

Winter 11-17-2021

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### Recommended Citation

Brian M. Linn, "On “The US Army and the Pacific: Challenges and Legacies”," *Parameters* 51, no. 4 (2021): 111-114, doi:10.55540/0031-1723.3095.

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## On “The US Army and the Pacific: Challenges and Legacies”

Brian McAllister Linn

This commentary responds to David M. Finkelstein’s article, “The US Army and the Pacific: Challenges and Legacies,” published in the Autumn 2020 issue of *Parameters* (vol. 50, no. 3).

**I**n his *Parameters* article, David M. Finkelstein invites countries that presume to “question US willingness to defend American interests and those of our allies and partners [to] please review the historical record.”<sup>1</sup> One might expect the head of the Center for Naval Analyses’ China section to recall Sun Tzu’s stricture to put yourself beyond the possibility of defeat first before seeking to defeat an enemy. Any historically informed other country could quickly review that record, which includes, in barely a century, the Siberian intervention debacle, our passivity toward Japan’s aggression in China in the 1930s (the USS *Panay*), the abandonment of the Nationalist Chinese and South Vietnam, and the over half-century’s imprisonment of the USS *Pueblo*. More relevant to *Parameters*’ readership, and especially Army officers, is that a review of the historical record does reveal two things Finkelstein fails to acknowledge. The first is a tradition of the US Navy drawing the Army into its Pacific strategic agenda. The second is that while jointness is a laudable objective, there are not only fundamental differences between sea power and Landpower, but between the US Army’s and Navy’s core interests.

Finkelstein dismisses the accusation that the United States is an “external actor” and “latecomer interfering in Asian security affairs.” He asserts the region’s importance to “our national well-being” dates “to the earliest days of our country as a maritime trading nation.” Indeed, he alleges the United States’ “permanent military presence” in the region has been manifest since 1835, with the creation of the East India Squadron. That the establishment of this squadron coincided with a maritime trade shipping narcotics and armaments to Asia and exporting its indentured labor goes unsaid. Moreover, it was neither economic nor national interests that prompted a US Navy commodore to defy his government’s instructions to remain neutral and instead assist a British attack against Chinese forces during the Opium Wars. In short,

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1. David M. Finkelstein, “The US Army and the Pacific: Challenges and Legacies,” *Parameters* 50, no. 3 (Autumn 2020): 113–19, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss3/11/>.

contrary to Finkelstein's altruistic narrative, from the beginning both our nation and our Navy's foray into the Pacific provides ample justification for Asian suspicion of our commercial and security motives today.

One of Finkelstein's arguments for an expanded Army role in the Indo-Pacific is its alleged "firm foundation of continuity of presence and a deep operational legacy." But the historical record undermines this assertion. The Army's permanent presence only began in 1898 after Commodore George Dewey's Asiatic Squadron shattered the antiquated Spanish squadron at Manila Bay. Army leaders, who had naively assumed the Navy might have warned them of this initiative, were soon ordered to send an expedition to the Philippines. The Army captured Manila with relative ease—though the Navy claimed the credit. Far more difficult was the Army's long and bloody conquest of the archipelago to secure the strategic results of Dewey's cheap one-day, one-off tactical stroke.

This pattern of the Navy looking to the Army to resolve its problems continued with the emergence of the nation's first true joint strategic problem: defending the new Pacific empire. The Navy insisted on a Philippine base to maintain its battle fleet in Asian waters but refused to commit that fleet to defend it. During the Japanese-American war scare of 1907, the Army's planners discovered the Navy had stationed its four armored cruisers in Japanese harbors. Its sole Pacific-based battleship could not depart from the West Coast for two months and only two ancient monitors and a few torpedo boats defended the Philippines. At that time the Army had 15,000 soldiers—almost a quarter of its total personnel—in the archipelago. With few exceptions, insisting the Army stay to fight for an Asian base it declined to defend remained the Navy's position for the next three decades. The consequences played out tragically in 1942 when the Asiatic Fleet departed the Philippines; those soldiers left behind suffered the greatest land defeat in the nation's history.

For Army strategists studying the Pacific's legacy and challenges, I offer three strategic truths proposed by the great naval strategist Julian Corbett over a century ago. First, one of the great benefits of maritime power is the freedom it offers a nation to *limit its military commitments*. Second, *naval forces are able to sail away from their commitments* and armies are not. A final and related point is Corbett's observation that "*command of the sea*" may be general or regional, fleeting or permanent. The United States' "uncontested military dominance" in the Pacific after World War II was a temporary condition and a reversal of previous

policy. The United States (and its Navy) had conceded *regional* maritime supremacy in the Far East to the British throughout the nineteenth century and to Japan implicitly after 1907 and explicitly in 1922 with the Washington Naval Treaty's 5-5-3 ratios. The *Pueblo* Incident might be taken as indicative of an insignificant naval power's ability to impose *fleeting local command* over its waters. Indeed, only by the most qualified definition of *uncontested* can Finkelstein substantiate his claim for American military dominance in the Pacific since World War II.

The Army serves the nation and it will go where the nation bids. But its strategists must rigorously study costs, benefits, dangers, and likely consequences. Appeals to a faux-historical narrative should have no place in their assessment. A balanced analysis of the Army's "deep operational legacy" in the Pacific—the controversial pacification of the Philippines, the humiliation of Bataan, the bitter interservice battle over the central or southwestern Pacific, the "Big Bugout" and the Korean stalemate, and the still embittering Vietnam War—should be as much a source of caution as an incentive.

Army strategists would do well to question Navy-generated demands for expansion in the Pacific and examine their historic legacy there. They could start with one of their own "Old China Hands." In a 1969 letter to an Army War College student concerned about Vietnam, General Matthew Bunker Ridgway outlined the following strategic principles:

*. . . identify what are and what are not our vital national interests. Commit armed forces only in a situation that lies clearly within the zone of those interests, and where all other means offer little or no hope of being effective. Recognize that the world has radically altered since the days of 'gunboat diplomacy', or when, as in the case of Great Britain in the 19th century, a small military commitment might be rewarded with large national gains. Reject any political involvement that might gradually commit us to military efforts that could jeopardize our basic security or those vital national interests which cannot be compromised.<sup>2</sup>*

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2. Matthew B. Ridgway to Gerald G. Gibbs Jr., letter, October 18, 1969, in Gerald P. Gibbs, "United States Policy Towards Future Wars of National Liberation (student paper, Army War College), US Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, PA.

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## The Author Replies

The author declined to respond.

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