



George W. Goethals and the Army: Change and Continuity in the Gilded Age and Progressive Era by Rory McGovern.

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Most studies of reform movements concentrate on the reformers themselves and their struggles against an established order dominated by narrow-minded traditionalists. In *George W. Goethals and the Army*,¹ historian and US Army Maj. Rory McGovern takes the unusual step of focusing on an officer who held himself aloof from the often heated and rancorous debates about Army reform and the professionalization of its officer corps in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Using the career of George W. Goethals (1858–1928), an engineer best known for managing the construction of the Panama Canal, McGovern provides a discerning analysis of the factors that slowed reform, despite the efforts of Emory Upton (1839–81) and other reform-minded officers. In contrast to previous historians, McGovern argues that Secretary of War Elihu Root's reforms, including the creation of a general staff (1903), did not significantly alter how the Army functioned. Only the mass mobilization for the First World War in 1917 forced it to change.

A typical officer of his era, Goethals graduated from the US Military Academy in 1880 and advanced through a succession of engineering positions, learning through experience and self-study rather than formal training and education. He explored and surveyed western lands in the last years of the frontier and then directed river and canal improvements to enhance the navigability of inland waterways in the Midwest and South. He served in Puerto Rico during the Spanish-American War (1898) and on the general staff shortly after its creation. In 1907, he took charge of the Panama Canal's construction when the Army assumed this mission from the troubled Isthmian Canal Commission. He managed this effort through its completion in 1914. Recalled from retirement during World War I, he played a central role in managing the equipping, supply, and transport of America troops to Europe.

McGovern ties the process of Army reform to changes in American society, particularly the progressive movement and the managerial revolution, and traces their slow implementation in the Army through Goethals's career. The "closing" of the frontier around 1890, changing US foreign policy goals, the managerial revolution, the rise of progressivism, educational reforms, and an emphasis on professionalism encouraged Army officers to reform and modernize their service. The Army's uneven performance in the Spanish-American War exposed its shortcomings and outdated institutions. In response, Elihu Root sought to "create formal systems of military education, rationalizing the command structure, and establishing the General Staff Corps—a new entity responsible for developing war and mobilization plans well in advance of any crisis and coordinating the execution of those plans as crises arose" (xvii).

During the frontier era, large-scale training proved impossible, as most officers were scattered among small posts across the west. Army culture resisted change even as the frontier closed and civilians embraced a host of reforms and progressive-era changes in American society and busi-

1. Orig., diss. Univ. of North Carolina (2017).

ness. Rather than emerging as a vibrant agent of change and effective manager of the Army, the General Staff was, McGovern writes, gutted by “institutional dysfunction and congressional politics.” Twelve years after its formation, as the United States prepared to enter World War I, it remained “too small to plan and coordinate the myriad aspects of mobilization for the type of mass industrialized warfare that characterized World War I” (141). Similarly, Army culture opposed new systems of formal education and training. Even as graduate schools proliferated across civilian academia, the Army’s institutional culture continued to stress experiential learning and self-education. As with the General Staff, Army culture worked against the intent of the Army War College and other new educational institutions established by Root and limited their effectiveness.

Reform-minded officers sought to change Army culture and modernize their service. Like their civilian counterparts, they believed that changing institutional structures would facilitate the transformation they desired. Instead, “by focusing only on institutional structures, reformers unintentionally created a schism between those structures and the Army’s institutional culture, blunting the effect of reform and preventing reformers from achieving their goals in the early twentieth century” (51–52). Even the Army War College, led by Tasker H. Bliss, “rejected its own educational mandate in favor of more traditional forms of experiential learning” (82).

Goethals was largely a product of Army culture, but his management of the Panama Canal project from 1907 to 1914 forced him to adopt modern managerial practices. After all, he oversaw some 45,000 employees and contractors, a force roughly half the size of the US Army at the time. Embracing the managerial revolution, as Goethals did, proved to be “the first stage of a gradual process that would eventually repair the schism between the Army’s institutional culture and its institutional structure wrought by the Root reforms.” Accepting new managerial theories in turn made “the notion of a general staff” palatable to officers, even if they could not agree on its form or function. The “managerial revolution provided the Army with an effective theoretical framework to conceptualize and resolve many of its systemic weaknesses revealed during the first year of the American intervention in the First World War” (132).

Indeed, American efforts to mobilize for war in 1917 “created a crisis severe enough to shock the Army to a degree that made possible the cultural shift needed to realign the Army’s institutional culture with its structures” (135). The Root reforms had not changed the Army’s administrative bureaus, which remained mired in tradition, failed to cooperate with one another, and worked to undermine the General Staff. Originally designed to supply the needs of small frontier forces, they proved inadequate for industrial war. Their overlapping functions bred competition rather than cooperation and waste rather than efficiency. Several different bureaus purchased the same materials, ranging from cloth and leather to auto parts. They produced finished goods and arranged for their transport and shipment independently, snarling railroads and clogging ports—disruptions that spread to the civilian economy.

Goethals, who enjoyed a reputation as an expert manager, was appointed acting quartermaster general to solve these problems. Opposition from the bureaus and the Army’s lack of experience with largescale procurement forced him to take an incremental approach to centralization. He created a Purchase, Storage, and Traffic division staffed with experienced civilian managers. Peyton C. March, appointed Chief of Staff in February 1918, supported Goethals and gave him more and more authority. By the end of the war, the Quartermaster Department controlled 80 percent of commodities purchasing. Goethals’s innovations dramatically increased troop shipments to France and made possible the late-war US offensives that compelled the Germans to seek an armistice. Goethals played a key role in the war by bringing to conclusion “a decades-long

process of military reform that stretched from the late nineteenth-century experiments with post-graduate military education, through the Root reforms, and to the ultimate realization of the potential of those reforms immediately before and during World War II” (206).

The interwar Army recognized the importance of formal education, centered on the Command and General Staff School, the Army War College, and the Army Industrial College. It institutionalized the lessons of the First World War, which “ultimately closed the gap between the institution’s culture and its structures that had been created by the Root reforms” (200).

Rory McGovern’s perceptive and convincing analysis clarifies the realities of reform. Despite the efforts of Root and his supporters, their package of reforms failed to bridge the chasm between the Army’s institutional culture and a changing American society that increasingly valued professional education and scientific management. McGovern places military education within the context of broader educational changes in the United States and explores the complex problems of military transformation that continue after legislation is passed and orders are issued. He necessarily focuses on the Army, but some discussion of the US Navy’s contemporaneous struggle to modernize and reform outdated institutions would have strengthened his argument. That said, both students and specialists will find *George W. Goethals and the Army* to be filled with valuable insights into the processes of reform and military transformation.