

[Szilagyi on Muehlbauer and Ulbrich, 'Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century'](#)

Review published on Sunday, August 21, 2016

Matthew S. Muehlbauer, David J. Ulbrich. *Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Routledge, 2013. Illustrations, maps. 560 pp. \$160.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-88676-5; \$64.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-88677-2.

Reviewed by Jason Szilagyi (Central Michigan University) **Published on** H-USA (August, 2016)
Commissioned by Donna Sinclair

American culture and warfare have been intertwined since the first encounters between “English” colonists and indigenous peoples in the seventeenth century, and a blend of warfare and peace has continued into the twenty-first century. Early colonization, sometimes peaceful and at other times outright aggressive, wove threads of cultural and militaristic themes into the tapestry of American military history. As techniques and technologies changed over the passing centuries, along with the very nature of the armed forces, the core principles of the United States were able to adapt alongside the feats of its military.

Matthew S. Muehlbauer and David J. Ulbrich state clearly in the introduction that the US military, and its British colonial predecessor, evolved over the centuries and adapted new techniques, weapons, and tactics as it encountered new threats. They state that warfare in the twenty-first century can roughly be broken into two general types of warfare: “high-intensity” or conventional warfare and “low-intensity” or guerilla warfare. The US military has been engaged in and practiced both types of warfare throughout its history. The authors want their audience to be able to understand the tactics and methods involved in both types. Furthermore, Muehlbauer and Ulbrich lay the basic elements of the US military into three broadly chronological categories: “the ‘militia’ era, the ‘conscription’ era, and the ‘volunteer’ era” (p. 4).

The earliest conflicts fall under the “militia” era (roughly 1607 to the twentieth century). The beginning stages of warfare inside North America revolved around the internecine conflicts between various Native American groups, between European colonists and Native Americans, and finally between Europeans and European colonists. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich state that “native bands engaged in what is today called low-intensity warfare, particularly raids, ambushes, and skirmishes” (p. 11). Only with the continued expansion of European encroachment did Native warfare change; new weapons, tactics, and techniques evolved as Native and European warfare styles and weapons mingled.

Native American groups allied themselves with different European colonists, primarily the English and French, over the course of the eighteenth century. They were pulled into larger geopolitical conflicts and soon found their interests eclipsed by those of their colonists. The English and French empires intersected at numerous points throughout the world but none longer than in North America. The French and Indian War (1754-57) had dire consequences for the Native forces involved; those

allied with the French found themselves victims of their fellows who had allied with the English. The American Revolution (1775-83) forged the American colonial militias into the Continental army. With extensive training, supplies, and leadership by foreign officers, the Continental army blended high- and low-intensity warfare into a freedom-winning combination.

Muehlbauer and Ulbrich continue using this basic formula of adaptation, new technology, and new fighting techniques to show the evolution of the military. The War of 1812, the Mexican American War (1846-48), the American Civil War (1861-65), the post-Civil War American-Indian Wars (1862-90), all the way through the Spanish-American War/Philippine Insurrection (1898-1902) illustrate the adaptation practiced by the US military. The authors cover each of these conflicts, initially internal and then increasingly external, by describing the ever-changing diplomatic situations confronting the United States.

Beginning with chapter 9, the authors come to the primary focus of their work: modern wars and what they call “the conscription era” (1902-73). Here the authors begin by discussing the reforms pushed through the services by Elihu Root, President William McKinley’s secretary of war. Root applied progressive principles as he recast the army and the War Department into flexible and adaptable institutions in a new century. Concurrent to Root’s reforms, the Marine Corps and United States Navy also expanded and adapted to the lessons learned during the conflicts prior to the outbreak of the First World War (1914-18). These reforms and expansion of services would have direct effects on the preparedness of the military in coming trials. The authors also describe the multiple interventions the United States found itself launching in Latin America and the slow realization that a larger conflict was looming in Europe. They discuss in detail the challenges faced by Woodrow Wilson as the world was plunged into the war.

A brief, but well-executed, description of the major campaigns of the First World War prior to American involvement is followed by a discussion of the domino effect of the “neutrality” practiced by the United States, the destruction caused by the German U-boat campaign (1914-15 and 1917-18), the American declaration of war on the Central powers, the adoption of the Selective Service Act (May 18, 1917), and the quick expansion of the United States Army. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich describe the major battles that the newly minted American Expeditionary Force fought throughout France before the armistice (roughly 1918). The lessons learned by the army, Marine Corps, and navy during this conflict launched a new era of experimentation and adaptation as the world entered the interwar period (1918-41), during which massive budgetary cuts and arms limit treaties threatened the existence of much of the military’s gains. A new era of austerity forced the American military to initiate new technologies, weapons, and fighting techniques on an ever-shrinking budget.

Chapters 10 through 12 cover, in detail, the interwar period to the end of the Second World War (1939-45). Muehlbauer and Ulbrich discuss the financial and political restraints that had been placed on the US military during this period, including the crushing effects of the Great Depression. The Washington and London Naval Treaties (1922 and 1930) put a freeze on new naval building by the major powers and most hoped they would prevent another arms race. The introduction of the airplane as a military weapon during the First World War also caused a scramble for dwindling funds and rivalry between the US military services throughout this period. Proponents for the new technologies and weapons, examples of which included airplanes and tanks, ran into die-hard detractors who sought to keep traditional modes of warfare alive; for example, the insistence of horse-borne cavalry

units slowed the progress of adaptation to new techniques of warfare. War plans also had to adapt to the dynamics of international power that evolved during this period. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich discuss the growing coordination between the United States Navy and Marine Corps as Japan, which had been a wartime ally of the United States, began aggressively expanding into the Pacific Ocean and mainland China. The growing threat of Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy and their increasingly hostile stance toward the Western democracies is also discussed by the authors.

Muehlbauer and Ulbrich offer an excellent discussion of American military strategy as the United States plunged into the Second World War. They provide a solid analysis of the major factors that would balance a Europe-first strategy with a carefully executed Pacific-holding action. They also do an excellent job describing the segregation of the US military; the discrimination that non-Caucasian, non-male members faced; and the challenges they had to overcome. The massive expansion of the military is well documented throughout these chapters. The vast majority of the major campaigns launched by the United States are briefly touched on and the hard-won lessons from them are illustrated. These operational lessons were documented, studied, and adapted by newly enlisted service members and veterans alike as American forces pushed further into Europe and the Pacific. The authors end this section with the surrender of the Japanese on the USS *Missouri* (September 2, 1945) effectively ending the Second World War and the dawning of the Cold War (1947-91). This section is lavishly illustrated with numerous maps, line drawings, photos, and pieces of primary-source material. Overall, this section, with the previous chapter on the First World War, is the most vital part of the book when it comes to understanding the transformation of the US military from a militia to a full-fledged professional force.

Muehlbauer and Ulbrich next cover the new dynamic of superpower confrontation throughout the slowly decolonizing world. The former world of imperial powers had quickly eroded and the two new superpowers began a policy of alliance systems with an increasing number of independent countries. Covering the Korean War (1950) to the beginning of the Vietnam conflict (1955-75), the authors demonstrate the growing reactionary, and eventually overt, acts that the US military and government would take to contain the threats of Communism throughout the world. The downsizing of the huge postwar US military and increasing budgetary cuts were major factors in the adaptation of new technologies, such as ballistic missiles, atomic weapons equipped with strategic bomber formations, and nuclear-powered warships. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich describe the war in Vietnam in some detail and discuss the changing technologies and tactics that the US military used. The authors describe the damaging effects of the Battle of Ia Drang (November 14-18, 1965) as “the U.S. military’s employment of systems analysis and faith in firepower and technology versus the North Vietnamese use of military and political realities as weapons” (p. 467). The United States increasingly relied on helicopter-borne soldiers to carry out deep attacks on the North Vietnamese throughout South Vietnam while simultaneously holding the major cities of the South and abandoning the countryside to the North Vietnamese. While this seems counterproductive to the type of warfare being fought by the Americans and the Vietnamese, the authors state that the United States “needed a U.S. military—especially the Army—that could stop the Soviets in Europe in a conventional fight” (p. 468). The authors effectively demonstrate the challenges faced by the US military: facing a possible war in Europe and an actual war in Southeast Asia and not being able to adapt to combat experience gained into the training of new recruits. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich also discuss the impacts of the Tet Offensive (1968) on the American home front and damaging effects on the morale of the American military abroad.

The last chapter discusses the final part of their formula of evolution in the US military, the “volunteer” era (1973-2013). Here the authors begin by describing the withdrawal of American military forces and the collapse of South Vietnam (1973-75). The hard learned lessons of Vietnam and the trauma of a bitter loss became a major challenge for the military to absorb. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich discuss the long shadow cast by the Vietnam War on each successive president. Major reforms in the military, the development of new weapons, and the massive expansion of the American military under President Ronald Reagan (1981-89) caused a resurgence inside the services and a new confidence in foreign policy. The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 called into question the massively expanded American military and a slow downsizing of the forces began. The First Gulf War (1990-91) brought the United States into direct confrontation with a major Middle Eastern power and set a future course of direct confrontation in the region. The War on Terror (2001-present) thrust the United States into a global conflict targeting small groups of fighters instead of national opponents. This type of counterinsurgency warfare is a major challenge to military planners and commanders. The expanded use of Special Forces and remote drone strikes against enemy combatants has added powerful tools to the US military. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich believe that the American military will continue to adapt and evolve to face the threats to both the United States and its allies.

The book only has a few weaknesses, as one could expect from a survey textbook. Most of the conflicts covered only receive a brief overview of the events, people, and consequences and leave some questions unanswered about how these all interact. The lack of truly in-depth discussions of major domestic issues on the home fronts of these conflicts is telling, though the authors state that they are concerned about the effects on the American military rather than the effects on the domestic sphere. A few brief mentions about conditions at home and abroad for minorities do come up, yet they provide small details about the discrimination minorities faced inside the military. There is also no mention of the discontent felt over the invasion of Iraq in March of 2003 compared to the operations in Afghanistan. These factors are important to the continuing missions inside those counties and destabilization of regional politics and civilian life.

Overall, this book is an excellent addition to the ever-growing body of scholarship on the evolution of the American military. As the authors state, this book is for beginners in American military history, but even those more familiar with the subject will find it useful. Muehlbauer and Ulbrich are experts in their fields and take their time explaining how they believe, based on the evidence they present, the American military has accepted new challenges and modified its operating procedures, training, and tactics based on practical experience. The chronological layout of the book allows the reader either to follow a steady progression of advancement from the colonial period to the present day, or to skip to certain areas of interest. The use of so many illustrations, maps, and primary source materials gives the reader a rich, multilayered understanding of the information presented within. Also, Muehlbauer and Ulbrich’s use of selected mini-bibliographies at the end of each chapter allows the reader a chance to evaluate the evidence. Beyond a few complaints about the lack of in-depth analysis of the home fronts and political dissension about the execution of the present wars, this book should be added as supplemental course materials for US history classes.

Printable Version: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=43070>

Citation: Jason Szilagyi. Review of Muehlbauer, Matthew S.; Ulbrich, David J., *Ways of War: American Military History from the Colonial Era to the Twenty-First Century*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews.

August, 2016. URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=43070>

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/).