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USAFA Harmon Memorial Lecture #1
"Why Military History"
Professor W. Frank Craven, 1959

I deeply appreciate the honor that comes with your invitation to deliver the first of the Harmon Lectures on Military History. The Establishment of this series of lectures is a fitting tribute to the Academy's first Superintendent, who wisely recognized the place belonging to history and other social studies in the training of officers for a modern armed service and whose own distinguished career makes a bright chapter in the history of the United States Air Force.

I appreciate too the opportunity this invitation has afforded me for another visit to the Air Force Academy. I visited the Academy during its first year, when there was but one class and the physical plant was somewhat less impressive than what I have seen today. Let me congratulate you on the magnificent setting in which you are now privileged to study. For me it is a special privilege to meet again with old friends, and to make new friends, in your Department of History. Perhaps it is the high quality of the young officers the Air Force, the Army, and the Navy now regularly send to Princeton for postgraduate study that persuades me that I have also a special privilege in speaking this evening to so many members of the Cadet Wing. Perhaps it is only that no other educational institution has ever provided so large an audience to hear me lecture. In any case, I am flattered.

The Harmon Lectureship offers fresh testimony to the active interest in military history that has developed in this country during the course of the past twenty years or more. For this development the Second World War has been no doubt largely responsible. A war does not necessarily have such an influence, as may be noted simply by observing the quite different influence of World War I. Indeed, the experience the American people had in that war encouraged among us a marked indifference, perhaps I should say hostility, to most things military, including military history. The great historical question that challenged the post-war generation of that era was the question of how the war got started in the first place. When I was in college during the 1920's there were few courses in the curriculum that were so exciting as the course on European diplomatic history from 1870 to 1914. One took the course in the belief that he might find an explanation for one of the greatest tragedies in human history. I have often thought since then that it must have been an easy course to teach, if only because of the students' very great interest in the problem which dominated the last weeks of the term—the problem of "war guilt." To the issues discussed in that course, our instructors in American history added a question no less challenging. Why, and how, had the United States become involved in this European war? A number of answers from time to time knew favor—such as President Wilson's idealism, the interest of Wall Street bankers who were understood to have underwritten the Allied cause, or the skill of the British as propagandists. No historian worth his salt would ignore today any one of the points I have mentioned, but he would deal with each of them in a mood quite different from that

I knew as a college student in the 1920's. It was a mood that encouraged drastic revision of the basic assumptions which had guided the American people during the course of the war, a state of mind which stimulated little interest in the actual conduct of the war except for the purpose of condemning the whole venture.

That mood carried over into the 1930's, as the nation struggled with problems of economic and social dislocation that were frequently charged to the great war. It was often suggested, in other forms of literature as in our histories, that it was not a very bright thing to get involved in war. Our history texts continued to carry the conventional accounts of the many wars the American people had fought, but these accounts seemed to be there very largely for the sake of chronological completeness, and the instructor (I was teaching by then) might even suggest that they required no such close reading as did other chapters in our history. Perhaps we were guided too much, in our rejection of the most recent of our war experiences, by a fond desire to believe that the American people had won a dominant position on this continent by methods essentially peaceful. Certainly, there were many reputable historians who argued that warfare represented no central theme in the story of the American people. Perhaps our thinking was too much influenced by a deterministic view of history, a view that encouraged us to see the outcome of any battle as something rather largely predetermined by the superior force belonging to the victor. The battle might still be the payoff, but it was only the payoff.

Our attitude toward the great wars of our history showed some variation and at the same time a certain consistency. The wonderful narratives in which Francis Parkman recorded the long conflict between an English and a French type of civilization for dominance on this continent collected dust on our library shelves. The War of Independence remained a good thing, as it has always been in the minds of the American people, but at this time very largely perhaps because it marked the break in our history with Europe. Isolationist sentiment was strong, and so the wisdom of the Revolutionary fathers was once more confirmed. But we had little real concern for the way in which our independence had been established, except for a certain interest in the diplomacy of the Revolutionary years. If I may group the smaller wars together, the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American War held interest primarily for the deplorable examples they afforded of imperialism, or of the martial spirit. Such attention as was given these wars served chiefly as a means for continuing the attack on war itself.

It is always necessary to make some sort of exception for the Civil War, in which we have been perennially interested. Possibly it is because of the continuing fascination we find in the question of how a people who had so much in common could have fought so bitter a conflict. The 1930's saw the publication of Douglas Freeman's four-volume biography of R. E. Lee, one of the truly great biographies in American literature. But Freeman's approach to the problem of Lee was altogether conventional, and for a time at least the work stirred little interest in a major re-exploration of the military history of the Civil War. Lee remained, as he had been for some time past, a worthy representative of the Lost Cause, a great captain in whom the entire nation properly took pride. Much more exciting to students in the 1930's was the chapter Charles and Mary Beard had written a few years back in their *Rise of American Civilization*, a chapter entitled "The Second American Revolution." In this brilliant discussion the Beards invited us to see the Civil War as a contest between the superior power of an industrialized North and the outworn agrarianism of the Old South and as a conflict which established the dominance in

American society of the finance and industrial type of capitalism which presumably still controlled it. In such a contest, Lee could be important only as the heroic symbol of outworn values; even Grant and Sherman were robbed of the credit they might have received from another view of the war. Except for the entertainment on an evening that Freeman's Lee might provide-and except, of course, for the real "buffs"-few of us in the 1930's were inclined to explore the great campaigns of the Civil War. Our really serious interest in the Civil War was engaged by books which undertook to answer the same questions we had about the First World War. HOW had it happened? Who was responsible? Who was guilty?

And then came the Second World War. Its coming had been foretold in a sequence of military and diplomatic maneuvers which persuaded many of us that here were issues on which men properly staked their lives. The story is too complex to justify any attempt at a quick summary here. The point is this: when we found ourselves involved for a second time within a generation in a major war, we began to take a different view of military history.

One of the more remarkable evidences of the new attitude was the effort by the military services themselves to record the history of this new war as it was made. In different ways and at different times, but in every instance reasonably early in the war, each of the services, including the Army Air Forces, established some kind of historical office. It may be that President Roosevelt deserves the chief credit, for in the spring of 1942 he expressed his desire that all of the war agencies keep a historical record of their administrative experience. I have sometimes wondered if the decisions by the several armed forces to include combat operations as well as administrative experience in their historical records may have been prompted in part by the military man's regard for what was then known as public relations. But if this be the case, our military leaders had the wisdom to turn the job over to professionally trained historians and to support these historians in their effort to record the history of the war in accordance with the highest standards of historical scholarship (On this last point I am glad to be able, in this place, to offer testimony based on my own personal experience as to the especially enlightened policy of the Air Force.) As a result, the Second World War became, if I may use the phrase becoming now somewhat hackneyed through much use, the best recorded war in our history.

Fortunately, the new interest in military history that came with the war was not restricted to the immediate war. For the time being so many of our historians were committed to war service of one kind or another that individual research and writing tended very largely to be suspended for the duration of hostilities. But thereafter, and very promptly, a new awareness of the significance of our military history began to show in many works of great interest and high quality. Recently, and for the first time in decades, we have had a study of King Philip's War of the seventeenth century, an excellent book which appeared under the imprint of one of our leading commercial publishers. It could be demonstrated by reference to the bibliography of almost any period of American history, including those periods in which there were no wars whose names you would readily recognize, that we have been much inclined in recent years to restore warfare to its rightful place in our national history.

The significance of much of the work done in these post-war years is attributable to the broader view we have come to take of military history, a view for which we may

owe some debt to the historians of the pre-war era. The battle itself is no more than a part of the story. The central problem is man's continuing dependence on force as an instrument of policy, and we have come to see that every aspect of his social, economic, and political order which has some bearing on the force he can command is pertinent to military history. We thus have gained a broader view of our military experience, and in so doing we have added greatly to our understanding of many of the more significant chapters in our national history. For example, we have read with new interest so familiar a story as that of Alexander Hamilton's proposals on the bank, the tariff, and the excise simply by considering them as being in part an attempt to give a new country at a troubled time in the world's history the substance of military power. We have gained too a new appreciation of the principles for which men are willing to fight. Read the latest books on our Revolution and our Civil War and you will find that there were great issues at stake, the kind of issues on which men are willing to stake their lives. I think it can be said that we are no less aware than formerly of the role that propaganda may play in the mobilization of war sentiment, and no less conscious of the conflicting interests that have so frequently divided men and nations, but have we not gained a more balanced view of history by recognizing that wars also have been fought about issues that mattered?

One hesitates to use our continuing concern with the problems of the Civil War as an example of any trend other than an increasing tendency among us to be fascinated by that general subject. And yet, one or two points may be worth noting. It is beginning to look as though intelligence, and skillful generalship, had something to do with the victory won by the North. Grant, it has been suggested, was a superior general to Lee; Sherman was the equal of Jackson; and quite possibly Phil Sheridan outrode Jeb Stuart. On these questions I can speak with no special competence. I seek only to suggest some of the ways in which our postwar interest in military history promises a better perspective on our entire national experience.

With so much of gain from this new interest in military history, you may well be wondering why I put the topic for this evening's discussion in the form of a question. Walter Millis, a good historian and partly for that reason an especially well informed commentator on military affairs, is perhaps chiefly responsible. In the reading I undertook by way of preparation for this occasion, I noted again an observation he made in the foreword to his very valuable *Arms and Men*, a book he published in 1956. After commenting there on the new and broader interest Americans had come to take in military history, and after mentioning specifically the voluminous histories of the Second World War that have been published under the sponsorship of the several armed forces, he added this: "Unfortunately, parallel with this newer attitude toward the history of war, there has come the contemporary transformation in the whole character of war itself. The advent of the nuclear arsenals has at least seemed to render most of the military history of the Second War as outdated and inapplicable as the history of the War with Mexico."

This proposition naturally gave me some pause. I have devoted a good deal of my professional time over the course of several years to a voluminous history of The Army Air Forces in World War II—a work published, if you will permit the plug, by the University of Chicago Press. And so it is perhaps understandable that I should be reluctant to have the Second World War dismissed in terms suggesting that its extraordinary history has no more value for us today than does the history of President Polk's War with Mexico. My reluctance was reinforced by a suspicion that Mr. Millis

may have intended to say more, that he possibly was going as far as he could in a study that was basically historical in character to call into question the historical approach to the current dilemmas of our military policy. I played with the idea of attempting here some rejoinder, but on second thought I decided there was no need to do so. I may have misread Mr. Millis' intent, and if not, his own book carries as good a rejoinder as could be given by me. I do not agree with all of its conclusions, but I consider the work nevertheless to be an admirable example of the modern approach to military history, an approach that emphasizes the interrelationship of war and society, an approach that reflects the current difficulty we find in defining any military problem as a purely military problem. In short, there is so much good history here, and it is so helpful, as to make nonsense of any suggestion that in our present military situation history itself has lost its meaning. Obviously, history still retains one advantage at least: if only by pointing up the contrast with past experience, it can help to clarify even the most revolutionary of developments.

Perhaps Mr. Millis meant only to comment on what may be possibly described as an unusually high rate of obsolescence attaching to modern military history. If so, I think I know what he means. When we began to publish *The Army Air Forces in World War II*, one worked, or at least I did, with a strong sense of dealing with the contemporary scene, of having something to say that had a direct relation to issues immediately before the public for decision. It was a rather intriguing experience for me, as a historian who never before had bothered to comment, outside the classroom, on any part of our history of later date than the seventeenth century. The experience helped me to see something of the excitement that challenges some historians to study twentieth-century history, and it gave me a new sympathy for some of their problems-especially the problem arising from the amount of paper a modern society insists upon accumulating for the historian's investigation. I have since then returned quite happily to the seventeenth century, when people wrote less and kept fewer copies of what they wrote, a time far enough back to allow for a few fires and a few wars, which always have had a way of reducing the bulk of the historical record, often most regrettably so. But my point was this: when we came to the end of the Air Force history it was unmistakably history, with little or none of the quality of a commentary on the contemporary scene. I think the change that time had wrought-and a remarkably short span of time it is-came home to me most forcibly in the selection of pictures for the illustrations. We tried to include a picture of all the planes used by the Army Air Forces, and with the passage of time the great planes of World War II-the B-17, the B-24, and the B-29, the P-38 or the P-51-began to take on a look somewhat reminiscent of the old "Jenny" or the DH-4 of World War I.

This is indeed an age of extraordinarily rapid change, especially when one considers the weapons modern science and technology can place in your hands. They are weapons of such terrifying force as to make the question of whether you can ever be permitted to use the full power that may be at your command a subject of the gravest public discussion, in part because they are weapons held also by our adversary. They are weapons that tend to call into question every jurisdictional line upon which our military organization depends. They are weapons that leave no room whatsoever for assuming that a textbook based on the tactics employed in World War II could enjoy the long life belonging to the famous text Jomini based on the campaigns of Napoleon, a text that was closely studied by the leading generals on both sides in our own Civil War. Let it be

admitted that the modern technological revolution has confronted us with military problems of unprecedented complexity, problems made all the more difficult because of the social and political turbulence of the age in which we live. But precisely because of these revolutionary developments, let me suggest that you had better study military history, indeed all history, as no generation of military men has studied it before. And let me also suggest that in the reading of history you need to read it with a sophisticated understanding of what history can teach and what it cannot teach.

Perhaps because history rests upon a solid content of fact, and because the writing of it is subject to a severe discipline that insists upon honest regard for established facts, one is easily led to expect more of history than it can tell. It can tell us much, but the lessons of history are rarely, if ever, so exact as to permit their adoption as unflinching principles for the guidance of future action. There has been in time past some effort among professional historians to discover what might be regarded as the laws of history. One such effort, undertaken by a distinguished scholar in the middle of the 1920's, led to the suggestion that a trend toward democratic and representative forms of government could be viewed as one of the laws of history. Possibly time may yet prove him to have been right, but for the moment we must conclude that even the closest study does not qualify the historian to become a prophet.

I do not mean to suggest that there are no constants in history. For one thing, history is always concerned with the human race, and human nature has a way of being much the same wherever one chances to meet it. There are also constants that may be observed in the habitual usages and customs of a particular people. The American people, for example, have a way of depending heavily upon some kind of constitution or fundamental charter as their guide for any organized activity into which they may enter. This inclination is by no means restricted to our political life. Whether we are engaged in establishing some undergraduate organization for an extracurricular activity on the college campus, a faculty club, or a woman's book club in some small town, the first order of business is the adoption of a constitution and of such by-laws and ordinances as may be deemed appropriate. The constitution and the by-laws may be thereafter lost to sight, even lost quite literally without seriously impairing the effectiveness of the organization, but we all understand that this is the way in which an organization properly begins to function. If the local society intends to be associated with other organizations of like interest or purpose, it expects first of all to qualify for a charter defining its rights and fixing its obligations. Some of our British allies who served during the Second World War on combined staff committees, and who thus assumed important obligations for their government in an area lying outside the well defined limits of established authority, were a little bothered to understand the delay in getting down to business that so often resulted from the concern of their American colleagues to establish first the charter by which the committee was to be guided. Had the British officers been more familiar with American history than most of them were, they more easily would have understood this evidence of a national trait. Similarly, had the Americans been better versed in English constitutional history than most of them were, they could have comprehended more readily the Englishman's impatience to get down to work with a minimum of fuss about the charter.

Other examples readily come to mind, some of them especially pertinent to the interest of those who may be charged with heavy responsibilities for the administration of the nation's military affairs—such as the marked tendency a people may show to judge

public policy by some moral standard, the inclination of one people through long experience to accept war and the burdens of a military establishment as a normal part of national life, or the disinclination of another people, quite irrationally if you wish, to view war as anything more than a deplorable disruption in the normal course of their history. If I may add one more example, there is the marked tendency the American has shown to view a problem as something to be solved, to assume that a right solution to the problem properly has some element of finality, and to reject as a basic assumption in his thinking any possibility that there may be problems for which there are no solutions- problems that men can only learn to live with, as mankind so often has had to do in the past. To study the history of a people is somewhat like reading their literature. One can gain from the reading knowledge and understanding that may make him wiser, but in history, as in literature, there is no blueprint to guide him. History has a way of not repeating itself. Each generation faces a new combination of circumstances governing its need and its opportunities. We can draw upon history as a source of courage and of wisdom. We can use history to lengthen the experience on which we base our judgment of contemporary problems, but the course ahead is our own to chart.

I have wondered if I might find some chapter of our history, one chosen with a view to your own particular interest in the history of the Air Force, that might be used to illustrate the generalization. My hope, of course, is that I may be able to suggest to you the pertinence of the history of your own service to the responsibilities you will soon assume as officers in the United States Air Force. So let me try this.

The far-reaching influence of the modern technological revolution is no new thing in the history of the Air Force. Even the extremely rapid acceleration of developments within that revolution which is so disturbing today is impressively evident from a very early date, together with the influence political forces have so largely played in stimulating the acceleration of which I speak. It was man's conquest of flight, one of the truly great breakthroughs of the modern age, that opened the way for the early experiments in the employment of the airplane for military purposes to which you properly trace the beginnings of your service's history.

The first chapters of that history have been viewed by your predecessors in the service with an understandable fondness and an active interest in the full antiquarian detail. Forgive me for speaking of antiquarianism in connection with so modern a subject as the history of the United States Air Force, but as one who considers himself perforce, being a colonial historian, something of an authority on antiquarianism, I feel inclined to say that I have never read anything more antiquarian than are some of the books that have been published on the history of military aviation in this country. Please understand that I have no objection to antiquarianism. It feeds upon a natural interest that men have in their past, and it often serves to record useful data for the historian. But the antiquarian interest should not be allowed to obscure history, as I think may have been the case in this instance. The historical point that may have been lost, in the sense that its full meaning may have been missed, is the obvious fact that in little more than a decade after the beginnings of military aviation in this country the American people found themselves involved because of the airplane in the most heated and prolonged debate of their entire history on a question of military policy. I refer, of course, to the protracted dispute that is associated primarily with the name of Billy Mitchell.

We had not been a people notably inclined to debate questions of military policy,

except in time of war. This debate was staged after the war, a victorious war, and at a time, as I have suggested, when we were much inclined to believe that we would not become involved in another war, unless attacked in our own hemisphere. And yet everyone involved in the debate seemed to get mad, so much so as to suggest that the issue was a critical one, and certainly so much so as to make it very difficult to find in the whole bibliography of works that give notice to the dispute a truly dispassionate account of it, whether the account be long or short. Perhaps we have lacked perspective. Perhaps we need to view the debate as significantly representative of the difficulties the American people and their armed services have faced in making an adjustment to this new and frightening age of ours.

At the heart of the debate was the question of the airplane and of how best it might be fitted into the nation's military organization. In earlier years there had been no problem. The primitive airplane, it could be generally agreed, was useful chiefly for the purpose of extending the reach of intelligence and communications services, but the First World War brought a great change. The war was fought between the leading industrial powers of Europe, and these states soon found themselves caught, despite the best-laid plans of their general staffs, in a bloody stalemate on the western front. As a result, the full energies of the most technologically advanced peoples in the world were poured into an effort to break the stalemate. There is no reason to believe that their hopes ever came to be pinned primarily on the airplane-it was too new and too primitive for that. Nevertheless, in a war so desperate that no bet could be ignored, the airplanes received the closest attention from highly sophisticated technicians on both sides of the conflict. At the war's end, the airplane was still a very primitive instrument of warfare by any standard we know today, but an astonishingly modern weapon by any standard known to men only four years before. Indeed, its rate of development had been such as to invite a correspondingly rapid development of thought as to how it might be independently employed as a weapon. At the close of hostilities in 1918, plans had been drafted and adopted for the employment by the Allied powers of an Independent Air Force in the campaign of 1919.

In these extraordinary developments the United States, though it had given the airplane to the world, played a minor part. But in no other country did the postwar debate over the military role of the airplane achieve the intensity of the debate which opened here immediately after the war, and which continued with varying degrees of intensity from 1919 to the enactment of the Air Corps Act of 1926.

Let us not be guilty of simplifying the issues at stake in this long and bitter dispute by clinging to the loyalties and the prejudices that the debate itself did so much to awaken. Let us dismiss any inclination we may feel to view the contest as basically an intra-service conflict between a few far-sighted pioneers of the air age and a somewhat unimaginative General Staff. Let us dismiss also the view that it was essentially a row with the Navy, in which the airplane was pitted against the battleship to the latter's embarrassment. Finally, let us dismiss the popular notion that the whole story can be explained in terms of a one-man crusade by Billy Mitchell, a prophet deprived in his own way of the honor he deserved from his country. All these views, of course, have some basis in historical fact. Mitchell was the leader, the catalyst whose energy and imagination determined very largely the public conception of the issues in debate. I think it high time that we take him seriously as a significant figure in twentieth century

American history, and I am looking forward to the completion of a study of his ideas, their sources and their development, that has been undertaken by a member of your own Department of History. Mitchell was shrewd enough to recognize the special advantages belonging to the Navy at that time as the first line of national defense. And the Navy in a very real sense became the target in his most dramatic attempt to publicize the military potential of the airplane. I have no desire to reopen old sores, but I think it may be worth suggesting that in so doing Mitchell helped to make our Navy the most airminded in the world, with results that are written large in the brilliant achievements of the United States Navy in World War II. And Mitchell fought the General Staff, even to the point of demanding the martyrdom he was awarded by his court-martial. But do any of these frequently popular interpretations get really to the heart of the question?

Briefly stated, the proposal after 1918 was that we recognize the airplane's capacity to assume its own special role in warfare, and that we adjust our military organizations accordingly by the establishment of a separate air force on terms more or less of equality with the Army and the Navy. I hope I have not been guilty of serious oversimplification by thus stating the issue. There are difficulties in answering the question of just what kind of war was uppermost in the minds of those who made the proposals which came into debate, and these difficulties must remain unresolved until further studies have been completed. Meanwhile, I believe that my statement of the basic issue is close enough to the fact. In making the statement, I want chiefly to emphasize that this proposal raised for the American people a serious and difficult question of national policy. It is no easy task even today to resolve with full logic the jurisdictional problems that have arisen from the employment of the airplane as a weapon, as may be well enough established by a glance at our present organization of national defense. The question in the 1920's had a complexity comparable to that belonging today to the issue of control in the development and employment of missiles, perhaps an even greater complexity.

For advocates of a separate air force the critical task was to establish the airplane's capacity to undertake an independent military mission. The difficulty lay partly in the fact that the plane's military potential, though well enough understood by those close to its development, lacked as yet any clear demonstration in combat. Had the war lasted another year, the operations of the Independent Air Force might have given the demonstration that was needed, for the plan called for the bombing of targets far enough beyond the lines of battle to have been unmistakably different from any attempt to render immediate support to a ground assault. It is pertinent also to note that the proposed operations were to have been directed by a single air commander directly responsible to the Allied Commander in Chief. But all this remained on paper at the war's end.

As a result, the American public was left with a somewhat misleading impression of the military potential the plane actually had acquired during the war years. What had captured the imagination of the people was a type of personal combat in the air that was destined to be limited largely to this particular war—a type of combat, reminiscent in some of its qualities of the more chivalric ages, that seemed to offer a welcome contrast with the highly impersonal slaughter which marked the struggle on the ground. It is true, of course, that the Zeppelin raids on London had also left their impression, so much so as to lend a dreadful reality to the predictions soon made by the advocates of strategic bombardment as to the destruction that could be accomplished in another war. But this

new doctrine could be viewed, and not without justification, as a European doctrine that was especially applicable to the conditions of a European war. Given the short distances of the compactly settled continent of Europe, London and Paris might become highly vulnerable, but New York was differently situated. Measured by the range of any plane that man had yet built, three thousand miles of water seemed to offer protection enough, and for some time to come.

In this connection, mention belongs perhaps to the effect of the war's end on the extraordinary rate of technical progress that had marked the development of aviation during the preceding four years. Except for the United States, all of the belligerents reached the end of the war in a state of exhaustion, and the Americans were determined to return to a state of "normalcy." Military budgets were drastically cut at a time when as yet we had no commercial aviation capable of supporting any substantial part of the war-sponsored aviation industry. Indeed, the hopes for development of commercial aviation depended so largely upon the aid that could be given the industry in the form of military contracts as to make this consideration, I assume, a factor of no small importance to an understanding of the debate which followed. The technical achievements of the 1920's were by no means insignificant, but the airplane observed at first hand by the American public remained a craft of marked limitations. More commonly than not one saw it at the fair grounds, state or county, and was chiefly impressed by the daredevil quality of the man who risked his neck to fly it. The claims advanced for its destructive power tended to be discounted, and the advocates of a drastic reorganization of our armed services to be dismissed as over-zealous enthusiasts. It may be worth noting that Lindbergh's celebrated flight to Paris, which caused so many of us to reconsider the airplane's potential, came only in the year after the enactment of the Air Corps Act.

For the military aviators the provisions of that act were most disappointing, and out of this disappointment have come charges of a decision unfairly taken. It is possible so to interpret some of the evidence, but it would be difficult to document the point beyond dispute. Between 1918 and 1926 no less than six special boards, commissions, or committees conducted investigations of the problem for the guidance of the legislative or executive branches of the government. At times some prejudgment of the issue may have shaped the proceedings, but certainly the aviator had his hearing, not only through testimony before public agencies but through a press that freely opened its columns to Mitchell and other protagonists. Indeed, Mitchell's adroit exploitation of the opportunities offered by the more popular part of the press constitutes one of the most interesting chapters in the whole story. The final judgment of history may well be that the American people showed wisdom in debating the issue for so long as they did before deciding on a compromise with which the aviator was able to live until the Second World War.

If the traditional Air Force view becomes thus open to question, how then are we to explain the failure to win more than the corps status granted in 1926? There is always the possibility, as I have just suggested, that the decision reached in that year was for the time the right decision. But let us proceed on the assumption that the advocates of a separate air force had a good case that they failed to make good. Wherein did they fail? It is possible, I think, that the failure was one of communication, if I may use a term that has grown very popular in this modern age.

In suggesting this I have no thought of directing your attention to any peculiar problem that a military organization may face under our system of government in making

its needs known. Indeed, I think we have been too much inclined to think of the pioneers of your service as military men. That they obviously were, and some of them had the full qualification for membership in the military order that comes with graduation at West Point. But there were many others, including some of the more important, who entered your history by a quite different route. Some of them had enlisted in the Army during World War I, had learned to fly, and after the war had broken with the normal American pattern by staying in the Army in order that they might continue to fly, as later others would join the Army for no reason except that of learning to fly. I suggest that it may be profitable to discount the military associations they shared, and to think of them as men joined together primarily by the common bond of flying. I have been told that West Point graduates enjoyed certain advantages in the old Air Corps, comparable to those which probably await you in the Air Force, but it has been my observation that full enjoyment of any such advantages has depended on being able also to fly a plane. Certainly, the developing air arm in this country has built its structure and its caste system around the pilot- possibly too much so.

Through this interest in flying the military aviator found a common tie with all other men who flew and with the engineers who designed and built the planes. One has but to look into traditional Air Force policies of development and procurement to appreciate the broad community of interest binding together the leaders of military aviation, aeronautical engineering, and the aviation industry in a great experimental venture. Together they knew the challenge and the excitement of experimentation on one of the more rapidly moving frontiers of the technological revolution. They shared the achievements, as they shared the disappointments. Shared too were the limitations so often experienced by the technical specialist in our society in the effort to communicate his enthusiasm, his knowledge, his understanding to the layman.

Was not this perhaps a basic cause for the failure of Billy Mitchell and his colleagues? The aviator in his own special way lives for the future. His experience encourages him always to think ahead. He knows that the plane he flies today will soon be obsolescent, soon even obsolete. He has been taught by the technical achievements of the past to give free rein to his imagination in estimating the possibilities of the future, and so in his thinking he easily can get ahead of the rest of us. Billy Mitchell was an acute observer of the rapid development of the military plane in World War I. His mind, though probably not especially original, was highly receptive to the new ideas of Trenchard and other European leaders. He had great gifts as a publicist, and he brought to his task the enthusiasm of a late convert to the cause of aviation, but he failed to bridge the gap between his own thinking and the thinking of the American people. Was it because he had to talk too much in terms of wars that could only be fought by planes not yet built, not yet to be found even on the drawing board? Was it because he had to persuade a people, traditionally proud of their hardheadedness and as yet not so accustomed to the technological miracle as they have since become, who insisted on judging the question with due regard for the limitations of existing aircraft?

I have purposely brought these comments to a close with a question, for my remarks are based more upon reflection than upon close study of the pertinent record. They are offered as suggestions rather than as fixed conclusions, partly in the hope that they may open some fruitful line of further investigation. I would be hard put to say just what lesson or lessons, immediately applicable to the present world situation or to the

current problems of the United States Air Force, could be drawn from these comments, and I suspect that such an effort would be highly unprofitable. My purpose has been to suggest that history can give depth to our understanding- even of the extraordinary age in which we live.

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