
By James Jay Carafano

Keith Payne is not like the rest of us. When the Cold War ended, most of the military stopped worrying about how war actually worked and why it ended in the fall of a wall rather than a mushroom cloud—but not Payne. A longtime professor at Georgetown and Missouri State Universities, adviser and consultant on arms control, and president of the National Institute for Public Policy, Payne never stopped thinking about the unthinkable. Now he has captured his decades of personal experience and research in The Great American Gamble: Deterrence Theory and Practice from the Cold War to the Twenty-First Century. Payne concludes that many of the common lessons drawn from the experience of the decades-long nuclear standoff between Moscow and Washington are wrong. Persistent belief in outmoded and wrongheaded theories for preventing proliferation and atomic conflict may have, in Payne’s words, “catastrophic consequences for U.S. society.”

The Great American Gamble is essential reading. For many who have taken a decades-long time-out in thinking about nuclear confrontation and ballistic missile threats, it is long past time to get their heads back into the game. For a younger generation of Americans concerned with military affairs, who know little of the Cold War debates that tossed around words like throw-weight, megatons, counterforce and counter-city, there is a lot of learning to do. All will find no better introduction to the topic than The Great American Gamble, a book that must be studied by anyone involved in national security.

Payne argues that there were two central schools of thought about how to deal with the threat of nuclear war between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both believed in deterrence—preventing nuclear war by convincing the other side that a nuclear war could not be won, thus deterring each from initiating nuclear war to begin with. One view was championed by Thomas Schelling, whom Payne cites as “the single most influential Western strategic theorist of the Cold War.” Schelling argued that it was “uncertainty,” the inability to determine when confrontation might escalate to nuclear conflict, that deterred the Soviets. The exposure of both sides to massive nuclear attack by the other, Schelling concluded, was actually a good thing—vulnerability made both sides more cautious. Schelling’s theories were eventually codified in American military doctrine as mutual assured destruction, or MAD.

Herman Kahn pioneered the second school. Kahn argued that MAD was little more than Russian roulette—mistakes or miscalculation could well lead to horrifying results. Kahn famously coined this concern as “thinking about the unthinkable,” and he did much to emphasize the catastrophic consequences of thermonuclear war through his work at the RAND Corporation and later as founder of the Hudson Institute. Kahn argued that rather than making America intentionally vulnerable to an enemy first strike, the United States needed to adopt a damage-limitation strategy, demonstrating that America could, as Payne writes, “survive the execution of its nuclear escalation threat.” Kahn concluded that building a credible capacity for defense would make the U.S. nuclear deterrent more credible. Schelling countered that defenses would be destabilizing, making the Soviets more, not less, aggressive. (The Soviet Union might attack out of fear that its weapons might one day be useless or build even more offensive weapons, putting the arms race in hyperdrive.)

Schelling won the argument; Kahn became a figure of ridicule. (The character Dr. Strangelove—who worked for the “Bland Corporation”—in Stanley Kubrick’s 1964 film was a send-up of Kahn. This is ironic: Kubrick’s film was intended to lampoon the MAD strategy, which was the brainchild of Schelling, not Kahn.)

The problem, Payne points out, is not so much who was really right during the Cold War—Schelling or Kahn—but that Schelling’s assumptions have been transported into the 21st century unexamined. Indeed, Payne concludes that most classical nuclear deterrence theory does not fit well for the world in which we live now. Virtually every facet of Cold War “common sense” may be wrong. Rogue states and non-state actors might not be deterred by the U.S. nuclear arsenal. Nascent nu-
clear nations, like North Korea, which might not understand the “rules” of Cold War-style deterrence, could blunder into nuclear war. Defenses against ballistic missiles are not only achievable, but desirable. In the world in which we live now, strategic defense might, just as Kahn predicted, make the U.S. nuclear deterrent more, not less, effective. In short, intentionally leaving the United States vulnerable to ballistic missile attack is no longer rational. Payne presses for a strategy that would protect and defend the United States against ballistic missiles and relegate MAD to the dustbin of history, along with the Soviet empire.

The military, which has not played a prominent role in nuclear strategy debates for a long time, should rejoin the discussion. The services have every reason to be interested in ballistic missile defenses, whether they are to ensure access to space and defend space-based assets, to provide fleet protection, to defeat regional threats or to protect the nation. Every branch of the armed forces has equity in the debate over the future of ballistic missile defense. The Great American Gamble offers some intriguing ideas for those interested in this vital subject.

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Varied Fare


In the annals of American military history, no cavalryman occupies a higher position than Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart, the preeminent horse soldier of the Confederacy. In the first full-scale biography of the enigmatic Stuart in two decades, Jeffry D. Wert integrates additional manuscript collections and biographies to present a balanced assessment of the Southern leader, whom one Northern adversary characterized as “the greatest cavalry officer ever foaled in America.”

Wert is no stranger to Civil War history. His previous books have included provocative interpretations of the Union Army of the Potomac, the Shenandoah Campaign of 1864, Mosby’s Rangers and the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg. Cavalryman of the Lost Cause now joins Wert’s acclaimed biographies of Gen. George Armstrong Custer and Gen. James Longstreet, perhaps the Confederacy’s most controversial soldier.

Wert’s Stuart is a true son of Virginia, a devoted family man, a deeply religious person and “an unbending believer in the justness of the Confederate cause.” Only 28 years old at the start of the war, Stuart became one of the South’s initial heroes after circumventing Union Gen. George B. McClellan’s Army of the Potomac in June 1862. He repeated the feat following the Battle of Antietam a few months later. Such raids provided limited strategic value, but they were valuable in that they inspired the Southern populace and enhanced Confederate nationalism. At Chancellorsville in May 1863, Stuart succeeded the fallen Stonewall Jackson and commanded Jackson’s corps with distinction for the remainder of the battle.

Despite his battlefield success, Stuart suffered his share of detractors. His peers in the Army of Northern Virginia often viewed him as an overly ambitious officer, ever craving promotion and public acclaim. Elevated to corps command following the reorganization of Lee’s army in the autumn of 1863, Stuart expected to be promoted to lieutenant general. He was gravely disappointed when Lee decided that the responsibility for commanding a cavalry corps did not equal that of an infantry corps.

Though he clearly admires Stuart, Wert provides a balanced assessment of his subject. Wert finds Stuart’s “efforts wanting” in the days preceding the Battle of Antietam. At Gettysburg a year later, Stuart acted injudiciously and “committed a critical misjudgment for which he was condemned at the time and since.” Without Stuart’s usual detailed intelligence of enemy dispositions, Lee stumbled into the war’s climactic battle without proper preparation. Justly or not, Stuart’s eight-day absence during the opening days of the campaign has framed modern interpretations of the Confederate cavalryman.

In the final analysis, Cavalryman of the Lost Cause is a welcome addition to our understanding of one of the most remarkable soldiers this country has ever produced. Wert succeeds in bringing the controversial Stuart to life, warts and all. In doing so, he joins a long list of Stuart admirers who view the South’s premier cavalry commander as an avid student of warfare, a firm disciplinarian and a realist who was far in advance of his contemporaries with respect to mounted operations.

—Col. Cole C. Kingseed, USA Ret.
As the subtitle suggests, *American Rifle: A Biography* by Alexander Rose traces the evolution of the rifle from the pre-Colonial period in American history to the present and beyond. The beyond is dealt with in the final chapter, entitled “The Rifle of the Future,” and the reader might be surprised by Rose’s insights.

One might expect charts, graphs and metrics filled with statistics on things such as muzzle velocity, caliber variances, rate of fire, grains of powder per cartridge and casualties. There is some of that—enough to keep the most technical-minded reader satisfied—but there is more than that, much more.

This is the story of the development of the rifle and its influence on American history. Perhaps a better description might be how American history influenced the development of the rifle. No matter how you phrase it, however, the rifle’s symbiotic relationship with the progress of the nation cannot be overstated. The histories of the rifle and America are intertwined to the extent that it is impossible to separate the two.

Rose introduces us to many of the key players along the way, the visionaries, entrepreneurs, bureaucrats and scoundrels and their triumphs and failures, fortunes won, fortunes lost. Visionaries and entrepreneurs include Samuel Colt, Oliver Winchester, Christian Sharps and countless others who were responsible for the improvements in the American rifle over the course of the last two-plus centuries.

All of this innovation has been in the seemingly unattainable quest to create the “perfect rifle”—unattainable because the definition of perfect seems consistently imprecise. Do we want our perfect rifle to be the most accurate weapon possible, or are we more concerned with a high rate of fire? Is it “one shot, one kill” or is it more “steel on the target”? And we cannot overlook the improvements in ammunition, innovations that led to smokeless powder, waterproof caps and increases in range, all of which necessitated changes in infantry tactics.

To the early Americans who lived off the land and to Infantry soldiers of every generation, the rifle was and is...
not just a tool of the trade, but an extension of their identity. To quote the Rifleman’s Creed: “My rifle is my best friend. … My rifle is human, even as I, because it is my life.” American Rifle: A Biography, well written and well researched, would be an important addition to the history buff’s collection. This book will be enjoyed by anyone interested in military and American history or readers simply looking for a good story—Rose whets the appetite and leaves the reader hungry for more.

—CSM Jimmie W. Spencer, USA Ret.

Briefly Noted...


U.S. Army Cadet Command historian Arthur T. Coumbe, along with Paul N. Kotakis and W. Anne Gammell, provide a detailed history of Cadet Command’s activities during the period 1996–2006, picking up where U.S. Army Cadet Command: The 10 Year History ended. The book provides information on how the commissioning program operates, focusing on the internal workings of the command.

The volume studies the recruiting and training of future officers, as well as how the command handled its numerous responsibilities.

Following a background chapter covering the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps’ (ROTC) heritage and development until 1996, the chapters continue chronologically, each covering a span of a few years. There is a chapter devoted entirely to Junior ROTC during the time frame, as well as a summary chapter. Forty-nine tables—in addition to charts, maps and color photographs—help tell the Cadet Command story. This is a must-read for anyone seeking comprehensive information about this important U.S. Army command. For a copy, contact Coumbe at arthur.coumbe@usacc.army.mil or 757-788-4608.

American Rifle: A Biography, well written and well researched, would be an important addition to the history buff’s collection. This book will be enjoyed by anyone interested in military and American history or readers simply looking for a good story—Rose whets the appetite and leaves the reader hungry for more.

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