

**The Changing Nature of  
Civil-Military Relations and Military Leadership**

## ***War, Military Leadership, and Democratic Civil-Military Relations: 'The Stab in the Back' — The Endurance of a Dubious Idea***

by Donald Abenheim

It is currently fashionable—though misinformed and ultimately counterproductive—to insist that the Global War on Terror marks a complete departure from the political and strategic paradigms that obtained before 11 September 2001. However novel the casual student of current events might find the irregular combat in the Hindu Kush and along the Tigris and Euphrates—in which Muslim fighters or Arab insurgents resist coalition special operations forces and mechanized infantry in protracted, low-intensity conflict—things look rather more familiar from an historically informed perspective. Well-known civil-military tensions are in evidence among senior political and military leaders and so, unfortunately, are the key myths and legends that surround their interactions with each other and with a pluralistic political and strategic culture.<sup>9</sup>

King among such myths reigns the “stab in the back,”<sup>10</sup> a legend in which armies seldom, if ever, suffer defeat on a battlefield for military reasons. According to the “stab in the back” myth-makers, the fighting men and women have battled their way to the very edge of victory, or at least they can see success from their current position. They are not thwarted by, say, faulty military leadership, defective command or

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<sup>9</sup> See: Carl von Clausewitz, *On War* (Princeton, 1976), pp. 75ff; Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* Vol 1, (Munich, 1970), pp. 13ff.; Gordon Craig, “The Political Leader as Strategist,” in Peter Paret et al eds. *Makers of Modern Strategy* 2d ed. (Princeton, 1986), pp. 481-509; 905-908; Eliot Cohen, *Supreme Command: Soldiers, Statesmen, and Leadership in Wartime* (New York, 2002).

<sup>10</sup> On the German version of this idea, which forms the basis for this essay, see: Friedrich Hiller von Gaertringen, “‘Dolchstoss’ Diskussion und ‘Dolchstosslegende’ im Wandel von vier Jahrzehnten” in *Geschichte und Gegenwartsbewusstsein: Festschrift fuer Has Rothfels* (Goettingen, 1963), pp. 122-160; Herfried Muenkler et al. *Siegfrieden: Politik mit einem deutschen Mythos* (Berlin, 1987).

morale, flawed strategy, or operational weaknesses arising from within an army itself. Rather, defeat comes from behind one's own lines, from enemies within the ranks and especially from the seats of political power and from far-away and fickle civilian society. These unreliable quarters sap the fighting front by such means as the checks and balances of pluralistic government and the international system of states; pacifism; socialism; an undue emphasis on the needs of civil society even in wartime; or the role of religious minorities and other un-martial groups for whom profit or narrow self-interests rise above soldierly virtue, honor at arms and patriotic duty. Whatever the mechanism, the non-military powers that be manage to stab the army in the back, stopping it short of triumph.

The stab in the back legend, thus, serves both as a flourish of morning-after blame deflection and as a chestnut of military mistrust of the political and social context of war and strategy. To be sure, civil-military strife attends all exercises of organized violence except perhaps Clausewitz's total war, in which unrestrained armies, wield mutually annihilatory strategies by way of first blows that escalate into a perfect storm of violence. Especially now that the United States finds itself in a deadly struggle with its various Islamic enemies in a war with few discernable front lines, civil-military issues have become more urgent in 2004. The year's headlines list some of the ingredients of a simmering calamity: military prison torture scandals, ground force reservists' involuntary tour extensions, and recriminations about missing armor plate from the battlefields of the Iraqi insurgency against the main supply routes of coalition forces. While these episodes make the nightly news, the nature of this civil-military experience is poorly understood in this country and abroad. Such misunderstandings in a time of strategic stress and political strain in the Global War on Terror augur difficulties to come in U.S. democratic civil-military relations and thus for the country's alliance partners.

The stab in the back as a unitary explanation for strategic reversals arises when the divergence between elite, expert proclamations of strategy and explanations of the character of war in the ideal tear

themselves to pieces amid reverses, setbacks, and rigors of actual war.<sup>11</sup> The basic problem is that how one imagines war must be waged at the outset (i.e. in the sense of an ideal form of war, or of Clausewitz on war on paper, as it were) differs greatly from how it is indeed waged in the face of the forces inherent to war and its political purpose. Thus arises the cognitive dissonance between political and soldierly elites and various social groups that seek a remedy in myth and legend to shift responsibility to its improper locale. There unfolds a kind of strategic transference of guilt in the sense of Freud, if such an assertion is possible in this context.

This divergence of expectations and experience of the reality of war, the capacity of military proficiency to master all that might emerge from the face of battle, and the striking power and durability of military force in the face of setbacks all appear to exacerbate this strategic and civil-military “disconnect” in a democratic body politic. Crucial here is the fear in the minds of policy-makers and especially of senior military figures that a pluralist civilian population will go soft in the face of the sacrifice of war. Less visible is the uncertain basis of military professionalism among its leading lights—that is, the tendency to distrust civilians as inherently less vested of such secondary virtues as bravery, loyalty, and self-sacrifice than are soldiers.

Iraqi insurgents of 2004 recall their anti-British forbearers of the early 1920s; they also might be identified with Tito-ite or Soviet partisans in 1944. The present differs less still from certain pre-existing assumptions within politics and society about the capacity of strategic expertise and armed force to master a transformed kind of warfare, which bears rather too great a resemblance to the conflicts of imperial decline and European withdrawal from overseas outposts of the twentieth century.

The weight of the past bears down on the civil-military thought and practice that surrounds this struggle in international as well as domestic politics. The rancor of the 2004 election, the discord in the international community, and the increasing domestic insecurity in the United States

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<sup>11</sup> On the dual nature of war in Clausewitz, *On War*, pp. 22-23; 78-89; on friction, pp. 119-121; on psychology, pp. 186ff.

have historically explicable bases—and resolutions. Indeed, the more one reflects about the first four years of policy and war in the twenty-first century<sup>12</sup>—and as one necessarily turns a skeptical eye to the airless pronouncements of revolutionaries of military affairs and transformers of military doctrine and orders of battle—the more one senses that an historically informed comparison of trans-Atlantic civil-military relations may offer some generalizations that illuminate rather less the content of change, but more what has remained unaffected.

One must now treat how the soldier in the state within mass politics has come into fatal domestic conflict in the worst of times; moreover, one must explore the pathological response of myth, partisanship and the formation of legends in political culture in the face of crisis. In this, the idea of the stab in the back remains a force of special virulence. The risks and perils of the present strategic era demand that a new generation once more acquaint itself with the destructive career of this idea.

### **The Old New Stab in the Back**

For example, an e-mail message, reportedly from an unnamed major of the U.S. Marine Corps, serving in the staff of the Multi-National Corps in Baghdad, made the rounds in the early fall of 2004. In it, the author suggested that mainstream U.S. press accounts of the war after the war suffered from an undue pessimism, if not an outright defeatism. That is, as this correspondent from the front put it in the title of his message: “Doom & Gloom about Iraq’s future....I don’t see it where I am

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<sup>12</sup> For example of writings that suggested change in the 21<sup>st</sup> century based on Israeli military experience, see Martin v. Creveld, *The Transformation of War* (New York, 1991). Journalistic accounts of the 2003-2004 Iraq war widely read despite their tendentious tone: Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, (New York, 2004); Seymour Hersh, *Chain of Command*, (New York, 2004). The manner in which the advocates of the so-called revolution in military affairs or so-called military transformation sought to bend strategic reality to their pre-conceived notions of politics, technology and war comprises a subject for fertile inquiry that lies outside the scope of this essay.

sitting.”<sup>13</sup> The major continued: “Everything Americans believe about Iraq is simply perception filtered through one’s latent prejudices ....”<sup>14</sup> One won’t know the truth until one actually stands on the banks of the two ancient rivers and faces the reality of the occupation and the insurgency—and incidentally, the former is proceeding well against the latter with rebuilt schools, repaired sewers, and flourishing commerce. These successes shine beyond those areas of die-hard Sunni and non-Iraqi resistance by “dead enders” of the Ba’athist stay-behind organization and the thuggish decapitators led by the Jordanian Au Musab Al-Zargawi. But the folks at home only hear the bad news.

The remedy, according to the major, is more reality for everyone. To amplify his point, he invoked a John Wayne film about the Vietnam War, which, in all likelihood, was made before he was even born. “If you haven’t seen, or don’t remember, the John Wayne movie, *The Green Berets*, you should watch it this weekend. Pay special attention to the character of the reporter, Mr. Beckwith (the Journalist in the movie). His characters [sic] experience is directly related to the situation here. You’ll have a different perspective on Iraq after the movie is over.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, in this cult-classic flourish of pro-war propaganda that hit U.S. theaters the same year as the Tet Offensive, the once nay-saying newsman Beckworth comes to recognize the validity of the U.S. role in Vietnam once he sees the actual war through Colonel Kirby’s combat-honed eyes. Thus apprised of the truth, he is freed of the baleful influence of Mario Savio, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, or any of the other hippies, yippies, free-speechers, sitters-in, or collegiate malcontents who prefer free love to a free South Vietnam and who foment domestic dissatisfaction to undermine the vital U.S. mission in Southeast Asia.

In contrast to Beckworth’s salutary transformation, the fourth estate today persists in its seditious negativity, which provides “fodder for our enemies to use against us and against the vast majority of Iraqis who

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<sup>13</sup> A copy of the text of the e-mail appears at: <http://realpolitik.us/archives/001909.php> or [http://marx.mine.nu/the\\_truth.htm](http://marx.mine.nu/the_truth.htm), both sites last checked on 17 MAR 2005.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. The character is actually called George Beckworth, and he was played in the movie by David Janssen.

want their new government to succeed.”<sup>16</sup> Thus, the major concludes, U.S. national morale is put at risk by “sensationalized stories hyped by media giants, whose #1 priority is advertising income” and journalistic partisanship that ditches the truth in favor of left-wing prejudice, “as Dan Rather and CBS News have so aptly demonstrated.”<sup>17</sup> The man on the street should leave soldiers alone to do their difficult work—or, better yet, suit up and do his part for the country and the cause or at least get some real facts from real experts before he ventures an opinion. The implicit truth here is simple: Enthusiastic and preferably unquestioning support represents the highest duty of a citizen toward the professional soldier. If the civilian falters in this role, he stabs the soldier in the back and the country in the heart with his insufficient patriotism.

It is striking that the writer, fully involved in this conflict that purports to be unlike anything before it, should reach for parallels in an old movie about a by-gone war. There may be something to be said about the hegemonic iconography of Hollywood and the immortal John Wayne in the national mind within the image of war. More salient, however, is the persistence of traditional perceptions of the civil-military past and present among professional soldiers, including doubts about the strategic efficacy of democracy and its institutions, as well as an ideal of war divorced from, or superior to, civil society. The e-mail and the circumstances in which the author wrote it—and thousands of Americans presumably read it—suggest just how little has changed, even since 11 September 2001, from the civil-military record of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While a noteworthy Jewish broadcaster of a formerly leading television news organization (and *bete noir* of the American right) plays the traditional back-stabber in the civil-military cast of characters of this marine’s e-mail, a long-dead film star in an imaginary role bulks large as an arbiter of strategic truth in a war of which the author likely has no direct experience other than in partisan myth and legend. Yet the myth and legend of feckless

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. The reference to Dan Rather refers to the apparently empty assertions in the midst of the 2004 election campaign as to President George W. Bush’s gaps of service in the Alabama Air National Guard in the early 1970s.

civilians losing the Vietnam War, and particularly the specter of the stab in the back, resonate with today's soldier. The chimera of the perfidious civilian has survived the years to breathe more flame into new-old civil-military tensions.

### **Soldier and Politics**

The same flame stoked the Third Reich—and the Holocaust. In this connection, another set of movie images merits consideration. Within the soaring walls of a new multiplex cinema on the Potsdamer Platz, only a couple of hundred meters from the remnants of Hitler's bunker, young Berliners of 2004 could see the film, *Der Untergang*,<sup>18</sup> a historically precise (within its limits) dramatization of the Nazi leadership's last weeks in World War II. On the one hand, the events of April and May 1945 seems a very long time ago. The depressing locale is now mostly obscured by low-rise office buildings of post-modern, granite-and-steel design. Bustling, if middle-brow, retail and a few official houses now fill the space that comprised the gardens of the chancellery, open to the nearby Tiergarten, which later became the glaxis of the Berlin Wall. A few hundred meters beyond to the north, in the direction of the Brandenburg Gate and the Pariser Platz, now stands the controversial Holocaust memorial. On the other hand, the movie offers a very current account of the climax of the civil-military misfortune caused by the doctrine of the stab in the back in twentieth-century Central Europe; this idea that became a dogma, in turn, formed one of the central tenets of National Socialism in its historical self-justification as well as in the civil-military structures of the Nazi state. The film depicts the final disintegration of national command and the waging of war in the worst case; that is, when the key Nazi assumptions about the German defeat in 1918 and the civil-military ideals of totalitarian ideological and state power finally crashed to earth in the middle of a devastated Berlin. The ultimate union of the most

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<sup>18</sup> Joachim Fest, Bernd Eichinger, *Der Untergang: Das Filmbuch* (Reinbek, 2004); the foregoing film was based on: Joachim Fest, *Der Untergang: Hitler und das Ende d. III. Reiches* (Berlin, 2003); Traudl Junge, *Bis zur letzten Stunde: Hitlers Sekraeterin erzahlt ihr Leben* (Munich, 2002).

fanatical of National Socialists, soldiers and total war in its most absolute form leaves a strong impression on the viewer.

This catastrophe of the soldier in the age of mass politics and of command in war in the era of the nation state raises the issue of the putative unity of command that existed in the old regime (i.e. before 1800) and that broke apart with the advent of the nation-state in a bureaucratic and mass political epoch from the end of the eighteenth century to the dawn of the twentieth century. This phenomenon of European state, society, and arms requires elucidation as the prelude to the civil-military relations of total war and what has followed thereafter into the present era.<sup>19</sup> The cultish obeisance to unity of command at the highest level in totalitarian regimes arose more or less logically in the evolution of this institution from the early modern era to the present—and is, therefore, highly germane for the subject at hand.

The manner in which the military profession became disconnected from its dynastic political and social basis in the course of revolutionary and Napoleonic era and then secured a professional and national foundation in the industrial age thereafter enabled skeptics, doubters, and critics in uniform—and their allies in mufti—to conceive the idea of the stab in the back as the guiding principle of civil-military relations in the modern era. They insisted that the home front, the civilian realm of society as well as civilian makers of policy, invoking their conventions, convictions, and constitutions, refused to allow soldiers to fight in the manner appropriate to the so-called timeless verities of war. These realities of the battlefield, its masters said, stood above and beyond those of civil society and the rule of law. The army professed to know best how to preserve and protect the state and the nation. Thus, the dynastic and aristocratic disdain for the lesser estates in society that had been visible in the civil-military relations of the old regime and the revolutionary period underwent a transformation whereby professional

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<sup>19</sup> On the role of theory and military professionalism as visible in the career of the Swiss Henri de Jomini, who became the leading light of this dominant school of strategy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see: Jon Shy, “Jomini” in *Makers of Modern Strategy* 2d ed. pp. 143-185. On the civil-military transformation of politics and society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, see: Michael Howard, *War in European History* (Oxford, 1976) pp. 75ff.

soldiers of the nation-state reacted to the rise of mass politics with a contrived mish-mash of pseudo-aristocratic professional attitudes that they applied to a new political cosmos of the nation, an industrialized society of growing class conflict, and break-neck social changes.

In its extreme form, the doctrine of the stab in the back suggested that civilians caused defeat by dint of half-heartedness, subterfuge, calumny, and dishonesty of the worst kind, while the soldier selflessly gave his life for national survival and glory. Already by the middle of the nineteenth century, this idea had taken hold in various forms in such countries as Prussia/Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States.<sup>20</sup> This idea later became a dominant principle of political and strategic thought in the twentieth century as the age of total war among the leading nation-states unfolded with brutal results.<sup>21</sup>

Nazis thinkers joined the myth of national unity in 1914 with the putative stab in the back for a single explanation of defeat in 1918 and then sought to organize party and state institutions against the enemies within on a comprehensive scale. The dual-pillar concept of party and armed forces meshed with the ideological organization of state and

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<sup>20</sup> On Prussia/Germany from 1848, see: Gordon Craig, *Politics of the Prussian Army* (Oxford, 1964), pp. 217ff; Manfred Messerschmidt, "Die politische Geschichte der preussisch-deutschen Armee" in MGFA eds. *Handbuch zur deutschen Militaergeschichte* (Munich, 1979), vol. II, pp. 9ff.; on the impact of French colonial warfare on civil-military relations, see: Douglas Porch, "Bugeaud, Gallieni, Lyautey: The Development of French Colonial Warfare," in *Makers of Modern Strategy*, pp. 376-407; for the example these ideas in the thought of the US military theorist, Emory Upton, see: idem. *The Military Policy of the United States* (New York, 1968) pp. vii-xv; Russell Weigley, *Towards an American Army: Military Thought from Washington to Marshall* (New York, 1962), pp. 100-126; on the impact of British colonial warfare on "stab in the back" thinking in the UK, see Hew Strachan, *The Politics of the British Army* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 74-117; 161-194.

<sup>21</sup> On the impact of the World War I on German politics and society: Michael Howard, *The First World War* (Oxford, 2002); in greater detail, Wolfgang Mommsen, *Imperial Germany, 1867-1918* (London/New York, 1995); Steffen Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat: die "Ideen von 1914" und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im EWK* (Berlin, 2003); Roger Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War, 1914-1918* (Cambridge, 1998); Heinz Hagenluecke, *Deutsche Vaterlandspartei: die nationale Rechte am Ende des Kaiserreiches* (Duesseldorf, 1997).

society for total war, the creation of an internal security organization, and even genocide served to preclude a future stab in back by a geopolitical and racial revolution of conquest. While the Hitler regime initially refrained from as drastic measures as embraced by the Soviets in the subordination of the army to the party, by 1944, the national leadership had reached a similar posture, in which mass mobilization, ideological purity, all reached a furious climax in the last months of the war.<sup>22</sup> These measures did no good, and rather meant the needless deaths of hundreds of thousands.

### **Strategic Idealism Gone Wrong**

Attendant to the stab in the back, there also persists an image of an ideal form of strategy and military institutions that are liberated from the messiness of pluralistic politics and also able to render combat like a sand-table exercise, without any of the liabilities and distractions inherent to modern societies or to the frictional nature of war itself. The men and women who hold such misapprehensions about war and strategy are usually neither stupid nor malevolent; typically, they arrive at their positions by way of a well-intentioned, if unattainable, strategic idealism. The aspirations to a more perfect warfare is part of the intellectual history of the stab-in-the-back legend, with proponents whose theories and practices date back at least two centuries.

For example, in 1951, after President Harry Truman relieved General Douglas MacArthur amid the Korean War, the five-star general testified to Congress about strategic theory within his conception of the soldier and politics visible in a kind of ideal form of war: “There is no substitute for victory.”<sup>23</sup> He put forward an encapsulated version of the

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<sup>22</sup> The Nazis depicted the 20 July 1944 plot as a failed redux of the events of the summer and fall of 1918, but this comparison fell wide of the mark. See: Peter Hoffmann *The History of the German Resistance, 1933-1945* (Cambridge, Mass, 1977), pp. 507ff.; Karl Heinrich Peter ed. *20 Juli: Spiegelbild einer Verschwörung* (Stuttgart, 1961).

<sup>23</sup> Walter Millis, *American Military Thought* (Indianapolis/New York, 1966), pp. 481ff; D. Clayton James, *The Years of MacArthur: Triumph and Disaster, 1945-1964* (Boston, 1985), pp. 621-640.

U.S. way of war, namely a strategy of annihilation that had been present in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and that formed an essential condition for the adherents of the stab in the back to prosper. In particular, once war began, MacArthur asserted, conflict became solely the realm of the soldier-expert. Civilian makers of policy simply had to await the final outcome, lest they gum up the war-making proposition with their treaties, conventions, constituents, and qualms.

MacArthur presented himself as the embodiment of the U.S. military ethos for an adoring and assertive Republican Congress enraged by Truman's Euro-centric strategy of limited war and undue credence to British reservations about coalition strategy in Northeast Asia. To MacArthur's congressional audience, this policy of half-measures, tantamount to a stab in the back, had been rendered unbearable by the president's sacking of the war hero right at the moment when the United States might secure a major victory in Korea (and not just some grey treaty that left half the peninsula in Communist hands). In the minds of his devotees, MacArthur's Inchon offensive had brilliantly restored the initiative to the West, despite the ultimately deleterious role that this operational advance played in the strategic near-collapse of the UN campaign a few months later, in the face of the Chinese assault across the Yalu river.

Though Truman may have seemed to his critics to have stabbed MacArthur in the back, in fact, MacArthur's inability to grasp the global strategic dimension of the war beyond the operational realm—linked with his partisan intervention in favor of the Asia-firster Republicans through his open criticism of Truman's containment strategy—had doomed his political efficacy as a commander. MacArthur refused to consider the Korean War within the context of all U.S. interests in the Cold War. One might argue—though not very convincingly with the domestic and international bills for World War II fresh on the president's desk—that, from a military perspective, a war with China would have been winnable in 1951, before Mao Zedong solidified Communist rule in the country and before the Chinese successfully detonated their first nuclear bomb. But politically, such a war was neither desirable nor plausible to Harry S Truman. The U.S./UN coalition fighting in Korea teetered on collapse in 1951;

drastically expanding the operation over the thirty-eighth parallel likely would have pushed it over the edge, with ramifications for the Cold War balance however the United States proceeded with the war. This difference of opinion between the two leaders quickly revealed its most fundamental point of contention, namely civilian control of policy and strategy. It ended with the primacy of (civilian) politics and, therefore, with General MacArthur's ouster.<sup>24</sup>

MacArthur's idea that war somehow existed outside or beyond the realm of domestic politics and alliance strategy was surely the common property of his generation, although many Americans today erroneously ascribe this theory solely to him. Like many of his contemporaries, MacArthur would have encountered such notions in the course of his own military education. That is, MacArthur, whether he was conscious of it or not, took a page first from the writings of the Swiss theorist Antoine Henri de Jomini,<sup>25</sup> who postulated grand tactics of a single offensive style as the highest form of strategy. Jomini further theorized that generals best knew how to fight wars and whose theories paid little heed to the civil-military implications of revolutionary and Napoleonic warfare.

In similar stead stands the Prussian-German chief of the general staff and theorist Helmuth von Moltke,<sup>26</sup> whose doctrines in the first half of the nineteenth century propagated the idea that policy should bow to the needs of strategy in a narrow sense. In Moltke's ideal political and social system, once the artillery spoke, men in frock coats should silently await the outcome of battle before they raised their voices once more. He asserted that diplomacy and domestic politics should allow the commander free rein to secure victory—in other words, these other

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<sup>24</sup> John W. Spanier, *The Truman-MacArthur Controversy and the Korean War* (Harvard, 1959); D. Clayton James et al. *Refighting the Last War: Command and Crisis in Korea, 1950-1953* (New York, London, 1993), pp. 196ff.

<sup>25</sup> See citations in note 12.

<sup>26</sup> Stig Foerster, ed. *Moltke: vom Kabinettskrieg zum Volkskrieg* (Bonn, 1992), pp. 630-632.

(and somehow separate) political goals should remain subordinate to the military purpose.<sup>27</sup>

Moltke's writings formed the basis for the education of generations of military professionals and represent a milestone in the "stab in the back" phenomenon. His writings perpetuated a kind of skewed civil-military dogma, which established the basis in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the early twentieth century for the further perversion of his ideas amid the flowering of the stab-in-the-back syndrome in its full virulence once the misfortunes and yet greater trials of total war befell central Europe.

The similarity of Moltke's ideas and those of his U.S. contemporary, soldier-theorist Emory Upton, suggest themselves for the theme at hand.<sup>28</sup> Upton gave a voice to the disgruntled U.S. military professional at the end of the nineteenth century, as the United States cut its standing army following the Civil War and otherwise asserted its civilian interests at the expense of the fighting men. Upton further spoke for those in search of a modernized, expansible army with modern bureaucratic brains on a machine-age European model—and with a professionalized military cadre in charge. He deplored the U.S. civil-military system as wasteful, venal, corrupt, enfeebled, unaccommodating of military genius, and apt to extend conflict artificially to gain political capital at the cost of soldiers' blood. In this connection, the U.S. Army before 1861 and especially thereafter in the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. On this issue generally, See Gordon Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army*, (New York, 1964), pp. 160ff. This dogma emerged in the wake of civil-military contentions with Otto von Bismarck in the 1864, 1866, and 1870-71 Prussian campaigns of German unity. In these years and the decade that followed, the needs of Prussian-German diplomacy for national unity within the system of European states collided with strategic-operational dictates of the grand battle against Prussia's foes. Conflicting goals of policy and strategy diverged sharply amid the paradigmatic civil-military contest between the chancellor and the chief of the general staff about the battlefields of unification ( i.e. the fortifications of Düppel in Schleswig-Holstein in 1864, the aftermath of Königgrätz in Bohemia and Austria in 1866, and the siege of Paris in 1871) and the need for a stable international system once the fighting had come to a halt. Of more recent origin, Michael Schmid, *Der "Eiserne Kanzler" und die Generale* (Paderborn/München, 2003).

<sup>28</sup> See works in note 13.

decade of the 1870s, had been stabbed in the back by the civilians in the first instance by misconceived combat that wasted lives and treasure; and in the second instance, by the executive and legislative branches that then allowed the U.S. armed forces to languish in peacetime.

When the world war came in 1914 the civil-military predisposition to the “stab in the back” thus existed on all sides and quickly became an organizing idea, especially for the continental powers.<sup>29</sup> The results were swift and doubly fatal in their effect when compared to the nineteenth century. Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg upheld the political influence of strategic restraint so long as the idea of civil peace endured in a Germany united within against its foes in the east and west. However, the strategic reverses suffered by the Central Powers in the stalemate on the western front and the limited efficacy of the eastern campaigns until 1917 fostered the polarization and radicalization of domestic politics. This political chaos, in turn, cleared the path in 1916 for the rise of the 3. Oberste Heeresleitung.<sup>30</sup> Thus collapsed the remaining restraints of a policy of moderation as domestic politics paid horrific tribute to the machine age battle field. The army sought to reorganize and rationalize the fighting front, the economy and society in a technocratic reform from the ground up to recapture the killing fields for the central powers. The victors in the East of 1914, Paul von Hindenburg and Erich Ludendorff,<sup>31</sup> emerged as the dual figures of total war in the ideal, in which ideological mobilization went hand in hand with national *Gleichschaltung* of society and economy for victory.

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<sup>29</sup> Konrad Jarausch, *The Enigmatic Chancellor: Bethmann Hollweg and the Hubris of Imperial Germany* (New Haven/London, 1973), pp. 308ff; Holger Afflerbach, *Falkenhayn: Politisches Denken und Handeln im Kaiserreich* (Munich, 1994), pp. 190ff.

<sup>30</sup> Gerhard Ritter, *Staatskunst und Kriegshandwerk* Vol. III, pp. 251ff.; Chickering, *Imperial Germany and the Great War*, pp.65ff.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Rauscher, *Hindenburg: Feldmarschall und Reichspräsident* (Vienna, 1997); Wolfgang Vennohr, *Ludendorff: Legende und Wirklichkeit* (Berlin/Frankfurt, 1993); Franz Uhle-Wettler, *Erich Ludendorff in seiner Zeit* (Berg, 1995).

The culmination of this effort, which in key aspects formed the pattern for Nazi practice two decades later, lay in the strategic-operational blow against the West in March 1918. The *coup de main* widely missed its mark, as the local successes failed to result in the strategic collapse envisioned by the German side and instead blew back against the exhausted Central Powers. The general defeat followed quickly at the end of the summer of 1918, culminating in an armistice negotiated while the army was still in the field, which fostered the legend in its final, most vicious form.

The search for the causes of the war and the final collapse of imperial Germany began in parliament a year after the armistice in the chaos of defeat and international banishment for the Germans. Quickly, the question, to say nothing of the various answers, assumed the atmospherics of fierce partisanship. The civil-military results proved disastrous for the course of modern central European history. Hindenburg's testimony to the parliamentarians—to the effect that a British general had told him that the army had been stabbed in the back—followed a reactionary pattern common to his kind since 1848. This well-honed conspiracy theory saw the roots of defeat at home among parliamentarians, socialists, and Jews.<sup>32</sup> Weakling civilians had failed to live up to the lofty strategic goals of the 3. OHL. The field marshal's testimony provided millions of returning soldiers with a hate-filled rationale for defeat that, in Hindenburg's upside-down world, was snatched from the jaws of imminent victory by a civilian society that had lost its nerve.

The onus must rest anywhere other than on him and those in field-grey and carmine-red facings, who are the myth's heroes. Hindenburg's thesis on the German defeat in World War I shifted the blame well away from those who had truly wrecked Germany's alliance politics and isolated the country, hoped too much for the operational level of war to revolutionize strategy, and who generally misunderstood the requirements of a modern nation-at-arms to wage total war as effectively as the western democracies had done. The German army thus emerged from defeat in 1918 with its reputation in tact, if

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<sup>32</sup> Rauscher, *Hindenburg*, pp. 211-212. See also citations in note 3.

unreflected. However, Hindenburg's violation of the historical record provided the intellectual basis from which Ludendorff's political allies of the 1920s and 1930s set about constructing a political and social order incapable of stabbing the army in the back—and disinclined to stop the legend from proceeding to its murderous extremes in the Third Reich.

### **The Present and its Dangers**

Although the stab in the back suffers from its association with anti-democratic thinkers and practitioners, and despite the myth's lack of factual support in any historical case study, the idea of the stab in the back has not been dormant in the United States, even in recent years. Indeed, the Indochina war in the popular imagination of more than a generation later seems wholly explained by the stab-in-the-back paradigm; the anonymous marine's e-mail shows just how lively this strategic misunderstanding of the Vietnam War remains all these decades later. The election campaign of 2004 contained the revival of the polemics and vitriol of the late 1960s and early 1970s and lost nothing in comparison to the ill feeling and name-calling that surrounded Hindenburg's testimony to the Reichstag in November 1919.

All too many observers seemed to accept at face value a misrepresentation of the strategic realities of 1967 and also of 1991 as regards the termination of the first Gulf War on what in the minds of some had been an incomplete basis. That is, George H. W. Bush had stabbed General Norman Schwarzkopf in the back when "the politicians" halted the ground and foreclosed the final decisive battle against Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard. Such an un-substituted victory would have been the overture to the liberation of Iraq. Instead, the coalition settled for the lesser measure of what it wanted in the first place: Iraqi soldiers out of sovereign Kuwait. This imagined, stabbed-in-the-back formation of legend in 1993 must now appear to many as being somewhat more sobering and troubling from the perspective of late-2004 and the difficulties of the actual liberation of Iraq.

Since 11 September 2001, the stab in the back has reasserted itself as a leading idea in the political debates of the United States and its allies; the civilian leaders, particularly those figures who would restrict the armed forces with standard procedures or international law, find themselves painted as part of the problem. Such a development should hardly be surprising. Various critics of all stripes sought political profit by questioning those responsible for failures of defense against the September 11<sup>th</sup> assaults, just as detractors of Franklin D. Roosevelt and of U.S. defense policy before World War II came to the United States ascribed the Japanese attack on U.S. Pacific forces to the president's subterfuge and sleight of hand in the years 1938-1941.<sup>33</sup>

In a similar vein, critics in the United States have asked: Who let Osama bin Laden escape from the Afghan badlands of Tora Bora at the close of 2001? Who was to blame that the successful lightning maneuver operation of the initial campaign in Iraq during the spring of 2003 presently became bogged down in a botched occupation and incipient insurgency from the summer of 2003 onward? In this latter connection, supporters of the war can assert that ex-Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki stabbed Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz in the back (or in the front) with the controversy over the size of the post-conflict constabulary force in Iraq. Conversely, Shinseki can be seen by his critics as a politicized, partisan back-stabber against the democratically legitimated civilian control of the U.S. armed forces. Meanwhile, polemicists cast Jacques Chirac and Jacques de Villepin as back-stabbers of the liberators of 1918 and 1944 while also being egotists of appeasement and a statecraft of anti-U.S. spheres of interest. The stab-in-the-back legend can accommodate most personalities and situations. Perhaps it endures as a chestnut of civil-military friction in part for this versatility.

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<sup>33</sup> Justus Doenecke *Storm on the Horizon: the Challenge to American Intervention, 1939-1941* (Lanham, 2000).

## Conclusions

An observer of late-2004, transfixed by scenes of carnage in Iraq and Afghanistan, might ask what all of this history portends for the present and future. Plainly we are elsewhere than the Fuehrerbunker in the spring of 1945 or in the emperor's headquarters at Spa, Belgium, in the fall of 1918. Why bother at all, since we live in a brave new world of counter-terror amid a revolution in military affairs that has rendered moot all that has gone before? Are we not at a similar point in the development of organized violence as in the early 1950s, when observers claimed that the thermonuclear bomb had rendered the history of war quite silly for serious minds? But just as the assumption that nuclear weapons had transformed the face of war beyond all recognition proved false within a brief time, so too are the claims that the post-11 September 2001 world has departed wholly from all that has come before.

While there has grown up among some in the political class of the United States a fondness for imperial warfare amid the Global War on Terrorism—complete with highly romanticized notions of the *pax Britannica*—this neglected dimension of the stab-in-the-back requires more reflection. The British scholar Hew Strachan has pointed out the manner in which warfare in the empire politicized soldiers in a very distinct manner.<sup>34</sup> The model was the British soldiers in the Indian army and the civil-military conflicts of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which were later duplicated in such other imperial garrisons as Palestine, Malaya, and Borneo. The soldiers of these distant campaigns carried their partisan ethos into the domestic politics of the United Kingdom, as likewise happened with France and the United States in the 1950s and even until the present day.

Today's stab in the back civil-military legend-making and the shifting of blame derives from a misunderstanding of the nature of war, the over-estimation of tactical operational outcomes of the battlefield too narrowly defined, and the incapacity by professional soldiers or defense civilians to address the requirements of national mobilization and the mechanisms of pluralism in the age of national and even imperial

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<sup>34</sup> Strachan, *Politics of the British Army*, pp. 74ff.

warfare. In other words, the same misconceptions continue to sustain the myth. In light of the record of the past, however, one might hope for a steeper upward slope in the proverbial learning curve. The consequences of these failures have been truly appalling in terms of strategic error and wasted lives.

Professional soldiers must be aware of the dangers inherent in bad habits and bad history amid the needs of military leadership in the present. The past offers plenty of guidance; the future rather depends on the thoughtful consideration of it. For one example, military planners in and out of uniform with a modicum of historical understanding must recognize the limitations of strategy conceived solely in strategic operational terms. There is always more to a war than the belligerents' battlefield capabilities. More broadly, planners must understand the limits of annihilationist strategy, particularly as actual combat develops and changes in its military means and political ends. Civil-military relations will remain a source of tension, particularly in times of national peril. The United States' democratic institutions can continue to withstand such crises, as long as they are not "secured" or streamlined beyond all recognition in an over-hasty response to reversals on the frontlines.

Similarly, the stab in the back is always there, promising a guiltless association with the inevitable setbacks in and of combat. Military and political thinkers alike must resist the lure of the stab in the back if they are to secure the full fighting power in a democracy. To separate the armed forces from the social and political context at least serves to weaken the overall effort by disconnecting the elements of the U.S. system of governance and policymaking. The ensuing polemics certainly do little to allow us to wage the war more effectively. At worst, the stab in the back myth launches the polity down a steep and perilous path that leads away from the liberal democratic ideals and practices at this nation's heart. Rather than a promiscuous assignment of blame, the present requires a very sober, realistic assessment of vital ends and precious means, all of which is ill-served by a recourse to a manner of thought discredited by the past.