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Sizing Up Military Effectiveness

JEFFREY RECORD

A Review Essay on: **Military Effectiveness**. Edited by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray. 3 volumes. 1017 pages. Meršhon Center Series on Defense and Foreign Policy. Allen and Unwin, Boston, 1988. \$50.00.

American military effectiveness has become an increasingly prominent and contentious issue within US defense and foreign policy circles. Concern derives from a number of factors, including the US military's spotty performance in combat since World War II and the mounting and strategically dangerous disparity between US defense commitments overseas and the Pentagon's ability to fulfill them.

So-called military reformers, who are wont to equate military effectiveness with professional excellence at the operational and tactical levels of warfare, contend that problems of US military effectiveness as well as solutions to them lie entirely inside the US military itself. At the other end of the defense analytical spectrum are those who would excuse the armed services from any responsibility for what happened along the Yalu in 1950-51, in Vietnam a decade and a half later, in the Iranian desert in 1980, and in Beirut in 1983. The apparent underlying premises of the Reagan Administration's first-term military expansion were (1) that past US military miscarriages and failures were attributable to political, strategic, and other exogenous factors over which the military had no control, (2) that the only thing really wrong with US military power in 1981 was the lack of enough of it, and (3) that more could be had simply by making more budgetary and other resources available to the Pentagon.

The reformers' exclusive focus on the operational and tactical does not provide a satisfactory grasp of military effectiveness, unless one presumes

that campaigns and battle are—or could be—waged in a political and strategic vacuum. Reform analysis does not explain, for example, the utter defeat of the operationally and tactically superior German army of World War II (the reformers' favorite historical model) or, for that matter, the Army of Northern Virginia. Having a stable of Mansteins and Guderians or Lees and Jacksons at one's disposal counts for nothing in the end absent an informative, coherent, and consistent strategy that imposes discipline in the relation between political ends and military means.

Conversely, the proposition that military effectiveness is a function mainly of levels of defense investment implies that how defense dollars are spent is of little importance compared to the number of dollars available. This proposition cannot, among other things, explain defeat in Vietnam, where the one thing US forces did not lack was more than enough of everything that could be counted. US, South Vietnamese, and allied forces enjoyed an enormous superiority over the North Vietnamese army and Viet Cong in all the measurable indices of military power, a superiority reinforced by a huge technological advantage and virtually uncontested supremacy at sea and in the air.

Understanding the issue of military effectiveness is hampered by a total lack of consensus on the definitions and ingredients of military effectiveness. Professional military effectiveness is not synonymous with *national* military effectiveness, since the latter derives not only from the professional military's operational and tactical competence, but also from the political and strategic competence of the national leadership (be that leadership civilian or military).

The critical distinction between the effectiveness of military organizations and the military effectiveness of nations as a whole is often blurred in *Military Effectiveness*, a collection of 27 essays edited by Allan R. Millett and Williamson Murray, two fine historians at Ohio State University's Mershon Center. Funded by the Defense Department's Office of Net Assessment, *Military Effectiveness* starts from the premise that military historians "have an obligation to examine the issues involved in why some military forces succeed, while others fail." However, though the three-volume work assesses the military effectiveness of seven *countries*—Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, and the United States—during World War I, the interwar period, and

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World War II, it offers a confusingly narrow definition of military effectiveness:

Military effectiveness is the process by which armed forces convert resources into fighting power. A fully effective military is one that derives maximum combat power from the resources physically and politically available. Effectiveness thus incorporates some notion of efficiency. Combat power is the ability to destroy the enemy while limiting the damage that he can inflict in return.

There are at least two problems with this definition. First, it implies that the only real test of military effectiveness is war, which could be true only if the sole *raison d'être* of military organizations were to wage war. In fact, deterrence of war has always been an implicit (and for the United States military since 1945, a declared) if secondary objective of military establishments. The interwar period culminated in failed deterrence—military ineffectiveness—on the part of those very same countries—Great Britain, Russia, and the United States—who later went on to win the Second World War. Can it be denied that US and allied forces deployed in Europe today, however they might perform in the event of a Soviet attack on NATO, have nonetheless registered a level of military effectiveness sufficient so far to deter such an attack?

Second, the definition, standing alone, is incomplete, because it says nothing of the political and strategic factors bearing on the ultimate success of military organizations' performance in war. This is recognized by Millett and Murray, who clearly understand that their definition of military effectiveness denies any firm "relationship between military effectiveness and victory," which is another way of saying that there is a difference between military effectiveness at the professional and national levels, or, as contributor Jürgen Förster puts it, "Military effectiveness cannot be reduced to 'fighting power.'"

Millett and Murray concede that political effectiveness (the military's ability "to secure the resources required to maintain, expand, and reconstitute itself") and strategic effectiveness ("the employment of national armed forces to secure by force national goals defined by political leadership") are indeed "facets of military effectiveness," and each essay examines what the editors "believe to be the four levels of war: the political, the strategic, the operational, and the tactical from the point of view of [each] national case study."

The results are impressive. *Military Effectiveness* is a first-rate historical analysis and commentary on the performance of nations at war in the most violent half-century in recorded human history. Drawing upon the considerable talents of such historians as Paul Kennedy, Holger H. Herwig, John Gooch, Earl F. Ziemke, Robert A. Doughty, Ronald Spector, Alvin D. Coox, MacGregor Knox, and Russell F. Weigley, *Military Effectiveness* offers a host of compelling if not always new insights as to why "some military

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forces succeed, while others fail.” Though the work’s examination of military effectiveness limits itself to the preparation for, and conduct of, total conventional war by seven industrial states in the immediate pre-nuclear era, many of the lessons it derives would appear to have enduring validity.

The first and perhaps most important of them is that no amount of operational and tactical brilliance can offset gross political and strategic incompetence. Germany was on the losing side in both world wars because, as Paul Kennedy correctly concludes, her great effectiveness at the operational and tactical levels was “vitiated by persistent failures at the political and strategic level,” the prime example of which was Hitler’s invasion of Russia in 1941, an endeavor that, to quote Förster again, “stands in grisly testimony to the necessity of harmonizing reach and grasp, will and means in national policy.” Alvin D. Coox declares that Japan was no less doomed in World War II because of “an appalling disparity between ends and means”; on 7 December 1941, Japan, already stalemated militarily in China and suffering acute shortages in critical raw materials, had a gross national product of but ten percent that of the United States.

Conversely, “no amount of political wisdom or strategic finesse,” contends Kennedy, “can secure victory if a country’s armed forces are ineffective on the battlefield.” In World War I ambitious and at times grandiose strategic plans, such as the French Plan XVII and the Gallipoli landings, were thwarted again and again until almost the end of the war by an inability of both sides to break the tactical supremacy of the defense. As noted by Douglas Porch, an entire generation of Frenchmen was decimated in 1914-1918, in part because “French Army . . . leaders were committed to an aggressive strategy which was beyond their tactical powers” to execute.

Another lesson that one encounters at every turn in *Military Effectiveness* is the inherent and often decisive value of flexibility at all levels of warfare. MacGregor Knox details the Italian high command’s culturally and politically derived disdain for technological innovation, which would have doomed Italy to defeat in World War II even had Italy not suffered a fatal disparity between Mussolini’s declared war aims and the Italian military’s

capacity to fulfill them. As it turned out, Italy went to war in Europe in 1940 with “an army leadership that rejected armor, a navy staff that neglected radar and coastal warfare, and an air force that preferred biplane fighters.” Indeed, the Italian military’s “most brilliant tactical success in war” was in securing “the Duce’s bloodless removal” in July 1943. A deadly inflexibility in the interwar period also denied France any effective responses to German aggression even before May 1940. Robert A. Doughty’s examination of French military effectiveness during the period reveals a purely defensive, “total-war” force posture (based on the assumption that the next war would be a repeat of World War I), incapable of responding effectively even to such limited German moves as the occupation of the Rhineland in 1936. An utter inability to adapt to the unanticipated also characterized, as Holger H. Herwig shows, the failed Schlieffen Plan and German naval strategy in 1914. Both Schlieffen and Tirpitz paid virtually no attention to how the enemy *might* respond, thereby ignoring Moltke the Elder’s wise caution that “no plan of operations can look with any certainty beyond the first meeting with the major forces of the enemy.”

Worse than inflexibility is the illusion of flexibility. Murray and Brian Bond, commenting on Royal Air Force doctrine on the eve of World War II, issue a cautionary generalization:

Air forces picture themselves as possessing an inherent flexibility and capacity to inflict surprise attacks on their opponents. What they have been less willing to recognize are the inherent *disadvantages* of air power: its dependency on fixed, vulnerable air bases, the necessity of favorable weather conditions, the difficulties involved in identifying and hitting targets in unfavorable circumstances, and finally the vulnerability of aircraft to enemy counteraction.

Military Effectiveness contains much of value to senior Defense Department decisionmakers, though the vast government bureaucracy that the Pentagon has become allows its paper-overwhelmed inhabitants little time for “outside” reading. Moreover, historical inquiry—even relevant and well-written—continues to elicit yawns from all too many of the managerial technocrats who have run the Defense Department since the early 1960s. It is thus all the more encouraging that *Military Effectiveness* was commissioned by the Office of Net Assessment. □