

The US Army War College Quarterly: Parameters

Volume 51
Number 1 *Parameters* 51(1) Spring 2021

Article 16

Spring 3-2-2021

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Recommended Citation

J. P. Clark, "US Army Reforms in the Progressive Era," *Parameters* 51, no. 1 (2021), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol51/iss1/16>

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US Army Reforms in the Progressive Era

J. P. Clark

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ABSTRACT: A look back at F. Gunther Eyck's assessment of reforms enacted under US Secretary of War Henry L. Stimson may reveal as much about the historiography of the early 1970s as it does about Stimson's reform efforts themselves. Eyck's 1971 evaluation, among the first in a decade of scholarship examining successes and failures of Progressive Era Army reforms, raises important issues but avoids broader considerations of the sociopolitical realities of the United States at the turn of the twentieth century.

During the 1970–71 academic year at the US Army War College, Professor F. Gunther Eyck served as the Henry L. Stimson Chair of Political Science. Presumably the connection with his position's namesake led Eyck to write a short assessment of Henry L. Stimson's first tenure as US secretary of war for the inaugural issue of *Parameters*. While these circumstances suggest Eyck might have come to his subject more by incident than by design, the article is worth revisiting. In fact, Eyck's factually sound narrative of events is relevant to military professionals today. The article, however, can also be examined as a product of the early 1970s—a period of institutional tumult not unlike our own.

Scholars and professionals are inevitably products of their times; as such, interest in particular topics ebbs and flows. Eyck's article presaged a wave of scholarship examining military developments and reform in the Progressive Era (1896–1916) that would last for about a decade and then recede, leaving the period largely neglected as a topic of research since.

The article is also emblematic of the extent to which authors depend on the availability of conceptual tools. As historian Daniel T. Rodgers observes, the majority of individuals are “users rather than shapers of ideas” and depend on “the constellation of live, accessible ways of looking at society within which they [work].”¹ Eyck wrote his article just before the advent of the so-called new military history that emphasized the interchange between society and military institutions. Accordingly, even though the early 1970s was a period of intense civilian scrutiny of military affairs, the article's analysis remained confined, in retrospect, to a surprisingly narrow technocratic focus.

Eyck concentrated on the three most important events related to the effectiveness and efficiency of the US Army during Stimson's first tenure as secretary of war: the bureaucratic and legislative battle over the size and powers of the War Department General Staff (established

Colonel Jason P. Clark, PhD, is a US Army strategist. He is the author of *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917*.

1. Daniel T. Rodgers, “In Search of Progressivism,” *Reviews in American History* 10, no. 4 (December 1982): 127.

just a few years earlier in 1903), the creation of an Army Reserve, and the reorganization of the peacetime army from a system of regional administrative units into one of tactical divisions. The article concludes with a brief summation of several lesser reforms instituted by Stimson and his failure to create a cross-departmental body similar to our present National Security Council.

In its basic portrayal of events, Eyck's analysis withstands the test of time. While subsequent scholarship has added some details to the events described—particularly the circumstances surrounding Stimson's relief of the main opponent of a strong General Staff, Adjutant General Frederick Ainsworth—the basic narrative given in the *Parameters* article has remained largely unaltered.

Eyck's interpretation of those events also still falls within the bounds of scholarly conventional wisdom, albeit toward a less popular margin of that band. Eyck concluded Stimson was an effective reformer who successfully continued the work of his friend, mentor, and law partner Elihu Root—a transformative secretary of war from 1899 to 1903. Russell F. Weigley, a leading US Army historian, came to a similar conclusion in his magisterial institutional history first published in 1967. Weigley deemed Stimson one of the greatest secretaries of war of all time.²

Other accounts, however, cast Stimson mainly as a supportive adjunct to then Chief of Staff of the US Army Leonard Wood rather than a major reformer in his own right.³ Some historians contend because Stimson lacked Root's political savvy and willingness to compromise, he not only fell far short of his ambitions, he triggered a congressional backlash that set the Army back in some respects.⁴ While these differences are not trivial, they are matters of emphasis and comfortably situate Stimson within a broader reform movement set in motion by Root after the Spanish-American War. Readers interested in the institutional history of the US Army or the topic of military reform would still profit from reading the article.

In retrospect, the timing of Eyck's article might be more intriguing than his findings. As noted above, there was a surge of interest in the Progressive Era military throughout the 1970s.⁵ This trend does not seem to have been due to Eyck; a search of the most relevant works did not yield any citations of the article. Thus it appears Eyck was a

2. Russell F. Weigley, *History of the United States Army*, enl. ed. (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), 333.

3. Daniel R. Beaver, *Modernizing the American War Department: Change and Continuity in a Turbulent Era, 1885–1920* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2006), 34.

4. Jack C. Lane, *Armed Progressive: General Leonard Wood* (San Rafael, CA: Presidio Press, 1978), 158, 171–75; and J. P. Clark, *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815–1917* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 246–48.

5. See also Lane, *Armed Progressive*; Allan R. Millett, *The General: Robert L. Bullard and Officership in the United States Army, 1881–1925* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975); John Patrick Finnegan, *Against the Specter of a Dragon: The Campaign for American Military Preparedness, 1914–1917* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974); and I. B. Holley Jr., *General John M. Palmer, Citizen Soldiers, and the Army of a Democracy* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1982).

bellwether rather than a trendsetter. Nonetheless the question remains: What drove this decade-long surge of interest in the Progressive Era Army before the subject once again fell into relative neglect?

A confluence of factors within the historical profession likely played some role. While Weigley's institutional history of the Army surveyed the Progressive Era in just two of the volume's 22 chapters, his brief summary might have been enough to expose the subject to a generation of graduate students selecting their dissertation topics. At the time, the field of military history was undergoing a shift away from battle and operational history to the new military history focus on war and society—on events and trends occurring outside of armed conflict, such as the efforts of Root and Stimson.

This explanation, however, does not account for the subsequent waning academic interest in Progressive Era research. The answer may lie in the identity of the historians taking up the subject. The topic of Progressive Era military reform was popular with military officers serving in the late stages and immediate aftermath of the Vietnam War.⁶

The same sense of looking to the past for answers to questions of how to improve an ailing organization might have motivated Eyck. He arrived at Carlisle just a few months after the US Army War College published a report on the state of the military profession, commissioned by Army Chief of Staff William Westmoreland, on the suspicion the war had eroded both the competence and the ethics of the officer corps. The study gave compelling evidence he was correct.⁷ Whether Eyck simply wanted to study the namesake of his position or was motivated by an interest in organizational renewal, it is nonetheless suggestive that the post-Vietnam War nadir coincided with an increase in the study of military reform.

If Eyck was motivated by the problems of his time, he was also limited by his contemporary intellectual tools. Though his study was factually sound, in retrospect it is striking just how narrowly Eyck focused on military factors. The feud with Ainsworth is described primarily as a disagreement over methods of military administration—albeit one with wider implications for which offices would wield the most power within the War Department—that was ultimately resolved based on the merits of the case.

To be fair Eyck did note the complicating role of politics in that resolution. For instance, he described how the bitter internecine fight within the Republican Party between then President William Taft and

6. James L. Abrahamson, *America Arms for a New Century: The Making of a Great Military Power* (New York: Free Press, 1981); Vardell E. Nesmith Jr., "The Quiet Paradigm Change: The Evolution of the Field Artillery Doctrine of the United States Army, 1861–1905" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1977); Charles D. McKenna, "The Forgotten Reform: Field Maneuvers in the Development of the United States Army, 1902–1920" (PhD diss., Duke University, 1981); and Andrew J. Bacevich Jr., "Family Matters: American Civilian and Military Elites in the Progressive Era," *Armed Forces and Society* 8, no. 3 (Spring 1982): 405–18.

7. US Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College, 1970).

Theodore Roosevelt—Taft's predecessor and friend-turned-rival—was the source of Taft's reluctance to expend political capital in support of Stimson and Wood against Ainsworth. Eyck also noted the manner in which congressional allies of Ainsworth were able to exact revenge through opposition to some of Stimson's later initiatives.

Nonetheless Eyck made no attempt to place those intersections between the Army and the civilian sphere in a larger context. They are cast as discrete instances in which the internal battles of two distinct groups—the military and the political class—happen to interact because of the confluence of personalities with ties to both groups: Stimson as a political appointee at the head of the Army, Wood as a friend of Roosevelt, and Ainsworth as an officer with political connections due to the nature of his position.

In this respect, Eyck's article is written in the spirit of Samuel P. Huntington's influential *The Soldier and the State*, published in 1957, that viewed military professionalism as best when it was an isolated activity kept apart from civilian society. Indeed, Huntington hailed both Root and Stimson as unusually enlightened civilians who enabled military reform by a deferential shielding of military ideas from corrupting civilian society.⁸ Eyck's article fits easily within this interpretive tradition.

In the five decades since Eyck's article, the historical consensus regarding the source of Progressive Era military reform has markedly shifted. In the 1980s and 1990s historians conclusively demonstrated the state of military isolation portrayed by Huntington was factually incorrect. The evidence showed the military and American society engaged in considerable intellectual interaction in the decades leading up to the Root reforms Stimson reinforced.⁹

The documentation of those civil-military links led historians to a conclusion far more reasonable than that of Huntington: military reform was not an isolated development but was a product of engagement with civilian society. After all, the Progressive Era was arguably the most intense period of reform in American history. Huntington's contention that military reform during that period had completely different origins than those of civilian society strains credulity. The aggressive drive for change in society influenced what occurred within the military realm.

Revisiting Eyck's article with this insight in mind, it is clear he missed some opportunities to make connections among events linked by deeper forces. For instance, the Roosevelt-Taft rift in the Republican Party was not purely incidental to the struggles within the Army. Though personal ambitions and style played a role, the political struggle reflected a fundamental split between the progressive and conservative wings of

8. Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1957), 251–53, 326, 453.

9. John M. Gates, "The Alleged Isolation of US Army Officers in the Late 19th Century," *Parameters* 10, no. 1 (Spring 1980): 32–45; Bacevich, "Family Matters"; Edward M. Coffman, "The Long Shadow of the Soldier and the State," *Journal of Military History* 55, no. 1 (January 1991): 69–82; and William B. Skelton, "Samuel P. Huntington and the Roots of the American Military Tradition," *Journal of Military History* 60, no. 2 (April 1996): 325–38.

the party caused by the same tensions between change and status quo that underlay the Wood-Ainsworth feud. In the political battle, Root, Stimson, and Wood all were forced to choose whether they stood with the Roosevelt faction or the Taft faction.¹⁰

The existence of a similar divide within the Democratic Party is further evidence deeper tensions were straining both civilian and military institutions. Stimson's tenure in the War Department would come to an end with the election of Woodrow Wilson, a progressive whose southern heritage made him acceptable enough to members of the party's conservative wing, like Virginia's James Hay, to win the nomination. Not coincidentally, Hay was Ainsworth's primary congressional ally and a leading opponent of the General Staff. Conservative Democrats like Hay were ardent proponents of states' rights, a stance that led to support for the National Guard, antipathy for the regular Army, and a desire for a divided War Department administration susceptible to political influence.¹¹

Hay's central role in supporting Ainsworth and in nearly fatally weakening Stimson's reserve plan seems to lead naturally to a consideration of the National Guard and the long history of federal versus state power. Yet Eyck limited his discussion to the narrow question of length of enlistment as if this were the central issue rather than part of a larger question of whether the balance of power should reside in federal or state governments. The term of enlistment was simply the means by which Hay hoped to sabotage the larger plan, not because he had strong opinions about how long a soldier should serve as one might conclude from Eyck's account.¹²

Ultimately our understanding of the past is a collective, cumulative process. Eyck did his part by writing a well-researched, reasonable interpretation of the past. The purpose of pointing out these missed analytical opportunities is not to criticize Eyck for failing to anticipate later scholarship but to remind readers of the extent to which we are all products of our contemporary milieu. For though Eyck might have lacked the conceptual resources to draw upon, the raw material for recognition of the interplay between the military and civilian spheres was all around him. He wrote just a few years after Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara, a former head of the Ford Motor Company, revolutionized Department of Defense policies with a set of reforms explicitly drawn from corporate practices.

More generally the country was debating questions such as who should serve and who was responsible for military accountability. Yet

10. Stephen Skowronek, *Building a New American State: The Expansion of National Administrative Capacities, 1877–1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 223–25; and Ronald J. Barr, *The Progressive Army: US Army Command and Administration, 1870–1914* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998), 177–89.

11. George C. Herring Jr., "James Hay and the Preparedness Controversy, 1915–1916," *Journal of Southern History* 30, no. 4 (November 1964): 384–86.

12. Leonard Wood, diary, December 7, 8, 15, 17, and 19, 1911, box 6, Wood Papers, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

Eyck chose to describe the military as a separate sphere. In doing so, perhaps he had a different contemporary problem in mind. Eyck's article concluded with a passage reminiscent of Huntington's famous epilogue contrasting West Point with the outlying town of Highland Falls but even more pointed within the context of 1971. For Eyck, Stimson's tenure was notable for having "convincingly demonstrated in his conduct and actions alike that a man could be deeply rooted in a traditional value system yet not cut himself off from the winds of change and the light of progress."