Diplomat in Khaki

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Diplomat in Khaki: Major General Frank Ross McCoy and American Foreign Policy, 1898-1949.

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According to the standard view, the United States Army before World War II occupied only a peripheral place in American life. Scholars have tended to dismiss American soldiers before 1941 as enjoying neither influence nor popularity. Apart from intermittent emergencies, political authorities in Washington before that time seldom showed interest in military affairs or in the army as an institution. The nation’s military posture—measured by the beggarly state of the regular establishment surviving between periodic military adventures—stemmed in part from the geographic invulnerability of the United States. The absence of any credible threat to American security made an army of European scale unnecessary. Yet historians advancing this interpretation regularly cite two other influences on American military policy. The first concerned the way Americans have traditionally viewed the use of force, a view springing from a long-standing tendency to see war and peace as distinct and wholly separate phenomena. A corollary of this notion was that only war legitimized the use of force in international politics; once war ended, force became impermissible. One historian summarized American thinking about force this way: “In the night of war the soldier by ‘victory’ restored the peace which the statesman had somehow lost. With the dawn of peace, the soldier marched back to his barracks, and the statesman resumed the direction of affairs. There was little in this view for politics in time of war and very little for force in time of peace.”

The second influence, related to the first, was the idea that military and democratic values were antithetical and that a large standing army constituted a threat to liberty. This alleged antagonism enforced upon soldiers an isolation from the mainstream of American life. Generations of scholars have accepted popular antimilitarism and the soldier’s consequent estrangement from society as cardinal determinants of American military history. This notion of alienation
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defined and stunted the study of American civil-military relations, reducing it to an extended debate as to the effects of the military’s supposed isolation.\(^1\)

Recently, historians have begun challenging this interpretation. Pioneering studies by Richard D. Challener, John Morgan Gates, Peter Karsten, Richard H. Kohn, Paul A. C. Koistinen, Jack C. Lane, and others have enlarged our understanding of the military’s role in American life. These writers do not constitute a coherent “revisionist school.” Yet they question whether American views about the utility of force were quite so naive as they are often portrayed, and they reject the assumption of a military establishment divorced from society. They have sought to redefine the tenor of relations between soldiers and civilians and to integrate the military into the overall fabric of American history. Cumulatively, their efforts make it impossible any longer for Americans to see themselves as a uniquely unwarlike people with a military heritage composed of long intervals of peace interrupted only by occasional outbursts of crusading idealism.\(^2\)

This study employs biography as a vehicle to explore further some of the issues raised by these revisionists. Its twofold aim is to examine the relationship between American military and political elites and to assess the army’s contribution to American foreign policy during the half-century following the Spanish-American War. Its subject, Maj. Gen. Frank Ross McCoy, was an army officer whose extraordinarily diverse career spanned the nine administrations from William McKinley to Harry S Truman. A leader of proven skill and courage in battle, McCoy did not march back to his barracks when war ended. In the absence of declared war, he played a recurring role in the ceaseless conflict of international politics, first as an aide or junior assistant and later as an advocate or principal in his own right. Adept at the noncoercive methods of diplomacy, he also understood the utility of force to achieve policy objectives even in peacetime.

This book focuses on the periods of McCoy’s life that fall between wars. As a result, it departs from the tendency of conventional military biography to stress combat episodes in which the subject figures prominently. One consideration shaping this narrative was my desire to show how McCoy’s close connections with men such as Leonard Wood, Theodore Roosevelt, and Henry L. Stimson enabled him to enjoy a long and fruitful career as an agent of American diplomacy. Of course, when deploying as an expeditionary force to Cuba in 1898 or to France during World War I, the army in which McCoy served was functioning as a political instrument, a fact overlooked by those who insist on seeing American wars as righteous crusades. For the purposes of this study, however, McCoy’s participation in those wars is less important than his role in peacetime missions to Latin America or the Far East. For there, too, and with much greater frequency, the army served as an instrument of the national purpose.

I alone am responsible for any errors of fact or interpretation contained herein. Many others have contributed to the preparation of this work, however, and
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