

The Relevance of Operational Flexibility

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Mark Ethan Grotelueschen. [*The AEF Way of War: The American Army and Combat in World War I*](#). (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

The newspapers today are filled with references to evolving Army doctrine in support of our national security interests. Very recently, the Army unveiled a new doctrinal publication highlighting the requirement for “nation-building” missions as well as conventional combat. This new field manual on Stability Operations comes on the heels of the groundbreaking counterinsurgency manual co-authored with the Marine Corps in 2006. Mired in Iraq, the Army jump-started its doctrine process under the leadership of forward thinkers like General David Petraeus. However, both documents have their critics arguing that the Army is headed in the wrong direction. Claiming the Army is guilty of losing focus of its “core warfighting” skills, these critics stress that the Army must be preparing for major ground combat operations. Spending too much time on non-traditional skills is, in their view, a “dangerous distraction.”¹

This is not the first time the Army has wrestled with doctrinal controversy. In a well-written book on the First World War, author Mark Ethan Grotelueschen addresses the competing views about the nature of war within the US Army at the dawn of the 20th Century. Although there are many books on American operations in France, they are generally memoirs or unit histories, all falling short of true campaign studies that tell us why the Americans fought the way they did. Mr. Grotelueschen provides us with an extensively researched book on how the Army actually prepared for the war and how it adapted its doctrine during the war to take advantage of lessons learned. It is highly recommended.

As preparations intensified for operations in France, initial training was based upon the prewar Army view that decisive results in war would be achieved by infantry forces utilizing the rifle and bayonet. This “traditional, human-centered” or “open warfare” approach valued highly mobile units of riflemen with artillery merely assisting the infantry to close with and destroy the enemy. Firepower was relegated to a supporting role with increasing reliance on massed formations and individual marksmanship. On the other hand, there were those who believed the existing doctrine did not reflect the increasing lethality of the modern battlefield as seen on the Western Front. Known as the

¹ Ann Scott Tyson, *Standard Warfare May Be Eclipsed by Nation-Building*, Washington Post, 10/5/08, p. 16.

“trench warfare” approach, this set of ideas argued for the maximum use of integrated firepower and detailed attack plans.

The author begins with an analysis of the prewar Army and how established doctrine shaped the training of the American Expeditionary Force (AEF) and shows how unprepared the US was for the war. Regrettably, the Army leadership failed to take into account the consequences of placing infantry on the battlefield in an age of industrial warfare with massed artillery and machine guns. As reflected in the 1914 Field Service Regulations, the Army adopted the traditionalist approach emphasizing “offensive combat” centered on infantry formations and minimizing the role of modernized firepower. In reality, the development of modern doctrine based upon lessons learned in France prior to the American deployment was stagnating. I found particularly interesting the author’s assertion that the 1916 Punitive Mexican Expedition was so taxing to the Army that its leaders became focused on fighting limited war and unable to anticipate conditions prevailing on the Western Front. The situation once units were deployed to France was not too much better as General Pershing’s General Headquarters (GHQ) failed to modify established doctrine as operations evolved in the field. As the author notes:

“Unwilling or unable to work outside of the existing paradigm, many senior officers treated doctrine like dogma and failed to understand that the true test of doctrine was the reality of combat and that doctrine had to be refined – even radically altered if necessary – to be useful.”

Fortunately, the AEF that crossed the Meuse in November 1918 was not the same force that defended Chateau Thierry in June. This theme is highlighted by the author’s discussion of the development, training and combat experiences of four AEF divisions: 1st, 2nd, 26th and 77th Divisions. The 1st and 2nd Divisions were regular Army units while the 26th and 77th Divisions were National Guard and National Army divisions, respectively. These units were chosen because they were probably the most active US divisions in terms of actual combat operations. The author treats each division in a separate chapter and highlights its training, personalities of the various commanders, and combat experience. Although initial training reflected accepted norms, most division officers recognized the need to reject official doctrine and rely on carefully planned operations supported by massive firepower. This realization unfortunately came after early blood letting and miscues. Subsequently, some brigade and division commanders learned the hard way and adapted. Operational innovations in all the divisions were the norm by the end of the war, often despite GHQ meddling. Marine Corps Gen. John Lejeune of the 2nd Division receives a commendatory assessment for his leadership in this regard following the terrible casualties at Soissons. Thus, at the end of the war, many AEF officers felt they had made a significant contribution to success of the allies.

As a student of the Great War, I found this small book to be an excellent historical study of American military doctrine at the dawn of the 20th century. Falling between general summaries of operations and unit/personal memoirs, it stresses the importance of operational flexibility and innovation. This is especially critical today as we struggle

with questions about the direction of the US military in the complex operational environment of the future. Any military organization, bound by tradition and capable of being a ponderous bureaucracy, is challenged not to plan to fight the last war. The key is not to focus on the details of the last conflict but to institutionalize a system to capture valuable lessons learned and to empower imaginative mid-grade officers to challenge the status quo. To paraphrase an old adage: Doctrine never survives the opening of hostilities. Thus, it is the speed of innovation or the “velocity of organizational learning and adaption”² that can be the difference between victory and defeat. The nation that quickly assesses existing doctrine during a conflict and then adapts as necessary to the ever-changing conditions will prevail. I hope the generation of current junior officers has a few like David Petraeus, John Nagl, and H. R. McMasters. This book is a remarkable addition to any military library as it provides a comprehensive analysis of the AEF in World War I as well as confirming the importance of innovation and operational flexibility.

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² Center for Emerging Threats and Opportunities, “*Compressing the Learning Curve*” in *COIN*, Best & Worse Practices in Modern Counter-insurgency, Quantico, VA, March 2006, p. 101.