Geoffrey Parker

Geoffrey Parker is Andreas Dorpalen Professor of History at The Ohio State University, as well as an associate of the Mershon Center for International Security Studies.

Parker is author or editor of 36 books, almost 100 articles, and almost 200 book reviews on the social, political, and military history of early modern Europe. He is perhaps best known for his scholarship on Philip II of Spain, including a biography (translated into five languages), The Grand Strategy of Philip II (Yale, 1998), and The Spanish Armada (Manchester, 2001).

Among Parker's recent publications are “Crisis and Catastrophe: The World Crisis of the Seventeenth Century Reconsidered,” part of a special issue of American Historical Review. His article looks at why the period between 1640 and 1660 saw more wars and state breakdowns around the world than any other before or since.

Parker has also completed a revised biography of Philip II, who from 1556 until his death in 1598 ruled the first global empire in history, controlling much of Europe and the Americas. Yet his reign also marked the beginning of Spain's decline as a world power, epitomized by the defeat of the Spanish Armada in 1588.

Parker has used 50,000 notes handwritten by the king on everything from how to conquer England, to where to locate the toilets in the monastery of El Escorial, which he founded. These stream of consciousness notes provide a glimpse into Philip’s mind as events unfolded, undistorted by hindsight.

Parker believes that Philip precipitated Spain's decline in two ways. First, he tried to micromanage government actions throughout his empire. He had built an unrivaled information and communications network, but this led him to think he knew all the important facts and so could tell commanders in the field how to run their battles. The Spanish Armada failed to conquer England, Parker says, because Philip's instructions to his admirals were too narrow and there was no Plan B.

Second, Parker argues Philip operated a faith-based strategy, believing that if he did his best, God would intervene to bridge the gap between mean and ends. Such faith made him completely inflexible. When his admirals pointed out that it was rash to send ships to England during the winter, Philip responded God would send good weather. When his ministers claimed that Spain could not afford to fight so many foreign
wars, Philip replied that "since this is God's cause, He will provide the resources." Philip II, Parker says, was the decider, a leadership style whose inflexibility has certain parallels today.

Parker is a fellow of the British Academy, the Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, the Spanish-American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Royal Academy of History (Madrid). He has received the Samuel Eliot Morison Prize from the Society for Military History, two book prizes, and two Guggenheim awards.

Parker's work has also been recognized at Ohio State. In 2006 he received the Alumni Award for Excellence in Teaching, Research, and Service, and in 2007 he was named Distinguished University Professor, one of only 35 Ohio State faculty members who hold this title, the university’s highest honor.