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Military Brass vs. Civilian Academics at the National War College: A Clash of Cultures

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Howard Wiarda

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Two millennia ago, the original author of Sun Tzu’s Art of War presumably never intended the work to be applied to the twenty-first-century global marketplace. However, Mark McNeilly has taken the liberty of doing so. In a novel approach, he has compiled a list of strategic concepts derived from the ancient military strategist and translated them into a lexicon for modern corporate capitalists. Sun Tzu and the Art of Business is a guidebook for business managers looking to increase profitability for the sake of their companies and their employees. The book was originally published in 1996 but has been revised to address the influence of globalization, the increased use of the Internet, the increase in cooperative alliances, and the economic rise of China.

McNeilly, a former infantry officer and corporate strategist, derives six principles from Sun Tzu’s philosophy that, if followed, will yield business success. The prescriptive list consists of winning without fighting—capturing your market without destroying it; avoiding strength, attacking weakness—striking where they least expect it; employing deception and foreknowledge—maximizing the power of market information; using speed and preparation—moving swiftly to overcome your competitors; shaping your opponent—employing strategy to master your opponent; and displaying character-based leadership—providing effective leadership in turbulent times. McNeilly assumes there are natural parallels between ancient warfare and modern commerce. For example, battlefield victory is likened to market share and industry dominance. In order to validate his points, the author juxtaposes numerous business case studies with military history. While certainly engaging, some of the parallels seem oversimplified and lacking in critical analysis. The inclusion of so many case studies tends to minimize the complexities of each one, and when taken out of context, the case studies become almost trivialized. There is also little discussion on risk assessment or how one’s enemy or competitor may react to each of the principles outlined.

For those who want a simple approach to applying military strategy to the competitive marketplace, this book achieves that objective. It is an enjoyable and quick read, written in a style that is brisk and easy to follow. Included is a practical section designed to help readers develop and apply a business approach. What readers may find especially helpful is the inclusion of Samuel B. Griffith’s translation of Sun Tzu’s The Art of War and a list of references for further study. Overall, this work may appeal more to a general audience than to serious students of strategy.

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Howard Wiarda’s memoir of his time at the National War College is a startling book. During nearly a decade of teaching in the professional military
education (PME) program at the National Defense University (NDU), Wiarda amassed anecdotes that point to dire flaws in the way military education is conducted in the United States.

Unfortunately, the book is a missed opportunity. Every professor who has worked at a war college will recognize the stories Wiarda tells and can likely match many of them. However, because the book is written in the tone of an angry tell-all rather than with the detachment of a scholarly volume, too many legitimate points will be too quickly dismissed, especially by the most entrenched elements in PME, who are rightly the focus of Wiarda’s criticisms. This is all the more regrettable because these are not the gripes of a disaffected or failed academic. Howard Wiarda’s expertise and reputation are beyond question, and the government was fortunate to have him teaching U.S. military officers. Alas, if only NDU had felt that way about him and the other civilian scholars who have worked there.

Wiarda shows that he and other civilian academics at the National War College, a school within NDU, were treated by the administration as little better than irritants, necessary evils to be endured. Senior leaders at NDU cared little for education and not at all for scholarship. Their attitude toward the civilian faculty veered from benign neglect to sneering disdain, which sometimes manifested itself in weird ways. In one example, Wiarda was hauled into the commandant’s office one morning after attending a reception and told he should not be “socializing above his rank,” whatever that means.

Among these sometimes comical stories (a note to National’s faculty: don’t ever park in the commandant’s spot), Wiarda is making a serious point about a common problem in all PME institutions—the people in charge of education are not actually educators.

Wiarda provides this blistering description, for example, of the kind of president who is “the bane of NDU’s colleges and institutes”: a “heavy-handed one, full of fire and brimstone, who thinks he/she knows everything there is to know about military education or even education in general, wants to change and reform the entire institution, and especially seeks to put ‘those independent professors’ in their place. He/she will usually spend a year or two instituting grand, sweeping changes, fulminating at the scholars and teachers, and wondering why his reforms are not carried out.”

This general hostility to the faculty and the educational enterprise has deep roots. Wiarda writes that in military culture, senior officers are taught that they are good at everything, especially anything civilians can do. Worse, any disagreement with these senior military leaders triggers what Wiarda accurately sees as a huge intellectual inferiority complex. This insecurity not only makes officers more difficult to educate but warps the priorities of the institution toward an obsession with student happiness rather than educational results. The idea that the faculty should teach and the students should learn clearly chafed Wiarda’s superiors, who saw education as far less important than protecting the well-being (and fragile egos) of the officers at NDU.

Here Wiarda is merciless in his description of the students as “pandered to” and “pampered.” He provides plenty of material to support that description,
including the virtual impossibility of failing students for any reason. Wiarda was told, as all PME faculty have been for years, that the students were his peers, an assertion that Wiarda found “laughable.” Nor was it true. Wiarda shows that the students were actually treated as his superiors and that he was expected to serve them accordingly.

Academics, for their part, have no understanding of the military obsession with hierarchy and procedure—also a point Wiarda mentions. Yet in this too-brief volume, the author does not explore either culture as much as his title promises. Too much space is taken up with anecdotes and score settling at the expense of discussing remedies, the stories and problems being presented without priority. In one example, Wiarda is absolutely right to decry the often sadistic manipulation of faculty contracts by some of the martinets for whom he worked. This is a widespread problem in the PME world. More time discussing the pressing need for a tenure system in PME, however, and less complaining about distractions (like student parking) might have been more productive.

There are other problems with the book as well. Although short, it is poorly edited—indeed, it seems not to have been edited at all. The same anecdotes appear again in different places, sections overlap, and there are avoidable lapses in grammar and spelling. An entire chapter, about Wiarda’s international travels while working for NDU, is out of place and disposable.

Nonetheless, the book’s flaws do not obscure the reality of the problem. Successful and highly regarded educators from every major PME institution—including George Reed, Dan Hughes, Judith Stiehm, and Joan Johnson-Freese, among others—have stepped forward and written about the same issues. While Wiarda’s narrative is flawed in tone, it is still an important step in illuminating serious and continuing problems in the PME community.

THOMAS NICHOLS
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This book explores the history of the development of naval policy making in the British Admiralty from 1805 to 1927, from the Battle of Trafalgar to the aftermath of World War I.

The author, C. I. Hamilton, a professor of modern European history at the University of the Witwatersrand, writes that he first became interested in this subject because he wished to know who did what at the Admiralty and how they did it. Reading this book answers those questions and introduces a rich tapestry of interesting historical characters and complex naval policy issues.

Although the book paints an analytically cohesive picture of naval policy issues that plagued would-be planners for over a century, it also contains many colorful historical details. Beginning in 1805 with Lord Barham, who at age eighty could run the navy almost single-handedly from his desk, the book deals authoritatively with thorny issues of naval administration and policy.

Many fascinating professional and civilian characters appear in this period. Only naval historians may initially recognize some, but there are many other