

The Columbus Dispatch

Ohio's Greatest Online Newspaper

awards

Spoils of war include honor for historian

Tuesday, August 12, 2008 3:08 AM

By [Bill Eichenberger](#)

The Columbus Dispatch



Allan R. Millett

When he accepts the Pritzker Award for lifetime achievement in military writing, Allan R. Millett will do so for the troops.

"Whenever an officer gets a Medal of Honor, for instance, he'll always start by saying, 'I'm getting the individual recognition today, but this is an award that should really go to the troops,'" said the 70-year-old professor emeritus at Ohio State University.

Millett will receive the prize -- the second -- on Oct. 4 in Chicago.

He gave credit to collaborators Williamson "Wick" Murray, co-author of *A War To Be Won: Fighting the Second World War* (2000) and co-editor of the three-volume study *Military Effectiveness* (1988); and Peter Maslowski, co-author of *For the Common Defense: A Military History of the United States of America* (1984).

A War To Be Won was praised for its concision and clarity, and, according to one reviewer, for its appeal to both "popular and academic readers."

Millett has "contributed . . . substantially to the revitalization and reconceptualization of military history over the last four decades," said Joyce Steltzer, his editor at the Harvard University Press.

He is in good company: Best-selling Civil War historian James McPherson -- the first winner of the \$100,000 Pritzker Award, in 2007 -- served on the jury for the latest prize.

By e-mail, McPherson spoke highly of Millett's writings, especially *For the Common Defense* and *A War To Be Won*, while noting that his achievements extend beyond specific works:

"He has played a major role in the redefinition of military history that has taken place over the past four decades, and he ranks today as the dean of active military historians."

His affinity for the military was established early.

"I was born into World War II," Millett said in 2001. "My father was stationed at the Pentagon during the war, and I grew up playing war in our backyard (in Arlington, Va.)."

He became a company commander in the Marines and eventually their most significant historian, publishing *Semper Fidelis: The History of the United States Marine Corps* in 1980.

"In the (TV) show *Major Dad*, the star, Gerald McRaney, had a copy of *Semper Fidelis* on his desk," Millett said. "I got a lot of phone calls telling me about it, but I had to admit I'd never seen the show. McRaney said he'd actually read the book."

Millett taught at OSU from 1969 to 2005, helping to found its military-history program and guiding 64 graduate students through dissertations.

Today, as the director of the Eisenhower Center for American Studies and a history professor at the University of New Orleans, he spends most of his time in Louisiana while maintaining an office in Columbus.

Since the late 1990s, Millett has become a leading authority on the Korean War -- penning the online entry for the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and starting *The War for Korea*, a three-part examination of the conflict. (The first volume, *1945-1950: A House Burning*, was published by the University of Kansas Press in 2005.)

"Allan is a terrific historian, not just a terrific military historian," said Michael Griggs, editor in chief at Kansas.

"He's an excellent researcher and leaves no stone unturned in his efforts to track down relevant sources in support of his work. And he's an excellent writer, one who knows the value of narrative in holding the reader's attention and can also effectively integrate accessible analysis within the context of his storytelling."

Despite the inclusion of four Millett books on the required-reading list for officers of the U.S. armed services, he didn't consider exploring the Korean War until the mid- to late 1980s -- when he mentored graduate student Huh Nam-Sung, a retired colonel in the South Korean army.

"His father had been executed by the communists, but he wasn't eaten up by revenge or anything," Millett said. "But through Huh, I learned that, from the Korean perspective, the war was horrific in the same way that our own Civil War was and remains horrific to us."

Millett traveled as a Fulbright professor in 1991 to South Korea, where he taught at the Korean National Defense University.

"I was reading a lot of Korean War stuff and was less than happy with the accounts," he said. "By probably 1994, I was convinced I would write a book about the Korean War -- though I didn't think I'd write three."

He began his work at a fortuitous moment in world history:

"The Russians were opening up with Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and blaming everything on Stalin -- everything but Korea, which they blamed on Mao.

"That made the Chinese mad, so they, selectively, began to release information about the Korean War that reflected poorly on the Soviet Union."

No war or historical field, he thinks, is ever exhausted literarily.

"I remember, when I was in graduate school (in the 1960s), everyone said: 'The Civil War is a dead field. Catton took care of it.' But I guess they forgot to tell Shelby Foote or -- lo these many years later -- Jim McPherson."

beichenberger@dispatch.com

Copyright © 2008, The Columbus Dispatch