

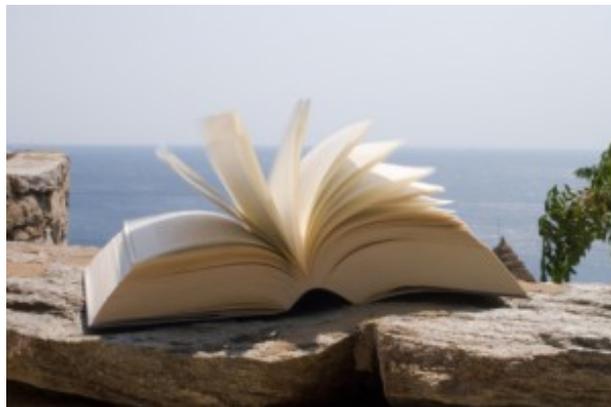
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## Recommended Reading: The Summer Reading List for 2012



Sunday, June 10, 2012

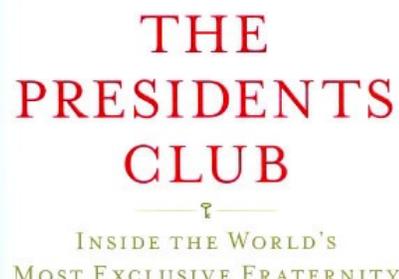
Reading has its own seasons and rhythms. For much of the year, leaders and other busy people put off a great deal of the reading they *want* to do in favor of the reading they *have* to do. For many of us, summer affords the season to read at least a few choice volumes off the *want to read* list, and some of that reading is unapologetically fun and diversionary.



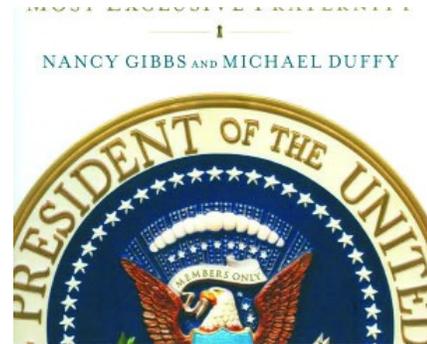
Some of our most important reading takes place when reading those books that most deeply interest us, regardless of subject area. One of the happiest experiences in reading is discovering an entire area of knowledge or subject matter that never seemed to be interesting before. Here are a few very choice non-fiction titles for summer reading. Enjoy the list, and share your own.

1. Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy, *The Presidents Club: Inside the World's Most Exclusive Fraternity* (Simon and Schuster, 2012)

“I think we ought to organize a former presidents club,” said Herbert Hoover. “Fine,” answered Harry Truman, “You be the President of the club, and I will be the



Secretary.” That unlikely exchange took place on January 20, 1953, at the inauguration of Dwight Eisenhower as President of the United States. Nevertheless, as Nancy Gibbs and Michael Duffy explain, the “club” really began in 1797 when George Washington retired from office and became, by his own design, the nation’s first *former* president.



In *The Presidents Club*, Gibbs and Duffy offer readers a treasury of insight into “the world’s most exclusive fraternity.” From the time of George Washington’s retirement, the nation has known relatively few periods without at least one living former President. The last time that happened followed the death of Lyndon Johnson in 1973. In contrast, when Bill Clinton took office in 1993, no less than five former Presidents were living. Four are living today.

What makes this book both important and impossible to put down is the way Gibbs and Duffy reveal how America’s former Presidents have related to each other and to the incumbents they often served. Even more interesting is the fact that these relationships have been so utterly unpredictable. Hoover and Truman were an unlikely pair, but they held each other in high respect (and shared a dislike for Eisenhower). Jimmy Carter defeated Gerald Ford in 1976, but delivered the main eulogy at Ford’s state funeral in 2006. The two had become close friends when both were out of office. George H. W. Bush became a surrogate father to Bill Clinton, and the man who helped the relationship along was none other than George W. Bush. If you are interested in politics and presidential history, *The Presidents Club* is mandatory reading.

Excerpt:

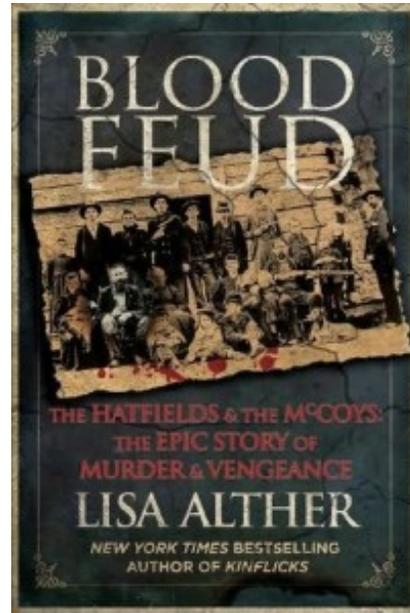
*Nixon was not wired to seek out club members for companionship, as Johnson had; in any event Eisenhower had died within a few months of Nixon taking office, and Truman was safely retired in Missouri. Nixon did travel to Independence to present for his presidential library a piano that had been in the White House when he was there. The encounter was warm, clubby; you would not have known they had hurled insults at one another for decades, as they shook hands and smiled. Nixon sat down at the piano and pounded out “The Missouri Waltz.” Truman actually hated the tune, but by then he was too deaf to mind.*

*But it was Johnson that Nixon cared about, Johnson whom he courted and flattered and watched like a hawk to make sure he did not cause trouble. It was not that Johnson retained a drop of political clout in his Texas exile. It’s just that he knew too much about Nixon’s past. Handled correctly, Nixon believed, LBJ could be a valuable ally and asset in the future. Mishandled—well, anything could happen.*

2. Lisa Alther, *Blood Feud: The Hatfields and the McCoys—The Epic Story of Murder and Vengeance* (Lyons Press, 2012).

Most Americans know of the infamous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys, but few know much, if anything, about it. The story has been passed down in American popular culture in a cartoon-like version that fails to take the real story seriously — and this is a story that demands to be taken seriously.

Lisa Alther's *Blood Feud*, just published this year, is our best access to the story. Alther, a native of Appalachia, tells the story in all of its sordid and sad horror, and she tells it about as well as it can now be told. As she admits, many of the details are lost to the fog of memory and competing arguments. At the same time, the basic story can be traced, and Alther adds considerable insight from the nation's larger history and social development. The infamous feud between the Hatfields and the McCoys is put within the larger frame of Appalachian history, American sectionalism, the Civil War, and patterns of immigration from England and Scotland. The real story is much larger and significant than most Americans imagine, and far more tragic as well. *Blood Feud* is a timely book on a neglected chapter of America's past, with implications for the present as well.



Excerpt:

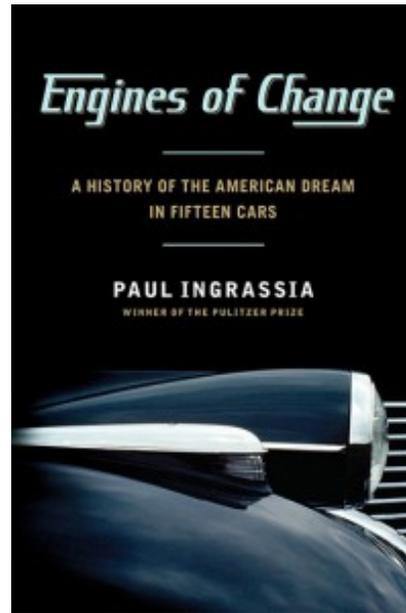
*Any one explanation for the feud, taken on its own, doesn't do justice to the extent or the gravity of the events. But taken as a whole, their collective weight seems valid: too many guns, too much moonshine, too little regard for human life, an inflated sense of personal pride, an exaggerated need to experience hormonal highs through violence, inchoate rage spawned by largely subconscious inner conflicts. British borderland folkways and the remnants of a frontier culture still exerted their influence. Civil War antagonisms and the habit of guerrilla justice lingered on. Without regular schooling, feudists hadn't learned how to subdue destructive emotions with rationality. Without churches, many had no sense of moral values that transcended personal or family whims. The warrior ethos conditioned into young boys taught them to disparage or disregard advocates for peaceful solutions to clashes. Young men with no land of their own were raging against the approaching exploitation of their labor and extinction of their way of life occasioned by the arrival of the large-scale timber and coal consortiums.*

*The Hatfield-McCoy feud was a perfect storm. It resulted in many deaths. But this*

*was a man-made disaster, not a freak of nature. Given some measure of sobriety, humility, rationality, and compassion, most of these deaths could have been avoided.*

3. Paul Ingrassia, *Engines of Change: A History of the American Dream in Fifteen Cars* (Simon and Schuster, 2012).

Most people do not name their computers, notes Paul Ingrassia, but they often do name their cars. Americans have been infatuated with the automobile for almost a century now, and the history of the car is one important aspect of the nation's history as well. Ingrassia, whose plans to write this book were interrupted by the recent economic crisis and the need to cover the auto industry's struggle to survive, has finally released his labor of love. *Engines of Change* tells the story of America and its automobiles through the stories of fifteen historic cars, from Henry Ford and his Model T to Toyota's Prius and its drivers ("the Pious"). Along the way he tells the stories of the Volkswagen's unlikely embrace by Americans, the rise of tail fins, the Mustang, the Pontiac GTO, the Chrysler minivan, the Jeep, the Ford F-Series pickup, and others. Each tells part of a compelling story.



Even if you do not give your cars names, you will enjoy this book. *Engines of Change* tells the American story, illuminated by the headlights of its automobiles.

Excerpt:

*Showing off, of course, was the very purpose of tail fins. They started out small, like the tails on tiny tadpoles, in 1948. But they soon grew. In 1957 Chrysler bedecked its cars with enormous tail fins that pointed to the sky, and touted them with advertisements that declared: "Suddenly, it's 1960!" The company also claimed that its outsized tail fins were safety devices; "directional stabilizers" in its words, that kept its cars going straighter than ordinary, unfinned cars.*

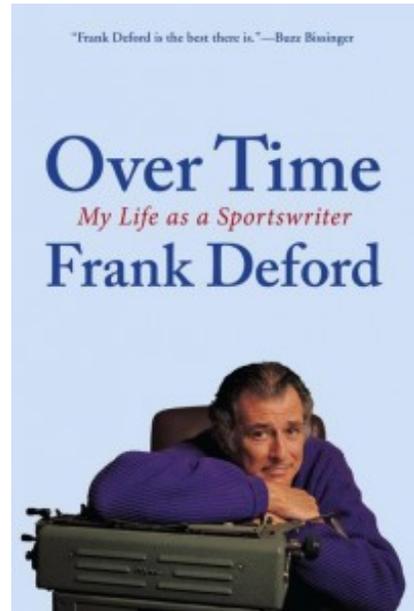
*It was ludicrously outrageous, of course, even for an industry where hyperbole is as ambient as horsepower. But the mandarins at the Harvard Business School swallowed the claim anyway, lock, stock, and dipstick, and honored the Chrysler executive who fathered the big fins. Meanwhile, the styling gurus at Cadillac worked themselves into a near panic at the prospect of being out-finned by Chrysler. They launched a crash program to develop bigger and more ostentatious fins of their own. As America found itself locked in the arms race and the space race with the Soviet*

*Union, Detroit's great tail fin race was on.*

4. Frank Deford, *Over Time: My Career as a Sportswriter* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2012).

I no longer need to tell people that I am not a sports fan. Evidently, that one fact is so infuriating to people that they know it when they know nothing else about me — or when they know something else that makes sense supposedly because I am not a sports fan. “Did you know that Albert Mohler likes salmon?” “Why no, but it makes sense. He is not a sports fan.” Huh?

But, even if I am not a big sports fan, I am interested in sports, and I do admire great sportswriting. I enjoy reading John Feinstein on golf, George Will on baseball (you knew I would work him in), and Frank Deford on almost anything. In *Over Time*, Deford offers a memoir packed with anecdotes, insights, comments, and his own very interesting life.



There are not many sportswriters who learn their craft at Princeton, but Deford did. He has been writing about sports for a half-century, including a very influential run at *Sports Illustrated*. He is clever, candid, and pithy. He developed a literary style all his own, and it is on full display in *Over Time*. Warning: athletes and others in this book use bad language and display bad behavior. Deford reports it all—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the uglier. He was among the first major sportswriters to deal with many of the moral issues inherent in violent sports, as well as the controversies about collegiate athletics. Readers will be especially touched by Deford's sweet memories of his daughter Alex, who died of cystic fibrosis at age 8.

Excerpt:

*After I give a speech, and I solicit questions, invariably somebody will want to know something about what's up there at the top of my all-time lists: my favorite all-time game list or the all-time most inspiring athlete list or the all-time hardest story I ever did list. It's a list-centric world. I also get this question: how do you write?*

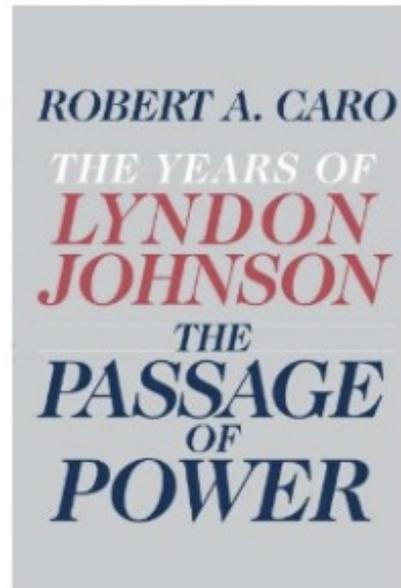
*You mean like: in the morning after breakfast, in my office, on a computer. That's how I write.*

*Oh.*

*All are terribly disappointed when I tell them that. But I understand. Because writing is such a personal endeavor, people are curious as to exactly how you go about it. I don't think people ask, say, what captains of industry do in their offices. How do you talk on the phone? Tell us. Mr. Insurance Agent, how exactly do you go about selling life term policies? But it's flattering that people want to visualize you writing. I'm always sure to tell them how Victor Hugo would give all his clothes to his valet every morning and then write naked so that he couldn't go anywhere until he'd written his quota for the day. I don't know if that's true, but I read it once, and it's certainly more interesting than how I write, fully clothed, without a valet, so it's a good answer, even if a lot of people don't any longer know who Victor Hugo was.*

5. Robert A. Caro, *The Passage of Power: The Years of Lyndon Johnson* (Alfred A. Knopf, 2012).

Lyndon Baines Johnson lived an outsized life, and Robert Caro is an outsized biographer. *The Passage of Power* is the fourth volume in Caro's monumental biography of America's 34th president. Johnson was powerful, profane, cunning, and passionate. Caro's three previous volumes document Johnson's rise from poverty in Texas to the most powerful seat in the United States Senate, stealing elections and twisting arms as he went along. In the newest volume, Caro recounts Johnson's first year as President, including a harrowing account of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy and the hatred many within the Kennedy administration directed at Johnson as he took office.



Caro vindicates Johnson from many of the charges made against him by Kennedy loyalists, and shows Johnson's grasp of power and politics, of which he was a master. More importantly, Caro traces Johnson's high-velocity transformation of himself and his administration as a political dynamo for domestic legislation. Johnson took advantage of the nation's grief over the violent death of its young president and channeled that energy toward the passage of ground-breaking legislation — acts and programs that went far beyond Kennedy's own plans for a first term in office. Robert Caro is one of the last of his kind; biographers who believe that facts matter, that individuals make a difference, and that the truth must be told on a big canvas. *The Passage of Power* is one of the most important biographical volumes to emerge in recent years.

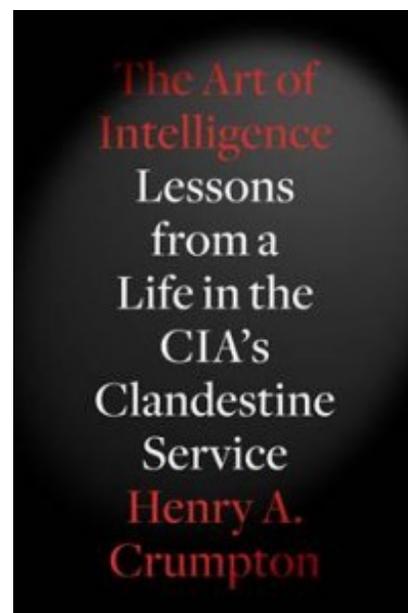
Excerpt:

*As Lyndon Johnson arranged the crowd, jerking his thumb to show people where he wanted them, glancing around with those piercing dark eyes, Valenti's initial feeling that this was a different man was intensified: Johnson was suddenly "something larger, harder to fathom" than the man he thought he knew. He looked, in fact, for the first time in three years, like the Lyndon Johnson of the Senate floor. Now he had suddenly come to the very pinnacle of power. However he had gotten there, whatever concatenation of circumstance and tragedy—whatever fate—had put him there, he was there, and he knew what to do there. When O'Donnell, obeying his order, went to her bedroom and asked Jacqueline Kennedy if she wanted to be present at the swearing-in, she said, "I think I ought to. In the light of history it would be better if I was there," and followed O'Donnell out, to the door of the stateroom.*

*"A hush, a hush—every whisper stopped," Roberts recalled. She was still wearing the same suit, with the same bloodstains. Her eyes were "cast down," in Judge Hughes' phrase. She had apparently tried to comb her hair, but it fell down across the left side of her face. On her face was a glazed look, and she appeared to be crying, although no tears were coming out. Johnson placed her on his left side, and nodded to the judge, who held out the missal. He put his left hand on it—the hand, mottled and veined, was so large that it all but covered the little book—and raised his right hand, as the judge said, "I do solemnly swear . . ." Valenti, watching those hands, saw that they were "absolutely steady," and Lyndon Johnson's voice was steady, too—low and firm—as he spoke the words he had been waiting to speak all his life. . . . The oath was over. His hand came down. "Now let's get airborne," Lyndon Johnson said.*

6. Henry A. Crumpton, *The Art of Intelligence: Lessons from a Life in the CIA's Clandestine Service* (The Penguin Press, 2012).

Henry Crumpton first applied to join the clandestine service of the Central Intelligence Agency when he was a ten-year-old boy. He received a formal letter from the CIA inviting him to apply again when older. He did, of course, and spent almost a quarter century as a key figure in American intelligence before retiring and entering private life in 2007. *The Art of Intelligence* is his memoir and treatise on how intelligence is gathered, evaluated, and deployed by the CIA in the service of national security. "I loved every day at the CIA," Crumpton recalls, "even the hard and ugly ones." Readers of *The Art of Intelligence* will understand why.



Crumpton served in several of the CIA's most crucial postings, including the direction of counterterrorism in Afghanistan. He reveals many of the most important elements of the clandestine service (as allowed by the CIA) and puts it all within a narrative that includes September 11, 2001 and the transformations that followed that terrifying day. *The Art of Intelligence* makes for a riveting and revealing read. There is, quite simply, no other book like it.

Excerpt:

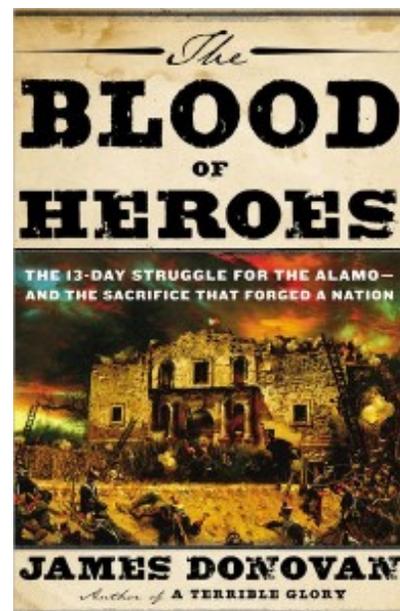
*A few weeks later, the Senate confirmed me as the coordinator for counterterrorism. The process took twenty minutes. There were no contentious questions or commentaries. I was sworn into office the next day, 1 August 2005. I was now on the policy side, a consumer of intelligence. No more clandestine missions. After all the years, it almost seemed imaginary. I joined the CIA, learned the art of espionage, ran agent networks, collected valuable intelligence, executed global covert action, led men in war, and helped defend our country. I had lived the dreams of a small boy.*

*In other ways, it was all too real. I mourned the deaths of many. I struggled with the risks of espionage, covert action, and war. I endured the uncertainties and errors of our foreign policies and our politics. But I loved my CIA mission, our opportunities seized, and our victories won. Most of all, I was honored and privileged to defend our Constitution and serve our great nation. May God bless America and her spies. We need them, more than ever.*

7. James Donovan, *The Blood of Heroes: The 13-Day Struggle for the Alamo—and the Sacrifice that Forged a Nation* (Little, Brown, and Company, 2012).

The story of the Alamo is central to the narrative told by Texans, but the heroism of the Alamo is central to the American story as well. The martyrs of the Alamo did not survive the great day of battle, but their words, deeds, and names have found their way into the America's national character. As James Donovan makes clear in *The Blood of Heroes*, a major retelling of the story, Americans remember the Alamo for good reason.

The actual structure known as the Alamo is surprisingly small, but the strategic importance of the events that took place there February 23 through March 6, 1836 loom large. Donovan is an accomplished researcher and writer, and he was



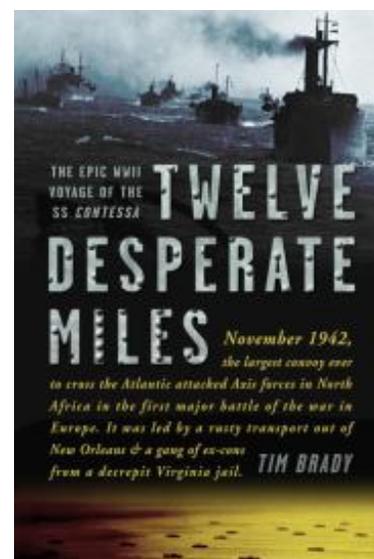
determined, as far as possible, to determine what really happened at the Alamo, especially on the fatal day of March 6, 1836. Every member of the garrison present that day died. There were no survivors to tell the story in detail. Furthermore, the events were subsumed in mythology almost as soon as the day was over. Yet, Donovan knows how to deal with such mythology, as he did in *A Terrible Glory*, his history of Gen. George Custer's famed "Last Stand." Donovan places the story of the Alamo within the troubled history of relations between the United States and Mexico and within the emerging national energies of the United States. The cast of characters (including Crockett, Travis, and Houston) and drama are compelling, and the issues he covers in *The Blood of Heroes* are deeply relevant today.

Excerpt:

*Eight of the Alamo's defenders were Tejanos who had bravely decided to join the colonists in their rebellion—they, too, were outraged by Santa Anna's actions. But like the great majority of the Americans at the time, the rest were of Anglo-Saxon stock. Most of the men in the fort were Scots-Irish whose Scottish ancestors had fought for their freedom from the British at Stirling and Bannockburn, and then fought the Irish at the same time they were marrying and breeding with their women. A dozen or so were Englishmen whose forefathers had defeated the French at Agincourt and Crecy, and beheaded their own king for aspiring to tyranny. And for those who were American-born, 1776 was no distant memory; there were veterans of that struggle still living. At least fifty of the defenders proudly claimed fathers or grandfathers who had participated in the Revolutionary War. No, whatever else happened, these men would back down from no one.*

8. Tim Brady, *Twelve Desperate Miles: The Epic World War II Voyage of the SS Contessa* (Crown Publishers, 2012).

The twentieth century was, as Eric Hobsbawm has remarked, the century of megadeath. At the center of that carnage stands World War II and its cataclysmic tragedies. Given the stature and lasting significance of that war, my summer reading always includes some titles that focus on World War II and its meaning. This can sometimes be a challenge, since so many of the war's major story lines have been told over and over again, subject to historical scrutiny. Not so with the events behind *Twelve Desperate Miles*, an incredible story that is told well by Jim Brady.



The story of the *SS Contessa* is one of the least likely we can imagine. As the Allies planned the amphibious invasion of North Africa in 1942, the largest fleet of naval ships

ever to cross the Atlantic included a rusty banana freighter from Honduras that was crewed by sailors that included 14 from the Norfolk brig and at least two teenage boys. The *SS Contessa* was to play an unlikely but essential role in the invasion of North Africa, delivering necessary fuel and bombs up a heavily defended twelve mile stretch of river. Gen. George S. Patton desperately needed that fuel and those bombs, and the *Contessa* was the only vessel found that could navigate the shallow waters of the river. The story is epic and suspenseful, with Dwight Eisenhower, George Patton, George C. Marshall, and many others in important roles. *Twelve Desperate Miles* draws much needed attention to the war's events in North Africa, including the Battle of Morocco.

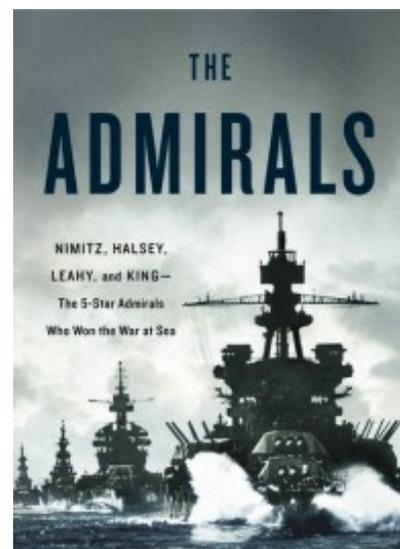
Excerpt:

*Shots pinged around the banana boat and her highly explosive load as the navy gunners looked out from their stations, trying without success to find something to shoot at. The Contessa inched along so slowly that she couldn't help but draw attention to herself. In contrast to the landing craft that were zipping by, she was in a slow-motion war. Time had never ticked by with such difficulty for the men on board as she climbed up the river.*

*The men on deck could plainly see American troops moving along the hillsides; they could see half-tracks and jeeps running over open ground. There was a clear sense that the battle had been won, yet it was impossible not to consider how exposed they remained to some uncoordinated attack from the enemy. The sensation intensified as the Contessa inched her way through the northeastern bend of the river and traveled by the swamp that had mired the Third Battalion the evening before. A single strafing run from a French Dewoitine rushing in from the airport at Meknes would place them in dire circumstances. A lost French battery zeroing in on the Contessa could blow them to kingdom come.*

9. Walter R. Borneman, *The Admirals: Nimitz, Halsey, Leahy, and King — The Five-Star Admirals Who Won the War at Sea* (Little, Brown and Company, 2012).

The leading generals who led the Allies during World War II are household names. Americans know to identify victory in the war with leaders such as Eisenhower, Patton, Bradley, Montgomery, Clark, Marshall, Montgomery, and Slim. The admirals of the war are less known, but the war in the Pacific was largely a naval struggle, and that struggle was led by four five-star admirals whose massive contributions are documented in



Walter Borneman's *The Admirals*.



Borneman follows the four admirals from Annapolis to their destiny as major naval commanders of the second world war. He admires all four, but his account is also critical (especially of Halsey at Leyte Gulf). Readers will appreciate Borneman's ability to tell their stories as well as the large narrative of the war at sea. Finally, *The Admirals* recounts the fact that their victories also sealed the fate of the older way of naval warfare. The age of the battleship was no more.

Excerpt:

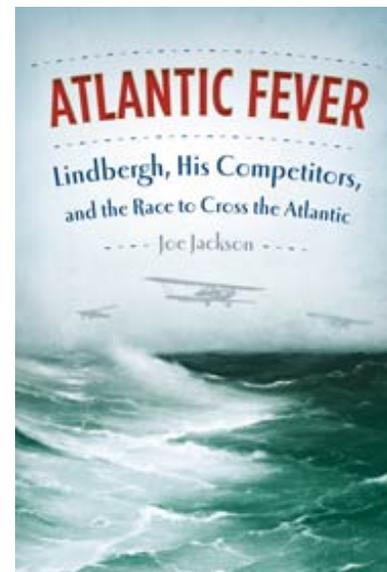
*Despite the Japanese surrender ceremony being held on the deck of a battleship, the war had been a final curtain call for battleship admirals and their revered gray behemoths. Stately and magnificent though they were, the battleships had been eclipsed by aircraft carriers and submarines as omnipotent offensive weapons. Never again would navies come at one another with 16-inch guns blazing.*

*Throughout most of their careers, King, Nimitz, and Halsey had been on the cutting edge of the developing innovations in naval aviation and undersea warfare. And while Leahy dragged his black shoes for years over the battleship's increased vulnerabilities, he came to embrace these newer weapons as essential to achieving the wartime goals he oversaw from the President's right hand. Naval aviation and America's submarine force would continue their ascension as both spear point and deterrent, but for the fleet admirals, September 2, 1945, was the apex of their careers.*

10. Joe Jackson, *Atlantic Fever: Lindbergh, His Contemporaries, and the Race to Cross the Atlantic* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012).

Charles Lindberg probably was the first pilot to be successful in the great air race to cross the Atlantic nonstop. That does not mean that he was the first pilot to cross the Atlantic without stopping, but just the first to live to tell about it. That fact, among many others, is revealed in Joe Jackson's book, *Atlantic Fever*.

Jackson goes back to the opening decades of the twentieth century in order to lay out the world's blossoming fascination with airplanes and the wonder of flight, and how so much of the world's attention came to be focused on the challenge of a single pilot crossing the Atlantic and landing safely on the



other side. It is an incredible tale of human daring (and near insanity), of titanic egos and national honor. In many ways, the French thought themselves to be far ahead of the Americans when it came to manned flight, and the challenge of an Atlantic crossing was a French frenzy. Between September 21, 1926 and May 20, 1927, sixteen fliers attempted the crossing. Six of these pilots would die trying, and five crashes had taken place before Lindberg took off. Lindberg was not even considered by many to be a likely winner, and Jackson makes clear that any number of others might have beaten him, but for circumstances often out of their control. In *Atlantic Fever* Jackson tells the larger story, and explains why, in the aftermath of World War I, the age of flight held such fascination for people on both sides of the Atlantic.

Excerpt:

*By Christmas Day of 1927, the death toll of those trying to cross the North Atlantic had tripled: eighteen dead and five injured in eleven attempts that were either part of or inspired by the Orteig Prize. But there were others: two French fliers who died trying to cross the South Atlantic on the same day that Nungesser and Gouli were lost; the ten in the Dole Race; Paul Redfern in his attempt to fly to Rio. "If this were in the name of progress, it might be worth it," lamented The New York Times. But the sad fact remained that during the flying seasons of 1926/1927, at least thirty-one aviators vanished or died in the grip of a strange obsession that no one understood but that excited the world. Though many declared such risks necessary and in the name of science, progress had veered in another direction: toward the development of big multi-engine planes that could ferry riders across a rapidly shrinking world. The doomed aviators of 1926 and 1927 weren't even sacrifices. They were the dying gasp of something more personal, a glimmer revealed to them, if only briefly, by Lindberg and the others competing for the Orteig Prize.*

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NOTE: The number of worthy books for summer reading 2012 exceeds a single list. Expect a second list to be released in July. Happy reading.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at [mail@albertmohler.com](mailto:mail@albertmohler.com). Follow regular updates on Twitter at [www.twitter.com/](http://www.twitter.com/)

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