A Southern Military Tradition

The cadets from the Virginia Military Institute stormed across the battlefield at New Market in Virginia’s Shenandoah Valley during the American Civil War, and thereby took their place in the annals of history. That glorious, but brief appearance, however, was only a moment in the long history of the Southern military school tradition. Rod Andrew, professor of history at Clemson University, examines the development of Southern military schools. He contends that “southerners equated military virtue with civic virtue and agreed that a good soldier was a good citizen” (p. 3). The underlying reason for military schools in the South was to create responsible, respectable, young men who appreciated their role as American citizens.

Andrew admits that antebellum Southerners agreed with other Americans that an able military force was important for the protection of the Republic. He believes, however, that Southerners never allowed this feeling to overshadow the true reason for the schools’ existence, even during the decades prior to the Civil War. To be sure, this does not mean that states did not recognize the value of trained officers graduating from their schools. During the war, the graduates would provide the Confederate army with greatly needed trained officers during the conflict. Andrew, nevertheless believes that war was the least influential factor in the creation of the Southern military school tradition.

The author disputes earlier claims that the schools developed as an “outgrowth of naturally ‘militaristic’” society (p. 19). Plenty of opposition came from state governments that were uninterested in providing public funding for the institutions, while other resistance appeared from local populaces who believed that young men were too rowdy for school. School supporters, on the other hand, used this same argument for the creation of the schools. Military training could “tame” the youngsters and make mature men of them.

Postbellum Southern schools were quite different than their western and northern counterparts in their everyday activities and requirements. To meet the Morrill Act’s tactics clause, northern and western schools instructed their students in the art of drilling or tactics. Students did not wear uniforms at all times, nor did they organize in student companies. In the South, most students likely wore uniforms every day, were under strict supervision with a demerit and court-martial system, awoke to the sounds of reveille and bedded down at the sound of taps. Within the post-war Southern school, a strong dedication to the lasting memories of the Lost Cause crept into every moment, something that set them apart from northern and western schools.

According to Andrew, the “Lost Cause strengthened the Southern military tradition” (p. 47). What the Confederate soldiers symbolized was what the schools wanted their cadets to become. The spirit of the South and the pride associated with sacrificing for a larger cause meant students placed themselves in a larger context. The Lost Cause could set them apart from other regions of the nation, while simultaneously bringing them...
together under one banner. Cadets and administrators alike, contends Andrew, did not see a contradiction between their type of military life and “Americanism” (p. 66). Indeed, they were, in their eyes, reinforcing the “American way.”

Another unique characteristic of the Southern military tradition, which Andrew succinctly illustrates, is the cadets’ collective resistance to authority. The Esprit de Corps, ever-present in the best of the military, paradoxically promoted a questioning of authority. Challenging the establishment, usually school administrators or boards, over actions or rules that the students believed unacceptable, clearly represents a situation where militarism and the American belief about individual rights interplay or even contradict. Students believed that if the authorities wrongly handled a situation, it was their duty as citizens, to speak out and correct the problem. In some instances, entire student bodies threatened to walk out over a particular problem.

Andrew does not neglect the distinctive situation in which blacks found themselves when enrolling in a black Southern military institution. Unfortunately, the black schools’ unique situation suppressed their development in the pre-World War I era. Constant discrimination from many separate sources caused most black schools to lack arms for training, maintain a constantly low Esprit de Corps, and create an atmosphere of general disgust from the students toward the institution that made them drill for, as they perceived it, no real reason. Black schools lacked proper training officers, because few black officers existed. Most white Southerners, who supported the creation and sustainment of black schools, believed that it was an adequate way to “correct the flaws of the Negro (and Native American) races” (p. 91). Therefore, military institutions existed to make corrections to the inherently flawed black or Indian who, in order to become good soldiers, had to adapt to “civilized” society. Blacks and Indians, however, could never become fully developed soldiers in the Jim Crow South, because that meant being complete citizens.

As the nineteenth century closed with the Spanish-American War, the qualifications of a good patriot were redefined. Civic virtue was replaced by battlefield prowess as a necessary component of patriotism. An able combatant who was proved in battle made a good soldier, not a person who could exercise republican virtues of individual rights properly.

Andrew concludes with a careful evaluation of the Southern military schools ability to contain both militaristic and liberal thought. Southern schools tried to create capable officers for the battlefield as well proper citizens for the communities of America. Northern schools, he argues, when experiencing the clash between militarism and liberalism quickly scorned militaristic education as “un-American or undemocratic” (p. 117). Southerners, on the other had, embraced the two together and judged the merit of the individual, not the system itself.

This study is the first in-depth look into the Southern military school tradition. Andrew takes a concise, well-researched, thought-provoking stance about the development of Southern military schools. Students of the South and those of the Civil War will be delighted with this work. This reviewer believes that a more comparative study between Northern and Southern schools may have benefited this research. Although the author does compare the two in some instances, the question that arises is why that the Southern schools did develop this tradition why the North did not. The Lost Cause, as the author points out, had some effect. Readers can understand how the Southern military tradition arose, but it is difficult to ascertain why. Despite minor flaws, this work is definitely worth reading.

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