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RESEARCH & DEBATE

STRATEGIC CULTURE IS NOT A SILVER BULLET

Antulio J. Echevarria II

Frank Hoffman's review essay "Strategic Culture and Ways of War: Elusive Fiction or Essential Concept?," which appeared in the Spring 2017 issue of the *Naval War College Review*, has mischaracterized my argument regarding strategic culture and, more generally, has misrepresented my book *Reconsidering the American Way of War*. I therefore would like to clarify both—my position on American

strategic culture and the purpose of my book—for this journal's readers. Frank Hoffman and I have agreed on many issues over the years, and I appreciate the time he put into generating a detailed review essay; yet we clearly have our differences.

On the question of strategic culture, I certainly do believe that culture is important and that we should try to understand it—ours and others'. But there are huge risks in doing so, and buyers need to be aware of them before they buy. Since Jack Snyder introduced the concept in 1977, the study of strategic culture has grown into an almost-desperate search for a silver bullet, a cure-all: if we could just fix American strategic culture, we could cure U.S. strategic thinking. But the concept has taken on a life of its own—and not a good one. The concept's proponents have failed to exercise discipline when defining it, and they have employed it too enthusiastically, without a critical eye or a healthy dose of skepticism. Buyers need to

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know there are ample historical examples to prove almost any theory of strategic culture—as well as its opposite.

In their enthusiasm to find a cure for U.S. strategic thinking, the concept's proponents merely have paid lip service to the difficulty of defining it, then have moved swiftly on to advancing their own theories. Most of these definitions are arbitrary, not based on rigorous inductive analysis. This problem is a critical one for any social science, because if a concept cannot be defined inductively, it cannot be studied scientifically. Unfortunately, the terms *culture* and *strategic culture* have become all but ubiquitous, encompassing virtually any conceivable variable that possibly could influence a key leader's decision. Worse, the concept has become highly politicized. It is now a political catchall for every policy aim or military approach one party does not like, particularly when a war is under way, and at the same time it serves as a means to advance each party's own agendas.

Consequently, no generalizable conclusion nor observation can be drawn from the many studies of strategic culture that have proliferated over the years. In short, the field is in disarray precisely because most scholars are self-defining strategic culture, which means there is no conceptual foundation on which to build knowledge.

While this state of affairs is an academic's dream, it is a policy and military practitioner's nightmare. Academics earn their credentials and build their reputations by developing unique or contending interpretations—by challenging the status quo. But practitioners need more than unique theories, because they must bear the heavy burden of responsibility: they must decide whether to put lives and treasure at risk, and they are held accountable when things go wrong. This is not to say that academics are irresponsible; the good ones are not. But even the good ones never have to order people into harm's way; that means academics can afford to be experimental in their thinking and to advance ideas that are not quite ready for prime time. Practitioners, on the other hand, can benefit from the intellectual stimulus that such cutting-edge ideas afford. But when it comes to choosing courses of action that might have to be sold to Congress and to the public, they need concepts that have a reasonably solid foundation, especially when the stakes are high. Sadly, that is not the case with strategic culture. My argument in *Reconsidering the American Way of War* is simply that no scholar yet has made a truly compelling case for an American strategic culture, and thus it remains too nebulous and unreliable for the realities that policy and military practitioners typically face.

I am all for self-critical analysis, and I have written on that topic a great deal over the years. Critical thinking is the practitioner's best ally. But to solve a problem we first must understand what it is. In this case, it is not clear that we do. The problem is that the American way of war has had many more successes than

failures. The differential in favor of successes is quite significant and it applies to all kinds of wars—large, small, and in between. That needs to be explained. But existing theories of strategic culture cannot do so. The problems inherent in the concept obscure not only what is wrong with U.S. strategic thinking but how to fix it.

With regard to the overall purpose of *Reconsidering the American Way of War*, I endeavored to make that clear in the book's introduction, but perhaps I should have been more explicit. In contrast to Russell Weigley's 1973 classic *The American Way of War*, which focused mainly on our strategic theories and ideas, my aim was to look for *patterns* in the way we actually practiced war. The history of ideas has fallen out of vogue for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the gap that always exists between what people say they are doing or going to do and what they actually do. I decided to close this gap, at least in part, between Weigley's *American Way of War* as a history of ideas and the many narrative histories we already have that tell us what happened. In a sense, I played Marx to Weigley's Hegel in an effort to identify any consistent patterns in our approach to doing, rather than merely thinking about, war.

Accordingly, the book's chapters are short. It was unnecessary to describe every battle or engagement in detail; such descriptions already exist in hundreds, if not thousands, of other works. The readers of this journal likely know where to find them. Some of our largest and longest wars have been characterized by the application of strategic patterns that represented no significant changes; hence, there was no need to drag out the discussions of those conflicts. The book includes details only insofar as they affected the general pattern (or patterns) that drove a conflict. Moreover, the chapters are designed for a staff college or war college curriculum that likely would include other readings. I regret not including maps in the book, as they would have made the patterns more obvious to the reader, but the publisher vetoed that idea because it would have driven the cost of the book too high. However, the West Point military atlases serve the purpose and are available free online.

My analysis of U.S. military practice uncovered six basic patterns of military strategy in our wars: annihilation, attrition, exhaustion, decapitation, coercion, and deterrence. Interestingly, instead of overwhelming kinetic force, as Hoffman and others argue, the strategic pattern that emerges most frequently in our way of war is decapitation—the idea of replacing a leader whom we do not like with one we do, through kinetic or nonkinetic means or some combination of the two. There are various concrete reasons for the recurrence of this pattern, which I discuss in the book and thus will not repeat here. But, once again, this observation points to the gap between what we say we do strategically and what we actually do, or attempt to do, in practice.

To sum up, my argument is not that we do not have a strategic culture, or that culture itself is not important; my point is that strategic culture is not the silver bullet its proponents want it to be. Whatever American strategic culture is, was, or might be, it is too elusive to pin down. Nor can we compare it to its British or Russian counterpart to identify what is uniquely American about our way of war versus what has been imported from elsewhere, or which aspects really are driven by the conditions and requirements of warfare—modern industrial-age warfare and its reliance on wholesale attrition, for instance—rather than a general culture. To be sure, Americans do have a way of battle, as I have said elsewhere. It is also true that the evolution of operational art over the twentieth century has hampered the U.S. military’s ability to think strategically. But these conditions were not always true. I am working on a book now that will offer one defensible explanation for how and why our major failures and successes occurred. I would be very pleased to have it reviewed in this journal.