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REVIEW ESSAY

STRATEGIC CULTURE AND WAYS OF WAR ELUSIVE FICTION OR ESSENTIAL CONCEPT?

Frank Hoffman

Reconsidering the American Way of War: US Military Practice from the Revolution to Afghanistan, by Antulio J. Echevarria II. Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2014. 232 pages. \$54.95 (paperback \$29.95, e-book \$29.95).

Is there such a thing as “strategic culture” and a distinctive “American way of war”? What defines this supposedly unique approach to warfare? What elements

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or habits comprise this approach, and how has it been applied over the course of time? Do other countries have strategic cultures that shape how they plan and conduct strategy, and how they plan to conduct war? In this provocative and aggressively argued book, the author explores these critical questions.

Dr. Antulio Echevarria brings impressive intellectual credentials to this project. He has been a leading scholar in German military thinking of the nineteenth century, and his *After Clausewitz: German Military Thinkers before the Great War* (Univ. Press of Kansas, 2001) is deservedly praised. He also penned a superb book on the contemporary relevance of Clausewitz.

Reconsidering the American Way of War has two central and related arguments. First, Echevarria argues that the very concept of a strategic culture

is flawed and that an American strategic culture—a culturally framed way of war—is not historically founded. To the author, the entire concept of a “strategic culture” is built entirely around vague generalities and caricatures. “The search for a distinctly American approach to strategy and its core determinants,” he argues, “was based more on myth and conventional wisdom than fact.”

Echevarria’s second argument involves the purported existence of a proverbial American way of war. He argues that many criticisms of the American way of war—namely, its alleged apolitical orientation, its astrategic character, and its emphasis on overwhelming force to obtain decisive results—cannot stand up to historical scrutiny. Here, over several chapters, Echevarria seeks to demonstrate that this characterization is inaccurate over the breadth of America’s history.

This argument runs counter to the central thrust of Russell F. Weigley’s writings and my own narrower book on U.S. military culture.¹ While both of the author’s main contentions are argued aggressively, they remain unbalanced and less than compelling.

STRATEGIC CULTURE’S UTILITY

Echevarria devotes an initial chapter to debunking strategic culture’s analytical value. He concludes that the entire concept is little more than an elusive fiction. But the U.S. strategic culture he depicts is an enduring, monolithic, and exceptionally American construct applicable across all the national security institutions, and such a depiction is too rigid—a caricature of how most scholars look at the role of cultural factors. The author’s narrow interpretation fails to account for historical influences that impact strategic culture over long and climactic periods. Surely, the U.S. Civil War, World War II, and the Vietnam War emphatically impacted the way Americans looked at war and the utility of force. Other scholars, including Sir Lawrence Freedman, accept this view: “Culture, and the cognition which it influences[,] is rarely fixed but [is] in a process of development and adaptation.”²

The notion of strategic culture as a frame of reference for beginning to understand one’s adversary and the distinctive (but not predictive) approaches to conducting war clearly has some analytical value.³ A number of scholars in the strategic studies community are advocates of the concept’s utility.⁴ The role of strategic culture on strategic performance is a staple in the literature.⁵ A review of strategic culture often has been an element in net assessments. Historian Williamson Murray concludes that grand strategy—at the highest level of the expression of strategic culture—must “rest on a realistic assessment and understanding not only of one’s opponents but also of oneself.”⁶ Michael Howard’s warning is perhaps the most trenchant: “Wars are . . . conflicts of societies, and can be fully understood only if one understands the nature of the society fighting them. The

roots of victory or defeat often have to be sought far from the battlefield, in political, social, or economic factors.”⁷ Colin Gray posits that strategic culture is not determinant, but does cue problem recognition and the search for solutions.⁸

Thus, Echevarria is pushing back against a body of scholars who contend that any nation’s approach to strategy and its way of fighting are framed by its culture and experiences.

Other scholars warn that ideas concerning ways of war tend to be used prescriptively—as if adversary leaders were completely constrained by them.⁹ Surely, strategic culture can be taken too far if we presume it to be predictive. The paradoxical nature of strategy must be considered, and a government may take steps that are out of character (culture) to generate a surprise advantage.¹⁰

However, the reverse side of the argument is equally disconcerting. If strategists, while drawing up a strategy, took Echevarria’s concerns to a logical end, they would not concern themselves with studying the nature of the government, values, experiences, geography, or technological focus of a potential adversary. I doubt the author intended to create that impression. However, intelligence shortfalls and acultural thinking about the Other are classic shortcomings in U.S. strategic culture. A flawed conception of Iraqi sociology and the multiethnic divisions found in Iraq in 2003 certainly reinforces Gray’s depiction of the American way of war as “culturally challenged.”¹¹ Lacking a deep understanding of an adversary’s history, culture, sociology, and government decision-making structures certainly blinds one to possibilities, if not probabilities.

Dismissing the study of other cultures and their ways of war will only perpetuate a lack of understanding of both adversary culture and the larger context it offers. Instead of ignoring these elements, we should make them fundamental considerations in the development of strategy. This conclusion is a key, indeed a central, insight from recent conflicts.

HISTORICAL SCOPE AND RESEARCH

The book’s scope raises several concerns. First, the author has bitten off quite a project on which to chew. His overview covers a sweeping range of the nation’s history. America’s strategic performance over two hundred years, from the defense of Boston to the march on Baghdad, is covered in fewer than two hundred pages. American strategic planning and execution from World War I through World War II and the Korean conflict are connected cohesively, but are covered in a chapter of only twenty-two pages. Even when done by a talented historian such as Echevarria, it is impossible to address the conduct of U.S. strategy comprehensively in such a compressed manner. Far too much depth and relevant scholarship were sacrificed for breadth.

Much of that breadth is irrelevant to today's debate. The bulk of *Reconsidering the American Way of War* deals with the first 150 years of the history of the United States, during which its strategic position and interests were different than in the post-World War II era. Most of the criticisms of the American way of war (including Weigley's classic) were written at the end of the Vietnam War and generally were critical of the contemporary U.S. military, especially its kinetic focus and emphasis on conventional application of force.¹² It is with regard to this period that consistently limited strategic performance is blamed on U.S. strategic culture, military culture, or both.

Even when the more modern sections are examined, the research base is limited; a lot of relevant scholarship was overlooked. For example, the author's section on Vietnam lays the blame on Secretary of Defense Robert S. McNamara for the strategy of attrition on which the United States based its operations, but Echevarria admits the U.S. Army maintained its focus on "search and destroy" operations far too long. Neither Robert Komer's famous book on U.S. military culture nor Andrew Krepinevich's critique of the Army nor Lewis Sorley's dissection of Westmoreland's strategy is cited.¹³

Echevarria's section on the 1989-90 American intervention in Panama, Operation JUST CAUSE, overlooks shortfalls in planning for what was intended to be Phase IV of that operation and the subsequent difficulties in establishing order.¹⁴

The brief discussion of the first Persian Gulf War and the most recent phase of U.S. operations inside Iraq also avoids well-documented military shortfalls, particularly poor war-termination planning that reflected a desire to avoid politics. As the British historian Hew Strachan has observed, the apolitical nature of the U.S. military is demonstrated by its strong preference for concentration on the operational level of war, as a "politics-free zone."¹⁵ The U.S. strategy in Iraq for 2003 was far too focused on the initial conventional battle, and again was devoid of political context. This was demonstrated when Commander, U.S. Central Command General Tommy Franks told senior Defense Department officials that he would focus on the day of battle and they could deal "with the day after." Such attitudes reflect shortcomings in our understanding of what constitutes war, as well as in the leadership development of U.S. generals.¹⁶ But General Franks's comment and memoirs are not cited in the three pages this book devotes to America's longest war.

Echevarria concludes that the purported habits that characterize the American way of war are simply erroneous. In his interpretation, American strategy in practice has been flexible and appropriately crafted for both irregular conflicts and major wars. He finds (pp. 164, 174) that "the American way of war has been nothing less than political in every respect and in every period of its history. . . . It is clear that both policy and politics have influenced U.S. military practice." If

there is a consistent mental frame, it is the mistaken belief that “tactical victory redounds in favor of strategic success.”

This assessment is hard to square with any objective evaluation of the last fifteen years. The American way of war has influenced profoundly U.S. war planning and strategic performance in Iraq and Afghanistan. During Operations ENDURING FREEDOM and IRAQI FREEDOM, success was elusive. Some of these failures may be attributed to senior civilian leaders, while others relate to flaws in strategy or implementation that can be laid at the feet of U.S. military commanders; both represent components of strategic culture. But Echevarria never examines subcomponents of a national culture nor alters his level of analysis. The Joint Chiefs of Staff’s own conclusions about operational lessons from those conflicts suggest that U.S. military campaigns were limited by a lack of understanding about adversaries and by a “Big War” mind-set. These lessons, including the Joint Chiefs of Staff’s own lessons-learned product, *Enduring Lessons from the Past Decade of Operations*, are absent from Echevarria’s history and bibliography.¹⁷ Those candid evaluations found that U.S. experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan reflected apolitical thinking, astrategic logic, and ahistorical reasoning. These attributes were not just evident but conspicuous, both at the national level and within the U.S. military’s plans. They were key contributors to failure, if one objectively assesses our shortfalls. Others have noted these elements, but the author does not counter their arguments.¹⁸ To contend that flaws in the American conceptual approach to war and strategy do not exist and do not help to account for the limited success the United States has obtained in two protracted contests over the last fifteen years may be the biggest hole in Echevarria’s argument. This perspective, should it become the revealed wisdom of the last two wars, would perpetuate shortfalls in how strategists think about war, how the U.S. military prepares for warfare across the range of military operations, and how students are taught about their profession.

Dr. Echevarria’s two major arguments are presented cogently, but fall short of convincing. The author is correct that examining strategic culture offers limited predictability, but he is wrong to claim that it offers neither insights nor explanatory power. If we ignore a deep grasp of strategic culture—our own as much as others’—we will ensure that the lessons encountered during the last fifteen years will have to be dealt with again in our next war(s). Policy makers and military planners should want to know more about the strategic culture of potential opponents and how it influences their decision making, not less.¹⁹

Reconsidering the American Way of War makes a material contribution to the long-standing debate about strategic culture, especially by highlighting limits to the construct and its usage. But embracing Echevarria’s perspective about

strategic culture in general or the American way of war in particular overlooks extensive evidence and criticism about U.S. strategic competence.²⁰ If you want to understand why tactical brilliance is undone by slipshod strategic thinking, you will not find the answer here; those who seek a better American way of war must look elsewhere.²¹ There are no arguments here for overcoming, by education or process, America's penchant for deficient strategy. Despite an increasingly disordered world, Echevarria apparently perceives neither need nor grounds for altering a paradigm that is skewed heavily toward kinetic solutions and conventional fighting, regardless of our enemies.²²

This book should stimulate a necessary debate as today's generation of veterans on both sides of the Atlantic steps back to examine the last two wars. Learning from and modifying entrenched behaviors after major wars are not easy feats.²³ With Britain's Chilcot inquiry there has been at least one serious effort to do so by one of our allies, but there is little appetite in the United States for such reviews. Yet tomorrow's leaders should recognize the limitations strategic culture offers in predicting how our adversary's strategy will be formulated, how another actor may think about war and warfare, and how we should understand our opponent's approach to warfare. Just as importantly, we must better understand ourselves.²⁴

NOTES

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7. Michael Howard, "The Use and Abuse of History," *Parameters* 11, no. 1 (March 1981), p. 14.
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19. For an example of such research, see Philip C. Saunders and Andrew Scobell, eds., *PLA Influence on China's National Security Policy-making* (Stanford, CA: Stanford Univ. Press, 2015).
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