

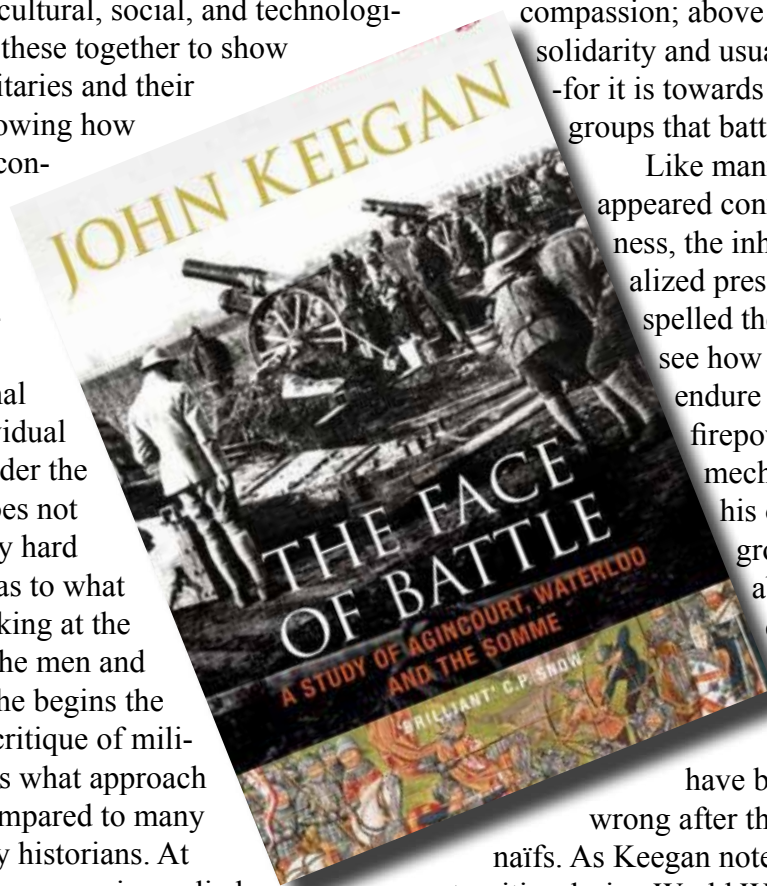
Book Review

The Face of Battle

A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme

Keegan was a brilliant historian who had an uncanny ability to cast a strategic eye over centuries of political, economic, cultural, social, and technological changes and weave these together to show how they impacted militaries and their conflicts, while also showing how militaries and military conflict in turn affected these other areas. In a way, this book takes Keegan out of his comfort zone, having him turn his rigorous, rational gaze toward three individual battles and put them under the microscope. Keegan does not disappoint, asking many hard and relevant questions as to what happened and why, looking at the commanders, but also the men and the environment. Still, he begins the work with a sweeping critique of military history and outlines what approach he preferred to take, compared to many other renowned military historians. At the end of the work, Keegan again applied his sweeping strategic view to draw some conclusions about the trend of battles and society and what that meant for the future of warfare.

Keegan sums up his approach to the study of battle -- What battles have in common is humanity: the behavior of men struggling to reconcile their instinct for self-preservation, their sense of honor and the achievement of some aim over which other men are ready to kill them. The study of battle is therefore always a study of fear and usually of courage; always of leadership, usually of obedience; always of compulsion, sometimes of insubordination; always of anxiety, sometimes of elation or catharsis; always of uncertainty and doubt, misinformation and misapprehension,



usually also of faith and sometimes of vision; always of violence, sometimes also of cruelty, self-sacrifice, compassion; above all, it is always a study of solidarity and usually also of disintegration--for it is towards the disintegration of human groups that battle is directed. (p 303)

Like many others before him, Keegan appeared convinced that the destructiveness, the inhumanity, and the industrialized pressures of modern warfare spelled the end of war. He could not see how any human being could endure the increasing noise, speed, firepower, destructiveness, and mechanization of warfare. In his own words, "the suspicion grows that battle has already abolished itself." (p 344) Of course, those others who predicted the end of war, from the Kellogg-Briand Pact through Francis Fukuyama,

have been proven so tragically wrong after the fact they all appear as naïfs. As Keegan noted when analyzing the casual atrocities during World War II: "It must be counted as one of the particular cruelties of modern warfare that, by inducing even in the fit and willing soldier a sense of his unimportance, it encouraged his treating the lives of disarmed or demoralized opponents as equally unimportant." (p 329) (I myself might quibble with this, as soldiers that thought highly of themselves were often the most likely to treat opponents mercilessly, but I'll let Keegan speak in his own voice here.) It is too bad Sir Keegan is no longer with us; we would benefit greatly from his contemporary interpretation of how warfare actually developed after the Vietnam conflict (the era when this book was published).

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Warfare has forked. One fork has indeed embraced the mechanized, industrial, inhuman route by going with armed drones. In fact, this route seems to be leading the way the original Star Trek episode "A Taste of Armageddon" presaged, comfortable war fought far away without any of the inconveniences coming home; well, except for the dead. The other fork led away from pitched battles, with those would-be belligerents recognizing their inability to face major powers on the open field and opting for terrorism, guerilla tactics, cyber war, and other such asymmetrical methods. Indeed, the reality Keegan saw when he wrote this book--the frightening possibility of warfare between the world's major nuclear powers, conflicts that would lead to losers but no winners, is still a threat with which we live. But in terms of those conflicts that have been active since the book's publication, they have tended in the two ways outlined above. The last great pitched battle was Desert Storm, and that was over in a flash, a completely one-sided massacre.

Indeed, Keegan could have foreseen the turns warfare has taken, for he noted herein, "it will be his task [a general's] to bring his enemies to battle on his own terms and force them to fight by his rules not theirs." (p 191) Just so have the asymmetrical actors drawn in the United States and other great powers to fight them on their terms. One lesson Keegan undoubtedly drew from the just-concluded Vietnam conflict and many others, "Battle, therefore...is essentially a moral conflict. It requires, if it is to take place, a mutu-

al sustained act of will by two contending parties, and if it is to result in a decision, the moral collapse of one of them" (p 301) Just so, modern conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and elsewhere pit external actors (be they the United States, Russia, the UK, or Saudi Arabia and Iran) against indigenous actors (often working through indigenous proxies). Invariably, the external actors talk of graduated escalation, withdrawal timetables, rules of engagement, apply detailed legalistic micro-managed political oversight, refuse to declare wars as wars, send in "advisors" instead of soldiers, and so on. They thereby show that they are fighting a limited war with limited means, while the local actors are typically fighting a total war for survival itself. There is no mystery who will win each of these conflicts, regardless of the apparent inequalities between the contenders otherwise.

A worthy book, like any of Keegan's works. Of course the reader interested in military history ought to read it, but most of Keegan's books, this one included, can be quite beneficial for those who are not ordinarily students of military history, given his ability to tie military affairs into ordinary life. If anything, the beginning section with its detailed review of historical methods might be a little tedious for the non-historian, but Keegan's examination of the battles and his concluding remarks are certainly worth waiting for.

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