Reviews

The Evolution of the U.S. Army


By BG Harold W. Nelson
U.S. Army retired

Everyone who cares about the Army needs to read this book, and not just because it is on the Chief of Staff of the Army’s (CSA) Professional Reading List. It provides a sound theoretical framework for thinking about transformational change in the Army, sets the broad context that shaped the post-Cold War transformation, describes the transformational efforts chronologically and thematically, and speculates on the way ahead. Whether tomorrow’s Army evolves from today’s or endeavors transformational change, John Sloan Brown’s insights will help light the way.

ARMY readers have become familiar with BG John Sloan Brown, U.S. Army retired, through his fine “Historically Speaking” articles. He was already a mature Army leader and a Ph.D. historian when the Army transition began, and he was an essential player in many of the situations he describes. His first-hand familiarity with the people, processes, organizations and sources gives his work an immediacy and power seldom encountered in official history, and his analytical strength gives it a level of objectivity seldom encountered in a history of recent events.

The thesis is stated several times: “From 1989 through 2005 the Army transformation was a centrally directed and institutionally driven attempt to achieve a revolution in military affairs relevant to ground warfare that exploited Information Age technology, adapted to post-Cold War strategic circumstances, and integrated into parallel Joint and Department of Defense efforts.”

This transformation—like others that had come before—“represented adaptation to new strategic circumstances, socioeconomic change, and technological advances,” much like those others required by Army leaders who could “decide on a way ahead, wrap up debate, and market the transformation inside the Army and out.”

The organization chosen for the first five historical chapters reflects the vital role of the leader. Generals Vuono, Sullivan, Reimer, Shinseki and Schoomaker each get a chapter. Only the last half of GEN Vuono’s tenure as CSA is addressed because that is when the external forces triggering transformation coalesced, and only the first half of GEN Schoomaker’s term is included because the pace, intensity and breadth of Army warfighting operations rolled transformation initiatives into deploying brigades and terminated many theoretical debates on organizational, technological and doctrinal questions. “[F]ocus had understandably shifted to reinforcing capabilities most relevant to success in Afghanistan, Iraq, and the Global War on Terrorism as it evolved.”

Coverage of the entire period, 1989–2005, is important because, as Brown notes, “Some now characterize the events of 2001 as the pivot point that launched the Army in new directions. As we shall see, the pivot point was actually 1989, and the Army since 2001 has been following through and capitalizing on changes that started because of the end of the Cold War.”

In Brown’s view the Cold War Army was designed to evolve continuously and thoughtfully, but incrementally. GEN Vuono sensed that a different approach would be needed and directed staff efforts that forced a choice between the traditional mobilization model of the 20th century and a high-readiness deployable Army in which the entire force would look more like the old XVIII Airborne Corps. He chose the latter, setting the foundation for GEN Sullivan’s mantra, “What we keep we keep trained and ready,” during the downsizing that began in 1991.

Brown recognizes the importance of GEN Sullivan’s modern Louisiana Maneuvers in helping leaders at every level in the Army appreciate the attraction of long-term change while linking theory to practice in an environment characterized by lots of good ideas, very little money and an uncertain future. This top-down positive attitude toward change linked to improved warfighting ability set the foundation for GEN Reimer’s Force XXI and Army After Next. Excellent summaries of the Army of 1995 (the end of Sullivan’s tour as CSA) and 1999 (the end of Reimer’s) give snapshots of the progress made during this critical period, showing how growth and change had been fostered in spite of downsizing and ongoing contingency operations.

GEN Shinseki recognized that Army deployments were receiving all of the attention and the Army was getting no credit for its transformation efforts. He set out to communicate an Army
message and introduced Army Transformation with a capital T. He laid out the concept of a legacy force, interim force and objective force, and introduced a pervasive graphic to illustrate this idea. Brown details how Shinseki then set about building the interim force with what began as a Stryker Brigade at what was then Fort Lewis, Wash., noting, “Doctrine and a vision of the future force preceded the actual hardware with which it was to be equipped.”

The rapid progress with actual force development at Fort Lewis is contrasted with the rocky relationships in the Pentagon that came with Donald Rumsfeld’s confirmation as Secretary of Defense. Brown asserts that Secretary Rumsfeld and his Director of Net Assessment, Andrew Marshall, saw transformation as “less of a program than an ideology: speed, flexibility, precision, ‘leap-ahead’ technology, and space-based assets. Ideologies are not necessarily right or wrong, but they are believed rather than proven.”

Given all the analysis and testing that enlightened each step from theory to practice in Army Transformation, some conflict was inevitable. Brown notes that there had been tremendous Army leadership continuity from GEN Vuono through GEN Shinseki and that Secretary Rumsfeld deliberately aimed to disrupt that continuity when he chose GEN Peter Schoomaker to come out of retirement to become Chief of Staff in 2003.

He reminds us that the real change was to an Army at war, forcing a shift in the balance between current and future requirements. “The change in slides was far more dramatic than changes in funding or programs.”

After carrying us through the dramatic shift that was imposed by the big “boots on the ground” requirements in Iraq, Brown then provides several thematic chapters covering the entire period under review. “Army Force Structure, 1989–2005” describes the debate over echelons of command, force mix and structure of capabilities. It is an excellent summary and a handy reference for those who think current arrangements are expedient, tailored to current warfighting requirements and subject to radical revision. We have never had an Army coming out of a war that did not inspire such beliefs.

Chapter 8, “The Army Family and Army Family Support, 1989–2005,” tells the story of increased institutional awareness of the importance of the Army family and outlines some of the implications for families inherent in a continental U.S.-based deployable Army that is brigade-based and unit-manned.

Chapter 9, “The ‘Transformed’ Army in Action,” addresses several pertinent questions to test whether the Army has been transformed: Can it deploy more quickly and effectively? Can it still fight war at the high end of the spectrum of conflict? Can it adapt to the requirements of unconventional warfare? Did investments for the high-intensity battlefield pay off at the low end? Was sustainability enhanced? Most answers are positive, and Brown characterizes the results as the “80 percent solution” that military realists often must accept.

Chapter 10 offers concluding thoughts. This is far more than an executive summary, especially for today’s reader who knows that sharp reductions in supplements with a declining defense budget will pose significant challenges for our Army. Will the digitized expeditionary Army mature or transform? Will a brigade-based, unit-manned Army have the flexibility and staying power that it may be called upon to demonstrate in future conflicts? Brown addresses these questions, noting that the Army needs to be “conceptually ready for all the contingencies it can foresee.” He looks back over this period of change and asks whether the Army could conduct a centrally directed and institutionally driven transformation in the future. He sees the value of getting out in front on staff work, stacking the Quadrennial Defense Review and similar defense-wide deliberations with “top drawer” talent, ensuring consensus inside the Army while negotiating outside it, and sustaining the support of key outsiders.

Brown acknowledges the value of
AUSA on those last two points. If you have never been to an Annual Meeting, check out pages 194–196 to see how an Army Chief of Staff uses an Eisenhower luncheon, and note the importance of the Institute of Land Warfare (ILW) as a clearinghouse for Army-oriented publications and arguments. Kevlar Legions made its debut in an ILW session at the 2011 Annual Meeting. Everyone should be talking about it when we meet in 2012 and for years to come.

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A History of Deaths in Land Warfare


By LTC Michael Burke
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As the United States finishes with one war and begins withdrawing from a second, it may or may not be a good time to publish a historical survey of how men die in battle. Given the relatively small number of people who have been directly affected by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, however, perhaps we need reminding of just how intimately war and death are bound together. Michael Stephenson, former editor of the Military Book Club and student of battles across history, offers an encyclopedic synthesis of the deaths of others from the prehistoric to the most-contemporary battlefield. His focus is solely on death in land combat, which, while limiting in some ways, lets him concentrate where most combat deaths occur. He also relies only on the written experiences of others—soldiers, historians, memoirists, commentators—because, like almost all Americans, he has no direct war experience of his own.

Many other writers have offered readers similar surveys over the years, with John Keegan’s The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme and Victor Davis Hanson’s Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power, coming to mind. Both are also the works of scholars without direct combat experience. Stephenson quotes both books and includes the well-known memoirs of Lord Moran (The Anatomy of Courage), Guy Sajer (The Forgotten Soldier) and many other figures from across the history of land warfare. Being necessarily derivative, then, why bother with it?

The answer lies in Stephenson’s ability to synthesize his many sources into a coherent narrative, one that avoids two pitfalls: the extreme particularity of individual experience and the sweeping generalizations of distant historians. He uses diary entries, memoirs, summaries of historical events, and long and short views of human conflict and experience to create a coherent whole that meets his one overriding concern: expressing the utter misery associated with death on the battlefield. He robs it of glory, showing readers without embellishment exactly what happens when men fight wars: They die in large numbers and small, killed by weapons used close up or from far away. Sometimes they see their killers; most often they do not. Some die quickly, others slowly. A few are killed by—in the words of that most grotesque of euphemisms—“friendly fire.”

The chapters grow longer and more detailed as the written experiences of soldiers grow from reliance on hard-to-verify Greek and Roman historians to the explicit, detailed analyses written during and about 19th- and 20th-century wars. In his chapter on World War II, Stephenson points out who is reliable and who is not, criticizing S.L.A. Marshall and Stephen E. Ambrose for sloppy work. He prefers the memoirs and diaries of the veterans themselves, men like E.B. Sledge, William Manchester and even Paul Fussell.

Stephenson makes connections across time, pointing out similarities between infantrymen and artillerists of all times, paratroopers and medieval knights, and the like. He points out, too, that different classes of soldiers in armies sometimes have divergent interests: Medieval pikemen, for example, would kill enemy knights to loot the corpses, while knights preferred to take their opponents alive in order to ransom them back to their families.

As part of this discussion, he devotes a great deal of space to changes in weapons technology and their impact on the business of killing. His chapter on prehistoric warfare is the first cogent discussion I have read of how the atlatl, a kind of launching tool for a short spear, revolutionized Stone Age warfare by adding some distance between target and shooter. It nicely sets up his discussions of bows and arrows, crossbows, swords, lances, gunpowder and other kinds of transformative technology on the battlefield. We learn, for example, that the English longbow was superior to the crossbow for some kinds of battles but not others, that ar-
A Vietnamese Perspective


By COL Gregory Fontenot
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Although the American war in Vietnam ended nearly 40 years ago, what happened there remains shrouded in myth generated by such deep-seated ideological biases that what really happened is, as yet, unknown. Not only is it difficult to get beyond “revealed truth” delivered like religious liturgy, but American scholarship is also oblivious to how the people who lived in Vietnam—or anyone who lived in the region, for that matter—might view the several different wars fought on that unfortunate peninsula. Practically since the boomer generation discovered placards, the United States has been absorbed with the idea that the war in Vietnam was about America.

It was not about America or the Students for a Democratic Society or the civil rights movement or the various skeins of Occidentalism now prevalent in American scholarship. The war—or, more accurately, the wars—in Vietnam stemmed from historical events prominently featuring Chinese, Japanese and French imperial ventures coupled with competing political philosophies imported from Europe. Nguyen Cong Luan’s Nationalist in the Viet Nam Wars: Memoirs of a Victim Turned Soldier is a first-rate contribution to correcting the record. Readers who approach Luan with their hackles well down will find a new and refreshing view of what happened in Vietnam from the end of World War II through 1975. The author’s work is refreshing because there is far too little published in the United States about Vietnam from the perspective of the Vietnamese. Gaining this perspective is of enormous value not only to soldiers but frankly to the average American as well. Revising or altering revealed truths about Vietnam could reduce the American propensity to erroneously compare Vietnam to almost everything that has happened since. The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not like those in Vietnam.

Born in the north in 1937, Luan saw the wars in Vietnam as a child, a serving soldier, a political prisoner, and finally a man with enough time on his hands to consider more fully the implications of his experience and that of his country. His account is both riveting and thoughtful, drawing insights with surprising objectivity given his personal history.

Luan begins his narrative by recounting, in compelling detail, a harrowing experience he had at the hands of French Colonial African troops. Early one morning in the summer of 1951, African troops serving in the French colonial army, in search of Viet Minh guerrillas, swept the village where he
was visiting his grandmother. These troops, or any French troops really, “could do almost anything [they] wanted to a Vietnamese civilian without fear of being tried in a court or punished by [their] superiors.” That morning Luan barely survived an encounter with an enraged French colonial thanks to the intervention of a sergeant who stopped the attempted murder after Luan’s nemesis had already fired and missed him.

As good a book as this is, the first few chapters are disorienting. Luan’s style is fast-paced in describing events in a complex environment extending from before World War II. There are surreal moments, such as when he describes the Japanese occupation. Curiously, when the Japanese took over from the Vichy in March 1945, little changed in terms of what life was like under the French before the war and the Vichy French during the war. The French, the Japanese and the Chinese all played competing roles before, during and after the war. Thus from the author’s viewpoint, change was the only constant in his life—that and bloody civil war.

Fundamentally, Luan describes the path that he chose among the two main trails available to Vietnamese: nationalism and communism. He chose nationalism, opposing the French from the perspective of independence. To that end he and others of his stripe occasionally collaborated with their communist countrymen but seemed always to be at a disadvantage ideologically. For Luan and those who thought as he did, a Vietnamese society should be based generally on democratic principles not unlike those the French enjoyed. The nationalists shared no particular ideology; not so the communists.

The bulk of the narrative takes Luan from his days as a cadet in the army of the Republic of Vietnam through his incarceration by the North Vietnamese from 1975 to 1982. He does well telling the story of the various Vietnam wars as he saw them. Although he had only reached the rank of major by the time the T-54s drove onto the presidential compound in 1975, he held important posts in the defense establishment. He served as director of the largest directorate in the Chieu Hoi Ministry, where communists who came back to the fold were processed and reintegrated into society. At the very end, he also served as chief of research in the General Political Warfare Department within what amounted to the South Vietnamese joint staff.

In April 1975, as South Vietnam collapsed, Luan chose to return home from Fort Benning, Ga., after becoming a distinguished graduate of the Infantry Officer Advanced Course. Less than a month later, the short difficult life of the republic in the south ended. Not quite three months later, he went off for more than seven years of “reeducation.”

This is a poignant history of the several wars involving the Vietnamese against the French, against each other and with and/or against the Americans. Luan will please few
who accept the point of view of the various protagonists. He is thoughtfully critical of the Americans, the French, his own government, his enemies and himself. What emerges is a man of genuine integrity who richly deserves to have his story read. This is a first-rate book with perhaps a single downside: It is not a book for someone who has never read anything about Vietnam. It is, however, an essential read for those who seek to understand the complex tragedy of the wars of Vietnam.

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### Evolution of an Institution


By LTC Frederick H. Black Jr.

The United States Military Academy is a national treasure that holds a special place in the hearts of many graduates and non-graduates alike. Hundreds of books examine West Point from any number of angles or aspects. Lance Betros has added to that list with Carved from Granite: West Point Since 1902, but in a very different way than most previous works. This is not a coffee table book, and it is not a book cheerleading for West Point. It is an in-depth thematic study and a well-researched history with more than 100 pages of endnotes. Most important, Betros uses historical analysis to recommend changes necessary for West Point if it is to maintain its prestigious position. In doing so, he frankly addresses a full range of historical and contemporary issues, and he does not gloss over the rough spots. His thesis is that despite common beliefs to the contrary, change, not continuity, best characterizes West Point since 1902.

Each of the first seven chapters focuses on a specific theme: governance, admissions, academics, military training, physical program, leader development and character building. Each chapter follows a similar format, starting with the status of the situation as it existed in 1902 and then tracing changes to the present. Occasional redundancies may seem distracting, but they actually work well by increasing emphasis on certain topics.

The examination of governance boils down to the struggle between the academic board, composed of long-serving academic department heads (including Betros, chair of the history department), superintendents and a rotating general officer. This conflict ebbed and flowed until 1977, after both the Borman Commission and the West Point Study Group recommended a stronger role for the superintendent and making the academic board advisory. Betros advocates for a more cooperative role between the academic board and the superintendent as the only way to succeed. Some discussion of the requirement for superintendents to retire from the Army after a five-year term would have added significantly to the analysis. While intended to remove the pressure of bucking for promotion or future assignment from the decision-making process, this move may have also degraded the relevance of superintendents within the larger Army.

Over the years, admission to the academy shifted from a patently political system in 1902 to the whole candidate approach used today. Betros critiques the current policies of admitting underqualified athletes and underrepresented minority groups. Despite strong empirical evidence, the analysis lacks a stronger explanation of the distinction between “fully qualified” and “best qualified.” For example, a class composed of the 1,200 best-qualified applicants would lack more than just minorities and athletes. It would also lack a national character because such a system would skew towards admitting more cadets from larger and better-quality school systems. The present system ensures the desired national representation.

A graduate of just 40 years ago would not recognize the vastly different academic program that current cadets experience. Similarities exist, but the overall structure of the program and choices left to the cadets in terms of academic majors and electives make a much stronger program, tailored to cadets’ interests and aptitudes. Some of these changes originated with the academic board, while others came from either superintendents or other outside influences for a variety of reasons. Betros proves, beyond a shadow of doubt, that the changes have had an overwhelmingly positive effect.

Athletics and physical education are concepts closely associated with the overall West Point experience. Betros levels his strongest criticisms at the direction in which the Academy has moved over the last several decades in intercollegiate athletics, espe-
cially the resources and the concessions made in the admissions and academic processes. Despite the strong factual evidence to support the argument, however, it lacks some necessary context. At several other points in the text, Betros justifies decisions or changes because they followed the trends of most other U.S. colleges and universities. The growing influence of athletics on college campuses easily fits that mold, but it never enters the discussion. In addition, while Betros mentions the influence of alumni and donors to the athletic program, he never addresses the huge institutional influence of the Association of Graduates, the fundraising apparatus.

Military training at the Academy has proven surprisingly controversial over the years. The struggle hinges on the purpose of pre-commissioning military training and how much of it to conduct during the academic year versus the summer months. Any addition to the schedule generally requires a corresponding deletion, again pitting various segments of the academy governance against one another. Regardless of opinion on how to solve the problem, current cadets clearly receive a significant amount of training over 47 months and far more than four-year ROTC scholarship cadets.

The leader development and character development pillars of the framework also show significant differences of opinion, both across different eras and among academics and non-academics. Early 20th-century cadets gained leadership experience largely by osmosis, with limited practical experiences in their senior year. The same held true for character development. The Academy employed an attritional model in which those found lacking in these aspects were typically separated from the Academy at the earliest opportunity. The current developmental model provides practical experiences more distributed across the entire time at West Point, along with opportunities to correct deficiencies instead of separation.

On the whole, Betros has produced an excellent work of scholarly research and analysis. Anyone involved in post-secondary education will benefit from this book, with West Point serving as the case study. Leaders of military colleges will benefit even more as the unique challenges of operating a college within a military environment receive excellent coverage. Lance Betros has also provided an excellent opportunity for anyone who professes a love for West Point to learn far more about the Academy than he or she probably ever thought possible.

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