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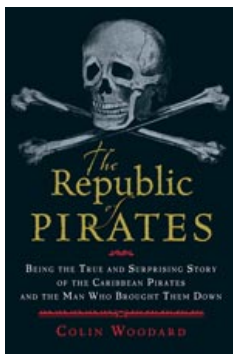
## Books for the Backpack — Recommended Summer Reading

Friday, June 8, 2007

Summer is supposed to be a season of rest and relaxation — at least in theory. As one wit remarked, "A perfect summer day is when the sun is shining, the breeze is blowing, the birds are singing, and the lawn mower is broken."



Fair enough. But even on less promising summer days there may be an opportunity for reading books for sheer pleasure and enjoyment. Several readers have asked for a list of books profitable for summer reading, and so I offer the following list of more recent titles, drawn from the nonfiction category.



Colin Woodard, *The Republic of Pirates: Being the True and Surprising Story of the Caribbean Pirates and the Man Who Brought Them Down* (New York: Harcourt, 2007).

Pirates have been mainstays of the American imagination from the colonial era — and for better reasons than some might expect. The era of the famous Atlantic pirates coincided with the growth of the American colonies and had a great deal to do with world politics and competition between expansionist powers.

Woodard sets the record straight, describing the major characters and events in the so-called "Golden Age" of piracy in the early eighteenth century. Readers will be introduced to some familiar characters and famous pirates, but Woodard also includes colorful portraits of those less well-known today.

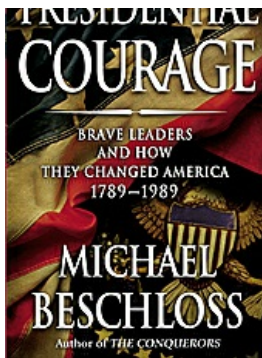
Like the pirates themselves, this book will take your imagination captive. I was taken with the book from its introduction to the end, and I really appreciate Woodard's careful explanation of why the pirates were such important characters on the world scene.

An excerpt:

*The Golden Age of Piracy lasted only ten years, from 1715 to 1725, and was conducted by a clique of twenty to thirty pirate commodores and a few thousand crewmen. Virtually all of the commodores knew one another, having served side by side aboard merchant or pirate vessels or crossed paths in their shared base, the failed British colony of the Bahamas. While most pirates were English or Irish, there were large numbers of Scots, French, and Africans as well as a smattering of other nationalities: Dutch, Danes, Swedes, and Native Americans. Despite differences in nation, race, religion, and even language, they forged a common culture. When meeting at sea, pirate vessels frequently joined forces and came to one another's aid, even when one crew was largely French and the other dominated by their traditional enemies, the English. They ran their ships democratically, electing and deposing their captains by popular vote, sharing plunder equally, and making important decisions in an open council — all in sharp contrast to the dictatorial regimes in place aboard other ships. At a time when ordinary sailors received no social protections of any kind, the Bahamian pirates provided disability benefits for their crews.*



Michael Beschloss, *Presidential Courage: Brave Leaders and How They Changed*



*America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007).

Beschloss, a popular historian who appears often in the media, offers in this book a series of vignettes profiling presidential character. Americans have invested incredible authority and power in the nation's Chief Executive, and Beschloss has chosen presidents such as George Washington, John Adams, Andrew Jackson, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Ronald Reagan as examples of presidential courage.

He weaves the theme of courage through some of the better known acts of presidential leadership (such as Lincoln signing the Emancipation Declaration) and lesser known events (such as Washington braving the Treaty Crisis). The book is history written as if history matters, and Beschloss has a keen eye for just the right anecdote to add color and content to presidential character.

In this excerpt, Beschloss deals with President Truman's decision to recognize the new state of Israel in 1948:

*Truman understood that had the world's most powerful nation failed to recognize the new Jewish state, Israel's foes would have been emboldened to brand it an illegitimate fiction that did not deserve to survive.*

*By recognizing Israel, Truman knew he would be forever damned by those who did not want the Jews to have their own state — or who did not want it in Palestine.*

*But as Truman always told himself, the ultimate test of any Presidential decision was “not whether it's popular at the time, but whether it's right. . . . If it's right, make it, and let the popular part take care of itself.”*

*The precocious Harry had written at age fifteen, “A true heart, a strong mind, and a great deal of courage and I think a man will get through the world.”*

*Heir to the pioneers of Independence, Missouri gateway to the American West, Truman believed that great leaders must be optimists.*

*From his lifetime reading about the “land of milk and honesty,” he was sure that the Jews could make the Palestine desert bloom: they and those Arabs were “first cousins anyway,” so why couldn't they get along?*



Donald L. Miller, *Masters of the Air: America's Bomber Boys Who Fought the Air War Against Nazi Germany* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2006).

Americans often forget that the war against Nazi Germany was first fought in the air. Long before land forces would stand on European soil, brave American airmen were flying missions over Nazi-dominated lands, with massive bombers and their crews flying what were, for so many, effectively suicide missions.

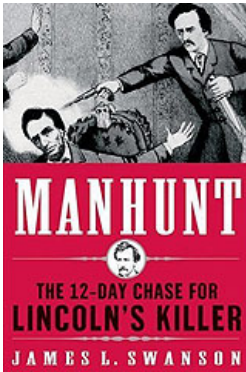
In *Masters of the Air*, Donald Miller writes a compelling narrative of the development of the air war over Europe. He reveals the overconfidence with which British and American war planners plotted an end to Nazi tyranny by air attack. His massive research project demonstrates not only the error of that assumption, but also the fact that massive bombing did have an effect on Nazi manufacturing and morale.

His book explains the development of the bomber as a weapon of war and an instrument of unprecedented killing power. He also takes readers to the ground, where incendiary bombing sent firestorms through historic cities with hurricane force winds of death and destruction.

Most compellingly, he writes of the bravery and courage of the boys — and most were boys — who flew and crewed the massive flights of B-17s across Europe. These “bomber boys” were often just teenagers, and they had to negotiate themselves into manhood even as they knew their lives as men were likely to be short.

An excerpt:

*There were ten men in the crew of an Eighth Air Force bomber. The pilot and his co-pilot sat in the cockpit, side by side; the navigator and bombardier were just below, in the plane's transparent Plexiglas nose; and directly behind the pilot was the flight engineer, who doubled as the top turret gunner. Further back in the plane, in a separate compartment, was the radio operator, who manned a top-side machine gun; and a mid-ship there were two waist gunners and a ball turret gunner, who sat in a revolving Plexiglas bubble that hung — fearfully vulnerable — from the underside of the fuselage. In an isolated compartment in the back of the plane was the tail gunner, perched on an oversized bicycle seat. Every position on the plane was vulnerable; there were no foxholes in the sky. Along with German and American submarine crews and the Luftwaffe pilots they met in combat, American and British bomber boys had the most dangerous job in the war. In October 1943, fewer than one out of four Eighth Air Force crew members could expect to complete his tour of duty: twenty-five combat missions. The statistics were discomfiting. Two-thirds of the men could expect to die in combat or be captured by the enemy. And 17 percent would either be wounded seriously, suffer a disabling mental breakdown, or die in a violent air accident over British soil. Only 14 percent of fliers assigned to Major Egan's Bomb Group when it arrived in England in May 1943 made it to their twenty-fifth mission. By the end of the war, the Eighth Air Force would have more fatal casualties — 26,000 — than the entire United States Marine Corps. Seventy-seven percent of the Americans who flew against the Reich before D-Day would wind up as casualties.*



James L. Swanson, *Manhunt: The 12-Day Chase for Lincoln's Killer* (New York: William Morrow, 2006).

Most Americans probably think they know the story of Abraham Lincoln's assassination and subsequent events. A few pages into *Manhunt* by James Swanson will convince readers that they do not know the real story — at least not in the way Swanson recounts these crucial days in the nation's history.

The assassination of President Lincoln set off the largest manhunt in American history, and the events of the murder and its aftermath threatened to tear the nation apart. The young nation — not even a century old — had just been divided by a bitter civil war. The assassination of Lincoln jeopardized the American experiment itself.

Swanson brings the history alive, tracking John Wilkes Booth as he sought to evade capture. Along the way, Swanson offers fascinating portraits of the leading characters and crucial events. What so many Americans living now often miss is the fact that Booth was himself such a well-known figure.

Swanson takes his readers through Washington, D.C. and its environs, tracing Booth's flight and capture. Along the way, readers will learn about everything from the assassination conspiracy to investigative techniques used by law enforcement authorities of the era.

An excerpt:

*It was time to take him home. Stanton ordered soldiers to go quickly and bring what was necessary to transport the body of the slain president. He ordered another soldier to guard the door to the death room and to allow no one to enter and disturb the president's body. When the soldiers returned from their errand and turned down Tenth Street, the crowd began to wail. The men carried a plain, pine box, the final refutation of their hopes. They knew already, of course, that the president was dead. They had seen the cabinet secretaries leave the house, and then Mary Lincoln. But the sight of the crude, improvised coffin made it too real. It was finished. The box looked like a shipping crate, not a proper coffin for a head of state. Lincoln would not have minded. He was always a man of simple tastes. This was the plain, roughly hewn coffin of a rail-splitter.*



Michael B. Oren, *Six Days of War: June 1967 and the Making of the Modern Middle East* (London: Oxford University Press, 2002).

This book is a bit older than the others, but the fact that this week marks the fortieth anniversary of Israel's Six Day War demands its inclusion. This is one of the most compelling accounts of battle ever written.



Michael Oren takes his readers back into the world of 1967. Israel was less than twenty years old as a state. Its Arab neighbors were united against her, with most pledging themselves to the annihilation of the Jewish state and the elimination of any Jewish presence in the region.

Israel's predicament in 1967 appeared desperate. Israeli forces were vastly outnumbered. Her enemies were armed with equipment that was considered vastly superior to her own. Nevertheless, the Jewish state had some things her enemies did not have — a tenacious will to survive and a military command structure that had the support of the troops and the people. Israel could also count on a corps of brilliant military officers and fiercely committed soldiers on the ground — and in the air.

Israel's massive victory — destroying the Egyptian air force on the ground and cutting through armies in hours — led to the contours of the modern Middle East, and to some of the most pressing controversies of our times.

No one can understand the modern Middle East without understanding the 1967 war, and there is no better way to learn about that war than by reading *Six Days of War*.

An excerpt:

*In the sky, the visibility was excellent, the wind factor close to zero. Conditions were optimal for attack. The Israeli jets now swooped up sharply to as high as 9,000 feet, exposing themselves to Egyptian radar and sending Egyptian pilots out to the tarmac, scrambling. Few would reach their planes.*

*The jets dove. They approached in foursomes and attacked in pairs, each making three passes — four, if time permitted — the first for bombing and the rest to strafe. Priority was given to destroying the runways, then to the long-range bombers that threatened Israeli cities, and then to the jet fighters, the MiG's. Last to be raided were missile, radar, and support facilities. Each sortie was to take between seven and ten minutes. With a twenty-minute return flight, and eight-minute refueling time, and ten minute's rest for the pilot, the planes would be in action again well within an hour. During that hour, moreover, the Egyptian bases would be under almost uninterrupted attack.*

More to come.

