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**A Forgotten American Military Strategist:**

**The Vision and Enigma of Homer Lea**

by

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**ABSTRACT**

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## INTRODUCTION

Warfare, either ancient or modern, has never been nor will ever be mechanical. There is no such possibility as the combat of instruments. It is the soldier that brings about victory or defeat. The knowledge of commanders and the involuntary comprehension and obedience to order is what determines the issue of battles.

Homer Lea, Valor of Ignorance<sup>1</sup>

On the morning of December 12, 1941, five days after their attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, Japanese forces began their invasion of the Philippines. The exact invasion sites, as well as the Japanese strategic plan, were outlined by Denver born Homer Lea in his book Valor of Ignorance in 1909. He predicted the Philippine capital, Manila, would fall in three weeks or less; the Japanese Army took it in 26 days.<sup>2</sup>

Who was Homer Lea and what were his theories? Why has he been forgotten? If alive today, how would he illustrate a strategic vision and identify flashpoints of strategic interest to the United States?

Homer Lea at a little over five feet tall and weighing about 100 pounds, was both a colorful and pitiful character. He was a Lieutenant General in the Chinese Imperial Army;<sup>3</sup> he became an advisor to Lord Roberts, Chief of the British General Staff, as well as Kaiser Wilhelm and General von Seeckt of Germany prior to World War I. The King of Italy personally annotated a copy of Valor of Ignorance for his chief of staff.<sup>4</sup> A copy of Lea's book was seen on Lenin's desk in Zurich in 1916. Lenin said that

"this book will some day be studied by thousands of people."<sup>5</sup>  
His book was on the curricula of the German, Russian and Japanese military academies.<sup>6</sup>

His supporters in the United States included Elihu Root, former Secretary of War, then chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and former Army Chief of Staff, Lieutenant General Adna Chaffee, Major Generals Harrison Gray Otis and J.P. Story. While his supporters saw Lea as a visionary who would ultimately predict the nature and areas of conflict in the 20th century, his enemies described him as "fascist-like, anti-Semitic and insistent on racial purity."

#### WHO WAS HOMER LEA?

The grandson of a Civil War, Confederate physician (Dr. Pleasant John Graves Lea),<sup>7</sup> he was born on November 17, 1876 in Denver, Colorado. Because of a birth defect called scoliosis which causes a "hunchback" appearance, and weak eyesight aggravated by smallpox, Lea's ambitions for military service and a complete academic education were never realized.

His family moved to California where Lea excelled in Latin, French, history and mathematics<sup>8</sup> and learned Chinese from the family cook. After attending Occidental College and Stanford University from 1897-1899, he left school because of poor health. Yet, he left a reputation as a brilliant military student of the campaigns of Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar, Napoleon and Civil War generals. While his fellow students enjoyed Lea's ability to

confound "his professors with his intimate knowledge of the campaigns of Napoleon and Hannibal," Dr. David Starr, then president of Stanford and a renowned "pacifist," recalled Lea as "a vulgar, loud-mouthed, excessively war-like youth."<sup>10</sup>

After leaving Stanford, he joined a secret Chinese movement that was a branch of the White Lotus Society, and a source for Chinese revolutionaries over hundreds of years. The goal of the society was the overthrow of the Empress Dowager and the Manchu court of China.

Accounts of Lea's participation and role in the revolution in China are fragmentary, incomplete, and in some cases contradictory. What can be said about Lea's role is that in the summer of 1899, he left for China with at least \$60,000 to participate in the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty and was commissioned a lieutenant general in the Chinese Imperial Army.

He met Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the future President of the Chinese Republic and leader of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party), either in Japan or Hong Kong. Sun selected him as his military advisor and later as his chief of staff. Perhaps it was Sun's western medical education and his political ideas borrowed from western democracies that drew him to select Homer Lea as a trusted confidant.

In May 1900, when then Major General Adna Chaffee led a multinational expedition to end the "anti-foreign" uprising known as the Boxer Rebellion which was aimed at "driving out the foreign devils," Chaffee met Lea in Peking and was supportive of

his plans to democratize China.<sup>11</sup>

After Lea's return to California, he continued fund raising efforts for the Chinese Reform movement. In 1904, he established a Western Military Academy using former U.S. Army personnel as trainers. The Academy was expanded to over 20 cities nationwide to include, Chicago, New York City, Boston, Denver, Seattle, Phoenix and a number of cities in California.<sup>12</sup> A contingent of 50 marched in the 1905 "Tournament of Roses" parade.<sup>13</sup>

While secretly sending graduates of the Academy to China in anticipation of the uprising against the Manchu regime, he ran into trouble at home. Legal problems arose in California, Minnesota and New York because of accusations that he was illegally training soldiers on U.S. soil for use in a foreign war.<sup>14</sup> He was even investigated by the Secret Service. However, the charges could not be proven and both the charges and the investigation were dropped.

Homer Lea sought the financial and political assistance on one trip to the east coast of the United States. He visited the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York, the Colt arms manufacturing company in Hartford, Connecticut and sought support from the White House. Efforts by the Chinese reform movement in Massachusetts and Connecticut to secure support from manufacturers and politicians met with failure.

According to his sister, Ermal Lea Green, in a letter to the Saturday Evening Post in May, 1942, Homer had an interview at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt seeking support for

his Chinese revolutionary cause. The fruits of his travels are unknown but he probably was unsuccessful in raising any substantial sums of money or political support from national figures.

Lea's first book was a novel published in 1908, The Vermillion Pencil. The plot concerned the destruction of Chinese society by Christian missionaries. This theme echoed a principal of the Chinese Reform movement to seek a China without foreign influence on its soil. Concurrent with this novel, he wrote an unproduced play called "The Crimson Spider".

His second book, published in 1909, would become more popular in America during World War II. Written after the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War (Spring 1907), it was dedicated to Elihu Root. The Valor of Ignorance, a strategic geopolitical and military thesis, sold 18,000 copies in the United States and went out of print in 1922. In 1922, Japan was beginning to build up the islands around Wake and Guam which were acquired from Germany after World War I.

In Japan, The Valor of Ignorance was published under the title "The War Between Japan and America" and was reprinted at least 24 times and sold over 84,000 copies in its first three months after publication.

Valor, was studied by General Douglas MacArthur and was quoted by then Colonel (later Major General) Charles Willoughby, MacArthur's G-2 during World War II and the Korean War, as the roadmap for Japanese hegemony in the Pacific and Asia. In an



interview with Colonel Willoughby in 1942, in an article "Ever Hear of Homer Lea?", Willoughby goes on to say "Homer Lea was neither a mystic nor a prophet. He was a scientist. He studied the science of war - the fundamental laws of which are as immutable as those of any other science... He also sought to analyze the causes of war and diagnose the symptoms of an approaching conflict. And having proved, at least to his own satisfaction, that great causes for war existed between the United States and Japan...he proceeded to set forth the tactical course that war would take."

Shortly after Valor was published, Lea sent a copy to General Chaffee for his critique. General Chaffee along with Major General Story, former chief of artillery, immediately came to see Lea. Chaffee said " I have not been able to sleep since I read it."

Pacifist groups denounced Valor as fascist and totalitarian. At the same time, Literary Digest called it "a daring and startling book...which every American would do well to ponder."

In Europe, Field Marshal Lord Roberts, Chief of the British General Staff wrote that "...when I read it, I could not rest until I had finished it. So struck was I with your description of the unpreparedness...of the people in America with that of my own people..."

In Germany, Kaiser Wilhelm II sent a personal invitation to Lea to attend German military maneuvers. In the dress uniform of a general in the Chinese Reform army, Lea observed the maneuvers

and met with senior German army officials.

By 1911, Lea, along with Sun Yat-sen, went to Europe to meet with military and political leaders in Great Britain and Germany, to raise funds for the Chinese Reform movement, to see German doctors for eyesight problems, and to seek European support or at least nonintervention in the overthrow of the Manchu dynasty. In the full dress uniform of a Chinese general officer, Lea attended meetings in London and war games in Germany.

In October 1911, the child emperor of the Manchu dynasty, Pui Li (as portrayed in the movie "The Last Emperor"), was unseated in a surprise uprising. Sun and Lea returned to China. During this time, Lea published The Day of the Saxon. The book highlights Anglo-Saxon superiority and the threat posed by Germanic and Slavic powers. In 1911, he warned Germany against an attack on Russia. He saw such a future war leading to the defeat of Germany. The book sold 7,000 copies in English and went out of print in the early 1930s in the year Adolph Hitler came into power.

In 1911, Sun Yat-sen was elected President of the Chinese Republic. By 1917, he established the Republic of South China as leader of the Kuomintang (Nationalist Party).

In December 1911, Lea started his third geopolitical and military strategy book, "The Swarming of the Slavs," but it was never finished nor are copies of his writing extant.

While in China, Lea suffered a stroke and returned to California where he fell into a coma and died November 1, 1912,

two weeks before his 36th birthday.

On April 10, 1969, the ashes of Homer Lea and his wife, Ethel, were brought to Taipei, Formosa. They were interred during a ceremony on April 20th in a ceremony attended by the Premier and Vice Premier of the Republic of China (Taiwan) and the President of the Taiwan Legislature, Yuan Sun Fo, Dr. Sun Yat-sen's only son.

The U.S. government provided no official recognition to this event. Considering President Nixon's trip to mainland China in 1972, this indifference is not surprising.

#### HOMER LEA'S STRATEGIC VISION

Success in military operations depends primarily upon the excess of rapidity that one army has over another in reaching a theatre [sic] of war and moving therein. As the theatre of war increases in distance from the main bases of the combatants and extends in area, armies become more dependent upon the rapidity and capacity of means of transportation. As an army is limited or retarded in gaining strategic positions in a theatre of war, its worth is decreased accordingly.

#### Valor of Ignorance<sup>15</sup>

Homer Lea is an enigmatic figure lost in the shadows of the geopolitical and military strategists of the time including Fredrich Ratzel (1844-1894) and Rudolf Kjellen (1864-1922) who established the term "geopolitik". Sir Halford Mackinder (1861-1947) a British geographer and theorist of the Eurasian heartland, received great notoriety for his work in 1904 on The

Scope and Methods of Geography and The Geographical Pivot of History.

Karl Haushofer (1869-1946) transposed some of Lea's thoughts in German geopolitical thinking which influenced Hitler's nationalist socialist movement. In 1909, Haushofer travelled to the Far East for service study with the Imperial Japanese Army. He learned Japanese, increased his knowledge of the region and taught at the Japanese staff college. Perhaps Haushofer's two years of service study with the Imperial Japanese Army drew him to Homer Lea's works including Haushofer's theories on "Autarky" or the ideal of national economic self-containment; "Lebensraum" or the right of a nation to expand to provide room for its population; and "Panregions" or claims/manifest destiny of a nation to conquer and annex territory.

During the same period in the United States, Alfred T. Mahan (1840-1914) rose to international prominence because of his works on naval strategy, The Interest of America in Sea Power (1898). Mahan, like Lea, drew on historical analogies to support his principles. There are strong similarities between Mahan's six elements of seapower and Lea's treatise which cite land power as the ultimate source for victory. While some writers believe Lea's theories contradict Mahan's principles, in reality they complement Mahan.<sup>16</sup>

Homer Lea believed that war was inevitable. Caused by population growth and the needs of survival and geographic access to transportation and resources, wars result from territorial

aggression and economic expansion.

Lea illustrates this expansionism in The Day of the Saxon:

The loot of town and tavern has given way to the universal thievery of natural resources that modern civilization has made necessary for the progression of man and the supremacy of his political institutions. In those old days it was the orderless strife of individuals; now it is the pre-determined struggle of nations. In those times when the world was opulent and the greed of man was the small greed of his single self, mankind marauded rather than warred. Now it is the struggle of nations in the last looting of Nature; increasing each year in intensity, not alone by the added increment of population, but by the development of material science and the growing hungers of insatiable civilization..."

In the determination of "nation-states," Lea notes that "one of the principal causes responsible for much that is erroneous in our ideas of national existence is due to the indifference with which we form our conceptions of the forces that control the formation, progress, and dissolution of states."<sup>17</sup>

In an ominous warning in Saxon, he noted that "the wealth and population of the United States excites no fear in Japan, nor does the vastness of the British Empire cast any foreboding shadow across those routes of march over which Germanic armies exact in due time, to make their way."

Lea viewed states located between great powers as the battlegrounds of future wars. "Whenever a physically inferior state is placed between two greater powers so that it is included within their sphere of political and military progression, its independence is never more than tentative and its political survival brief." In this category he cited Poland, the

Philippines, the Balkans, Persia [Iran], Afghanistan and Korea.<sup>18</sup>

When considering economic power, Lea notes that "instead of adding power to a nation, it simply increases the responsibility of its rulers and necessitates a greater diligence for defence..."<sup>19</sup>

Like Mackinder, he saw Great Britain, Germany and Russia as major players in the future...but he also included China and Japan. Homer foresaw Japan as the "industrially controlling factor in Asia." He foretold of German and Russian expansion into Poland; and he saw Persia's ultimate goal of controlling the Persian Gulf.<sup>20</sup>

While he saw Russia and Japan as geopolitically natural allies, he observed friction between China and Russia. As Lea noted, "The expansion of China is antagonistic to Russia more than to any other nation." He prophesied the end of the British Empire "east of Suez" with the loss of India.

Concerning war, Lea said:

In the future, it can be considered as an established principle that nations will more and more make war without previous notification, since modern facilities increase their ability to take their opponents by surprise and to strike the first blow as nearly as possible to their main base.

Lea recognized the profound impact that logistics and transportation had on power projection and as the fulcrum for national military power. In his historical analogies, Lea highlights the grave impact this had in the Spanish-American War and on war in Europe.

Lea uses the analogy of the transportation and power projection difficulties the United States faced in transporting troops to the Philippines during the Spanish American War.

Because of technology, Lea foresaw that future wars would erupt quickly and extend over great distances with far more destructive results than in the past. Along with the revolution that technology has on warfare, Lea focuses on the critical impact internal political and economic changes have on the strategic policies of nations.

Lea believed that economic interdependence between nations would not reduce conflict but rather precipitate it. He goes on to note that "opulence, instead of being a foundation of national strength, is liable to be the most potent factor in its destruction. Instead of adding power to a nation, it simply increases the responsibility of its rulers and necessitates a greater diligence for defence. National opulence is a source of danger instead of power, for...trade, ducats, and mortgages are regarded as far greater assets and sources of power than armies and navies." There are parallels between Lea and Mahan in this philosophy with Mahan citing a like rationale for the fall of the Roman empire.

During World War II, much of the Japanese Army was in China and Southeast Asia. Perhaps the Japanese should have dedicated more of its army to the Pacific campaign because according to Lea, "Should Japan, to extend her sovereignty on the Asian continent, neglect to first gain control of the Pacific, then the

duration of her national greatness will draw to an end."

### LEA FORGOTTEN AND HIS VISION OF THE FUTURE

The amalgamation of small states into great political entities is the reason for the diminution in number and frequency of wars, a lessening of international conflict that has nothing to do with the so-called increasing morality of man.

#### Valor of Ignorance<sup>21</sup>

"In the past it was the individual who was the predominant factor; today, nations; tomorrow, races." Homer Lea's detractors identified Lea with authoritarian figures who used ethnic and cultural differences to project their power. Some of his undemocratic philosophies are reasons for Lea's obscurity.<sup>22</sup> Yet, he lived in a period where the Chinese Exclusion Act had a profound impact on his Asian activities. He recognized that the United States focused on a "Europe first" strategy.

Lea had other shortcomings. In two articles in Harpers Weekly in August 1910, he didn't believe in the importance and influence the airplane would have on future war. Perhaps its only importance would be for reconnaissance according to Lea. He was also against the use of the "citizen soldier" to fight in any national conflict less "total war". The roots of this aversion in the use of the reserves are unclear.

For the "civilian volunteer" soldier he notes:



The soul of the soldier can only be developed by discipline, by honor and martial deeds. It cannot be constructed to order or dressed up with false shoulders in twenty-four days by uniforming [sic] a civilian volunteer or by commissioning and spurring him with purchased valor...

Homer Lea also criticized those of advocated disarmament. He saw armament of a democratic society as relieving the great mass of society from the responsibility of being on a perpetual war footing. For totalitarian nations like Germany and Japan, he wrote in 1909, "Should Germany on the one hand and Japan on the other continue to adhere rigorously to these laws [of national existence], resisting the deteriorating influence of industrialism, feminism, and political quackery, they will, in due time, by the erosive action of these elements on other nations, divide the world between them."

Lea's short life, Pacific focus, lack of academic credentials and a strong defense posture were out of step with his strategist contemporaries. He is a remarkable geopolitical and military strategic thinker with uncanny insight on the future flashpoints of war. Homer Lea is overlooked by historians and academicians. Yet, his analytical approach to warfare and subsequent forecasts on warfare in the 20th Century are astoundingly accurate.

With the break up of the former Soviet Union, cultural, ethnic and regional power conflicts have increased in number and intensity. A recent article by Samuel P. Huntington<sup>23</sup> observes that the source of conflicts today are neither ideological or economic but, rather, cultural... mimicking the thoughts of Lea.

Robert Kaplan's book, Balkan Ghosts, and recent article on "The Coming Anarchy" cite the historical genesis for ethnic conflict. Kaplan goes on to cite how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism and disease are all contributing to conflict.<sup>24</sup> Today there is a renaissance in geopolitical analysis in works published by Zbigniew Brezinski, Henry Kissinger and others.

Lea's theories of convergence and intersection of lines emanating from centers of power to forecast future wars show extraordinary similarity to the warfare and campaigns of the 20th Century. Lea's principles and mathematical paradigms at the strategic level of warfare show a striking similarity to military strategist Antoine Jomini's standardized military methods at the operational level of war in his treatise, the Summary of the Art of War. Jomini had great impact on Mahan's view of seapower, and Lea's view of landpower.

In a recent futurist book, War and Anti-War, authors, Alvin and Heidi Toffler cite that the geopolitical assumptions of the turn of the century as characterized by Halford Mackinder are obsolete with the role of space dominating the future battlefield.<sup>25</sup> Yet, Lea notes "modern means of transportation and communication, while shrinking in a practical sense the size of the world, have to a corresponding degree increased the area [and probabilities] of modern and future warfare." That area is one where technology is only a tool for victory; the geopolitical and military reasons for war are much the same as during the turn of the century. Ethnic warfare, over population, nation-state

aspirations of regional hegemony are sources of conflict as we enter the 21st century and step back to the future.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Homer Lea, The Valor of Ignorance, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942: 43.
2. Ibid., 251-253; Clare Boothe, "Ever Hear of Homer Lea?," The Saturday Evening Post, (March 14, 1942): 12.
3. Key Ray Chong, Americans and Chinese Reform and Revolution, 1898-1922: The Role of Private Citizens in Diplomacy, Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1984: 68.
4. Valor of Ignorance: 24.
5. Valeriu Marcu, "American Prophet of Total War," The American Mercury, (April 1942): 474.
6. The Charles Beach Boothe, Joshua B. Powers, David Starr Jordan, Bertram Wolfe, Stanley Hornbeck and Howard P. Jones collections at the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution and Peace, Stanford, California relate to Homer Lea.
7. Chong: 41.
8. Chong: 42.
9. "General Homer Lea," The Literary Digest, (November 16, 1912): 931.
10. Richard O'Connor, Pacific Destiny, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1969: 303.
11. O'Connor: 312.
12. Raymond Hardie, "Homer," Stanford, (June 1990): 46.
13. Thomas Fleming, "Homer Lea & The Decline of the West," American Heritage, (May/June 1988): 101.
14. Chong: 81-83.
15. Valor of Ignorance: 230-231.
16. John Clark Kimball, "Homer Lea-Interloper on History," Proceedings, (April 1972): 66.
17. Homer Lea, The Day of the Saxon, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1942: 129.
18. Ibid., 46-48.
19. Valor of Ignorance: 58.

20. The Day of the Saxon: 199.
21. The Valor of Ignorance: 92.
22. Clare Boothe noted that when she checked out Homer Lea's Valor of Ignorance from the New York Public Library in 1942, it was only checked out three times since it was published.
23. Samuel P. Huntington, "The Clash of Civilizations?" Foreign Affairs (Summer 1993): 22-49.
24. Robert D. Kaplan, Balkan Ghosts: A Journey Through History, New York: St Martin's Press, 1993; "The Coming Anarchy," The Atlantic Monthly, (February 1994): 44-76.
25. Alvin and Heidi Toffler, War and Anti-War: Survival at the Dawn of the 21st Century, New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1993: 106-107.

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