

Benjamin Jensen. *Forging the Sword: Doctrinal Change in the U.S. Army.* Stanford: Stanford Security Studies, 2016. 216 pp. \$24.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8047-9737-5.

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Brains in the Iron Cage

In *Forging the Sword: Doctrinal Change in the U.S. Army* Benjamin Jensen places responsibility for doctrinal development squarely where it belongs—with the institution’s imaginative officers possessing the ability to think about war, communicate those thoughts, and then move the institution towards adopting their ideas. At the heart of these efforts are two critical components: incubators, what he terms the “safe spaces” enabling the free expression of ideas, and advocacy networks enabling the communication of those ideas (pp. 1-2). Fundamentally, Jensen describes a dynamic process undertaken by intellectually creative individuals—literally the opposite of the prevailing view of professional soldiers as “unimaginative bureaucrats trapped in an iron cage” (p. 15). In so doing, Jensen conveys what is ultimately the US Army’s greatest strength: the ability of its professional leadership to see, understand, and act, an ability seldom recognized by those not in intimate contact with the army. What emerges from Jensen’s work is a cogent description of the key dynamics of doctrinal change in an institution reliant on effective doctrine to equip, train, lead, and employ a force required to operate at any point on conflict’s spectrum at any location on the globe.

There is no shortage of writing on the motivations and mechanics of military adaptation, innovation, and transformation, and Jensen touches on the works of Barry Posen, Steven Rosen, Morton Halperin, and others in cogently describing the theoretical motivations for change within the military institution. This places the work within the recognized historiography of institutional change. Critically, Jensen notes that doctrinal change “emerges from within” as leaders seek to overcome new operational challenges flowing not only from technological change but also changing policy objectives. He observes that formal structures are inadequate facilitators of change as bureaucratic tensions and organizational inertia serve to stifle critical debate (pp. 16-17). This places a premium on incubators, with Jensen noting their history within the army. In a very strong work, a rare but glaring omission is Jensen’s not extending the discussion of incubators through the 1980s and the creation of the combat training centers and the associated changes in how leaders came to understand the dynamics of battle and the ways to communicate their understanding.

He also notes that advocacy networks that enable ideas to move both up and down and laterally across the institution are as important as incubat-

ors. Jensen suggests that these networks “infect officers,” using a colorful turn of phrase to describe the movement of both ideas and the vision behind them (p. 22). He rightly notes that the networks not only allow movement but also create champions for those ideas, enabling their incorporation into revised doctrine. He reinforces Posen’s argument that senior leader support or protection of “mavericks” within the institution is important if the service seeks to preserve the requisite tolerance for dissent and discussion essential for effective debate (p. 22).

Jensen captures four major events in modern military history and their impact on doctrine’s evolution. These are the combined effects of the 1973 Arab-Israeli War and the withdrawal from Vietnam creating new doctrinal approaches to prosecute a general war in Europe, the critical shift from “Active Defense” (the 1976 solution to war in Europe) to “AirLand Battle,” the Cold War’s end and the army’s efforts to adjust to the new global order, and, the events of 9/11 and its simultaneous execution of diverse missions. Each of these events, and the army’s response, meant leaders had to not only consider complex problems but also guide solutions through the institution’s bureaucratic structures. The “iron cage” that Jensen masterfully described presented itself in a variety of ways through each of these events. His treatment of the so-called Octoberfest conferences that saw disagreement between the heavy and light branches illuminates the power of bureaucratic structures, branch identities, and their ability to shape decisions (pp. 48-49). Jensen offers praise for the leaders who successfully enabled doctrinal change, referring to them as “escape artists” (p. 142). The term is apt by virtue of capturing a key element of both incubators and advocacy networks: the professional officer willing to take on the challenges of reimagining a future conflict and then pushing for the changes he—or she—believes create the best opportunities for battlefield success. If anyone has doubts about the intellectual curiosity or professionalism of the

army’s officer corps, *Forging the Sword* should allay them.

Clearly articulating the key elements of professional officership, incubators, and advocacy networks, *Forging the Sword* skillfully documents the critical role of the professional officer and his or her relationship to the service’s formal and informal structures to enable change. For anyone considering doctrine’s evolution, this is a must-read work. For those examining broader issues of institutional process, Jensen provides a wealth of information on bureaucratic power, personalities, their intersection, and the resulting outcomes. Informative, thought-provoking, and even entertaining in places, Jensen’s work possesses a contemporary resonance, making it a valuable read.

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