Only 7 percent of contemporary Americans are veterans of our armed forces; that percentage is likely to decrease further in the future. However, military history attracts plenty of readers, especially when it describes the “big” conflicts: the Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam imbroglio. Joseph T. Glatthaar’s short, readable book provides a good starting place for neophyte readers with this inclination. His volume narrates American military experience from the colonial era to the present. He begins with the amateur soldiers of the colonial era—the citizen militias—and ends in Iraq and Afghanistan, touching on all of the conflicts in between. Glatthaar provides a concise overview and at least some of the political background of each conflict.

His main theme is the struggle across history “to establish a balance between regular military forces and citizen soldiers and sailors” while searching for the appropriate distribution of resources “among the various armed services” (p. ix). As the narrative reaches the twentieth century, Glatthaar directs the reader's attention to the problems posed by the increasing mobility of armed forces and the complexities engendered by evermore sophisticated technology. He closes with some reflections on the current defense dilemmas, particularly what Paul Kennedy might call “imperial overstretch.”[1] As Glatthaar notes, “Sometimes the task is greater than ... [the military] can fulfill; other times it can complete the assignment, but the costs are so great that the results are not worth the price.” He closes with the hope that the now highly professionalized military leadership will “communicate frankly and confidentially to political leaders what missions they can and cannot complete and what the human fallout is likely to be.” The nation needs clearer “guidance” and “education” on what military force can accomplish in the twenty-first century (p. 127). The difficulties of the post-Vietnam era are clearly on his mind.

Some readers may be disconcerted by the limited attention some topics receive in this book. For instance, Glatthaar focuses on the army, while the other services get short shrift. Consider the coverage of the US Navy. In the revolutionary era, the US was “without a navy”; no John Paul Jones here (p. 8)! The quasi war with France—where the navy won some notable victories—involved nothing more than “US and French ships firing on each other”; Ian W. Toll tells a much more interesting story in Six Frigates: The Epic History of the Founding of the U.S. Navy (2006), but it is not in Glatthaar’s bibliography (p. 17). For World War I, he provides a short section on convoys. The fierce naval struggles in the Pacific during World War II gets somewhat more attention, but the section on
Vietnam mentions the navy only in the Tonkin Gulf in 1964. You might have thought that the role of the army air force in World War II was central, but the discussion of the air contribution is mostly contained in a single paragraph; the same is true concerning the air contribution in Vietnam. The US Marines get limited attention; the US Coast Guard is not mentioned at all.

One can imagine that the very limited discussion of wars against native peoples will also bother some readers. Perhaps more interesting is the treatment of African Americans in the service of their country. Glatthaar has written a well-received book on black soldiers in the Civil War, *Forged in Battle: The Civil War Alliance of Black Soldiers and White Officers* (2000), so it is surprising that the experience of nearly one-fifth of the Union army is covered in only a paragraph and a half. Later discussions of World War I, World War II, and Vietnam are similarly brief. Of course, Glatthaar repeats the commonplace that the military “became the most integrated element in American society,” but the limitations of that integration and the struggle to get there do not figure largely in the book (p. 91). There is virtually nothing on the role of women. Of course, a book this short must exclude many topics, but the question is has Glatthaar achieved the appropriate balance here?

While we are noting potential lacunae in this work, we should also note a couple of quirks and an omission. As for the quirks, there is an odd discussion of the “square” (four regiment) divisions employed by the US in World War I and then there is a glib statement that “Reagan cut taxes” (not Congress) in the 1980s (pp. 69-60, 111). The omission is a set of tables listing the strengths of the armed forces on a yearly basis. That would have helped readers with scale.

Glatthaar’s diminutive volume may inspire some big questions about the place of the military in American life. For instance, how respected is a military career in American culture? Alexis de Tocqueville, writing in the 1830s, argued that, except in emergencies, Americans honor money-making professions far above military service. Glatthaar saw something similar in his earlier book: politicians in the post-Civil War era viewed “a peacetime army as a useless organization and an unnecessary drain on tax dollars.”

The budget is larger today, but is the profession really more respected? A related question: do American veterans fare well in comparison to those who have served in other nations? What role has the military played in maintaining law and order in the US in times of strife? Did it have a role historically in maintaining slavery? What about the culture of the services themselves? What were/are attitudes concerning race and gender, sacrifice, and obedience, or guns? Should we see the military as a distinct (minority) subculture within the broader American society? And one more constitutional/administrative issue: how have presidents managed their role as commander in chief? In short, Glatthaar invites readers to think more broadly about the role of the military in the democratic US nation.

Think of this book as a launching pad for your exploration of American military history; it offers a useful—if sometimes truncated—framework for the reader’s future study. Your next stop could be more extended and sophisticated volumes, such as Allan Millette, Peter Maslowski, and William B. Feis’s *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States from 1607 to 2012* (2012) or Russell Weigley’s *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy* (1984), both of which are listed in Glatthaar’s short, but helpful, bibliography.

Notes


Five students from my American military history class—Sandro de Oliveira, Ethan Kahlenberg, Matthew Karpenko, Michael Keegan, and Paul Sterzinger—contributed to this review.

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