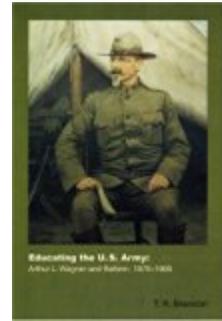


Todd R. Brereton. *Educating the U. S. Army: Arthur L. Wagner and Reform, 1875-1905*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000. xviii + 173 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8032-1301-2.

Reviewed by Thomas Nester (Department of History, Temple University)
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American Clausewitz

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Arthur L. Wagner, Todd Brereton asserts, was the “critical transitional figure” in the U.S. Army’s development of a comprehensive and progressive educational system at the turn of the nineteenth century (p. 127). Similar to his Progressive counterparts in the civilian world who professionalized their respective fields, Wagner advocated a socially responsible agenda and specialized education and training for the army’s officer corps. His scholarly work played an important role in surmounting the traditional anti-intellectual blockade to advanced education in the U.S. Army, and led to the establishment of the General Service and Staff College and the Army War College. Wagner worked his entire life to legitimize the use of military history to prepare the army for modern war and the new technology that it would face on the next century’s battlefield.

In this biographical analysis, the author examines Wagner’s career as an army officer and his many scholarly publications. Starting from his inauspicious beginnings as a West Point cadet who graduated 40th out of 43 in his class (p. 1), Brereton shows how Wagner rose to prominence in the army through his numerous writings advocating reform. The first of these works, an essay on the military necessities of the United States, was submitted for a contest held by the *Journal of the Military Service Institution*, and was published in that journal in 1884. Brereton states that Wagner’s ideas at this early stage reflect the influence of another prominent army re-

former, Emory Upton (p. 8). However, Brereton draws an important distinction between Upton and Wagner right from the start, and this contrast serves as a theme that he carries throughout the remainder of the book. Wagner, Brereton maintains, always worked within the realities of the American military tradition, and it was this pragmatism that allowed him to present alternatives to existing army policy that would not threaten “America’s egalitarian, anti-military traditions” and would prove more useful in bringing about change than those ideas proposed by Upton (p. 20).

Brereton next moves to an assessment of Wagner’s impact on education in the army, and it is these chapters that form the heart of book. After being assigned to the Infantry and Cavalry School at Ft. Leavenworth, an institution known also as “The Kindergarten”, Wagner immediately set about improving the school’s curriculum and the quality of its students (p. 16). While working in the Department of Military Art, he demonstrated the importance of education to a new generation of officers who would come to serve as the backbone of the army reform movement. It was here that Wagner recognized the need for a text on military operations and theory produced by an American author, and it was this discovery that led him to publish what Brereton identifies as his “most seminal” works, *The Service of Security and Information* (1893) and *Organization and Tactics* (1894) (p. 40). These books provided the army with American, rather than European military concerns and organizational ideas. They were so influential that they remained the primary works on the

subjects until 1910 and 1908 respectively, and they are still consulted today.

The more significant text, however, was *Organization and Tactics*, a work to which Brereton dedicates a full chapter. This book was the first American text on military theory based on historical experience, and the first to enunciate a “genuine doctrine of combined arms combat” (p. 47). Brereton goes so far as to proclaim it a “watershed” in the army’s professional development, as it provided a disciplined, systematic, and historical approach to the American study of war (p. 54). As Brereton points out, however, the work did not produce an immediate change in thinking. Rather, it initiated the process whereby the army slowly took on a more sophisticated demeanor

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Brereton then offers an examination of the army’s performance during the Spanish-American War to illustrate the service responded to the nation’s first real military challenge since the American Civil War. Here the author correctly finds that while the U.S. was victorious, the army was beset with problems that a more competent adversary would have exploited to disastrous effect. However, Brereton cautions the reader not to indict the school at Leavenworth for the poor communication and disorganization exhibited by the army. Instead, he asserts that the junior officers performed well and that it was the general officers who had long resisted advanced education who proved ineffective. Brereton finds that this war provided the impetus for the army to seriously consider reform. This determination was spurred by the Dodge committee hearings on the army’s disorganization at the outset of the conflict and the appearance of Elihu Root as Secretary of War (p. 92). It was through this public airing of the army’s inadequacies in Congress and the

presence of a true reforming spirit in government that the army began to embrace the educational and training ideas that Wagner had been promoting for two decades (i.e.: establishment of the War College, conducting large-scale maneuvers, incorporating the National Guard in exercises, etc.).

As Brereton notes, Wagner’s role in military education became more prominent after the turn of the century. He served as the Assistant Commandant at Leavenworth in 1903, and in 1904 was named Senior Director of the War College. He instituted improvements in the curricula of both institutions, but, unfortunately, he did not live to see the results of his work. Wagner had long suffered from poor health, and he died suddenly in 1905. Ironically, his death came on the same day that his promotion to brigadier general was to be signed by President Roosevelt (p. 119). Brereton argues that Wagner’s greatest legacy was a “useable, practical history that demonstrated theoretical military concepts” which would remain forever a part of the army’s officer education curriculum, and that he succeeded in legitimizing peacetime training as the “only reasonable preventative against a military disaster” (pp. 121, 93).

The strengths of this book are many. In his analysis, Brereton relied almost exclusively on primary sources, paying particular attention to documents authored by Wagner himself. He also makes good use of contemporary reviews of Wagner’s work to illustrate the reception his innovative ideas received from the stodgy anti-intellectual establishment. Brereton’s argument for Wagner’s important role in army reform is convincing, and his inclusion of discussions of Wagner’s shortcomings as a theorist adds balance to the work. The only instance where the author possibly over-states his case comes in his assertion that the “army’s consistent offensive orientation” during World Wars I & II was “defined and enunciated” by Wagner (p. 123). Wagner’s greatest impact on the army, as Brereton maintains throughout the book, came in the areas of education and training, and he died before he could contribute significantly to reforms in tactical doctrine.

Wagner was, in fact, a key transitional figure in U.S. army education, professionalization, and reform, and Brereton is to be commended for going beyond the traditional focus on “great captains” to offer this superb examination of his life’s work.

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