

The Decline of Mars:

Change and Its Effect on the Warrior Spirit

by Major Gregory A. Daddis

"I see many soldiers; could I but see as many warriors!"

- F.W. Nietzsche

In late January, 1944, as the Second World War was entering its fifth and most critical year, an ecstatic George S. Patton Jr. was notified of his selection to command the Third United States Army in the upcoming battle for France. While Patton had performed admirably at the head of the Seventh Army in Sicily, the notorious "slapping incidents" had led many to question his emotional stability and capacity for continued command. While not tagged to be included in the initial invasion forces of Normandy, Patton could at least find comfort in the fact that he still possessed a grand opportunity to fulfill his self-proclaimed destiny as one of history's great military commanders.

As the ex-cavalryman set about to form the Third Army into a unit capable of besting Hitler's legions on the European continent, he was dismayed at the fighting spirit of his men, who were soon to be grappling with experienced Wehrmacht troops. "He found everyone too complacent, 'willing to die but not anxious to kill'."¹

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Patton's emphasis on killing certainly shocked many a citizen-soldier who had never before been in battle. But the Third Army commander realized, both from personal experience and a passionate ardor for military history, that untested troops required hardening before their initial taste of combat. While Patton may have held an anachronistic view of what it meant to be a warrior, his focus never wavered from preparing men to succeed on the field of battle.

Recent trends suggest that Patton's concerns are still quite valid today in regard to developing warriors able to survive and win on the modern battlefield. At a time when societal, technological, and strategic changes are all exerting immense pressures on the very organizational structure and outlook of the United States Army, especially in the combat arms, perhaps it is fitting to re-evaluate how we develop a warrior class in our military. This article attempts to delineate how historical evolution has affected the development of a fighting spirit in our combat soldiers and, more importantly, the need to continue stressing the value of such a spirit in an era of turbulent change.

Societal Change

On the eve of the American Civil War, most professional soldiers and officers had relatively minor experience with combat. The war with Mexico (1846-48) was the baptism of fire for young captains and subalterns who would less than two decades later command armies, and there seemed little to alter their ideas of battle garnered from studying Napoleon's campaigns or Baron Antoine H. Jomini's analysis of the great battle captain. Ulysses S. Grant, suggesting the worth of the lessons learned in Mexico, would later note: "The Mexican army of that day was hardly an organization."³ Conversely, the Civil War changed almost all of the participants' views on armed conflict. Within two years, soldiers once patriotic and willing to sacrifice all for their cause, came to view war as nothing more than a destructive abnormality. The totality of the combat, where civilian life and property were no longer safeguarded,



The sheer brutality of the Civil War broke down traditional concepts of a warrior's courage. Rebel General Stonewall Jackson, scouting his own front after a great victory at Chancellorsville, died of wounds after being shot by his own men.

impacted all aspects of society, non-combatant and military alike.

One of the soldiers who would usher in such changes was William Tecumseh Sherman. His admonition that "War is cruelty, and you cannot refine it" took a nation by horrid surprise. Men like Sherman, Grant, and Philip H. Sheridan were among the few Union generals who advocated a relentless style of warfare in which the enemy was awarded no respite. But such a strategy could prove expensive. Grant's frontal assaults at Cold Harbor in June of 1864 cost the Federal Army over 7,000 dead and wounded in less than an hour. Though criticized by many for being an unimaginative butcher, the future President was able to see beyond

the casualty lists and remain focused on his goal of defeating Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. His dogged pursuit of victory would not be thwarted, for he felt that after any hard-fought battle, the side which "first renews the fight, is sure to win."⁴

Grant's perseverance, as noted, found censure in many quarters of the day. In large part, this was due to the change in how society defined a warrior's courage. Early in the war, soldiers in general, and officers in particular, were required to exhibit their fearlessness in battle to prove they were worthy of the uniform they wore. In fact, many "soldiers called combat the test of manhood.... A failure of courage in war was a failure in manhood."⁵ By 1863, this unquestioning ideal was being challenged as casualties ravaged units to mere skeletons of the original regiments that marched to war. When Grant became General in Chief of the Union Armies in 1864, society had altered its outlook on what it meant to be a warrior. Death, which had become so commonplace in homes throughout the Union and the Confederacy, had lost its gallant significance. There no longer seemed to be any honor in dying on the battlefield simply to display one's courage.

These societal changes — perhaps described plainly as war weariness — had a tremendous impact on what were considered acceptable losses on the battlefield. Eighty years after Cold Harbor, American military leadership defined courage in quite different terms than their Civil War ancestors. "For Dwight Eisenhower, perseverance became courage; heroism, he declared, was 'the uncomplaining acceptance of unendurable conditions'."⁶ The warrior spirit had changed dramatically in less than a century.

This is not to say that the soldiers of World War II were any less heroic than their ancestors in the Civil War. Anyone reading the exploits of the 1st Infantry Division on Omaha Beach or of the 101st at Bastogne will easily comprehend the hardships and terror experienced by those who fought. But by the middle of the 20th century, American society was not as willing to accept such losses as Grant had sustained in the Wilderness of Virginia in 1864. This acceptance, as John Keegan notes, has an unequivocal impact on a nation's armed forces. "For an army is, to resort to cliché, an expression of the society from which it issues. The pur-

poses for which it fights, and the way it does so, will therefore be determined in large measure by what a society wants from a war and how far it expects its army to go in dealing with the outcome."⁷

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There seems little argument that society's expectations of the soldier have changed dramatically since the days of Grant and Sherman. The basis of such change is far more debatable. Many would contend that technology, which has made war universally more destructive, has raised general fear regarding the application of force. More to the point of developing warriors, technology, in its course of improving our national quality of life and making our lives easier, has in the process made ours a less hardy society than that of our Civil War ancestors. Have we not become more "soft" as a nation? Still others would assert that, in our quest to create a more civilized society, we are less willing to use force to solve international impasses.

The Clausewitzian principle that war is an extension of politics is often challenged with the conviction that war is instead the bankruptcy of politics. In such light, it is better to define the military profession not as warfighters, but rather as peacekeepers.

American democracy has historically been uncomfortable with the existence and development of a warrior class. While today's military is one of the most trusted professions in the public's eye, martial endeavors have lived a tenuous existence inside the American way of life. And with society evolving, tolerance of human loss associated with

combat has decreased dramatically. Could the United States public watching the Gulf War on television ever have accepted the 7,000 dead that Grant's army suffered in a single day at Cold Harbor? The uproar would have been instantaneous and damning. It seems a societal paradox that we are willing to acquiesce to the ever-increasing violence in our daily lives (the present debate in entertainment and video games an example of this), yet we are far less inclined to condone any loss of human life associated with most any military operation.

Nor should we ever be complacent about loss of life, in training or in battle. The American public would never consent to, and rightly so, the casualty rate sustained in German Waffen SS training, which sometimes reached ten percent during World War II.⁸ But as professionals, we cannot afford to lose sight of our *raison d'être*. As historian Samuel P. Huntington aptly noted: "It must be remembered that the peculiar skill of the officer is the management of violence."⁹ Managing violence involves risk, and as such, we must ensure that we develop leaders and soldiers who can scrupulously assume risk in the pursuit of becoming better warriors.

Societal changes have historically affected how the military approaches its profession and the overall management of violence. It will no doubt continue to have such an impact in the future, for society itself is affected by technological innovations that in turn influence the military. There are many pundits, for instance, who blame the military failure in Vietnam on the vociferous anti-war sentiment exacerbated by the coming of age of television. They argue that the media was swayed by enemy propaganda that led to the erosion of American public support for the war effort.

Yet one historian believes that most reporters honestly portrayed what they saw in Southeast Asia. "Much of what they saw was horrible, for that is the true nature of war. It was this horror, not the reporting that so influenced the American people."¹⁰ Technology was making a certain impact on the way Americans viewed the battlefield.

Technological Change

"When you're well drilled and trained in your profession, you don't like something to come along that makes

you have to learn all over again, and the older you are in your profession, the more you resist change.”¹¹ So commented General Carl Spaatz, the first chief of staff of the Air Force, in his testimony at the Billy Mitchell court-martial trial in 1925. Mitchell’s scornful condemnation of the War and Navy Departments — charges of negligence, incompetence, and even treason — was spurred by two separate tragedies involving naval aviators. The technological advent of the airplane had thus necessitated a debate, a very public one thanks to Mitchell, on the establishment of a separate air force, the development of combat aircraft, and the role of air power in future wars. But senior army officials of the time strongly opposed Mitchell’s views and even intimated to younger officers like Spaatz and Henry H. “Hap” Arnold that testifying on the defendant’s behalf could seriously jeopardize their military careers.

Spaatz’s courage in testifying not only exemplified the importance of character in the development of a warrior spirit, but also illustrated the difficulties new technology imposes on the relatively conservative military mind. In their management of violence, professional officers are required to be proficient in the use and coordination of the most advanced weaponry. Yet throughout history those same professionals have been wary of, if not entirely resistant to, new technology. Take for instance the impact of the rifle on the Civil War generation of American officers.

Thanks to the transition from the smoothbore to the rifled musket, which essentially doubled the effective range of the infantryman’s basic arm, the Civil War included countless battles where the tactical defense was more than simply practical; it was essential to success. During the battle of Fredericksburg in December of 1862, Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia entrenched themselves along the Rappahannock River, with Lieutenant General James Longstreet’s First Corps positioning themselves along a sunken road and behind a stone wall on Marye’s Heights. Armed with rifles, it was an almost impregnable position. The 12,600 Union dead and wounded (the Confederates lost fewer than 5,400 casualties) reflected the fact that the battle was never in serious question. Longstreet himself noted that the “unending flame



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from the wall created ‘the most fearful carnage,’” while a Federal division commander exclaimed “that his ranks ‘melted like snow coming down on warm ground.’”¹² Yet costly frontal attacks, with officers bludgeoning their troops against well-prepared defensive works, continued throughout the course of the war.

Why did Civil War generals not appreciate the technological revolution of the rifle? Why did they continue to lose massive numbers of soldiers in headlong, sometimes reckless, assaults that now seemed to have offered little chance of success? While commanders in the Civil War had no precedents to guide them — the Crimean War (1854-1856) saw the first use of rifles, but not to the extent used a decade later — even with historical illustrations, military leaders have often failed to grasp the importance and potential of new technology. Generals in World War I took no heed of the lessons of the Civil War or of the Russo-Japanese War only ten years before, though the prominence of rifles, trenches and machine guns are only now too evident. Young officers in the interwar period, such as Patton and Dwight D. Eisenhower, realized at least the potential use of tanks in the next war, yet resistance to such ideas was widely prevalent. Eisenhower, commander of the wartime U.S. Tank Corps Training Center at Camp Colt, Pennsylvania, noted: “The future of the tank corps was uncertain. Many experienced officers thought tanks clumsy and slow, mechanically unreliable, expensive and tactically useless.

On several accounts they were right. On the last they were wrong.”¹³

Skill as a warrior on the modern battlefield is not guaranteed by appreciation for technology alone. A balance must be achieved in capably wielding the implements of war while also being able to train, motivate, and lead the human beings who will use those implements. Patton himself was fond of saying that wars may be fought with weapons, but they are won by soldiers. The Army appeared to garner such lessons coming out of the Second World War. Prior to the war, training often focused on small unit leadership in battle. “Combat confirmed the need for competent, inspirational leaders and showed that the outcome of engagements often hinged on the actions of a few influential leaders. Drawing from its leadership experiences in battle, the Army identified three essential qualities necessary for successful leadership: initiative, responsibility, and resourcefulness.”¹⁴

With World War II being such a pivotal experience in the first half of the 20th century, it would seem that such battlefield lessons would become a focal point for training warriors of the future. But the most frightening of all technological innovations, the atomic bomb, changed everything. For over a decade after its successful introduction, the bomb dominated military thought in the United States. As Lieutenant General James M. Gavin, wartime commander of the 82nd Airborne Division, noted: “To some extent, military thinking seemed to be paralyzed by the

bomb, and the lessons of World War II were ignored or quickly forgotten.... Little that we learned in World War II, it was said, would have meaningful application in the future.”¹⁵ A slight twenty years after the end of the Second World War, a renewed importance on small unit leadership would surface in Southeast Asia. To those who believed there would be no true role for the Army to play in the nuclear age, the war in Vietnam harshly proved otherwise.

The doctrinal debate between the end of World War II and the Vietnam War clearly illustrates the impact technology has on the development of a warrior class in our military. And while technology has been an important factor in America’s military dominance over the last quarter century, unfortunately its impact has not always been a positive one. With scientific advances creating a global interconnectivity unprecedented in the history of mankind, sophisticated technology has paradoxically caused a fragmentation in the officer corps. Specialization, an apparent outgrowth of technology and evidenced by the OPMS XXI career field designations for officers, has arguably done little to increase cohesion among professional warfighters.¹⁶ While mastering technical skills is an important aspect of soldiering, it should never be considered an end unto itself. Instead, the skilful warrior utilizes technology to his advantage as a means to improving proficiency in the management of violence.

Strategic Change

We are in the midst of a strategically amorphous time. There are those who would argue that the Army has lost its collective mission focus, perhaps its strategic vision, and emphasis is no longer placed on managing violence. Is our mission to fight and win our nation’s wars, or is it to keep the peace in trouble spots around the globe? Can we effectively do both as an organization without blunting the tip of the sword?

While changes in strategy have been a common thread running through the history of our nation’s armed forces, so too has been the American penchant for annihilating its adversaries on the battlefield. Since George Washington first clashed with the professional troops of 18th century Great Britain, Americans have invariably sought decisiveness on the battlefield through destruction of the enemy’s army. While the means

may not always have been available to execute such a strategy, there always loomed the preference for annihilation over attrition.

In his significant work, *On War*, Carl von Clausewitz defined strategy as “the use of engagements for the object of war” and in essence, strategy can be divided into two distinct forms — annihilation and attrition.¹⁷ Annihilation aims at using battlefield engagements in a decisive manner to quickly and effectively destroy an enemy’s armed forces, while attrition can be likened to a form of erosion where an opponent’s army is worn down through continuous assaults over an extended period of time. One of the central themes that runs throughout historian Russell F. Weigley’s books on the American military, for example, is that the prevailing strategic preference has always been first and foremost that of annihilation. From the conception of the nation’s first army, leaders have sought destruction of the enemy through climactic battle even when they had not the means to achieve such ambitions. While George Washington, who highly regarded the professional British army and sought to fashion his own force upon a similar model, employed a strategy of attrition throughout most of the Revolutionary War, his “was a generalship shaped by military poverty.”¹⁸ Weigley contends that Douglas MacArthur’s indirect, leapfrogging approach in the Pacific theater of World War II was also influenced by limited resources, while Eisenhower was no less troubled by continuous supply problems in the European theater. What appears is an officer corps that seemed continually frustrated by insufficient means to achieve the desired goal of complete destruction of an adversary’s army in battle.

Current frustration in the officer corps seems now focused less on materiel means than on overall purpose. And here is where study of the past is important, for as Patton was also fond of saying, war, as history, is cyclical. As an example, the 1928 Kellogg-Briand Pact, “by which nations renounced war as a means of policy” left the American military in a strategic dilemma.¹⁹ If the army’s purpose was to fight and win the nation’s wars, how would such an organization fit into national policy if war itself had been officially forsaken? Officer promotions slowed to a snail’s pace, training was listless and funding was a continual problem. In the inter-war pe-

riod, the United States Army fell into such disrepair that it actually ranked eighteenth in the world behind such countries as Spain, Sweden, and Portugal. Officers like J. Lawton “Fighting Joe” Collins spent 17 years as a lieutenant and grew so discouraged he pondered resignation. Luckily, George C. Marshall was then deputy commandant at Fort Benning and he “taught professionalism, inspired hard work, and encouraged the brilliant, promising officers to be patient.”²⁰

That core of officers committed to their profession would later lead the United States Army to victory in Europe and the Pacific. As improvements in motorization, weaponry, and communications prompted constant changes in tactics and even strategy, men like Eisenhower, Marshall and Bradley persevered through the transitions, sometimes even at the risk of their careers. As a young officer, Eisenhower was at odds with senior infantry officials on the proper utilization of the fledgling tank corps. Ike was called before the Chief of Infantry and threatened with possible court-martial. “I was told that my ideas were not only wrong but dangerous and that henceforth I would keep them to myself. Particularly, I was not to publish anything incompatible with solid infantry doctrine.”²¹ Even with this riposte, Eisenhower resolved to continue studying doctrinal and tactical problems that were not advocated by senior Army officials. It no doubt made him a better officer.

In this current time of strategic transition and uncertainty, it is well that warriors follow in the footsteps of Eisenhower and Patton. While societal and technological changes may drive strategic reformations, there remain certain universal principles and functions which are time-honored in war. There are those who see future conflict “emphasizing aerospace power or ships at sea to threaten precision strikes from long range, with small, stealthy unmanned vehicles to collect information and deliver firepower, and they will be controlled by distant leaders using virtual command technologies.”²² But even with these dramatic changes, military axioms of striking, protecting, moving, and supplying will still be essential to success. And to properly execute these functions, victory will still be dependent on competent, professional soldiers. Leadership is ageless. Its study is imperative.

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Change and the Warrior Spirit

Resistance to change, especially in the military, can be terribly damaging. Those conservative minds who discounted the importance of such weapons as the rifle, tank, or airplane most probably never led their soldiers in battle to their fullest potential. But total acquiescence to change is never the right answer either. In our current period of transformation, where the very definition of war may be in flux, we cannot lose sight of how we define warriors. Societal, technological, and strategic changes should not be grounds for suppressing the warrior spirit in our soldiers and leaders. The profession of arms “requires a balance between the three roles of heroic leader, military manager, and military technologist.”²³ An honorable and heroic leader is just as critical in a peacekeeping operation as he is in an attack against an entrenched enemy defense.

There is, of course, the difficulty in defining the true composition of an effective warrior. Some would argue toughness to be the preeminent characteristic, others courage, and still others competence. One historian has noted the problem of putting such a formula on paper. The masters of command, including Marshal de Saxe, Frederick the Great, and Napoleon, believed there existed something far less structured in defining a true warrior. “The great practitioners spoke of the *coup d’oeil* or sense (as we speak of baseball or football ‘sense’) that combined intuition and experience.”²⁴ While intuition may be an inherent trait, experience is gained through doing and reading. And here lies the key to maintaining the warrior spirit in times of change and uncertainty.

Field Marshal Erwin Rommel was noted for, among other things, his remark that the best form of warfare for one’s troops is tough, realistic training. As professionals we must remember that teaching warriorship is an integral part of our responsibilities — to ourselves and to our nation. There is a dif-

ference between teaching hate and teaching soldiers to defend themselves and their country. Patton may have been fond of stressing fighting and killing, but he tempered such pedagogy with an insistence on honor and discipline. Simply stated, warriors must be trained. If it cannot be done on the field of battle, whether real or simulated, it needs to be supplemented through the study of military history. In an era of change, maintaining the warrior spirit must remain a point of stability as we look towards an uncertain future.

Notes

¹Quoted in Martin Blumenson, *Patton: The Man Behind the Legend, 1885-1945* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1985), 220.

²*Ibid.*, 222.

³Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant* (New York: Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885; Everitt B. Long, ed. New York: DaCapo Press, 1982), 84.

⁴J.F.C. Fuller, *The Generalship of Ulysses S. Grant* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 284.

⁵Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: The Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1987), 8.

⁶*Ibid.*, 18. No further citation noted.

⁷John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Viking, 1987), 2.

⁸Lee Kennett, *G.I.: The American Soldier in World War II* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1987), 52.

⁹Samuel P. Huntington, *The Soldier and the State: The Theory and Politics of Civil-Military Relations* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1957), 13.

¹⁰Harry G. Summers, *On Strategy: A Critical Analysis of the Vietnam War* (Novato, California: Presidio Press, 1982), 39.

¹¹Quoted in Edgar F. Puryear Jr., *American Generalship, Character is Everything: The Art of Command* (Novato: Presidio Press, 2000), 32.

¹²Jeffrey D. Wert, *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy’s Most Controversial Soldier —*

A Biography (New York, London, et al: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 221.

¹³Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 156.

¹⁴Michael D. Doubler, *Closing with the Enemy: How GIs Fought the War in Europe, 1944-1945* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 22.

¹⁵James M. Gavin, *War and Peace in the Space Age* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1959), 97.

¹⁶For a detailed argument on technology’s impact on the professional soldier, see Martin Van Creveld, *Technology and War: From 2000 B.C. to the Present* (New York: The Free Press, 1989), 225, 231, 314.

¹⁷Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976), 146.

¹⁸Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1973), 3.

¹⁹Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York, London, et al: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 808-809.

²⁰Edgar F. Puryear Jr., *Nineteen Stars: A Study in Military Character and Leadership* (Novato: Presidio Press, 1971), 57.

²¹Eisenhower, *At Ease*, 173.

²²Wesley Clark, “How Will We Fight?” *Time*, 22 May 2000, 99.

²³Morris Janowitz, *The Professional Soldier: A Social and Political Portrait* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1960), 21.

²⁴Theodore Ropp, *War in the Modern World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1959), 35.

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