

A Soldier's View

Gian P Gentile

Since Andrew Bacevich placed me in the “Conservative” camp in his [Atlantic article](#) and based on the two outstanding pieces just penned in *SWJ* by Shawn Brimley and Tom Donnelly I thought I would add a few comments of my own. As [Joint Force Quarterly](#) editor Colonel (retired) David Gurney has stated publicly on this blog, myself and John Nagl have a set of point-counterpoint articles due out in the next edition of *JFQ* that address the Bacevich *Atlantic* article and the issues involved.

First, I thought that Shawn Brimley's *SWJ* oped, “[Mediating Between Crusaders and Conservatives](#)” drew out very well and accurately the points that Bacevich only touched on and did not develop in his *Atlantic* piece.

I also found much to agree with in Tom Donnelly's “[One Crusader's View](#).” I especially liked his points at the end of the article where he articulated that the future of war is not just more Iraqs and Afghanistans but potentially conflicts that will require the American Army to have competencies at the higher end of the conflict spectrum. And Tom's acknowledgment that there is still a need in the American army for armor platforms that he states are still (and implicitly in the future) “powerful formations” warmed the cockles of my cavalryman's heart. I do, however, take issue in degree with what Tom said about current American Army doctrine. He said that “conventional force operational doctrine [did not] disappear with the publication of the counterinsurgency manual.” True, but not in spirit since the organizing principle of the current three American Army doctrinal manuals (FM 3-24, FM 3-0, and FM 3-24) has become nation building and not fighting has in a sense eclipsed the “conventional” side of the Army. I develop this argument much more in the upcoming *JFQ* piece.

As a historian (not a soldier commenting on current foreign policy) I don't accept Tom's and other neo-conservative's teleological view of American history as one of a straight-line progression of active intervention throughout the world. Tom's article by starting off with a quote from TR gives one the sense that hey, America has always been an imperialist nation with the consensus support of the American people so what is the big deal about doing it now in the middle east? My read of American history is that the issue of imperialism and intervention was for many years a highly contentious issue. The importance of Bacevich's *Atlantic* piece in this regard was to point out that sadly the American people through their elected representatives in congress have “gone to the mall” and no longer play a role in the construction of the principles of American foreign policy.

As a soldier and historian I disagree with Tom's derisive caricature of me (and some other unnamed officers) as the 21st Century versions of “Emory Upton.” Let it be said that there were

plenty of things to admire in Upton. First was his courage and innovativeness on civil war battlefields like the Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse where he devised new tactics to assault enemy entrenchments. After the Civil War, Upton played a very significant role in moving the American Army toward better professional education and standards. His reforms set the groundwork for the following Root reforms. The much less attractive side to Upton was his arrogance and militarism in his (anti-Clausewitzian) rejection of the dominance of politics once war began. Tied to his militarism were his troubling notions that irregular warfare was not worth much of the Army's time.

I have always completely and unequivocally accepted the fact that if our political masters tell the army to go do this (irregular war, counterinsurgency, stability ops, peacekeeping, etc) or that (high end conventional warfighting) then that is exactly what we will do, and do our damndest to win while we are at it. In this regard Tom Donnelly is spot on where he criticizes the notion that came out of the 1980s and often stated in the American Army that its purpose was to "fight and win the nation wars." As Tom rightly points out the American Army will do "pretty much whatever its elected political leaders decide."

The argument that I have been making is that good strategy and military policy requires choices to be made about resources, organizational structure, training time, etc. We can't build an Army to do "everything" so we must focus on the things that we have to be able to do right. In my mind that means to build an Army on the organizing principle of fighting. From there can flow the ability to step in other directions to perform such missions as nation building as well as irregular and counterinsurgency warfare. To build an Army around the core principle of nation building in my mind we court strategic peril. This is not an argument to "get out of Iraq" and not win the wars we are in currently nor is it a position of militarism in telling the country how and where we should be used. Instead it is a call to look honestly at where the Army is at now and where, based on our past 6 years of combat experience, we want to take it in the future based on an assessment of the threats that we will face.

So there are some points in which I agree with Tom, and others where I disagree. But at least Tom, like Shawn Brimley, appreciate the gravity of the issues involved and their relevance for the present and future security of the nation and are willing to discuss them. And I thank Tom and Shawn (and *SWJ* editors) for the opportunity to discuss and debate. Hopefully it will continue.

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