

In the School of War

Roger J. Spiller

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War, as a topic, lends itself to unending discussion, research, debate, and analysis. Historians argue over past strategies, methods, and the results of battles waged over several centuries. Roger J. Spiller's collection, *In the School of War*, is an effort to expose elements of war that many historians tend to avoid or ignore. Rather than doggedly dissect every movement on an obscure battlefield, Spiller prefers to look at the impact of war from a human perspective. He offers a wide-ranging series of essays that explore topics ranging from urban warfare to overrated and underrated generals. Backed by impressive credentials, including twenty-five years as a professor of military history at the US Army Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Spiller's insights are thought-provoking without getting mired down in military minutiae.

Spiller's essays are gathered into sections and arranged by topic area. He begins by examining our deepest responses to war: the psychological effects of combat, cultural differences in warfare, and the meaning of valor.

The second section provides a look at the development of military history and how attitudes and subject matter have changed over the years. Insider stories of the issues involved in establishing the Fort Leavenworth School of War and deciding on the direction of its curriculum inform his essays. This behind-the-scenes information reveals the varied and deeply held sentiments of historians on what should be taught.

Especially interesting is Spiller's look at the public's perception of warfare. The American public, according to Spiller, has a romanticized image of war. Movies and other art forms show heroic, often sanitized versions of war, while brushing aside or simply choosing to ignore altogether the more mundane and grisly views that combatants encounter every day. These misrepresentations of warfare distort the actual historical record and can even influence the slant historians use to document history.

Spiller concludes with a few essays that he describes as "experimental history." Citing examples such as Stephen Crane's *The Red Badge of Courage* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, Spiller explores the possibilities of using "historical imaginations" to try different ways of expressing historical knowledge.

In the School of War provides a tour through many aspects of warfare, military history, and the philosophical differences involved in documenting such a varied subject. By focusing primarily on the human aspects of war rather than tactics and strategy, Spiller's work may also help introduce the genre to an audience segment that may not be inclined to take on a more academically oriented book. Spiller gives his readers an intriguing education on man's conflicts through the ages and how they influence everyone's lives.

JEFF FRIEND (May / June 2010)

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