American Spartans, by J. Warren

Commandant’s Professional Reading List

- Why American Spartans? –

“The Marine Corps is committed to a demanding and explicit warrior code…loyalty, discipline, boldness, frugality, persistence, courage – both physical and moral – and of course pride”1

1. Why this book is on the CMC’s Reading List? American Spartans, by James A. Warren, represents an excellent example of an overarching view of the development of the modern Marine Corps. It provides greater context for understanding the roles and missions of the Marine Corps through the examination of the wars and battles fought in the mid-20th century and early into the new millennium. This book represents a good transition from LtGen (ret) Krulak’s book First to Fight that had, for many years, been hailed as an overarching history of the Marine Corps for those that are curious about our history, traditions, and legacy. Unlike First to Fight though American Spartans takes a much more direct approach eliminating much of what academia calls propaganda portrayed in First to Fight due to the field work, interviews, and research done by James Warren in his development of American Spartans.

2. Why is this book important to you? For those personnel new to the Marine Corps, be they young Enlisted Marines, new Lieutenants, or Civilians in the Supporting Establishment, this book provides the historical context that explains, in part, how the Marine Corps came to become the institution that it is today. For anyone affiliated with the Marine Corps, a re-examination of this book will bring out the operational significance of what occurred in the Corps from the end of World War II through to current operations in Afghanistan. The lessons learned from the closing days of Afghanistan, combined with those of all previous battles, as discussed in this book, can serve as a guide to the Corps’ future development. Specifically, the discussion of the austere periods between WWII and Korea; Korea and Vietnam; and Vietnam and the Gulf war sound quite similar to the current discussion that are ongoing within the beltway. While not a major work with regard to strategy or the strategic level of war, having an understanding of the general history and inter-war struggles serve as important context. This understanding gained by the reader can then be carried forward as the reader examines other senior level books, like How Wars End by Gideon Rose, Assignment Pentagon: How to Excel in a Bureaucracy by Perry M. Smith or Modern Strategy by Colin S. Gray. American Spartans’ approach to discussing the historical significance of the Marine Corps in the last 70 years does a good job of linking tactical and tactical/operational tasks and operations to strategic insight by building a common understanding of what the Marine Corps is and how it has developed over time.

3. Things to think about. As you read this book, keep in mind the various parallels between the current environment, both political and military, and those that existed in the past. As alluded to above, the inter-war periods [term is used here to identify actions between WWII and Korea; Korea and Vietnam; and Vietnam and the Gulf War, not the time period between the two world wars] provide a wealth of insight as to how we operate with a limited budget as a reduced force, as well as the associated consequences of when a crisis erupts. In addition, since this book ends with the seizure of Baghdad, what have the nine years since shown us regarding the political nature of the conflict and the expanding requirements placed upon our Marines?