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THE DECLINE OF MILITARY LITERATURE

by

DONALD ATWELL ZOLL

(Editor's Note: In June of 1971, Professor Donald Atwell Zoll of the Department of Political Science, Arizona State University, attended the National Strategy Seminar at the Army War College. He was sent a copy of the Spring/Summer issue of *Parameters*, and on 1 November 1972 he wrote to the editor to say that after examining the *Journal* he was prompted to pen a brief article entitled "The Decline of Military Literature," and he submitted it for consideration for publication in *Parameters*. The article that follows is the one he submitted for consideration. It takes issue with the paucity of military commentary and contains a number of interesting challenges to the military professional, not the least of which is that he start to write about the problems that are pertinent to his profession in order to preempt the civilian in academic circles who is producing quasi-military works. Professor Zoll cites six factors that account for this decline and he hopes his insights will contribute to a revival of what he calls "military literature." It is hoped that his article will stimulate our readers to meet his challenge head on, and

write. Our address is on the inside of the front cover.)

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It is notable that the Indo-China War, a struggle featuring ubiquitous tactical and strategic subtleties, provoked no vast body of critical military literature. This is surprising not only for the reason that the Vietnam conflict would seem, all else being equal, particularly appropriate a subject for sophisticated military commentary, but also for the reason that other military operations conducted by the United States and other powers have invariably stimulated such professional interpretation. This paucity of military commentary is made more provocative yet by a collateral observation that since the initial introduction of nuclear weaponry there has been comparatively little speculative military literature beyond the two areas of technological discussion and quasi-political exposition.

It would seem that the era of the military critic—in a somewhat similar genre to the literary critic—has passed. The post-World War II period has produced no figures comparable to the nineteenth-century theorists like Clausewitz, Jomini and Delbruck or the twentieth-century commentators of the type represented by Reppington, Liddell Hart and Baldwin. Even World War II did not appear to trigger as fulsome a torrent of military criticism as might be imagined, although the historical coverage of this conflict has been extensive and competent. True, we have had generals' memoirs (some of which, like Von Manstein's, deserve the attention of the military scholar) and works essentially in the milieu of grand strategy, but, curiously, most of the classics of modern military exposition were penned in the period between the wars,

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such as those of Fuller, Liddell Hart and the air power theorists. Indeed, one can see a decline in serious military commentary among the professional soldiery, as well as a tendency in civilian academic circles to produce quasi-military works, either predominantly political or technological.

CAUSES

On broad reflection, it is possible to speculate on the causes for the decline of military literature in general and upon the particular diminishment of military commentary in the case of comparatively

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recent operations in Korea and Indo-China. One might suggest the following factors in accounting for this decline: (1) a lowered intellectual vitality in speculations about the art of war; (2) a feeling of the diminishing significance of the craft of war in view of the advent of highly sophisticated technological weaponry; (3) a preoccupation with political as against purely military problems and an assumption that the two considerations are invariably inseparable; (4) an increased hostility against military activities by the general public and a lack of rapport and understanding between the academic community and the professional military; (5) changes in military education; (6) the inclination of some military bureaucracies to be suspicious of non-service military critics (however sympathetic in general viewpoint) and to introduce canons of secrecy in regard to military affairs uncustomary in previous



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Karl von Clausewitz

relationships between military establishments and military observers and commentators.

(1) There are subtle indications that there is a lowered intellectual level in regard to intra-service military speculation and its attendant literature in most western armies. To some degree this has resulted from a broadened social and educational base from which officer recruitment is inaugurated. Evident, too, is a deepening suspicion of the "general staff" mentality, which, granted its limitations, did infuse into armies a distinct intellectualistic cast. The undeniable "bureaucratization" of most western military establishments had led to greater emphasis upon the skills of "management" and "leadership" or technological competency and to decline in more academic attitudes to the art of war. In this sense, Max Weber's predictions have held true for military as well as civilian bureaucracies. It is very clear, if one examines the casual literary efforts of military officers of the current period, that the

thematic materials they choose to deal with mirror this emphasis: political-military relationships, human management, technological innovation and problems of procurement. In any case, bureaucracy, as a social phenomenon, tends to discourage theoretical speculation and it is doubtful whether a young De Gaulle would have contemporaneously penned his well-known treatise on armored warfare.

(2) There is a widely held view that the advent of electronic-nuclear devices have eliminated many of the classical concerns of the arts of war. Judgment may still be important and leadership and organization and logistical skills, but "generalship," if that term may serve, is seen as vaguely archaic. Such an outlook obviously discourages military commentary. But the attitude is itself fallacious on a number of counts. In the first place, the military operations since the dawn of the nuclear age have not been trials of arms decided by the superiorities in sophisticated weaponry. Indeed, overwhelmingly they have been atavistic struggles, in a historical sense,



Antoine Henri Jomini

"A SPRITELY CONTINUITY OF MILITARY CRITICISM WOULD HAVE BEEN AND WOULD BE DISTINCTLY USEFUL IN RENDERING MILITARY THINKING MORE RESPONSIVE AND EFFICACIOUS."

placing great emphasis upon the most rudimentary and perennial problems of tactical and strategic thought. They have also taxed heavily what may be called the military imagination—and that military imagination has, in most instances, been found wanting. Without attempting an extended critique of military operation since Korea, it is apparent to the unprejudiced observer that events have tended to spawn improvisational solutions, solutions of a tactical and strategic nature that could have well profitted from a more theoretical and even academic grasp of the elements of military art, historically evolved.

A spritely continuity of military criticism would have been and would be distinctly useful in rendering military thinking more responsive and efficacious. We were benumbed, intellectually, by the formidable aspect of our immense weapon power, but such a derogation of the military intellect proved a marked liability in our ability to cope with the realities of our military commitments. If anyone harbors any doubts as to the human and intellectual factor in the conduct of war, one only need scrutinize the "Six-Day War" between Israel and the United Arab Republic.

(3) Military thinking in the postwar era was extensively "politicalized," doubtless adhering to Clausewitz's famous dictum regarding war as an extension of policy. There is, of course, much truth in the Clausewitzian precept, but it does not cancel out a viable division of labor between political planning and military planning. If war is an instrument for the attainment of broader political objectives, the efficacy of that instrument turns on matters predominantly military in nature. There has been an alarming fashion

among some military careerists—in a number of western armies—to become, in fact, students of politics to the exclusion of concern for military crafts, particularly the syphoning off of the best military minds into areas of political preoccupation. It may be desirable, one would grant, for a contemporary general (akin to Gilbert and Sullivan's "modern major general") to be well-versed in a number of areas, including the political. One would see no reason why a general might not also hold a Ph.D. degree in political science, *provided* that his central calling, as he would envision it, would be the science of arms. It is vital for the contemporary soldier to be politically sophisticated, but he must be so in order to practice his profession in a superior fashion. Thus, he ought to be a better military critic than a political one.

The military art is not to be despised. It may be secondary to the political in a grand strategic sense, but this does not mean that it need be an inferior intellectual preoccupation. Politics, in any case, may determine the context of the soldier's activity, but it cannot instruct him significantly as to the character of that activity in its more specific applications. The hyper-political orientation of some contemporary military theorists has led them to the questionable assumption that the operations of politics can be directly applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to the realm of military activity. History offers a sharp rebuttal.

(4) Prospective military writers and theorists—both in service and in the civilian ranks—suffer, currently, from a culturally induced inferiority complex. The pernicious implication that professional military activity is somehow a socially reprehensible business is amplified in the case of serious-minded military writing and criticism—so presumably cynical, amoral and cold-blooded. That this is errant sentimentality is beside the point, but it is notable that major newspaper chains no longer boast of having "military correspondents," although the gallant S.L.A. Marshall continues to buck the tide. Even career officers feel this taint in regard to wholly military discussion and tend to infuse

it with a sort of politically-derived euphemistic rhetoric.

Also, the professional military no longer trusts, by and large, the civilian academic community which yet contains many intellectuals interested and concerned with military affairs, not only from a sociological point of view, but also from the stance of military history and art. This attitude on the part of the military establishments is quite understandable—they have been the targets of much quasi-intellectual abuse or have been often the victims of ill-advised civilian "consultants" who were in the vanguard of the bureaucratization of the armed services. But in many instances, the professional military is too suspicious and does not fully appreciate the intellectual stimulation to be gained by contact with sympathetic civilian theorists. Many civilian observers know more about the current travail of the military than many officers appreciate and, too, in some instances, possess competencies regarding the intellectual aspects of the arts of war that are highly useful, especially in a critical way. A renaissance of military literature involves healing this lamentable breach. It also requires



Liddell Hart

BASSANO, LTD., LONDON PHOTO

jettisoning of the feeling that military science is a blighted business, unfit for superior minds. Tell that, indeed, to a Turenne or a Frederick the Great.

(5) Military literature is, after all, the indirect product of a military education. Education cannot remain static or, indeed, stagnant. But military education in most western armies is in dire need of some reforms. Two principal areas are indicated: (a) reduction of the reliance upon civilian institutions of learning in the educating of officers and (b) restoration to the curriculum of the service schools of a systematic emphasis upon military art, history and doctrine. Civilian universities are far from ideal places to carry on the further education of officers, especially those eventually to be seconded to important command function. It is, by and large, an alien environment, it heightens feelings of "inferiority" regarding the intellectual respectability of military art and it infuses an excessively political outlook. Military establishments would be well-advised to undertake military higher education themselves and if this involves a return to the "general staff" concept, so be it. It is far better to introduce the best civilian minds into military-operated institutions of learning than to "farm out" potential military leaders to civilian institutions whose concerns are, in general, quite remote from the trade of the soldier. This is not said, of course, to deprecate universities (one of which the author serves), but to suggest that the integrity of military art as an intellectual undertaking is seriously jeopardized by extended exposure to influences professionally isolated from this concern.

But the service schools themselves have a responsibility that goes beyond either a facsimile of civilian education and an indoctrination of necessary skills. The military college—or its equivalent—has a very special educational role, dictated, of course, by the nature of the profession it serves, not unlike colleges of medicine or law. Indeed, no college of law or medicine would relegate jurisprudence or physical pathology to a secondary role in its curriculum and a military college cannot do so either, particularly if it



S. L. A. Marshall, Brig. Gen., USAR (Ret)

takes seriously, which it does, the challenge of protecting the state by the training of superior military minds.

(6) A lamentable feature of the "politicalization" of some military establishments in the West has been to adopt an excessively defensive posture in regard to its relationships with other organs of government and, indeed, to the general public. The sources of this defensive attitude are not hard to find and certainly the military establishment feels the sting of hostility within the complex of the society. It quite understandably desires to cloak itself from irrational and prejudiced criticism and it has, of course, certain ideal means of doing so. But it might keep two thoughts in mind: (a) such a posture, used indiscriminately, discourages genuine and enlightened military criticism and (b) it is one thing to protect the integrity of information and yet another to make it difficult for the military critic to evaluate performance, a role which the military critic has justifiably undertaken in the modern period and which, generally speaking, has proven beneficial to the military establishment overall, even if it has damaged a few private reputations.



Hanson Baldwin

Perfection is an illusive condition. No reasonable man expects perfection in the application of the military arts. The general does not live—or ever has lived—who has not made a mistake. Great generals are, by the way, those who had wit enough to learn from their mistakes. No people can legitimately demand only victories or that every soldier be a credit to the uniform he wears. The military life is based upon reasonable standards, well understood by students of the history of warfare. Military establishments in the present age suffer from hypersensitivity; they often do not accord to their critics a knowledge of what are the reasonable standards of judgment. Thus, military literature, contemporaneously, declines to the extent that this hypersensitivity prevails and the military seems to ask for a finally impossible immunity.

CONCLUSION

No one of the factors described above is

wholly responsible for the paralysis of military writing—all contribute in varying degrees. Moreover, military literature has not disappeared altogether, but only diminished in scope and quantity. The complexities of military problems yet before us and likely to be confronted strongly suggest not the obsolescence of writing on military art, but an increasing need for the practice of this talent. The need is as much psychological, perhaps,

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as theoretical. It is discouraging (to this writer anyway) when one talks with otherwise highly intelligent officers today who have not the foggiest notion of what Hannibal did at Cannae or why Gustavus Adolphus overturned the military system of the Empire and the advantages of the *battalion carre*. What is discouraging is *not* simply a lack of specific historical information—what is discouraging is that it indicates the fact that the officer does not subjectively place himself within the altogether honorable and significant continuity of his chosen profession. How, indeed, can a lawyer really revere his profession who knows nothing of Coke, Blackstone and Holmes? How can a soldier cherish his calling without an identification with Marlborough, Frederick, Grant and Lee? When he realizes the worth—and contemporary significance—of this tradition, then he will turn to it and turn his pen to it and zealously join those in and out of the service who share this common intellectual concern. This awareness will do more than anything else to remedy the conditions that retard a revival of military literature. ■