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Commentary & Reply: On “Serving a Nation at War”

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Commentary & Reply

On “Serving a Nation at War”

To the Editor:

The Acting Secretary of the Army and the Army Chief of Staff properly note in the introduction to their article in your Summer edition, “All great changes in our Army have been accompanied by earnest dialogue and active debate at all levels.” (“Serving a Nation at War: A Campaign Quality Army with Joint and Expeditionary Capabilities,” by Les Brownlee and General Peter Schoomaker.) I’m sure their assessment of the strategic environment and the Army’s role will engender an engaging and illuminating debate.

They begin with a quote from Clausewitz: It is essential to understand “the kind of war on which [we] are embarking.” Many good words follow, such as asymmetric, non-state actors, adaptive advantage, war of ideas. The word I expected was *long*. They seem to understand that we are committed to extended deployments in the Balkans, Afghanistan, and Iraq, and they foresee deployments to many other potential hot areas, but I don’t see the linkage between this policy insight and the strategy and operational capabilities they are advocating.

Since they state that “doctrine links theory, history, experimentation, and practice” and their article should have significant influence over emerging doctrine, I feel compelled to take issue with some of their uses of our history. First, I think they have an incomplete understanding of the Cold War and the Army that evolved during that 50-year period. Our Army did not simply sit in Europe preparing for a “symmetrical” conflict with the Warsaw Pact. Within that theater, we constantly looked for ways to transform advantages into accomplishments, and many of these had to do with building a strong alliance to replace ad hoc coalitions that had been a feature of our earlier experiences in warfighting on the continent. Those accomplishments are still important and relevant.

But there was an ideological dimension to the Cold War, and “Wars of National Liberation” were part of the other side’s effort to introduce asymmetry. As a result, much of the Army was expeditionary during the Cold War. In the 1950s and 1960s, various joint headquarters planned and exercised expeditionary deployments involving multiple Army divisions. That activity diminished when the Army became involved in an extended expedition to Vietnam—an expedition that was not in a “developed theater with access to extensive host-nation infrastructure” (their characterization of the basis for the design of the Army’s Cold War logistics structure). At the time, the Army may have been so shortsighted that its leaders could not see that they had to master the lessons of the asymmetrical war in Vietnam while continuing to focus on the challenges in Europe. In fact, they probably taught and practiced the “conventional war” doctrine at the expense of “unconventional war” learning. No one wanted a long war in Vietnam, but Army

strategists were asking, “What else must we be able to do while we are doing this?” “What must we prepare to do when this is over?” I don’t see much evidence of that kind of thinking in this article.

My reading of current defense budgets and the force posture of the Air Force and Navy lead me to believe those services are asking those questions and getting plenty of support for their answers. That picture may be erroneous, but to make the flat assertion, “The air-, sea-, or land-power debates are over,” as these authors do, seems disingenuous. The Army may be signing up for “joint interdependence,” but there don’t seem to be too many other signatures on the bottom line when viewed from a resources perspective. I can’t see the investments the Air Force and Navy are making to meet the tactical interdependence needs of an Army that must expect to fight for information in distant, austere theaters where the force must fight throughout the battlespace from the outset. These conditions I have just stated constitute the authors’ “entirely different challenge—and the fundamental distinction of expeditionary operations.” That sounds a lot like the expeditionary concept that justified the Marine Expeditionary Force with its vast array of organic capabilities rather than the expeditionary concepts of the 20th-century Army that saw itself having a larger role.

That larger role seems to be lost on the authors, who write, “The Army’s preeminent challenge is to reconcile expeditionary agility and responsiveness with the staying power, durability, and adaptability to carry a conflict to a victorious conclusion no matter what form it eventually takes.” That’s a reconciliation that may be impossible, but it’s not the preeminent challenge. The real challenge is to gain and maintain popular support—inside and outside the Army—for the long, costly effort that a durable, adaptable Army will make as it brings its staying power to bear until a victorious conclusion can be achieved. The Marine Corps—as a small expeditionary force on distant, austere islands in World War II—had to worry that the fleet would sail away. The Army has always had that worry, too, but it has the much bigger worry of losing a much broader form of support during the long fight. Placing so much emphasis on “expeditionary agility and responsiveness” doesn’t help the Army face up to this much more fundamental problem.

Emphasis on “Modular Units” shouldn’t do much harm if the reasons for change are valid. This short article can’t possibly lay out the entire rationale, but the little bit of history it uses in justification is unconvincing: “The presumption of infrequent large-scale deployment encouraged the Army to centralize certain functions at higher echelons of command, and implicitly assumed that deployment would be largely complete before significant employment began.” In fact, our fathers and grandfathers were quite good at analyzing the range/density/utility/cost of various weapon systems and asking what echelon would best control an asset. They may have had too many echelons, and they may have insisted on a great deal of redundancy, but force design did not assume that deployment would be complete before the fighting started. Neither the World War I nor the World War II generation had that kind of experience, and they were quite sophisticated in their attachments and detachments to give tactical commanders the capabilities

they needed as a situation matured. Where they seem to have differed from the current concept was in their idea of a maturing theater. Whether the infrastructure was austere or developed, higher echelons of a formation brought capabilities that were not organic in the lower echelons. Various types of corps- and army-level engineer units could perform many tasks that were beyond the capabilities of a divisional battalion, and specialized attachments from Army assets to corps engineer battalions as well as specialized attachments from corps to division were part of the process of transforming the theater of war so the Army's staying power could be maximized. That's a different way of thinking about being "expeditionary." When you think that way you may not be so certain that you can plug everything you need into a brigade module.

If you study the Army's history, you may not be so certain that you will have enough of the best equipment for every deploying formation. These authors assert, "In the past, the Army reserved the best individual equipment for units most likely to fight." "Reserved" is surely the wrong verb. When there was a fight, the units in the fight got the good stuff. Whether or not there was a fight, there was never enough good stuff. Modernization always has been extremely expensive. In a democracy such as ours, all of the services must make do with outmoded equipment. The expeditionary Army will be no different from the wartime and peacetime armies that preceded it. When there is no war, there's very little money. When there is a war, there are more things that need to be bought than time and money will allow. The Army is seldom at the head of the line.

Finally, I feel compelled to comment on the sections addressing "Professional Education" and "Leader Development." Many topics are covered under those headings. I don't take strong exception to the statement, "There is no substitute for experiential learning." But do the authors understand that our entire professional education system is built around "experiential learning?" When Leavenworth took off in the early 20th century, it did so because Arthur Wagner and his buddies insisted on the "Applied Method." That meant you couldn't hide behind theory or history. You had to develop actual plans and issue real orders to formations trying to accomplish a mission on an actual map with a real opponent. When senior leaders such as Sherman and Schofield invested in those schools, they wanted to make sure that the next war would not be characterized by leaders learning the art of war with the blood of their soldiers. They probably would not disagree with the notion that "some of the best battlefield lessons result from tragic but honest mistakes," but given their commitment to professional education, their emphasis might have been on getting those lessons into the classroom quickly with the right instructors and the right students—not worrying about "a zero-defects mentality to write off those who make such mistakes." That's a career development issue.

"Career development" and "leader development" are used almost interchangeably—an odd departure from our old way of thinking. "Leader development" was activity that was ongoing in an individual, institutional, and organizational mix that would vary from one leader to another but would be pervasive in the individual's growth with the Army. "Career development" was the

dialogue between an individual and the “experts” and senior leaders who determined assignments. Many of us Cold War officers had magnificent leader development opportunities because we were the subjects of such strange career development vagaries. I can’t begin to guess what the younger generation can anticipate, but I worry when the leadership writes that “accreditation of a greater variety of substitute experiences” may be a feature of “some current career roadmaps.” During our long, asymmetrical war in Vietnam, we needed to put the Silver Star recipients in the classroom with the people who had different experiences. We needed to teach people “how the Army runs” because many knew how to run only one little piece of it. In other words, Professional Military Education gave commissioned and noncommissioned officers perspective on the important work they had already done and new insights and skills necessary to move to higher levels and more complex tasks. Careers lacking these opportunities will not result in leaders who can develop creative solutions at the tactical, operational, and strategic levels.

I have great confidence in the Army—it has changed and grown to meet every challenge it has faced in its 229 years. The dialog engendered by this article will surely contribute to continued growth.

Brigadier General Harold Nelson, USA Ret.
Carlisle, Pa.

Reply:

Brigadier General Nelson’s thoughtful critique of “Serving a Nation at War” is a welcome addition to the debate about the future of the Army. The past certainly offers an essential if not wholly sufficient perspective on the future, and no one is more qualified to judge that perspective than a distinguished former director of the Center for Military History.

That acknowledged, General Nelson’s critique is at the very least inconsistent. In some cases, he objects to the article’s historical characterizations without challenging its prescriptions. For example, concerning modularity, he writes, “Our fathers and grandfathers were quite good at analyzing the range/density/utility/cost of various weapon systems and asking what echelon would best control an asset.” Whether or not that invariably was so, increasing reliance on jointness and the demands of rapid global force projection have fundamentally changed the echelonment calculus.

In other cases, General Nelson likes the history but not the institutional strategy. For example, he writes, “Specialized attachments from corps to division were part of the process of transforming the theater of war so the Army’s staying power could be maximized. . . . When you think that way you may not be so certain that you can plug everything you need into a brigade module.” But as the article makes clear, modularity is by no means just about combined arms brigades. On the contrary, the real promise of modularity resides precisely in its ability to tailor those “specialized attachments” more effectively to the nature, scale, and objectives of a conflict.

Finally, in a few cases, General Nelson apparently likes neither the history nor the strategy. He argues that “much of the Army was expeditionary during the Cold War.” In fact, for most of the Cold War, the Army’s rapidly deployable capability was limited to a single contingency corps. The rest of the Army was hardly expeditionary in terms of deployability, readiness, or sustainability. Nor was there much evidence until after the Arab-Israeli War of 1973 of the kind of forward thinking that General Nelson attributes to Vietnam-era strategists.

In contrast, “Serving a Nation at War” deliberately looks past the war on terror to the challenge of preparing for future conventional conflicts while simultaneously defeating the unconventional adversaries we currently face. The whole point of rethinking expeditionary operations is to balance the campaign qualities that Brigadier General Nelson praises as our legacy from the Cold War against the continuing need to accommodate short-notice expeditionary deployments.

At the end of the day, General Nelson fairly objects that the article’s historical references are incomplete and imperfect. But then, so too is history itself. We are barely three years past 9/11. Three years after Winston Churchill warned of the descent of an “Iron Curtain” over Europe at Westminster College in March 1946, the United States had just begun to work through the military implications of containment. It shouldn’t surprise us that our understanding of this era’s military requirements likewise remains incomplete.

But we know enough now to begin adjusting to those requirements, and one clear lesson of history is the risk of waiting for perfect understanding. Brigadier General Nelson wisely reminds the Army to be wary of discounting its historical experience. If the article prompts more thoughtful debate about the enduring implications of that experience for the future, so much the better.

Brigadier General David A. Fastabend
Director, Concepts Development and Experimentation Directorate,
Futures Center, US Army Training and Doctrine Command,
and Director, Task Force Joint and Expeditionary Capabilities,
Fort Monroe, Virginia

Praising (mostly) “In Praise of Attrition”

To the Editor:

Ralph Peters has the correct intent but the wrong wording in his article, “In Praise of Attrition” (*Parameters*, Summer 2004). What he seems to want is annihilation of our enemy, not attrition. He appears to desire the absolute destruction of the enemy forces, not the gradual erosion of the enemy force which is attrition. Attrition is a slow-roll.

In my view, annihilating the enemy is the desired end-state in our current war on terror. Why? Because you aren’t going to change the minds of terrorists through imprisonment or tactical defeat. You have to kill them, remove them

from society forever. Mr. Peters understands that concept, and he articulates it well, but I think he needed to use the term annihilate more than the single time I saw it in his article. You don't fight dead people a second time. Dead people can't speak to their followers, and they can't continue to generate followings among the disenchanting and largely unemployed young male populations found throughout the Islamic world. The concept of martyrdom is short-lived if you kill all the adherents over time—and the shorter the time interval the better. We need to further the goal of martyrdom for the followers of al Qaeda.

I rather like the physics definition of annihilation, and I would like to see it applied to the battlefield: the phenomenon in which a particle or antiparticle (call that a philosophy, idea, or doctrine) as an electron and a positron (call those warriors), disappears with a resultant loss of energy approximately equal to the sum of their masses. For when you kill off all the warriors, you also will eventually kill the enemy's ideas as well.

Annihilation, not attrition, is the real solution. And just to be clear, to annihilate our enemy certainly doesn't mean we have to kill off those in the Islamic world who aren't part of the problem.

Colonel Neal H. Bralley, USA Ret.
Lansing, Kansas

To the Editor:

Ralph Peters is of course entirely correct. "Kill" is the only four-letter word no longer allowed in public discourse, especially as applied to our enemies. Neither World War II Japanese nor German leadership, nor in fact anyone in modern history, surrendered for fear of overwhelming force facing them. They did not surrender being shown the sword, but only upon seeing it used over and over again, on their armies, navies, and even civilian populations—and then surrendering only after prolonged and massive losses. Even the first atomic bomb drop could not persuade the Japanese, and this after staggering casualties in the Pacific islands and the horrendous firebombing of their cities. Did we pontificate about "hearts and minds"? Of course not: we made violent and massive war as best we could, until we were asked to accept surrender. Then, and only after near total disarmament of an utterly defeated enemy, we helped rebuild whole countries and remade relationships with peoples who would make today's terrorists look like little children—but who rather suddenly liked us and refashioned their societies in our image. No other nation in history has been this magnanimous, and our behavior in triumph still serves as a model of reason and humanity today, putting the lie forever to those who would claim empire or genocide is our goal.

Today's statesmen-warriors are horrendously misguided in their politically correct posturing over war and over those who declare war on us. We do have to ruthlessly pursue and kill those who would kill us, not just show them ("shock and awe") the sword. We do have to pursue and kill retreating armies: a retreating army is not a surrendering army, our terrible mistake in the first Gulf War. We do have to go into Fallujah, with the new Iraqi government, and kill or accept the

surrender of everyone who opposes our entry—or get the hell out of the Middle East and soon everywhere else, fall back, and defend Florida.

Or . . . we could surrender.

Elliott Hinkes, M.D.
Los Angeles, California

To the Editor:

In his article “In Praise of Attrition,” Ralph Peters says:

Curiously, while our military avoids a “body count” in Iraq—body counts have at least as bad a name as wars of attrition—the media insist on one. Sad to say, the body count cherished by the media is the number of our own troops dead and wounded. With our over-caution, we have allowed the media to create a perception that the losses are consistently on our side. By avoiding an enemy body count, we create an impression of our own defeat.

I could not agree more. Only once on the news did I hear a number for both sides of a skirmish in Iraq. I immediately sent off an email to the Pentagon in support of releasing this information consistently.

I am old enough to remember the Vietnam War, but not old enough to have served. I understand why the military is skittish on releasing body counts. However, at the most superficial level, for people who are not following the war as closely as they should, the numbers matter. A similar result would be obtained if at the end of a baseball or football season, sportscasters mentioned only a team’s losses. After a few seasons, the fans of the winning team would be convinced that they were fans of a losing team. Even the best team can’t win all the games.

By concentrating only on the losses, it is no wonder that so many people are demoralized by this current war. If I didn’t have the diversity of information provided by the internet, I would probably be demoralized too.

John Davies
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

To the Editor:

I just read Ralph Peters’ “In Praise of Attrition,” and it was the most refreshing thing I have read or heard in a long time. I have been recalled to active duty twice since 9/11, and I agree with the ideas proposed in this article. They are right on target.

It is good to know that there are people who understand the situation and would place the emphasis back on the trained professionals of the military and take it out of the hands of the politicians and journalists. The latter groups are so worried about elections and ratings that they are mucking up clear thinking, and our society is buying into their flawed theories.

Chief Petty Officer Patti Geistfeld, US Coast Guard Reserve
Hammond, Louisiana

To the Editor:

The article by Ralph Peters, “In Praise of Attrition,” reads like a Tom Clancy novel on steroids. It might seem like a ballsy thing to say that wars are won by killing lots and lots of people, but at least since World War II, it is not so obvious that this is a true statement. Moreover, the question of just what “winning” means has gotten a lot more complicated, it seems to me. For example, we dropped more ordnance on Vietnam than was dropped in all of World War II and killed upwards of a couple million soldiers and civilians, yet we lost the war. What would “winning” the war have meant? The logic of American strategy in Vietnam was rapidly evolving to a point where total annihilation of the country and its people through the use of nuclear weapons was a distinct possibility. If Mr. Peters is suggesting that we should not be so squeamish as to back away from this tactic, then my hunch is that he’s not going to find meaningful support among his military colleagues or government officials or the general population for this tactic, were it put into effect in, say, Iraq.

Of course we can destroy almost any country utterly and completely with an all-out deployment of weapons of mass destruction. But my sense is that in order to carry out such a policy with impunity would require the transformation of this country into a militarist totalitarian state. What would be worth defending at that point? With all due respect, Mr. Peters’ article is nothing more than an exercise of intellectual machoism. Please clean up his mess.

Brian Kammer
Atlanta, Georgia

The Author Replies:

Each of the many essays I’ve been privileged to publish in *Parameters* over the past 16 years has had the same fundamental intent: To encourage frank discussion of issues that seemed to me to demand more serious attention than we had yet paid to them. Thus, I’m pleased by all of the letters sent regarding “In Praise of Attrition,” whether they agree with my conclusions or reject them.

Colonel Bralley’s preference for the term “annihilation” over “attrition” certainly draws my sympathy; however, the diffuse nature of the struggle against international terrorism will only rarely allow us to engage our enemies in a set-piece battle (but when they do prove foolish enough to stand and fight, annihilation is definitely the order of the day). So, while annihilation of our terrorist enemies is much to be preferred, we more often will have to wage cat-and-mouse warfare against this ancient threat—amplified so mightily by postmodern technologies. But, as the essay stated, no law says that a war of attrition need be fair, or that the casualties must be equally distributed on both sides.

Mr. Kammer’s letter was also welcome (“Tom Clancy . . . on steroids”—Ouch!), since it suggests that *Parameters* is reaching an ever-wider audience. It’s insufficient for those of us who serve or have served to ponder matters of national security—we need an informed, engaged citizenry. Of course, the first require-

ment for a useful debate is that each side must first educate itself. Mr. Kammer might do well to study history a bit more objectively, rather than simply embracing the truisms of the Michael Moore School of Military Analysis. Our war in Vietnam was waged under such severe, even ludicrous political restrictions that it was unwinnable. We could not pass our ground forces into the enemy's heartland, nor could we employ airpower for maximum effectiveness. Our approach was absurd, counter-productive and, often, pettily vicious—that tends to happen when civilian appointees, determined to impose their theories on reality, reach down to adjust the smallest pieces on the battlefield.

Like Mr. Kammer, I lament the many needless deaths caused by self-adoring amateurs playing war from the safety of Washington offices. If we do not mean to win, every death is a mockery and a waste. Of course, we have come a long way since Vietnam—who could imagine arrogant, inexperienced civilians overruling military experts today?

When faced with critics of Mr. Kammer's temper and convictions, I think of Pompeii, the Roman city buried under lava and ash in the Year of Our Lord 79. And I wonder which of our cities will be the American Pompeii, destroyed not by that original weapon of mass destruction, nature, but by the unnatural forces of terrorism. Will it require the utter devastation of an American city for our fellow citizens of Mr. Kammer's school to understand that our terror war is a zero-sum game, that our enemies cannot be soothed, appeased, or deterred? It continues to astonish me that, in the wake of 9/11, so many cling to prejudices that may well do for the campus faculty lounge but which cannot serve in the bloodstained world beyond.

Some propositions are breathtakingly simple: If my enemy is determined to kill me, it is much to my advantage to kill him first.

A soldier does not speak of killing blithely. But if we cannot discuss such matters honestly and openly, we shall never penetrate to the heart of the matter. In these cruel times, no subject can be taboo.

Ralph Peters

Commentary & Reply Submissions

We invite reader commentaries of up to 1,000 words on articles appearing in *Parameters*. Not all commentaries can be published. For those that are, the author of the article will be invited to provide a reply. Commentaries may be edited to meet style and space constraints. Send to US Army War College, ATTN: *Parameters*, 122 Forbes Ave., Carlisle, PA 17013, or by e-mail to Parameters@carlisle.army.mil.
