable addition to the historiography. It needed, however, to have more contextual analysis at times, especially early on about terminology and the dangers of “jumping centuries.” We all do the latter in the classroom, but not usually without some explanation to the students about the uniqueness of each time period and the dangers in automatically assuming that what worked in the past will work in the present or the future. Readers need the same explanation.

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