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Taking Stock

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TAKING STOCK

In my frantic rush to catch up on the eight years of American history that I missed, I am often appalled by the studied, analytic approach to warfare taken by so many of the educated, well-intentioned individuals who directed our war in Vietnam. If my understanding of their reasoning is to remain lacking, so much the better. For he who supports the position that warfare and warriors are just other things to which the rational concepts of business and economics apply is missing the mark. Lewis Sorley reviews *Crisis in Command* in the Professional Reading section of this *Review* and I think his opening assessment of the book is accurate: the book is flawed. Gabriel and Savage's little volume has been condemned by many as an exaggerated indictment of American performance in Vietnam; many say it is hung on a questionable historic framework, and almost all its readers agree that its suggested reforms are reminiscent of the Dark Ages. Though acknowledging all of that, Sorley again hits the nail on the head when he adds: to dismiss this book for the above reasons, however, is to ignore the tremendous power of the authors' central thesis. That thesis is that American victory was impossible because our traditional fighting man's gladiatorial ethic had been programmed out of style and supplanted by an entrepreneurial ethic whose tools were

based on the rational corporate model, systems analysis and util. This new fad assumed that management and leadership were synonymous. Natural outgrowths of that concept were officers' ticket punching, organizational "efficiency" at the expense of honor, and ultimately a breakdown of small fighting unit cohesion, spirit and integrity.

Wars cannot be fought the same way bureaucrats haggle over apportionments. The toll of human life in battle does not lend itself to cost/benefit analysis. One's plan of action on the international chess board cannot be built on compromise businesslike decisions among factions. To design a country's strategy along a middle course for bureaucratic reasons is to aim at what Winston Churchill has called the bull's eye of disaster. That our country was steady on course for that bull's eye of disaster, even before I was shot down in September 1965, is evident from a reading of Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp's recent book *Strategy for Defeat*. By that time, the bureaucracy was already sending him, CINCPAC, waffled directives (consensus documents with "all factions inside the paper") that were not consistent with the stated military objectives of that same bureaucracy. The managerial authors of the war policy spoke self-assuredly in the language of war but their mind set continued to be that of faddish entrepreneurial gamblers; by the time

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they realized that the enemy was ignoring their finesses, it had long been clear to those in the field that these game-men had no belly for a fight. With forces already committed, there was no place to go but down.

The style, ethics and language of business are peculiar to that vocation. So too does war have its own style, ethics and language. Adapting the business approach to the military profession has serious shortcomings; too many in uniform caught the habit of asking, "What's in it for me?" This type of self-centered careerism may be *de rigueur* on Wall Street but is the antithesis of service in the military. War is a unique human enterprise that cannot be managed on the margin. Clausewitz wrote: "War is a special profession, however general its relation may be and even if all the male population of a country capable of bearing arms were able to practice it, war would still continue to be different and separate from any other activity which occupies the life of man." Contrast this with a paragraph from a study done in 1974 entitled *U.S. Tactical Air Power*: "Waging war is no different in principle from any other resource transformation process and should be just as eligible for the improvements in proficiency that have accrued elsewhere from technological substitution." This is simply not true. There are men who in battle can realize proficiency that would be labeled "impossible" by any systems analyst, men who can make 2+2=5 time after time on the basis of their personal courage, leadership, strength, loyalty and comradeship. When the chips are down, and you're facing real uncertainty instead of that on a projected Profit and Loss sheet, you need something more than rationalist stuffing. The first step is to acknowledge that fighting men resent being manipulated by carrot and stick enticements; they find no solace in being part of some systematic resource transformation process when

they're told to go in harm's way. In short, you can't program men to their deaths; they have to be led, and, as *Crisis in Command* points out, high risks and high casualty rates for senior officers are common elements of victory.

Thus, though I take issue with some of the assertions in *Crisis in Command*, I think it carries a strong message for leadership. Whether we're driving ships around the ocean or navigating a desk ashore, all of us in the military should continually contemplate that "different and separate activity which occupies the life of man." As we follow the peacetime horde down the prescribed track, let us not adopt the false sense of security that combat philosophies will be issued by "the system" when the need arises. The twists and turns of the fortunes of war have a way of throwing military men into new decision making territory where all previous bets are off and no philosophic survival kits are available. Have you thought it through? When the whistle blows, are you ready to step out of your business suit with both the philosophy and the belly for a fight?



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P.S. The growing rate of submission of professionally written articles and the prospect of receipt of more War College student papers of publishable quality prompts the immediate increase in our printing frequency from quarterly to bi-monthly. Look for your next *Review* in May.



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