

The American Military: A Concise History

Stanley J. Adamiak

University of Central Oklahoma, sadamiak@uco.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Adamiak, Stanley J. (2019) "The American Military: A Concise History," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 21 : Iss. 2 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.21.2.12

Available at: <https://repository.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol21/iss2/12>

Review

Adamiak, Stanley J.

Spring 2019

Glatthaar, Joseph. *The American Military: A Concise History*. Oxford University Press, \$18.95 ISBN 978019069281

The United States has had a tumultuous history, growing from colonies on the edge of the Atlantic world to a global superpower. Its armed forces have fought a variety of wars, both large and small, including a destructive civil war and global conflicts. Over time, its policies adapted to the challenges of industrialization, societal change, and projecting its economic and military power beyond its borders. Drawing on his broad background in teaching, researching, and publishing military history, Joseph T. Glatthaar, Stephenson Distinguished Professor of History at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, crafts a brief thematic overview in his *The American Military: A Concise History*, covering four hundred years within some 127 pages. This broad approach by necessity is not a comprehensive history, but rather a summarization of four major themes: America's reliance on citizen soldiers versus professional armies; the professionalization of the officer corps; technology; and the limits of power. All of these factors have shaped the American experience at varying degrees over the centuries.

Divided into four chapters, the first explores from the military origins of the British North American colonies through the end of the War of 1812. The English militia concept remained the only pragmatic means of defending the colonies against indigenous and foreign threats. During the American Revolution, the militia ideal clashed with the necessity for a standing army, yet as Glatthaar indicates, victory required both, along with substantial French military and economic aid. The newly independent United States wrestled with this legacy of trained professionals versus citizen soldiers. The dramatic shortcomings of the nation's defenses during the War of 1812 led to a series of administrative and educational reforms. This professionalization dominates the second chapter, exploring institutions and providing overviews of the Mexican American, Civil War, and Spanish American Wars. The latter conflict came at time of tremendous technological change that affected war on both land and at sea. Reformers used the

nation's successful, yet poor performance to usher in major reforms by 1903, overhauling Army administration and reserve system.

Two world wars utterly changed US military and foreign policy. By comparing America's mobilization efforts and its conduct at the war, the author demonstrates lessons learned in harnessing national power. During the First World War, the nation depended upon its European Allies for much of the emerging technologies from artillery to tanks and airplanes. The nation struggled to harness its economy and manpower. While not always a leader in technological development, the US during the Second World War underwent a far greater management of human and economic resources in creating a military machine to fight a global war. This experience projected the United States as a global superpower.

The final chapter concerns the limits of American power from the Cold War through America's ongoing conflicts in the Middle East and Afghanistan. Nuclear weapons and increasingly sophisticated and costly technology became a vital part of the American way of war. From Dwight Eisenhower's "New Look" to his warnings regarding the rise of the "Military-Industrial Complex," every American president has grappled with the size and cost of maintain and projecting military power abroad, while engaging in ideological and military competition with Soviet Union and China. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States effectively used its superior technology to defeat Iraq in the Gulf War, leading many leaders to embrace a true military revolution. However, technologically-dominated conventional wars, with the exception of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, did not follow. Like the Vietnam conflict of the 1960s, American military and political leaders had to grapple with technology, counter insurgency, and nation building with mixed results. Professional education, including a study of military history, Glatthaar argues, can assist in decision makers in understanding past predicaments and assessing the ramifications of committing military power and understanding its limits, be they technological, financial, or cultural.

The American Military: A Concise History is a provocative summary of the influences that have shaped US military policy, especially regarding continuity and change in professionalization, technology, and the limits of power. By its nature, the work focuses on breadth and not depth in its historical coverage. Major conflicts are covered in a few pages and minor conflicts in a few sentences. Written more as an essay, there are few citations except for a handful of direct quotes. The author also provides a select bibliography of major secondary

works. Nevertheless, Glatthaar's thematic approach challenges the reader to combine seemingly disparate elements of the past and apply them to current military issues.

Stanley J. Adamiak

Dr. Adamiak teaches military history at the University of Central Oklahoma.