

**Review of *The Mask of Command*
By John Keegan
Review By Walter S. Zapotoczny Jr.**

In his introduction, John Keegan's describes his book *The Mask of Command* as, "a book about generals, who they are, what they do, and how what they do affects the world in which men and women live." While this subject about command and styles of heroic leadership is a straight forward enough subject, the way in which Keegan approaches it is not. Through four case studies of Alexander the Great, the Duke of Wellington, Ulysses Grant and Adolf Hitler he reflects upon the changing character of generalship over two thousand years of Western history. He uses numerous historical comparisons to widen the study's focus and make it much more than a loosely linked description of four commanders.

Keegan's "mask of command" is the face a leader shows to his followers, those external attributes contributing to the power over them, presented in a way that reflects their needs. In the case of Alexander the Great, it is the only image we have. We know little of his inner life and ideas. His mastery of the Greek world, conquest of the Persian Empire and projection of his power as far as India, left a model of heroic leadership for men since to emulate. It was a highly theatrical style in which the leader's spectacular armor, dramatic story and self-association with the gods set him apart, while his meticulous provisioning and close knowledge of and concern for his soldiers made him one of them. On the battlefield he sought victory by risk-taking and self-exposure. Alexandrian heroism found numerous imitators throughout the history of warfare, but increasingly, argues Keegan, a second theory of generalship began to dominate. Growth in the size and complexity of armies, intensification of drill and increasing use of reserve formations made it imperative for generals to know what was happening but at a suitably distant to be able to direct the battle as a whole.

Keegan's analysis of Wellington's command at Waterloo gives an excellent picture of the Duke's tireless movement from one section of the battlefield to the next, in close range of the fighting. He used personal direction of the action, using the topography to screen his troops. He scrutinized enemy movements in search of an advantage and moved decisively when an opportunity arose. Wellington was, in Keegan's words, "perhaps the most perfect embodiment of the gentlemanly ideal England has ever produced." He was disciplined, modest, self-assured, and reticent. Wearing civilian clothes, he avoided all self-dramatization and scorned Napoleon's dramatics. His was a deliberately antiheroic style. If Wellington's style suited aristocratic Georgian England, Ulysses Grant's reflected both the mood of American democracy and the vast technological changes that transformed war in the next half-century.

Keegan examines Grant, supreme commander of the Union armies, as an example of the new professionalism. The growing density and accuracy of rifle and artillery fire created wider and more lethal killing zones than were previously imaginable. Railroads and the telegraph had also revolutionized logistics and communications. Trained at West Point, grasping fully the significance of river, rail and cable links,

Grant was exceptionally good at anticipating the intentions of his opponents and ruthless in carrying the war into the heart of the Confederacy. In battle Grant remained close to the action, rallying disheartened regiments. He was neither in front like Alexander or exposed like Wellington. Instead, he exercised a kind of complete forward control. Keegan describes how this consciously un-heroic professional with his plain and simple style captured the popular imagination. He seemed an expression of the Republic's populism with his firm sense of the subordination of the military to civilian government and his recognition that the volunteer and largely untrained troops of a people's army must be led, not driven to battle.

Keegan's final example of command is Hitler, who, like Alexander, combined in one personality, supreme political ability and the planning inconsistencies that marred the invasion of Soviet Russia. Numerous accounts have detailed his stubborn refusal to contemplate the real circumstances of his armies in the East. Keegan offers a fresh and perspective on Hitler's strengths and deficiencies as a military leader. The figure that emerges from this analysis is more soldier and front-fighter than politician. Hitler politics was war, at least the preparation for war, and his unswerving goal was to realize the victory that seemed near in 1918. While stubbornness epitomized his larger strategy, meddling with details increasingly substituted for professional tactics. This, Keegan argues, was superficial generalship, haphazard, amateurish. It was also "false heroic," chiefly because it sought to eliminate the distance between commander and combat troops. Propaganda portrayed Hitler as a suffering hero allowing him to share the hardships of his soldiers.

Each of these four case studies forms a separate entity of its own. Combined, they show a general theme about the reshaping of heroic leadership in response to social and military change. This has contemporary significance as well, and Keegan concludes with the nuclear age. His comments are brief, more tantalizing than substantive. He notes that the inevitable secrecy surrounding nuclear command procedures conflicts with democratic openness, but does little to explore the consequences.

Keegan calls for a "post-heroic" style, one that will inhibit, not instigate, conflict. He calls for less posturing, less readiness to use foreign policy for domestic political ends, and more modesty, prudence and rational thinking to counter the computerized technology. Keegan's recommended style may be is too limited and too passive in the contemporary environment but, there is need for a different kind of heroism. Perhaps the courage to pursue forthrightly and unambiguously new strategies requires our leaders' place to be out in front, like Alexander. The Mask of Command causes us to think about what this new leader would look like.

Copyright©2009 Walter Zapotoczny