

US Army War College

**USAWC Press**

---

Parameters Bookshelf – Online Book Reviews

Parameters and Associated Collections

---

10-17-2023

## **Book Review: The Origins of Victory: How Disruptive Military Innovation Determines the Fates of Great Powers**

Zachery Tyson Brown

Follow this and additional works at: [https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters\\_bookshelf](https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters_bookshelf)



Part of the [Defense and Security Studies Commons](#)

---

Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr.



T H E



O R I G I N S



O F



V I C T O R Y



How Disruptive Military Innovation  
Determines the Fates of Great Powers

Reviewed by Zachery Tyson Brown, defense analyst,  
Office of the Secretary of Defense

**T**here seems to be widespread agreement that emerging technologies will change at least the character of warfare, if not its eternal nature, but there is much less agreement about how they will do so and how quickly. In *The Origins of Victory: How Disruptive Military Innovation Determines the Fates of Great Powers*, Andrew F. Krepinevich Jr. presents an insightful exploration of a series of questions with enduring interest for defense policymakers: How do states gain advantages in military competition during periods of disruptive change? How are developmental technologies best incorporated into legacy military structures? Or are entirely new structures necessary?

The answers to these questions are of keen interest to the US Army, which is currently engaged in long-term military competition with an increasingly ambitious and capable People's Republic of China in an age marked by profound technological, economic, and social change. If we take seriously the alarming comments made by senior US defense and intelligence leaders regarding the advancement of China's various efforts, then the outcome of a potential conflict in the near term is increasingly uncertain.

Krepinevich has worked for the Department of Defense's Office of Net Assessment and on the personal staff of three secretaries of defense, giving him unique insight into how states compete

to develop, field, and incorporate new technologies for strategic advantage. In *The Origins of Victory*, he argues that states that successfully pursue military innovation enjoy great advantages, while those who fail to do so expose themselves to danger.

There are no end-states in the march of history, however. *The Origins of Victory* argues that we are at the outset of a new revolution in military affairs, a revolution that the United States has no guarantee of dominating. Whichever state best understands and exploits the opportunities provided by this new revolution, Krepinevich explains, will be best positioned to win the military competition of the twenty-first century.

Krepinevich examines four case studies to identify commonalities of success—the British Royal Navy as it struggled to reinvent itself at the twilight of the Victorian Age, the German Reichswehr as it rebuilt its military during the interwar period, the US Navy as it fought through the crucible of the Pacific theatre in World War II, and the US Air Force as it learned from the painful lessons of the Vietnam era and evolved into the force that would triumph during the Persian Gulf War. Based on the case studies, Krepinevich suggests the factors that enable successful military innovation go beyond identifying novel technologies. Innovation instead depends on accurately identifying operational challenges and creating equally innovative operational concepts that best employ novel technologies.

Operational concepts shape a military's doctrine and structure, forcing leaders to select capabilities for investment and divestment. The British naval revolution would not have succeeded without the Royal Navy embracing the flotilla defense and enacting a reimagined scheme of naval infrastructure that radically redistributed their surface fleet to focus on core operational challenges. The Wehrmacht's panzers would not have been as effective without the parallel development of the doctrine of combined arms and sustained combat logistics. An operational environment that favored Japan drove the US Navy to innovate during World War II. Thus, the flattop swiftly supplanted the dreadnought as the primary capital ship, and the carrier battle group became the organizing unit of naval warfare.

I quite enjoyed *The Origins of Victory*. It highlights the importance of the human aspects of military innovation, with all the attendant messiness and uncertainties that human personalities guarantee. It neatly summarizes the history of the precision warfare regime, insightfully examines previous military revolutions for comparison, and artfully sketches the contours of future developments as today's leading militaries seek to adopt the technologies and concepts that will shape the next revolution. Of course, the book is not perfect. It would benefit from a deeper look at the tension between technological pulls and pushes—that is, between militaries adapting to emerging technologies and militaries deliberately developing technologies for adoption.

Army leaders should read this book to cultivate a clear vision of future warfare, identify and resolve the operational challenges that vision entails, and implement the solutions identified for military advantage.

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023 • 568 pages • \$40.00

---

**Keywords: technology, innovation, World War II, Vietnam, German Reichswehr, British Royal Navy**

Disclaimer: Book reviews published in *Parameters* are unofficial expressions of opinion. The views and opinions expressed in *Parameters* book reviews are those of the reviewers and are not necessarily those of the Department of the Army, the US Army War College, or any other agency of the US government.