

THOUGHTS ON CAVALRY, GUERILLA WARFARE AND THE FALL OF EMPIRES¹

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Marian Smith in her 1951 article dealing with warfare among North American Indians, complains that warfare is perhaps one of the least studied areas of human activity. This paper is prepared to repeat the complaint, suggest some possible reasons for the situation, and explore in brief some principles which seem useful in analyzing the effect that warfare and military activity have had on the course of human history.

One of the most important reasons for this neglect, it seems to me, has been the overuse of the words "invasion" and "conquest" to explain every change in head form, shift in tool type, new ceramic technique or abandoned settlement which has occurred. However, now that the anthropologist is conscious of the dynamics of culture change it appears that we can profitably devote some portion of our attention to war as an element in culture history. I suggest that by failing to consider warfare with the same attention we have given to kinship, economics, irrigation and ritual we have allowed a number of simplistic explanations to creep into culture-historical thought which are based on misconceptions about the nature and dynamics of war.

Smith suggests that cultural bias has made it difficult to assess warfare objectively and I can but agree with this idea. War is an activity which produces a profound paradox. Although it requires skill and training and is apt to produce lasting and important consequences, it is an activity in which all men, or at least all European and American men, no matter how inexperienced, may take part. It is indeed a paradox that anyone seems to feel qualified to take up arms or to enter into a love affair, while few people would as lightly undertake many far less significant activities.

At the same time, there also seems to be a tendency among Western scholars to relegate discussion and investigation of war to the professional military man . . . a tendency stemming, perhaps, from the European tradition of an exclusive military aristocratic class.

The nature of the data available to students of military behavior certainly must contribute to the situation. One would, I am sure, be hard pressed to find in the world's literature an unbiased view of a single war. Reporters of wars appear to report from three viewpoints. The victor (or his scribes) may use the account to enhance his own prestige by describing the power of the enemy, his own close relationship with God or his own brilliance. The defeated, on the other hand, must explain away his defeat, using such excuses as the barbarity of the victor, surprising technical superiority, the treachery of allies, corruption of political figures or incompetence of subordinates. The memoirs of military figures in our own Civil War or of Axis and Allied leaders in World War II provide us with a complete spectrum of excuses for failure.

The third viewpoint, that of an observer who is not involved on either side of a conflict, which should be objective, is perhaps the least valuable. Such reporters inevitably disparage and discount the wars of foreigners, and campaigns of non-European nations have been haughtily written of as the senseless skirmishing of savages, without plan or reason and certainly beneath contempt.

As the title of this paper implies, I am here concerned with more specific problems . . . actually two problems which can be examined independently as they bear on yet a third question.

I am not suggesting that every case of a civilization passing into the hands of an alien people can be explained in simple military terms, but I do believe that where a military element is present we must give it full weight. Culture history is replete with instances where centers of civilizations have fallen to or been brought under the control of ruder, less civilized peoples. The civilized Near East was successively overrun by Guttitas, Kassites, Syrians, Assyrians, Hittites and Persians . . . each of these peoples barbarian when compared to their victims. Mycenaean Greece gave way to the Dorians. Civilized Crete fell before less civilized Greeks. Egypt was subjugated by the rude Hyksos. The Shang Chinese were replaced by the unlettered Chou Chinese. The great empire of the Sung was overwhelmed by Mongol herdsmen. In the New World, the Valley of Mexico appears to have been the scene of repeated encroachments by barbarian tribes.

This repeated situation presents another paradox. Civilized societies are, compared to barbarian tribalists, seemingly better prepared for war. A stable agricultural basis, relatively greater control over a larger population, specialization permitting a military class, superior technology, all of which are part of a civilized society, would seem to make such a society invulnerable to the homogeneous, less stable tribal society.

One way of explaining away this contradiction has been to rely on a literary device . . . to speak of savage hordes or "wolves from the fold"; phrases which contribute to a picture of irresistible waves of uncivilized warriors sweeping with flame and sword into the lives of the helpless civilized peoples. Such explanations may still the question, but they provide little understanding of the process.

My purpose is not to criticize literary style but to examine some attempts at analysis. One of the most common attempts at analysis has been the technological explanation. If, for instance, the Hittite possessed iron swords and his enemy did not, this fact is used to explain his military success. So simple and clear cut is this kind of explanation that one is tempted to accept them without question. However, the European conquest of the New World provides us with ample evidence that the possession of metal armor, and even firearms, are not guarantees of victory, even when confronted with an enemy using stones. Perhaps the most dramatic example of this was the stinging defeat inflicted upon De Soto in 1539 at the hands of the Tascalusa Indians. De Soto, a veteran of Pizzaro's campaign against the Peruvians, was forced to retreat with a large number of wounded when the Indians fell upon his force after a seemingly friendly welcome. Certainly the technological superiority of the

Spanish over the Indian was even greater than the difference between bronze and iron in the ancient Near East.

Perhaps the most common explanation given for barbarian success in the Old World is the use of the horse, either as cavalry or to pull chariots. The second use of the horse, as a puller of chariots, can be discounted as a key factor when we consider that the vehicle appears to have been most important as a conveyance for warriors into the line of battle where they dismounted and fought on foot. Recorded attempts of the Persians to use the chariot as a combat vehicle were failures, even when the chariot was equipped with scythes on the wheels. There is no argument that as a conveyance the chariot was an important factor in ancient warfare, but only inasmuch as it brought well trained, equipped and courageous soldiers into the line of battle.

Cavalry, on the other hand, would seem to be a vital factor. Time and again in history, mounted troops have been victorious against infantrymen. However, the question would appear to be more complex than whether or not the horse was employed. Let us look for a moment at a description of such a contest. Lamb, recounting the Mongol invasion of China, says: "The Mongol cavalry divisions nosed out the scattered forces of the empire, composed mainly of foot soldiers and rode them down making havoc with their arrows shot from the back of a hard running horse into the close packed ranks of infantry."² What this stirring sentence does not make clear is that the Mongol divisions owed their presence inside the Great Wall, not to their horses but to the fact that the Mongols had won the support of the half Sinatized border barbarian tribes to whom the keeping of the gates had been entrusted. (I must add, however, that Lamb does not ignore this political fact, but that it is obscured by the more colorful and dramatic phrases such as those quoted.) Moreover, what would appear to have been a whirlwind campaign takes on a totally different cast if one remembers that the Mongol conquest of China required 45 years to complete.

A more certain indication of cavalry superiority is perhaps the victory of the Persian, Darius, over the army of his brother Cyrus. Cyrus had enlisted the famous Ten Thousand Greek infantrymen as mercenaries to serve as the center of his line, with lightly armed Persian infantry and cavalry on their flanks. Darius had in his force a large body of cavalry which swept away the inferior cavalry and Persian infantry of Cyrus, forcing the Greeks to begin their historic retreat. Despite his victory, Darius was never able to break the ranks of the Greek hoplites and, though it retreated, the phalanx was never broken. Before we credit the cavalry with too large a share of this victory, it is well to remember that seventy years later another Greek phalanx, this time supported by dependable allies, defeated the Persians at the battle of Plataea.

In 53 B.C. the Roman Legions under Crassus were routed by a numerically inferior force of Parthian cataphracts and light mounted archers. The issue here, when the battle is examined, is not horse against infantry, but logistic superiority. The Parthian general had been defeated before by Romans who waited out showers of arrows, safe behind shields and armor, until the Persian quivers were empty and then carried home an irresistible charge.

This time he carried reserve missiles into battle on camels so that the legionnaires were never able to take advantage of the empty quivers, which this time never became empty.

One more example; in 1066 the mounted knights of Normandy defeated the pedestrian Saxons at Hastings. Some historians explain the victory in terms of the Normans' use of the horse. Others have claimed that the Saxons were exhausted by an all night march . . . and periodically British students, weighted down with chain mail, have made the march to prove or disprove the theory.

However, an examination of the tactical situation makes other explanations unnecessary. Stalemated by the Saxon entrenchments, the Norman horseman made a retreat, real or feigned. When the undisciplined Saxons smelled victory they surged into the field, scattered, without protection on their flanks, and were promptly overridden by the Normans. The same device was used by the Spartans and Alexander more than a thousand years earlier.

What each of these examples proves is that victory is most often explained in tactical rather than technical terms.

A roster of the great military commanders reveals the same fact. No great military leader has ever contributed substantially to military technology. Alexander added a few feet to the spear of the hoplite and increased the armor of the mounted Companions. No major change in weapons or equipment was developed under the Romans. The armies of T'ang dynasty, which campaigned as far as India, marched with the ko, a pike which was the basic weapon of the Shang soldier 2,200 years before. Charlemagne may have been among the first European knights to use the stirrup, but if so, it was after he was proclaimed emperor. Frederick the Great had arms no different from those of his enemies, but he did develop radically different troop dispositions. Napoleon contributed a field gun mounted on wheels and pulled by large teams, an innovation adopted so rapidly by his enemies as to be neutralized. In short, military success appears to have little or no correlation with superior or different technology, unless of course such a difference is vast; and in such a case factors of economics, social organization, population are probably more important than military factors.

Nonetheless, there remains the repeated success of mounted troops over infantrymen to be explained. If we cannot apply simple technological explanations, it seems that the kind of analysis which has been useful in other fields of anthropological investigation may be helpful. Military institutions represent only a single facet of a society. Let us look again at the contrast between a barbarian and a civilized society. One of the clearest differences is that tribal society tends to be more homogeneous with each man participating in most of his culture's complement of male activities. In a society where war played a significant role, this means that every man was a warrior. The civilized group, on the other hand, tends toward class stratification and toward specialization of these classes in different spheres of activity.

One of the possible specializations is the development of a military class . . . although this may vary from the rather broad base which we see in the Near East and Greece to the exclusive military aristocracy of Medieval Europe and pre-reformation Japan. Or the military arts may become the property

of all freemen in a society, but a neglected property, utilized only in war-time. In either case, a great deal less of the potential of a civilized community is devoted to the arts of war. Military classes are seldom, if ever, the lower classes. Although such levels may supply the men for the ranks, those who are devoted to perfecting themselves in the military arts and sciences are inevitably the upper classes. It is among those with wealth we find men able to purchase the armor and weapons of the professional soldier. Thus, if the horse is part of the cultural inventory and used in war, it is not surprising that the well-to-do upper class military specialist will be mounted. In a tribal society with every man acting as a soldier, if the horse is present, it seems probable that every man will be mounted in battle. The coordination of wealth and a mounted military class can be seen today wherever cavalry units are maintained. Because of the expense of animals and the time required to train troopers, horse units are kept at full strength, while infantry units tend to be kept understrength, the ranks to be filled in time of war by volunteers or conscripts.

What this discussion would suggest, then, is that whenever mounted troops appear in battle, the horsemen are apt to be the best trained and best armed soldiers in the field.

I have already mentioned the military organization of the Near East and Greece which could be likened to the militia or the National Guard of later periods. In China and Japan we see much evidence of conscription and military corvée at a relatively early date. The Westerners, farmers or landholders, we can assume reacted to wartime service in the manner of later day militiamen . . . willing to fight short term wars, but unwilling to be drawn from their homes and primary occupations for any length of time. Two Japanese sayings illustrate the attitude of the Asian conscript: "The wretchedness of a soldier is not different from that of a slave" . . . "of all the forms of forced labor that of a soldier is most bitter." Can we be surprised that it took soldiers thinking as these sayings suggest eight hundred years to subdue the wild Ainu and savage Kumasu tribesmen?

It should be remembered, however, that societies which did not develop mounted tactics (and in which the horse usually served only minor purposes in other aspects of life), men like the Scots, Swiss and the Japanese after the thirteenth century . . . societies in which no status symbolism was assigned to the mounted fighter . . . have developed infantry organizations which had little to fear from mounted troops. But such units were rare. Perhaps the rarest of all military commodities has always been a well trained and well disciplined infantry unit. The reasons for this I think are clear from the foregoing material.

The point that I am trying to emphasize is that when we examine the question of relative military power between civilized and uncivilized groups we must examine the tactical situation as it related to other socio-cultural factors.

Some writers have tended to discount totally the military factor in a situation in which a barbarian society overcomes a civilization. To assign the downfall of the civilization to internal weaknesses inherent in the

structure of the civilization fails to meet the question of how barbarians could defeat civilized men in battle, and, by implication at least, suggests that barbarians could not have brought about the fall from which they benefit. Wittfogel, for instance, says: "the tendency toward disorder and uprising grows. In the case that neighboring nomadic societies have reached a point of relative concentration and high aggressive striking power, the decadent irrigation civilization is overrun by nomadic conquerors . . . either way however, it is an inner crisis mechanism which loosens up the oriental social structure and prepares it for civil war or defeat from the outside" (emphasis supplied).³

It is not my purpose to dispute this kind of analysis . . . I would like to point out, however, that this and other explanations based on some structural crisis mechanism overlook the possible effect that barbarian military activity may have had on the decline of the civilization. Here we face the question directly; how can an uncivilized, technologically inferior, poorer, barbarian society have an important military effect on a civilization in its' strongest phase and thereby contribute the crisis which makes it possible for an eventual barbarian victory?

The key to the question is summed up, I think, in a sentence by Adcock in his series of Sather lectures delivered on this campus several years ago. Discussing the Greek defeats and victories in wars against the tribal peoples on their borders, and the changes this brought about in Greek tactics he says: "They had different ways of life and different ways of waging war."⁴ The point that he was making was that different cultural traditions include different views of warfare both in its aim and its methods, and when two differing traditions meet in battle, victory is apt to go to the side having the tradition best suited to the situation. Traditions of warfare also have traditions of defeat and victory so that two armies following different war traditions may well not agree who won or lost a battle. . . without such agreement no war can come to an end.

Now let us look at the military situation of ancient civilizations in the light of the above remarks. In the Eastern civilizations, as pointed out earlier, there was a dependence on conscript peasants to fill the ranks of infantry led by nobles in chariots (using the bow, which in the Far East seems to have played an important role as a military status symbol as well as a weapon). With the abandonment of the chariot this leadership role was taken over by mounted men; particularly in Japan at a later date. In the Near Eastern civilizations the armies appear to have been composed of farmer-soldiers, militiamen, under the direction of men who might best be called specialists in leadership. At Lagash, for instance, in addition to the general levy there was a special corps of men who tilled the lands of the temple, maintained irrigation ditches, and who in time of war were armed by the temple and led by their peacetime foremen. This tradition of a special corps continued in the Mediterranean until at least the time of Alexander; and in the Middle East it often played a role in economics. The primary tactic of such militia forces was what Adcock described as a mass duel. Soldiers in ranks met other soldiers in ranks with swords, shields and spears. Those who fell in the front rank were replaced by men from the rear ranks. Victory depended on weight, often the weight of a running charge . . . if possible the weight of a downhill charge. There was little room for generalship in such a battle. A leader could dispose his troops,

but once the battle was joined, maneuver on command was almost unknown. Moreover, wars between city states had to be fought in periods of agricultural inactivity. The field of battle was determined by the desire of both armies to avoid receiving a downhill charge. The defending forces preferred to fight near home so that in case of defeat they could retreat to the shelter of the city walls. Such an army, protected by its armor and shields, standing beside neighbors under the walls of the city, would have been more than a match for barbarians, even mounted barbarians. These men were used to a short battle, terminated when one side broke ranks and ran. There was no pursuit. How would the rush of a barbarian force appear to such men? A sudden rush, a shower of arrows or javelins, just as those described in the battles between Athens and the Aetolians, followed by a withdrawal . . . would more than likely appear as a victory to the militiamen of the ancient city. On the other hand, the barbarian, satisfied perhaps with the casualties inflicted, the livestock run off, or outlying houses burned, might well be celebrating victory himself.

Let us now picture the effect of a continuing series of barbarian raids on a civilized society. It must have been impractical if not impossible to call up the entire militia to meet each band of barbarians as it appeared . . . particularly barbarians who refused to fight in a "civilized manner." Two solutions seem probable. The special corps could be called up to meet sporadic raids. The consequence, of course, would have been that the public works tasks assigned to the special corps would remain undone. The other solution would be a conscious or unconscious reorganization of the armed forces so as to deal with barbarian tactics more effectively. While this might increase the effectiveness of the civilized army against barbarians, it would weaken it when confronting the armed forces of other civilized groups. This situation is admittedly speculative, in the absence of specific investigation for the Near East, but we have evidence for the Far East which would seem to support the hypothesis. In the closing years of the Shang Dynasty there are records of a number of successful expeditions against western barbarians. These expeditions are recorded as successes, but do not seem to have extended the domain of the Shang Kings. One is forced to speculate that perhaps the barbarians didn't know they had been defeated. Creel has suggested that these victories taxed the Shang potential to the degree that the less civilized Chou people were able to overwhelm the Shang empire and adopt Shang culture.

Four centuries later we read these two poetic laments of peasant soldiers in the service of the by now civilized Chou kings. "What plant is not wilting? What man is not taken from his wife? Alas for us soldiers . . . treated as though we were not fellowmen". . . and: "we cannot rest or bide/ because of the Hsien-yun. The year is running out. But the king's business never ends. . . How should we dare stop or tarry. In one month we have had three alarms." One does not have to look for a crisis mechanism to account for discontent and rebellion . . . the raids of the Hsien-yun, victories or not, provide us with an answer.

The situation of continual guerilla warfare harrying the borders of a civilization might well contribute to discontent and disorganization, but why, we may ask, did the relationship change from one of raiding and resisting

to outright conquest on the part of the barbarians, a conquest culminating in the adoption of civilized culture by the barbarians. Generally this is explained in terms of a growing envy on the part of the barbarian have-nots when confronted with the wealth and comfort of the civilized haves. What is forgotten is that the life of the nomad seems always to have an appeal to at least some sedentary agriculturalists. We must remember that the civilized society had, in addition to the problem of attacks from the outside, to deal with the problem of defection to the barbarians. Lattimore has pointed out that the Great Wall of China was built as much to keep Chinese in as to keep barbarians out. Certainly we have seen in recent North American history the willingness of Indian farmers to abandon agriculture for equestrian hunting. We also can point to the willingness of farmers of the civilized Europe and the eastern seaboard of North America to flee the comforts of civilization for the freedoms of the frontier. Such population shifts from civilized to uncivilized areas carried civilized techniques, attitudes and aspirations to the barbarian, and one can suggest that in time the influence would be felt among the barbarians themselves who would decide to conquer and adopt, rather than raid and exploit.

What I have suggested in the foregoing paragraphs is that barbarian tribal peoples would probably have been able to use guerilla warfare as a successful offensive tactic against an agrarian civilization. We are apt to view guerilla warfare as the hopeless tactic of native peoples resisting European invasion, or conquered populations harassing oppressors. In either case, guerilla tactics seldom are able to obtain a victory without the support of conventional forces. However, when employed against an agrarian civilization, fought in the fields which were the very foundation of the civilization's economic system, there is every reason to believe that it would be effective, leading to a break down of irrigation and other public works, reduction of agricultural output, growing unrest and dissatisfaction among the peasant soldiers. Its effectiveness would be reduced as empires formed, based in part of trade, with its more easily defensible ports, market cities and way stations, and able to incorporate peoples of varying military traditions and develop a more flexible military force. The shift from agrarian and commercial empires to industrial civilizations reduced guerilla war to a tactic which, while it might be employed with some success as evidenced in Algeria,⁶ Malaya and Indo-China, cannot bring about victory without conventionally organized forces which can strike directly at the factory cities, defended by regular military forces. It is this inability of guerilla forces to strike the final victorious blow, and the differing traditions of war in which both sides disagree on exactly what constitutes a battle won or lost, which in part explains the continued fighting in Algeria today.

While I have suggested a number of explanations of recurring events in history I would prefer they be viewed as suggestions and not dignified as hypotheses. What I have in fact tried to do is to illustrate the importance of examining the nature of war in the same detail and depth, and with the same methodological rigor as is devoted to other aspects of culture.

ENDNOTES

- (1) This paper, in a slightly abbreviated form, was read at the Fourth Annual Kroeber Anthropological Society Meeting, May 21, 1960, Berkeley, California.
- (2) Lamb, Harold, 1952, Genghis Khan. Garden City, p. 87.
- (3) Wittfogel, Karl A., 1939, Theory of Oriental Society in Fried, M. A., Readings in Anthropology, Vol. II, New York, p. 110.
- (4) Adcock, F. E., 1957, The Greek and Macedonian Art of War. Berkeley, pp. 117 ff.
- (5) Waley, Arthur, 1946, Chinese Poems, London, pp. 28-29.
- (6) The Roman recruitment of Germanic warriors, the Chinese alliance with border barbarians, the Spahi, janissaries, sepoys, Indian and Philippine scouts and KATSUA are examples of this tendency to recruit soldiers of various backgrounds for special service.