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A Combined Arms Response to *Death of the Armor Corps*

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Since the emergence of Counterinsurgency (COIN) as a strategy in 2004, it has gained widespread acceptance both within and outside of the military. It has gained so much acceptance that it has essentially become Army dogma. Most writing on the subject is overwhelming supportive. However, one officer has stood out because he has dared to write articles that question COIN. Colonel Gian Gentile has been the one dissenting voice in the Army. He has used well researched and written historically based articles that question COIN as an underlying strategy of the Army. He has called for a return to core competencies of our various branches.

Colonel Gentile looks beyond the fifty and one hundred meter targets and sees targets that look more like conventional military adversaries with armor and artillery instead of insurgents with machine guns and improvised explosive devices (IED's). Whether or not one agrees with his assessments and suggestion, his work is terribly important to the Army because it does not toe the party line. In fact, when Thomas Ricks published his list of the top voices in *Foreign Policy* magazine, Colonel Gentile was the only one who was not pro-COIN. His opinion is imperative or else we might all drink from the COIN Kool-Aid and relive the days of Active Defense where Army doctrine was the result of one man and debate was discouraged. We are familiar with the result of how that doctrinal era turned out. Sadly, Colonel Gentile seems as if he has finally given up, gathered his pistol and canteen and ventured off to Fiddlers Green. In his most recent article, *The Death of the Armor Corps*¹, Colonel Gentile seems to be complaining that no one is listening. Gone are the well thought out historical examples, and they are replaced by incomplete contemporary examples. The result is a product that appears to stubbornly refuse to accept that what makes our military great is our ability to adapt and innovate while still retaining the ability to relearn our core competencies. As former company and troop commanders, we thoroughly enjoy the musings of Colonel Gentile, thus we have four simple reasons why Colonel Gentile should get back on his conventional horse, buckle his chinstrap and continue his charge for the combined-arms high ground.

A recent example of armored units successfully transitioning along the spectrum of conflict might help assuage his fears. Two squadrons from the Third Armored Cavalry Regiment (3ACR) assumed the Stabilization Force Mission Seven in Bosnia from FEB – OCT 2000. Although tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles were located in their respective Bosnian motor pools, they sat dormant in favor of High mobility, multi-purpose, wheeled vehicles (HMMWV)

¹ Colonel Gian Gentile, *Small Wars Journal*, 17 April 2010.

1109 and 1114s. This occupied nearly two years with planning, training and executing peace-enforcement operations for the Regiment. That means, limited live-fire gunnery, or combined arms exercises. More importantly is who replaced 3ACR in Bosnia. It was same brigade the conducted the famous “Thunder Run” into Baghdad, Spartan Brigade, 2d Brigade, Third Infantry Division. Clearly the Spartan Brigade was successful in conducting conventional, combined-arms operations two years after their peace enforcement operations in Bosnia. Their ability to successfully perform all the necessary mission essential tasks for a Heavy Brigade Combat Team during Operation Iraqi Freedom’s speaks for itself. Additionally, Units such as the 1st Cavalry Division, 1st Infantry Division, 1st Armored Division, 3d ACR, etc would all agree that Other HBCTs were able to make a successful transition from the peace-keeping focus of Bosnia and Kosovo to the conventionally lethal focus demonstrated in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Some examples that demonstrate the successful employment of heavy combined arms operations include the Third Infantry Division’s invasion of Iraq in 2003, the 1st Cavalry Division’s fight against the Mahdi Militia vicinity An Najaf and Sadr City in 2004, The 1st Infantry Division conduct in the Battle of Fallujah in 2004, and the 3ACR’s in Tal Afar in 2005. This does not even take into account similar operations that took place by Heavy Brigades during the 2007 Iraq Surge. So you ask, “Could we do it?” It is apparent that we already have.

The second point is related to the inclusion of Strykers units over the last decade. Stryker units have filled a gap that would have otherwise required HBCTs to conduct those missions “grounded in the principles of population centric counterinsurgency.” This would have required heavy units to “mothball” their equipment (again) and conduct operations on equipment did not include tracks or 120mm gun tubes. Fortunately though, more HBCTs can continue to maintain that “razor’s edge” through motor stables and scheduled gunnery rangers. As a result no Heavy Brigade Combat Teams (HBCTs) deployed to Afghanistan. Only 1st and 4th Infantry Divisions have deployed Brigade Combat Teams to Afghanistan which could be mistaken as heavy brigades. Yet both were Infantry Brigade Combat Teams (IBCTs), not HBCTs. That said, 4th Infantry Division will soon be the first division to deploy a HBCT to Afghanistan in the near future.

In the mean time, one of our most storied Cavalry units, the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) has actually made itself heavier and more relevant. With the switch from ACR to Stryker Cavalry Regiment (SCR), the regiment has replaced its traditional HMMWV fleet with Strykers. Some would bemoan the change as at least a flagrant disregard for the proud history of a unit or as another example of the Army becoming ever more Infantry centric. Neither is correct. This change makes the unit heavier and better armed. It gives the troopers a much better chance to survive in the current fight, and also enhances their ability to survive and thrive while conducting more traditional cavalry missions.

The third point relates to the intangibles of combat. These qualities include, but are certainly not limited to initiative, judgment, awareness, decision-making, loyalty, and trust, which are masterfully developed in a combat environment. Can these skills be acquired in a training environment? Certainly, but anyone with a unit patch on their right shoulder can attest to the fact that developing these attributes in training are much different when real bullets are flying back at you. I believe it would be a disservice to the armored branch and an unfair burden on our infantry brethren if we did not shoulder the deployment burden together. This could potentially

happen in Afghanistan if the Armor branch argues that gunnery is more important than shouldering the Afghanistan mission with our infantry counterparts. Think about the disproportion in combat experience when comparing Armor and Infantry leaders? Who would you want to lead us into the next fight, the leader with combat experience in Afghanistan and Iraq, or the leader who was the beach master on the last gunnery range? I also would suggest that the light cavalry squadron is probably one of the best and most flexible task organizations to meet the conventional and irregular threats our Soldiers face in Afghanistan. Fight the enemy, not the plan.

To do otherwise risks making the Armor branch the Army's equivalent of the Air Force. They would be indisputably the best equipped and trained force in the world that was not actively engaged in fighting our current fight. This would be especially sad given the extremely high level of inter-branch acceptance and understanding that currently exists between the Infantry and Armor branches. The creation of the Maneuver Center of Excellence at Fort Benning is confirmation that the Army values both branches. That both branches have very unique attributes and skill sets that have proven invaluable in the current conflict. It also recognizes that our futures are tied together. Both branches are doing similar things and we can only both get better by putting aside our egos and looking past our recollections of days gone by. Patton is gone and so is Eisenhower, but thankfully, a new generation of smart, creative, motivated young officers of both branches who recognize and encourage the greatness that is maneuver branch.

Finally, we must recognize the flexibility displayed by many other branches in the Army, and their ability to maintain their core skill set over the last decade. For example, the Field Artillery branch has been asked to do a multitude of conflicting skill sets over the last decade. Many of them such as detainee operations, escort operations, deterrence patrolling, and IED clearing operations have nothing to with their core skill set, yet they have successfully mastered their roles as conventional artillerymen when the role presented itself in Iraq and Afghanistan. The same is true for Military Policemen, Engineers, and operational support branches as well. So what makes the Armor branch any different? There is no reason to believe that Armor Soldiers and officers are any less capable of adaptation. In fact, the one thing that has always made our Army great is our flexibility and creativity. Those attributes have only been sharpened, at all levels, by years of operation in the ambiguous environment on COIN.

Instead of bemoaning the lack of skill and experience that junior leaders and Soldiers have in traditional Armor competencies, Colonel Gentile should take comfort in the memory of the intelligent and creative leaders that served in his squadron, and every other Cavalry squadron and Armor battalion in the Army. When the situation changes and those same young leaders need to get back to their corps competencies, they will be much more mentally able to understand and accept that reexamination than previous generations were when we were learning COIN. Combat experience has manifested itself is another equally important way. These same leaders who have become comfortable with ambiguity, and have learned to be flexible and adapt are institutionalizing these attributes by embracing and Outcomes Based Training and Education (OBT&E). They have learned to identify what is important in a training event and structure the event so that it forces Soldiers to achieve a desired outcome and not just remember a battle drill or checklist which explicitly exist to negate the need for a person to think. One only needs look at the training at the Infantry Training Brigade at Fort Benning, the military training program at

the United States Military Academy, or almost any other Brigade Combat team at any post around the world to see that the future is bright for our junior leaders and Soldiers. When the time comes that we all need to focus on more traditional skills, we will be much more prepared to understand and embrace that change than we were prepared to understand and embrace the principles of COIN.

Colonel Gian Gentile is an important dissenting voice in the Army. He is the only one who seriously questions the military's love affair with COIN. Nothing is potentially more destructive to an Army than unquestioned adherence to doctrinal dogma. In fact, what makes us great is our continual self examination. For the good of the Army and the Armor corps that he loves so much, Colonel Gentile must shake off the disappointment and discouragement that has increasingly shown itself in his writing, and he must continue to keep up the fight. Even if we do not agree with what he says, we must continue to listen and consider what he is saying.

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