

### Preparing For War: The Emergence Of The Modern U.s. Army, 1815-1917

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## Review

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**Clark, J.P.** *Preparing for War: The Emergence of the Modern U.S. Army, 1815-1917*. Harvard University Press, \$39.95 ISBN 9780674545731

### War! What is it Good For? - Professional Reform

War birthed the United States and the nation has rarely stopped fighting since its inception. During the long nineteenth century, the U.S. stumbled through the War of 1812 against its former colonial ruler, increased its territorial possessions via westward and foreign conquest, preserved national union through Civil War, and tasted industrial slaughter during World War I. War's centrality to U.S. history has led to a growing body of scholarship examining the nation's preparation for mass violence. This literature often treats war colleges and military academies as primary sites of historical inquiry into the institutional indoctrination of specific professional values, training, and education. J.P. Clark breaks from a normative measure of military professionalism. He instead charts new conceptual ground to alter our understanding of the U.S. Army's professionalization.

Clark's work is not about military professionalism, but rather military professionalisms. He divides the Army men of the nineteenth century into four successive generations (foundational, Civil War, composite, and progressive) distinguished not by their age, but instead by military experience and societal influence. His primary analytical focus is on moments of armed conflict and the often-divergent lessons military thinkers drew from experiencing the same war. Because Army officers drew differing conclusions from battle, efforts to better prepare for the next war by reforming academy curricula, training practices, and organizational structure regularly faced heated debate and resistance. One generation's pursuit of a new form of professionalism through military reform presented a threat to another generation's entrenched practices and career trajectories. Clark suggests the intergenerational conflicts and differing experiences of the nineteenth century's Army parallels the service's

contemporary division between senior officers formed by the Cold War and junior officers molded by the War on Terror.

Clark dubs the first of four generations of Army professionals the “foundational” generation. Exemplified by Winfield Scott, the men in this generation were veterans of the War of 1812 and subsequent West Point graduates serving during the antebellum period. Scott repeatedly witnessed the incompetence and cowardice of militia troops during the War of 1812. He aimed to remedy the Army’s deficiencies with a tactical manual wedded to Napoleonic line tactics that required discipline and coordination. Scott favored technical skill fostering an elitist hierarchy within the foundational Army that elevated engineering and ordnance officers above those in the infantry and cavalry. This practice contrasted the relatively egalitarian spirit of the Jacksonian era. Jacksonian politics, however, heavily impacted the Army’s officer corps as politicians doled out commissions as forms of patronage. The anti-intellectualism of the Jacksonian era also shined through the foundational generation’s belief that “military genius” was an inherent trait of an individual, rather than something learnable. This disposition to education, combined with typical service conditions of small territorial detachment nearly devoid of opportunities to rise in rank, contributed to a perception that “there was little need for elaborate systems of professional training or education.”(5)

The Civil War’s massive mobilization of men, materiel demand, and cost in lives created a sharp break from the foundational generation’s military experience. Clark centers Emory Upton in his narration and analysis of the Civil War’s ramifications upon a new generation of Army professionals. During the Civil War, Upton regularly distinguished himself in combat and rapidly rose to the rank of brigadier general at the young age of twenty-four. His success in battle was in part due to his extensive operational planning and the continuous training he imposed upon the volunteer soldiers under his command. Upton’s most significant realization during the Civil War was that neither the generals in command, nor their supporting staff, were qualified for their positions. Upton railed against politicians or political appointees in command. Other incompetent officers were simply products of an Army institution that had previously seen little need for preparing them for large command, organization, or to teach tactics to an untrained volunteer force. Upton’s post-war career shifted from the battlefield to military education and writing. He served as the Commandant of West Point then taught at other military schools while publishing on the need for Army reform. Upton advocated merit-based promotion, a War College devoted

to strategic theorizing not simply tactical proficiency, educational reform to prepare officers for generalship, and the creation of a general staff system mirroring Germany's model of well-trained and rigorously selected commanders.

Unfortunately for Upton, his reform measures faced opposition for decades. Clark's "composite" generation consists of Civil War regulars that stayed in service and new enlistees through 1889. Clark characterizes this generation by its variance in experience and thinking. Many officers that entered service after the Civil War attended West Point while Upton was Commandant. This experience led some to support his reform initiatives. However, the Army's commanding generals during the three decades following the Civil War—William T. Sherman, Philip H. Sheridan, and John M. Schofield—were all among the top commanders by the war's conclusion and did not share Upton's negative perception of wartime leadership. Rather than recognizing institutional flaws within the Army as Upton did, these members of the Civil War generation considered their personal war-time performances more than proficient and blamed others' mistakes on individual incompetence. For these commanding generals, the Civil War "served as an intellectual tether limiting how far the profession could stray from past forms." (129)

Clark insists none of the three commanding generals were unthinking conservatives resisting change. Sherman commissioned Upton's work and agreed with some of his arguments. But with the Army's size dramatically reduced after the Civil War, and its primary function returned to its antebellum role of territorial constabulary, few considered it necessary to adopt Upton's proposed reforms and prepare for a large war. Reforms were attempted, but not seriously pursued. Examinations testing officers' competence generally failed to cull those who failed, as many still considered battlefield performance the only true measure of a soldier. Schofield proved the most open-minded of the three Civil War generals commanding the post-Civil War Army. He created the officers lyceum tasking officers to draft research projects concerning professional issues within the Army. However, Schofield failed to support this experiment into intellectual work with additional instruction in producing meaningful military scholarship. Michael F. Steele, a bookish officer and critic of the lyceum, quipped most officers' essays amounted to "a constipation of ideas in a flux of words." (136)

Substantive reform in the Uptonian vein finally came during the “Progressive” generation. During the Spanish American War, the U.S. Army struggled to mobilize and equip troops, highlighting the lack of a general staff devoted to pre-war planning. Elderly and physically unfit officers led their troops to disaster on the battlefield. The Army’s ill-discipline horrifically and controversially emerged in the Philippines through its use of the “water cure” and indiscriminate violence to quell guerilla resistance. The prevalence of death from disease further fueled public perceptions of Army incompetence. Clark contrasts the Army’s poor performance with that of the U.S. Navy, which had instituted extensive educational and professional reforms that proved effective during the war.

The Spanish-American War’s numerous problems spurred public outcry and official response. The negative findings of the Dodge commission’s investigations led President McKinley to appoint Elihu Root, a corporate lawyer devoid of military experience, as Secretary of War. The Root reforms reflected the Republican Progressive’s commitment to the efficient power of proper organization. After compelling political machinations detailed by Clark, Root’s legislative efforts created a General Staff, reorganized the National Guard, and followed Upton’s suggested modifications to the Army’s promotion and education systems. Clark argues the progressive generation’s embrace of organization, centralization, and specialization led to dramatically improved military performance during the First World War. While Clark largely celebrates the Army’s progress, he notes servicemen traded individualism for professional indoctrination. Clark rightly notes that despite the immense destruction demonstrated by industrial war, Army doctrine still improperly claimed the skill of the infantryman could reign supreme over machine guns, tanks, and artillery.

Clark has done a wonderful job analyzing Army reformers’ efforts to revise educational and organizational structures to better prepare for war. Yet his work leaves notable gaps. Unlike Peter Karsten’s study of the Annapolis Naval Academy in *The Naval Aristocracy* or Edward M. Coffman’s analysis of transitionary twentieth century Army professionalism in *The Regulars*, Clark does not substantively engage with race, class, or gender as analytical categories. At some moments these analytics could improve his work and their absences are problematic. For instance, he engages in detailed operational history during the War of 1812, Civil War, and Spanish American War as supporting evidence for the need to reform Army institutions. Yet the horrific details of Army action motivated by racial hatred during wars against Native Americans receive scant

attention. Clark could have treated Army racism as evidence of lacking professionalism that exemplified ill-discipline, incited violent response, and evoked negative public reaction.

Clark does attend to the Army's engagement in indiscriminate warfare through the targeting of Native American foodstuffs when enforcing Andrew Jackson's 1830 Indian Removal Act. He does so primarily to contrast Winfield Scott, who found the act "professionally unappealing," to other officers who followed Jackson's request to starve the natives. (44) What most shocked this reviewer was Clark's reference in this section to British officer C.E. Callwell's *Small Wars: Their Principles and Practice* as an "impressive and useful book" that might have aided Army conquest if it existed decades prior to its 1896 publication. (43) It is difficult to stomach praise for Callwell's *Small Arms*, a work that drew from Britain's numerous experiences in quelling rebellious native societies to delineate the best tactics for imperial powers to follow, while rationalizing acts then and now considered war crimes through an argument of civilizational difference and racial savagery. Clark's mention of Callwell's work when discussing events prior to its publication, then failure to analyze the source in its more relevant context of U.S. anti-guerilla action in the Philippines, is particularly confusing considering his recognition of other foreign influences on Army policy and his close readings of other important works of military tactics and policy.

Occasionally, Army officers derided their peers that showed a particular interest in study and writing as a "book soldier" in contrast to a fighter. Clark highlights this divide when discussing the confrontation over academy curriculum and training between two members of his composite generation, Eben Swift and Arthur L. Wagner. The latter wrote extensively in the Uptonian vein advocating educational reform. The denigration of Wagner as an effete soldier appears an ideal moment to consider how differing Army professionalisms became wound up within conceptions of masculinity, but Clark does not analyze the conflict in this manner. Wagner's story becomes even more interesting during the Spanish American War when he desperately attempted to overcome his bookish reputation by serving in the field. This desire of the dedicated professional student of war raises a broader question ignored by Clark, but often discussed in the literature on military professionalism: Does military professionalism and careerism foster a desire among soldiers to practice their violent craft?

Clark is an active duty Army officer who previously served as a Pentagon strategist and history professor at West Point. Though there are gaps left in our understanding of nineteenth-century Army professionalization, Clark has produced a valuable work that will appeal to military historians, particularly those interested in the Civil War's legacy on Army education and organization.

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