

2019

## The Plurality of American War: "Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century"

John T. Kuehn

Matthew S. Muehlbauer

David J. Ulbrich

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

---

### Recommended Citation

Kuehn, John T.; Muehlbauer, Matthew S.; and Ulbrich, David J. (2019) "The Plurality of American War: "Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century", *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 72 : No. 2 , Article 8.  
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol72/iss2/8>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu](mailto:repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu).

## REVIEW ESSAYS

---

### THE PLURALITY OF AMERICAN WAR

*John T. Kuehn*

*Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century*, by Matthew S. Muehlbauer and David J. Ulbrich. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2017. 516 pages. \$74.95.

Matthew S. Muehlbauer and David J. Ulbrich have produced an admirable text built around Russell Weigley's framework in his now classic *American Way of War*.<sup>1</sup> The occasion for this review is the release of an updated, second edition of this work. As mentioned, the book clearly seems designed as a text, specifically for

an upper-level undergraduate course, but possibly for graduate-level seminars on American military history as well. Accordingly, this review assesses the book on the basis of that pedagogical design.

The authors' study is primarily narrative in nature, but never far from the flow of facts, figures, faces, and the occasional military fiasco hangs the authors' overarching thematic argument: there is no one American way of war, but rather many ways, determined by a complex interaction of factors and institutions. They have updated this aspect of the book in an expanded introduction to the second edition, but its fundamental claim remains unchanged (pp. 5–6). The student or professor wanting one-stop shopping for these ways of war will be rewarded here.

*Dr. John T. Kuehn is a professor of military history at the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College (CGSC). He retired from the U.S. Navy in 2004 at the rank of commander after twenty-three years of service as a naval flight officer. He has taught a variety of subjects at CGSC since 2000. He authored Agents of Innovation (Naval Institute Press, 2008), A Military History of Japan: From the Age of the Samurai to the 21st Century (Praeger, 2014), and Napoleonic Warfare: The Operational Art of the Great Campaigns (Praeger, 2015), and coauthored Eyewitness Pacific Theater (Sterling, 2008) with D. M. Giangreco. He was awarded a Moncado Prize from the Society for Military History in 2011. His latest book from the Naval Institute Press is America's First General Staff: A Short History of the Rise and Fall of the General Board of the Navy, 1900–1950 (2017).*

*Naval War College Review, Spring 2019, Vol. 72, No. 2*

The sheer scope of the text is impressive, yet it does not descend overmuch into the weeds of battles and military trivia, instead remaining focused on how conflict involving Americans, and not just European Americans, has evolved over the years. Nonetheless, the narrative does start—as advertised in the title—with the mass arrival of “modern” Europeans on the North American continent during the sixteenth century. However, that is preceded by cogent contextual discussions of native warfare prior to the arrival of the Europeans; the so-called military revolution in early modern Europe; and necessary discussions of tactics, technology, and logistics. In other words, the authors do a fine job of setting up the in-place “initial conditions” for the continuum of conflict that follows. This is good news for novices to these debates, since it gives them, up front, an understanding of the key definitions and concepts used throughout the text. Another welcome discussion is that covering the “levels of war.” All too often Americans, and readers and writers of military history specifically, are two-dimensional in their thinking about war as just tactics and strategy (pp. 4–5). The operational level of warfare and the higher level of policy beyond military strategy often are disregarded in instruction and writing on these matters beyond what one might find in esoteric discussions of military doctrine.

As for the narrative itself, in something of such broad scope the biases and preferences of the authors are almost inescapable. But they tend to succeed in achieving their aim of using the most updated scholarship to avoid perpetuating the tired myths and unchallenged legends that make up so much of what sometimes is called popular American military history. However, no one author, or two, can be expected to get it all completely correct, or agreeable, as if such a thing is even possible. The purpose of this review is not to catalog all those places where the authors’ narrative differs from the reviewer’s interpretation of things, especially causation. A larger understanding of history includes such arguments about the past, but the purpose of this study is more of an ongoing refinement rather than a final word.

However, one minor error that occurs in the last chapter is worth correction. The authors claim that the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 delineated as follows: “The chairman [of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, CJCS] . . . assumed a new position in the operational chain of command: Theater commanders reported to the chairman, who then reported to the president” (p. 468). Goldwater-Nichols does make the CJCS the “principal military adviser to the President, the National Security Council, and the Secretary of Defense,” but under §211 it states: “CHAIN OF COMMAND.—Unless otherwise directed by the President, the chain of command to a unified [i.e., regional or theater] or specified combatant command runs—(1) from the President to the *Secretary of*

*Defense*; and (2) from the Secretary of Defense to the commander of the combatant command" (emphasis added).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the CJCS is simply the principal military adviser, and civilian control over regional or global combatant commanders is absolute and does not include the chairman.

That quibble aside, many of the accounts listed here are refreshing in the new way in which they cast American conflict, in terms of both its political context, owing to foreign and domestic factors, and what has been called the "war and society" approach.

Finally, the later chapters in particular might be regarded as the starting point for future conversations about events still ongoing and will serve instructors and teachers well in engaging their students in debates about more-recent and familiar events. The second edition takes the book up to the most recent times of President Barack Obama's second term and, particularly, includes a heavy critical component of the (still ongoing) so-called Global War on Terror as well as a discussion of the impact of the neoconservative movement on the American way of war (pp. 478–79, 490–95). These are welcome additions and fit nicely into the overall construct of the book.

Historian N. A. M. Rodger recently wrote about Americans and history as follows: "Our problem is not that we know too little history to understand the present but that we know too much, and most of it is wrong."<sup>3</sup> Muehlbauer and Ulbrich's effort here goes a long way toward correcting that problem—if only more people would read it. Highly recommended for all audiences, not only college undergraduate and graduate students.

---

#### NOTES

1. See Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1973).
2. Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act of 1986, Pub. L. No. 99-433, §§201, 211, 100 Stat. 992, 1005, 1013 (1986).
3. N. A. M. Rodger, "The Hattendorf Prize Lecture: The Perils of History," *Naval War College Review* 66, no. 1 (Winter 2013), p. 8.