

# The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

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Volume 25  
Number 1 *Parameters* 1995

Article 39

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7-4-1995

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### Recommended Citation

Richard G. Trefry, "Ashes to Ashes?," *Parameters* 25, no. 1 (1995), doi:10.55540/0031-1723.1760.

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# Review Essay

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From *Parameters*, Summer 1995, pp. 55-59.

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## Ashes to Ashes?

**RICHARD G. TREFRY**

This summer will mark the fifth anniversary of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. On 2 August 1990, Saddam Hussein invaded that small country, triggering a remarkable chain of events in which the United States led a coalition of nations to protect Saudi Arabia from aggression and then to evict Iraq from Kuwait.

The events of the fall and winter of 1990-91 fade as newer challenges appear. But it is useful to remember what transpired then. President Bush sought the consent of Congress to use military force in support of the 29 November 1990 UN Resolution to "use of all means necessary" to evict Iraq from Kuwait by force. The favorable votes were 250-183 in the House and 52-47 in the Senate. The air attack phase of Desert Storm began on 17 January 1991; it was followed on 24 February 1991 by the ground attack by the US-led coalition which resulted in the military defeat of Iraq in 100 hours.

The events of this seven-month period provide a mother lode of study for the military professional of any rank or service. Fortunately, authors and publishers are providing volumes detailing the period in matters of strategy, doctrine, materiel, organization, politics, personalities, logistics, diplomacy, intelligence, and other functions incident to the conflict.

And what a wealth of riches is emerging for the student of strategy. As the Gulf War was unfolding, the Cold War was in its terminal state, the reunification of Germany was under way (whither NATO?), and the Warsaw Pact was dissolving. Desert Shield and Desert Storm were clearly digressions, as the United States and its allies began to cope with the forces of change.

On the day Saddam crossed the border into Kuwait, President Bush was at the Aspen Institute in Colorado, where he announced a new national security strategy for the United States. The Cold War strategy maintained in NSC 68 had served the nation well since the days of Harry Truman, Dean Acheson, and Paul Nitze. It was being replaced by what was commonly referred to as "The Base Case" force, wherein large standing forces would be reduced, forward-deployed forces would become projected forces, and a force that had been mobilization-based would become contingency-based. The changes under way at the time of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait were sufficient to whet the appetite of every social scientist who had written or intended to write a book, of every geopolitical junkie who might revel in playing statesman, and of every pundit who ever participated on a radio talk show or performed on a TV panel. Saddam couldn't have timed his move better. The new national security strategy was to be tested within days of its announcement.

The test that followed was rooted in a series of operations--Iran and our hostages, Beirut, Grenada, Panama--whose outcomes left unanswered many questions about the recovery of the US armed forces from the Vietnam experience. The public sought some assurance that the Defense Department had learned from each of those operations, that a new generation of military personnel had discovered how to integrate technology and doctrine, and that US forces--their forces--could perform the complex operations expected of the remaining superpower.

There is no question that Desert Shield and Desert Storm were, from a military standpoint, extraordinary operations. Not everything went according to plan, but no plan is ever executed as written. It would be difficult to find the equal of the extraordinary professional competence of US forces during these operations.

First off the press were the campaign histories and "you were there" books designed to satisfy the interests of the participants and others closely related to the actual participants by occupation or kinship. With time for further analysis, *The Commanders* by Bob Woodward and *Crusade* by Rick Atkinson appeared. General Schwarzkopf wrote his autobiography, and General Pagonis told the story of the immense logistical effort. The Army's contribution to the wave of analytical books, *Certain Victory*, was published in 1993 as the Army's history of the war. According to the principal author, Major General Robert Scales, the book provides a unique report of the Army's performance during Desert Shield and Desert Storm, with the focus on the operational and tactical levels of war.

In 1993, Al Santoli wrote a book titled *Leading The Way*. His purpose was to tell the story

of a small group of courageous and determined people. Against all odds, they helped to turn around a broken institution--the United States military--and to reinstall confidence among their ranks and in the eyes of the American people. These veterans recall, in their own words, how in the aftermath of bitter defeat, they overcame self doubt as well as prejudice from their civilian peers. And above all else, how they developed qualities of leadership that were believed lacking in overall American society.

Those are strong words, and while it is doubtful that many soldiers would subscribe to all of them, the professional military found his intent comforting.

*After the Storm, Lessons From The Gulf War*, edited by Joseph S. Nye, Jr. and Roger K. Smith, covers the diplomatic, regional, geopolitical, and strategic lessons of the war. In *Storm Over Iraq: Air Power and the Gulf War*, Richard P. Hallion traces "the history of air power, describing the rebuilding of the American military after Vietnam, the emergence of new doctrines and strategies for air and land warfare, and the various small wars of the 1970s and 1980s."

Two books published in 1995 add to our understanding of the evolution of the American military. *Prodigal Soldiers* by James Kitfield illustrates the careers of selected senior commanders who led the forces in Desert Shield and Desert Storm, and their mentors. It examines the development and contributions of General Colin Powell, Lieutenant General Chuck Horner, Major General Barry McCaffrey, Vice Admiral Stan Arthur, and Lieutenant General Walt Boomer. The second book, *The Generals' War*, by Michael R. Gordon and Lieutenant General Bernard Trainor (USMC Ret.), is comparable to both Woodward's and Kitfield's, but offers much greater depth than the former. Both books focus on the actions of the senior military and National Command Authority leadership between August 1990 and March 1991.

Together these books provide insight into the qualities and competence of those who have led and are leading the military forces of the United States, particularly how those officers respond to political leadership. Santoli ranges from junior to most senior, from the lieutenants and enlisted soldiers of the Vietnam War to today's generals and command sergeants major. Kitfield similarly covers the careers of a few senior officers from the Vietnam War to today, as do Woodward and Trainor. Each of the books merits careful reading and analysis, particularly for those interested in the recurring attitude of Americans as one conflict ends and before the inevitable next one takes shape.

Each of the books provides a critique of Desert Storm. The uninitiated might conclude that operations were rather confused; that is a normal perception as the services analyze any campaign. The process is guaranteed to generate discussion of "better" or "best" ways to have accomplished the mission. The sound of a post-mortem of any operation at any service school at any time will be cacophonous. School solutions to abstract problems are the departure point for uninhibited enthusiasm and unbridled debate. These are the sounds of a learning organization going about its business in public.

In time of peace, regardless of the outcome of the most recent war, the average citizen tends to become indifferent to the institutions that have guaranteed his heritage. History demonstrates that this is a very expensive attitude. The warmth and glow of victory produce the ashes of disinterest. Whether the nation will repeat the cycle after the extraordinary military victory in the Gulf cannot be predicted with any assurance; the trends, unfortunately, appear all too familiar. The parallels of the periods 1918-41, 1945-50, 1953-65, and 1973-91 are startling. What will be the legacy of the stunning performance of 1991?

The value of the books under review is that each relates how a particular group of men worked the ashes of Vietnam to

produce the military of 1991. The stories tell of the careers, the personalities, and the dedication of not just the few, but the many who for the past 30 years committed themselves to the service of our country. The stories illustrate the point that the military forces of the United States possess at any time many outstanding and extraordinary leaders. As was said of Christopher Wren, "If you would see his monument, look around you." The stories of the few, told by these authors, are representative of the many who served with equal competence and dedication, ready to carry out national policy and the national military strategy.

The epilogues of *Certain Victory*, *Crusade*, *Prodigal Soldiers*, and *The Generals' War* summarize what went wrong militarily during and after Vietnam, and what corrective action was taken to right the wrong. Perhaps these corrective actions will stand the test of time. We never seem to learn, although sometimes we may do better than we believe we have done.

Reading these books one gets the impression that the nadir of professionalism was reached in 1979-80. That may be so, but the perception may depend on personal experience. It helps to remind people who have not been part of the Army that at any given time there are many armies within the Army. Sometimes the good and the poor parts of the whole Army may be readily identified. In 1965-67, the "good" army in Vietnam was created and sustained by Forces Command, US Army Europe, and the Army school system. The refusal of civilian leaders to call up more than a few members and organizations of the Army National Guard and the Army Reserve was a disaster whose ramifications still affect the Total Army. This action, compounded by the inequities of the draft, resulted in the imposition of a personnel infusion program and multiple repetitive overseas tours with the problems attendant to those actions. The mid-1960s also produced "Project 100,000," the dream scheme where social misfits were to be handed a free winning lottery ticket in the form of an Army uniform.

For those military leaders serving in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos from 1972 to 1975, the problem was not only to keep all the remaining Americans alive, but to rationalize to our Southeast Asian friends why we were leaving when a few years earlier we had promised them we were going to nail military coonskins to some political wall.

Superimposed on these eventful times were the wonders of "systems analysis," prominent management fads such as "zero defects" and "management by objective," and various analytical and evaluative procedures: Command Maintenance Management Inspections, The Personnel Reliability Program, Technical Proficiency Inspections, and Hamlet Pacification. A senior leader in Southeast Asia replying to a query from a fellow soldier on how things were going described the state of affairs as follows: "Every morning when I get up, I pad to the bathroom, turn on the light, look in the mirror and say 'Good morning Alice,' because I damned well know I am in wonderland."

It bears remembering that the dynamics described were imposed *on* the Army, not *by* the Army.

In the mid-1970s came the cultural revolutions--some good, some bad--of the amnesty for draft evaders, the assimilation of minorities, gender-norming, Armed Forces Qualification Test-norming, women admitted to the service academies, "The Army Wants To Join You," the service academy cheating scandals, the difficulties in expunging substance abuse from the ranks, and children marrying children while seeking shelter in the service. Add to that the imposition of an Inspector General Act. In the Army, the act attempted to convert an institution whose military heritage from Von Steuben was "He provided instruction and discipline to the citizens who thereby achieved their independence" to the politically correct and frantic search for "fraud, waste, and abuse."

These books largely confine themselves to solutions to the problems involving internal professional dynamics. The story waiting to be told is the relationship of the importance of external dynamics to the military culture. What these books relate are professional achievements in the face of cultural factors alien to the military.

In his 1934 book, *The Edge of the Sword*, Charles de Gaulle described what the culture of soldiering is all about. The challenges in the military, particularly the Army and the Marine Corps, are worth a moment's reflection.

Men who adopt the profession of arms submit of their own free will to a law of perpetual constraint. Of their own accord they reject the right to live where they choose, to say what they think, to dress as they like. From the moment they become soldiers it needs but an order to settle them in this place, to move them to that, to separate them from their families and dislocate their normal lives. On the word of

command they must rise, march, run, endure bad weather, go without sleep or food, be isolated in some distant post, work till they drop. They have ceased to be the masters of their fate. If they drop in their tracks, if their ashes are scattered to the four winds, that is all part and parcel of their job.

Since the beginning of time armies have found in this life of drudgery, this vocation of sacrifice, their meaning and their joy. Unaided they plough a field and sow a crop which others will reap. But how is it possible to live in a world apart, to serve an ideal which is unlike that of other men, without feeling differently, without thinking differently from those who belong to an almost alien community, without having a special scale of values and relationships? The existence of an armed force within the nation is inconceivable without the corollary of a separate code of behavior which holds it together and gives it life. But this code, this spirit, while isolating the soldier from his civilian fellows, contributes to his prestige. The mass of mankind shows that respect for him which the manifest example of great moral strength almost inevitably arouses. Military discipline and military solidarity have never failed to strike and hold the imagination. The debt owed to it by literature, the theater, music, architecture, and the dance is incalculable, so greatly have they been inspired by the sufferings and the triumphs of men trained for battle. To say nothing of the recorded events of history, legends, songs, and pictures that alone bear witness to the effect upon our forebears of the splendors of armed might. Even today we find ample evidence for this in children's games, in the crowds that gather round the coffin of a marshal of France, in the electrifying effect of a regiment marching by.

The books reviewed here tell a story of remarkable military prowess, but they do not address the imposition of political and sociological factors which contributed to the climate that Santoli described as "a broken institution--the United States Military." It is left to other authors to provide the analysis that might help prevent a return to that climate in the future.

The Revolution in Military Affairs has been under way for more than 20 years, disguised for a while by the East-West stalemate, only first tested in the desert sands in 1990-91.

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