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# After the Trenches: The Transformation of U.S. Army Doctrine, 1918-1939

Cole C. Kingseed

William O. Odom

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Odom, William O. *After the Trenches: The Transformation of U.S. Army Doctrine, 1918–1939*. College Station: Texas A&M Press, 1999. 296pp. \$44.95

How well an army prepares for war largely determines the military effectiveness of that force in future conflict. In *After the Trenches*, military historian William Odom examines the transformation of U.S. Army doctrine during the interwar period. He concludes that the Army's primary combat doctrine, the *Field Service Regulations* (or *FSR*) did not adequately adapt to the changing technological and tactical dynamics of the modern battlefield. The result was that American soldiers paid with their blood for the U.S. Army's failure to develop an integrated modernization process to address weapons, organizations, and doctrine following World War I.

In his quest to enhance understanding of the Army's mission, organization, and operational concepts, Odom, an active-duty Army officer, admirably succeeds. His book is divided into two components, based on the 1923 and 1939 publications of the *FSR*. Prior to World War II, the Army published field regulations in lieu of a separate manual for "doctrine," which Odom defines as the "fundamental principles by which military forces guide their actions in support of national objectives." The average life span for

Army doctrinal manuals is less than five years, but Odom notes that the frequency of changes underlines both the transient nature of doctrine and the Army's belief that doctrinal evolution is of paramount importance.

According to Odom, the Army performed well in efforts to modernize doctrine when aided by the experience of recent war. The 1923 *FSR* sought to apply the lessons of World War I to the postwar army's mission and capabilities.

Successfully integrating the lessons from "the war to end all wars," the manual correctly assessed current technological capabilities, and it suited the Army mission defined in the National Defense Act of 1920. So effective were the 1923 regulations that they remained in force for sixteen years, a period that roughly paralleled the longest period of peace in the twentieth century.

Lacking adequate financial resources, however, the Army had a difficult time fulfilling its routine missions, let alone modernizing doctrine. As a result, the 1939 *FSR* failed to recapitulate the recent technological changes and did not develop a viable doctrine following the preceding period of extended peace. What money the service did acquire was used to fund manpower. Moreover, the nation itself turned from preparedness to isolationism. Finally, the U.S. Army

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developed neither an effective mechanism for material procurement nor a tightly run, well coordinated doctrine-development process.

Had the Army fought World War II based on *FSR* 1939, it surely would have squandered American lives. To the credit of officers like Army Chief of Staff George C. Marshall, Army Ground Forces commander Lesley McNair, and a small group of innovative thinkers, the War Department took immense strides toward the development of a viable fighting force based on their observation of German military successes in Poland and France. The resulting *FSR*, published in 1941, took into consideration operational accounts of European battles and American large-scale maneuvers. Though not perfect, *FSR* 1941 significantly increased the emphasis on air and armored operations.

Odom's analysis mirrors the history of the U.S. Army during the interwar period and offers a chilling reminder that today's Army must overcome challenges similar to those it faced in the decades of the 1920s and 1930s. To remain a viable force for the twenty-first century, Odom advises, the Army must avoid the mistakes of the past and procure enough equipment for experimentation, as well as develop a system that collects, analyzes, and disseminates foreign intelligence. Most

importantly, however, the Army must establish an organization dedicated to monitoring and accommodating change.

In the final analysis, Odom has produced a superb analysis for current planners. Using military history as a forum to promote modernization, Odom offers the Army two choices: pay in cash today to remain on the cutting edge of military development, or pay in blood later, on a yet-unknown field of battle.

COLE C. KINGSEED  
Colonel, U.S. Army

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Keegan, John. *The First World War*.  
New York: Knopf, 1999. 475pp.  
\$35

"The First World War was a tragic and unnecessary conflict." With those sad words, John Keegan opens his history of that war to end all wars, from which came such grief. Much has been written on the origins, conduct, and consequences of the First World War, some of it quite splendid. Keegan's *The First World War* is a distinguished addition to the genre.

John Keegan was for many years a senior lecturer in military history at the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst, and later a visiting fellow at Princeton University. Starting with his now classic *The Face of Battle* (1977), Keegan has