

2017

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Recommended Citation

Tol, Jan Van (2017) "Why? And other Thirty-Five-Year Questions," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 70 : No. 1 , Article 12.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol70/iss1/12>

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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 "unisexual" 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