

HISTORY

BOYD:
*The Fighter Pilot Who
Changed the Art of War.*

By Robert Coram. Little, Brown.
485 pp. \$27.95

In an age when forgettable (and forgotten) sitcom stars get their own *Biography* segments on A&E, it's hard to believe that John Boyd hasn't been the subject of a miniseries. A bombastic fighter jock turned controversial strategist, Boyd (1927–97) was arguably the most influential military



Colonel John Boyd in the cockpit of his F-86.

thinker of the past half-century—and maybe, his supporters claim, the greatest since Sun Tzu. Yet Boyd was virtually unknown outside the military during his lifetime. Even in the air force, he was marginalized as the Mad Colonel.

But Boyd hasn't just faded away. Although he mostly remains persona non grata to the air force, his concepts have been adopted by the Marine Corps and, to a lesser degree, the army. His principles of time-based strategic thinking, codified as OODA (for observe-orient-decide-act), have become a mantra for new-millennium business consultants. Now comes Robert Coram, a journalist and novelist, with an entertaining biography—the

second book on Boyd to appear in two years. More are sure to follow.

Coram meticulously traces Boyd's painful rise from hardscrabble roots to duty flying an F-86 in MiG Alley in Korea. Although Boyd didn't score any kills there, he later earned a reputation at Nevada's Nellis Air Force Base as America's top fighter pilot. He boasted that he could defeat all comers in mock aerial combat within 40 seconds, and, according to Coram, he was never beaten. As an instructor at Nellis, he produced the nation's first rigorous study of dogfighting dos and don'ts, which the air force later adopted as its official tactics manual.

After earning an engineering degree in 1962, Boyd applied his new scientific knowledge to his dogfighting insights and achieved a revolutionary breakthrough: the first objective, quantitative tool for analyzing how and why one fighter plane is better than another in combat. Much to the chagrin of his superiors, Boyd's Energy-Maneuverability Theory accurately forecast that the F-4 and the F-111 would be outflown in Vietnam by lower-tech MiGs.

At the Pentagon, Boyd was the godfather of the so-called Fighter Mafia, lobbying for small, nimble airplanes in place of the bigger, more complex, and more expensive models favored by the air force. He was the father of the F-16—still the world's premier dogfighting machine—and a leader of the military reform movement of the 1970s and '80s. In 1991, Boyd advised then-secretary of defense Dick Cheney about tactics for the war against Iraq. According to Coram, Boyd may have been an anonymous architect of the lightning strike that ended Operation Desert Storm.

Coram is particularly good on the bureaucratic battles fought by Boyd's disciples—no surprise, perhaps, considering that these reformers were Coram's principal sources. The book is also full of wonderful material about military culture, from the testosterone-laden ambience at Nellis to the protocols of official briefings. Unfortunately, Boyd himself comes off as something of a cartoon figure. Though Coram debunks some of the more outlandish claims, his Boyd is still

scaled so much larger than life that it's hard to take him seriously. Then again, maybe this age of instant celebrity has blinded us to the qualities of a true hero.

—PRESTON LERNER

CAPTIVES:

The Story of Britain's Pursuit of Empire and How Its Soldiers and Civilians Were Held Captive by the Dream of Global Supremacy, 1600–1850.

By Linda Colley. Pantheon. 438 pp. \$27.50

Linda Colley made her name as a highly original historian with *Britons* (1993), which explored the deliberate creation of “British” (and anti-Catholic) identity and patriotism after the Act of Union brought England and Scotland together in 1707. Her equally innovative *Captives* examines the British imperial enterprise through its less publicized failures and the experience of British citizens taken prisoner.

Whatever the anthem “Rule Britannia” might say, Britons were made into slaves with dismaying regularity. By trawling through the archives, Colley can account for at least 8,000 British taken prisoner by the North African pirate beys in the 17th and 18th centuries. And in the wars against Tippoo Sultan of Mysore starting in 1768, some 1,300 British soldiers were held captive—a strikingly high proportion of the approximately 10,000 British troops then in India. These numbers usefully challenge the orthodox narrative of endless success through British military and naval prowess. In land warfare, the British enjoyed little technological advantage once the Indian states hired or suborned European artillery specialists.

Colley places the initial British defeat in India, at Pollilur in 1780, squarely in the context of the parallel reverses suffered a world away in North America. By seeking to hold both India and the North American colonies, the empire was overstretched and humbled. In 1784, when Parliament passed new legislation to regulate the affairs of the chastened East India Company, any further attempts at imperial expansion were explicitly ruled out—“schemes of conquest and extent of dominion [are] repugnant to the wish, the honor, and the policy of this nation.”

That changed swiftly with the French revolutionary and Napoleonic wars and the threat of a French alliance with Tippoo Sultan. The British concentrated naval assets in the Mediterranean to defeat the French in Egypt and sent troops to India to fight Tippoo. The outstanding Admiral Horatio Nelson and General Arthur Wellesley (the future Duke of Wellington) secured India and the Mediterranean, and the reborn British Empire advanced to its most glorious and rapacious phase. Colley splendidly and readably places this triumphal comeback in the context of the nation's previous losses.

British propaganda often emphasized the interior lives of the country's captured soldiers—“the strength of their sympathy with one another,” in the words of a 1788 memoir. “Teetering on the verge of unprecedented global intervention,” Colley writes, “the British then—rather like Americans now—needed to be persuaded that they were not only a superpower, but also a virtuous, striving, and devoted people.” She goes on to draw further parallels with the U.S. response to accounts of prisoners of war in North Vietnam. Great powers whose populations are accustomed to victory, it seems, make overseas humiliations tolerable by focusing on individual suffering rather than strategic miscalls.

Colley has something in common with military historian John Keegan, who found a new and illuminating way to retell old tales by focusing on what battle did to its losers and to its wounded. But unlike Keegan, Colley brings a contemporary edge to her writing, as in that reference to the Vietnam War. Some may object to modern politicking in a book about the past, but it adds the spice of controversy and provocation to the writing of one of the most interesting historians at work today.

—MARTIN WALKER

DUTY, HONOR, COUNTRY:

The Life and Legacy of Prescott Bush.

By Mickey Herskowitz. Rutledge Hill Press. 229 pp. \$24.99

Despite having produced two presidents and a governor of Florida, the Bushes reject any suggestion that their family is a political dynasty. They insist, as George W. Bush told me in a 1995 interview, that public service is “just