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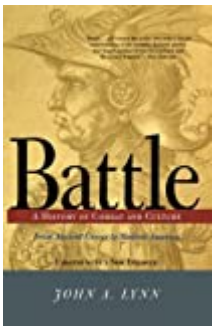

John Lynn. *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture from Ancient Greece to Modern America.* New York: Westview Press, 2003. xviii + 431 pp. $34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-3372-4.

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Let's get a couple issues out of the way quickly. First, I come to praise John Lynn's *Battle*, not to bury it. In the nature of things much of the rest of my comments will sound critical (that is after all what we do!), but fundamentally I am deeply appreciative of this work. It is insightful, wide-ranging, compelling, and it pushes the debate in the right direction. Among other things, I suspect that it is the seed of many a dissertation to come. A number of my comments are in fact "additive" or even suggested by Lynn's analysis; they are not (necessarily) intended to point up shortcomings. Second, anticipating the possible criticism of others, let me suggest that one of the reasons I enjoy military history as a profession is its generally welcoming attitude to this kind of synthetic work. *Battle* is not a monograph. It leans heavily on the work of others, but brings them together in new and interesting ways. Such synthesis has tremendous value. The point of doing detailed studies is to help reshape broader generalizations and interpretations, and *Battle* puts those detailed works to excellent use.

Lynn confronts two historiographical pendulums that he feels need pushing back. The first is the older, even long dominant, emphasis on the determinative role of technology in military history, especially in the story of western dominance. The best technology wins out, and the nature of the technology shapes the battlefield. There have always been subtleties to this line of argument, but Lynn strongly feels that determinative technology needs to take another beating. In what is perhaps a signature phrase, Lynn argues that "Armies made choices within menus of possibilities consistent with necessity and technology" (p. 124). For Lynn those choices were shaped by "culture." More specifically, Lynn defines culture as the complex of values, expectations, and preconceptions about war, which he sums up in the word "Discourse." While discourse may seem an odd word choice, it is fair enough: we would *like* to know what a society's values were, but all we have are their texts, and thus their "discourse." (Lynn departs from his reliance on texts in Chapter 8, inferring conception from action).

The other historiographical pendulum in play here is that created by Victor Davis Hanson, and furthered by John Keegan.[1] I assume that this forum is broadly familiar with Hanson's characterization of a "western way of war;" its popularity and influence at the moment are extraordinary. Lynn appreciates the cultural approach taken by Hanson and Keegan–that ideas, values, and social structures matter in shaping military behavior–but he is vehemently opposed to the universalism and continuity asserted in their argument. Lynn doesn't reject all of their conclusions, only that there has been a constant "western" style opposed to a constant "ori-

ental" or eastern style, and that the western way has been successful nearly universally. For Lynn culture is highly idiosyncratic–not "peculiar," but more in the original Greek sense of the word, a blend specific unto itself. People are creatures of their context, and thus so is their style of war. To make his point, Lynn provides eight chapters of idiosyncratic war-making. In the remainder of my comments I will try to briefly summarize the thesis of each of the first six chapters, with case-specific comments or critiques, and then at the end I will make some more general comments about Lynn's overall model. I will leave commentary for the two twentieth-century chapters for other commentators.

In Chapter 1 Lynn essentially accepts Hanson's argument that the ritualized style of Greek phalanx combat was a deliberate creation designed to fight short decisive battles, allowing their citizen-soldiers to return home. In Lynn's terms, for the Greeks Discourse virtually dictated Practice (rather than merely shaping it, as in later cases). Hanson's argument has always been the most compelling for the Greeks; it *is* his specialty. But even for the Greeks there are problems. I will avoid the technicalities of evidence here, but I would like to point out a circularity in the argument. Lynn accepts and repeats the idea that the shift to phalanx warfare begat wider political rights. The later Athenian emphasis on the fleet begat even wider democracy. But then how did they get to the decisive phalanx battle in the first place? Part of Hanson's argument is that widespread citizen participation in the army meant that battles had to be fought (to defend their farms) and that they had to be decisive (so the war would be contained in time). Part of the evidence for this argument are the peculiarities of the phalanx battle itself. But without the phalanx battle (and all its peculiarities) one does not get widespread political power, and without widespread political power, one does not get the ability of the citizen soldiers to dictate the style of the phalanx battle. Which came first? Who wanted short decisive battle in the first place, and thereby empowered the citizens by making them soldiers, who then wanted short decisive battle? Is there no sense here that the hoplite phalanx might in part have been a calculation of military effectiveness? I do not know the answer to this question, and the sources will not help us much more than they already have. It is surely true (as Lynn and Hanson point out), that the topography of Greece would seem to make the choice of phalanx warfare an odd one from an effectiveness point of view. I might suggest that we could push the culture argument even deeper: the phalanx did not create political participation, rather a profound sense of collective solidarity inherent in the *culture*, not the political structure, of the polis, created the phalanx.

For the rest of this chapter Lynn properly questions the continuity of Hanson's thesis past the Romans, although accepting the idea that the Romans did inherit the "western way of war," adding to it the invention of total war. Here of course is a major opportunity to refute Hanson that Lynn has missed. The true inventors of total war were hardly the Romans, but the Assyrians. For those who might question the issue of continuity from the Assyrians, I would respond: "Exactly! and the same applies to Greece." But the Assyrians certainly do not fit the "oriental" model of avoiding decisive clashes through indirect strategies either.

In Chapter 2 Lynn embarks on a much more speculative exploration of early South Asian and Chinese warfare. Here he is confined mainly to examining discourse, having very little solid evidence on practice for those periods and places. His main point is to deconstruct the unitary vision of an eastern way of war. The Indian and Chinese discourse and method differed profoundly, and the Chinese in particular developed an ability to fight large-scale battles with disciplined close-order infantry not unlike the supposed western way of war. Furthermore, Lynn asserts that "early" societies progressed through "stages" of military development. Early Greek, Indian, and Chinese conventions were very similar because they were in the same stage. The problem comes, Lynn says, when one compares the early Greek to later Indian (Mauryan) or Chinese (Warring States era) discourse and practices. These are, as Lynn says, apples and oranges. The better comparison is Vegetius, writing during an equivalent "stage" in western military development. There is a teleological quality to this "stage" business that makes me uncomfortable at times, especially when one is comparing hundreds, if not thousands, of years of development and still referring to it as "early," but it is a worthy point to note that Vegetius's works are not unlike Chinese ideas in the advocacy of indirect strategies. And in support of Lynn's take on Vegetius and his later interpreters (which he deals with again in Chapter 4) I offer the comments of Robert Monro, a Scottish mercenary commander serving in the Thirty Years' War, who wrote, praising Gustavus Adolphus, "we see his Majesty with clemency doth follow the example of the ancient Romans, who, of all victories, thought that victory best, which least was stained with bloud, having given quarters and service to three thousand Emperiall Souldiers, without drawing one drop of blood."[2]

With Chapter 3 Lynn really begins to come into his own in the development of his model. The basic argument is that the Practice/Reality of war in the late middle ages so diverged from the idealized chivalric Discourse, that an alternative, "perfected" reality was developed in the tournament. Meanwhile the church's appalled reaction to the reality of war led them to offer a substitute reality in the Crusades, which could be made to fit the discourse more closely. Lynn is careful to show that even here the discourse could shape reality, despite its frequent divergence, but the primary causative agent in this chapter is psychological disjuncture. "The way we fight is SO different than the way we talk about it, and fighting is SO important to our conception of ourselves, that we must create an alternative universe in which we can actually act out our values (rather than actually change the way we fight)."

In chapter 4 Lynn turns to enlightenment warfare, or as he styles it: linear war. Here he sees cultural values very strongly patterning the nature of war, in an era where practice usually has been explained by reference to developments in gunpowder technology. Lynn focuses on early modern aesthetics, the theoretical literature of the "Military Enlightenment" which advocated a scientific approach to war rooted in universal principles, the development of international codes or laws of war regulating behavior, and finally, aristocratic honor. This is Lynn's home turf, and there are a lot of subtleties here; I will wrestle with only one of them. Lynn argues that the military enlightenment avoided battle because of its bloody indecision. Enlightenment rationalism sought to deemphasize luck, and thus their cultural vision preferred the engineered predictability of siege. I would suggest, however, that a better interpretation is that there existed a kind of mental tug-of-war, between believing in and *wanting* decisive battle, but fearing that achieving one was profoundly difficult to do. Battle was *believed* to be decisive, and for that reason was usually avoided. Risktakers like Frederick and Marlborough tried it, and their inability to achieve decision has convinced us in hindsight that battles were in fact not decisive. Furthermore, Lynn hints that one preference for siege was to avoid the heavy losses of expensively trained troops in battle. Here I would like to see a comparison of how many troops were lost in a siege; not just in a storm or in the approaches (although that could be bad enough), but by dying of disease in camp.

Chapter 5 is a fascinating return to India. Lynn examines how the European colonial powers overwhelmed native rulers, not with technology (which Lynn argues was a tide floating all boats in eighteenth-century India), or with a western way of war, but with a unique combination of western techniques with Indian values of duty, loyalty and honor made manifest in the Sepoy troops, and resting on the stability and longevity of the European bureaucracies to whom they remained loyal. This is a very convincing argument, but the one aspect that needs elaboration is this last phrase. When Lynn confronts the issue of why native rulers using western style troops continued to repeatedly lose to European administrators using primarily Sepoys (thus both sides using native men trained in western techniques), the difference between them, he suggests, was bureaucratic stability. Indian rulers suffered through constant internal political flux and thus never built up the dedicated loyalty Lynn argues for the Sepoys. That is the crux of the question, but it gets only a short treatment here.

Chapter 6 addresses the shift from a Military Enlightenment to Military Romanticism in the years after the French Revolution. Lynn suggests that the French Revolution provided a kind of blank slate opportunity to impose a developing idea of the motivated citizen soldier (modeled on antiquity) onto reality. Here he again fronts the "menu of choices" aspect of cultural influence (or as I have preferred to phrase it in the past: the "horizon of possibles"). Revolution and military necessity mean change, but what kind of change? It would be interesting to compare here the choices made by George Washington and the American colonies in a similar situation. They too held a mental template of the effective citizen soldier as a replacement for the presumed ancien regime automaton, but their enactment of it followed a very different course (also, I would argue, for cultural reasons). The new French citizen army proved to be tactically "freer" from relying on individual initiative, capable of huge expansion, and also more willing to absorb the heretofore fearful casualties brought by battle. To this patriotic mix Napoleon brought professionalism and consequent success. Here Lynn dodges, I think, the question of what role patriotism continued to play (or not) in French military success under the empire. But Lynn's larger concern is how perceptions and interpretations of Napoleon's success were colored by the ongoing Romantic intellectual currents. He finds Clausewitz both an exemplar of Romanticism (although not a unique one), and rising above it. In Clausewitz's theory, heavily influenced by Romantic thinking, will, psychology, and passion reassert their position within war. The supposed timeless principles of war suggested by enlightenment thinkers are in fact time-bound (I would be interested to hear Lynn's expla-

nation of why the "principles of war" nevertheless continue to hold such currency in the modern military). I think this is a much better reading of Clausewitz than Keegan's dry, state-bound, emotionless version, but it raised an interesting question in my mind. Consider how discourse (using Lynn's terminology) sets the level of "decision" in war. In the Enlightenment, where all sides' discourse focused on tactics, a tactical loss had decisive implications. Tactical failure meant overall failure. In the maturing Romantic era (post- Napoleon), the discourse a la Clausewitz shifted the center of gravity to a higher level: "will." Under this kind of thinking the conflict must become more all-consuming and all-destructive, because to destroy the will requires a great deal more destruction than merely to destroy an army. This is the era, and the thinking, that produces attacks on the will like that of Sherman, Grant, and Douhet.

I have now gone on for much too long, and I have a great deal less to say about chapters 7 and 8 (as interesting as they are), so let me conclude with a few comments about Lynn's model. Lynn's model conceives of war as a dialectic between thinking about war and the actual fighting of war. This is an important insight, and keeping it in mind can help clarify historical thought, but I would like to make a couple of suggestions. First, it would be helpful to remember that it is a *punctuated* or episodic dialectic. Unlike other potentially dialectical processes (economics, class relations, race relations), war is not continuous. In one sense this makes his model even more functional: first we examine pre-war discourse, then wartime reality, then post-war discourse and voila, we can see causation at work. The model also demands, however, that cultural analysis be very attentive to the details of "Reality." In Lynn's formulation Reality is a little bit like a black box: discourse enters in and comes out stunned and shaking its head. Lynn is too careful a scholar to allow it to be a truly inexplicable black box–he shows us the details of a medieval *chevauchee* so we can see how it differed from discourse. But consider as an example the debate between Gerald Linderman and James McPherson over the nature (or question) of discourse/value shift in the minds of Civil War soldiers during the war. For Linderman the reality of war exerted a profound shift in soldiers' values, separating them from the home front where values remained more static.[3] For McPherson, the soldiers remained true to their discourse throughout the war.[4] To choose between these arguments requires a very careful study of the ongoing process of discourse *during* the reality of conflict. All of which is to suggest that Lynn is right about the dialectic process of discourse and reality, but also to suggest that historical investigation of how it works requires great care, and enormous archival attention. This is especially true, as Lynn points out, because there is frequently more than one discourse on each side, separated by class, gender, and eventually, profession. Each discourse would then have its own influence on practice.

Furthermore, it would seem that one must ask what gives values/discourse(s) staying power in the face of the seemingly overriding "military necessity"? It has often been argued that calculations of necessity lead to the discarding of pre-war conceptions and values–this is particularly true when speaking of restraints on violence within war. Lynn repeatedly argues, however, that values retain their ability to shape the practice of war even within the cauldron of war. I obviously think he is right, but we should investigate each context to determine why those values retain their salience–surely it is more than cultural inertia? In my own work I have suggested that the need for legitimacy provides a practical impulse to the retention of values of restraint in war. Waging war according to expectations (i.e., according to the discourse) helps keep the uncommitted on your side, or at least keeps them on the fence.[5] As Lynn himself advises in the war on terror: "the task is to defeat the terrorists with as little harm as possible to those who are sympathetic to their cause and to the usually far larger neutral population" (p. 327).

Finally, in the end technology may get too short a shrift here. Again, I think Lynn is pushing the debate in the right direction, and he may be overstating his case to make a point, but one still gets the nagging feeling that western dominance in technology at certain key points made the crucial difference. William McNeill's formulation in *Pursuit of Power* seems at least partially right: western capitalist development accelerated technological development beyond the capacity of many non-western societies.[6] There seems little doubt of its significance, for example, in many of the continental conquests of the late 19th century.

But I had come here to praise, not bury. *Battle* stands as a challenge to the rest of us to work more carefully in building links from thought to tool to action. That has always been the challenge, and Lynn has helped provide a useful new model for the task.

[1]. Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989); Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001); John Kee-

gan, *A History of Warfare* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993).

[2]. William S. Brockington, ed., *Monro, His Expedition With the Worthy Scots Regiment Called Mac-Keys* (Westport: Praeger, 1999), p. 202.

[3]. Gerald F. Linderman, *Embattled Courage: The Experience of Combat in the American Civil War* (New York: Free Press, 1987).

[4]. James McPherson, *For Cause and Comrades: Why Men Fought in the Civil War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

[5]. Wayne E. Lee, *Crowds and Soldiers in Revolutionary North Carolina: The Culture of Violence in Riot and War* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2001).

[6]. William H. McNeill, *The Pursuit of Power: Technology, Armed Force and Society Since A.D 1000* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1982).

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