

Book Review by Mackubin Thomas Owens

THE FOG OF WAR

The American Civil War: A Military History, by John Keegan.
Alfred A. Knopf, 416 pages, \$35 (cloth), \$16.95 (paper)



JOHN KEEGAN IS ONE OF THE GREATEST MILITARY historians of our day. The author of some 20 books, including the acclaimed *The Face of Battle* (1976), *The Price of Admiration* (1988), *A History of Warfare* (1993), and two excellent overviews of the great wars of the 20th century, *The First World War* (1998) and *The Second World War* (1990), his magnificent track record makes his new study all the more disappointing.

I expected *The American Civil War: A Military History* to be similar to Keegan's remarkable account of World War II, a masterpiece of clear, narrative history. Unfortunately, despite flashes of brilliance, *The American Civil War* adds little to our understanding of the great conflict. Those who seek a comprehensive military history of it would be better served by consulting the late Russell Weigley's *A Great Civil War* (2000) or David Eicher's *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (2001).

Keegan's book suffers from two sets of problems: conceptual and editorial. The former arise from Keegan's failure to "connect the dots" by providing a truly comprehensive overview of the war; *strategy*, the plan for using available means to achieve the political goals of the war; *campaigns*, a series of related operations, including movements, battles, and support operations,

designed to achieve a strategic objective within a theater of operations; and *battles*, tactical engagements that may or may not have an impact beyond the particular battleground. As a result, the narrative is disjointed.

In addition, Keegan persists in conflating battles with campaigns, missing a golden opportunity to demonstrate the thread linking both to strategy and the political goals of war. For instance, rather than his approach of viewing the Seven Days' Battles, Second Manassas/Bull Run, and Antietam as isolated events, it would be more fruitful to see them as parts of a unified campaign, during which Confederate General Robert E. Lee's objective was, first, to save Richmond, which was in danger of falling to a Union siege, and second to inflict the sort of catastrophic defeat on a Union force that he thought necessary to persuade the North that the cost of subduing the Southern Confederacy was too great. Thus Lee's attack on McClelland at Beaver Dam Creek on June 26, 1862, which initiated the Seven Days' Battle; the maneuvering of Confederate armies in July and the battles of Cedar Mountain and Second Manassas in August; and the invasion of Maryland, culminating in the battle of Antietam in September came about because of a unified and calculated attempt by Lee to win the war in the summer of 1862.

Keegan knows that wars are not fought for their own purposes but to achieve political ends. Accordingly, a military history must address the goals of the war before it can address questions of strategy. To his credit, Keegan recognizes Lincoln's central role in developing Union strategy. As James McPherson has noted, the 16th president was a better strategist than any of his generals, and his initial war aim was to preserve the Union. Lincoln's initial approach, contemptuously called the "Anaconda Plan" in the press, provided the outline of Union strategy throughout the war: to squeeze the Confederacy by blockading Southern ports and dominating the inland waterways. This framework was later fleshed out by Lincoln's "concentration in time," the simultaneous or at least coordinated application of military force at multiple points, making it difficult for the Confederacy to defend its territory.

A good strategy transcends purely military considerations. Thus, although Lincoln initially avoided interfering with the institution of slavery, it soon became clear to him that "soft war" would not work, and that more extreme measures were required. As he wrote to Cuthbert Bullitt in late July 1862, the time had come to stop waging war "with elder-stalk squirts, charged with rose water." The most powerful instrument available to Lincoln was to attack

the Southern social system, based on slavery, by issuing the Emancipation Proclamation. Although Keegan pays tribute to Lincoln as an intuitive strategist, he never discusses emancipation as an instrument of Union strategy.

KEEGAN'S TREATMENT OF CONFEDERATE strategy is also problematic. For one thing, he does not make it clear that Jefferson Davis, unlike Lincoln, never acted as strategist-in-chief. There was no central voice in making Confederate strategy. Keegan criticizes Lee for not fulfilling this role, but he was not general-in-chief (until the last two months of the Confederacy, when it was too late) but a commanding general of a field army. When it did emerge, Rebel strategy was complicated by the Confederates' departmental system, which ceded military operations to regional commanders. As a result, Confederate military operations were often uncoordinated.

Keegan treats Confederate strategy as purely defensive. But despite Davis's claim that the Southerners sought "no conquest, no aggrandizement," it seems clear that the Confederacy envisioned an empire stretching north to the Mason-Dixon Line and the Ohio River, and west to the Colorado. This empire would have contained all 15 slave states, including those that had not seceded, and two existing U.S. territories, New Mexico and the Indian Territory south of Kansas. In keeping with this grand vision, the Confederacy admitted Missouri and Kentucky to statehood, despite the lack of a secessionist majority in either state; initiated treaties with the Indian tribes; and dispatched an expedition to conquer the New Mexico Territory. In January 1862, the Confederate Congress organized a separate Arizona Territory.

There is evidence that the Confederacy envisioned an even more expansive empire. In his famous "Cornerstone" speech at Savannah on March 21, 1861, Alexander Stephens, newly installed as the Confederate vice president, claimed that "we are now the nucleus of a growing power, which, if we are true to ourselves, our own destiny, and our high mission, will become the controlling power on the continent." Stephens made it clear he expected the Confederacy to grow by the accession of more states from the old Union (seven had by then seceded), including not only the other slave states

but also "the great States of the North-West." These free states could be accommodated, he said, when "they are ready to assimilate with us in principle."

These points go a long way toward explaining Confederate campaigns in Maryland, Kentucky, and Pennsylvania. But one will not find any discussion of them in *The American Civil War*.

THE VOLUME IS NOT WITHOUT ITS strengths. One is Keegan's ability to place the war and its concomitant developments within the broader context of trans-Atlantic military and political history. He shows that many American practices, e.g., fiscal policies to finance the war and the practice of "volunteering" for military service reflected an approach to war similar to that of the British. He also compares the operational aspects of the war to those of earlier and contemporary European wars. One of his conclusions seems remarkable for someone writing from the other side of the Atlantic:

By 1865, [both the Union and Confederate armies]...had grown into the largest and most efficient armies in the world.... Though dismissed by European military grandees as amateur and unprofessional, each, but particularly the United States Army, outmatched the French, the Prussian, and the Russians in up-to-date experience, and, but for the interposing Atlantic, would have threatened any of them with defeat.

It must be said that Keegan's understanding of military geography, the factor he has called the "Rosetta Stone of all great battles," is profound. Unfortunately, he doesn't apply his insights often enough to the conflict he is examining here. For instance, although the reader will come away with a much better understanding of the geographical imperatives of the 18th-century struggle between the British and French in North America, he will not necessarily grasp the way in which geography made the West—the "heartland" between the Appalachian mountains and the Mississippi River—the key to Union victory. Thus, Keegan doesn't stress the importance of the Tennessee River as the gateway to the heartland that ultimately en-

sured Union victory in the war. He mentions the Tennessee in passing, suggesting that Ulysses S. Grant stumbled onto a strategy for the heartland by seizing Fort Henry on the Tennessee and Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River.

Keegan fails to observe it was Major General Henry Halleck, the overall Union commander in the West until elevated to the command of all Union forces in July 1862, who early on recognized that the Tennessee River constituted the "main line of operation" against the Confederates. By moving up this waterway ("down" on a map), Union forces were able to penetrate deep into Confederate territory, outflanking Rebel forces on the Mississippi River and in Kentucky and eventually seizing—after the bloody battle of Shiloh—the major rail junction at Corinth, Mississippi. After the capture of Corinth, Union forces were able to move east toward Chattanooga (which allowed the Union to penetrate the Appalachian barrier and open the way to Atlanta), to move west to Memphis, and southwest toward Vicksburg.

The second set of problems, those of an editorial nature, cannot, of course, be blamed entirely on the author. The book is often repetitive, a problem that might have been cured by decent editing. But like many publishers these days, Knopf must have concluded that it would cost less to publish a longer book with many redundancies than to hire a good editor who might have put *The American Civil War* into better shape. There are far too many errors, large and small, for a book by a military historian of Keegan's stature. The volume is also out of balance, as Keegan frequently devotes as much or more space to minor clashes as he does to major battles.

I am a great admirer of John Keegan, a distinguished historian and exceptional writer who has educated at least two generations of readers on the realities of war. Unfortunately, his sterling qualities are not often on display in *The American Civil War*.

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STUCK IN VIETNAM

From Colony to Superpower: U.S. Foreign Relations since 1776, by George Herring.
Oxford University Press, 1056 pages, \$35

GEORGE HERRING'S *FROM COLONY TO Superpower* is the latest installment in that excellent series, the Oxford history of the United States. Best known for his distinguished work on U.S. policy in Vietnam, Herring sketches the history of American foreign policy over more than two centuries.

In any book covering such a lengthy period, the author may take one of two approaches: offer some bold reinterpretation of well-known events, or narrate with such an authoritative, grounded, and truly balanced tone as to establish the work as the standard account. Herring aimed for the latter, and has succeeded in writing a lucid, comprehensive, but all-to-conventional history.

A central theme of the volume is American exceptionalism—that the United States has a special destiny in the world. Herring views this belief as bound up with attitudes of cultural and racial superiority, smug parochialism, and unilateralism. He traces these attitudes through the history of U.S. diplomacy, and urges Americans to disenthral themselves of them. The ride engages and sometimes informs, but to describe this conclusion as either novel or unconventional would be seriously misleading. Indeed, it is already received wisdom among academics.

Herring's interpretation of America's Cold War policies, which fills almost half the book, captures his argument. At the beginning and end of each chapter, he strikes a note that is even-handed, and his style is hardly polemical, but the moral is clear: the United States consistently exaggerated the Soviet threat, engaged in unnecessary and immoral interventions overseas, propped up brutal right-wing dictators, and paid a serious price at home in terms of civil liberties, debt, an imperial presidency, and an overly militarized foreign policy. This has been the dominant interpretation among U.S. diplomatic historians for many years now.

But can this view still be sustained, with the continuing archival revelations from existing and former Communist countries? For example, Herring says the Truman Administration exaggerated the threat posed by the USSR under Stalin, but makes no clear argument as to Stalin's actual intentions. No doubt, Stalin wished for tactical, limited cooperation between the major power victors after 1945, but he also saw long-term conflict between the USSR and the West as inevitable, and looked to expand Soviet influence whenever possible. To imply that his foreign policy was not influenced by Marxist-

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Leninist ideology is simply inaccurate. Similarly, Herring suggests that the U.S. missed some sort of opportunity for diplomatic settlement with Moscow in the 1950s. But what alternative, acceptable to the USSR and preferable to the one that actually developed, does Herring think existed at the time? He scolds Truman and Eisenhower for their lack of diplomatic effort with Moscow, but never spells out the real world consequences of such hypothetical efforts. For some reason it is usually the United States that errs, by failing to accommodate, while the Soviets' willingness to compromise is taken for granted.

THE MISTAKES MADE BY AMERICAN LEADERS, in Herring's account, are invariably on the side of using too much force and too little diplomacy. He does not see that force and diplomacy must be coordinated in world politics to have any practical effect. For example, Herring chides the Reagan Administration for using covert action in Central America and elsewhere, and for ratcheting up Cold War tensions in the early 1980s. He later praises Reagan for reaching an arms control agreement with the USSR in his second term. Yet it never seems to occur to Herring that perhaps the two were related.

The author insists that the U.S. constantly mistook Third World nationalists for Communists, and therefore engaged in wrongful, unnecessary interventions overseas. But Guatemala's Jacobo Arbenz, Chile's Salvador Allende, and Nicaragua's Daniel Ortega were convinced Marxists as well as anti-American nationalists who received arms and inspiration from Communist countries. It is almost as if Herring thinks the United States had no right to compete with the USSR and its allies for international influence. Certainly Soviet leaders felt no such compunction.

Herring seems to view most American Cold War policies through the lens of his heartfelt opposition to the Vietnam War. But whatever one thinks of it, Vietnam was only one episode in the Cold War struggle, and fixating on it seems generational. As those passions fade, America's overall Cold War policy of anti-Communist containment may come to be seen for what it was: an astonishing success.

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