

# STRATEGIC VISIONS MAGAZINE

Newsletter for the Center of the Study of Force *and* Diplomacy

Strategic Visions Volume 9 Number 2 (Fall 2008)

Thirty-Five and Still In Its Prime: Russell F. Weigley's *The American Way of War* and the Military Classics Seminar

by Jeffrey K. Bower, Program Analyst, Defense Logistics Agency.

As someone who is fast approaching eligibility for retirement from the Federal government, I regard thirty-five to be a young age. For a non-fiction book, especially one about military history, being thirty-five years old is often considered ancient. The discovery of new documents or fresh interpretations can rapidly transform a book from authority to antiquity. It was a pleasant surprise then for one who had been an undergraduate and graduate student of Russell F. Weigley to see a notice that the Military Classics Seminar would be using their September meeting to discuss his *The American Way of War*.

As described by one of its co-secretaries, the Military Classics Seminar is an organization – some members might label it a disorganization – of individuals interested in the many phases of military history. Established in 1958, it consists of academics, historians from the official history offices in the Washington area, active duty and retired officers and enlisted personnel, retired intelligence officers, and interested citizens.

The seminar normally meets on the third Tuesday of each month during the academic year, September through June, at the Fort Myer, Virginia, Officers Club. Sessions consist of a reception that normally begins at 5:30 p.m. followed by dinner at 6:30, a formal presentation at 7:30 by a speaker knowledgeable in the field about one or more books selected by the members during the previous year, and audience discussion at the end of this talk. As Weigley was a life-long Phillies fan, one cannot help but think that he would have been pleased that the seminar put *The American Way of War* in the leadoff spot on September 23 to start the 2008-9 season.

True to the format of the seminar, there was time for the close to 60 people present to meet, greet and eat, and then get down to the purpose of the evening. There was another pleasant surprise in that the welcoming remarks were made by none other than our old friend and CENFAD supporter, Dr. Randy Papadopoulos of the Naval Historical Center. Following recognition of people attending the seminar for the first time Dr. Papadopoulos introduced the speaker for the evening, Dr. Edgar F. Raines of the U.S. Army Center of Military History.

Dr. Raines opened his talk with a detailed overview of the book, paying particular attention to Weigley's use of the terms first coined by Hans Delbrück, "strategy of attrition," and "strategy of annihilation." According to Weigley, a strategy of attrition is where one tries to erode the will of

an opponent to discontinue conflict. It does not rely on large, climactic campaigns and battles to subjugate the enemy, but rather on numerous small and continuous actions to compel the enemy forces to meet one's definition of victory. The strategy of annihilation, on the other hand, is directed at nothing less than the complete destruction of the enemy's military. In citing published reviews of the book by such renowned historians as Jay Luvaas and Stephen Ambrose, Raines acknowledged that the terms can cause confusion for the reader. He freely admitted that the differences between the two strategies can be difficult to grasp, especially as there are instances in the book when Weigley mixes them together. Events like the American Civil War, where both sides followed strategies of annihilation that could only be achieved by attrition, or the Indian Wars, where a strategy of attrition resulted in annihilation, make it difficult for even an astute student of history to appreciate the nuance that Weigley tried to inject.

Regardless of this superficial paradox, Raines went on to list what he thought makes *The American Way of War* a classic. His opinion was that Weigley's broad views, impressive insight, and style of writing make the book "a joy to read." And though Weigley does a "send-up of the snobbery of historiography," it is Raines' contention that he was, in fact, "Too good a historian to be a first rate theorist." It was this latter statement that Raines used to segue into his mild criticisms of the book. It was his contention that if there is fault to be found with the book then it is that it deals solely with the nation-state period of American history, only specifically addresses national strategic policy in the post-World War II era, and concludes prior to the end of the Vietnam War.

It was these criticisms that stirred discussion following the presentation. As the book's subtitle is *A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, there were questions as to why Weigley did not include the wars and conflicts of the colonial era. Furthermore, some in the audience felt that the book was incomplete because it did not discuss historically unique American military policies, such as the role of the citizen-soldier, civilian control of the military, or the on-and-off use of African Americans as combat troops. The response to these detractions was that Weigley wrote *The American Way of War* for the Macmillan Wars of the United States Series and that the colonial period had been covered in that series by Douglas Edward Leach's *Arms for Empire: A Military History of the British Colonies in North America, 1607-1763* and Weigley's own *History of the United States Army*. Furthermore, though writing in 1973, Weigley did capture an essence of American strategic thought that continued in force through the Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq.

All too soon, the seminar had to close for the month. That did not stop attendees, however, from staying overtime to continue conversation about Weigley's views. Members referred to other books, cited official United States doctrine, or recounted their personal stories to make their points for or against what Weigley wrote. The back-and-forth was all in good humor and accomplished a goal that Weigley himself would surely have endorsed: to have people think and talk about what the American way of war is and what it should be. Did all of this lead to a great revelation that all could agree would be the next step in American military policy? Alas, the answer was no. But what we did arrive at a consensus that even after thirty-five years *The American Way of War* is still as much of a heavy hitter as when it was first published.

