

One Crusader's View

Thomas Donnelly

We have a great duty to perform and we shall show ourselves a weak and poor-spirited people if we fail to set about doing it, or if we fail to do it aright.

Theodore Roosevelt
America's Part of the World's Work
Lincoln Club Dinner
February 1899

A century later and with the painful costs of Iraq and Afghanistan ever in our minds, TR's call to American greatness can seem hubristic, jingoistic, anachronistic and its unguarded moments (and to a politically correct sensibility) outright racist. But Shawn Brimley's recent "Mediating between Crusaders and Conservatives" called this quote to my mind. Brimley's piece advances the original future-land-force-structure argument to its ultimate and proper point: what do we think about America's employment of its military, and most particularly the U.S. Army and Marine Corps, over the next generation? At its indivisible core, this is a debate about American purposes in the world.

Brimley's crusaders-or-conservatives taxonomy is likewise not a bad way to frame the landscape of debate; simplicity and clarity are indeed virtues and certainly ones that Roosevelt would have approved of. Yes, there many nuances among observers on all sides and indeed many points of analysis that those with profoundly divergent conclusions can agree upon. But let me offer an unreconstructed "crusader's" view, meant to explain more fully several issues than Brimley glossed over. Most of what follows will focus on the purposes of U.S. land forces in the Middle East, but I will also end with a few observations about force structure and size.

Let's begin with the idea that the U.S. military exists for the purpose of fighting the nation's wars. I find that historically and legally false and dangerous. Even the *SWJ* discussion on this issue is too narrow, tending to be an argument about whether our land forces should be sized and structured to fight large-scale, conventional conflicts or for irregular, small wars. A more enduring definition would acknowledge that U.S. military forces may be used for whatever Constitutionally-consistent mission the commander-in-chief assigns them: conventional or irregular, in times of war or "peace." The military may also be properly employed domestically; the Posse Comitatus Act of 1877 was a regular statute (and a result of the political compromise that ended America's most long-running and vicious counterinsurgency, during the 12 years of Reconstruction), can be repealed or modified by further act of Congress, already includes a

provision that allows it to be suspended by a vote of Congress, or by the executive branch under the Insurrection Act (as happened in the 1992 Los Angeles riots). In sum, the job of U.S. military forces can be pretty much whatever its elected political leaders decide.

Indeed, it was only with World War II that large-scale “warfighting” became the bread-and-butter of the U.S. Army. For most of the time prior to that period, its primary jobs had been to protect pioneers on the frontier, man coastal defenses, and such like. Even the Civil War is an exception that proves the rule – although it produced the first “Giant Generation” of officers, most notably Emory Upton, who were not only reluctant but resistant to the idea of extended irregular-warfare duties.

As American strategic horizons have expanded from North America and the Caribbean Basin, so have the missions of U.S. armed forces. Two world wars moved the United States from being merely an interested observer of the European balance of power but a direct – in fact, still the largest – weight in that balance. The post-World War II period also marked the time when the United States described for itself an enduring geopolitical interest in the Middle East, and most particularly in the oil-rich Persian Gulf region. Arguably, it was Franklin Roosevelt who made the first move in what we have come to understand as “The Long War” with his meeting with Saudi King Abdulaziz at Egypt’s Great Bitter Lake in 1945. In this reading, the 1979 “Carter Doctrine” is less a doctrine than a corollary; during his terms in office George W. Bush has added a second corollary to the effect that U.S. strategic interests will be best served by encouraging responsive and representative governance in the region.

The Bush years have also marked a transition in U.S. military strategy and posture, from being an “offshore balancer,” to talk like a social scientist, to a deeper involvement. We’re still more a balancer, for all the interventions since 9/11, but we’ve come ashore and we’re not leaving. An Obama Administration may value Afghanistan over Iraq, and may eventually reduce our overall “footprint,” but the fundamental commitment continues. These are tactical, not strategic adjustments (although they may contribute to a strategic adjustment if they spiral into a larger defeat). Nor will it be easy to return to the comfy concept of the past, that we can entrust our interests to the tender mercies of the region’s monarchs and autocrats. We may have more modest definitions of what better governance looks like in Iraq and Afghanistan, but it would be a reflection of that larger defeat if we again pretended that it looked like Saddam Hussein or Mullah Omar.

This may indeed be carrying our principles past pride to hubris, if not a crusade per se (since our motives are entirely secular and worldly rather than religious) then perhaps a vaulting ambition that may overleap itself. On the other hand, the conservative offshore-balancing approach was tried for more than five decades and was ultimately found wanting; the “small-footprint” strategy failed long before and even more catastrophically than in Iraq circa 2006. The attacks of September 11, 2001 were many things, but they were critically a reflection of the idea that Afghanistan was simply a place to fight Russians and that an erratic “indirect approach” could meet all our needs. It’s not just the American crusading impulse that argues for a larger force, persistently present, in the Middle East, but a realistic appraisal of our own interests and strategy. To repeat: the conservative strategy was given a long trial, and it failed. Of course it did not produce liberty, but it also did not produce the stability that was its one and only goal.

Thus the argument that Fred Kagan and I advance in *Ground Truth: The Future of U.S. Land Power* is far less an analysis of our experience in Iraq or Afghanistan -- if you don't believe me, read it and see! http://www.aei.org/books/filter.all,bookID.934/book_detail.asp -- than an analysis of the larger and much longer U.S. experience over decades, not only in the Middle East but elsewhere. Our geopolitical goals in the Middle East are enduring, and our maturing grand strategy now accepts that long-term political change demands a deeper involvement. This is not just the logic of American strategy, but of the politics of the region: do we honestly expect our partners in Iraq or Afghanistan or elsewhere who share our goals to risk their lives -- and this always costs them a lot more than it does us -- if we do not share some of the same risks? For them, the dangers of too much American presence pale in comparison to too little American presence; they're more worried about American isolationism than American imperialism.

Even less persuasive is the idea that, because military power is not the only requirement for success, that we won't need sufficient military power. Or that, because the enemy won't mass forces the way the Soviets used to, that there won't be significant "battles." We're not fighting a condition called "extremism," we're fighting a series of quite distinct enemies motivated by an extremist ideology and a vicious version of a faith that does not much distinguish between the personal and political, a backwards-looking travesty of Islam that not only elevates God's law above man's law but in fact finds the very notion of man-made law to be illegitimate and blasphemous. Thus, Clausewitz still rules: these wars are politics by other means. Consider the case of Hezbollah in southern Lebanon (read either the brief section on the 2006 war with Israel in *Ground Truth* or, for a more thorough and recent analysis, *The 2006 Lebanon Campaign and the Future of Warfare* by Steve Biddle and Jeffrey Friedman). The organizations are wrongly described as "non-state actors;" they are proto-states, or mini-states, but they are clearly entities that evince state-like behavior. And as they become moreso, their military behavior will become more conventional. We had better start counting and understanding Hezbollah-style "brigades." The true answer to the irregular-versus-conventional argument is "both."

Finally, the idea that "balancing" strategic risk means equalizing risk is flawed. To begin with, the Bush Administration has already -- if perhaps by default -- done a very precarious balancing act, both within the Middle East (betting, I think rightly, that Iraq is inherently more strategically important than Afghanistan) and around the world (betting, perhaps wrongly, that Russia is not much of a danger in Europe or elsewhere and, perhaps even more wrongly, that China's rise was likely to be a peaceful rise). Preserving the international order is not like preserving financial "liquidity" or managing a stock portfolio: we "disinvest" from Iraq at our very great peril. We could manage our force better, to be sure; it's hard to see why flying air cap in Iraq with carrier-based air is the most efficient way to that mission. And if we haven't "broken" the Army and Marine Corps yet, it's not for wanting of trying. But while dumbing down the strategy to meet current force constraints may produce perfect unit-rotational harmony, it isn't any more likely to produce victory than down-sizing the force has proven to be. American strategic under-achieving will change the world even more than American strategic overstretch.

A postscript: the facts are that the force-structure-and-size argument is currently almost entirely academic. The land-force increases outlined by the Bush Administration are very small (a 7-percent increase in the active Army from about 510,000, which is the right number to start from

because of the “temporary” end-strength rise already on the books under the “modularity” program, to 547,000) and nearly complete (the Army is now at about 540,000). This will only add six light infantry brigades to the field Army, fill out some higher-echelon units and relieve a tiny bit of the pressure on the “institutional” Army; there is no additional money to create either Stryker or heavy units. Neither are there any plans to get rid of any heavy units. The “heavy” Army of the Cold War is, well, a phenomenon of the Cold War; less than half the field units are Abrams and Bradley brigade combat teams, and those have been reduced from a three- to a two-battalion structure. Further, heavy units have proven to be quite useful things, and not simply for “thunder runs” through Baghdad. Tank and Bradley crews may not be shooting quite as much gunnery as in the past, but these remain immensely powerful formations. Nor did conventional force operational doctrine disappear with the publication of the counterinsurgency manual. So what exactly, dear *SWJ* readers, would we really change about today’s Army if we could?

Shawn Brimley is surely right to say that members of the American defense community should not shirk the responsibility to think and argue about the connections between our country’s strategy and its forces. But we’re not trying to solve an equation. Our task is not simply intellectual, it is moral. We may be forced to live in a world where American power is curtailed, and American principles rejected. We may indeed be defeated, but let the enemy impose his will upon us, if he can; let us not yet choose to be defeated.

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