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The American Military: A Concise History

Marc Beaudreau

Joseph T. Glatthaar

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BOOK REVIEWS

BATTLE ON MANY FRONTS

The American Military: A Concise History, by Joseph T. Glatthaar. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2018. 152 pages. \$18.95.

Often, good things come in small packages. Joseph T. Glatthaar's *The American Military: A Concise History* is one of those works that might be overshadowed by the larger volumes on one's bookshelf. At a mere 127 pages of text, the reader sprints through American military history, hitting the highlights of familiar U.S. wars while absorbing the importance of lesser-known internal service battles and political skirmishes that served as the connective tissue among major conflicts. This study covers four successive phases of American military historical development: the rise and resourcing of the American citizen-soldier, the professionalization of the force, the transformative effects of technological achievement in warfare, and the struggle to recognize the limits of American military power.

Notably, the book serves as an excellent historical primer for American military development. It provides insight into why things are by explaining the way things were. Glatthaar argues convincingly that American militarism played a role from the very beginning, citing the first settlers' notion of collective security at Jamestown. Although

George Washington is often considered America's original citizen-soldier, the first settlers followed a philosophy of self-defense rooted in English traditions dating back to King Henry II (ca. 1181) that would serve as the core principle for centuries to come. Certainly the role militias played in the American Revolution is remembered favorably, but the citizen-soldier concept also served to ballast the threat to liberty from a standing army, paving the way for an American democracy nearly free of military influence. As the fledgling country grew, with trade and expansion to the west requiring protection, a permanent military appeared to be the solution.

The challenge of developing an American profession of arms arose with the standing army. Internal and external struggles shaped the development of a professional corps of commissioned and noncommissioned officers in the nineteenth century. By midcentury, the initial establishment of professional military education, the refinement of tactics, and a test case of sorts in the Mexican-American War generated a professional cadre of soldiers, sailors, and Marines.

Professionalism was limited to the small corps of permanent leadership, on the assumption that the United States could call on its population of citizen-soldiers when necessary (as proved the case in the ensuing Civil War). The post-Civil War era produced domestic laws defining the use of the military within U.S. borders (e.g., the Compromise of 1877, the Posse Comitatus Act of 1878), while further economic expansion demanded the growth of a viable Navy by 1900. The arrival of the twentieth century further bolstered professionalism at the highest political level with structural and doctrinal modifications strengthened by the establishment of a joint Army-Navy board for planning and coordination, an Army general staff, and the establishment of service war colleges for higher education of officers.

While professionalization was taking shape, the military generally continued “old world” ways of waging war. Glatthaar contends that the harsh effects of technological advancements of World War I drove wholesale organizational changes within the U.S. military, requiring the translation of professional military conduct into effective military practice. Moreover, the American tradition of fighting independently—not embedded with allied forces—began at this time owing to the U.S. desire to have a viable role in the postwar world order. Throughout postwar demobilization, America remained reliant on the citizen-soldier now turned National Guardsman; however, new technologies (e.g., armor, aircraft) demanded personnel specialization and retention, along with the creation of new military branches. These developments accelerated during the next world war, eventually yielding

the creation of the U.S. Air Force and new civil-military organizations to safeguard a new Cold War world order. If the lessons and policies arising out of World War II cemented the importance of the citizen-soldier concept, military professionalization, and the impact of technology on waging war, then the conflicts that followed would illustrate the limits of American military power.

The postwar U.S. geopolitical position required a permanent military-industrial complex to support it—with centralized planning at its core. Massive (to include nuclear) retaliation, total war, and mass mobilization eventually yielded to the concept of flexible response and then an all-volunteer force complete with family-support mechanisms. The post-Vietnam era brought further professional development and improvements in the conduct of joint operations and unified command structures with the passing of the Goldwater-Nichols Act in 1986. However, as the forces continued to mature and strengthen, limitations on military power can be seen not only in what the military could accomplish for national interests abroad in the new framework but also in how political interests could limit the use and application of military forces in conflicts within a larger context of international relations.

This is not an exhaustive volume of U.S. military history packed with endless detail. It is, however, a thoughtful overview that is relatively rich in explanation, reads like a well-written narrative, and offers an excellent—and compact—history of the development of the American military.

MARC BEAUDREAU