

BOOK REVIEWS

Warrior's Spirit: Review of Michael Matthews's book *Head Strong: How Psychology is Revolutionizing War*

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Michael D. Matthews is Professor of Engineering Psychology at the United States Military Academy at West Point. From 2007 to 2008 he headed the American Psychological Association's (19th Division of Military Psychology). Collectively, his research interests center on soldier performance in combat.

Matthews is one of those scholars and practitioners who started what was in effect "a military psychological revolution" in the US military in 2008 under the leadership of General George W. Casey, Jr., Chief of Staff of the US army, by fundamentally transforming its mission, orientation and methods of military psychology. In 2012, in collaboration with Janice H. Laurence, an associate professor at Temple University in Philadelphia, he edited the 1496-page 4-volume *Military Psychology Reference Collection*.

The book *Head Strong* is a kind of manifesto proclaiming the psychological nature and character of war. The author believes war to be an act of will, a test of will and will, he maintains, is a psychological category. War can exist in the human dimension only. Psychology plays a pivotal role in winning a war. A more profound understanding of the human element is needed more than ever before owing to intensity and lethality of modern weapons, impact of real-time communication systems and revolutionary development of science, technology, engineering, revolutionary changes in the world's political structure. Hence he arrives at the conclusion that nations and armies that will realize this notion and will be able to "ride the wave of cutting-edge science" will have strategic advantages in the 21st century. Success is no longer guaranteed by using sheer force and purely kinetic energy in

combat (superior firepower). To illustrate his point the author mentions the failure by the powerful military groupings of the Soviet Union and the United States to win a victory in Afghanistan.

The book under review is what virtually amounts to a manifesto reflecting revolutionary change now underway in American military psychology. This change stems from the awareness of the fact that the disease-treatment paradigm which is at the core of the US Army system of psychological aid has proved to be inadequate. Enormous efforts and means involved in this area, have failed to yield the results expected. The level of combat-stress related disorders, including PTSD among US soldiers who took part in the fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan is extremely high.

The author proposes to reframe the current situation. He argues that instead of concentrating on 15–25% of combatants suffering from psychological problems we should focus on the fact that 75–85% of the troops keep their fighting ability, successfully overcoming stress factors of a combat situation. He proves it necessary to shift the emphasis from development of psychological help to optimization of psychological training of military personnel. In this regard, the author proposes the following:

1. To further improve psychological selection of servicemen through increased implementation of non-cognitive techniques in selection practices enabling to assess, first of all, such qualities as psychological resilience — an ability to overcome the effect of combat stressors while maintaining the necessary level of combat capability. Secondly, enhanced quality of military personnel selection is dependent on a wide application of modern simulators that imitate actual types of military activity. This will make it possible to study soldiers' psychological characteristics in conditions close to those in combat.
2. The author proposes to base psychological preparation on the key ideas of positive psychology elaborated by Martin Seligman. This approach can be summed up in the following words, "right thoughts about events generate right emotions."

Matthews is one of the ideologists and developers of the comprehensive soldier fitness program and what is essentially the all-Army psychological resilience training of soldiers. The program was conceived as a proactive training-based approach to form soldiers' healthy psychological and emotional skills before their exposure to combat stress. It aims to prevent psychological traumas instead of treating them. The book provides a theoretical basis and technological content of the program.

3. Revolutionary ideas are to be also found in the approach towards psychological aid. It is proposed to focus on the positive effects of an injury instead of its pathological ones (PTSD). The author believes a psychological trauma involves not only dramatic changes but it also creates opportunities for further post-traumatic growth. It is this aspect of the post-traumatic crisis that should, in the author's opinion, become the object of psychological help.

Even a moderate improvement in a soldier's awareness of his self-efficacy, confidence, coping skills can translate into a dramatic enhancement of the quality of soldiers' lives. It will also have a positive impact on the armed forces in terms of raising their morale, combat readiness, mission accomplishment and self-preservation.

Reflecting the picture of modern American military psychology, Michael Matthews's book *Head Strong* is highly insightful and beneficial to Russian military psychologists who are building the Armed Forces' psychological service.

References

Matthews, M. (2014). *Head Strong: How Psychology is Revolutionizing War*. New York: Oxford University Press.