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BOOK REVIEWS

WHAT IS THE KEY TO VICTORY?

Desch, Michael C. *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 2008. 232pp. \$45

The notion that “democracies don’t fight one another” is well known, but recently some scholars have made a stronger claim—that when democracies do fight wars, their battlefield effectiveness is far greater than that of nondemocracies with comparable technology and training.

Michael Desch challenges the supposed military prowess of democracies in his book *Power and Military Effectiveness: The Fallacy of Democratic Triumphalism*. Desch, a political scientist, holds the Robert M. Gates Chair in Intelligence and National Security Decision-Making at Texas A&M University and is an authority on civil-military relations. His past work argues that it is strategic interests, not regime types, that determine a nation’s security policy. His latest book extends that theme by delivering a convincing rebuttal to what he calls the “democratic triumphalists.”

The case of the “triumphalists” rests upon statistical analyses showing that democracies have been more likely to win wars than other political systems over the last two hundred years. Desch challenges these studies head on,

arguing that in most cases the democracies in question would have been expected to win in any case, due to traditional military advantages (the United States in the 1991 Gulf war) or to motivation, national survival being on the line (Israel in 1973), and that in other cases there may have been errors and uncertainties in the data sets themselves. To prove his point, Desch offers four case studies: the Russo-Polish War (1919–20), the battle for France (1940), the Falklands War (1982), and Israel’s wars from 1948 to 1982. These case studies trace the details of governmental decision making and the military operations of each conflict, showing that the factors identified by the triumphalists were not the key drivers of battlefield outcomes.

The combination of quantitative analysis and case studies is notable. Few authors are comfortable working in both methods, but Desch demonstrates both methodological sophistication and a command of military history. However, one might ask for a more thorough exploration of a few issues. One example is how quick Desch is to dismiss the

possibility that democracies grow faster economically than other regimes and thus accumulate more resources in the long run. Such questions are minor, though, and the overall case is quite persuasive.

This book is a must for scholars of military effectiveness or civil-military relations. The statistical sections will satisfy researchers; they might be a bit difficult for general readers, but overall the work should interest a broad audience of national security professionals. Desch's writing is excellent throughout, with lively case studies and clear explanations of his theories and results.

One hopes that policy makers will read this book. As Desch notes, democratic triumphalism has become popular in Washington. The mistaken belief that democracy itself is a "force multiplier" could lead officials to underestimate the risks of U.S. interventions or to encourage unduly weak but democratic U.S. allies. Desch offers a warning that it is superior strategy, resources, and skill, not the magic bullet of democracy, that remain the keys to victory.

DAVID BURBACH
Naval War College



Doyle, Michael. *Striking First: Preemption and Prevention in International Conflict*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008. 200pp. \$24.95

Even before the United States and its allies embarked on war in Iraq in 2003, the question of whether it is acceptable to strike enemies without clear provocation was an increasingly vexing one to policy makers, academics, and legal experts. "Preemptive war" (attacking an enemy who is clearly about to strike

you first) has always been an acceptable response to a dire and clear threat. But "preventive war" (striking a potential enemy while circumstances are favorable to the attacker, or striking in early anticipation of a possible, or even only theoretical, threat) has traditionally been regarded in the international community as not only unwise but immoral.

In this slim, tightly reasoned volume, one of America's foremost foreign-policy thinkers tackles the problem of preventive war and reaches surprising conclusions. While rejecting the so-called Bush Doctrine, which putatively grants to the United States almost unlimited permission to attack almost any threat in any form, Doyle delivers a clear warning that the previous rules of war do not apply in the twenty-first century. Doyle struggles (as have other scholars in many nations over the past decade) to find criteria that would allow preventive attacks in an internationally acceptable framework. He settles on four criteria: lethality, likelihood, legitimacy, and legality.

The book is actually a collection of essays by four other scholars, who supply a foreword and criticism of Doyle's chapters, to which Doyle responds in a conclusion. The debate format is lively and makes this work a particularly useful tool for introducing students at advanced levels to the subject.

Although Doyle's prose is direct and clear, in places he makes overly structured arguments, and his attempt to set his four criteria into a matrix produces something more like a rigid template. Doyle certainly recognizes that the perception of a threat, versus the actual threat, is often idiosyncratic and affected by a slew of factors, but his

criteria are more likely to make sense after the fact than at the outset of action. The moral questions he raises are, and should be, crucial to policy makers, but his framework is more suitable as an after-action analysis than as a guide to preventive attack.

That said, *Striking First* is an excellent, thought-provoking, and highly readable volume, indispensable for both specialists and interested general readers. No future discussions of this problem (and there will be many) can afford to ignore Michael Doyle's contribution.

THOMAS NICHOLS
Naval War College



Mahnken, Thomas G., and Joseph A. Maiolo, eds. *Strategic Studies: A Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2008. 464pp. \$49.95

Tom Mahnken and Joseph Maiolo will not be unfamiliar to readers of the *Naval War College Review* or to students of strategy and policy. Mahnken, a former professor at the Naval War College, is currently visiting fellow and professorial lecturer in the Strategic Studies Program at the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies; Maiolo is a senior lecturer in war studies at King's College London. Seeking to enhance the teaching of this important subject, Mahnken and Maiolo have put together a collection of previously published essays on the theory and practice of strategic studies.

This collection is wide ranging, both topically and chronologically. It begins by examining the uses of strategic theory, with essays by Bernard Brodie, Lawrence Freedman, and William C.

Fuller, Jr. The second section examines the "classics," with selections from Sun Tzu, Basil Liddell Hart, and Thomas Schelling. A look at conventional warfare on land, sea, and air is found in the third section, in articles by Richard Overy, Brian Holden Reid (on J. F. C. Fuller), and Daniel Byman and Matthew Waxman on airpower in Kosovo, along with a selection of Julian Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy*. Nuclear strategy is not neglected, with a selection from Bernard Brodie's *The Absolute Weapon* and Albert Wohlstetter's famous article "Delicate Balance of Terror." The fifth, and by far the largest, section is on irregular warfare and small wars. The essays here are both new and old classics: T. E. Lawrence, Mao Tse-tung, David Galula, David Kilcullen, Andrew Mack (on big nations losing small wars), and Peter Neumann and M. L. R. Smith (on strategic terrorism). To conclude, there are essays by Andrew Krepinevich, Michael Evans, Colin Gray, Adam Roberts, and Hew Strachan (all since 2003), which engage the future of conflict and of strategy making.

One should not quibble too much with the editors' selections (or omissions); Mahnken and Maiolo acknowledge from the outset that space prevented them from including all they wished. Still, some readers may question the description of strategy that Mahnken and Maiolo offer in their introduction. By strategy they largely mean *military*, rather than national or grand, strategy, but they do not specify. In a collection such as this, a more precise explanation of strategy at the beginning would have been helpful for framing the collection's essays. Nonetheless, this text will be extremely useful as a starting point for

professional military education on this topic. The editors are to be commended.

JONATHAN WINKLER
Wright State University
Dayton, Ohio



Stavridis, James. *Destroyer Captain: Lessons of a First Command*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2008. 224pp. \$22.95

The politically correct aspiration for all surface warfare officers is to attain to command at sea. Realistically, these officers cannot begin to comprehend all its ramifications, but they viscerally know it is the Holy Grail. Reading Admiral Jim Stavridis's *Destroyer Captain* is about as close as these officers will come to enjoying the ride until they actually receive their orders to command. It is our great fortune that then-commander Stavridis scrupulously kept a journal during his days aboard USS *Barry* (DDG 52) (1993–95) and has offered to share his experiences with us.

James Stavridis is prolific on this subject, having written extensively on life at sea for the naval professional. Such earlier works as *Watch Officer's Guide* (editor, 1999) and *Command at Sea* (with William Mack, 1999) now serve as textbooks. *Destroyer Captain*, however, is designed to be a good read for anyone fascinated with what life is like behind the doors of the captain's cabin. Fortunately, Stavridis is a writer who is not only good with the small details of daily life but shares a sense of history and awe of the sea. Simply, he is in love with command at sea, and you feel it throughout the entire book.

Stavridis does not purport to tell new destroyer skippers that there is one correct way to succeed at their job, but he has tried to keep to the basics. The "ends" are mandated: the ship should be ready for war. The "means" is where a captain's personality turns seemingly identical structures into radically different habitats. Stavridis adheres to simplicity. Serve good food. Walk around. Have a plan. Smile.

Stavridis, currently the regional combatant commander of Southern Command, was the second skipper of *Barry*. His predecessor, today Admiral Gary Roughead, is the Chief of Naval Operations.

A particularly poignant piece is his account of the tragic death of Admiral Jay Prout, a friend and mentor and always an ebullient companion. Prout had a trademark of passing to friends en route to command a paperback about the exploits of a Royal Navy destroyer skipper who had three ships shot out from under him during the Second World War. He called that book motivation for a successful command. We can place *Destroyer Captain* on the same list.

TOM FEDYSZYN
Naval War College



Cliff, Roger, et al. *Entering the Dragon's Lair: Chinese Antiaccess Strategies and Their Implications for the United States*. Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND, 2007. 154pp. \$27.50

This study has already attracted widespread attention from the policy community and media, for good reason. The U.S. military appears poised to face challenges to its ability to maintain access to a variety of regional littoral

areas, such as in the Persian Gulf. It is time for American planners to view the rising antiaccess challenge as part of a global problem that may require significant restructuring of U.S. platforms, deployment, diplomacy, and even, in a worst case, strategy and tactics.

The authors have produced the first major study that evaluates comprehensively the specific antiaccess methods being discussed by Chinese military strategists. They bring to bear a wide variety of relevant doctrinal and analytic materials (many of which they themselves have translated) and explain clearly their relative authority. The authors' conclusion is sobering: in the unfortunate event of a Taiwan Strait conflict, China's military may consider launching a rapid surprise attack. Such a first strike could damage and render ineffective a wide variety of U.S. military platforms (aircraft carrier strike groups—which are described as having special vulnerabilities—and assets at regional bases). This could deny U.S. forces effective “access” to sea and air space to China's east, leaving Taiwan vulnerable to military coercion and testing American resolve. The authors term this growing zone “the Dragon's Lair.” While the United States would retain significant military forces regardless of the outcome of such a conflict, China might be able to achieve specific military and political objectives at America's expense.

An enduring challenge for analyses of the People's Liberation Army (PLA) is distinguishing between aspirations and capabilities. The authors do their best to differentiate between the two, and they deserve great credit for addressing seriously a set of issues on which there has been insufficient open analysis.

While the continued lack of transparency makes it difficult to determine the PLA's precise capabilities, long-established technical expertise and focus on the development of such weapons as missiles and related technologies suggest considerable potential on China's part. The authors offer, in light of their findings, a wide variety of specific policy recommendations, which should be considered carefully. However, the expense, difficulties (largely because of inherent physics-based limitations), and side effects potentially associated with some of them—and indeed the ruinous nature of any U.S.-China conflict—make it vital to consider the larger strategic context as well.

Conflict over Taiwan is the only readily imaginable scenario in which the United States and China could have a kinetic military exchange today. This unfortunate contingency, already only a remote one, has been rendered more so by the March 2008 Taiwan election and President Ma Ying-jeou's constructive approach to cross-strait relations. Continued U.S. presence and influence in strategic regions of East Asia, which Beijing has not challenged directly in public, will remain an important subject for American policy makers, as well as for bilateral and multilateral discussion. Even as the two nations cooperate, there will undoubtedly be areas of contention. But there is no reason at this point to fear that war is imminent, and every reason to believe that each side's coercive capabilities can deter the outcome that each most fears.

ANDREW ERICKSON
Naval War College



Cole, Bernard D. *Sea Lanes and Pipelines: Energy Security in Asia*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 2008. 280pp. \$75

This book, written by a retired Navy captain and professor of international history at the National War College, provides an up-to-date summary of the movement of energy resources in and around Asia, of the concurrent buildup of naval power in the region to protect that movement, and of strategies employed by Asian nations to ensure the safe and secure transport of energy resources.

Bernard Cole is well versed on the subject, drawing upon his thirty-year naval career, all served in the Pacific, and his obvious focus and research on naval and energy issues in Asia. His extensive notes and bibliography constitute almost a fourth of the book, showing the breadth and width of Cole's research and sources.

While the title implies a focus on both sea-lanes and pipelines, actually more time and space are allocated to maritime issues. Cole explains in his introduction that "no form of transporting oil is more important than the sea" and that "the role of naval force on the seas provides the primary vehicle from which the question of the military security of Asia's energy supplies is viewed."

Conceding that energy security cannot be addressed individually for each nation, Cole recognizes globalization as a fact of life and thus holds that the transport of energy via sea-lanes, "the commons," must be addressed from a regional perspective—in this case, that of Asia. The book is divided into chapters specifically by issues, and within

each chapter Cole examines each issue on a country-by-country basis.

Cole builds issue upon issue, to include the geography of the region and the resultant physical problem of the secure sea lines of communication; the energy sources within Asia; and the problems of transporting energy to and from there. He ends with a look at multilateralism and various international organizations that may influence maritime issues in Asia, as well as a profile of individual countries and their anticipated changes vis-à-vis energy security and freedom of the seas.

The previously mentioned "up-to-date summary" lends a time-sensitive nature to the book. Cole takes the time to explain the necessary background and history, but he is quite aware that the value of current data is subject to atrophy as time passes. An update will certainly be warranted in a couple of years if this book is to remain relevant.

JAMES P. LEWIS
Naval War College



Lawrence, Quil. *Invisible Nation: How the Kurds' Quest for Statehood Is Shaping Iraq and the Middle East*. New York: Walker, 2008. 288pp. \$25.95

Marcus, Aliza. *Blood and Belief: The PKK and the Kurdish Fight for Independence*. New York: New York Univ. Press, 2007. 368pp. \$35

While the establishment of the nation-state as the preeminent system for political and social integration has led to the benefit of many social groups, it has led to the disaffection of others. The Kurds, who for centuries have acted as political pawns and mercenaries, have arguably benefited the least. Even now, with a population estimated at twenty-eight

million, the Kurds remain divided among four separate countries—northern Iraq, northeastern Syria, southeast Turkey, and western Iran.

Literature on the Kurds is extensive, and, as suggested from the publication of the books reviewed here, it is likely to grow. What that means in terms of greater visibility for the Kurds or the enhancement of their rights remains to be seen. If the pen is indeed mightier than the sword, Kurdophiles will welcome any expansion of their documented trials and tribulations, which date back to the early 1800s.

Invisible Nation focuses on the Kurds' experience in Iraq, with particular attention to their plight under Saddam Hussein and to their role in constructing a democratic Iraq, post-Saddam and the Baathists. The implicit question is whether Kurdistan is, or will ever be, an independent country, de facto or de jure. Lawrence's chronology of events touches upon various aspects of the problem, such as the long-standing party factionalism among Iraqi Kurds (Talabani's PUK versus Barzani's KDP) and a wide array of cabals and conspiracies with Iraq's other social groups (Sunni Arabs, Shiite Arabs, Assyrians, Turkomans) and neighbors. Following a brief introduction to Kurdish history, Lawrence moves quickly to the middle of the twentieth century, where the reader learns details of the Kurdish struggle for self-determination, whether as part of an independent Kurdistan or an autonomous region within Iraq.

Lawrence is an excellent writer, but his depiction of events seems at times anecdotal, based on his trips to Kurdistan as a reporter and on his sampling of informants. Contributing to that feel is what appears to be arbitrary footnoting of

sources and declarations. Yet the book flows nicely and offers insight from diverse elements of Kurdish society.

Blood and Belief is a different kind of book altogether. It too follows a chronological approach, but its time span is shorter and its topic—the creation and evolution of the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party)—is much narrower. More a social movement than a political party, the PKK was established to bring recognition, if not outright independence, to Kurds living in Turkey. While the PKK grew out of Kurdish nationalism, however, its roots were in leftist revolutionary traditions.

Marcus begins with the 1978 gathering in southeast Turkey where the PKK was founded and then tracks its development, principally through the personal history of its longtime leader Abdullah Ocalan. That might seem strange, but it is difficult to separate the party from its leader, since Ocalan has led the party and has been its driving force from the start. Yet as Marcus frequently points out, Ocalan's position as leader has come at a high cost, because of his consolidation of power both within the PKK and against competing parties. Marcus's story leads to the conclusion that Ocalan's need for absolute control produced not only several purges but poor and inflexible strategies. Too often suggestions for making the PKK more effective were dealt with by Ocalan as threats to his leadership and authority.

Using data from "close to 100" interviewees, Marcus explains how the PKK evolved until Ocalan's capture in 1999. The intrigue behind that event is by itself worth the price of the book. The depth of Marcus's reporting on the PKK's early years is unfortunately offset by the brevity of her coverage of events

since Ocalan's arrest. Although she does include a convenient time line, an index of the principal players and informants would have been a valuable aid to the reader.

Blood and Belief will be of interest not only to scholars of Kurdish and Turkish history but to anyone interested in the development of political movements and parties and in how power is consolidated. *Invisible Nation* offers an excellent, readable overview of the Kurdish experience in Iraq, especially since the Gulf war of 1991. These books document two different approaches taken by a social group long oppressed. Both raise questions about the cost and feasibility of self-determination, given the growing permeability of national boundaries. Another issue is the viability of using terrorism as a way to get recognition or press for one's rights, however legitimate they may seem. A lesson for national leaders is that the more you deny the identity of a social group (for years the government of Turkey claimed there were no Kurds, only mountain Turks) and its right to self-expression, the more you sow the seeds for insurrection and rebellion.

Despite their geopolitical separation, which contributes to the tendency to collude with or against each other, the future for the Kurds seems brighter than ever. Marcus shows that they can organize themselves effectively, while Lawrence suggests that with autonomy and better economic times, historical animosities can be set aside. Both authors have added pages to Kurdish history.

ANTHONY DIBELLA
Naval War College



Ebadi, Shirin. *Iran Awakening: One Woman's Journey to Reclaim Her Life and Country*. New York: Random House, 2007. 256pp. \$14.95

Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2007. 240pp. \$14.95

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran has posed a serious dilemma for regional and global peace and security. Today, Iran is more perplexing and ominous than ever, thanks to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's threatening rants and Iran's supposed nuclear ambitions.

Two books about Iran and Shiism are must reads to understand better the current dilemma in the Middle East and its ramifications for global security. Nobel Peace Prize laureate Shirin Ebadi's autobiography *Iran Awakening* and Vali Nasr's *The Shia Revival* provide unique insights and analyses of the power-hungry clerics ruling Iran and of the Sunni-versus-Shia paradigm.

Shirin Ebadi's personal story about her upbringing in Iran, first under Shah Pahlavi and then under the Islamic Revolution that brought Ayatollah Khomeini to power, is captivating. Each chapter contains shocking developments, but nothing grabs the reader more than the prologue, in which she describes her surreal discovery that she is next on the revolutionary clerics' hit list. The Shia revolutionary paradigm that evolved in Khomeini's Iran proved as repressive and brutal as the shah's reign. Particularly bewildering was the Shia messianic belief in the return of the Mahdi—the "hidden imam"—whose arrival would be preceded by the apocalypse. Equally provocative is the nearly hypnotic religious fervor with

which the Shia sought martyrdom, especially when they fought Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War (1980–88). The scale of destruction and loss of human life was staggering, yet Iranians volunteered to fill the front lines in droves. Shirin Ebadi vividly describes these strange, violent events, as well as the ideological earthquakes in Iran and the state of fear that pervaded the very air people breathed.

As a human-rights lawyer, Shirin Ebadi has taken on cases that were extremely perilous to her and her colleagues. She has particularly involved herself in cases of gross violations against women and children. Both men and women, young and old, underwent torture, disappeared, or languished in Iranian prisons. Extrajudicial executions and assassinations were not uncommon. In 2003 Shirin Ebadi was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. In chapter 12 she describes her strange elation in being chosen, and how her fellow Iranians reacted—the authorities were unhappy, but the people, especially the women, were ecstatic. Today, Shirin Ebadi continues to work as a human-rights lawyer in Iran, despite continuous threats to her life.

Vali Nasr's book illustrates the patterns of conflicts between Shias and Sunnis throughout Islamic history. In *The Shia Revival* he explains how he believes these patterns will continue to shape regional politics in the Middle East and South Asia. It is a book to which U.S. policy makers, military, and intelligence groups should pay close attention. Nasr has the ability to do something that probably no other "analyst" has done—to explain the mind-set of the Sunni and Shia leaders and their followers, and why they have such deeply

emotive sentiments about themselves and resentments toward each other. These sentiments and resentments, Nasr is convinced, are affecting politics in post-Saddam Iraq and have ramifications for regional and global security. The book's subtitle states his theory that it is the many conflicts within Islam that will shape the future. All we need to do is look at what is happening in Iraq, and other parts of the Islamic world, to see that this is true.

The Sunni-Shia rivalry is as old as Islam itself. Today, for military and security strategy purposes, it is especially important to understand the political, sociocultural, religious, historical, and even economic variables affecting the Sunnis and Shias. For example, the Shias tipped the balance of power when they ruled the Islamic empire during the Fatimid dynasty. However, the Fatimids were not successful in expelling the crusaders from Jerusalem. The Sunnis stepped in and victoriously fought the crusaders, eventually tipping the balance of power back into their hands.

The Sunnis and Shias fear that the same power struggle will take place today in Iraq. This time, it is the Americans who invaded Iraq, providing the opportunity for the Sunnis and Shias to play the power game once again. In the long run, global peace and security are at stake.

HAYAT ALVI-AZIZ
Naval War College



Crile, George. *Charlie Wilson's War: The Extraordinary Story of How the Wildest Man in Congress and a Rogue CIA Agent Changed the History of Our Times*. New York: Grove, 2004. 560pp. \$14.95

A longtime best seller in its tenth printing, this important book received a boost in December 2007 when the popular movie of the same name brought this story—CIA's secret proxy war in Afghanistan against the Soviet Union—to the big screen. Crile's painstaking account of the complex chain of events and of the powerful personalities that produced the most successful covert war in U.S. history is the result of extensive research, countless interviews, travel, and personal interaction with most of the key characters in this real-life drama. Over a period of fifteen years of research and reporting, George Crile traveled repeatedly to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Israel and throughout the United States to interview the many who played prominently in bringing about the Afghan mujahideen victory over the Soviet Union's Red Army in early 1989.

Reading more like a good spy novel than the historical and factual piece of reporting that it is, the book takes the reader through the fascinating story of how the CIA gained support and achieved victory due, in large measure, to the backing and behind-the-scenes political and relationship maneuverings of Texas congressman Charlie Wilson and CIA operative Gust Avrakotos. The extensive cast of characters includes many other prominent figures in the U.S. government; Texas society; and the governments and intelligence services of Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and

Israel. The author's source notes at the end of the book give a sense of the grand scope of this story, which is still playing out today.

Crile's career, spanning thirty years with CBS, most notably as a producer for *60 Minutes* and *60 Minutes II*, positioned him to be a part of this epic as it unfolded. A two-time winner of the Edgar R. Murrow Award for broadcast journalism, he shows his penchant for bringing a complex story to the reader in an evocative, entertaining, and compelling way.

For students of national-security decision making, foreign policy, U.S. and international politics, and the processes that ultimately result in decisive action, this book provides an insight into how things really transpired during the Reagan administration's support of the Afghan freedom fighters. The author's epilogue, a valuable resource for the student interested in the history and effects of this period, examines the long-term unintended consequences of both U.S. support and periods of nonsupport over four presidential administrations. Some of these consequences include the current negative opinion of the United States in the Muslim world, the rise of radical Islam, the attacks of September 11, 2001, and our ongoing conflicts in both Afghanistan and Iraq.

George Crile passed away in 2006. Although he did not live to see his story come to life as a full-length motion picture, he would probably have been pleased to see the renewed interest and intellectual curiosity that the film has brought to his important chronicle of a pivotal time in our history. There are countless lessons and insights here for national security professionals and those interested in the messy processes

and decisions that result in world-changing events.

GENE MILOWICKI
Naval War College



Dugard, Martin. *The Training Ground: Grant, Lee, Sherman, and Davis in the Mexican War, 1846–1848*. New York: Little, Brown, 2008. 446pp. \$29.99

The English novelist C. S. Forester once observed, concerning soldiers in war, that it was a “coincidence that when destiny had so much to do she should find tools of such high quality ready to hand.” This comment aptly describes the human story line woven throughout *The Training Ground*, Martin Dugard’s spirited and nearly blow-by-blow account of the major battles of the Mexican War. Dugard, author of *The Last Voyage of Columbus* (2005), has written a robust narrative of this conflict describing President James K. Polk’s ambition to expand the territory of the United States. Reaching beyond the formal history, Dugard uses the strong personalities, individual battlefield accomplishments, and close relationships among a small group of professional soldiers who actually fought the war to bring his story to life.

These soldiers, West Point graduates and well-drilled junior officers in a meager U.S. Army, were the human tools “ready to hand” in 1846. Ulysses S. Grant, Robert E. Lee, William Sherman, Jefferson Davis, Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson, and others with names remembered today were first exposed to the hardships and brutality of warfare in the conflict with Mexico. The experience gained in combat tactics, engineering, and logistics by this

“brotherhood” hardened its veterans and taught them to lead, lessons that would be evident during the much more horrific bloodshed that was to take place in the U.S. Civil War.

Dugard relates numerous stories of these young officers and their friendships: of Lee assisted by a young George McClellan and supported by Jackson’s mobile gun batteries; “Sam” Grant and Davis charging together into battle; “Pete” (actually James) Longstreet serving as best man at Grant’s postwar wedding; the calmness of Grant and his keen battlefield observation under fire; the savagery of Jackson’s energy; the frustration of Sherman while posted in California; and the courageous, almost supernatural, professionalism of Lee.

In the end, Mexico City and Mexico were conquered, and the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, signed in July 1848, ended the war. Mexico lost vast portions of its northern states, including California, while the still-young United States nearly doubled in size.

The spare and honest Grant wrote of his experiences in Mexico, “I would like to see a truthful history written. Such a history will do full credit to the courage, endurance, and soldierly ability of the American citizen, no matter what section of the country he hailed from, or in what ranks he fought.” As Dugard’s brisk and engrossing story forecasts, the competence of this small brotherhood would be put to the fullest test during the long and bitter conflict between the states. This later war was fought with great determination and violence by the men whom destiny had trained on the same ground—the West Point veterans of the Mexican War.

WILLIAM CALHOUN
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