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Alumni News | Steven Wills discusses naval strategy, role in deterrence and combat in Eurasia

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Steven Wills, Ph.D.

[From Ohio University News](#)

A new book by Ohio University alumnus Steven Wills, Ph.D., [*Strategy Shelved: The Collapse of Cold War Naval Strategic Planning*](#) (U.S. Naval Institute Press, 2021), examines the development of U.S. naval strategy during the Cold War and the immediate post-Cold War period.

In a Q&A below, Wills discusses how the U.S. Navy has devolved from strategy-driven to budget-driven after the end of Cold War, yet remains crucial to deterrence and, if necessary, combat against “a rising China and a revanchist Russia.”

Wills earned a [Ph.D. in History](#) and a [Contemporary History Certificate](#) from the College of Arts & Sciences. Currently a research analyst with the Center for Naval Analysis, Wills is an expert on U.S. Navy strategy and policy as well as naval surface warfare programs and platforms. His research interests include the history of naval strategy development and the post-World War II U.S. surface fleet.

Prior to his academic career, Wills had a 20-year career as an active duty U.S. Navy officer. He served on a variety of small and medium surface combatants, including an assignment as the executive officer of a mine countermeasures ship, and held shore-based billets at the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Joint Non-Lethal Weapons Directorate, and the NATO Joint Forces Command in Naples, Italy.

In addition to *Strategy Shelved*, Wills is the co-author with former Navy Secretary John Lehman of [*Where are the Carriers? U.S. National Strategy and the Choices Ahead*](#), published by the Foreign Policy Research Institute in September 2021. Wills’ articles have appeared in the United States Naval War College Review, the United States Naval Institute News, [realcleardefense.com](#), [cimsec.org](#), [warontherocks.com](#), and [informationdissemination.net](#). He has delivered presentations at the Center for International Maritime Security events. Wills also holds an M.A. in National Security Studies from the United States Naval War College, having earned his undergraduate degree from Miami University.

[Contemporary History Institute](#) graduate student James Bohland recently spoke with Wills about his new book and life as a naval officer turned historian. Wills’ responses have been lightly edited for clarity and to conserve space. It should be noted that his answers reflect his own personal opinions, not those of the Center for Naval Analysis nor of the U.S. Navy.

Q&A with Steven Wills

Q: How has your background as a naval officer shaped you as a historian? Obviously, it seems to have influenced your research interests, but beyond that, do you feel that your naval background gives you a perspective that other historians studying this same topic might not have?

A: My naval service has significantly shaped my post-Navy history career. Just as Joseph Conrad could write maritime fiction based on his years of seagoing service, I speak “Navy” and understand its culture as a native speaker. I know most of the myriad of acronyms that populate naval texts or know where to find them. Some of my past commanders have helped me gain access to documents and significant historical figures as well. I move more easily within the naval world than those who never served.

Being a former sailor also gives “street cred” to a naval historian with the people that he/she might want to talk to in the course of their research (admirals, former civilian officials, other sailors.) Being a part of the naval family really helps in this regard.

Q: Conversely, how has your historical training altered the way you think about and understand the Navy? Has your view of the service changed since you were an officer?

A: Yes, my seven years at Ohio University were helpful and allowed me time, space and the necessary academic training to step back from a purely naval view and approach naval and military history from the perspective of the researcher and the academic as opposed to just the practitioner (active sailor). The Navy is a very big institution and in my active-duty career I only saw parts of it.

While I was concerned with meeting the demands of my own command, momentous changes in how the whole service was run were occurring in Washington, D.C. I was oblivious to this at the time, isolated as I was in my small, seagoing world on one ship, (generally without email as well until after 1998). Being an OHIO history graduate student was a life-changing event from which I developed new perspectives on naval history that I had been unable to see or fully understand while I was still wearing a uniform.

Having studied multiple aspects of military history as a student (with teachers like [Dr. Ingo Tauschweizer](#), [Dr. John Brobst](#), [Dr. Steven Miner](#), and others), I now have a much better understanding of the Navy and other military services than I did as a serving officer. The OHIO history program is outstanding, and I think it prepared me well for what I do now at the Center for Naval Analyses.

Q: *Strategy Shelved* is a book about the process of strategy creation. You argue that the U.S. Navy mastered this process in the 1970s and 1980s when it developed the “maritime strategy,” before subsequently losing its ability to think strategically at the close of the Cold War. What accounts for the success of naval strategy-making in the 1970s and 1980s? What undermined this success in the 1990s? What have the consequences been for the U.S. Navy?

A: The 1970s and 1980s were good periods for the development of naval strategy for several reasons. There were naval leaders who had “grown up” in the Cold War and understood the need for a strategy on which the Navy could base its global operations, its makeup in terms of ships, aircraft and submarines, and its budget requests to Congress.

While tumultuous in many ways, the Navy resolved many of its problems in the 1970s. It decided during that decade to move forward with the acquisition of big deck, nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. It laid the groundwork for the *Ohio* class ballistic missile submarine; and it designed and prepared to field the AEGIS system to shield the fleet from the threat of Soviet missile attacks. Its ship designs, which had been the subject of much infighting, matured. As a result, the decade of the 1980s was peaceful and halcyon. Like the second century AD period of the so-called “good” Roman emperors (Nerva to Marcus Aurelius), the 1980s were years of relative strategic and force structure stability.

This peaceful period came apart with the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet opponent (around which so much of the Navy strategy, force structure and doctrine was based). The empowerment of the 1986 Goldwater Nichols legislation took the power of fleet control away from the admirals and gave it to non-naval joint commanders, while the 1991 Desert Storm campaign forced the Navy to alter its Cold War strategy.

The consequences of those changes have been profound for the Navy. The service no longer has a “global” perspective such as it had in the Cold War. Instead, the Chief of Naval Operations is a “manager” that provides ships for a variety of land-based global combatant commanders. The fleet force structure and strategy are no longer linked. The Navy lacks purpose and vision.

Worst of all, the service is dominated by a “strategy of means” where the only long-term planning conducted is in terms of maintaining existing ships and eventually replacing them with new ones to maintain a budget-driven rather than a threat-based fleet size. Many of those who served in the 1980s and wrote maritime strategy have kept alive the light of naval strategic thought, but quantitative budget analysts – both in the navy and in the Department of Defense – firmly dominate force size.

Q: What should the role of the U.S. Navy be in the 21st century? How can the period you write about in *Strategy Shelved* help inform that role?

A: As the famous British Royal Navy Admiral Sir John Fisher said, “Strategy determines tactics, and tactics should determine armaments.” The U.S. global strategy now again seems to be one of containment. Containment of a rising China and a revanchist Russia. The U.S. and its allies and partners are again cast in the role of Jacob Spykman’s “Rimland” powers, seeking to deter and constrain continental Eurasian expansion.

Naval actions are crucial to deterrence and, if necessary, combat against either of these Eurasian states. A large and capable U.S. Navy that can control and strike opponents from the sea is likely to be the first, and in some cases, the only military force the U.S. can bring against any Eurasian land opponent. The U.S. Navy can do those things, while also threatening China’s sea lines of communication and trade to the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and the wider world.

The Navy can be the force of choice to exploit the tyranny of distance that prevents the widely spaced Russian navy from concentrating its forces in any one location. In addition, naval forces will continue to perform critical diplomatic functions through port visits, exercises with friends and allies, and through humanitarian assistance as was evidenced by U.S. Navy relief to the victims of the 2004 Pacific and 2011 Japanese tsunamis. The other services do not have nearly the number of roles and potential battlespace size as the U.S. Navy.

The service should be appropriately equipped with a global strategy and a force structure to match its responsibilities that include the vast Indo-Pacific, the North Atlantic and Mediterranean, and now an expanding Arctic due to climate change. Reflecting Fisher’s dictum, the fleet should be sized and equipped to meet those missions, and those missions should in turn determine the fleet weapons, whether carrier aircraft, cruise missiles, submarine torpedoes, mines and now directed energy weapons such as lasers or the rail gun.

Q: If there was one message you would like the readers of *Strategy Shelved* to take away from the book, what would it be?

A: I think a number of things should be takeaways. First, General Dwight Eisenhower was wrong in saying during World War II that separate land, sea and air warfare were outdated. They perhaps were at a point in time in Europe, but that has never really been the case in the Pacific and certainly was not during World War II for Eisenhower’s counterparts there (Chester Nimitz and Douglas MacArthur). Much of how we think about the military services and their roles still stems from World War II, and while Eisenhower’s view has been the predominate one now for some time, it is not a correct view in my analysis of the problem or for organizing the services. The other key takeaway is that the Navy always needs a strategy for its employment in order to justify its size to Congress. The training and development of the people who think about and write naval strategy is also crucial and the story of the rise of the group and its collapse after the Cold War is a crucial takeaway.

Q: One of my all-time favorite books is Sebastian Junger’s *The Perfect Storm*, which is an account of the 1991 Halloween Nor’easter that pummeled New England and was responsible for sinking several ships, including most famously the fishing trawler *Andrea Gail*. The book really got across to me just how foreign and unforgivable life at sea can be. You spent a good chunk of your life sailing the world’s oceans; what were some of your most memorable experiences? Any close calls?

A: I was so busy doing my job that I didn’t really have time to think about being scared. I remember wearing my boots to sleep sailing through the Strait of Hormuz for the first time out of fear that we might hit an Iranian mine and that I would not have time to put them on. I got soaked with fuel once in a refueling accident but went back to shower and change clothes without much thinking. One of my ships (*USS Shamal*, a 180-foot patrol ship) went through some very rough weather off Cape Hatteras en route to the Norfolk area after the ship was commissioned in Baton Rouge, La. Everyone was sick, and those of us on the bridge tied ourselves to immobile objects to prevent being tossed around the space. I suppose that was the worst storm I went through, but I also went through another bad Pacific storm in *USS Vandergrift* that was strong enough to rupture our sonar dome’s rubber window and keep the ship in Pearl Harbor for several days of repair.

I was also supposed to be at the Pentagon on 9/11 to give a briefing but was instead sent by my boss to an Army conference out of town. The section of the Pentagon where I would have been was not hit by the plane, but one always wonders....