

BATTLE: A HISTORY OF COMBAT AND CULTURE FROM ANCIENT GREECE TO MODERN AMERICA

by John A. Lynn

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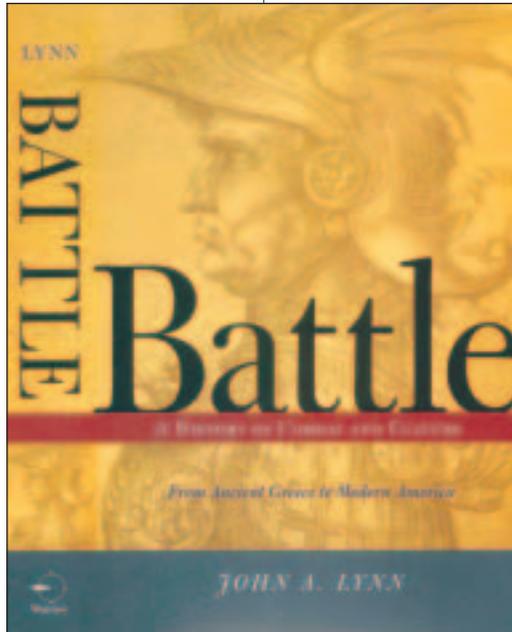
Reviewed by Colonel Mike Capstick

John A. Lynn, one of America’s most eminent military historians, has entered into the debate surrounding a “western way of war”. In his new book, *Battle: A History of Combat and Culture From Ancient Greece to Modern America*, Lynn takes on the conventional wisdom advanced by academics such as Victor Davis Hanson that there is a western way of war inherently superior to all others which will result in inevitable victory. In this elegantly written volume, Lynn takes a long view of the history of warfare and has broadened the Eurocentric analysis common to English-language historians by including case studies drawn from Chinese, Indian and Egyptian experience.

In *Battle*, eloquent arguments are presented against the school of military historians that depends on “technological determinism” for its interpretation. Lynn makes a convincing case that “...choosing, integrating and exploiting new weaponry remain[s] essentially a conceptual task” which is defined and determined by cultural factors. Even more important, he uses his case studies to demonstrate the dichotomy that exists between a society’s way of thinking about war (“Discourse on War”) and the reality of combat. The lessons of history, according to Lynn, are clear: nations and military forces that fail to adapt an idealized Discourse on War to reality are risking tactical, operational and strategic failure. The reader is brought to a clear understanding of the disconnected notions bedeviling armies that adhere to a ‘heavy metal’ discourse on war – ideas like “overwhelming force” – as they try to cope with the new face of war in the 21st century.

Each of Lynn’s eight chapters deals with a different set of cultural factors affecting both the Discourse on War and its reality. Although each chapter could stand alone, they all fit neatly together to build *Battle*’s narrative one piece at a time. The chapters focusing on South Asian,

Chinese and Egyptian military culture are truly original contributions to the literature. Those that cover more familiar ground – Classical Greece, Europe and the Second World War in the Pacific – effectively challenge the “technological determinists”, and offer vivid illustrations of how armed forces either reform themselves and their Discourse on War, or risk failure. In all of the chapters, Lynn has raised the bar for historians; his approach takes military history beyond the traditional use of archival material to include penetrating analyses of philosophical works and contemporary literature. At the same time, he has avoided the weaknesses that are so obvious in works that emphasize social history and popular culture – but seem to forget that it is really the battle that counts. Lynn clearly understands complexity, and, despite the sweeping historical arc covered in this book, he has proven to be a master of the art of simplifying without being simplistic.



The Epilogue (“Terrorism and Evil”) and the Appendix (“The Discourse and the Reality of War: A Cultural Model”) are of significant value – both to the academic and to the military professional. In the Epilogue, Lynn makes a convincing argument that the developed Western nations must rethink “...our military policy, the purposes of our armed forces, and the nature of war itself.” His discussion of Terrorism – a term that he capitalizes – challenges the strongly held assumptions that usually guide military theorists and planners. The Appendix describes his model of the complex interaction between the “ideal and the real in warfare”. This model is the conceptual underpinning for Lynn’s thinking, and is probably the most important

part of the book for senior officers, public servants and ‘think-tank’ academics involved in planning military transformation.

Battle: A History of Combat and Culture is history at its best. It is readable, rigorous, and, above all, relevant. This book is a ‘must read’ for senior military professionals and civilian analysts. It deserves a prominent place on professional reading lists, and in the curricula of advanced professional military education establishments.

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