



From Horses to Horsepower: The Mechanization and Demise of the U.S. Cavalry 1916–1950 by Alexander Bielakowski.

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Despite the extensive space devoted here to photographs, many adding little to the text, *From Horses to Horsepower* has particular value because it drills down through abstractions and institutions to consider the debate over the mechanization of the cavalry in terms of the role of individuals. Military historian Alexander Bielakowski (Univ. of Houston–Downtown) distinguishes the officers he considers as traditionalists, modernizers, pragmatists, and compromisers.

The aftermath of the first World War led in the United States and elsewhere to a reassessment of the likely role of cavalry in the future. This was not an either/or question, for cavalry could be expected to perform in very different settings. America was a military power not only in its hemisphere but also in the Philippines. And it might well be called upon again to take a role in Europe, as, indeed, proved to be the case. In short, there was no single role or likely opponent. Who could have foreseen, for instance, that US troops would land in Africa through Moroccan surf in 1942 and advance to fight in Tunisia in 1943?

Wartime changes were made to meet immediate challenges and the strengths of particular opponents. Naturally, this was not the case in the interwar years, when there was a peacetime pause for the army. That too, however, posed problems, Bielakowski notes, because of a lack of money and manpower in the 1930s. But these snags did and do not necessarily preclude reform. When there is a need to consider investment in procurement, a relatively small force can make it easier to institute reforms, while shortages themselves can encourage serious thoughts about, say, wasteful duplication.

Yet, shortages can also foster a sclerotic promotion system that discourages merit, as in the pre-Civil War armed forces, while simultaneously making it hard to rectify and update established structures in order to invest in new options. To a degree, that was a problem not only for the Americans. But, compared to the Soviet Union, Britain, France, and Germany, the United States was slow to engage with new armored doctrine and procurement. This could mean a failure to invest in systems that swiftly became inadequate and/or redundant, as with Soviet and (differently) British armor and aircraft in the early 1930s. But such investment could also prove to be a means to build up skills.

Bielakowski ably captures the changes within this dynamic environment. He shows that in 1920–28 there was a distrust in the cavalry about the efficacy of mechanization, whereas concerns in 1928–38 had more to do with financial practicality, which spawned a conviction that mechanized units would be at best ancillary to horse cavalry. From 1938, in contrast, most cavalry officers believed it possible to mechanize the cavalry completely. As Bielakowski astutely notes, the pragmatists and compromisers among the officers, in a crucial institutional change, joined the modernizers in endorsing the US Armored Force formed in 1940. He takes the story through the war and into postwar occupations, like the US Constabulary in Germany (1946–52), that actively used horses alongside mechanization.

From Horses to Horsepower is an enlightening study of doctrine, weaponry, logistics, and contemporary debates over World War II. It deserves a wide readership.