A Book Review

By JAMES JAY CARAFANO

The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth
Edited by Jeffrey Grey
Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 2003
177 pp. $69.95
[ISBN: 0–313–31083–1]

The aim of *The Last Word? Essays on Official History in the United States and British Commonwealth* is to illustrate how a variety of Western militaries addressed the challenge of writing official histories of battles and campaigns. But the book delivers more than it promises, offering a glimpse into the subtle cultural factors that influence how nations address the art of war and illuminating the shortfalls of institutions that rely too heavily on themselves for understanding their own nature. With contributions from a solid team of international historians, the first of the book's two parts consists of four essays on official history writing in Canada, South Africa, New Zealand, and Australia. Five essays on various aspects of World War II historiography comprise the second half.

Since all the militaries under consideration grew out of the traditions and language of the British way of war, an expected common theme in how each engaged in preparing its official histories is notably and surprisingly absent. Most striking are the distinctions between the Commonwealth and American approaches to the art of writing about war. Truly, these were military historians divided by a common language.

The Commonwealth militaries have always maintained an air of the amateur's superiority. Deeply rooted in the British civil-military tradition that remained skeptical of standing armies, British military professionals were expected, like Cincinnatus, to return to the plow after winning the war. Professionalism was akin to fox hunting, something every well-bred man should be able to do. The Commonwealth armed forces seemed to have inherited this attitude, albeit in a more egalitarian form, and their attempts at official military history appear to have followed suit. History projects were ad hoc affairs, championed by those who had a particular interest, and produced for a variety of idiosyncratic reasons that may have had little to do with professional military education or the pursuit of academic excellence.

In contrast, the U.S. Army's green book series, its official histories of World War II, also reflected the Nation's approach to war, but it reads altogether unlike the Commonwealth writings. In one of the best essays in the book, Edward Drea, a former branch head at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, describes the genesis of one of the most substantial and comprehensive military history projects ever attempted, a work on an industrial scale, with volumes dedicated to every major campaign in the global war as well as additional treatises on various functional areas such as medical care and ordnance operations. Authorized in 1946, the project was so massive that the last volume, *The Medical Department: Medical Service in The War Against Japan*, by Mary Ellen Condon-Rall and Albert E. Cowdrey, was not published until 1998.

Also, unlike the Commonwealth histories, U.S. military history had a clearly utilitarian purpose. Official accounts were primarily intended as professional military education tools, both to pass on the honors and traditions of the service and to act as platforms for critical thinking about the conduct of war.

Where American and Commonwealth efforts share common ground is that, like all histories, they must be understood within the context of when they were written. Even official historians do not have perfect knowledge, nor are they free of bias, either their own or someone else's. Politics often played a role. General Robert Eichelberger, for example,

frequently complained to Washington that General Douglas MacArthur was suppressing the publication of the green book on the Buna campaign to diminish Eichelberger's place in history. Indeed, Drea reveals that one of MacArthur's generals tried to derail work on the official history of the Southwest Pacific Theater while he peddled his own commercial, hagiographic version of MacArthur's war.

Curiously, official historians shared their academic brethrens' frustration in obtaining access to records. Historians working on the European campaigns during World War II, for example, were barred from looking at War Department holdings. As a result, many of their judgments on how theater operations fit into the overall strategic intent of the Pentagon are suspect.

While *The Last Word?* provides a worthwhile collection of readable and informative essays on the state of official historical writing over the course of the 20th century, missing is an overall assessment of the current state of the craft or projections for the future.

Jeffrey Grey's conclusion that "official histories are best understood as the first word, not the final one" (p. xi), is simply no longer correct. The age when we relied on combat historians for history's first draft and a solid and dependable backbone of chronology, names, and places for others to build on, is over. Today, journalists and academics can crank out reasonably well-written histories long before official historians can have their efforts blessed for publication. The recent war in Afghanistan is a case in point. There are

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half a dozen volumes on the subject but not yet an official history.

Finally, official historians have much to explain regarding their role as educators of future military leaders. Many of the essays presented in *The Last Word?* detail efforts to reach for objectivity and scholarly excellence. Still, it is worth asking if institutional histories can provide the critical introspection and analysis needed to move the profession forward. Militaries tend to call for the histories they want rather than the histories they deserve. There is no need to look further than the current occupation operations in Iraq. Planners and leaders have little history to turn to for guidance. While the U.S. military churned out dozens of combat histories on the battles of World War II, the official histories on the occupation period are few and far between.

There are examples of official history being used to transform a military rather than simply document the past. The post–World War I studies commissioned by German General Hans von Seeckt, which helped launch a revolution in combined arms warfare, are probably the best example of this type. Such moments are the exception and are rarely seen today. Official military history has much to do to recapture its stature as the authoritative word on the past. **JFQ**

A Book Review

By JOHN HILLEN

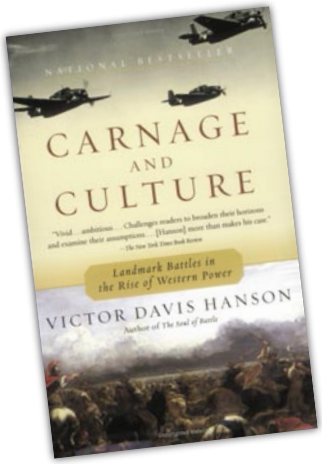
Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power
by Victor Davis Hanson
New York: Anchor Books, 2001
544 pp. $29.95
[ISBN: 0–3857–2038–6]

Although for many observers 9/11 brought the return of history to a globalizing world, it is still unfashionable in polite society to admit—à la Samuel Huntington—that civilizations exist and are fairly clearly demarcated not only by their history but also by unique cultural traits. It is even more déclassé to suggest that those distinctive characteristics might give one civilization an advantage of one sort or another over others. While few observers deny that the West has seemed to have the upper hand in military struggles over the past few hundred years or more, it is far more acceptable in saloon society to chalk up the phenomenon to environmental caprice, as Jared Diamond did in his popular *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, or to the mercantile and militaristic ambitions of a civilization gone greedy.

Classical historian Victor Davis Hanson does not buy the prevailing thinking. In *Carnage and Culture*, he offers fundamental and systematic reasons why history has unfolded as it has, particularly military history. His thesis is that the undeniable Western advantage in warfare itself, particularly on the battlefield, stems directly from the cultural traits of Western societies. Conversely, the cultural traits of non-Western societies gave way to ritualistic and tribal forms of warfare that were regularly bested by Western militaries.

Victory has causes, Hanson tells us, and they are not always the ones that crop up in after-action reviews, such as terrain, command, planning, local tactics, and weaponry. Instead, such factors as political freedom, the quest for decisiveness, a sense of civic duty, rationalism and science, capitalist economics, technological enthusiasm, discipline combined with individual initiative, and a tradition of critique and self-correction have not only made Western societies into what they are today, both good and bad, but they also provide the foundation of understanding the enduring Western military advantage in battle.

While allowing for anomalies, Hanson maintains that the whole of military history basically supports his thesis. To illustrate his points most vividly—and



he is a vivid writer and historian—he chooses one West versus non-West battle (to include a few Western defeats) to highlight advantages derived from each cultural trait.

The Athenian naval victory over the Persians at Salamis in 480 BC shows the moral advantage that free men have over slaves. Alexander the Great's breaking of Darius III's large Persian and Greek force at Gaugamela in 331 BC evinces the advantages of a Western tradition of decisiveness rather than ritual maneuvering. The annihilation of the Romans by Hannibal's army at Cannae in 216 BC and Rome's subsequent recovery to drive him from Italy and win the war with Carthage demonstrate the ability of a civic republic to rally its citizenry to strategic victory even after a calamitous defeat.

The Frankish victory over the Moors at Poitiers in 732 AD exemplifies the power of the yeoman tradition in Western warfare—lower class landed infantry soldiers and their shock formations whose operations were based not on brave individual warriors, a proud non-Western tradition, but on a team of exchangeable cogs in a machine. Cortez's campaign in Mexico in 1520–1521 and culminating victory over the mighty Aztecs at Tenochtitlan point up the advantages of Western rationalism and technology when put together. The Venetian crushing of the Turkish fleet at Lepanto in 1571 highlights the military benefits capitalist societies have over command-directed economic traditions.

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The 1879 British defense of Rourke's Drift against the Zulus after the annihilation of the British force at Isandhlwana shows the advantage of the soldier over the warrior. Nimitz's tide-turning triumph at Midway in 1942 illustrates the value of a society that prizes individual initiative. Finally, and perhaps most controversially, the U.S. operational victory/political defeat in the Tet Offensive of 1968 is an example of the self-correcting mechanisms of societies not afraid to criticize themselves and improve.

Hanson's battle chapters are rich and entertaining. Even so, the problem with this battle-per-cultural-trait method is that military history is so rich and diverse that it offers a series of actions or battles to prove almost any thesis on warfare. Hanson is primed to take on this argument and spends considerable time in a preemptive defense to convince the reader that such engagements as Thermopylae, Kabul, the Little Big Horn, Isandhlwana, Khartoum, and Dien Bien Phu do not disprove his thesis. His general tactic is a debater's best friend—positing the impossible to imagine the opposite case. After all, "England was in India, India not in England," and a handful of Zulus could never be imagined "butchering thousands of rifle-carrying redcoats."

Moreover, where many non-Western forces were successful, Hanson contends that it was because they borrowed Western tactics and weapons. "In all such debate [scholars] must keep in mind that non-European forces did not with any frequency and for long duration navigate the globe, borrowed rather than imparted military technology, did not colonize three new continents, and usually fought Europeans at home rather than in Europe." For those keeping score and bent on citing notable non-Western victories, Hanson maintains that his essential points still stand on the record: the dynamism of the West has generally made for superior forces and that dynamism sprang from political and cultural values unique to the Western tradition. Moreover, there has been no attempt by Western forces to incorporate non-Western traditions or cultural values to improve battlefield effectiveness, while the reverse has often been true. After all, as Hanson tells us, "Alexander did not hire the [Persian] Immortals, the British did not outfit regiments with assegais, and the American Navy did not institute samurai sword training."

Hanson's broad and provocative thesis is largely supported by his analysis of selected engagements (themselves subject to endless reinterpretation), but the more interesting issue is whether his choices are indicative of a more universal theme that provides the single best explanation for Western dominance. This is a complex question. First, there is the matter of what the *West* is and what it is not. Hanson is squarely in the Adlerian intellectual tradition in assuming that the West is defined by a relatively linear cultural tradition evolving from Greece to Rome to Europe and at last to the United States. David Gress, author of *From Plato to NATO: The Idea of the West and Its Critics*, has challenged this traditional interpretation effectively, or at least expanded on the idea of a pure cultural link from Socrates through to Milton Friedman. But questions remain. For instance, what traditions do the Russians/Soviets represent? This is not addressed. In fact, much could be learned from West-on-West conflicts, but Hanson's only point there is that such clashes have always been a bloodbath due to the military effectiveness of both sides.

Second, who represents "everyone else," and why can't these societies reach

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a point where they can challenge the dominant characteristics of Western societies? This brings to the strategist's mind the question of whether these cultural traits represent truly sustainable, competitive advantages on the battlefield—advantages that are valuable, unique, hard to copy, and decisive. Hanson leaves no doubt that these qualities are valuable. He also makes a persuasive case that they are unique. It is less certain whether they are difficult or costly to imitate—and the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese in particular have effectively demonstrated that on occasion. Finally, we know that these traits, while giving great advantage to Western militaries, are not always decisive.

Most important, there are the questions of whether these advantages even matter. The invasion of Iraq would certainly prove Hanson's point about Western military superiority when the enemy stands and fights, but the non-Western way of war has been employed since the initial victory and with some tactical success for America's adversaries. If these cultural traits manifest themselves as advantages only on the battlefield, then a Westerner hopes that he doesn't run short of fights and adversaries willing to accommodate him. Finally, there is the question of where political and cultural qualities actually make the West more vulnerable. For instance, do the standards of individual freedom, openness, and transparency make homeland defense harder? Do the traditions of civic society and clear separation between combatants and noncombatants hamper the West's effectiveness in counterinsurgency campaigns?

The questions remain to be answered. But Hanson's provocative thesis is more right than wrong and marks a valuable contribution to a hotly debated subject. Whether one buys his entire premise, Hanson's enduring contribution is to reintroduce the power of culture to the debate about military effectiveness. For too long it has been out of fashion to speak of cultural influences and differences—systems of belief, patterns of behavior, and values. Instead, intellectuals swarmed to cultural relativists (Aren't we all really the same? It's just our greedy leaders who are different) and geographic determinists such as Jared Diamond, who offered explanations about Western military superiority that had the comforting feel of an apology.

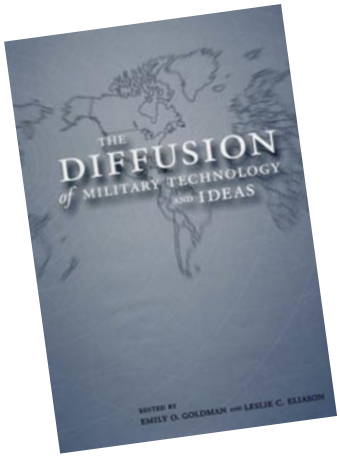
Ironically, Hanson's controversial thesis is fairer to the non-Westerner than to Diamond or others. Unlike them, he is by no means an implicit racist. He makes much of the fact that intelligence and bravery are shared the world over and by every culture in equal measure. But some cultural groups evolved different societal traits concerning the way they would order their economic and political affairs. The traits of the West allowed it to develop a matchless military power that accounts for the advantages it has enjoyed on the battlefield and in campaigns. **JFQ**

A Book Review

By JAN M. VAN TOL

The Diffusion of Military Technology and Ideas
Edited by Emily O. Goldman and Leslie C. Eliason
Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2003
415 pp. $75.00
[ISBN: 0–8047–4535–8]

This book comprises historical case studies on the diffusion of military technologies and ideas, framed by a concise introductory section laying out the key issues and how to think about them and a cogent final chapter drawing thoughtful hypotheses from the cases. The case studies were prepared for workshops sponsored by the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD) addressing the international consequences should the United States



realize the dramatic increase in military effectiveness the Gulf War suggested.

Advances in information technology (IT) are having revolutionary impacts on a wide range of human activities. Perhaps the closest recent historical analog was the upheaval that ensued from widespread diffusion of small engines and motors in the first decades of the last century. Societies, cultures, militaries, economies, and the structure of international relations changed in ways that could not have been foreseen. The impact of today's information advances is similar in scale for the same reason: IT has become ubiquitous in virtually every facet of life. For defense strategists, the key question is how to think about the possible military consequences.

The diffusion of U.S. military technology is a multifaceted problem. Most of the current debate on the ostensible IT-driven revolution in military affairs (RMA) is focused on what the United States can or should do to transform its forces. The debate, however, is taking place without reference to what other actors will do in response to U.S. transformation. Yet it is virtually inevitable that new technologies and ideas with military applications will diffuse to other state and nonstate actors. As the Director of OSD Net Assessment notes in his preface, this diffusion "raises issues that U.S. policymakers will have to address in developing a strategy to guide our actions in the RMA that is currently unfolding." The editors note that:

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our study takes up the question of how others are likely to respond to U.S. innovations and how this will affect America's position. The answer depends on whether and how others assimilate and exploit innovations. Anticipating the diffusion trajectories likely to accompany military innovation and transformation, and developing strategic responses, are core aspects of the RMA challenge.

As various Third World nations have found, diffusion of technology and ideas is not merely a matter of purchasing new technologies, thereby achieving instant improved performance. The contributors to this volume distinguish between two facets of technologies and innovations: hardware (the physical manifestations of the technologies) and software (ideas, organization, doctrine, or social change). Many observers focus wrongly on the more obvious hardware facet. Merely acquiring the hardware in an effort to emulate other militaries is rarely sufficient to improve capability. Indeed, "a key finding of this analysis is that for military diffusion, the spread of ideas, or software, has throughout time been the crucial dimension that accounts for military effectiveness." Yet, "software generally does not travel as well as hardware [since] military innovation and diffusion are shaped by societal, cultural, institutional, organizational, bureaucratic, individual, doctrinal, and historical forces." The case studies illustrate these points.

The first set of cases addresses the way "local culture shapes and redirects even the most assiduous attempts at emulation." These include the highly successful 18th-century introduction of the British regimental system into South Asia, the less than effective adoption of Soviet doctrine and organizational forms by Egypt, Syria, and Iraq, and the successes due to cultural affinity between

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The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Toward an Equitable and Durable Solution

Aaron David Miller, President of Seeds of Peace, argues that there is an equitable and durable solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. But such a solution can only be achieved through the long and imperfect process of negotiation. Sadly, Israelis, Palestinians, and Arabs in general still see the struggle as an existential conflict over physical security and political identity. U.S. diplomacy must recognize that ending the conflict is a generational proposition.

U.S.-Australia Alliance Relations: An Australian View

Paul Dibb, professor emeritus at The Australian National University, discusses how Australia will remain a committed U.S. ally for the foreseeable future. Though Canberra and Washington have common views on many issues, Australia faces considerable challenges in its own neighborhood, which have first priority. Maintaining a strong relationship will be contingent upon Washington's success in convincing the Australian public that U.S. policies are both necessary and legitimate and that Australia's contributions to mutual security are not taken for granted.

Sustaining U.S.–European Global Security Cooperation

Stephen J. Flanagan, director of the Institute for National Strategic Studies at the National Defense University, explains how sustaining effective transatlantic security cooperation over the next decade will require narrowing remaining European-American differences over threat perceptions, strategy, and military priorities. In fact, Washington will remain reluctant to treat Europe as a full partner until it demonstrates a willingness to enhance lagging defense capabilities.

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the United States and its Anglo allies that underpins their sharing of military expertise.

The next cases examine "whether and to what extent it is possible to shape, direct, and manage the diffusion process." Tracing cause and effect turns out to be difficult. One case explores how the Soviets consciously tried to restructure the military organizations of the Warsaw Pact states by controlling the diffusion of technology. Strikingly, the Soviet motivation for the type and quantity of technology to supply to each ally was driven less by the international security of the alliance than by the need to safeguard and legitimize the communist regimes in those states, something not understood in the West until well after 1989. Another case examines the diffusion of nuclear weapons. This is a less satisfying case in that, given that the imperatives for acquiring nuclear weapons or constraining their proliferation are so unique, it is difficult to generalize from such special weapons to technological diffusion more generally. A third case addresses differences between diffusion from "core" (major or technologically advanced) states to the "periphery" and vice versa.

A third set of cases examines how diffusion of ideas and technology has resulted in large-scale military transformations. Cases include the Napoleonic and Prussian revolutions, which "consisted of military innovations embedded within broader social and economic transformations"; the varying Allied responses to combined arms armored warfare in World War II; and the differing paths to carrier aviation taken by the British, U.S., and Japanese navies, as well as those considered by Germany and Italy.

The final set of cases addresses diffusion in the information age. Information technology is not merely the means by which military effectiveness may be greatly increased in coming years; it simultaneously facilitates the rapid diffusion of ideas about warfare generally, which may be as important. The easy access to inexpensive advanced IT may in itself lower the barriers to entry to acquisition of lethal capabilities; as a result, smaller powers and nonstate actors may have access to destructive capacity formerly the province of only major powers. On the other end of the scale, diffusion of IT systems and ideas to growing powers such as China could affect military balances globally, perhaps much more rapidly than has happened historically. It thus is not clear that aggressive U.S. exploitation of an information RMA, reacted to by a host of actors, will leave the Nation in a better position over the long term. Accordingly, these diffusion issues are among the most complex and vital that policymakers face in planning forces and capabilities.

Editors Goldman and Eliason are professors at the University of California at Davis and the Monterey Institute of International Studies, respectively. The case study contributors come from a wide range of military and civilian academic institutions. Mixed groups of academics and military professionals attended the various OSD workshops for which these cases were prepared. **JFQ**

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