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Although I was familiar with court intrigue, I was not prepared for the National Security Council’s intrigue. One might enter as an editor in the Executive Secretariat and then leap into a role as a senior adviser for a deputy national security adviser. Others held court in deputies’ or principals’ meetings for many years, deftly staying above the fray. Still others fell, finding knives in their backs as other strivers seized their spots. While this court intrigue is tame compared to the murder and magic of William Shakespeare’s plays, Professor Eliot Cohen shows how much we can learn from the Bard. Indeed, one need not squint hard to see that courts continue to run most human organizations today.

*The Hollow Crown* effectively explores Shakespeare’s political insights into how leaders evolve. While never explicitly stated, Cohen draws on Shakespearean examples to advocate for an ideal arc. Leaders should acquire power legitimately or seize power when a ruler is weak. They should rule through inspiration and manipulation (with only the occasional murder). Then, rulers should depart the stage in their prime. Cohen explores this arc through an expertly organized book divided into parts on acquiring, exercising, and losing power, subdivided into three appropriately named chapters.

Readers will become familiar with the book’s rhythm. In each chapter, Cohen first defines the chapter’s subject, provides motivating modern examples, pivots to illustrative lessons from Shakespeare, and concludes by applying the lessons to recent cases. In the chapter on murder, Cohen explains that murder might literally mean killing others (see Pol Pot, Joseph Stalin, for example), or less literally, the unexpected departure of senior executives to new and undefined opportunities elsewhere. Examples from *Henry VI, Richard III,* and *Macbeth* show the early benefits and ultimate risks of ruling through murder, which...
Cohen effectively compares to the individual rises of Adolf Hitler and Xi Jinping. This effective structure allows chapters to stand on their own while remaining part of a cohesive whole.

A deep appreciation for Shakespeare’s works is not required to enjoy the book. Readers familiar with Shakespeare will enjoy how The Hollow Crown integrates and explains his plays related to power. Readers like me, with a passing familiarity from plebe English and high school, will find much to appreciate—and might also find themselves inspired to reread Macbeth or Henry VI. The Hollow Crown occupies an unusual literary space but would rest easily on a bookshelf alongside biographies and excellent leadership texts. Its most direct parallel is likely Lincoln and Shakespeare by Michael Anderegg (University Press of Kansas, 2015). Readers will find much in common, however, with books like Robert A. Caro’s Master of the Senate (Knopf, 2002), which explores Lyndon B. Johnson’s manipulative leadership style. The Hollow Crown also offers a more cynical counterpoint to more affirmative leadership books like John W. Gardner’s On Leadership (Free Press, 1990) or Elbert Hubbard’s classic 1899 essay, “A Message to Garcia.”

At its best, The Hollow Crown helps readers see common challenges in new ways. Cohen deliberately tackles a common belief that leaders improve with time. Through the examples of Henry VI and Macbeth, he shows that isolation, arrogance, and poor selection of subordinates can undermine initially savvy leaders. Also relevant to military readers, Cohen expertly explores perceptions of strength and weakness in Richard III in his chapter on murder. Richard most admires those willing to murder on his behalf, as these hard men mirror his lack of sentimentality. His reliance on these hard men, however, is his undoing, leaving Richard unhorsed and dead on the battlefield. Leaders today would do well to abide by these lessons.

Cohen’s prose is also a delight. Lines like “Kings who wish they were carefree shepherds often end up as slaughtered sheep” and “Leaders who are lions, however, do not have to tell their underlings that is what they are” demonstrate Cohen’s inspiration from Shakespeare’s excellent writing (188, 194). Most readers will see themselves as courtiers instead of kings, and The Hollow Crown focuses more on these “kings,” despite Cohen’s claim that “courts are the central point in the vortex of power” (23). Short sections on court politics and evaluating subordinates are helpful but insufficient for those courtiers on the sidelines.

Eliot Cohen’s The Hollow Crown gave me insights into the rise, rule, and fall of members of the National Security Council, and it will help readers understand power, leadership, and the dynamics of courts. Students in scholars’ programs at the Command and General Staff College and US Army War College, anyone preparing to serve on a high-level personal staff, soldiers with a literary bent, or the ambitious among us would benefit from the book’s unique perspective and insights.