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Kimberly Kagan, *The Eye of Command*. Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 2006. Pp. viii, 271. ISBN 978-0-472-03128-3.

Review by John David Lewis, Social Philosophy and Policy Center, Bowling Green State University (classicalideals@yahoo.com)

For centuries historians writing battle narratives have often focused on the commander, who moved his troops in faceless groups and whose deeds and character were the key to explaining the outcome of a battle. There was an important truth at the base of this approach: of all the participants, the commander had the greatest effect upon the campaign. It is by his will that troops come to a particular battlefield, and he tells them when to stand, charge, or retreat. But this did little to tell us what the vast majority of soldiers saw in war. Their physical and psychological experiences were too often short-shifted in comparison to tactical arrangements or the glories of the commander's character.

John Keegan's challenged this orthodoxy.[1] Beginning with his self-reflective comment that he had never been in, or even near, a battle, Keegan concluded that, minus the actual experience of combat, he had no more understanding of war than his young students. He turned away from abstract analysis toward the direct experiences of the soldiers; explanation gave way to description, as every soldier's desire to save his own life was elevated over the aims of the commanders. Keegan claimed that soldiers fight not due to leadership, but rather "on the one hand, for personal survival, which individuals will recognize to be bound up with group survival, on the other, for fear of incurring by cowardly conduct the group's contempt." "Without direct reference to fear of death," Kimberly Kagan writes of Keegan's view, "no events in combat can be understood" (10). The "face of battle" drives a wedge between a commander's goal of victory and the goal of the soldiers to live.

Kagan offers a powerful challenge to Keegan, but without returning to an unrealistic view of the commander as directing faceless armies. Her "eye of command" encompasses the wider field of understanding held by the commander, which connects the actual experiences of soldiers to the broader context of the battle and the war. The commander must be as aware of the psychological states of the soldiers, of their morale and motivations, as he is of the strengths of forces and the best tactical maneuvers. Consequently, Kagan maintains, only through the eye of command can a historian engage critically analyze which factors were causally important in a battle, a campaign, or a war.

For Kagan, the Roman history of Ammianus Marcellinus exemplifies the "face of battle" approach, and Julius Caesar's *Gallic War* illustrates the "eye of command" perspective. Readers will find lively commentary on major battles in their accounts, used to illustrate her alternative to Keegan.

Kagan's criticism of the face of battle type of narrative stresses its adoption of a participant's perspective, its impressionistic episodes and the "generic causality" that links them, its "attempt to convey verisimilitude," and its inability to explain the outcome of a battle.

[1] See *The Face of Battle* (NY: Penguin, 1976) 51.

The latter is inherent in the very approach, she maintains: soldiers on the ground are not aware of the factors that most influence the overall situation, and the raw facts of their experiences do not allow for the critical analysis needed to determine causal connections. But the soldiers are not the only ones lacking knowledge; we, too, simply cannot know the thousands of details among thousands of men. Any attempt at enumeration is bound to fail, most obviously from lack of information, but also from an inability to determine which events and experiences are most important.

To create vivid images, the face of battle writer calls upon material that is assumed to have similar effects across time. Weapons, for instance, have similar effects upon generic classes of soldiers. Ammianus's own experiences (at the siege of Amida, in A.D. 359) are one means by which he tells us the details of a battle he did not himself witness (Strasbourg, in 357). He may also draw upon common motifs in art, writing descriptions of the "Dying Gaul" rather than using evidence from the battle. Keegan has made similar leaps, from miniatures in medieval manuscripts and modern newsreels of war protestors to his account of Agincourt. Death, for Ammianus, becomes a "mass event, rather than an individual experience" (36), categorized and generalized, all with a view to making vivid for us what the fighting was really like.

The structure of such a narrative is episodic. Small periods of time ("episodes") are set into patterns ("attack, defense, retreat") connected by vague "generic causal connections." Periods of intense activity are vivified while periods of lull are telescoped or effaced; chronology gives way to a series of generalized images. The result does little to explain the battle or its outcome.

Kagan's final verdict on this pretense of realism is harsh. Despite the vivid language of violence, face of battle accounts tend to be less realistic than analysis taken from a commander's perspective. Rather than a "Mask of Command," a mask of imagery is created within the face of battle.[2] The "attempt to convey verisimilitude" is a chimera; "the realism that the reader at first perceives in Ammianus' accounts disappears under further scrutiny, as it becomes clear that his general use of similar imagery and structures adds primarily symbolic value to the text" (70). It is not essential that the account be true, but rather that it appear true—this is its symbolic purpose.

To introduce her alternative, Kagan turns to Julius Caesar's perspective upon the battlefields of Gaul. His need is to grasp the whole—and to evaluate which events are most important—with a view to understanding rather than direct perception. A huge part of the problem with the face of battle approach is its reliance upon imagery, rather than a conceptual grasp of the entirety of the context—an approach that makes it impossible to analyze the situation critically. Like a historian, a commander cannot rely upon direct perception apart from understanding—Caesar was often in places where such a view was impossible. Kagan stresses Caesar's use of *animadvertere*—"to recognize," a cognitive act connected to observation—in his writings (125–26). Critical analysis means abstract understanding, which requires something other than a series of experiences.

Kagan's account of Caesar's actions in Gaul—against the Helvetii, the commander Ariovistus, the Nervii, and at Alesia—attempts to rescue Caesar from charges of bias and self-

[2] From John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (NY: Penguin, 1988).

aggrandizement. But his account also demonstrates his own lack of direct experience: often he could not have known where in the situation the decisive event would take place. The result highlights the differences between persons, units and events rather than the similarities that follow from the face of battle accounts. This is the exact opposite of what one might expect. But Kagan's eye of command stresses the need for a commander to integrate the particulars of a situation—including those he has not seen, but must infer— into his understanding, while avoiding unrealistic generalities.

This integration includes a special concern for friction—the effects of particular, localized occurrences upon the outcome. Surely troops that do not perform as well as they should, given physical, logistical or psychological shortcomings, can hamper a commander's ability to bring about a desired result. A single bottleneck can have dire consequences. But the illustration of Gergovia—Caesar's only defeat by the Gauls in battle—is that an excess of zeal by troops can also create such friction. According to Caesar, three legions advanced farther up a hill than they had been ordered to. They failed to hear the trumpets ordering retreat and were also overly excited by what they thought they could accomplish.

The eye of command approach demands that a historian, like a commander, take such particulars into account, evaluating their importance against the entirety of the situation and the campaign. A commander's tactical flexibility, not rigid adherence to a predetermined plan, while pursuing definite goals is a virtue. Kagan argues against Clausewitz's view that a commander needs "iron will-power," but perhaps the iron willpower must be expressed through an intransigent commitment to act as the facts demand, in a dynamic, deadly struggle for the highest of stakes.

The theoretical basis for Kagan's analysis, which she presents after her discussions of Keegan and Ammianus, begins with Clausewitz, but then broadens into an understanding of battle as a non-linear system, with holistic emphasis on the entire context rather than lines of causal relationships traced back to a single primary factor. In such an interconnected system, a small event can lead to a drastic change in the overall situation. For want of a nail, the battle—and the kingdom—were lost.

Both the traditional "commander-glorifying" narratives and the "face of battle" approach are unable to explain such matters. Traditional accounts emphasize the hierarchical positions of officers, whose orders flow down onto the soldiers in proportion to their ranks, failing to assess those factors on the ground that may influence outcomes to a degree that exceeds their apparent importance. In contrast, face of battle narratives are additive and assume that the overall flow of a battle is a summation of individual experiences. The nature and results of a battle flow upwards, and the commander is less in control than he may think. In either case, an action anywhere leads to a result mathematically proportional to its cause.

But this is a false alternative. Complex, non-linear and synergistic systems—such as turbulent airflows and weather systems—do not operate in such ways. In Kagan's view, it is crucial to determine the importance of a factor in the overall situation, not by tracing all causal lines (which is impossible), but rather by finding the essential, decisive events. The commander must evaluate the importance of such particulars or plan to allow his people to take advantage of a changing situation. This, as Kagan reads it, was a major strength of

Caesar, who was often in the wrong place (as he openly admits), but whose subordinates could turn a situation around as it unfolded.

Kagan's central point, which separates her view from the typical focus on the commander, is the commander's need for cognitive integration. He must see the system as a whole, despite gaps in his direct experience, not by forcing conformity on particular circumstances, but by seeing the interconnections amid variety. "Precisely because Caesar narrated two types of events, those that he could and could not see, we can learn how he integrated what he himself observed on the battlefield with the known outcome of the battle as a whole. We begin to see through the eye of command which concatenations of events are essential and how they relate to one another" (134).

For the historian—and for the commander who leaves a record of his campaigns—knowledge of the outcome is an important part of the integration, for it confirms which events were essential and decisive. A commander creates a tactical integration of forces; the historian creates a literary integration. Both the commander and the historian need the eye of command perspective, if they are to understand the entirety of the battle and its decisive moments.

A series of conclusions follow from Kagan's approach, of which only a few can be considered here. For instance, Keegan's disassociation of the commander's goal of victory from the soldier's desire to stay alive is false. "Keegan fails to recognize the critical importance of 'winning' and 'losing' to the morale of the soldier and the degree to which a general's 'losing' and a soldier's personal fear of death are likely to be intertwined and in some cases identical." Dying is a "much more imminent threat when they are losing" (183, 186). A good commander connects victory, without contradiction, to his soldiers' capacity to remain alive.

Kagan also observes that Ammianus and Caesar changed their narrative styles over time. Ammianus became more analytical, and wrote more of tactical issues, a progression that might relate to his assumption of command; Caesar became more refined in his recognition of causal, spatial, and sequential relationships, which begin to emerge in his account of the campaign against the Nervii in 57 BC. Caesar the master commander writes a powerful narrative, meeting the need for integration common both to military command and to writing about its meaning and its results.

Kagan's argument invites application to areas of study beyond battle narratives. In the broadest sense, history is not—as the face of battle suggests—a list of facts or images, to be described but not explained. But neither is history, as traditional commander-focused views might imply, a deduction from wide abstractions to the particulars on the ground. Historians must integrate what is important, given their purposes, into a coherent whole, without distorting the overall description or misstating the experiences of people caught up in events.

I do not think that Clausewitz was right, as cited approvingly by Kagan, that the discovery of facts "has nothing in common with theory" (101). Which facts shall we seek to discover? The answer to that question presupposes some theoretical standard to determine which facts are important enough to be sought. If our purpose is to find out what the experience of battle was like for a soldier, we will seek different facts than if our purpose is to discover why one side was able to impose its political will for a generation after a battle. Ka-

gan is surely right that fixation on particular experiences without regard for their integration into a broader system cannot explain why soldiers ended up where they were and why results followed as they did.