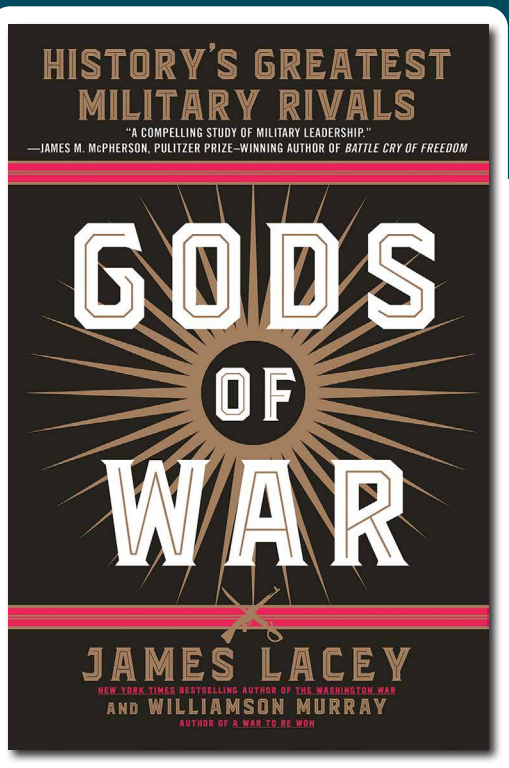
REVIEW ESSAY



Gods of War

History's Greatest Military Rivals

James Lacey and Williamson Murray, Bantam Books, New York, 2020, 416 pages

Mark Montesclaros

The intriguing title of this book is bound to attract intellectual curiosity, whether in reference to Greek or Roman mythology or to military warfare as implied. For this reviewer, a fairly obtuse reference comes to mind—Tom Wolfe's *The Right Stuff*, when describing the plight of the Mercury 7 astronauts in their quest for the heavens against the vaunted Russians, he introduces the concept of "single combat warrior."[1] This hero, representing his people or the state, would do battle with a similarly endowed counterpart in order to resolve conflict without unnecessary bloodshed. Of course, the rivals considered by prominent historians James Lacey and Williamson Murray did not go it alone, as they were aided by armies of varying sizes, but the head-to-head matchup is a compelling one nonetheless. Whether in warfare or in more common pursuits such as sports, nothing captures the attention more than a contest between two supremely gifted and equally talented rivals. If *Gods of War* were about sports, perhaps an appropriate analogy would be the "Thrilla in Manila," or Ali-Frazier III, the rubber match that culminated the heavyweight campaign between two historic juggernauts. However, do not take this analogy too far; *Gods of War* is a serious intellectual exercise despite its eye-catching title.

In *Gods of War*, Lacey and Murray demonstrate their considerable talents in analyzing and synthesizing six such matchups between equally adept opponents—the key term here is *evenly matched*. These case studies constitute the core of the book (chapters 2–6) and span roughly 2,200 years of military history—an impressive exercise in time, space, and purpose reminiscent of John Keegan's *A History of Warfare* and *The Mask of Command* or Victor Davis Hanson's *Carnage and Culture*, all of which challenge readers to think critically across the tactical, operational, and strategic realms of warfare. Two of the case studies deal with the ancient world—Hannibal and Scipio, and Caesar versus Pompey. The next—Richard I and Saladin during the Second Crusade—matches the two greatest military leaders of medieval times, according to the authors. These are followed by sections that

are perhaps more familiar to attendees or graduates of professional military education institutions across the services—Napoleon and Wellington, Grant versus Lee, and Rommel versus Montgomery and Patton. The six rivalries can be read separately or sequentially as they are self-contained, each with its own contextual introduction, body, and conclusion. They are bookended by two very thought-provoking pieces (chapters 1 and 8)—the first setting the context, or "framework for war," as the authors put it. The final chapter concludes the discourse, and like the first, effectively connects the dots between the six rivalries and provides the "so what" and "where do we go from here" intellectual underpinnings for the book.

While it is beyond the scope of this review to analyze each of the chapters in depth, some overarching comments are appropriate. Perhaps the most cogent is *Gods of War* will challenge the reader's assumptions and is bound to stimulate further inquiry into a number of issues. Lacey and Murray—pardon the repeat boxing analogy—pull no punches in this regard. They make a number of assertions that may cause readers to do a double take and then explain them in terms that are clear and accessible, especially to military professionals. (After all, both authors have extensive experience teaching and writing at the military academies and/or professional military education institutions across the services.) An early example of such an assertion appears as the authors consider the efficacy of "military genius" in chapter 1: "Acknowledging the misery caused by many of history's military geniuses, it is surely a good thing that there have been so few of them."[2] The authors then go on to explain their rationale, arguing that military genius is contextual and idiosyncratic in nature, and has often caused more harm than good to the societies that produced this quality in their leaders.

A second example is in the authors' consideration of what constitutes decisive battle. Referring to the World War II case study, they state, "There were certainly no decisive battles in the conduct of the war."[3] Generations of students raised on the criticality of engagements such as Midway, El Alamein, Stalingrad, and the Battle of Britain may scratch their heads at this assertion. However, the authors effectively explain that the importance of the single, decisive engagement was already on the wane toward the end of the Napoleonic period based on changes in the nature of warfare brought on by the Industrial and French Revolutions. Henceforth, campaigns rather than battles came to the fore. Consequently, *Gods of War* focuses its attention in its latter chapters on how campaigns, rather than tactical engagements, were prosecuted by the rivals. The authors contend that the unrelenting pursuit of a single, decisive victory (à la Hannibal at Cannae, covered in chapter 2) eventually did in exemplary battlefield commanders such as Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia, and continues to impact military doctrine even today. These examples help set the tone for the case studies that follow and establish themes that provide continuity throughout the book.

Another overarching comment—and one of the book's strengths—is that *Gods of War* provides great insight into the complexity of military genius and its relationship to leadership. Throughout the case studies and the chapters that bookend them, Lacey and Murray really do teach their readers about warfare, perhaps their most important goal as stated in the book's preface. And because the authors converse in a style and language that military professionals will recognize, readers will no doubt be readily equipped to challenge—as well as learn from—the authors' point of view. Regarding military genius, the authors clearly parse this somewhat amorphous concept and differentiate its multiple aspects. One way is through the levels of war paradigm; in their articulation of the case studies, they often refer to the how the rivals performed at the strategic, operational, and/or tactical levels of war. As an example, they conclude that of the six sets of rivals, only Saladin (during the Third Crusade) and Ulysses S. Grant (after assuming command of the Union army during the Civil War) had a strategic vision and saw it through to a successful outcome. Virtually all of the rivals succeeded at the tactical level as great battlefield generals—which seems to be a sine qua non for "military genius" status, but that did not necessarily translate into operational or strategic success. Hannibal, Richard I, Napoleon, Robert E. Lee, and Erwin

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Rommel come to mind in this regard—audacious battlefield generals skilled at maneuver and firepower but unable to achieve strategic success due to either the nature of the regimes they served or to personal flaws that eventually derailed them.

Turning briefly to the topic of leadership, in *The Mask of Command*, eminent historian Sir John Keegan wrote, "The first and greatest imperative of command is to be present in person."[4] All of the rivals excelled in this regard, without exception. One of *Gods of War*'s strengths is to bring to light some of the tactical exploits of the rivals as junior or intermediate leaders during their formative years—some of which are perhaps less well known to general readers. Scipio, Pompey, Saladin, Wellington (Arthur Wellesley), and Montgomery all led by example and exhibited elements (to varying degrees) of personal courage, audacious action, leading from the front, and identifying with their men. The authors effectively set the contextual tone for each case study by highlighting these tactical leadership strengths and how those strengths contributed to the generalship exhibited in later campaigns against their vaunted rivals.

A final observation deals with the case studies themselves; like the rest of the book, they are highly readable, insightful, and thought provoking. Each case study considers the plight of the protagonists before, during, and after the campaign in question—no easy feat considering the longevity of luminaries such as Hannibal, Caesar, and Napoleon, to name a few. (As a quick aside, the authors consider Caesar, not Alexander, as the greatest general in the ancient world.) The artistry in synthesizing so much history in the span of a chapter is evident; Lacey and Murray provide sufficient buildup to make the "matchup" exciting and have the reader anticipating the event. And while the conduct and results of the historical campaigns are generally well known, the authors provide their own analysis and expertise such that the recounting of events is never dull, never rote. They provide insightful analysis on the winners and losers of each rivalry, explaining why each conflict ended the way it did and using the prism of the aspects of military genius mentioned above. So, to employ one final sports analogy—perhaps fitting for a book discussing six of the greatest rivalries in military history—who is the GOAT ("greatest of all time")? While not stated in quite that manner, the evidence seems to favor Ulysses S. Grant, whose stock has risen over time (one piece of recent evidence—the History Channel's recent, critically acclaimed three-part biopic). The authors laud Grant for his ability to link all of the levels of warfare—particularly the strategic and operational—and his recognition that only by bringing "hard war" to the South could the Union be preserved. In particular, they mention that many consider Grant's operations against Vicksburg "the most brilliant campaign ever undertaken by an American general."[5]

The book is not without some minor flaws. A small example is Saladin's capture of Jerusalem; it occurred in the year 1187, not in 1177 as stated in the book. Graphically, some of the diagrams depicting ancient orders of battle are a bit dark and ambiguous, and the authors include a graphic of Operation Market Garden that is somewhat superfluous due to its relative lack of coverage in the text. Perhaps a map of the European theater of operations would be a better accompaniment to the chapter on Erwin Rommel, George Patton, and Bernard Montgomery. Obviously, these shortcomings are far outweighed by the book's many positive aspects as noted above.

Gods of War is highly recommended to military professionals and would make a worthy addition to the services' reading lists. It would also serve well as a graduate-level text due to its case-study format, power of analysis, and depth of research. As noted earlier, authors Lacey and Murray seek to teach their readers something about warfare. With *Gods of War*, they more than accomplish that goal, providing their audience much to ponder and discuss. They make a great contribution to lifelong learning and to the intellectual development of military professionals in this highly readable, accessible and thought-provoking work. ■

Notes

1. Tom Wolfe, *The Right Stuff* (New York: Bantam Books, 1983), 101.
2. James Lacey and Williamson Murray, *Gods of War: History's Greatest Military Rivals* (New York: Bantam Books, 2020), 6.
3. Ibid., 31.
4. John Keegan, *The Mask of Command* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 329.
5. Lacey and Murray, *Gods of War*, 272.