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James B. Agnew

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# A BRIEF HISTORY LESSON ON THE AMERICAN DREAM: RESPONSE TO TWO VIEWS

by

JAMES B. AGNEW

**T**wo articles in the March 1979 issue of *Parameters*, if read as widely and carefully as they merit, should provoke considerable critical concern, if not dismay, among American military personnel. Foreign Service Officer James R. Bullington's well-documented piece, "America's Battered Spirit: Our Security and Foreign Policy Dilemma," is perhaps the gloomiest but most valid appraisal of the recent course of current events, particularly the toboggan-like slide of American prestige at home and overseas, to emerge since Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's Harvard address in 1978 (Mr. Bullington quotes him early on). Admittedly, Russians as a group seem gloomy, but Solzhenitsyn has a fairly good foundation for comparative judgment. The possibility explored by Mr. Bullington—to "scale down our ambitions, revise our dream, and accept a much reduced role in world affairs"—may be the soundest principle of policy since Washington's and Jefferson's admonitions regarding unnecessary foreign involvement.<sup>1</sup>

Captain Andrew J. Bacevich, Jr., author of "Progressivism, Professionalism, and Reform," and probably a decade or so younger than Mr. Bullington (and at least two younger than this writer), has seized upon that perennial—no, continuing—dilemma of the Army officer corps—careerism. And let's call it by its "post, camp, and station" term—"ticket-punching" (self-aggrandizement at the expense of institutional responsibilities). He is to be admired, and I do not intend to imply a whit of facetiousness

in my compliment, for grappling with this ceaseless problem where so many others more senior, more experienced, but just as dedicated have failed. Compared with Mr. Bullington, whose Foreign Service experiences have probably ingrained in him the gradually dawning realization that in international relations there are no hard answers and the problems just won't "go away," Captain Bacevich furnishes a more substantive solution, but, unhappily, equally ephemeral and wistful. Mr. Bullington's recapitulation of the nation's malaises, which are going to get worse before they get better (if ever), is capped by a clarion call for "someone" to rekindle the American spirit and renew national vigor.<sup>2</sup> I can but wish for the springing to life of those four great leaders from the American past whose faces are chiseled into the face of a South Dakotan mountain, so that they might stride about the country, as a campaigning John F. Kennedy once exhorted, "to get America moving again." Captain Bacevich, younger and still idealistic, calls for something like 10,000 sacrificial lambs (Army officers) to break the back of brutal careerism by substituting concern with institutional well-being for "me firstism."<sup>3</sup>

Mr. Bullington, I believe, is right, as are the authorities—prophets of gloom, if you will—whom he cites. He is telling it as he sees it, and I tend to see it from the same focus. Despite the flourishing of trumpets, the inspiring roll of drums, and the singularly patriotic rhetoric of the Fourth of July orators, they are drawing largely on still-life

shots of what passes for the “American Dream.” They portray in heroic terms those periods of victorious conflict, and in the same terms those years when peace and prosperity prevailed and all seemed well. Yet, as John Shy points out, even the beginning—the Revolution—was an example of military and political “terrorism, rapacity, mendacity and cowardice.”<sup>4</sup> Slavery, as an institution, was brought down only by force of arms in a conflict that ended with the assassination of a President by a secessionist, racist zealot and with the most vengeful peace imposed on a defeated enemy since Napoleon punished the defector, William III, after Jena-Auerstadt.<sup>5</sup> As for military professionalism, the prowess displayed by the Indian-fighting Army after the Civil War to accommodate those paragons of prairie piracy, the cattle and railroad barons, does not stand as one of the brighter chapters of our military heritage. We revel in the glories of the US troopers at winning the West and defeating “the finest cavalry in the world,” but we fail to note that the supply of troopers was near-inexhaustible while the adversary was continuously shot, hanged, incarcerated, starved, or penned-up in ever-shrinking designated acreages known euphemistically as “reservations” during a 40-year war of attrition. As an American historian, Captain Bacevich should be familiar with the works of Russell Weigley and Robert Utley regarding the lack of professionalism in the Union, Confederate, and post-Civil War Armies.<sup>6</sup> Joe Johnston’s sulkiness over his position on the rebel promotion list, George McClellan’s defiance of the Commander in Chief, and “Cump” Sherman’s petulant removal of Army Headquarters from Washington to St. Louis are hardly good examples of professionalism in the old Army—and these were the cream of the crop among the professional soldiers of their times. The Lees were scarce.

Captain Bacevich points to former Secretary of War Elihu Root’s reforms and progressivism as being but two sides of the same coin. Root was to the Army what Henry Fayol, Frank Gilbreath, and other

scientific management pioneers were to business. He points out that Root engaged in “severely circumscribing each officer’s autonomy” so as to “undercut the basis for his spontaneous adherence to the professional ethic.” I may not have read as deeply into Captain Bacevich’s thesis as I should, but my own thesis, substantiated by Shy, Utley, and even the much-maligned Emory Upton (who in 20 years managed to get every conceivable “ticket” punched), is that professionalism has always been subordinate to careerism in the Army.<sup>7</sup>

What seems really to bother Captain Bacevich and former Army officers David Hackworth, Edward King, and Josiah Bunting (whom Bacevich cites as other proponents of professionalism) is that professionalism may be gone forever, a casualty of Vietnam. There are several factors that tend to lead me to think that Captain Bacevich and his fellow critics have overlooked the circumstances previously cited with respect to the 18th- and 19th-century American armies. *I believe they are seeking something that may not have existed except during brief and intermittent periods.* This reasoning also applies to Mr. Bullington’s pessimistic but essentially realistic outlook. The real truth, in this writer’s opinion, is that there never was an American Dream as our childhood history texts, Hollywood, and the old version of *The Saturday Evening Post* conveyed it. Black slaves were not happy people, cavorting spiritedly to the twang of banjos in the Alabama twilight; Tin Pan Alley was a cutthroat music consortium rather than a street of dreams; and American politics, as described by that Tammany fixture, George Washington Plunkett, in *Plunkett of Tammany Hall*, consisted of two parts: “honest graft” and “dishonest graft.” (The taxpayer was bilked in both.) There’s nothing new about Watergate. As for our military, American soldiers have more often fitted Kipling’s description of “Tommy” than the glorious images in such patriotic ballads as Theodore O’Hara’s *Bivouac of the Dead*. And so it goes—“Soldiers and dogs keep off the grass.”

I contend that, in many respects, the

idealistic attitudes that prevailed in the democracies of the world from 1941 to 1946 were an aberration in the normal course of events; and that, along with Mr. Bullington's authorities, we have reached a stage of "inner instability" (Hannah Arendt), and "the period of American dominance in the world has crested" (Daniel Bell).<sup>8</sup> We were headed that way in pre-World War II days if the Great Depression, prohibition and gangsterism, Teapot Dome, and sanguinary labor strife are symbolic of a trend. Totalitarianism, it seems, gave us a 30-year respite.

World War II may well have been the watershed, and to this writer the "golden age" of honest-to-goodness Americanism as the storybooks tell it. Certainly the experiences of the American military establishment in the Spanish American War and the Boxer Rebellion at the century's opening were hardly creditable ones; the Caribbean became the Marine Corps' pond—a series of encounters against lightweight *insurrectos* in Haiti, Cuba, and Nicaragua. We were Johnny-come-latelys (though hardy, resourceful, and timely) in World War I when allies and adversaries alike were worn out from three years of futile moiling in the trenches. But World War II had everything to make the American Dream appear as Norman Rockwell had drawn it, Kate Smith had sung it, and Buster Crabbe had acted it. A better melodrama couldn't have been staged more neatly by the old Biograph Studio. There were the classic villains in tyranny—a strutting Hitler, leering Tojo, and pompous Mussolini. Heroes abounded in olive drab, navy blue, and British khaki. There was evil planning followed by lightning invasions of hapless small countries by jack-booted, helmeted, motorcycle-riding German blitzers or banner-waving, tank-riding Japanese infantry. The stab-in-the-back, kick'em-while-they're-down, molest-the-women-and-children techniques of the enemy—all antithetical to the American Dream—united the populace of this country in a fashion never seen before or since. There were bad chapters—the incarceration of Japanese-Americans in camps; hoarding;

black marketeering; more racial repression—but they were unhappy ripples in the floodtide to win the war as a single country.

It was everybody's ballgame. Men in uniform, Bill Mauldin's bearded but dogged Joe and Willy, sensual movie queens, a crippled but inspirational President—all urged the homefront to save more gas, collect more scrap, buy more bonds, and grow more vegetables *now*. And it worked. For three and a half years, war was the great American pastime. For the military, careerism was largely forgotten because the pace of events— invasion, consolidation, new plans, marshalling, and another invasion—negated the requirement to jockey for position. The real professionals were the reservists and the legions of draftees and volunteers who had jettisoned education, careers, hometown, and farm life to join the great crusade. Do it; get it over with; and go home! Large casualty rates and rapid military expansion resulted in accelerated promotions and increased opportunities for command and high-level staff assignments. There was a sort of imparted military professionalism (some would call it just plain American arrogance), resulting in an indisputable triumph of American and Allied arms over grovelling, crushed tyranny. It was as if the swaggering outlaw and ruthless rancher had been brought

Colonel James B. Agnew, US Army, Retired, is a fellow at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Institute for Historical Research, Smithsonian Institution. A graduate of The Citadel, he holds an M.P.A. degree in International Relations from the Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs, Princeton University; he is also a graduate of both the Army Command and General Staff College and the Army War College. Colonel Agnew taught in the US Military Academy's Department of History from July 1971 to August 1973. From August 1974 until his retirement in August 1977, Colonel Agnew served as Director of the US Army Military History Institute at Carlisle Barracks. His most recent publications include the historical novel *The Eggnog Riot: Christmas Mutiny at West Point* (Presidio Press, 1979), and "Private Longden and the Medical Corps of 1898," in the July 1979 issue of *Military Review*.



to ultimate justice by the white-hatted sheriff and the citizens' posse. Now we could disband the posse. The United States quickly disestablished most of its military forces, promotions slowed, and, for the career military professionals, the jockeying for position commenced anew. The civilians in uniform hung up those uniforms and went back to other lives—lives just as careerist as those of the soldiers who stayed in the ranks! To each his own; one man's meat, another's poison; and all that. Soldiers and dogs—back off the grass!

**M**essrs. Bullington, Bunting, Hackworth, King, and I are products of the end of that era. Bacevich read of it, was told of it, but didn't live it as we "elders." I am not sure whether the others fought in that conflict, but I know they are old enough to remember it well. In their protests against careerism, Hackworth and Bunting, and maybe King, have forgotten that they were young once and that careerism was not so much a factor among lieutenants and captains as it would become in Vietnam and since. At that rank in the 50's and early 60's, professionalism was something to cling to and proclaim. It was a good word, for at platoon level there were few tickets to be punched. There were just soldiers, and that's where the fun was. Competition was there, too, but not of the individual, hand-wringing, "Will I measure up?" variety. There were, in the companies and batteries around the Army, thousands of potential Bradleys, Pattons, Marshalls, and Buckners. As they approached maturity, with the culmination of that process coming in Vietnam, the anti-careerists saw more and more evidence that the old clichés—"To get along, go along"; "Don't bite the hand that feeds you"; "Get just enough command to keep from being relieved"—were observed by more and more superiors. Some could not adapt and left. Most stayed, and a new generation of careerists was spawned. Doubtless Mr. Bullington saw it as a career malaise during his service with American officers in Vietnam. The dream had vanished for them,

but it was a dream that perhaps never *really* existed.

Captain Bacevich has been duped, but not intentionally so, by his superiors, who want to believe very much that the American military professional really exists. The full generals are the only officers in the US Army who can truthfully proclaim that this is true, for they are the only officers to reach the pinnacle of their careers—except those who yearn for the spotlight of the Chief of Staff's job, the Chairmanship of the JCS, or the Presidency. They are atop the pyramid. Everyone below them wants one more promotion or prestigious assignment which is realistically attainable by reaching intermediate career objectives: the proper blend of command, staff, and education, plus luck and contacts in the right circles. Captain Bacevich's address of the problem at this point in his career is a tribute to his courage and integrity—and a monument to his youth. His solution—demonstrated autonomy rather than compliance with higher authority—has several fallacies associated with it:

- It tends toward mutiny if audacity and autonomy are untempered by judgment. Despite the values implied in Captain Bacevich's brand of professionalism, and while individualism is a valuable asset on many occasions, it is difficult to ascertain where to draw the line and how much moral and valuational second-guessing an inferior can apply to a superior's orders or guidance. Besides, most knowledgeable senior officers are quite receptive to recommendations from juniors, if they are well-reasoned, persuasive, and free of sociological hangups. Perhaps autonomy might better be thought of as something to be extended by the commander rather than something to be asserted by the officers who work for the commander. *Given* a high degree of autonomy, the officers might then display true professionalism.

- It overlooks the problem of mass organization and communications. Assuming everyone in the lower four grades of the officer corps were reasonable and pragmatic, how would one mobilize them to take two steps forward from careerism to professionalism? Only thoughtless

automatons, I fear, would voluntarily "remove themselves from the marketplace."

• Logical career progression monitored by an Army bureaucracy that is not a power unto itself may often be mistaken for careerism. There operates in the system in some instances an effective blend of ethical values, consideration for the needs of the service, and cognizance of individual desires, without malice and manipulation.

In addition, there is one very effective, if not always touted, brake on those officer careerists who appear to be proceeding unchecked to God-knows-what selfish ends. This is the career noncommissioned officer corps. In those ranks can be found the patriotism, ethical values, sense of loyalty and service—and power—above self. Underpaid, overworked, transferred frequently, the American NCO has no War College or General Staff to which he can aspire; he will never, except by accident, command any unit larger than a squad, although he will command the dignity and respect of officers many grades his senior. He can stay with the troops—where Hackworth, King, Bunting, and I fell in love with the Army—as long as he wishes. The American NCO can look any officer in the eye and answer for the good of the unit, and nobody will lay a hand on him.

Perhaps the objectives of the option broached by Mr. Bullington—to scale down ambitions and relieve our frustrations—should be pursued, not just accepted as the inevitable course of events. Then, perhaps, we can address with more attention the dilemma posed by Captain Bacevich—the infusion (rather than restoration) of a greater degree of professionalism in the Army. But the American Dream says, "A winner never quits and a quitter never wins"; "When the going gets tough, the tough get going"; etc., etc.

In a manner similar to that in which they concluded their essays, however, I must regretfully conclude mine with the admission that neither can I provide any hard answers. We surely need some about now. I only hope that Mr. Bullington is wrong and Captain Bacevich is right.

1. James R. Bullington, "American's Battered Spirit: Our Security and Foreign Policy Dilemma," *Parameters*, 9 (March 1979), 46-51. See also Samuel Eliot Morrison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1965), p. 346, for Washington's warning against permanent foreign alliances and for maintaining a "respectable defensive posture" with occasional reliance on temporary alliances. Jefferson, a Republican and nationalist, eschewed any sentimental expressions of obligation to Napoleonic France during that country's turn-of-the-century crisis with Great Britain. Nor did he envision embracing again the erstwhile "Mother Country." He reaffirmed the neutrality policy adopted in Washington's first administration. See Morrison, p. 359, and Bernard Bailyn, et al. *The Great Republic* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1977), pp. 370-71.

2. Bullington, p. 51.

3. The figure of 10,000 is my own, not that of Captain Bacevich, who simply calls for "professional regeneration from within." See Andrew J. Bacevich, "Progressivism, Professionalism, and Reform," *Parameters*, 9 (March 1979), 66-71. In my opinion, of an officer corps of about 90,000, at least 10,000 "practicing professionals" would have to rise and do other than tamely acquiesce "to guidance from above." Demonstrations don't usually yield results; mutinies might; revolutions almost always do.

4. John A. Shy, *A People Numerous and Armed* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1976), p. 15.

5. That William deserved what he got for infidelity to an ally is the consensus of several Napoleonic historians. The terms imposed by the French Emperor were the harshest of modern times, probably until those of the Versailles Treaties in 1919. See Will and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization XI: The Age of Napoleon* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1975), p. 213. In contrast, the American South, despite its secession, did not break good faith overnight. The events had been moving in that direction for two decades. Interestingly, the Wade Hamptons, John Gordons, and Ben Humphreys returned to power in the aftermath of Reconstruction. The principal victims of the episode were the black man—for whom *de facto* slavery returned, but in a more odious guise—and, of course, Abe Lincoln, whom everybody needed.

6. See Russell F. Weigley, *The History of the US Army* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), pp. 197-265. For a closer look at the Army's actions in the West, see Robert M. Utley, *Frontier Regulars: The United States Army and the Indian, 1866-1890* (New York: Macmillan, 1973).

7. Emory Upton's classic, *The Military Policy of the United States* (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1912), might be labelled anti-militia by some, pro-regular by others. Despite his sound recommendations for a war college and general staff, later adopted by Root, Wood, and others, his proposals for an "expansible Army" are a scarcely concealed ploy at generating more command slots for regulars at the expense of the Reserve components. In the Civil War, Upton managed to obtain assignments in all three combat arms—artillery, cavalry, infantry—until he settled down where the promotions came the fastest. Professor Weigley lauds Upton for his demonstrated tactical innovation, zeal, and eye for improvement. Yet, Upton's petulance over the performance of the Reserves and his unattenuated public criticism of civil leadership of the military in a republic smacks of military elitism which is as unprofessional as the attributes of the Praetorian Guard of Rome or the modern-day mercenary.

8. Bullington, pp. 48-49.