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Unprepared



The Echo of Battle – The Army's Way of War

By Brian McAllister
Linn

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Our whole recent experience, then, our present duties and future prospects all point to the idea that by the study of war alone we shall be but little prepared for by far the greater burdens which are to fall upon us, which are the making of peace.

– General Robert Lee Bullard, 1907

Brian McAllister Linn's *The Echo of Battle: The Army's Way of War* is an important and profoundly disturbing book for anyone who loves the United States Army or cares about the security of the Western world. Linn, the foremost historian of the Army's successful counter-insurgency effort in the Philippines at the start of the last century, fundamentally challenges the Army's self-concept in the twenty-first century. Linn notes that for the majority of the Army's history, it has been at peace, preparing for the next war – and, all too often, getting that preparation not just wrong, but almost completely wrong.

While wars are fought by many, the course that armies follow in peacetime is driven by just a few. The choices they

make matter profoundly for those who will fight in the next war and for their nation. Linn offers an intellectual history of the United States Army's preparations for war in peacetime and finds much of the American military thought 'narrow, contradictory, and logically suspect.' These are scathing words, but no less critical of the Army's recent peacetime performance than those of Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at the Association of the United States Army conference on 10 October 2007. There Gates stated,

'In the years following the Vietnam War, the Army relegated unconventional war to the margins of training, doctrine, and budget priorities ... This approach may have seemed validated by ultimate victory in the Cold War and the triumph of Desert Storm. But it left the service unprepared to deal with the operations that followed: Somalia, Haiti, the Balkans, and more recently Afghanistan and Iraq – the consequences and costs of which we are still struggling with today.'

We are likely to be struggling with these consequences and costs for many years still to come. The Army is already thinking about 'reset', the use of extraordinary amounts of national resources to rebuild the battle-scarred Army after Iraq. Gates notes that 'How those resources are used, and where those investments are made today will shape the Army for decades to come. We do not get the dollars or the opportunity to reset very often. So it's vital we get it right. This will call on accountable and visionary leadership across the service and up and down the chain of

command.’ Linn’s book suggests that without deep thought about the nature of war, the Army is unlikely to get those investment choices correct, and that the cost of failure in peacetime will yet again be blood and treasure expended unnecessarily in our next war.

The sort of visionary leadership that is necessary during periods of dramatic change in the nature of warfare seldom appears in Linn’s account. Instead, the Army’s leaders have tended to over-correct the mistakes of the previous war rather than engaging in insightful analysis of the trends driving the future of conflict. They have made decisions in isolation from the political leadership of the country and without regard for international politics of the time. Perhaps most importantly, they have tended to prepare for wars they wanted to fight, rather than the kinds of wars that actually presented themselves.

Linn notes that the Army through its history has treated any sort of war other than major combat operations as a lesser included case: ‘Unconventional war has often been the army’s task but seldom its calling.’ Thus the 1923 edition of *Field Service Regulations*, the precursor to today’s *Field Manual 3-0, Operations*, notes that it was written to prepare for ‘a war against an opponent organized for war on modern principles and equipped with all the means of modern warfare. An army capable of waging war under these conditions will prove adequate to any less grave emergency with which it may be confronted.’

The current Secretary of Defense is not convinced that the *Field Service Regulations* were correct in this assumption. Indeed, he cautioned against just this attitude in October: ‘One of the Army’s concerns you’ve heard about at this conference is getting back to training for “high intensity” situations – a capability vitally important to deter aggression and shape the behavior of other nations. It strikes me that one of the principal challenges the Army faces is to regain its traditional edge at fighting conventional wars while retaining what it has learned – and relearned – about unconventional wars –

the ones most likely to be fought in the years ahead.’

This is an enormous challenge for an American army that until quite recently has focused all but exclusively on conventional war. The new version of the Army’s capstone *Field Manual 3-0, Operations*, released in February 2008, attempts to correct years of doctrine that have paid insufficient attention to post-conflict stability operations by making them co-equal with the Army’s traditional priorities. It introduces ‘full spectrum operations’ in which ‘Army forces combine offensive, defensive, and stability or civil support operations simultaneously as part of an interdependent joint force to seize, retain, and exploit the initiative, accepting prudent risk to create opportunities to achieve decisive results.’

This concept is undoubtedly a giant step in the right direction, but it does not fully accept the change in the operational environment of warfare in the twenty-first century. America will always need an Army that can fight and win battles decisively. But the experience of Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrates that winning battles does not lead to ‘decisive results’ but to the grinding opportunity to create incrementally better postwar situations, day by slow day.

In the twenty-first century, wars are not won when the enemy army is defeated on the battlefield; in fact, there may not be a uniformed enemy to fight at all. Instead, a war is only won when the conditions that spawned armed conflict have been changed. ‘Decisive results’ in the twenty-first century will come not when we wipe a piece of land clean of enemy forces, but when we protect its people and allow them to control their territory in a manner consistent with the norms of the civilised world. Thus victory in Iraq and Afghanistan will come when those nations enjoy governments that meet the basic needs and garner the support of all of their peoples. Winning the Global War on Terror is an even more challenging task; victory in the Long War requires the strengthening of literally dozens of governments afflicted by insurgents who are radicalised by hatred

and inspired by fear. The soldiers who will win these wars require an ability not just to dominate land operations, but to change entire societies – and not all of those soldiers will wear uniforms, or work for the Department of Army. The most important warriors of the current century may fight for the US Information Agency rather than the Department of Defense.

Decisive results in this world disorder come only with the establishment of a lasting peace. That will most often be the work of generations, but doing it well is necessary to keep America secure. Defeating the Global Insurgency we are fighting requires an Army that can clear, hold, and build with equal expertise. We are unmatched at clearing operations, but are not yet the finest force in the world at holding what we have cleared with local security forces, nor at building societies that can stand on their own.

The Army has an opportunity to draw upon the lessons of the past six years and build this force. To do so, it will have to overcome a tendency toward what Linn describes as ‘an intellectual rigidity, a propensity to mistake slogans for strategic thinking, and the dogmatic belief in itself as the “best trained, best armed, best led” force that had ever existed. Too few officers [have] asked the central question—best trained, best armed, and best led for what war?’

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates has challenged the Army to think hard about that question, and the Army’s new *Operations* Field Manual is an indication that some deep thought has gone into answering it. We must follow through on this foundation to build an Army that can implement the vision of *Field Manual 3-0* – that can not just fight and win the nation’s wars, but also prepare for by far the greater burdens, which are the making of peace. This task is the present duty and future prospect of this generation of Army leaders, and the next. They have their work cut out for them. ■

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