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Review of Roger Spiller, *An Instinct for War: Scenes from the Battlefields of History*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 2005. Pp. 416. ISBN 978-0-674-01941-65.

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This book caught me by surprise. I read its first section and was completely enthralled! Roger Spiller is an excellent and careful historian, but not one I would expect to venture into the gray world of historical fiction. He has drawn deeply on his years of scholarship to present a series of thoughtful “anecdotes,” vignettes that may serve as launching pads for discussion of the history of the military art and the motives for recourse to war.

“Some of this actually happened and some of it didn’t ....” Each story “speak[s] of war in a certain way.... Each tells of a moment when war changed ... sometimes profoundly” (iii). While the intended audience is not specified, Spiller’s well-crafted book will appeal to many, including neophytes and even those who “hate history.” It also provides points of access to “profound moments of change” in the history of warfare for those who hate war but honestly wish to understand and better confront it. As Spiller notes at the outset, some of the book’s many voices are those of actual participants, others of stage figures speaking words certainly uttered somewhere, sometime. The purist may be offended, but should not be. For example, Michael Shaara’s *Killer Angels*<sup>1</sup> is historical fiction to be sure, but at the Army War College we issue it to our students to draw them into the story of the great battle of Gettysburg, which they will visit with professional intent shortly after arriving for their year of education. We likewise recommend the novel to groups of corporate leaders because, again, it draws them into the context. From my perspective as an educator and historian, anything serving to inveigle the innocent into the study of well-written history that fosters reflection on profound issues of war receives my enthusiastic approbation. Napoleon is reputed to have said words to the effect that “the study of the military art is the giant among the branches of learning for it embraces them all.” Awkward metaphor, but if you are the Emperor ....

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Thucydides speaks before a gathering of young, soon-to-be commanders and seeks to tell them the truth of his “defeat” at Amphipolis—warning that truth is not always what you hear or read. Machiavelli, in chains, reasons with his torturer, a former soldier, about the efficacy of states and their control of disciplined military forces. Perhaps in purgatory, Wallenstein and a “mere scribbler” debate whether the man of action or the man of ideas is of greater utility on the field of battle. Maria de Estrada, initially a camp follower, accompanies Cortés into Mexico and survives to tell a story of epic boldness. George McClellan and Antoine-Henri Jomini meet and agree on much, as recounted by Major Lecomte, of the Swiss Army (as Jomini had once been). In the end, Lecomte concludes that both are in grave error as regards the American Civil War and this fellow von Clausewitz had it right

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<sup>1</sup> *The Killer Angels: A Novel of the Civil War* (1974; rpt. NY: Modern Library, 2004).

As I am generally familiar with all the vignette settings, I quickly became immersed in each, realizing at various points that I was seeing the episode through the eyes of some explicit historical figure. Having lectured on Napoleon's campaigns and used Surgeon-in-Chief Baron Dominique Larrey's memoir to recount the trials of the soldiers of the Grand Armée during the retreat from Moscow, I was entirely comfortable with the Battle of Bautzen vignette. Here Larrey's humane qualities are illustrated in an unusual way as the surgeon investigates the possibility of self-inflicted wounding by a group of mutinous soldiers. Whether this event actually took place is beyond my ken, but deftly captures the essence of the campaign, the battle, and the man.

As I turned to the Russo-Japanese War episode, my admiration for Spiller increased, as authentic incident after authentic report or memoir was woven into a most engaging story line. The obstinacy of the soldiers of the Japanese 37th Infantry, who after being intercepted at sea by a Russian cruiser squadron, killed themselves rather than suffer capture, emerges from the pages of a Japanese Army lieutenant's "memoir." (I was able to "Google" the event by entering the Kinshu Maru, the name of the Japanese ship—304 hits.) Again, whether the "memoir" is authentic (it is) ceases to matter, it so effectively makes Spiller's point: the Japanese entered this conflict with all the social baggage of the old empire which persisted at least into World War II, as seen in the excellent recent movie, *Letters from Iwo Jima*<sup>2</sup>—death before dishonor, at one's own hand if necessary. In marvelous contrast are extracts from Russian Colonel Tretyakov's "day-book," as he muses on the utter confusion and stupidity of the Russian High Command, while trying to prepare to meet the Japanese with coordinated firepower. He pays no attention to spiritual matters and seeks principally to employ the advantages of terrain and military science to best advantage. The two ways of war meet at Nan Shan Ridge and again at Hill 174 outside Port Arthur. The "spiritual" defeats the mechanical, but at horrible cost—an observation unheeded as a potential "lesson" for another dozen years, or arguably more.

One section of the book, on an AUSA (Association of the United States Army) convention, reeks of the turgid doctrinal-speak of such occasions. Readers who have "been there" will gently tap their pockets for the pens, card decks, key-chains, mini-CDs, and other traditional carry-aways so typical of these events. The scene then shifts to a visiting academic, who has obviously studied military history sometime in his distant past, asking potentially embarrassing questions. It shifts again to the best-selling author of another installment in the chest-thumping, "we always win" genre, and then again to a commentary on John le Carré's newest works, which, the author notes, have not been selling so successfully because le Carré has taken to criticizing the U.S. Fade out—Stryker display—speaker's hype—an NCO who served in Iraq with a somewhat different view—fade out and enter another figure talking on another topic—fade out—and so on. The speakers and the issues are all familiar and so too are some of the responses and respondents, but what is so compelling is Spiller's uncanny replication of the tempo of conversations and focal shifts that so typify these annual affairs.

The book includes an opening episode set in ancient China reminiscent of the work of Sun Tzu and proceeds through the Napoleonic episode noted above, the American Civil War, the Russo-Japanese War also noted above, World Wars I and II, and a "present-day"

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<sup>2</sup> Dir. Clint Eastwood, 2006.

AUSA Convention. In another startling shift, the last episode is an imaginative and disturbing future-war scenario that may be seen as an extension of our present conflict in Iraq, drawn in much larger strokes. It deals with global reaction to American hegemony and at places sounds a bit like Robert Heinlein's *Starship Trooper*. Nevertheless, this episode, like the others, challenges the reader to probe more deeply into the relationship between the causes and conduct of war—great material for a discussion of Just War theory—and in that way links back to the opening vignette. The story features “The Discovery of Kansas” and a long-buried library chock-full of military books and manuscripts from the distant past.

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I would love to give this remarkable book to each of my students at the Army War College. As my University of Michigan mentor, John Shy, notes on the back cover: it “will engage readers for whom the subject of war is too important to be left to either military historians or public officials.” I want the next generation of military practitioners, like Spiller's cast of characters, to grapple with the issues raised in each episode.