

A Scientific Way of War: Antebellum Military Science, West Point, and the Origins of American Military Thought

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Review

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Hope, Ian C. *A Scientific Way of War: Antebellum Military Science, West Point, and the Origins of American Military Thought.* University of Nebraska Press, \$55.00 ISBN 9780803276857

By Scientific Means: A Fresh Perspective on the Origins of American Military Thought

The historiography of the American Civil War tends to hold the conflict apart from the wider military history of the nineteenth-century world, perhaps because of the mass citizen armies that fought the war on both sides, and the proportionately small presence of career- and professional-soldier leaders on both sides. The related debate, over whether the Civil War was the last pre-industrial war or the first “modern” or “total” war—both terms that obscure more than they illuminate—(blank)also tends to work against attempts to contextualize the American Iliad. Several historians, including Jay Luvaas, Edward C. Hagerman, Brian Holden Reid, Wayne Hsieh, and Carol Reardon, have attempted to analyze the war’s conduct within a wider global context, but despite the quality and depth of these studies, a conceptual wall seems to separate these works from the seminal cultural history of the antebellum American army, Edward M. Coffman’s 1986 study, *The Old Army: A Portrait of the American Army in Peacetime, 1784-1898*. Coffman and Russell Weigley, author of another foundational work of American military history, *The American Way of War* (1973), analyzes the American conduct of war separately from its intellectual underpinnings, created in peacetime and in various educational settings, the most important of which is naturally the United States Military Academy at West Point. In spite of considerable evidence to the contrary, we still tend to view the Civil War in an intellectual vacuum.

Ian C. Hope, a serving Canadian Army officer and associate professor of history at the Royal Military College, seeks to merge these lines of inquiry with *A Scientific Way of War*. Hope posits that the military doctrine developed and

taught at West Point, defined here as “military science,” formed the basis for a uniquely American brand of military thought that hundreds of West Point graduates used in the service of both the Union and the Confederacy during the Civil War. American military science, Hope asserts, had its beginnings in the military science of the European Enlightenment, translated for American use in the early years of the Republic. The Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies made France the model for all things military in nineteenth-century America. U.S. military science developed along four lines of instruction: tactics and strategy, artillery and cavalry, civil engineering and fortifications, and topographical engineering.

The book begins with a comprehensive review of the sources of American military thought, through a useful survey of late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century European developments. The author then surveys the West Point curriculum as it developed during the nineteenth century. This portion of the book will provide the military historian with few new insights, but the author’s rigorous demonstration of the intellectual roots of the West Point curriculum will make this volume a regularly consulted reference. Other historians continue to develop the institutional history of America’s military academy, but Hope grounds its development in a broader context that is really useful.

After describing the West Point program of instruction and its intellectual underpinnings, the book places the evolving curriculum into a national context. American national security policy in the early decades of the nineteenth century focused on the Third System of fortifications and depots, reflecting American concerns over European developments and the possibility of a third war with Great Britain. This subject is ably covered by Mark A. Smith in *Engineering Security: The Corps of Engineers and Third System Defense Policy, 1815-1861* (2009), and Hope’s treatment of West Point’s education of engineers complements it nicely. Few Americans questioned West Point’s focus on engineering and mathematics during this time. With the European peace that followed the Congress of Vienna, the Jacksonian era saw a more inward focus in the United States, with a shift in military policy to complement westward expansion and Indian removals. At West Point, this new focus manifested itself in a new emphasis on topographical engineering, cavalry, and engineering skill adapted for growing internal improvements in roads and infrastructure. During the antebellum period, America went to war with Mexico and engaged in large-scale unconventional warfare in the West, demonstrating the value of a West Point education, but also the need for increased focus on the liberal arts—

languages and history. On the eve of the Civil War, U.S. Army Commanding General Winfield Scott directed an expansion of the West Point curriculum to five years to incorporate these additional subjects while maintaining the academy's traditional focus on the sciences. This gradual development in the West Point program faced constant opposition in Congress and in some sectors of the American populace, and the academy's leaders worked hard to justify its continued existence even as its graduates shaped national development in a number of critical ways.

The book's final chapter, in which the author surveys the role of American military science in the conduct of the Civil War, is of greatest interest to the readership of this review. A total of 1,135 West Point graduates served in the Civil War on both sides. Over 370 of them possessed some antebellum military experience, and a quarter had prewar staff, engineer, or instructor experience. Almost one-third rose to general-officer rank. West Point graduates "shared a military language and an understanding of standard processes." A "commonality of thinking about *la grande guerre* amongst West Pointers formed the basis for large-scale staff planning that gave the Civil War something more than what the vagaries of individual personality would have provided." West Point-trained officers shared "a mindset about how to raise, organize, train, supply, move, encamp, feed, and fight armies of volunteers and conscripts- all of the elements of military science they had learned at West Point." (216) There is nothing groundbreaking in this idea, and indeed Hsieh and Reardon have addressed it in their works, but the clarity with which Hope connects the Civil War to the wider nineteenth century, to Western military thought, and to the institutional development of West Point and the U.S. Army makes this book different from those on similar topics.

Hope also makes the useful distinction between military education and experience, and the "character traits necessary for high command," characteristics such as decision making, courage, determination, and resilience. Most of the historiography of Civil War generalship defaults to the latter set of characteristics, and they frequently defy nuanced analysis. The result is a body of scholarship that actively denies the role of education and experience, highlighting instead the role of personality in generalship. *A Scientific Way of War* adds to our understanding of the conduct of the Civil War because Hope evaluates the war through the lens of military science, as opposed to the personality-based approach that has dominated Civil War historiography to this point. This approach supports a number of younger Civil War scholars, including

Ethan S. Rafuse and Christopher S. Stowe, who have moved in recent years toward a more rational and wide-ranging analysis of Union and Confederate generalship, incorporating political and social history, gender studies, and the study of military organizations and change over time. Hope admits that an analysis of every Civil War battle and campaign through this method is beyond the scope of the book, but he does offer numerous avenues for further scholarship. One under-studied area concerns the role of staff officers in numerous capacities during the Civil War, especially within geographic departments and staff bureaus. The chapter's concluding statement, that "The legacy of the Civil War in the U.S. Army was of continued faith in staff planning, logistics, engineering, artillery competency, and integration of the means for industrial warfare and a reliance on volunteers," (244) is difficult to dispute.

A Scientific Way of War is an excellent book. It is deeply researched, thoughtful, and engagingly written, and supported with a number of useful tables. Hope engages some of the giants of the American historical profession in spirited debate, but in a collegial way. The end notes alone will be of great use to scholars or graduate students, and the book will make an excellent addition to graduate courses in military history. It is highly recommended.

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