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Review Essays

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Review Essays

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"We aren't here to do the decent thing': *Saving Private Ryan* and the Morality of War

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Editor's note: It may seem a bit long after the release to be "reviewing" Steven Spielberg's award-winning movie Saving Private Ryan. The essay that follows, however, is not so much a review of the film as it is an exploration of lasting issues of morality in warfare, using the movie as a springboard for discussion. -- RHT

Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* has been justly praised as the most realistic portrait of combat on film. Less often appreciated is the film's sustained discussion of the morality of war. This aspect of the film is even more important, in my view, than the film's realism. In this essay I examine Spielberg's film, focusing on the relations among the several moral perspectives presented in it.

Four Perspectives

There are four distinct perspectives at work in the film. First, there is the perspective of the soldier as an individual, concerned with his own survival and with the well-being of his relatives at home. Second, there is the perspective of the soldier as member of a small unit in combat, dependent for his survival on cooperation with his fellow soldiers. Third, there is the perspective of the soldier as member of a nation-state. Fourth and finally, there is the universal perspective of the soldier as one moral agent among many, including the soldiers on the other side.

The fourth perspective is the one we normally associate in the contemporary world with the word "morality." It is important to note, however, that each of the perspectives above is, or can be seen as, a moral or ethical framework. Each is concerned with the well-being of people: the first, with the agent himself and his family; the second, with the members of the small combat unit; the third, with the citizens of the agent's nation; and the fourth, with human beings in general. Moreover, each perspective presents the agent with practical obligations that have, or claim to have, an absolute hold on him. These frameworks are related to each other in complex ways. They support each other, but they also conflict with each other, as I hope to show.

The Individual Perspective

The perspective of the soldier as an individual might well be called the perspective of the soldier as a civilian. (When I speak of the "individual" I do not mean that term in a narrow sense, one which prescind from all family connections, but in a broad sense, which places the person in the context of his family and home.) The men in Captain Miller's unit identify themselves with their pre-military lives, with who they were "back home." We see this repeatedly in the film: they evoke the image of home to explain themselves to others. An example is the scene in the church in which Wade, the medical corpsman in the unit, talks about waiting for his mother to come home from work. Another is the scene in which Ryan talks to Miller about the last time he saw his brothers alive.

From the perspective of the individual, the mission of saving Private Ryan is a colossal mistake; or, as they describe it in the language of the GI, "fubar." Captain Miller's unit is being sent to rescue Ryan so that he may be sent home to his mother. But why should Ryan be deserving of such treatment? More to the point, why should the men of Miller's unit be sacrificed so that Ryan can be saved? As PFC Reiben states, "I got a mother, you got a mother, the Sarge has got a mother. I'm willing to bet that even the Captain's got a mother. Well, maybe not the Captain, but the rest of us have got mothers." Reiben's insistence on this perspective is part of what leads to his eventual mutiny, when he declares his intention to quit the mission after Miller releases the German prisoner.

The Perspective of a Member of a Small Combat Unit

Unfortunately, the perspective of the individual does not describe accurately the situation in which Reiben and others find themselves. They are not, after all, civilians, but members of a military unit. Their best chance of returning home to their civilian lives is cooperating with the other members of their unit in prosecuting the war. It is Miller who connects the two perspectives. In response to Reiben's mutiny he begins by revealing, for the first time, his civilian identity as a schoolteacher from Pennsylvania. His justification for seeking Ryan is that "if going to Reméal, and finding him so he can go home, if that earns me the right to get back to my wife, well then . . . then that's my mission." But the two perspectives are not fully compatible. Miller worries that serving in a combat unit in wartime may have made him no longer fit for civilian life: "Sometimes I wonder if I've changed so much, my wife is even gonna recognize me whenever it is I get back to her . . . and how I'll ever be able to . . . tell about days like today."

The morality of a small combat unit is perhaps the most ancient of the four moral perspectives we see in the film. Only the morality of the family can claim equal antiquity, and the individualism that is part of family life as I have described it is surely a more recent invention. The morality of the small combat unit is the morality of the tribe. It divides the world into two camps: friend and foe. The only true friends one has are the members of one's own unit. They are the people on whom one must rely if one is to survive. Even the higher-ups in one's own chain of command may justifiably be viewed with a jaundiced eye by the combat soldier. If the task of the soldier is to survive long enough to return home, then the high command seems bent on forestalling or preventing that outcome almost as much as the enemy, by sending him repeatedly into combat.

If the leaders of the high command are not the soldier's friends, however, certainly the enemy, who intend to kill him, are even less so. Befriending an enemy soldier, as Corporal Upham appears to do with the German prisoner, is an affront to the morality of the combat unit. It is an act of betrayal. The combat soldier is forbidden by practical necessity from extending any sympathy to the enemy. Acts that seem atrocities are justified by the hatred that is invoked in combat by the enemy's willingness to commit similar acts against one's companions. It is part of Spielberg's genius as a filmmaker that the acts of reprisal against the Germans on the beach seem fully in order to the viewer after only 15 minutes of *cinematic* violence against the invaders. It is astonishing how fast one can become a partisan. (Think in this context of the scene in which a German bunker disgorges several German soldiers, on fire from the assault of a flame-thrower, and an American soldier shouts, "Don't shoot 'em, let 'em burn.")

The bonds that form among combat soldiers are very deep, perhaps as deep as those within the family. This friendship has been glorified in some of the greatest literature in the history of the world. The *Iliad*, no less realistic about the violence and cruelty of war than *Saving Private Ryan*, focuses centrally on issues of loyalty that are rooted in friendship. Here is another example, just one of hundreds that might be chosen:

And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,
From this day to the ending of the world,
But in it we shall be remembered;
We few, we happy few, we band of brothers;
For he to-day that sheds his blood with me
Shall be my brother; be he ne'er so vile,
This day shall gentle his condition:
And gentlemen in England now a-bed
Shall think themselves accursed they were not here,
And hold their manhoods cheap while any speaks

That fought with us upon Saint Crispin's day.
(Shakespeare, *King Henry V*, Act IV, Scene III, 57-67)

Miller's troops don't share such a romantic view of comradeship--note their sarcastic criticism of Upham's plan to write a novel about the brotherhood of comrades. They suggest that this is a project that could be undertaken only by one who is innocent, as Upham is, of the realities of combat. Yet they feel the bond nonetheless, as is shown whenever one of their number dies. It is also shown by the dialogue in the church in which Miller explains to Sergeant Horvath that one of soldiers of his own command, one Vecchio or one Caparzo, is "worth a hundred Ryans." One suspects that the real basis for the Rangers' scorn for Upham's planned novel, over and above the sarcasm that generally characterizes American soldiers, is that he has not earned the right to be part of the "band of brothers" of whom he wishes to write.

The National Perspective

Fulfillment of one's duty as a soldier is seen by Miller, and by the others if they see the point at all, as a means to an end, the end of returning home safely. It can, however, become an end in its own right. A soldier may forget, or choose to disregard, his aim of getting home alive, and lay down his life for his comrades. This is essentially what Miller does when he decides to stay and defend Reméal. This decision is also connected with the third perspective displayed in the film, however, that of the morality of the nation. The small combat unit is part of a larger army, and that army serves the interests of the nation that fields it. Reméal needs to be held because the preservation of the bridge will benefit the Army and shorten the war.

National morality is not prominent in *Saving Private Ryan*, and where it is found it isn't expressed in terms of opposition to Germany, as one might expect, but in the rationale for the mission itself. When General Marshall, the Army Chief of Staff, is informed that Ryan has lost all of his brothers in the same week in combat, he determines to bring him home. That this determination is intended as a reflection of the character of the nation he serves is shown by Marshall's defense of his decision: he reads from a famous letter from Abraham Lincoln to a Mrs. Bixby, who lost her sons in the Civil War. The letter is filled with the values of national morality:

Executive Mansion,
Washington, Nov. 21, 1864.

Dear Madam,

I have been shown in the files of the War Department a statement of the Adjutant General of Massachusetts, that you are the mother of five sons who have died gloriously on the field of battle.

I feel how weak and fruitless must be any words of mine which should attempt to beguile you from the grief of a loss so overwhelming. But I cannot refrain from tendering to you the consolation that may be found in the thanks of the Republic they died to save.

I pray that our Heavenly Father may assuage the anguish of your bereavement, and leave you only the cherished memory of the loved and lost, and the solemn pride that must be yours, to have laid so costly a sacrifice upon the altar of Freedom.

Yours, very sincerely and respectfully,

A. Lincoln

The Morality of War

As I have noted, the values of the different moral perspectives described and instanced in the film can conflict. The desire of the individual soldier to return safely to civilian life may conflict with his duty as a member of a small combat unit. Likewise, his duty as a member of that unit may conflict with the larger aims of the nation he serves. This is shown not only in the specific mission to save Ryan, which from the perspective of Miller's unit is the foolish waste

of valuable lives, but also in the debate over whether to attack the German radar station the unit encounters on its way to Reméal. When Private Melish objects that "we can bypass this and still accomplish our mission," Miller responds, "I thought our mission was to win the war."

These conflicts, however, are easy to overlook or downplay in thinking about military service. The armies of all nations invoke, with greater or lesser success, the morality of the nation in justifying the specific assignments of particular units. And if the values of the individual are not so easy to reconcile with his military mission, it is easy to claim that the morality of the military unit and the nation somehow override or take precedence over individual concerns. The appeal to the morality of the nation, to national honor, is an appeal to a moral high ground, and it is often expressed in terms of a concern for the safety of the civilians the individual soldier cares about. So the conflicts, though real, might be seen as capable of being overcome. Individual and tribal morality might be subsumable under the morality of the nation. We might hope to develop a single perspective that justifies warfare, a perspective that I will call "the morality of war."

The Morality of Decency

This is not the case with the fourth perspective displayed in the film, which I will call the morality of decency. As noted above, the morality of decency is the perspective we today identify with morality *simpliciter*. Its fundamental concept is a universal respect for all human beings as moral agents. There are many different philosophical concepts and theories that can be used to articulate this concept. However the point is made, though, the morality of decency is at odds with the morality of war. War requires that the soldier view his personal survival, the completion of his particular mission, and the overall objectives of his nation as matters of overriding importance, to which everything else must be subordinated. The enemy soldier who intentionally stands in the way of these objectives is an impediment that must be removed, and not someone who must be accorded respect as a person. The aims of others who impede the completion of the mission are at best indifferent, of no importance.

Decency, however, requires that the enemy soldier be treated with respect and that the moral well-being of civilians be a matter of concern. We see the conflict between the two perspectives early in the film. In the first town visited by the patrol on its mission they encounter a bombed-out house inhabited by a French family. One of the soldiers, Caparzo, tries to rescue the daughter of this family. "I have to," he tells Captain Miller, "she reminds me of my niece." "The decent thing to do," Caparzo says, "would be to take her over to the next town"; to which Miller responds, "We aren't here to do the decent thing, we're here to follow fucking orders." When Caparzo is killed for his trouble, Miller tells his men, in anger and frustration, "That's why we can't take children with us." Later in the film Sergeant Horvath appeals to decency as a goal when he says, "Someday we might look back on this and decide that saving Private Ryan was the one decent thing we were able to pull out of this whole godawful mess."

The crucial episode revealing the conflict between the morality of decency and that of war, however, is the one involving the treatment of the German soldier captured as a result of the assault on the radar station. Miller's soldiers, angry over the death of Wade, abuse the prisoner. (It is the one place in the film where they lose, or are at least apt to lose, the contemporary viewer's sympathy.) Upham objects to Miller that "This is not right." When Upham tries to ameliorate the condition of the captured soldier, he is treated with scorn by the others. It is Miller's decision to release the prisoner rather than shoot him, to follow Upham's morality rather than that of the other members of his unit, that precipitates Reiben's mutiny and Miller's justification of his conduct, described above.

Upham, inexperienced in combat, represents the morality of decency in a pure, abstract form, as adherence to a set of universal principles, one of which is respect for human life as such. The rules of conduct by which soldiers in combat are supposed to abide forbid the killing of prisoners. As the film illustrates on more than one occasion, both sides routinely ignored this rule when it conflicted with their objectives. From the standpoint of the mission of Miller's unit, killing or at least wounding and thereby disabling the prisoner is the only course of action that makes sense. Apart from Upham (and Sergeant Horvath, who keeps whatever doubts he may have about releasing the prisoner to himself in deference to his commander), the rest of Miller's unit is unanimously in favor of killing the prisoner. They want revenge for Wade, but they also know that releasing the prisoner is an act of folly from the military perspective.

Miller, unlike Upham, is a combat veteran. He isn't innocent about the danger involved in releasing the prisoner. But

he is also a humane and decent man, who tries constantly to reconcile the morality of decency with his role as a combat commander. The lack of success he has (which is due, I think, to the fact that the two moralities are deeply and irreconcilably incompatible) is shown by the hand tremor he displays at intervals throughout the film. It is also shown in a scene in which he privately breaks down in tears in the aftermath of the assault on the radar station and the death of Wade. Unlike his soldiers, who are hardened to the reality of life in combat, Miller tries throughout the film to hold on to the morality of decency. His commitment to this morality is shown when he concludes his justification for releasing the prisoner by saying, "Every time I kill a man I feel farther from home." The prisoner is not simply an enemy soldier, but a man. Miller realizes that failure to respect the humanity of enemy soldiers, succumbing to the temptation simply to embrace the morality of war without qualification, would alienate him from his own humanity, from the best part of himself.

The Conflict of Perspectives: Home vs. the Battlefield

The morality of war and that of decency conflict. Steven Spielberg, a master filmmaker, uses the techniques and symbols of film to make this point, rather than the language of moral philosophy. The central symbol in his cinematic argument is that of home, and the central contrast is between home and the battlefield. Home, which is interestingly enough the milieu of the individual morality of the soldier as civilian, is the place in which we also find the morality of decency. It would appear that individual morality and universal morality complement each other better than either coheres with the morality of war.

We are introduced to the conflict between home and battle for the first time in the film after the opening sequence of carnage at Omaha Beach. Transitional scenes in the casualty branch of the Army and in General Marshall's office lead to the presentation of the Ryan home, photographed in the elegiac fashion of an Andrew Wyeth painting. In one of the film's many deftly handled scenes, accomplished completely without dialogue, we see in the collapse of Ryan's mother the power of war to bring its suffering into the very center of domestic tranquillity.

Home symbolizes for the soldiers of the film, as it does for soldiers in real life, the things in life that make it worth living. We have already seen that these things include the love of family and friends. Now it appears that they also include the morality of decency. This morality is part of a morally good, a "decent," life. At home, it is possible for people to behave well toward those who are strangers, and to accord respect even toward those with whom you have disagreements. At home, at least for the most part, you don't have enemies who are trying to kill you. The framing scenes of the film, much criticized as sentimental by critics who otherwise praised it highly, show clearly what the point of the mission was: to return Ryan home, to give him a chance to establish his own home and family, to give him a chance to live a good life. When he asks his wife whether he has been a good man, Ryan makes explicit his awareness of what he was saved for.

The contrast drawn between warfare and domestic life is an old one--it is just the contrast drawn in the earliest works of Western culture, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. Miller, like Odysseus, wants nothing more than to get home to his wife. Unlike Odysseus, however, Miller doesn't live to return home. In the film's most ironic twist, he is killed by the prisoner he released. Miller's act of humanity toward the prisoner, like every other act of humanity in the film, is punished. Miller is killed, as was Caparzo, as a reward for trying to do the decent thing. If Miller had had someone in the scene to play Miller to his Caparzo, he would have said, in anger and frustration, "That's why we can't release prisoners."

Miller's humanity, Spielberg seems to be telling us, is out of place in combat, a fact that his more realistic soldiers realize clearly. They regard his decision to release the prisoner as folly. They also regard the mission itself as folly. As hardly any of them survive the mission, one might say they had good reasons for their view. Yet Spielberg does not say that Ryan should not have been saved. *Saving Private Ryan* confronts us with a conflict between the morality of warfare and the morality of decency. Spielberg shows us clearly the point of each, and its hold on us. He does not resolve the conflict; nor does he try to reconcile the two moralities. He says to us, "If you try to act in war as you would at home, it will probably cost you your life." He doesn't say, "Don't do it."

Can the Conflict Be Resolved? Three Approaches

What are we to make of the conflict between the morality of war and the morality of decency? Spielberg, as an artist,

doesn't tell us. He vividly presents the conflict to the moviegoer, but offers no resolution. Philosophers have tried several resolutions. One is to attempt to combine the morality of decency with the morality of war by insisting that rules that respect the humanity of the enemy and civilians be followed in combat. This has been the approach of just war theorists. Spielberg shows how difficult that is, and how likely the attempt is to result in the deaths of the people who try to behave in a morally decent fashion in war. He also shows that, in the heat of combat, respect for the enemy is likely to be the first casualty of war--as soon as one's own comrades begin to die, it goes right out the window.

A second approach would be to order the conflicting moralities hierarchically. Most modern theorists who do this would rank the morality of decency above the morality of war. Many would reject the claim that the morality of war is a morality at all, since it fails to respect the basis of morality as they understand it. War, on this view, is essentially immoral. This is the view of the pacifist. It is a deeply satisfying moral position because of its purity, but it has been justly criticized as impractical.

A third possibility is acknowledgment of the conflict and of the irreconcilability of the morality of war and the morality of decency. This seems to be the position of Spielberg. This view acknowledges something the second approach does not: the fact that the obligations of a soldier in combat to his fellow soldiers, his unit, and his nation at least appear as *absolute* and *inescapable*. One *must* kill the enemy in combat, for reasons of survival and because of one's membership in a military unit with a mission to accomplish. One who holds this view may admit that the obligations of military service are situational, and that war exists to promote and preserve peace (as the mission to save Private Ryan was undertaken to return him home, where he could live a decent life); but he would also claim that the demands of combat are absolute in the situation of combat.

One might say that the morality of decency is *out of place* in combat. The attempt to apply that morality in combat must inevitably be unsatisfactory, and this third approach condemns the attempt as a moral error, an error of practical reasoning, not just as a bit of high-minded foolishness. Or it might be better to say that, although demands of decency might be always in order, and the Captain Millers of the world may always act on them, they are opposed in combat situations by weighty moral considerations on the other side.

This third approach legitimates the morality of war as a morality, although a limited one. It says that in certain situations it is not just permissible but morally required that people ignore the perspective of decency. The fear is that acceptance of this perspective might lead to the justification of atrocities and violations of the rules of war, such as the killing of prisoners. These things do occur, it might be said, but we can't condone or approve them.

Despite the dangers of this approach, and despite my own pacifist convictions, I am attracted to this position, for it grants to the morality of war something that many people, including those who oppose war, have long recognized: the status of a *moral* position. Everyone who is at all familiar with warfare, whether firsthand or by means of the accounts of others, is aware that war is ugly and brutal. Equally common, however, is the recognition that warfare can arouse some of the noblest moral values in people, values such as courage, friendship, and patriotism. Warfare provides occasions for heroic behavior not often found in peacetime, and can generate an ethos of self-sacrifice that is morally admirable. It seems to me that it won't do to ignore, reject, or diminish the importance of these facts.

This leaves me, however, as I think it leaves Spielberg, with an irreconcilable conflict. Both the morality of war and the morality of decency place absolute moral demands on people. These demands cannot be reconciled. To be a warrior is to be required, morally required, to do things that the morality of decency cannot approve. And this means that the modern warrior, educated at home in the morality of decency, must inevitably feel conflict, and indeed guilt, about his actions in combat.

Film: Spielberg, Steven. *Saving Private Ryan*. Amblin Entertainment, DreamWorks SKG, Mark Gordon Productions, Mutual Film Company, Paramount Pictures. 1998.

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books, *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics* (1985) and *Virtue and Knowledge* (1991), and the editor of a four-volume collection of articles titled, *Socrates: Critical Assessments*. He has published more than a dozen articles, chiefly on ancient philosophy and ethics. The author thanks Dr. Martin Cook, of the US Army War College faculty, for his encouragement and his helpful comments on this essay.

Review Essay

Three Looks Back at Vietnam

VINCE GOULDING

It seems fitting that 25 years after the fall of Saigon, military professionals and others interested in national defense should shift their attention from current events to a war that, arguably, began America's transition to the state of affairs it finds itself in today. Given that state, some reading might well be in order. The three books addressed in this essay cover the spectrum and provide varying degrees of usefulness.

Scan Bill McCloud's *What Should We Tell Our Children About Vietnam?*, a collection of letters he received in response to a request for help in teaching Oklahoma junior high school students about the Vietnam War. The respondents run the gamut from Tom Hayden to Dean Rusk to Robert McNamara, and from the profound (seldom) to the banal (frequently). For the most part, they say pretty much what you would expect. No surprise there, but then, why should there be? Letters received from veterans and the families of men who didn't come home certainly have more impact and scholarly value. McCloud, who served in Vietnam from March 1968 to March 1969, clearly has high motives, and his effort fills a niche. That said, check his book out from the library if the mood strikes and light, easy reading is the order of the day.

Better perhaps, if education of self or others is the reader's ultimate objective, to seriously consider taking on David Kaiser's *American Tragedy* and Michael Lind's *Vietnam the Necessary War*. Both these substantial efforts are well researched, passionately written, and sure to evoke a response. That's where the similarity ends, as the titles of the books clearly indicate.

David Kaiser teaches at the Naval War College, and his research skills are readily apparent. Many of his sources are new, a point he makes early and often. The subtitle, "Kennedy, Johnson, and the Origins of the Vietnam War," is a little misleading, in that although his main focus is the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, he includes significant discussion of Dwight Eisenhower. This is nontrivial, because the drum Kaiser consistently beats carries the message that JFK inherited a can of worms, would have fixed it had he not been tragically killed, and that LBJ is responsible for all the bad things that followed . . . and they were all bad. Before you come to the conclusion that the author owns a beachfront cottage at Hyannis, however, several secondary themes emerge that demonstrate a balanced approach. Kaiser cites many instances which underscore the fact that Kennedy and his closest advisors were not on the same sheet of music when it came to events in Southeast Asia. He also describes the Departments of State and Defense as consistently pulling in opposite directions. Kaiser's assertion that Robert McNamara and Maxwell Taylor misled JFK is less surprising. Predictably, Lyndon Johnson is treated harshly, on both ethical and leadership grounds. But let's hold that thought. After all, the author has written about an "American tragedy" that another author thinks was a "necessary war."

Michael Lind is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation and the Washington editor of *Harper's Magazine*. That's right, he's a conservative. That said, his book is a good follow-on to Kaiser's, principally because it carries America's involvement in Vietnam to its conclusion during the Nixon Administration. Lind also introduces new sources; of particular interest, those coming from the communist side. Another great utility of this particular book is its author's ability to tie events in Vietnam to American foreign policy today. That is, after all, the reason we study history.

Not surprisingly, Lind's thesis is that America's effort in Vietnam was a necessary, if painful, requirement in the ongoing proxy war between the United States and China/Russia. He even goes so far as to call it the Third World War. There are other eye-openers. Lind counters the conventional wisdom that Ho Chi Minh was a benevolent nationalist whom the United States could have co-opted with evidence that he was a Russian/Chinese puppet who willingly participated in the murder of thousands of his countrymen by Chinese advisors. Of particular note, and especially after digesting Kaiser, is Lind's portrayal of Lyndon Johnson as a President who made the right strategic decisions, albeit with methods that leave a bit to be desired. No Hyannis cottage for Lind; his treatment of JFK and his brother Robert would certainly not endear him to the Camelot crowd. Ironically, he even goes so far to make the statement that LBJ inherited a "disastrous situation" and that his biggest mistake was listening to General William Westmoreland. Lind demonstrates his balance, however, by castigating Richard Nixon for waiting too long to end American involvement, equating Vietnam to an auction where the buyer (the United States) had far overspent (in lives) for an item (Vietnam) that wasn't worth the price.

It is particularly interesting, and worthy of note by those in uniform, that these two authors, whose strategic analysis of the Vietnam War is so divergent, nonetheless share a common thesis regarding the US military effort. Both Kaiser and Lind challenge the conventional wisdom that US forces fought well but were not adequately supported by Washington. They are of the opinion that military operations in Vietnam, at the operational level of war, were unlikely to bring success and didn't even support strategic objectives. To a military establishment that has been weaned on the notion that "we won every battle [false], but lost the war [false in the eyes of Michael Lind, at least]," this might come as a bit of a surprise. The authors' contention is that the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the Joint Chiefs, and ultimately the Military Assistance Command, Vietnam (MACV), reverted to their respective operational comfort zones and fell into the trap of conducting a firepower-based war of attrition rather than the more unconventional approach required. The operational lessons to be learned were from the British experience in Malaya, not our own in Korea, nor especially from the doctrine that was emerging in northern Europe.

Also noteworthy, Michael Lind provides some demographic and statistical data on the composition of the major political parties, support for the war, and who fought there that is extremely interesting and instructive to anyone seeking a deeper understanding of this watershed event in American diplomatic, military, and cultural history.

The best way to teach is, first, to learn for yourself, then pass along the information you think accurately portrays the past. The truth about how America got into and out of the Vietnam War might very well lie somewhere between the opinions of Kaiser and Lind. One thing is certain, however. These two well-documented works are sure to prompt the reader to dig deeper and, in the process, become a better strategic leader, junior high school teacher, or for that matter, informed American citizen.

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Review Essay

Reviewing the Future

EARL H. TILFORD, JR.

The US Commission on National Security/21st Century, chaired by former US Senators Gary Hart and Warren Rudman, is scheduled to release its final report in February 2001, yet another in a series of reviews of service roles and missions.[1] Also known as the Hart-Rudman Commission, this is the most recent in a decade-long series of review efforts. They include the Base Force Review, the Bottom-Up Review, the Commission on Roles and Missions, the National Defense Panel (the forerunner of the current Commission on National Security), and one completed Quadrennial Defense Review with the second due to begin early next year. Against this background of ruminations over the future of the US national security establishment, defense analysts and national security scholars have offered numerous studies and prescriptions on the future of the American military and its role in the world.

Without meaning to, this decade-long review process fostered an interservice rivalry as intense and bitter as any of the last half century. The Army and the Air Force have emerged as the two major protagonists, with their respective visions focused on dominant maneuver on the one hand and precision strike on the other. If this ongoing review process produces substantive changes, the outcome could be crucial to the future of one or both services. Moreover, it may alter the way America goes to war. Currently, the future of the Army may be more at risk than that of the Air Force. That is why Senator Gary Hart's 1998 book, *The Minuteman: Restoring an Army of the People*, is important.

While serving in the Senate, Gary Hart organized the Military Reform Caucus in the early 1980s to redirect the defense debate away from weapons procurement and toward a focus on strategy, tactics, doctrine, and leadership. The caucus attracted bipartisan support with Republicans Barry Goldwater and Newt Gingrich joining Hart and like-minded Democrats. During this period, Gary Hart became one of the nation's best-informed public servants on defense matters. His 1985 book, *America Can Win: The Case for Military Reform*, coauthored with then Senate staffer William S. Lind, provided a preview to debates that emerged a decade later. When Hart writes a book proposing that the Army can be cut to five regular active divisions, the Department of the Army had better pay attention.

Hart's thesis is that "America's Army" is more than a slogan, it is a historical imperative whereby citizens called to arms in times of national peril have defended the nation. He contends that an aroused citizenry in uniform is preferable to a standing army of professionals when the Army is called upon to fight and win the nation's wars. That being the case, Hart recommends that the Army, whose current force structure and firepower-centered doctrines are anachronistic remnants of Cold War requirements and no longer relevant, should be reduced drastically in its active component and bolstered in the Army Reserve and National Guard. A force of five active component divisions, when coupled with the Marine Corps, Hart contends, would be sufficient to meet the landpower requirements needed to parry the initial thrusts of any aggressor. If necessary, the National Guard, with its heavier divisions, could be mobilized to secure the final victory. With the resources saved by reducing the active component by five divisions, regular Army cadres could keep the Guard and Reserve trained as well as supplied with top-of-the-line equipment.

Fundamental to Hart's argument is the issue of deployability. He points out that there simply is not enough airlift and sealift to move our heavy divisions quickly enough to distant battlefields. Therefore, with necessity as the mother of invention, the bulk of the Army's heavy forces should be in the reserve components.

At stake, Hart contends, is whether the United States will continue with its Cold War military structures, while spreading its forces into numerical weakness in search of weaponry and new enemies to justify their existence. His is a clear challenge and, since the current review of forces, roles, and missions goes by the name the "Hart-Rudman Commission," the Army cannot ignore what many will perceive as a reasonable alternative to the Army as currently configured. However, there are two flaws to the Senator's argument and a strategic concept he fails to note.

First, the Army of the future will be highly sophisticated and its soldiers must train for a variety of missions using the latest in technology to the greatest advantage. What is needed is more time in training for the wide range of challenges from peacekeeping in complex terrain, to counterterrorism, to remaining ready to fight and win quickly and decisively when the high-tech drive-by shootings provided by air power and precision strike are not enough.

Second, Senator Hart seems to believe that power projection is more important than a continual strategic presence. Currently the Army is stationed around the globe at locations astride historic points of geostrategic friction and close to those areas where America's vital interests are most likely to be threatened. Real strategic speed comes from the ability to move both quickly and decisively. It is far better to win quickly, before the enemy can dictate the strategic terms of engagement, before opposing forces achieve their operational objectives and become entrenched, ready for what could then evolve into a bloody war of attrition. The force structures and strategic paradigms Senator Hart advocates would not allow the United States to get there "the firstest with the mostest." It simply does not make good strategic or operational sense to get there "with a little now, a little more later, and a lot later on."

The strategic concept Senator Hart fails to consider is that short of annihilating the enemy by bombing them back to the Stone Age, only land forces can provide decisive strategic victory. As it now stands, the leaders in Pyongyang, Baghdad, and Belgrade can thumb their noses at the world, confident that our response will be another high-tech strike which they can ride out. Our National Command Authority should have the option of moving vigorously to win decisively, should that be necessary. Only land forces can invade, supplant a regime, and change the leadership. If Kim, Saddam, and Milosevic feared being deposed, arrested, and put on trial for their crimes, they might be more effectively deterred. Only modern and robust land forces can provide important war-winning capabilities--as opposed to imposing effects to achieve a degree of control, which is about as much as air power strategies can accomplish.

Defense specialist Michael O'Hanlon, in *Technological Change and the Future of Warfare*, assesses the current debate with a focus on the revolution in military affairs (RMA). O'Hanlon finds that there is tremendous potential for technological development but also significant limitations. In this respect, O'Hanlon both compliments and contends with Hart in significant and thought-provoking ways.

As a departure point, O'Hanlon argues that the RMA is built on four premises, of which one is valid, two wrong, and the fourth arguable at best. He postulates the first premise is correct: improvements in computers and information systems will increase their effectiveness, fostering new applications in robotics and increased weapon capabilities. The second premise, that sensors will become so much more capable that the battlefield will become virtually transparent, a fundamental assumption of precision strike advocates, is wrong. Also incorrect is the third premise, that land, sea, and air vehicles will become significantly lighter, more lethal, and stealthy, thus making them more deployable. The fourth premise, that new types of weapons like directed-energy beams and advanced biological agents will be developed and widely deployed, is arguable.

If correct in these assumptions, O'Hanlon's skeptical view of the RMA provides both good and bad news for the Army. The good news is that envisioning precision strike and a strategy based on air power alone as the primary and supported force constitutes wishful thinking based on flawed historical interpretation. The bad news is that improvements in pyrotechnic and metallurgical technologies are not going to be as dramatic as many are now hoping. Guns are not going to become significantly more lethal, and while lighter armored vehicles may be more deployable, they are not likely to be more survivable than current systems. In other words, while we might get there "firstest," it may not be with "the mostest." But advocates of decisive victory through land force dominance need not despair, because O'Hanlon's skeptical view of the RMA, coupled with Gary Hart's challenge for the need to maintain a robust active component, offer an opportunity to make the Army of Transformation a reality.

If we follow O'Hanlon's arguments, current cutting-edge systems like the B-2 bomber, F-117, and F-22 are dangerously susceptible to advances in technological countermeasures. Stealth, after all, does not mean a system is *invisible* but that it is *less visible*. And while "less visible" is good, it also means that these systems, restricted as they are to nighttime operations and requiring massive support in electronic countermeasures, will become more and more vulnerable in the future as our potential enemies find ways to detect and knock them down. In short, the limitations O'Hanlon sees in the RMA are more likely to affect future precision strike capabilities than they are to affect the Army with its equities in strategic presence and dominant maneuver.

The area where precious defense resources can be used to best effect is to improve our airlift and sealift capabilities. While O'Hanlon does not think the speed of transport aircraft will increase much and that the speed of ships will not improve by more than a few knots in the next quarter to half-century, we can improve deployability by simply increasing the numbers of C-17s and Roll-On-Roll-Off ships. As for systems like the F-22 and Joint Strike Fighter

(JSF), O'Hanlon believes a small number should be purchased as "silver bullet systems." These planes are projected to be so capable that a relatively small number of F-22s can achieve air superiority while the JSFs and other stealth aircraft hit the most heavily defended targets. Meanwhile, larger numbers of updated F-16s, F/A-18s, and F-15s will be sufficient to ensure overwhelming air supremacy at a reasonable cost to the year 2020 and beyond.

In the final analysis, war is about people, not systems. Armies, air forces, and navies function with people who use and employ machines and weapons. In their anthology *The Postmodern Military: Armed Forces After the Cold War*, Charles C. Moskos, John Allen Williams, and David R. Segal address the changes in the armed forces of 13 nations fostered by the shift from a modern to a postmodern paradigm.

First it is important to understand what is meant by "postmodern." This is a notion, originating among literary circles in the 1960s, that the current era is one in which there are no absolutes, truth is relative, values are paramount to virtues, and there is a profound relativism to all discourse and relationships. Its operative terms are pluralism, fragmentation, heterogeneity, deconstruction, permeability, and ambiguity. Postmodern is a pretty good way of describing the international strategic environment that the US Commission on National Security/21st Century has described as a prelude to recommending a more relevant and appropriate national security strategy and structure.

More to the point, the Modern Military originated with the *levee en masse* armies of the French Revolution and lasted through World War II. In the Modern Military, officers tended to be aristocratic and poorly trained. In wartime, armies expanded by calling up the militias and by conscription. This model was replaced by the Late Modern Military during the Cold War, when large standing armies, led by a cadre of highly trained professional officers, served as much to deter as to fight. With the passing of the Cold War, the Postmodern Military finds itself faced with new missions, new priorities, and changes to its internal dynamics that respond to pressures far removed from its traditional roles and missions. It is in this kind of military that programs like "Consideration of Others" (CO2) have risen to a level of importance equal to that of training for combat.

The editors' approach was to have an international group of scholars examine the military structures of the United States and 12 other countries. They assessed each according to criteria like perceived threat, force structure, and mission definition, how their respective armed forces are perceived by their peoples, media relations, the role of women, and attitudes toward service by homosexuals and conscientious objectors. Their conclusion is that there have been five major organizational changes in the Postmodern Military. First, civilians play a larger role in most armed forces. Second, the differences between the services based on branch, rank, and combat versus noncombat roles has decreased. Third, there has been a change in military purpose from fighting wars to conducting missions not traditionally considered "military." Fourth, there has been much more extensive use of multinational military forces authorized by supranational institutions like the United Nations and NATO. Finally, military forces have themselves become increasingly "internationalized." As Professor John Allen Williams of Loyola University Chicago points out in the conclusion, "All of these changes are observable to some degree."

As for the US armed forces, Northwestern University sociologist Charles Moskos concludes that they are pretty typical in exhibiting the ambiguity and uncertainty implicit in postmodernism generally. They are, in fact, ahead of most other nations in integrating women into their ranks, and while the status of homosexuals in uniform remains contentious, the services' permeability to civilian mores as superseding traditional military virtues, for better or for worse, has been relatively substantial.[2]

Moskos and the other writers seem to ascribe a sense of historical inevitability to the current sociopolitical pressures shaping the various armed forces, especially those of the United States. For instance, in the United States, the Army and Navy have embraced programs like CO2 and proclaimed vigorous "zero tolerance" policies for both sexual harassment and hostility toward homosexuals in reaction to criticism engendered by highly publicized incidents and accompanying political pressures. One has to wonder what would happen if the leadership made a concerted effort to re-infuse the warrior spirit even at the risk of being dubbed "politically incorrect." The authors failed to consider the possibility that the services might be going through a phase that is both temporary and reversible given a different political climate.

In conclusion, change is neither comfortable nor easy. Military institutions are by their nature conservative and

resistant to change. It is also natural for institutions to protect their prerogatives. While there are no easy answers to the complex issues raised by the uncertain and changing national security environment, it is good that we are addressing these matters. One hopes we can do so honestly and with the best interests of the nation at heart.

NOTES

1. Information on the US Commission on National Security/21st Century, the Hart-Rudman Commission, including the Phase 1 and Phase 2 reports, is available on the Internet at <http://www.nssg.gov/index.htm>, accessed 12 July 2000.
2. For further reading on the effects of gender integration on the Army and Navy, see Stephanie Gutmann, *The Kinder, Gentler Military: Can America's Gender-neutral Fighting Forces Still Win Wars?* (New York: Scribner, 2000).

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