

Mediating Between Crusaders and Conservatives

Shawn Brimley

The long simmering debate over American defense strategy, re-ignited by Andrew Bacevich's article in [The Atlantic](#) (and usefully stoked by *Small Wars Journal*), is perhaps the most important facing America's defense community. Mere weeks from the election of a new President, the debate over whether Iraq and Afghanistan are harbingers of why, where, and how America will fight its next wars helps to frame the context within which the next administration will decide how to construct a defense budget during a deepening economic downturn. The debate is real and the stakes are high.

In his article, Bacevich framed the debate as one between the *crusaders*, those who believe that Iraq and Afghanistan are but opening salvos in a generational long war, and those he labels the *conservatives*, who believe that organizing America's military to transform entire societies is a fool's errand. An oversimplified summary of each view might read as follows:

Crusaders: If 9/11 and the subsequent operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have taught us anything, it is that America's 21st century enemies are likely to exploit weak and failing states to export terrorism, instability, and extremism. The era of episodic or periodic conflict is over, and America's military had better get prepared for an era of persistent conflict, one in which instability anywhere can pose threats to America's interests anywhere. In the conflicts of the 21st century, the U.S. military will not be able to kill its way to victory, but must instead focus on transforming societies in order to address the grievances that manifest into powerful threats against America's interests. The types of capabilities most in demand for success in Iraq and Afghanistan – linguists, trainers, combat advisors, civil affairs and intelligence experts – are exactly the capabilities we will need in the future. Simply expanding so-called “white” special operations forces or marginal improvements in Army and Marine Corps capabilities will not prove sufficient. America's ground forces need to transform for a future of small wars and insurgencies, and if that means taking risk in more conventional capabilities like field artillery or armor, so be it.

Conservatives: If 9/11 and subsequent operations in Afghanistan and Iraq have taught us anything, it is that American power has limits. We cannot transform entire societies, and the notion that America needs to be persistently deployed as part of a generational *long war* is exactly what our enemies most desire. The most important variables in Iraq and Afghanistan are the actions of the various political actors – we are not in control of the outcomes and never have been. Yes, weak and failing states can play host to those that may threaten us, but the answer is not to engage U.S. ground forces in a global Manichean counterinsurgency or pacification campaign in the quicksand of the Muslim world, because to do so would permanently mire America in a series of unwinnable wars. America's Army and Marine Corps as currently organized are more than sufficient to

wage the counterinsurgencies we find ourselves in today, and the attempt to dramatically retool our ground forces for a never-ending long war imposes great risks to America's ability to defend against an uncertain future. With rising powers such as India, China and Russia poised to challenge American dominance, to embrace an era of persistent conflict is a recipe for a kind of permanent strategic distraction that will prove corrosive to America's power and global prestige.

A review of the recent debate here at *SWJ* and in the pages of other [journals](#) makes clear that the argument between those whom Bacevich terms *crusaders* and *conservatives* is really occurring on two dimensions simultaneously. Tom Donnelly is correct to [argue](#) that no one side can claim total purity, and I would go further to suggest that there are elements of both arguments that readers of *SWJ* can readily accept. By separating the two dimensions, it is possible to come to some conclusions that players on both sides might agree with.

First, there are diagnostic differences over the critical dynamics at play in Iraq, Afghanistan, and to what extent U.S. ground forces have failed to learn and adapt to the complexities of current operations. Gian Gentile has argued against the popular narrative that sees the so-called surge in Iraq as something completely contrary to the types of counterinsurgency operations his unit employed during his two pre-surge tours. As [Tom Ricks](#) and [others](#) have described, different commanders in Iraq employed different strategies, and some were far more focused on protecting the Iraqi population than others. Indeed, it is a fair criticism of the war's early years that the lack of a unified and consistent counterinsurgency strategy was a critical part of the problem. Readers of *SWJ* are familiar with the passionate [debate](#) between Gentile and recently retired Colonel Peter Mansoor on this issue. While not qualified to cast judgment either way, I am inclined to [believe](#) that it was a constellation of events in Iraq, and not only more troops and an improved strategy, that helped to dramatically lower violence in 2007 and 2008, providing a window of opportunity for Iraq's leaders to address the basic drivers of tension and violence.

Second, and most importantly, both *crusaders* and *conservatives* are making arguments that, implicitly or explicitly, concern the nature of American grand strategy, or how and why America acts the way it does in the world. Bacevich and Gentile are deeply skeptical of the notion that American grand strategy should be constructed around a generational *long war* against Islamist extremism. In his new book, [The Limits of Power](#) Bacevich argues that "as events have made plain, the United States is ill-prepared to wage a global war of no exits and no deadlines," lacking the resources to "support a large-scale, protracted conflict without, at the very least, inflicting severe damage on itself. American power has limits and is inadequate to the ambitions to which hubris and sanctimony have given rise." This debate over American grand strategy – contained within arguments over modern Generalship and the future of the U.S. military – is controversial, powerful, and worth debating openly and often.

But the conflation of these two debates tends to cause confusion and imprecision. Clausewitz wrote: "War has a way of masking the stage with scenery crudely daubed with fearsome apparitions." Yes, he was talking about fog and friction, but more than this, it was a warning that the battles a commander finds himself in, or the wars a nation is confronting, have a way of distracting one from essential and enduring strategic questions. America today is involved in large-scale conflict in the Muslim world, and it is in our national interests to minimize, not maximize, our exposure to conflict in this region. Viewing America's current and future challenges through the strategic lens of terms like "global counterinsurgency" or "persistent

conflict” or “generational long war” is insufficient, doing more to mask strategic challenges than to reveal them. It is vital that we strip away this unhelpful scenery.

None of this is to suggest however, that we turn away from recent wartime lessons. Indeed, it is vital to prevent the military from engaging in a [system reboot](#), the tendency to purge from memory the experience and learning associated with an unpopular war. One only has to review Andrew Krepinevich’s classic [The Army and Vietnam](#) to understand that hitting “CTL-ALT-DELETE” after Iraq or Afghanistan would be the height of folly. America’s military must retain hard fought lessons and prevent the dismantling of innovations associated with new capabilities or doctrine associated with counterinsurgency and stability operations.

Perhaps, as Valkovic and Burton [suggest](#), Bacevich erred by tarring people like John Nagl with the term *crusader*. Indeed, there is nothing wrong in arguing that Army and Marine Corps must do everything necessary to create the capabilities to succeed in current conflicts. Although, based on a recent trip to Iraq, I believe there is less of a problem here than some believe. Most brigades and battalions in Iraq are doing very well at adapting to the imperatives that the conflict demands. They are organizing themselves differently, are adept at partnering with Iraqi Security Forces, and they are preparing for the critical task of overwatch as the overall number of troops continues to decline. The argument that the Army and Marine Corps require dramatic overhauls in order to meet current missions grows less convincing over time. Innovations in doctrine and training, derived from over seven years of experience in high-intensity irregular warfare, are impressive and, if retained, will provide an excellent foundation for hedging against possible future contingencies.

But Bacevich, in his Atlantic piece and in his recent book, was talking about something much deeper. Bacevich was right to suggest that some so-called *crusaders*, in their understandable zeal to ensure that the U.S. military adapts for the wars it must fight today, go too far in making the case that the future will look like the present. While one can agree with those arguing in favor of ensuring that America’s military learn and adapt effectively for missions involving counterinsurgency and irregular warfare, it is something much different to suggest that America can and should continue on an indefinite or persistent long war in the Muslim world.

For example, in their advocacy to build a “million man” U.S. ground force, Tom Donnelly and Fred Kagan argue in [Ground Truth: The Future of U.S. Land Power](#), that “American land forces are less a wall of steel than a sponge, absorbing *takfiri* toxins and leaching them from the lands they incubate.” In their view, America “must reestablish a network of forward bases along the new American security perimeter... the future will see not only forward-deployed forces but forward-stationed forces. To win, we must be there.” This is a vision of American grand strategy that rests on the highly questionable proposition that forward-stationed U.S. troops in the Muslim world will somehow ameliorate extremism and promote stability. This view goes much too far toward embracing a view of American strategy that is unlikely to succeed in protecting our vital interests.

The need to retain wartime lessons and maintain the ability for the U.S. military to prosecute these operations is a fundamentally different proposition than the suggestion that America can and should continue on an unending path of perpetual war. One can thus embrace both the *crusader’s* argument that the U.S. military must adapt to ensure the ability to succeed in current conflicts while agreeing with the *conservative’s* admonition against perpetuating a view of American strategy that will tie us down in a never-ending *persistent conflict* or *long war* in the

Muslim world. One can thus have a *conservative* view of American grand strategy while accepting the *crusader's* plea to not embrace amnesia after Iraq.

Proof of this can be found in Frank Hoffman and Steven Metz's 2007 Stanley Foundation [paper](#), which resisted dramatically increasing the size of U.S. ground forces by arguing: "It would be utterly erroneous to conclude that ideological contest posed by Islamic extremism is going to be fought largely with conventional military power... Our enemy today is cunning, made up of tens of thousands of potential opponents in 60 countries. There is no mass for our new formations to attack, and few places worth occupying... No doubt there are pockets of extremists who are committed to martyrdom, and where necessary we should be willing to facilitate their journey. But in the face of a cellular and religiously inspired adversary, we should not gauge success in terms of how many infantry brigades can be perpetually deployed." At the same time, Hoffman has been a leading proponent of the need to adapt the U.S. military for [hybrid warfare](#), a vision of future conflict in which the lines between regular and irregular blur together, requiring full-spectrum capabilities and the ability to quickly adapt to an adversary's employment of multi-dimensional challenges. One can thus be skeptical of the *crusader's* vision of U.S. grand strategy while accepting the need to retain robust capabilities optimized for irregular threats.

Finally, Gentile and Bacevich are right to be concerned that the unconditional embrace of terms like "persistent conflict" and "generational long war" is deeply problematic and will, if accepted as the construct for American force planning and grand strategy, likely contribute to an erosion of America's power and exacerbate the problem of strategic overstretch at a time when basic questions of affordability and strategic risk are front and center. But there is reason to believe that we aren't quite there yet – that years of war and a desire among a growing number of military officers to be more cautious and prudent regarding how we conceive of and plan for possible future contingencies will win out over expansive visions of American power that are unlikely to secure our interests at acceptable cost and risk.

Both sides in this debate are populated with smart civilian and military patriots who have very different ways of looking at the present and future of the U.S. military and the contours of American grand strategy. They deserve great credit for not shirking away from the difficult and onerous task of determining, through vigorous argument, how we as a defense community should be thinking about the present and future of America's military and the grand strategy it supports.

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