

The Limits of American Power and Civil-Military Relations: A Framework for Discussion

Thomas Donnelly

It has been fascinating to follow the discussion sparked by Andy Bacevich's short but incisive piece on "The Petraeus Doctrine" in the *Atlantic*. However, two elements of the essay have been overlooked. Bacevich's core complaints are less about the structure of the U.S. Army (or the military more broadly) or its operational doctrine than they are about the underlying issues of the limits of American power and civil-military relations. The analysis of the John-Nagl-versus-Gian-Gentile debate is merely a framework for these larger questions.

Take the second question first. Bacevich concludes with what he rightly describes as "the biggest question of all." That is, in the American democracy, do the essential choices about war rest with soldiers or civilians? The presumption he makes, however, that the decision to prosecute the Long War has been delegated to the military, isn't correct: rather, it's been the military (with top-cover from former Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld) that's been trying to dodge the decision. One may well argue that the Bush Administration has made unwise choices, but they are undeniably choices that have been validated by the American political process. Bacevich has elsewhere argued that the course of events since the 2006 election has disregarded the democratic process, but that's not right, either. The Democrats' victories in the 2006 elections gave them a congressional majority, but not a large enough majority to override the Constitution's presumptions in favor of the commander-in-chief.

Bacevich similarly disparages at the quality of the war-policy debate, and it's hard to disagree. But quality is no more the measure of democratic legitimacy than is any particular outcome. As a matter of the historical record, America's domestic debates about war have generated more heat than light. And, when it came to Iraq, what is remarkable in retrospect is how long it took to translate civilian guidance – President's Bush's oft-stated goals of a stable and representative government in Baghdad – into military policy. The Decider decided; alas, the commander-in-chief did not sufficiently command, and the uniforms, too frequently, shirked.

So it is the new civilian leadership – in the form of a chastened, post-2006 President Bush and current Defense Secretary Robert Gates – that finally is dragging a still-reluctant military into embracing the irregular warfare mission. Just this Monday, Gates continued his jeremiad against "Next-War-It is" and "the defense bureaucracy's priorities and lack

of urgency opposed to a wartime footing and a wartime mentality.” This may be a strategic error, but it’s his civilian job to make the call. If anyone’s outside our norms of civil-military relations, it’s those in the Gentile-Bacevich camp.

And so to the second question. It’s hard to avoid the conclusion that the conventional-force advocates are looking for ways to constrain what they see as an unhealthy American, exceptionalist tendency to meddle in other peoples’ political affairs. Bacevich has long made this argument and makes it again in the *Atlantic* article, though by proxy. He approvingly quotes Gentile’s critique of Nagl’s “breathtaking” assertion about “the efficacy of American military power to shape events.”

Realism – that is, a cold-blooded assessment of costs and benefits – is no small virtue in the exercise of power. But this, along with realism about the limits of technology, was a central theme of Gates’ speech at National Defense University. And he allowed as how “we are unlikely to repeat another Iraq or Afghanistan anytime soon.” Yet he went on to say “that doesn’t mean we may not face similar challenges in a variety of locales.” This is not, as Bacevich portrays it, of “inescapable eventuality” of wars to come, or America’s predestined strategic fate, it’s an overdue recognition that we don’t just get to fight the wars that are congenial to generals.

Nor is Gates attempting to re-fight the last war. (This trope should be banished forever, but let it be noted that irregular warfare was America’s “first way of war;” *Small Wars Journal* readers would do well to read John Grenier’s – and he was an Air Force officer! – book by that title.) It’s the conventional-force school that is attempting to accomplish what Bacevich claims is Nagl’s goal: reducing and precluding U.S. strategic options.

It was a reasonable decision, as Bacevich points out, to refocus the Army on conventional combat after Vietnam; the Soviet 8th Guards Army had its engines idling in East Germany. It’s much harder to come up with a similar land-force threat today; Chinese military modernization is focused on the maritime, air, space and electromagnetic realms and the Russian army’s performance in Georgia was underwhelming. Invading Iran would call for lots of tanks, but if we’re precluding options, that would be high on my list.

By all means, let’s continue the debate on the purpose of America’s land forces, but let’s take the mission – as defined by the Constitutional civilian authority – as the point of departure. And yes, let’s not disguise a strategy and policy agenda in force-structure clothing. Let’s just also not claim all purity on one side.

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