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Paul K. Davis, *Masters of the Battlefield: Great Commanders from the Classical Age to the Napoleonic Era*. New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013. Pp. xiv, 607. ISBN 978-0-19-534235-2.

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Historian and teacher Paul Davis specializes in reference works.¹ In *Masters of the Battlefield*, he looks across time and place to show the importance of commanders on the tactical, operational, and strategic levels (ix-x), in the belief that studying superlative examples of command and leadership can be instructive to present-day commanders, especially at the operational echelon. After all, he writes, knowing one's enemy, the terrain of battle, and how best to lead soldiers trumps superior technology (538). Davis draws heavily on the US Army manual FM 100-5, *Operations*,² for terminology and definitions and to organize his chapters. He uses both US and British army "principles of war" as measuring sticks of success.

The book's purview extends from classical antiquity to 1815. Davis sets this endpoint because swiftly changing technology and increases in the size of armies altered the nature of command during the nineteenth century. Commanders no longer had to lead from the front, as communications technology reduced the need for their physical presence on the battlefield.³

Davis presents case studies of sixteen commanders,⁴ ranging from the famous (e.g., Alexander the Great, Napoleon) to the less well known (e.g., Epaminondas, Jan Žižka), mostly within the western command tradition. All were chosen because of their ability to "deploy forces and ... motivate those forces in combat" (xiii) and adopt new tactical formations or technologies. Finally, each was a commander-in-chief, operating independently on campaign and in the field.

It will be noticed that, like an earlier generation of writers in this genre (e.g., T.A. Dodge, J.F.C. Fuller, and John Laffin), Davis allows the European Middle Ages to slide into oblivion. Apart from the Byzantine general Flavius Belisarius, evidently no one between the sixth and the fifteenth centuries in Europe showed a "mastery" of tactics, operations, or strategy. So much for the military careers of Charlemagne, William the Conqueror, Richard I, or James I of Aragon.

Davis adopts a uniform chapter structure. For each figure, there is analysis of (1) biographical details that shaped his leadership, (2) the nature of armies and warfare in his period, (3) the character of his opponents, (4) the course of the war(s) he fought, (5) the strategic significance of his battles, and (6) the principles of war he exemplifies in Davis's view.

The work is flawed by a lack of clarity and sometimes outright factual errors. Davis writes that "Wellington stormed [Toulouse] and captured it on 10 April [1814], ignorant of the fact that in the wake of the Battle of Leipzig Napoleon had abdicated his throne four days earlier" (507). This was a long wake—Leipzig took place in mid-October 1813. Davis also credits both Scipio Africanus (96) and Gaius Marius (111) with replacing the maniple with the cohort as the Roman army's main tactical unit.

A more serious liability is Davis's reliance on suspect, badly outdated, and unscholarly secondary sources. For example, in the chapters on Belisarius and Žižka, he cites a long-superseded nineteenth-

1. His earlier publications include *100 Great Battles: From Ancient Times to the Present* (1999; rpt. NY: Oxford U Pr, 2001), *Besieged: 100 Great Sieges from Jericho to Sarajevo* (2001; rpt. NY: Oxford U Pr, 2003), *Encyclopedia of Invasions and Conquests: From Ancient Times to the Present*, 2nd ed. (Millerton, NY: Grey House, 2006), and, edited with Allen Lee Hamilton, *Encyclopedia of Warrior Peoples and Fighting Groups*, 2nd ed. (Millerton, NY: Grey House, 2006).

2. Unfortunately, Davis appears to have used only the original (1993) edition of this field manual, which was replaced by FM 3-0 (2001; updated 2008); nor does he cite ADP/ADRP, *Unified Land Operations* (2011/2012).

3. See, e.g., Martin Van Creveld, *Command in War* (Cambridge: Harvard U Pr, 1987) 1-4, 104-9, 148-55.

4. In order, Epaminondas, Alexander, Han Xin, Hannibal, Scipio Africanus, Julius Caesar, Belisarius, Chinggis Khan, Subedei, Jan Žižka, Oda Nobunaga, Gustavus Adolphus, the Duke of Marlborough, Frederick II, Napoleon, and the Duke of Wellington.

century study of medieval warfare.⁵ The chapter on Žižka also cites an anonymous article in an 1895 issue of *Macmillan's Magazine*, a Victorian middle-brow literary publication. Dodge's lecture series *The Great Captains*⁶ is frequently cited in several chapters. We are also treated to gobbets from the venerable 1910 *Encyclopedia Britannica* and Thomas Carlyle's biography of Frederick the Great⁷ (143, 396–97, 411). All are presented as if they were current historical interpretations, not monuments from bygone eras of historiography.

Besides such antiquated sources, Davis references websites, some of them catering to junior high students or war game players. His citation of war college theses, gaming magazines like *Strategy & Tactics*, and coffee-table books bespeaks an indiscriminating use of sources throughout the book.

So, Davis has not written a scholarly study, though the casual reader might mistake it for one, given its publication by Oxford University Press. Is it then at least a serviceable reference tool? The chapters on each commander can certainly be read as separate entries, though they vary widely in length, from seventeen pages on Epaminondas to fifty-four on Napoleon. And, too, the volume's bibliography is divided into chapter sections.⁸

Davis, however, makes it clear that he has higher aspirations for the book: he writes "Can the study of these great captains confer any advantages today at the tactical and grand tactical levels of combat? Without question" (538). This implies that he envisions an audience of military personnel, especially officers, that is, practitioners or would-be practitioners of the "operational art." But, rather than discussing his selected commanders and their armies in the context of their times (as in a good reference work), Davis instead fits them into a Procrustean bed by assessing each according to nine or ten *present-day* principles of war. This is not a properly nuanced way to approach the difficult task of explaining the magic of command and distilling its essence for present and future officers. For beginners who can recognize the names Alexander, Caesar, or Napoleon, but little beyond that, *Masters of the Battlefield* may be a salutary stimulant to further study. Serious students of military history, however, will find here neither a dependable reference book nor an original contribution to the scholarship of command across the ages.

5. C.W.C. Oman, *The Art of War in the Middle Ages*, in its first edition [1885] at that, rather than the enlarged (by 735 pages) but still inadequate revision reprinted as recently as 1998 (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books).

6. Boston: Ticknor, 1889.

7. In six volumes (1858–65).

8. This makes for some repetition, as the same works are sometimes listed for several chapters (e.g., Liddell Hart's *Strategy* at least five times).