

2022

## Military Virtues

Edward Erwin

Michael Skerker

David Whetham

Don Carrick

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

---

### Recommended Citation

Erwin, Edward; Skerker, Michael; Whetham, David; and Carrick, Don (2022) "Military Virtues," *Naval War College Review*. Vol. 75: No. 3, Article 11.

Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol75/iss3/11>

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).

it, in part because it is not a compelling technology with an emotional component that will “command the imagination like aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines do” (p. 50). This lack hinders advocacy of the technology.

The third chapter’s study of torpedoes shows that the maturation of torpedo warfare was slow and sporadic. After the Russo-Japanese War there was debate regarding the future role of torpedoes, because of their negligible effects in that war, but by the eve of World War I the range, speed, and warhead weight of torpedoes had increased—with deadly consequences. The British, Germans, and Americans all faced difficulties with sea-launched torpedoes, and early in the war the Americans’ air-dropped torpedoes had a staggering failure rate. For U.S. torpedoes, a reliable magnetic exploder did not appear until 1943, but after that the results were impressive. The authors contend that, more than for any other technology, torpedo development “shows that the combination of the right platform and the right target transforms a technology of marginal application into one with war-winning potential” (pp. 77–78). They continue this argument in the sixth and seventh chapters, dealing respectively with the development of submarines and aircraft.

Chapters 4 and 5 (radio and radar, respectively) provide summaries that for this reviewer were the most informative and show the exponential effects of combining technologies in warfare. Both technologies are constructed to use the electromagnetic spectrum, but with different core purposes. For radio, it is communication; for radar, detection. The Italian navy began testing shore-to-ship radio in 1897, and the British navy did so in 1899. Radio systems that competed

with Marconi’s invention soon arose, with other navies favoring them. By the time of the Russo-Japanese War, radio’s naval utility had been proved, and the technology continued to improve. The interwar years saw the initial development of radar and its varied use by belligerent nations, and World War II saw its maturation as an effective naval weapon.

The final two chapters, dealing with submarines and airplanes, likely will cover ground more familiar to most readers, and the authors present very good overviews of these technologies as naval weapons. The concluding chapter provides a synthesis of the lessons learned from the six weapons studies.

The volume has numerous photographs and charts that enhance the study, as well as an extensive bibliography. Equally weighted chapters provide balance to the book and ensure it is readable to generalists yet informative and thought provoking for all; it is filled with historical examples, well written, and engaging.

TIMOTHY J. DEMY



*Military Virtues*, ed. Michael Skerker, David Whetham, and Don Carrick. Havant, U.K.: Howgate, 2019. 410 pages. \$39.99.

The opening line of *Military Virtues* captures the attention of the reader with the provocative teaser: “What does Aristotle have to teach a fighter pilot?” (p. xxv). In response to the question, editors Michael Skerker, David Whetham, and Don Carrick integrate articles by thirty-eight warfighters, professors, and chaplains into one book, combining both theory and practice into a cohesive exploration of moral virtues for the profession of arms. Each of the fourteen segments on

the warrior virtues provides an overview that surveys the philosophical dynamics of the virtue in question, then follows it with two case studies that consider the practical implications of that specific character trait in historical scenarios. *Military Virtues* investigates the ideals of classical philosophy without retreating into the ivory tower of academia, while at the same time it examines current practice from the ethical foxholes of modern and ancient battle spaces without reducing morality to something responsive to a simplistic manual on decision-making. Aristotle's system of virtue as the golden mean between the vices of excess and deficiency can shape the military frontiers of just war theory and a whole gamut of applied ethics, including the use of drones, interrogation techniques, professional military contractors, and artificial intelligence. From Homer's tales of Odysseus in the Trojan War to the account of Chief Warrant Officer Thompson's intervention at the My Lai massacre in the Vietnam War, the reader journeys with distinguished writers and warriors who invite serious reflection on one of the most compelling topics in military ethics: the role and nature of virtue.

However, virtue ethics, whether defended by Aristotle or contemporary proponents in *Military Virtues*, draws a number of criticisms. In particular, the emphasis on character seems to dodge the quandaries of right choices and plays into the argument of moral relativists, who claim that all norms are subjective preferences or social conventions. In championing a moderate moral objectivity and referring to Aristotle's formulation of *aretē* (virtue) and *eudaimonia* (human flourishing), Peter Olsthoorn maintains that most philosophers reject moral relativism for

various reasons. For example, Olsthoorn points out that virtually all would agree that it is intuitively self-evident that "kicking babies for fun is morally wrong" (p. 2), and this admission of a foundational moral value, along with others (prohibition of rape, murder, genocide, and so on), undermines the argument for moral relativism. Thus, moral relativism lacks credibility as a viable truth claim.

More germane to military operations, Olsthoorn considers the Afghan practice of *bacha bazi* (the sexual exploitation of boys by adult male soldiers). According to moral relativism, *bacha bazi* calls for cultural tolerance, and yet this practice repelled NATO servicemembers deployed to Afghanistan. Rather than accept *bacha bazi* as merely a difference of cultural values, Olsthoorn conducted empirical research and uncovered that *bacha bazi* actually was outlawed by the pre-2021 Afghanistan government and, according to one study, 80 percent of Afghans find the practice morally abhorrent. The external evidence of law and public opinion on *bacha bazi* calls into question the adequacy of moral relativism as a sweeping theory and undergirds a more general premise of basic rights common to all humanity. Skerker notes that the latter part of the twentieth century was marked by ongoing twin reiterations of just war theory and virtue ethics, but little was espoused in terms of military virtues. Thus, *Military Virtues* is an implicit attempt to bridge that "curious" gap with virtues in the armed services that support the enduring precepts of the just war tradition.

By the time the reader has completed this comprehensive study, he or she very well may agree with Skerker's conclusion: "Aristotle has much to teach fighter pilots

as well as SIGINT analysts, artillery gunners, submariners, ordnancemen, snipers, linguists, and logisticians” (p. xxvi). Undeniably, Aristotle does have much to teach both the military practitioner and the philosopher of political theory. But by the same token, if Aristotle—a master of methodological induction and a posteriori analysis—suddenly returned to life today, no doubt he would learn much, just as the present-day military strategist and tactician would, from the candid war experiences and the well-reasoned arguments of the astute thinkers in *Military Virtues*.

EDWARD ERWIN



*Restoring Thucydides: Testing Familiar Lessons and Deriving New Ones*, by Andrew R. Novo and Jay M. Parker. Amherst, NY: Cambria, 2020. 218 pages. \$39.99.

When I was trying to drum up enrollment for an elective on Thucydides at the Naval War College, one interested student told me that he was most inspired by Thucydides’s famous quote that “the nation that makes a distinction between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards and its fighting done by fools.” I did not have the heart to tell him that he had not only the quote wrong but the author too. Sadly, this is only one of many misconceptions that national-security professionals have about Thucydides and his work.

Andrew R. Novo and Jay M. Parker’s *Restoring Thucydides: Testing Familiar Lessons and Deriving New Ones* takes on many of these misconceptions to “push back against the oversimplification and decontextualization of Thucydides” (p. 3). In doing so, Novo and Parker appear

to be part of the response to Graham Allison’s 2017 *Destined for War: Can America and China Escape Thucydides’s Trap?* and his use of Thucydides as a crystal ball for future Sino-American relations. While the authors acknowledge their issues with Allison’s analysis, they take pains to point out that they are less interested in refuting Allison’s thesis and more interested in providing a corrective to some of the worst misunderstandings of Thucydides that followed Allison’s best seller. To that end, they draw on some of the major scholarship on Thucydides over the past twenty years from diverse perspectives such as literary criticism, translation mechanics, and international relations theory. In addition, they rely on multiple English translations of Thucydides and even throw in a little ancient Greek.

The authors first identify five “common threats” that lead readers to superficial conclusions: that fifth-century Greece was bipolar, that Thucydides blamed the international system for the war, that domestic politics are less important than state-on-state interactions, that Thucydides is the father of realism, and that the Peloponnesian War was a single unitary conflict between Athens and Sparta. In each chapter, they provide something like an annotated bibliography of relevant books and articles that support their reexamination of these misconceptions. In addition, they present accessible summaries of some of the most important episodes of the Peloponnesian War, such as the political maneuvering during the Peace of Nicias, the siege of Melos, the Sicilian expedition, and the fates of Athens and Sparta after the war ended in 404 BCE.

The book ends with seven lessons to take the place of the five threats identified