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PROFESSIONAL READING

Troops, Technology, and Thought: The Intellectual Factor in War

David R. Mets

- Nye, Roger H. *The Challenge of Command: Reading for Military Excellence*. Wayne, N.J.: Avery, 1986. 187pp. \$9.95
- Parrish, Thomas. *The ULTRA Americans: The U.S. Role in Breaking the Nazi Codes*. New York: Stein and Day, 1986. 338pp. \$19.95
- Smith, Perry M. *Taking Charge: A Practical Guide for Leaders*. Washington: National Defense Univ. Press, 1986. 270pp. \$7
- Sherry, Michael S. *The Rise of American Air Power: The Creation of Armageddon*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale, 1987. 480pp. \$29.95

In the simplest terms, military power is made up of three factors: manpower, materiel, and the notions that meld those two into coherent force. Since the budget deficit and international politics portend less manpower and fewer weapons, the only way we can hope to sustain the military pillar of our national security is through improvement of the knowledge and ideas that constitute its intellectual element. Here we examine four recent books that may help.

No matter how “scientific” the problem-solving process, some intuitive judgments are required. Private eyes have hunches; scientists have hypotheses; military planners state assumptions. Experience can best improve the odds that the judgments will be correct; but some, like George Patton and Dwight Eisenhower, believed that one can also improve them with a lifelong professional reading program. This is especially so for the military professional where the costs of a mistake are much higher than for a private eye and where experimental wars are not practical.

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When an officer pins on his stars, it is too late. A worthwhile reading program has to start in the early years. But *what* is the ensign or lieutenant to read? Colonel Roger Nye provides one answer: *The Challenge of Command*. Nye is admirably qualified for the work. A combat tank commander himself, he earned a Ph.D. from Columbia and spent many years as a professor at West Point pondering the problems of officer education. He has produced a kind of “companion” volume for a solid professional reading program in terms appropriate to army officers but equally useful to other services. *Challenge* is organized into topical chapters: command, tactics, strategy, moral leadership, and the officer as a teacher—among others. They define Nye’s perception of what the modern commander should be. Each contains a list of the best books in that field, and the last, a chapter on teaching, specifies the two books on each list that should be read first. Colonel Nye explores the main ideas the junior officer ought to seek in each area and provides short checklists that would serve equally well as study guides or as vehicles for discussion. Also, it is hard to imagine a book that can better help senior officers fill their roles as teachers. *The Challenge of Command* should become a classic. Buy it.

One’s professional reading program is aimed at gathering general knowledge of the profession in preparation for war. Once the battle starts, effective officers must possess the knowledge to deal with the problems at hand—current knowledge from the intelligence community. This intelligence and other information on the current situation is processed and meshed with the set of beliefs generated in peacetime to produce a strategy. The startling success of the World War II Allies in breaking the Wehrmacht’s most secret codes was revealed only in the 1970s, and since then we have had a spate of books on the subject. No officer should remain unacquainted with the history of this feat. A new volume has just been added, *The ULTRA Americans*, by Thomas Parrish, a prolific author on military subjects. However, Parrish seems to be writing a nostalgia piece aimed mainly at the American participants in the ULTRA effort. He relies too heavily and uncritically on their memoirs and interviews. For the professional officer, the book is somewhat lacking, and one would be better served by using some of the earlier ULTRA works by Ronald Lewin, Anthony Cave Brown, Peter Calvocorressi, or F.W. Winterbotham.

Books on leadership have a tendency to be so general as to be useless or so specialized as to have too limited an application. In *Taking Charge* we have a practical book that is almost as useful as *Challenge of Command*. It, too, was written by a West Pointer with a Ph.D. from Columbia, Major General Perry McCoy Smith, now retired from the U.S. Air Force. In the course of his career, he was a jet pilot, held positions of command, and was a professor at the Air Force Academy. *Taking Charge* was written while he was Commandant of the National War College.

General Smith's book contains many ideas, but, regretfully, it has a goodly number of unhelpful truisms. However, there is enough in it that is practical and new to earn it a place on your reading list. Clearly, he prefers the persuasive over the coercive model of leadership, although he knows that stern measures are sometimes required. His book is organized into problem-oriented chapters and includes some checklists as aids. Such lists certainly cannot be rotely applied, but they can generate questions and new ideas. Like Nye, Smith includes a chapter on the leader as a teacher and is equally committed to a life-long professional reading program. He appends some interesting case studies on leadership that are common enough to make them worthwhile reading.

One of the most provocative books in recent memory is Michael S. Sherry's *The Rise of American Air Power*. It is an intellectual-cultural-psychological history of the American mind-sets that led to the "fire storms" in Germany and Japan in 1944 and 1945. One is tempted to classify it with the "revisionist" works of the 1960s that suggest President Truman condemned the citizens of Hiroshima mainly to strengthen his diplomatic hand for postwar dealings with Stalin. But in doing so, one would be guilty of branding the work as that of a young professor on the make—determined to win a name more with the shock value of his ideas than with the depth of his research. Sherry's book is not like that. He has done his homework. He has thoroughly mined the archives, and he carefully qualifies his notions. He is not nearly so arrogant as many of his "revisionist" forerunners. His purpose for analyzing the psychology which motivated the U.S. strategic bombing campaigns of World War II is to preclude the occurrence of a nuclear winter by creating an understanding of how an attack can become uncontrollable (as he says it did in 1944 and 1945) and by nuclear disarmament.

American Air Power makes this reviewer uncomfortable—probably because of four events that occurred in 1945. Michael Sherry was born, Tokyo was burned, Hiroshima was "nuked," and I entered my senior year in high school and became prime meat for the next year's draft. I have been through many of the same sources he used and can vouch for both the accuracy and the depth of his research. Yet, Sherry's book was a great eye-opener for me. I have never seen a better example of how widely divergent interpretations can emerge from essentially the same data.

Sherry starts with the assumption that the burning of Tokyo and the destruction of Hiroshima were bad. Fearful of wading ashore on Honshū in 1946, I believed and continue to believe that the burning of Tokyo and the destruction of Hiroshima, though regrettable, did more good than harm. He also seems to assume that there was someone in the American command structure who had the capability of understanding and controlling events, but who failed to do so. I believe that Clausewitz, World War I, World War II, and Vietnam illustrate that war builds a momentum of its own that is beyond

90 Naval War College Review

the control of any individual or group of individuals on any one side. Too, it seems to me that Sherry's book, like Charles Beard's revisionist *President Roosevelt and the Coming of the War*, misses that point because of its narrow focus. It thus takes the U.S. bombing out of the context of the Japanese 21 Demands of World War I, the conquest of Shantung, the invasion of Manchuria, the Rape of Nanking (where more died than at Hiroshima), and the attack on Pearl Harbor—all of which were well beyond the control of Curtis E. LeMay and even Henry H. Arnold. Too, it misses the point that *since then* few of the residents of Tokyo or Dresden have been promoting an invasion of Manchuria or Poland.

Do not misunderstand. I believe that Sherry's book should be read. His main idea that the United States became a captive of its strategic bombing strategy has risen from many sources. It led to undue brutality. It was often ineffective—and certainly less effective than has been acknowledged. He argues, too, that the U.S. commitment to strategic bombing was driven in part by "racism." In great part, it arose from our "technological fanaticism" and from Henry Arnold's pursuit of a separate air force—almost to the point of placing that goal ahead of winning the war. Sherry is concerned that his book will be resented. He is right, many will resent it; nonetheless, it should be read.

American Air Power should be read precisely because the winning side seldom learns anything from a war. Much of its literature is self-congratulation, few "new" lessons are learned, and there is no point in changing a winning lineup. The sparse critical literature that does emerge tends to arise from the knowledge that scandal sells well, but much of it is neither well-researched nor soundly argued. However, Sherry's revisionism is neither noisy nor shallow. It should be taken seriously as there is much to be learned from it.

With this said, had I written the book, I would not have dwelt on the idea of American racism, which takes the story out of its context, for it ignores the more virulent racism in Japan, Germany, Eastern Europe, and elsewhere. Preference could have been given to the word "nationalism." Also, what seems to Sherry to be "technological fanaticism" strikes me as being common sense. The American preference for spending dollars rather than bodies is well-known. It arises from the very foundations of our individualistic culture and constitutes one of the fundamental values distinguishing our society from those of Japan and Germany. "Technological fascination," yes! But "fanaticism," no!

Finally, I think that Sherry's research and much of his writing could just as well have been used to support the notion that since wars are uncontrollable, one ought not start them. He could just as well have supported the argument for a stout nuclear capability for future Hiroshimas and Dresdens, precisely to prevent them from becoming realities. Neither the Japanese nor the Germans have ever been more pacifistic. This point is clearly understood by both Washington and Moscow—where a cautious nuclear policy also has been followed since that time.