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BOOK REVIEWS

WHY? AND OTHER THIRTY-FIVE-YEAR QUESTIONS

Pussycats: Why the Rest Keeps Beating the West and What Can Be Done about It, by Martin van Creveld. Mevasseret Zion, Isr.: DLVC Enterprises, 2016. 249 pages. $11.95.

Martin van Creveld is one of the foremost—and most controversial—contemporary students of warfare. He has authored over two dozen books exploring various facets of strategy, the future of warfare, and military operations and organization, including such works as *The Rise and Decline of the State, The Transformation of War, Technology and War, Command in War, Supplying War,* and *The Training of Officers*.

In this book, van Creveld notes that, despite their overwhelming superiority in virtually every facet of military power, Western militaries since 1953 deployed abroad to fight non-Westerners almost always have been defeated and forced to withdraw. He poses the question, "How did the world's best and most ferocious soldiers, who for centuries fought and defeated anybody and everybody until they dominated the entire world, turn into pussycats?" Van Creveld suggests five broad categories of causes that individually and collectively over time have eroded greatly the basis for *effective* Western military superiority:

- Subduing the young
- Defanging the troops
- Feminizing the forces
- Constructing post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)
- Delegitimizing war

The first refers to the ever-growing restrictions most Western countries have placed on young people, ostensibly on grounds of their safety and welfare. The author declares that "the move to impose more and more restrictions on young people is a manifestation, if not to say disease, typical of modern life in general and Western life in particular." The entry into adulthood becomes ever more extended, reinforced by phenomena such as "helicopter parenting," "safe spaces" and "trigger warnings" on campus, and strict limits on work that minors are permitted to do. This is complemented by an excessive emphasis on unearned "self-esteem," a strong desire to avoid "traumatizing" the young by criticizing or reprimanding them, a de-emphasis on assuming individual responsibility, and the devaluation of competition for fear of hurting those who do not perform as well as others. The cumulative effect, van Creveld argues, is to infantilize the young, undercut the

motivation to excel, and steadily reduce individual and societal willingness to take risks—thus, "scant wonder that a great many young people no longer know how to cope with anything." Yet this is the pool from which Western militaries must draw their troops.

Van Creveld asserts that many factors have contributed to "defanging the troops." He notes the vast increase since Vietnam in the proportion of senior officers in the U.S. military. This rank inflation has resulted in ever more decisions being pushed to higher levels, with a seriously negative impact on the speed of decision making and a mounting risk aversion at all levels. Another problem is the spread of civilian attitudes into and imposition of civilian norms on the military. War is a deadly business, yet Western, especially U.S., military forces have been hobbled by "exquisite" rules of engagement that often impede mission accomplishment at excessive risk to friendly forces. One side cannot play by "Marquess of Queensberry rules" alone. At the same time, there is a growing trend of senior officers "treating their troops as if they were rowdies and/or babies unable to look after themselves, and/or 'pussycats.'" The recurrent bouts of drastic liberty restrictions on U.S. forces in Japan are a prime example. The author writes that "in today's politically correct world it is no longer enough to kill those who would kill you"; the enemy must not be disrespected, let alone humiliated after his defeat—no battlefield souvenirs taken. Male aggressiveness, historically quintessential to battlefield success, is now a problem for leadership to deal with, particularly with regard to matters such as pornography and allegedly rampant sexual misconduct in the military, which have nothing to do with combat effectiveness. The proliferation of military lawyers on staffs means that commanders or squad leaders now must keep potential legal ramifications constantly in mind, on top of all the other battlefield imperatives.

But even worse, posits van Creveld, is the "de-Militarized Military." While it is undeniable that "war is the most terrible of all activities we humans engage in," there always has been a sense of satisfaction, even enjoyment, in it. But "in the prevailing attitude of political correctness [to proclaim that] invites attack." For example, when Marine general Jim Mattis noted that shooting some people who merited it was "a hell of a lot of fun," he was roundly condemned and "counseled" to shut up. Similarly, the notions of "hero" and "heroism" that traditionally underpinned a military's fighting spirit and its "culture of war" have been devalued systematically in Western societies as they pertain to combat, whereas they once were associated closely with pride. But the author warns that "any attempt to tamper with [the culture of war], even if laudable in terms of a progressive country's instincts, is dangerous and should only be undertaken with the greatest caution. What has been demolished can never be restored." Thus, he concludes, "scant wonder that . . . the willingness to serve has been declining for decades."

Van Creveld's third category, "feminizing the forces," is no doubt the most controversial. He starts by stating flatly that "currently Western countries are embarked on a social experiment that has no precedent in history." He further asserts that "whatever feminists may claim and the statute books may say, women and men are only equal in

certain respects but not in others. Hence the attempt to treat them as if they were was bound to cause as many problems as it solved." There are two principal physical differences between the two sexes, namely, physical strength/endurance and pregnancy/motherhood. The author goes into some detail on how these impact individual and unit performance.

More importantly, van Creveld notes that the sustained, intensive effort to create a "unisex" military has had serious second-order consequences. Measures such as putting men and women through separate courses with different physical performance requirements and "gender norming" are inherently suspect from a combat-effectiveness perspective. The problem is that fair treatment implies equality, meaning that unit members essentially must be interchangeable, because "cohesion, the ability to stick together and stay together even when—particularly when—things go disastrously wrong, is the most important quality any military formation must have." Writes van Creveld, "since men and women are *not* identical, treating them as if they were is unfair. But treating them as if they were not is also unfair, though in a different way."

The contribution to a climate of intellectual dishonesty within the U.S. military is a more serious second-order effect. Van Creveld suggests that female service members actually receive preferential treatment, including higher promotion rates and more lenient treatment during disciplinary proceedings, and in connection with pregnancy. What is more dishonest is that "service personnel are prohibited from saying that such privileges exist," or, for that matter, from writing or commenting in any way that might suggest there are problems or challenges associated with full integration of women into all military fields. "The accusation of being 'hostile to women' will follow almost automatically," and being branded as such "can easily bring about the end of one's career." One other form of dishonesty concerns charges of sexual harassment; as one female U.S. pilot told the author, "sexual harassment is what I decide to report to my superiors." Whether that is an accurate reflection of reality or not, it is widely perceived that way among many men in the U.S. military. As a result, van Creveld notes that "to avoid trouble, men, military men more than most, are expected to believe—or at least conceal their disbelief in—two contradictory things. The first is that military women can serve and fight just as well as men can and that they therefore deserve the kind of equality they and their supporters are demanding. The second is that, being equal, they do not enjoy privileges of any kind." These contradictory ideas are "precisely the kind of thing that George Orwell in *1984* called 'double-think.'"

The author concludes this discussion with one final point. "Feminizing the forces and having women take an active part in war and combat threatens to take away one of the most important reasons, sometimes even *the* most important reason, why many men enlist and fight: namely, to prove their masculinity to themselves and to others." The "end of masculinity" as a desideratum for a military force is bound to undermine its "culture of war."

With regard to "constructing PTSD," historically there is little record of it as a widespread phenomenon. Van Creveld suggests that this was in part because war from ancient times had been

associated with notions of *aretē* (excellence) and *virtus* (prowess), and more recently with "honor" and "pride," all of which helped to forestall or suppress it. But over the last century, "what changed was the way [war] was perceived and understood. From a revelatory experience akin to a religious one, it was turned into a thoroughly rotten business [that] was without either virtue or honor or knowledge of any sort, merely a process whereby obtuse generals sent millions to be slaughtered. . . . As a result, almost anybody who spent enough time fighting was bound to suffer psychological damage." Or so it was claimed.

Western militaries in the world wars came to accept notions of "shell shock" and "combat fatigue." What is notable, however, is that U.S. forces suffered proportionately ten times the rate of such psychiatric casualties as did the German Wehrmacht, which was accepted generally as having displayed far greater cohesion and fighting power than its Western counterparts throughout the second war. Interestingly, postwar East Germany saw far lower rates of such conditions than West Germany, although both were treating the same ex-soldiers. This suggests that "there can be no doubt that social factors—politics, culture, organization, leadership, what have you—do much to determine the way PTSD is treated. The same seems to apply to its frequency and, perhaps, even to its very existence."

Psychiatric cases spiked in Vietnam and PTSD claims remain at high levels. Various causes are postulated: concussion; "the sheer terror of modern war"; guilt feelings from surviving while comrades died; guilt feelings from killing others, especially in close combat. But as van Creveld demonstrates, many of those factors were always present in war, yet did not manifest themselves in large-scale PTSD. In more-recent conflicts, van Creveld notes that there was a far lower incidence of PTSD among North Vietnamese than among U.S. veterans, suggesting that "victory is the best cure for the soul." Nor is defeat linked to widespread PTSD, as evidenced by the German experience in two world wars or, more recently, that of Serbs after the Yugoslav wars—a Serbian attaché informed the author that "PTSD is not a hot topic" in Serbia.

So why is the PTSD rate in the United States so high today? "Is it really war that is generating PTSD? Or is it present-day society's idée fixe that war is bad both in itself and for the soul of those who participate in it, so that over enough time anybody who does so *must* break down," in which case there is no disgrace involved? Van Creveld suggests that the cure may be driving the disease; there may be perverse incentives to overdiagnose PTSD, with the fear of liability at the societal level driving the process. There are large numbers of claims and claimants, and medical specialists, mental health workers, and lawyers all have strong incentives to keep the process going at full speed. Van Creveld poses the difficult question: "Is it conceivable that the compensations and pensions are providing at least some soldiers with an incentive to invent or exaggerate symptoms and retain them for as long as they can?" He concludes by quoting a speech by General Mattis: "I would just say there is one misperception of our veterans and that is they are somehow damaged goods. I don't buy it. If we tell our veterans enough that this

is what is wrong with them they may actually start believing it. While victimhood in America is exalted I don't think our veterans should join those ranks."

Van Creveld then segues to his fifth category, "delegitimizing war," by noting that "to wage war two things are indispensable: armed force and legitimacy." He briefly reviews various notions of legitimacy, including war as civic duty in ancient times, defense of the sovereign power of the state, doctrines such as *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello,* war as the "school of the nation," and finally the linking of war to Darwinian theories regarding natural selection, survival of the fittest, and nations' "will to live."

The rise of powerful antimilitarist feelings after the world wars deeply eroded the idea of duty to the nation, even while "the language of rights now dominates political debate in the United States." The post-Vietnam shift to an all-volunteer force further diminished the sense of individual obligation to the whole, while military service often came to be seen as being only for those with no better prospects. Van Creveld notes darkly that "where rights reign supreme and duty has become an object of neglect, suspicion, and even derision—as it has in most Western societies—whether, if and when the test comes, they will be sufficient is anybody's guess."

The 1899 and 1907 Hague Conventions initiated the idea that there were, or should be, better ways to settle international disputes than by war. This trend was reinforced strongly after the ruinous world wars by numerous subsequent conventions and treaties and the establishment of the United Nations. In parallel, concepts of "war guilt" and rejections of the national use of force except strictly in self-defense supplanted older notions of "the right of conquest" and have tended increasingly to delegitimize war, at least in the West. Thus, for many Western thinkers, the search for a replacement for war ought to favor nonmilitary alternatives, such as police training teams, mediators, and "dialogs." In van Creveld's view, "both intellectuals and politicians keep promising their audiences security without sacrifice, privilege without responsibility. But what if terrorists/guerrillas/insurgents/freedom fighters refuse to answer empathy with empathy?"

In van Creveld's view, these five trends collectively have deeply undermined Western military effectiveness and societal resilience, aggravated by the inability or unwillingness to examine the underlying causal factors rigorously and honestly. He closes by asserting that the bedrock cause is that "large parts of both European and American societies, each in its own way, have come to see war not simply as an evil that is sometimes made absolutely necessary by circumstances but as the ultimate one that almost nothing can justify. This will have to change. Or else."

Many readers will reject various of the author's arguments as anachronistic or, in any event, "overcome by events," hence not of interest or worthy of further debate or assessment. However, that at least some of them represent significant threats to contemporary policies or agendas is suggested by the ruthless de facto suppression of vigorous debate on sensitive topics by senior officers and top civilian leaders (which invariably leads to self-censorship, particularly among ambitious officers). Such intimidation is pure intellectual thuggery, which in itself

is a great institutional danger, especially in the military profession, where free thinking, combined with robust debate, is the essential prerequisite for not being outthought and outfought by future foes.

Almost as dangerous as intellectual thuggery is willful ignorance of "unpleasant truths" or empirical evidence. This was illustrated most notoriously by Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus's recent a priori policy decision, made in the fashion of *Alice in Wonderland*'s Red Queen ("Sentence first, verdict afterwards!"), to open all ground combat positions to women regardless of any data that might result subsequently from the Marine Corps's rigorous yearlong study regarding the performance of mixed-gender units. That sort of thing corrosively undermines the institutional trust essential to the success of any military organization.

Pussycats doubtless is controversial. However, van Creveld's arguments are coherent and intellectually substantive, even if one may disagree with some of the assumptions he makes to support them. Because they explicitly address the most fundamental criterion for assessing military forces—*their combat effectiveness*—they are very worth pondering by serving military officers and civilian policy makers, especially those more senior. Certainly the question of why Western military might, in conjunction with the other elements of state power, has not been more effective during the past half-century is a crucial one, given the multiple dangerous challenges the West confronts both today and over the longer term.

JAN VAN TOL

Assessing China's Naval Power: Technological Innovation, Economic Constraints, and Strategic Implications, by Sarah Kirchberger. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 2015. 318 pages. $129.

Few recent works on the Chinese navy have arrived with a more intriguing pedigree than this volume. It is unusual to find any in-depth work on the Chinese military being done by European researchers. *Assessing China's Naval Power,* the product of a German academic and released by a respected European publisher, is essentially unique in the field. Further, the author comes at the problem with a diverse résumé, having applied her academic training in East Asian politics as an analyst with the German shipbuilder Blohm + Voss. Despite these selling points, the work fails to deliver an original or compelling view of the fast-changing Chinese People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN).

Dr. Kirchberger sets out to create an objective and largely materialist yardstick by which to measure Chinese naval development. While dealing briefly with issues of policy and strategy, she notes that matériel "defines the upper limit of what is achievable through naval strategy." As she seeks objective comparisons, Kirchberger uses other Asian and the so-called BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India, China) navies as the benchmark for "normal" naval development. While interesting, this effort to quantify the analysis results in a strained attempt to extract meaning from what is quantifiable from available sources.

As an example, in one vignette Kirchberger compares Asian naval forces with the total areas of the exclusive economic zones (EEZs) their nations

claim. The result suggests that China has an average level of patrol-capable vessels, but that the PLAN submarine force, at one submarine per 35,716.75 square kilometers of EEZ, is comparatively large. It is tempting to critique such an approach on the details: the figure used for China's EEZ is smaller than the scope of its expansive maritime claims; and administration of maritime claims in China is a function of its rapidly growing coast guard and maritime militia (not explicitly included), whereas for many of the other nations analyzed the navy performs law-enforcement functions. More significant is the irrelevance of the figures themselves. By that yardstick, the U.S. Navy (not included in this analysis) defends one of the world's largest EEZs with a paltry one submarine per 210,000 square kilometers of EEZ. Navies are developed for strategic purposes, which vary from case to case.

Additionally, the focus on comparing the PLAN with developing nations' navies ignores the fact that one of the driving combat tasks for the PLAN is countering USN presence in Asia. Taking the U.S. Navy as a yardstick for Chinese naval development matters because it is the yardstick the Chinese themselves have set. That does not mean the PLAN needs or desires to emulate USN force structure in detail, but considering both sides of a two-sided interaction is critical to understanding.

More interesting is Kirchberger's analysis of China's shipbuilding capabilities. Drawing on her experience in the shipbuilding industry, Kirchberger assesses that the Chinese civil shipbuilding industry, though massive, offers few advantages in the production of naval combatants. In the critical maritime electronic sector, the book argues that the European arms embargo and centralized Chinese state control have stymied most meaningful innovation. Chinese combatants are presented as collections of imported and copied systems, with the assumption that the systems-integration problems such a model implies significantly hamper their combat performance. The Chinese decision to purchase the Russian-made *Sovremenny*-class destroyer and Kilo-class submarine in the middle of the previous decade is seen as a tacit admission of systemic deficiencies in Chinese maritime systems development. However, Kirchberger arguably underestimates China's success at both systems integration and adaptation of foreign technologies. For example, China received limited numbers of Russian-manufactured MINERAL ME radars and reverse engineered them with enough success that they now are deployed on every Jiangkai II frigate produced. Kirchberger dismisses these systems as poor copies.

While an earnest effort, at its heart this volume fails on its sources. Dependent on other secondary, primarily English-language, works, it contains few if any references to Chinese-language sources. As the volume was published in 2015, most of these sources are from 2013 and prior. For example, Kirchberger's most consequential conclusions about the PLAN submarine force hinge on a 2007 analysis of PLAN patrol activity during the prior decade. The result is a view of the Chinese navy that arguably is accurate as of about 2010, but that does not account for the rapid changes in the scope and complexity of PLAN platforms, capabilities, and operations in the intervening years.

Given the relatively small number of academics doing serious analysis of the PLAN, the introduction of a new point of view is always to be welcomed. In this case, however, naval professionals interested in Chinese naval development would be served better by going directly to the sources behind this volume.

DALE C. RIELAGE

Deng Xiaoping's Long War: The Military Conflict between China and Vietnam, 1979–1991, by Xiaoming Zhang. Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2015. 296 pages. $34.95 (e-book $33.99).

This book will be welcomed equally by historians, political scientists, and international relations specialists. It is a worthy addition to existing literature and belongs on any bookshelf dedicated to understanding modern China and Southeast Asia. Xiaoming Zhang, an associate professor in the Department of Strategy at the Air War College, has provided valuable additional information and analysis concerning the People's Republic of China's invasion of Vietnam in 1979. The Chinese invasion was planned deliberately and analytically, then for nearly a month the People's Liberation Army (PLA) fought fiercely against China's neighbor and former ally. At the end of this period, the two countries settled into a continuing active and deadly border dispute that lasted a decade. Taking advantage of recently declassified Chinese documents and an impressive number of interviews, Dr. Zhang has advanced significantly our understanding of why the Chinese chose to initiate the somewhat Orwellian-sounding "counterattack in self-defense against Vietnam," how the war was conducted, and why the subsequent conflict along the Vietnamese-Chinese border lasted so long.

As the history of the conflict unfolds, Deng Xiaoping becomes more and more the central figure and key Chinese decision maker. By the conclusion of the book, Dr. Zhang presents a convincing case that the war of 1979 was indeed Deng's war—a war into which he entered as much to preserve and promote his plans for economic modernization as to affect the balance of power in the international political system, while simultaneously aiming to rehabilitate and start the process of modernizing the PLA.

The book explains how the recent North Vietnamese victory over the Americans and the South Vietnamese had a surprisingly deleterious effect on Vietnam's previously amiable and long-term alliance with China. Flushed with victory and boasting a hardened and well-equipped army, the Vietnamese became, to Chinese eyes, increasingly arrogant and unfriendly. Vietnam's invasion of Cambodia and its deepening friendship with the Soviet Union led Deng to see China's position as potentially imperiled, threatened by the USSR to the north and the Vietnamese to the south. In particular, the invasion of Cambodia in December 1978 was viewed as proof of Hanoi's ambition to make Vietnam a hegemonic power in Southeast Asia, and added significantly to Deng's concerns.

Deng, who already had determined that economic and industrial modernization was the way ahead for China, arrived at an apparently counterintuitive conclusion. Significant combat operations conducted against Vietnam, the Soviet Union's most important regional ally, would signal to the United States

and other Western powers that China was a reliable partner that could be counted on to do what was needed. In return, the West would be more likely to continue to support Chinese efforts to modernize, and the perceived Soviet threat would be reduced.

However, as Zhang explains, the Chinese army had not fought a major war in three decades. Its tactics were outdated and its logistics support was inferior, and no officer below the rank of battalion commander was battle tested. Furthermore, the PLA did not enjoy a positive reputation within China's general population. In contrast, the Vietnamese army had decades of recent combat experience, large stores of modern Soviet and captured U.S. military equipment, and the intangible benefits that come with victory.

A massive propaganda campaign to improve the image of the PLA was launched. Significant amounts of military stores were moved into the Guangzhou and Kunming military districts. Army planners prepared for a massive offensive designed to seize several major northern Vietnamese cities and wreck two Vietnamese divisions in the process. The whole campaign was designed to "teach Vietnam a lesson."

Zhang provides a detailed account of the fighting that followed. The Chinese executed their plan successfully, albeit at a much higher cost than anticipated. Zhang debunks common claims by Vietnamese that the majority of their combatants were local militia fighters. While it is true that several elite Vietnamese divisions were engaged in Cambodia, far more regular army units fought in the north than the Vietnamese indicated. The war was almost exclusively a ground war, although both the Vietnamese and Chinese air forces carried out many reconnaissance missions.

After nearly thirty days of fairly hard fighting, Chinese forces withdrew to the border, having achieved their geographic objectives and inflicted significant casualties on enemy forces. The operation had been calibrated skillfully to "punish" Vietnam, without going so far as to bring the Soviets into the fray. Deng then directed the army to continue to fight along the border until the Vietnamese withdrew from Cambodia. It would take a decade—and the visible decline of the Soviet Union—but in the end Vietnamese leaders acquiesced and Deng got what he wanted. During this period Vietnam's economy suffered. China's southernmost provinces also suffered, but the nation reaped the benefits of modernization and Western engagement.

Chinese military leaders deliberately used the ensuing chronic border conflict to "blood" much of their army and local militias. The war also provided new heroes to place in the public eye. However, in one of the more poignant portions of the book, Zhang describes how China's Vietnam experience affected many of the participants in much the same manner as it had their earlier U.S. equivalents. Strategically, the war also saw the Chinese army embrace combined operations and a turn to modernization as a requirement for victory.

Zhang makes a convincing argument that Deng Xiaoping calculatingly used the Chinese military instrument to achieve strategic, domestic, and personal goals. His war was one of deliberate choice. Potential Vietnamese hegemonic ambitions were thwarted; Vietnam would be forced to leave Cambodia. China's ties to the West

were strengthened; Soviet influence in the region was weakened.

China reaped other benefits, although some were perhaps mixed. Vietnam would—and still does—view China with suspicion. Other countries in the region now know that China did, and could once again, wage offensive war, if seen to be in the interest of the state. The Chinese military, once so abysmally behind technologically, has transformed itself. Combined arms operations, performed haltingly at best in 1979, are now common.

Zhang frequently and conscientiously reminds the reader that, although knowledge of the Sino-Vietnamese conflict has increased greatly, it is important not to embrace any conclusions, even the most apparently convincing, as definitive. This is because some Chinese and all the Vietnamese records have yet to be declassified. The warning is appropriate, but should not detract from Zhang's analysis, nor from a deep appreciation of his work.

RICHARD J. NORTON

OUR REVIEWERS

Richard J. Norton is a professor of national security affairs at the Naval War College. He is a retired naval officer and holds a PhD from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University. His most recent publications include articles in the *Naval War College Review* and *Marine Corps University Journal*.

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Prior to his retirement from the U.S. Navy in 2007, Captain *Jan van Tol* served as special adviser in the office of the vice president. He was a military assistant to the Secretary of Defense's principal adviser for net assessment from 1993 to 1996 and again from 2001 to 2003. At sea, he commanded three warships, two of which, USS *O'Brien* (DD 975) and USS *Essex* (LHD 2), were part of the U.S. Navy's forward-deployed naval forces based in Japan. Captain van Tol's analytic work has focused mainly on long-range strategic planning, naval warfare, military innovation, and war gaming.