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on Russell Weigley, "The American Military and the Principle of Civilian
Control from McClellan to Powell"**

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Comment on John Shy, “The Cultural Approach to the History of War” and on Russell Weigley, “The American Military and the Principle of Civilian Control from McClellan to Powell”



Charles Royster

TWENTY years ago, if you were beginning the study of an American war and if you thought that your work might contribute to an understanding of the history of the United States, not just the *military* history of the United States, you did not have many American historians encouraging you; and you had before you even fewer examples of what the finished product might look like. At the head of that very short list were Russell Weigley and John Shy. If historians of the United States have anything worthwhile to offer to the advancement of the study of the history of war as a part of general history, the undertaking is much indebted to these two men.

In the two papers that we have heard we have been given two surveys. Russell Weigley has given us a survey of presidents and their generals. John Shy has given us a survey of historians. In both cases, I understand the main theme to be showing military men acting and war unfolding under influences beyond military calculations and imperatives—indeed, sometimes in violation of those calculations and imperatives.

Weigley presents a story of sharp contrast: a long tradition of unchallenged civilian policy making in wartime, to which military commanders submitted, even when the armed forces clearly were paying the price of political decisions about how to apportion the costs of war. He sees cracks in this tradition appearing with increasing frequency in the era of intermittent smaller wars since World War II—and, we might add, in the domestic cultural wars in this country. I certainly shared Russ’s amazement while watching the Joint Chiefs of Staff and their chairman announce recently not only what presidential orders they would regard as appropriate or inappropriate, but also what kinds of military action they would regard as acceptable or unacceptable. I

was reminded of George B. McClellan's open letter to Abraham Lincoln at Harrison's Landing, Virginia, on 7 July 1862. McClellan announced his opposition to the direction the Civil War was taking—a Federal attack on slavery and on Southern society. Lincoln at once recognized the letter for what it was: McClellan's de facto declaration of his candidacy for the presidency as a Democrat. Lincoln was willing to use generals like McClellan and Joseph Hooker, notwithstanding their pretensions and ambitions, as long as he thought that he could get good military results from them. Hooker had said that the country needed a dictator. Lincoln wrote to Hooker on 26 January 1863, "Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship." There was never any serious doubt about who was the boss, as Lincoln once called himself. Weigley has good reason to predict that those days may not come back again soon. If this is true, it will be so partly because high-ranking officers believe that they have a politico-cultural constituency independent of the president—one which will enable them to be, in effect, policy makers.

John Shy has rounded up a number of historians whose works suggest that the events of wartime had origins in the belligerents' preconceptions, mores, ideologies, or traditions antedating the start of the wars in question. If I understand Shy, his recurring concern is: why did these wars reach a level of ferocity or atrocity or promiscuous destructiveness out of proportion to the apparent military objectives? And of his cultural historians he repeatedly inquires: do we need your portrait of the belligerents' culture in order to understand their wartime behavior? For my own part, I would not like to relegate what John groups under the heading of cultural history or cultural analysis to the category only of explanatory tool.

The cultural attributes of a society may legitimately be the *most* interesting subjects of inquiry, the *first* objects of intellectual curiosity, for a writer on war as much as any other historian. From that point of view, some studies of a society's warmaking might be called not a cultural approach to the history of war, but an approach through the history of warmaking to the history of cultural attributes. Of course, this need not be one's primary concern, and, if it is, one may not have much to add to the general study of the history of war. I just suggest that, with some historians, the wartime events are not the primary focus of analysis so much as they are illustrations of a larger story of a whole society.

These papers are of a piece with much of the published work of Russ Weigley and John Shy. In their writings they have repeatedly returned to the theme that Weigley calls "The American Way of War." This "American Way" can range over a wide spectrum: from the highly

unmilitary eighteenth-century colonists and their extemporized war of independence, to the modern preference for sophisticated technology, an unstoppable war machine, conclusive victory, and the enemy's unconditional surrender, which Weigley has traced back to the U.S. Army's total victory in the Civil War. Such writing has always been at pains to connect the experience of war and the behavior of American armies with the society that made them distinctive—sometimes distinctively bad, but distinctive nevertheless.

Attempts by American military men to transcend these societal limitations have not usually had happy endings. In 1875 W. T. Sherman, commanding general of the U.S. Army, sent Lieutenant Colonel Emory Upton on a two-year, round-the-world tour of inspection of the world's armies. It would not be much of an overstatement to say that Upton was obsessed with freeing the United States Army from its national idiosyncrasies—especially those arising from democratic politics and voluntarism—and making it modern and professional. The joke in Upton's day was that the U.S. Army changed the headgear of its dress uniform after each European war in order to adopt an imitation of the headgear of whichever European army had won most recently. And that was the only thing the U.S. Army changed. Upton wanted a much more thoroughgoing professionalization—more specifically, Prussianization—of the U.S. Army, and he made his case for it in his 1878 book *The Armies of Asia and Europe*. He spent the few years remaining to him at work on a history of American warmaking, entitled *The Military Policy of the United States*, which was almost a catalogue of mistakes, defeats, wasted expenditures, and unnecessary casualties arising from the voluntaristic, amateurish, civilian-dominated American way of war. Apparently afflicted with a brain tumor, Upton committed suicide in 1881, at the age of forty-two. Sherman believed that Upton had consumed himself with the desire to make an ideal, effective, efficient army—an army that would be better than the nation from which it came. Upton was an early practitioner of the cultural approach to the history of war, but he wanted to free American warmaking from the clogs imposed on the military by the country's democratic culture and institutions. While not an opponent of civilian control of the military, he certainly longed for the day when civilian interference with the professional men would be held to a minimum. Upton was struggling against the ties between the society and its way of war.

If I were asked to choose one feature of Shy's and Weigley's papers that I thought most worthy of emphasis, it would be their concern with choice and responsibility in the minds of wartime actors. Unlike Emory Upton, they are not looking for the all-sufficient system of explanation. They are looking at decisions and actions. The common thread in the books John Shy calls to our attention is the study of consequences

flowing from prevalent attitudes in wartime society and the attempts to make war validate and fulfill the societal promises implied in those attitudes. The clear implication in Russ Weigley's survey of presidents and commanders is that the threats to civilian control of the military are not primarily systemic, bureaucratic, or even professional, but are individual and politico-cultural, arising from the careers and opinions of specific officers.

These papers have an implied moral in them, an admonitory message—that generals ought not to defy their civilian commander-in-chief, and that accelerating, wholesale, out-of-control destruction is to be deplored. If there is any prospect of giving practical effect to these admonitions, that hope would lie especially in Weigley's and Shy's premise that historians are studying acts of choice and responsibility. The cultural approach to the history of war, as John Shy has outlined it, is not primarily an anthropological, relativist approach, devoted to the study of various modes of behavior that are not ranked in a hierarchy of value. That cultural approach ultimately is a moral one, in which assessment of the behavior of belligerents is, directly or implicitly, an evaluation of the ethos of the belligerents' society and government. Russ Weigley, in his long-standing concern with the control of war, and John Shy, in his concern with armies and warmaking as dimensions of political revolution, have been leading exemplars of the study of war as a study of values. Long may that inquiry thrive.