

# Football as a War Game: General Robert Reese Neyland's Application of Basic Military Principles to Coaching

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Robert Reese Neyland (1892-1962), football coach at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville for twenty-one seasons, established a phenomenal record of 173 wins, 31 losses, and 12 ties. His tenure as Tennessee's coach (1926-1952) was interrupted by military assignments causing him to relinquish coaching in 1935, and in 1941-45.

He received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point and graduated with a degree in engineering. While at the Academy Neyland was a good student and a fine athlete, excelling in boxing and baseball. A series of military assignments, after his graduation in 1916, took him to the Mexican Border in Texas, Washington, D.C., France, and back to Texas initially to Camp Courchesne and then to Ft. Bliss as an army engineer. He enrolled in MIT as a student officer in 1920 to study mechanical and electrical engineering. Subsequently Neyland returned to the Academy as education and recreation officer and as an aide and personal adjutant to West Point's Superintendent, General Douglas McArthur. In 1925, at the end of his tour of duty at the Point, he was transferred to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville as senior instructor of the ROTC engineer unit and assistant football coach.

After serving one year as an assistant coach at Tennessee, he was appointed head coach. Under his leadership The University of Tennessee football program ascended from relative obscurity to national prominence. His contributions to the game were enormous, but a full assessment of his influence on the game has never been accomplished.

Past published accounts of Neyland's success and work as a football coach, mainly newspaper articles, invariably referred to the influence of his military education and experience on his coaching theory and method. Most of those who played for him, regardless of the era, championed this belief. Neyland's success as a football coach is believed to be related to his application of basic military principles in shaping his football teams and their performances.

A few of General Neyland's personal notebooks and unpublished papers, never before used in a study of the man and his work as a coach, were utilized in this project. These primary documents contain evidence of the theory and method of coaching he employed throughout his lengthy coaching career. The notebooks and other papers are in private hands and not readily

available. They were graciously loaned to the author by Neyland's son Bobby for study and analysis.

Available primary sources in which athletics in general and football in particular has been associated with war were reviewed for this project. Pertinent military related references in the Neyland papers and notebooks on the conduct of his football program were noted. For this study, the contents of Neyland's notebooks and unpublished papers were compared with the principles of war adopted by the United States Army in 1921. The principles of war listed and defined in *United States Army, STP145-I-MQs: Military Qualification Standards I, Manual* (Washington D.C.: Headquarters, Department of Army, 1986), heavily influenced by Karl Von Clausewitz's work on military operations, give rise to the following conclusions:

- (1) Neyland plotted each season as a "commander in chief." He organized his staff, players and outlined the fundamental principles of operation for the team, punctuated with excerpts of philosophical quotes, military in origin, illustrating the path for achieving victory. Just as in a military operation, as outlined under "objective" in the rules of war, victory was Neyland's "clearly defined, decisive, and attainable objective" for each football game and season.
- (2) Neyland's well designed team offense, using the single wing formation, encompassed a number of the principles of war including "mass," "economy of force," "maneuver," "surprise," and "simplicity." A good example of the application of these principles is evident in his famous 10 play, a well designed and highly successful off-tackle running play.
- (3) The General/Coach was clearly in charge of the team and maintained a "Unity of Command," recognized as a principle of war, insuring unity in the team's effort toward victory. He confidently passed on authority of command to select players on the offensive and defensive teams due to his firm belief that success or failure of the team depended upon what he termed excellent on-the-field "generalship."

In summary, Neyland viewed football as a *war* game. His reference for comparison was the military establishments' practice for "real war." In these rehearsals for war, military officers (coaches) and soldiers (players) are divided into opposing forces (two teams), and through the use of maps (field of play) and equipment (protective and otherwise), they train to react to assumed situations which occur in actual battle. He believed this so fervently that it follows that he would naturally adopt the rules of war in shaping and guiding his football teams to exceptional success.